



Stripped Bear
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ISBN 978-1-936279-88-3

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Amira Press
Charlotte, North Carolina
www.amirapress.com

Chapter One

Ayana threw her arms up in the air and danced around in a circle. She'd finally done it. She'd purchased her first house, all on her own, four hundred miles away from the rest of her family. None of them thought she could do it. They looked at her like she wasn't capable, like she'd never be anything in life, but she'd proven them all wrong. And her house was cute too. A sweet little square brick home with the second floor holding a big sunny room where she could work on her art, along with a bathroom and an office. If her family ever came down to North Carolina to see what she was up to, she would give them a look as if to say "now, what, bitches."

She giggled at the thought and checked her mailbox just for the fun of it. As she stood next to the boring metal box, she wondered if she could find someone to build one of those brick ones to match her house. That would be perfect.

"Hello," someone called just down the street.

She glanced around and once again was struck by the quiet block with residential houses all along it. The entire area was so unlike New York, she couldn't be happier. The woman who'd called to her waved, and Ayana waited for her and her friend to draw closer. The two were about her age, maybe a little older. Both were Caucasian, another bonus to the area—mixed-race neighborhood.

"Good morning," she called out. "I'm Ayana, your new neighbor." She held out her hand, and each woman took it in turn, speaking their names. Ayana sucked at remembering names. In fact, she was so convinced that she wouldn't remember these ladies without hearing them a few times, she didn't catch what they said the first time.

The one with the long fiery red hair glanced past her to the house behind her. "Oh you bought this place?" They shared a look with each other, each appearing annoyed. Ayana almost took a step back when they then examined her from head to foot. She blinked in disbelief. Seeing Ayana ready to get her hackles up, the woman spoke again. "Oh, you'll love it around here. Everyone's friendly and down to earth."

“Yeah,” the other one chipped in. Then she seemed hopeful. “Are you married?”

Ayana hesitated and crossed her arms over her chest. These women had some issues, and she couldn’t put her finger on it just yet, but she was going to. She didn’t think it was about race either, which was a relief. And the scan of her figure from head to toe didn’t have lust in it like they were into women. There was something else. “No, I’m not. I’m single.”

That hit it. If they had feathers, they would most definitely be ruffled right about now. The dark-haired one spoke again. “She’s single. Well, I guess it’s our duty to warn you about Brooke just in case you have a boyfriend.”

The last part of her statement sounded more like a question, but this time, Ayana wasn’t rising to it. They could find out on their own that she was between relationships right now. The two of them didn’t seem pleased that she wasn’t married.

“What about Brooke?” she asked. “Who is that?” Funny, she hadn’t seen this third woman yet, but she was pretty sure she’d remember her name. Just because of the weird vibe she was getting off these ladies.

Dark Hair pointed to the house across the street, on the end. “She lives over there. If you have a man, she’ll try to sleep with him. She claims to have slept with every available man in the neighborhood, and when she’s drunk, she even hits on a few of the older teenagers.” They both shivered in disgust. “Just steer clear, is my advice.”

“Yeah,” Fiery Red agreed. “Well, come on, Janet. We better continue our walk before it gets too hot. See you later, Ayana. Welcome to Lawnwood Drive.”

They didn’t wait for her to respond but swung around in the direction they’d been walking. Ayana’s lips tightened at the comment she was sure they meant for her to hear. “We have nothing to worry about. She’s too plain to be competition.”

Ayana returned to her house and climbed over boxes to get to the living room. She dug around for her purse and pulled out her cell phone. The decision to get the extended plan, which included Internet service on it, was a

good one. The cable company wouldn't get out to set her up with the bundle she'd purchased for another couple of days, and she needed to locate a grocery store. There wasn't a scrap of food in the house, and she was getting hungry.

Twenty minutes later, she strolled around the grocery store pushing a cart. Fresh fruit was better than her old standby granola bars. She should buy chicken instead of hamburger, but damn now that she had a backyard, how could she resist grilling good old-fashioned beef.

"I'd go with the beef," a male voice suggested when she pondered long in the meat section. A chill went down her spin at his deep timbre. She peeked up between a lock of hair that had flopped across her face and focused on the man now standing in front of her. *Talk about Prime Grade A!*

He was stocky with thick muscles in all the right places—chest and arms. His eyes were russet brown with gold flecks. A slight smile teased lips a woman could kiss all night and beg for more. In a word, he was gorgeous with a capital G. Ayana had to hold onto the cart with both hands to keep from running her fingers through his hair. The silky locks were a mess like he'd stuffed his head into a T-shirt and run out to the store just like she did. Maybe he didn't have a woman at home to cook for him. She frowned at the thought, because how likely was that. Not all this yummy goodness. A woman would have to be blind not to have snatched him up fast.

"I'm sorry," he said, breaking into her thoughts. "I didn't mean to annoy you."

She realized she'd frowned thinking about someone else getting him first. "Oh no, it's fine. You didn't annoy me." She offered her best smile and focused on his handsome face to be sure she didn't miss the name. *Man, I hope he lives close by.* "I just had so much on my mind what with just moving around here. I'm Ayana."

He put his hand out, and like a robot, she dropped hers into his palm. Her heart hammered in her chest and then felt like it had stopped when he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Pretty name."

Somehow she felt disappointed that he didn't give her a compliment along with the comment about her name. If she went by the interest in his

eyes though, he was feeling more than her moniker. “Thanks,” she breathed. He didn’t let go, and she darn sure wasn’t going to make him.

“Welcome to the neighborhood. I’m Reece. Tell me it’s my lucky day and that your new house is near here?” His eyebrows rose in question.

Reece. Yum! Should she tell him the street? Why not? She wanted to see more of him, and it was obvious he had no problem with her race. “Lawnwood Drive.” He drew in a sharp breath and named the number of her house exactly. She gasped. “How did you know?”

“For one thing, I live on that street. For another, I knew the house next door to me had been sold.” He moved in closer to her. Ayana’s breath caught in her throat. She didn’t think her heart would slow down any time soon. Everything inside of her screamed touch him, but she wasn’t getting arrested her first day here for attacking Mr. McHottie. Of course every woman within eyesight of him would understand the temptation.

Then she realized what he’d said. He lived next door to her? No way. Too, too lucky. “Next door?” she squeaked.

He nodded. “Yes, 6504.”

So that’s what it was, she mused. That’s why the two women from earlier had gotten their feathers up. She bet every woman in the block was lusting over Reece, and to have new blood move into the area, they were worried. Of course, they’d dismissed her out of hand, like a man this hot wouldn’t look twice at her. Wouldn’t they cuss up a storm if they saw her right now?

She brightened her smile even more. Not that she expected him to fall for her, because seriously, men didn’t land in her lap like that. She knew she was just ordinary looking. At least she had a decent figure, if a little smallish in the boob and butt area. So what. She liked to think she made up for it in personality—most of the time. “Well, it’ll be nice getting to know you.”

“You can count on it. In fact,” he said, eying the meat selection next to them, “since you’re so keen on beef, why don’t you invite me over to cook out. We can consider it a house-warming. I’ll bring you a gift.”

Ayana laughed. He did not just invite himself over to her house so she could cook for him. Like she was going to say no. “Sure, I’d like that.”

He grinned, revealing even white teeth. She resisted a bit of light-headedness. The man had all kinds of charm, and he knew it. “Is tomorrow evening too soon?”

An image of her wrecked living room slid into her head with wall-to-wall boxes. “Not at all. Sounds great.”

“Good.” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it. Flaming hot desire scorched a path between her legs. Another look from him seemed to say he knew how she felt. “Until then.”

He bent to pick up the basket he’d been carrying and turned and walked away. Ayana watched his ass in the jeans he wore and sagged against the side of the meat freezer. Moving to North Carolina was the best decision she’d ever made in her life!

Chapter Two

Ayana had been speculating about which house on either side of her was the one Reece lived in. There was a forest green pickup in the one driveway and a black SUV in the other. Either of those could be a man's choice for driving, and she hadn't seen Reece come home after she got back to her place. After peeking out the window constantly in between unpacking, at least she caught sight of the mailman when he passed. She hadn't been expecting to get anything, but he'd stuff something in there.

She slipped her feet into some flip-flops and headed outside. The trek down the drive to the street filled her with excitement. If this was her apartment back home, by now some idiot would have whistled at her bare legs in the short shorts she'd slipped on to clean. And blaring music would have been coming from somebody's place with no regard to who was disturbed. Instead, she was met with peaceful quiet.

She pulled open the slot to the mailbox and retrieved a bunch of junk mail. Ah well, even that couldn't dampen her mood. A door opened somewhere behind her. Ayana's pulse kicked into high gear. She turned slowly, trying to look casual. The man standing in the doorway watching her with a curious expression on his handsome face was not Reece.

Holy cow, two in the same neighborhood. What do they put in the drinking water down here?

The man left his doorway to walk toward her as if he was on a mission. His stance the way he bore down on her held determination or like he was being pulled. Ayana didn't know whether to stand her ground or make for the house. She settled on planting her feet. When he drew up, she had to throw her head way back to look him full in the face. Goodness, he rivaled Reece in height and size, but she couldn't say either man was more handsome. This one was darker, with black hair and eyes to Reece's shades of brown. He seemed dangerous, slightly angry, although she couldn't have put her finger on why.

He raised a huge pawlike hand to her hair and grasped a few strands.
Dude, invasion of personal space much?

“You’re very small,” he said.

She considered whether it was an insult and decided he was in awe. Wow, two big, sexy men mesmerized by her appearance. *Who’d have thunk it?* “Yeah, I take after my mother,” she told him, a hand on her hip. “But hey, I’ve got her by a couple inches at least. She’s five four.”

He nodded as if he was gathering info on her. His next words confirmed it. “And your name?”

He was somewhat brash and simplistic in his speech, not as charming as Reece. More untamed and slightly scary. She was hooked on him already. “Ayana. And you?”

“Blaine.”

Man oh man, she could enjoy his hard body, and even if he didn’t have much to say, who cared. She could look at him and feel his touch. She knew she was being shallow, but hell, who was deep when they first met someone? Not with looking at Reece and Blaine they weren’t. Ayana remembered the women she’d met and glanced around the street. No one was about, and she guessed now that it was later in the day, everyone had already gone to work. She’d driven during the night and arrived at her new place early.

Sudden inspiration struck her. She didn’t know why she’d even consider it, and maybe it was wrong, but leaving Blaine out of the invite to her “house-warming” seemed wrong. “Blaine, I’m having a sort of house-warming tomorrow night.” She laughed a little, self-conscious. “Guess it’s not really much of a house-warming since no one’s coming but Reece. I thought you might like to join us. You know him?”

His dark gaze flicked to the house on the other side of hers, confirming which belonged to Reece. When he looked back at her, she caught again the determination in him. “I’d love to. Should I bring something?”

“Just yourself,” she teased. And then all her bravado left at having a dinner with only two men invited. She turned back toward the house. “I’ll see you then. Five-ish, I guess.”

He caught her hand as she moved away and stopped her. Ayana glanced over her shoulder. His dark gaze flicked over her form, and she’d never felt

more aware of her femininity and her lack of curves. Still he seemed turned-on by what he saw. She didn't dare look too low to find the evidence.

"Wear something like that," he said.

Ayana's eyebrow rose. The man had just commanded her. Not like suggestion, but an actual do it. She had to admit the dominance turned her on, but he didn't know her like that. "Wear what?" she said anyway.

He nodded toward her ass. "Those shorts."

For the second time, she waited for the compliment that didn't come. This time she did look down at the front of his black jeans. Oh yeah, he liked what he saw all right. Big, big package. Ayana bit down on her cheek, pulled her hand free, and raced into the house. She shut the door and pressed against it while her chest rose and fell at a rapid pace. Just what had she gotten herself into? They might expect something from her with her only inviting them. What about her? Did *she* expect something?

She hadn't talked much with Blaine. But it was all animal magnetism with him, barely controlled sexual need. She'd never felt so desired—in seconds no less. Maybe he had a thing for black girls. That would be a good. But she didn't want to give up Reece's charm and sweetness either. She chewed her thumbnail and looked at it. The polish was a mess. She needed to find a nail place that was good. Did she have time between now and tomorrow to do that and get the house in order? Probably not.

Sighing, she got back to work. Well with her looking like she did, plain as can be, both men practically sopped her up with gravy and a biscuit. If she improved even a little bit, they'd be into her. With that settled, Ayana threw herself harder into her tasks while fantasizing about tomorrow night. If nothing else, it would be an experience to remember.

Chapter Three

Ayana plopped a huge grilled steak on Blaine's plate and one on Reece's. Then she filled their bowls with salad and made sure they had their choice of dressings and steak sauce. "Beer, soda, or sweet tea?" she called at the back door leading into the house.

"Beer," they answered in unison.

She nodded and went to grab them a cold one each. Good thing she'd picked up a couple six packs. She didn't drink beer but had opted on sweet tea. The brand she'd found in Walmart was insanely good, and she was already becoming addicted to it. After making her plate with smaller portions, she sat down across from them at the patio table she'd sprung for.

"This is delicious," Reece said while tucking a bite into his mouth. A bit of sauce stained his bottom lip, and she wanted to lick it off. He winked as if he wouldn't mind, and she looked away.

"Thanks," she murmured. "I didn't do it much back home, but I love grilled food.

"Where are you from?" he asked.

"New York. It's so different down here," she gushed. "I'm loving it already.

"Good," Blaine chimed in. "That way we don't have to hunt you down and bring you back in case you decide to leave." His smile didn't take away from the serious feel to his words.

Reece thumped his arm. "Don't mind him. You've already won this bear's heart just feeding him." Blaine gave him a sharp look, but Reece just laughed. "I'm from right here in North Carolina, all of my family as well. We have no need to go anywhere else at the moment."

"And I'm from South Carolina. I have no family," Blaine said. Her heart constricted for him. That must be hard. Even with her family getting on her last nerve, they were there for her. She'd never asked for help, but she liked to think they would step in if she needed it.

Ayana reached across the table and squeezed his forearm. A zing of pleasure went through her, and she tried pretending it was nothing.

Something told her the intensity in Blaine's eyes was put there by her touch. The way they were connecting so fast, and so hot for each other, was just weird. The two of them didn't even vie for her attention. They acted like it was a done deal that they'd share. The thought of it sent a thrill through her, but that was crazy. People did that kind of thing in porn movies, not real life.

"Don't worry," she told Blaine to cover her embarrassment and the direction her mind was taking, "you've got a new friend in me, and I'm sure Reece is here for you, right?" She looked at Reece. The amusement in his eyes watching Blaine turn red made him sexier. Between the two of them, she'd never get her body to calm down.

To combat her desire, she hopped to her feet and hurried over to the chair by the back door where she'd set her CD player. After skimming through a few songs, she found the one she wanted and called over her shoulder, "Hey, y'all like hip-hop?"

They tossed her blank stares, and she laughed. Blaine volunteered, "I like Lil' Wayne."

Ayana choked, eyes wide. "You lying!" She laughed again and looked at Reece. Maybe she was being stereotypical, but she'd expected him to say he liked country or at the least some white boy rock stuff, but Lil' Wayne. "You too, Reece?"

He cringed. "No."

She flipped on the song, and beats filled the late afternoon air, not too loud to disturb the neighbors but enough for them to dance too. She ran over to grab their hands. "Come on. Dance with me."

When she'd gotten them to their feet, she raised her arms and snapped her fingers while dancing backward. They followed, their eyes glued to her gyrating hips. Obedient little puppies, they tried dancing with her, but Ayana had to fight not to fall on the ground cracking up. Neither one had an idea where the beat was, but they tried the best they could, moving stiffly like it hurt.

"Oh wow, you need so much help," she teased looking at Reece push his pelvis forward like he was the King himself. She rested a hand lightly on her

head while she grooved over to him. He took hold of her hips just as she wanted him to. "Yeah, like that. Move with me."

Reece followed well. He closed the gap between them, and her breasts brushed his chest. Sweet lust took a hold on her, but before she could make him back off, Blaine closed in from behind. He didn't follow her lead as well, but the man didn't have to. His hard thigh brushed her ass, and she was no more good. Ayana broke free of the two of them and hurriedly turned the music down lower.

"Okay, that was more than I was ready for." She made a beeline for the table and sat down. "You should finish your food before it gets cold."

She didn't have to look up to know they both watched her, and Reece was the first to follow her suggestion. He sat and cleared his plate in seconds then pushed it away. "Have you ever considered a threesome?" he blurted.

Ayana had taken a sip of her tea when he spoke. She coughed. The liquid sprayed the table, and Blaine was around it in the blink to pat her back. Despite his bulky size, his touch was gentle. He didn't pound too hard. Her throat was soon clear, and she mopped her mouth and eyes with a napkin. "Thanks," she croaked.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," Reece said.

She glared at him. "Really? Because that came out of nowhere."

"Did it?" His golden gaze captured her attention, not letting it go. "You've seen from the first moment we all met, there's a connection. You want us as much as we want you. And we're all adults here."

"Yeah, that's what people always claim when they want to chuck their morals to the curb," she groused. "I have to live in this neighborhood, and I'm not trying for the slut on the block title."

"Don't worry. That title has already been taken."

Ayana blinked at Blaine, the irritation in his expression plain. She remembered the warning she'd gotten from the women yesterday, that she should watch out for Brooke. So even these two knew about her. She looked from one to the other as they watched her. Of course Brooke knew about these two fine specimens of manhood. She'd probably...

“Did you two have a threesome with Brooke?” She could have bitten her lip off for saying anything. Jealousy raged in her heart at the mere thought. What they’d done before she came was their business. She certainly wasn’t going to share details of her sexual history, except for the fact that she was clean. Her lashes lowered, and she shredded her napkin in her hands. “You do not have to answer that. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“She doesn’t interest us,” Blaine admitted.

He stood up and brought his chair around to set it beside hers, and he took her hand in his. Chills raced over her skin when he began running his fingertips along her forearm. She squeezed her legs together. Blaine leaned in close to her ear, and his breath warmed her. “Thank you for wearing the shorts.”

She’d been bold wearing the white ones with the cuff on the ends. If she bent over, half her ass would be exposed. How could they *not* think she was ready to jump in bed with them? But she’d always dressed sexy for her own enjoyment, and she played up what little she had in the way of a shape. She liked the sense of power it gave her when she went out, seeing the look of appreciation in others’ eyes, even more so with Reece and Blaine.

“I’m not going to deny I like the two of you, and it blows me away that you’re not fighting over me seeing who can get me. It’s like you have this unspoken agreement.” She eyed them. “Or did you talk about it already, agreeing to both have me? Do you share women all the time?”

Reece stood up. She couldn’t read what he was thinking anymore. Even the open attraction he’d shown all day was hidden. “Let the past be past, my beautiful Ayana. We’re not going to pressure you. We’ll get to know each other, have a little fun. If it leads to a new experience between the three of us, great. If not, well...”

He shrugged. Somehow she didn’t think that possibility really entered his mind. As far as Reece was concerned, the way she’d been acting like a woman in heat, it was just a matter of time. Blaine’s expression seemed to say the same. But he was less eloquent. He lifted her chin with one beefy hand and kissed her on the lips. Nothing too passionate, no tongue, just a peck. Still it left her shaken.

At the gate leading to the front of the house, Reece paused and also gave her a chaste kiss and whispered. "I'll call you." And they were both gone.

Ayana went into the house forgetting all the leftover food, the dishes, and everything. She flopped face first on the couch and lay there unmoving. When she couldn't breathe, she turned her head to stare at her blank TV screen. They hadn't come in the house, so she'd cleaned up like a mad woman for nothing. But that wasn't what numbed her brain. What had her forgetting how to function was having two sexy men wanting her, ready to fulfill the fantasy that probably every woman had and few got to experience. She must be insane for even considering it, but she would. Oh, she *so* would!

Chapter Four

Ayana packed the last of the food she'd prepared in a basket and wiped her hands. She took everything to sit on the table beside the front door and then checked her appearance in the mirror above it. Today she wore a sundress. While it was short enough to reveal half her thighs, she didn't think it screamed "do me now" as much as the shorts had a few days ago. Something told her that wouldn't stop Reece and Blaine from lusting over her, but that wasn't a bad thing.

With a grin of happiness spreading over her face, she grabbed her sweater and opened the front door. Brooke was just crossing the street headed in her direction. Ayana sighed. The only reason she knew the woman was Brooke was because Reece had pointed her out. All thoughts of him and Blaine having a threesome with her had left the building. *Yeah, probably not*, she thought.

Brooke wasn't unattractive really. Just not the stuff of fantasies. The way everyone had talked about her, Ayana had thought she was drop-dead gorgeous and had single and married men begging for one night in her bed. The woman was instead a lush. She drank until she was drunk, and when that happened, she was silly and sex hungry rolled into one. Her figure was round, and she wore round dresses. Ayana had always felt a woman should accentuate her figure no matter her size, not downplay it. So odd that Brooke would be running behind men and offering herself to them while at the same time dressing in what amounted to quality tents.

With all that in mind, Ayana did not want to talk to her. She'd known plenty of women in New York who were man hungry and who would do anything to get one. She'd also known plenty of drunks. Not her idea of fun.

Halfway across the street, Brooke waved her arm in greeting as if they were old friends. "Hey, girl." Why did those two little words remind Ayana of Drew Barrymore in *Never Been Kissed* when she was trying to look like a cool high school student. Brooke looked nothing like Drew. Her hair was long and straight, dark brown and parted down the center. Her skin was pale like she didn't spend much time in the sun or maybe she couldn't tan at all.

Ayana was about to greet her despite her feeling when out of nowhere Blaine stood next to her. He moved in front of her so she could only see his broad back and nothing more. For a minute, she thought she heard a low growl like that of an animal, but she dismissed it. This was the suburbs, not the country for goodness sake, and most people kept their animals on a leash. She'd never seen a stray dog in this neighborhood.

When she heard no more from Brooke, she stepped around Blaine to just catch Brooke disappearing into her house and slamming the door. Ayana wrinkled her nose. "Okay, that was weird. You'd think she'd have run over here faster seeing you. But whatever." She put a possessive hand on his arm without thinking about it. "Ready for our picnic?"

He smiled down at her, apparently not a care in the world. "Definitely. Did you cook?"

She laughed. "I'm getting the feeling you like me for my food, man. So not good."

"Oh no," He swooped her into a strong embrace that took her off her feet. Her heart raced when he leaned down and kissed her. "You have a lot more I want than just food."

Ayana almost toppled with overstimulation when he set her down again. And Reece strolled up just in time to steady her. She tipped her head back to thank him as he stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders. Her breath snagged in her chest just looking from him to Blaine and back again.

"Thanks," she murmured.

Reece ran a thumb across her cheek and then patted her ass, turning her in the direction of his SUV. "Any time. Let's get going, huh?"

Ayana grumbled, but she did as he asked. "Don't do that out here. Anyone could see."

He raised his eyebrows at her as he climbed into the driver seat and her on the passenger side. "Are you ashamed of us?"

"Please. What woman would be? No, I just know Brooke's watching us through her window. Everybody in the neighborhood will be talking about me going out with the two of you and come to the conclusion that I'm doing you both."

"I'm not opposed to making that true," Reece teased as he pulled out of the drive.

"Me either," Blaine quipped from the back seat.

She rolled her eyes at them while she clicked her seatbelt into place. "Well, I haven't decided to take you up on that offer. What if I'm more interested in one of you, rather than the other?" She knew she'd asked them the same question over and over for the last few days, but the truth was she was scared to take that step. Just looking at them told her sex with them would be explosive, but what kind of woman did it with two men at once? She'd never thought she'd be that type. But Reece and Blaine were into her like no men ever had been. They'd obviously been friends for a while. She couldn't mess that up. This was a huge risk for all of them.

A short while later, Reece pulled up to the park by the lake. Ayana breathed in the fresh, warm air, enjoying the sound of the birds chirping and the shade from the trees. She stepped out of the SUV and grabbed the blanket she'd packed. When she would have pulled the basket out too, Blaine's big arm came around her waist and he hoisted her out of the way to get it himself.

She shook her head chuckling and found a spot to lay out the blanket. In the distance, several other people had their same idea of enjoying the park, but she was glad no one was close by. Their spot felt secluded and private.

Once they were settled on the blanket, she opened the basket and began sorting through the food and drinks. "Do y'all want to eat now or later? I think it's warm enough to swim. We might want to get in the water for a while first."

Reece eyed her blouse front. "Do you have a suit on under that?"

She smirked. "Well I'm not skinny-dipping if that's what you hoped for."

He tsked. "Too bad."

"What about you?" she asked, pointedly staring at his crotch. "You got swim shorts on?"

He shrugged and lay on his back with his hands tucked behind his head. "These double as swimming trunks. I'm easy. But if you want to see me naked, you have only to say the word."

“One-track mind.” She twisted the cap off of a beer and handed it to him. Somehow she already felt domesticated. A second beer she passed to Blaine. He rested his back against a tree, his legs extended straight out. Seeing them crossed at the ankle was incongruent with his size. Blaine looked like the clichéd bull in a china shop, but she’d never seen him clumsy.

“Ayana, tell me about your family,” Reece encouraged her.

She looked to see if he was really interested, and from his attention to her, she concluded that he was. “Nothing interesting to tell really. I have two sisters and one brother. I’m the youngest.”

She must have had a funny expression on her face with the last part because he reached out and took her hand, twining his fingers between hers. “You don’t get the respect you deserve because you’re the youngest.”

“Not exactly.” She hesitated. Normally, she wouldn’t talk about the differences she had with her family, but sharing it with him felt natural. “I don’t bring men home often. I don’t know why. I just don’t, and one particular time I did, most of my family felt he wasn’t about anything. Never mind that he had a job, a car, and seemed like he had money. Maybe they could sense something I didn’t. I was so into him. Anyway, he showed his true colors real quick. He got his hands on my money and cleaned me out. Later, I found out he was messing with my friend, and she knew he was with me.” She waved her hand. “That’s a whole other story. With the help of my father and some people he knew we caught up with him.”

She fell silent, staring down at the sandwiches she’d unpacked but hadn’t put on plates yet. The same old embarrassment and humiliation washed over her. How could she not see what that bastard was all about? Her mother and sisters, even her cousin, had lectured her for hours, and they didn’t trust her to make her own choices after that. That’s why she’d moved to North Carolina, to get out from under them. Buying her house proved to them only so much that she could handle her own business.

Blaine tugged her onto his lap, and she stiffened looking around to see if anyone was looking. He wound his arms around her waist and made her lean into his big chest. A sense of protection and warmth stole over her. She didn’t dare trust this because she might have shown that she could get her

finances right again, but that didn't mean she wasn't still a lousy judge of men. For the time being she enjoyed him holding her.

He nuzzled her face and found her lips for a kiss. Ayana gave into it. When Blaine raised his head, she expected lust-filled eyes but found anger instead and gasped. "Where is he? What's his name?" he demanded.

She realized why he was ticked and stroked his strong jawline. "Thanks, you're so sweet. But he's serving time. After I went to trial over that asshole, so many women came out of the woodwork claiming he'd done that mess to them. He won't be doing it any time soon."

Blaine didn't seem appeased. He gritted his teeth. Reece chuckled and sat up. He grabbed a sandwich, ripped the plastic off of it, and stuffed it into his mouth. When he finished chewing, he said, "Don't tell him anything, Ayana. The idiot would hunt the man just to avenge you in his own way."

Her bear, which was what she was beginning to think of Blaine as, glared at Reece, but the other man only laughed again. They were as different as night and day, but she liked them both for that. Imagining if she had to choose between the two, she tried to figure out which one she'd go with. Reece was lighthearted and fun. He laughed and smiled easily, and conversation was usually with him and Blaine adding gruff responses in between. On the other hand, Blaine was so protective. She had no doubt he'd beat up her ex without blinking an eye if he ever came across him. Blaine's bulky size and his barely contained desire had her on fire. To be enveloped in his arms made her dizzy with happiness and contentment.

"What do you do?" she asked him over her shoulder.

"For a living?" he asked. She nodded. "Landscape."

She waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't. She laughed. This was why she wouldn't only have Blaine as a lover. She looked over at Reece. He explained. "He's being modest. He owns his own company. The bear might not look it, but Blaine's got a good head for business and is something of an inventor. He holds two patents on some type of motor for landscaping equipment. If you could wrestle more than a sentence out of him, he could tell you all about it."

Her eyes widened. “Wow, cool.” Blaine rewarded her with a hungry kiss. She had to push him back to keep herself in control. “And you, Reece?”

He’d gone back to lying down with his hands behind his head. “I’m just a lowly office worker.” Blaine grunted, and Reece sighed. “Fine, I am VP of a small firm.”

She blinked. “And you live on Lawnwood Drive?”

“I don’t take myself or life too seriously,” he responded.

She smiled. “I like that philosophy.” She wiggled out of Blaine’s arms and stood up. Both men watched her as she stripped off her dress. Ayana bit her bottom lip as she tugged her bikini bottom pretending not to notice how they feasted on her with their eyes. A plain woman never felt so beautiful. “I’m going for a swim. You can’t come, Reece, because you just ate.”

He leaped to his feet. “As if I’m not going to follow you wherever you go!” He practically tore out of his shirt and threw it on the grass. His shoes weren’t far behind, and Blaine shed his clothing as well.

Ayana ran down toward the water with both of them hot on her heels.

Chapter Five

Ayana woke up on Saturday having come to a decision. She was going to go for it with Blaine and Reece. She still didn't know a whole lot about them as far as personal stuff. A search of Blaine's name on the Internet had revealed a website for his landscaping business. The man was more successful than he'd let on just as Reece said. But she wasn't planning on losing her heart. This was about sexual enjoyment, and she was so going to do just that.

After a quick shower, she perused her closet for the perfect outfit to wear and then wondered if she shouldn't just choose something she didn't care a lot about. Something told her the minute she let Blaine know she was open to having sex with him, the man would rip her clothes off.

A tingle passed over her spine just thinking that. She'd never had a lover so aggressive as to go that far. But what woman hadn't fantasized about a hot man grabbing hold of her panties and tearing them into scraps of cloth. *So sexy.*

She imagined both Reece and Blaine doing it and then chastised herself. Rather than falling into a fantasy, she could have the real thing. So long as they were both still on board with sharing. After showering and brushing her teeth, she selected a minidress of butter yellow, which set off her mocha skin nicely. She slipped her feet into sandals and jogged downstairs to the first floor of her house.

Ayana could call but why delay things when she could be at one of her men's front door in seconds. Peeking outside, she made sure the coast was clear as far as neighbors and then felt childish. She raised her chin and flung the door open to step out. *Damn, now which one?*

Did she prefer one over the other? Not really. They both had their pluses. Both tugged at her desire to feel his hands on her body. At a roadblock, she stood there thinking. Not until Reece's door opened was the decision taken out of her hands.

He strolled across the half lawn expanse that separated their houses. “What are you doing out here just standing around?” he asked, amusement in his eyes.

Ayana put a hand on her hip and offered him a sassy smile. “I was trying to think which of you gets to know first that I’m ready.”

Reece stood stock still in front of her, staring. “By ready, you mean...”

She nodded.

Disbelief and excitement mingled in his eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.” She tugged at the strings that tied the top of her dress and played with them. “Do you like my dress?”

His gaze was like a full-body lick from her feet to her head as he scanned her entire form. “Very much. Now, you go inside your house. I’ll call Blaine.”

She wanted to ask why she had to go back in the house, but he turned her at the shoulders and gave her a little push forward. When she stepped over her entryway, she glanced back to find him returning to his own house. Ayana frowned. She supposed he wanted to clean up some and then he’d be back over. He could knock on the door. She shut it and began pacing. This was more of a production than she expected. This situation had taken too much thought, and now it felt like planning. Shouldn’t they have spontaneously fallen into bed all together?

While she considered it, the next knock she heard came from the back door rather than the front. Now she got what Reece had been doing. He knew she was still worried about what people thought in the block, so he’d used the back door and probably got Blaine to do it as well.

Now that they were here, her stomach knotted painfully. She swallowed wishing she had a glass of water, but her legs were too rubbery and her hands shook too much for her to answer the door and handle a glass at the sink.

She opened the door to both men, and they stepped inside her kitchen. All of a sudden the space she’d thought was just enough for her seemed more like a closet. Blaine and Reece both big men took up all the room in the area and towered above her. Her eyes widened, and she stumbled backward. Reece threw out a hand to steady her.

“Hey, easy, we can take this as slow as you need. Okay?” he said.

She nodded, not trusting herself to say a word or they'd know how nervous she was. Of course with the buggy eyes, they probably had a clue. She led the two of them upstairs to her bedroom, and while she stood next to her bed, Blaine shut the door. Reece moved closer to her and ran a gentle hand along her jawline. Ayana's breath caught in her throat. But soon her desire moved past her fear, and she remembered just how much she wanted these men.

Reece seemed to sense her rise in awareness of him. He opened his arms, and she stepped into them. Her palms flattened against his chest, and she tilted her head to the side as he searched out the sensitive skin at her neck.

Ayana shuddered and closed her eyes. "How can you know just the spot...?"

The tip of his tongue delved into the hollow at the base of her neck, just onto her shoulder. Tremors of delight passed through her. But before she could totally lose herself in what Reece was doing, Blaine came up. He tapped Reece, and Reece stepped aside as if they were doing a tag team thing. She melted into Blaine's big arms. His loving was miles different from Reece's. He hoisted her into his arms with her legs wrapped around his waist. His invasion of her mouth with his tongue was not a question of was she ready but a demand to give it up now.

Ayana's body flamed to life. She didn't protest when Blaine laid her on the bed and followed with a knee between her legs. Her heart pounded in her chest. She licked her lips as she watched him raise her dress. Just like she'd imagined, Blaine curled his fingers around the delicate material of her panties and snatched them off. They tore apart under his huge hands, and she had to bite down on a moan.

"You big oaf," Reece growled. "I told her we would take it slow."

Blaine glared at him. "How can I when I can smell her come wetting her pussy?"

This time, Ayana did moan. Blaine's rough words set her off. She wriggled on the bed as he laid a hand on her thigh. He was going to go down on her. She knew it, and he looked hungrier for it than any of her previous lovers. All of them had done it because they wanted to be sucked in return.

Blaine's expression said he didn't care if she did suck him. He wanted to lick her pussy as much as he liked. Who was she to stop him?

"I'm okay, Reece," she said and looked up at him. He studied her face and then bent down to kiss her. When he raised his head, he took hold of her leg and lifted it. The movement gave Blaine greater access to her pussy. Ayana cried out at the first touch of his tongue. He laved her from the bottom of her moist folds to the top. He scooped her opening taking her come into his mouth. She writhed and murmured his name. "Oh, Blaine, what are you doing?"

Reece whistled as he watched his friend eat her. "Mm, yeah eat her, Blaine. Make our Ayana come."

His encouragement made her all the more hot. The actions of Blaine's tongue were torment, especially when he closed his lips over her sensitive bud and began sucking. She all but screamed and tried to pull away. Reece held her in place, staring into her eyes. He held her captive with those gold depths.

"Reece," she whispered.

"No, you don't, baby. It's good, isn't it? You like it?" He pushed her dress higher, exposing her small breasts. She couldn't help hoping he wouldn't find them unattractive, but his eyes widened as he stared down at her. "I had no idea how dark your areolas are. They look like chocolate. Are your nipples sweet?"

"Find out," she said with shaky boldness.

Reece didn't waste time sampling her nipples. They were already rigid peeks, but his tongue swirling around the edges and then his lips pulling them into his mouth to suckle made them ache. She arched into his touch, closing her eyes while pushing her fingers into his hair.

"Mm, I can't believe..." she stuttered, "at the same time..." She pumped her hips against Blaine's mouth and lifted her head to watch as Reece tease her breasts. Her orgasm was building fast. The stimulation was overwhelming, but Reece laid a hand on her belly to keep her in place. Blaine's grunts as he sucked on her clit were the final straw. She screamed. Her core muscles tightened. Her climax shattered all ability to do anything

other than lie there and enjoy. She whimpered their names as her muscles spasmed.

Blaine reached under her and cupped her ass cheeks in both hands. He lifted her hips to catch every drop of her cream as it dripped down her channel. His hunger didn't abate until she'd shivered through a second orgasm and then a third. At last, he raised his head and sat up. Ayana gasped and blinked when she thought his face was different like it had shifted to someone or *something* else, but Reece moved in front of his friend before she could be sure the lust hadn't been playing tricks on her mind.

"Are you ready for me?" Reece asked.

She wanted to look around him to check Blaine, but then Reece opened his slacks. This time, Ayana could have whistled in appreciation at the size of his cock. Reece was long with a nice girth. His cock was slightly curved, and it was rock-hard. Her breath came out in pants as she stared at him. Ayana pulled her dress up over her head. She tossed it to the floor and lay back against the pillows.

Reece's eyes blazed with his desire. He shed his clothes and pulled out a condom packet from his pocket. While he rolled it onto his cock, Blaine stood up to take his clothes off as well. Ayana stared at him, but he appeared normal. She'd been imagining things. All thought of him having changed left her mind. Blaine's cock matched his stocky size. He was so thick, it scared her a little about taking him inside her. But hell, she wasn't turning him down.

"Come here," she said, holding her hand out.

Blaine's eyebrow went up at her command, but he came closer to the bed. She wrapped her fingers around his thickness and stroked. Blaine's breath hissed between his teeth. Ayana waited until Reece held her legs up and pushed the head of his cock into her pussy. Her fingers spasmed on Blaine's cock, squeezing him. He groaned in pleasure.

"Yes," she cried out. "Give it to me."

Reece pushed her legs even higher so that her ass rose off the bed as he seated himself deeper into her pussy. She groaned and wiggled. The contracting of her core made her feel like she was going to come again, but

she willed it to hold. Reece drove in as deep as he could and then pulled out. The sensation was too good to be over too soon. He grunted with each entry. "Oh, baby, you're so wonderfully tight. I wish I could get every inch in you."

"Try," she begged. But he was too long, at least nine inches. He moved with precision even though he quickened his pace. He knew how far to go without bumping her cervix. While he pinched her hips in a strong grip, he thrust into her pussy. Ayana called out his name.

Her lust increased so much, she had a craving to taste Blaine in her mouth. She looked up at him and found he watched her with dark, almost black eyes. Her lips parted at the danger she saw there, but she wasn't scared so much as nervous about Blaine's strength. He put a knee on the bed and moved closer. He caught her under the chin and tugged his cock from her fingers. A thrill passed over her when Blaine fed her his cock. She had to open her mouth wide to get his thick head between her lips. Precome flavored her tongue.

"Suck it hard," he insisted. She obeyed, taking it a bit deeper and pulling on his length at the same time. Blaine groaned. Soon she was lost in squeezing his shaft in her fist while Reece pounded between her legs. He was the one that let go first, shouting her name and throwing his head back as his hips rocked against her.

Reece kept up a slow pump into her pussy while she sucked hard at Blaine's cock. He pulled him out and licked his thick head, swirling her tongue around the tip. He tangled his fingers in her hair and tugged a little, but Reece growled, "Easy with her."

She looked up at her bear of a lover and knew that it was taking everything he had to keep control. She'd been right about Blaine having a danger about him. She was still too turned on to be afraid of him.

"Do you want to try DP, Ayana?" Reece asked.

Her eyes widened. She knew just what DP meant but felt kind of embarrassed to admit it. "DP?"

He grinned. "Double penetration. The big guy will fill your sweet pussy, while I'm in the back." She was about to reach out to stroke him to be sure

he was ready, but the man hadn't gone down at all. His shaft was erect. He'd discarded the condom and was preparing another. Something told her taking on the two of them was going to wear her out. But hell what woman would turn down this opportunity?

"Yes," she breathed, and she sat up. Reece replaced her in the position on her back, and Blaine hoisted her like she weighed nothing on top of his friend. A shiver of anticipation brought goose bumps to the surface of Ayana's skin. She watched as Blaine lifted her legs and held them high. He dipped two fingers into her pussy and made sure they were good and coated with her thick juices before teasing the hole at the back. Her eyes fluttered closed when he pushed in one then two fingers. She squirmed and whimpered, loving the feel of it. A tight fit, but it didn't hurt at all. She loved anal sex and enjoyed it with most of her past lovers.

"Tell me you like that, Ayana," Blaine commanded.

She moaned. "I like it. Don't stop."

He didn't. He worked her anus while Reece played with her clit. With his other hand he turned her head so he could capture her lips, and she surrendered herself to him. Reece stuck his tongue between her lips and swirled in the warm depths. She greedily kissed him back, seeking to experience more of his flavor.

"She's ready," Blaine announced, and Reece lost no time in guiding his cock head between her ass cheeks. Ayana gasped and groaned, but she took every inch. At least from this angle and because it was in her rear, she could take all of him.

Reece's fingers laced with hers on both sides of them. He began a slow grind that sent her flying. Ayana cried out as an orgasm careened through her system. She'd never had one with a man in her butt alone, but Reece had taken her there. Still, the pleasure wasn't over. Blaine had put on a condom as well, and he pushed his cock head between her slick folds.

"Slowly," Reece barked, as if he either felt it or sensed what Blaine was doing.

"I'd never hurt her," Blaine said, but he wasn't exactly gentle. His thick shaft pierced her and ground deep fast. Ayana's teeth chattered. Another

orgasm took hold, aftershocks. They fit so snug, and the sensation was so much she didn't know whether to moan or faint. She could do nothing but lie there allowing these two fine men to assault her body. They moved in unison thrusting into her pussy and ass, and then they moved at odds, first one, then the other. Blaine withdrew, and then Reece. Blaine pounded into her, and Reece followed.

Ayana screamed her pleasure. She'd never been a screamer either, but this was beyond anything she'd ever felt. "Stop," she begged. "No, don't stop. Don't ever stop!"

Her mind was in a whirl. This was all too much and not enough. Neither man gave into her pleas except to keep driving into her over and over. Ayana came for the millionth time. She'd lost count. Blaine jerked above her. His hold on her legs slipped. Her legs came down some because she had no strength to keep them up. A tighter squeeze, and he cursed. She knew he'd climaxed and smiled with her eyes closed.

Blaine panted above her, but Reece continued to pump into her rear until he reached his second orgasm. Finally, the two of them pulled out, and she rolled to Reece's side to land on the bed in an exhausted heap. When she caught her breath, she whispered, "I never knew it could be that good. Wow...just wow."

Reece rolled over and pulled her to him while he spooned her. His heavy arm rested over her abdomen. "There's plenty more where that came from."

She eyed him over her shoulder and Blaine who was discarding his used condom from an erect shaft. "Why do I feel like you two can go many more hours?"

Reece chuckled. "I don't know." He rubbed against her. She felt his shaft push against her rear. The man still hadn't gotten enough. A thrill shot through her. Well neither had she.

"Different positions?" she suggested hopefully.

Blaine climbed on the bed and scooped her into his arms. "Every way, until I have sampled every inch of your beautiful body."

"Mm," Ayana cooed. "Let's get started."

Chapter Six

Ayana had kicked the two men out of her house sometime around midnight. The sun had risen hours ago, but she'd been unable to move a muscle. Now that it was past noon, she struggled to her feet and winced toward the bathroom. Off and on all day yesterday, the three of them had made love. The only time they'd let her off her back or off their laps was to go get something to eat. Not that she'd been complaining. No way. If she was going to have two men at once, she was going to enjoy every second.

However, today, she was paying for her wantonness. Sore muscles and guilt. Too many women out in the world were looking for a good man, and she'd selfishly taken two. She ran the shower until the water was hot but tolerable and stepped inside. Okay, so the thought that she shouldn't be stingy passed through her mind, but she wasn't certain she was ready to give Blaine and Reece up. Not for some mystery woman, certainly not for one of the women in the block who'd had plenty of chances before she moved down there.

Alrighty-then, Ayana, you've officially gone insane with too much sex.

She grinned. When she made them leave, they still had desire in their eyes. They were like insatiable animals, and it turned her on just seeing how much looking at her got them hard. This was a dream to be enjoyed for the time being. Not for a moment did she think it could lead anywhere.

She ran her hands over her body, kneading sore muscles where she found them. If she was honest with herself, she'd admit she could love Blaine and Reece, maybe even felt a little something now. But that would be just that hormone thing that made a woman attached to the men she slept with. Had she screwed herself royally taking them both? What if in the end it did come down to a choice? The hormone, she suspected, wasn't choosy on its own. The thing had probably equally latched her to both men.

Ayana sighed. When she stepped out of the shower to dry off, she was resolute. A little more time. She'd let things play as they would and not question it for now. While she lotioned her skin and picked out something to wear, the doorbell rang. She frowned considering whether to hurriedly get

dressed or to toss on a robe to answer it. Her clothes won out just in case it was one of her men. They didn't need to start imagining she had nothing on under the robe. Her body was so not ready for more acrobatics.

By the time she'd scrambled into a bra, panties, and a dress, she was surprised the person was still at the door when she went downstairs. *Determined much? Sheesh.*

She opened the door to find Brooke standing there, darting furtive looks to the left and right. The words *crazy* and *dramatic* trembled on Ayana's lips, but she kept her opinion to herself. "Uh, Brooke, right? You okay?"

The bold woman darted past Ayana into her house and slammed the door closed. She rested a hand on her chest, half-exposed boobs rising and falling. Ayana crinkled her nose in disgust and put a hand on her hip. *I know this heifer didn't just barge into my house uninvited.*

"Is there something I can do for you because we don't know each other well enough for you to just charge in here. In fact, we don't know each other at all," she snapped.

Brooke's face took on a pitying expression. Ayana narrowed her eyes. She'd seen enough of that from her own family. She didn't need it from someone she didn't know. Brooke didn't seem to recognize how pissed off she was. She grabbed Ayana's arm, widening overly made up eyes for early afternoon. "I'm worried about you, and I thought I should come over and warn you."

Ayana shook her hand off and smirked. "Oh, you're worried about me. Somehow I don't believe that for a second. You think I don't know your reputation?" Common sense and just plain not repeating gossip she had no evidence of should have told her to keep her mouth shut, but this woman was irritating the mess out of her. The bottom line was she was jealous, like half the women around here. Ayana wasn't delusional. She knew she didn't command sexy men's attention on a daily basis. This was special, and why shouldn't she enjoy it without heifers like this trying to tear it down. "You want them for yourself. I heard there's not a single man around here you haven't propositioned or right out slept with. What, Reece and Blaine not

giving in to your offer and you're making sure no one gets them? How juvenile can you get?"

Brooke turned bright red. Her eyes narrowed. "They're dangerous. They threatened my life!"

Ayana jerked her front door open. Without a second thought, she took Brooke's arm and shoved her through the opening. "Maybe you should have called the police. Don't come to my house again, or I will have *you* arrested for trespassing."

"I saw them come out from behind your house late last night," Brooke blurted. Ayana slammed the door in her face. Before she realized she was going to do it, she started crying. Not noisy sobs, but tears streaming down her face. She had no reason to believe anything that woman had to say, but experience had taught her that she wasn't a good judge of character in men. What if there was something about them? After all, men didn't normally share their women like Reece and Blaine seemed happy to do. And she'd seen the darkness in Blaine's eyes, like he was more than what he appeared. Even though he'd been gentle with her, if rough around the edges, that didn't mean he wasn't hiding a temper.

She walked to the couch and sank down onto it to draw her knees to her chest. About to give in to a bout of self-pity, she recalled the last words Brooke said before she slammed the door in her face. Brooke had seen the guys leave her house. Of course, she was jealous, and anyone with half a brain would know what they were doing that late. She grinned and wiped her face. Relief washed over her. Okay, that whole episode had been prompted by Brooke wishing she was the one in the middle of that yummy sandwich. Whatever, she wasn't getting Reece and Blaine. For now, they were all Ayana's, and she wasn't giving them up any time soon. She would guard her heart while giving them her body. Just thinking it had her sexual desire igniting. She'd never thought she could want it as much as she did now, but the guys had turned something on in her that wouldn't be satisfied except by their touch.

She lay on her belly across the couch and reached for her cell phone. With a single button touch, she dialed Reece. He answered on the first ring. "Hey, beautiful, I was just going to call you."

She grinned. "Really? Why?"

"Missing that sexy body of yours."

She rolled her eyes and then flipped onto her back so she could look up at the ceiling. "Oh yeah? What about it?"

"Your chocolate nipples for one."

"Hmm," she responded, "yeah you do like sucking them a lot, but I'm sure they don't taste like chocolate."

"Have you tried them?" His tone had gone deeper like their conversation had begun to turn him on. That didn't stop her from hearing the other person in the room saying something about did Reece really have to talk so openly about his sex life while he was there. Ayana didn't know whether to be embarrassed or laugh at Reece's boldness. The man had no shame.

"Who was that? Where are you, Reece?"

"At work," he said. "That was my coworker, John. He has no appreciation of the fact that I can't get enough of you and I've done more talking about you than actual work today."

"Don't get in trouble on my account." She warned him, but she was still excited by the fact that he couldn't get her out of his mind. Of course, it might have been better if he thought of something other than sex, or in addition to it at least. "You should try to work so you won't get fired. I'm lucky I'm off today, but then I work from home. My boss isn't breathing over my shoulder."

"Must be very nice," he quipped. "Okay, my love, if you promise to open your sweet legs to me when I get home, I will make an attempt to be productive while I'm here." The man in the background growled Reece's name, but he only laughed. "Is it a deal?"

She sighed. "Fine, it's a deal. Now behave yourself. Bye."

"Bye." He clicked off.

Ayana sucked in another deep breath and let it go. Guard her heart. Yeah, right."

A lawnmower started up outside, and she got up to walk over to the window. When she pulled the curtain back, it was to find Blaine riding a standing mower around her front lawn. She watched as he gripped the controls, arm muscles already glistening wet from the heat of the sun. His tan was deep from being out in the elements probably all year around. When he zoomed by near her, he glanced up as if sensing her watching. The look in his eyes was possessive. She shivered both with nerves and excitement. Instinct told her Blaine would protect her no matter what the foe if ever she needed it. That was a nice thought.

She left the window and went up to the second floor where her office was. While her computer powered up, she dialed her boss. Kevin picked up on the third ring. "Hey, I thought you were off today."

"I am." She bit her lip, hesitant. "You remember you told me you have that friend in law enforcement?"

He chuckled. "My ex-girlfriend, yeah. What about her? Are you in trouble with the law, Ayana?"

She sucked her teeth. "Man, please. I'm not the one. No, I'm just hoping you're still on good terms with her. I...uh...I need a favor."

Kevin was more than her boss. He was a friend. In fact, they'd gotten to know each other online a few years ago and then had coffee and became good friends in the real world. Funny enough, there'd never been any romantic feelings between them—at least not on her part. She was pretty sure she hadn't missed any signs. But when Kevin decided to use his life savings and his expertise in web development to start up a business, he offered her the job of being his assistant. The salary spoke to her, and hell her job at the time hadn't been going well. The handwriting so to speak had been on the wall. She'd jumped at Kevin's offer, especially since the position was a work at home one. The two of them had never looked back, and she'd been right to trust Kevin's brilliant mind. His business was a huge success, and for the last three years, she'd gotten raises. That had allowed her to move away from her family to live in North Carolina.

"Seriously," Kevin insisted, "you can tell me if you're in trouble, Ayana. I'll help you no matter what."

She smiled, feeling warmed by his assertion. Kevin knew all about her disastrous past relationship, but she didn't want to go into details and hear him warn her off of a threesome with two men she didn't know. "Thanks. I just want you to see if your friend can find anything out about someone. Uh, two someones."

While she spoke, she did a quick search of public records online for Mecklenburg County. The site would share info on the owners of the two houses on either side of hers. She was in luck that both Reece and Blaine owned their houses rather than rented.

"I was wondering if you can have your friend check to see if there's anything on a Reece Covington and Blaine Shore."

"Criminal history you mean?" he asked. Her stomach knotted with guilt.

"Um, I guess." She didn't want to believe that either of them had a wrap sheet, not to mention not wanting to look into their backgrounds at all. There was such a thing as trust and violating a person's privacy. She could just ask them what she wanted to know, and she knew many people would condemn her who didn't understand the horror, the hurt, and the humiliation she'd gone through, and continued to at the hands of her loving family after what her ex-boyfriend did. No one but someone who had dealt with it could truly get how vulnerable it left a person. She couldn't just be careful or ignore her fears and just go back to the innocent thing she was back then.

Kevin spoke in a low, gentle tone. "Care to tell me what this is about?"

"Not really." She tensed waiting for him to deny her help if she wasn't going to give him details.

He sighed. "Okay, I'll see what I can find out and get back to you. If you need me, I'm always here, Ayana. You know that."

She smiled. "Yeah, I know."

"Good, now get back to enjoying your day off because I plan to work your ass tomorrow. I've got a backlog."

Ayana grunted and said her good-byes before she hung up the phone. She focused on her computer and looked up various recipes for dinner. Reece and Blaine loved food. She intended to make them a feast that would have them smacking their lips long after it was devoured. If guilt drove her to

do it, she didn't let it get to her too much. She was a woman alone in a state far from family and friends. She did what she had to do.

Chapter Seven

At four, Ayana had just stepped from the shower, when she heard her cell phone ringing. With a towel wrapped around her torso, she darted for it and shivered as the cool air in the room caressed her wet skin.

“Hello?” she said, slightly out of breath.

“Ayana, what have you been doing?” Kevin teased.

“Shut up, nut.” She laughed. “I was just running trying to get the phone before it stopped. “What’s up?”

“I got some info on your friends.”

Her eyes widened. “So fast? That was just this morning.”

She could hear the shrug in his voice. “What can I say? My ex was good at a lot of things. Hm, maybe I should revisit that...”

“The info?” she interrupted, not wanting to go there with his love life.

“Oh yeah. No major issues. Blaine Shore had a run in with the law in South Carolina when he was fifteen. Joy riding.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Shouldn’t that have been sealed or something?”

“Maybe. I don’t claim to know much about the law. Anyway, nothing after that. His record is clean. He owns a landscaping business, and all his permits and such are in order. The other one, Reece.”

Butterflies formed in her stomach. “Yeah?”

“Nothing. He’s even cleaner than the other guy. No record of wrongdoing. My friend said she couldn’t even find out where he was from, whether it was here in NC or elsewhere. Who is he?”

“Nobody.”

“Ayana.”

“Just drop it, Kevin, okay?” She sighed. “Listen, I have to go. I’ve got something in the oven, and I don’t want it to burn. Thanks a lot for looking into them for me. You’re a true friend.”

“I am. Ayana, I—”

“I have to go, Kevin. Thanks again.” She disconnected the call not knowing if Reece with no background was a good or bad thing. He’d said he was from right there in North Carolina, but to find zilch was weird, wasn’t it?

Didn't the police always have at least some tidbit on a person even if they'd been a model citizen, like family home or something? Maybe Kevin's friend hadn't looked beyond criminal background. And the fact that Blaine had a business license had stuck out, while Reece's VP job was less something to track as far as the law.

Well, she might have been wrong to investigate them without asking in the first place, so since nothing serious had been found, she decided to drop it. Tonight would be fun, and for now, that's all that mattered.

She lotioned her skin and searched through her closet for something cute. She'd gone through all the short shorts she owned for Blaine's pleasure. The man couldn't get enough of looking at her ass in material that barely covered it. A sense of warmth stole over her thinking of that. She probably shouldn't like it so much, but how could anyone not? Blaine was gorgeous, and he wanted her. Ayana didn't live a life of men running behind her.

She remembered that she'd bought a white tube dress that hugged her figure to the point that she looked like she was curvier. The dress reached the middle of her thighs, and her shoulders were bare. She decided to accent it with a wide beige belt that zipped together at the back. The belt was simple but stylish enough to set off the plain dress. Strappy, medium-heeled sandals completed her outfit, and she was ready to see her men.

Right on time, one of them rang the bell at five. Ayana glanced at herself one last time in the mirror and tucked a few strands of black hair behind her ear. She'd pressed it straight and curled the ends, nothing fancy. Her makeup was light since she didn't enjoy wearing it during the warmer months. She left her bedroom and hurried downstairs to get the door. When she opened it, her breath caught. Blaine and Reece stood in the doorway looking good enough to eat.

"I thought we were doing the back door," she breathed.

Reece's eyebrows went up. "Are you ashamed of us?"

"You asked me that before." She stepped back to let them by. "I'm not. Aren't you two hot in those jeans?"

Blaine's eyes glittered as he captured her to pull into his arms as Reece shut the door. "I could strip," he said, and she knew he would.

A chill of excitement raced over her flesh. "I'm sure you could and would, but I didn't cook for nothing. Come on. You two can help me set the table. Mind if we eat inside today? The mosquitoes put me on the menu last time."

She knew she was babbling, but being in Blaine's arms had set her body on fire. And Reece had moved up behind her, reminding her of what they'd done last time. Goodness knew she wanted more of *that*. But as much as she talked and tried wiggling away, Blaine wasn't ready to let go.

"A kiss?" he asked.

She melted against his chest, surrendering. His mouth came down on hers, and he parted her lips to invade with his tongue. Arrows of need shot straight between her legs, and she knew her panties were beginning to get soaked. From behind, Reece ran his hands along her sides, raised them up and cupped her breasts. Her heart pounded. She arched, pushing her ass back, and he took the offering by pressing into her, his cock nestling against her rear.

When Blaine raised his head, she was out of breath, but Reece immediately took hold of her chin and captured her mouth with his own. Blaine didn't back away. He continued to hold her to him while he watched Reece kiss her. Ayana couldn't help the moan that escaped her lips. Reece left her mouth and kissed her cheeks, her nose, and her eyes. While he nuzzled her temple with his lips, Blaine swooped back in to tease her neck with the tip of his tongue. Ayana shuddered. Realizing this was getting out of hand, she slipped from between them and took a few steps toward the kitchen.

"The food," she rasped, hurrying away. Both men followed her silent like predators, and she couldn't shake the longing to run back into their arms.

"I like the dress." Blaine's words were direct and simple, but she heard the excitement in his tone. How odd that it would be him who was most attentive to the changes she made in her appearance more so than Reece.

She smiled wiggling her hips as she paused in front of the stove. "Thanks. Now, if you boys will set the table, we can get this party started. I'm starving."

Ayana couldn't help the feeling of being a real couple—triple?—as they worked together to get the food on the table and their place setting done. Reece and Blaine sat at each end of the small table, and she sat at the side. Neither man was shy about dishing out heaping amounts of her homemade mashed potatoes, brisket, and green beans, along with homemade biscuits smothered in butter. The whole meal was a bit much for the time of year, but it was what they requested. She had a feeling they were used to microwaving their meals or eating out. Since she loved cooking anyway, she didn't mind going all out, and they always appreciated it, which was a huge bonus.

"So," Ayana began between bites of food, "how did you two meet each other? Was it when you moved into the neighborhood like me?" They looked at each other, each opening his mouth to speak, then snapping it closed. Ayana frowned. Surely it wasn't that big a deal. "Hello? Anyone?"

Reece was the first to speak up. "We had a run in...uh...a difference of opinion about a situation."

"A situation?" She sat her fork down annoyed. "I'm not sure why y'all seem hesitant to tell me how you met, but I don't appreciate the secretive attitude. It's not like I asked you something private. At least I don't think I did." She glared from one to the other.

Reece reached out and took her hand. She resisted his touch, but he held on and laced his fingers with hers. Ayana stared down at her plate. She'd barely eaten a few bites, but her appetite was gone. This was like repeating her past mistakes, and Brooke's comments came back to mind.

"I'm sorry," Reece said. "The truth is when we met it was in the Stecoah-Cheoah Mountain area."

Ste-coah-Cheoah sounded familiar to Ayana. She chewed her bottom lip a minute and then snapped her fingers. "That's along the Appalachian Trail when it crosses into North Carolina, right?"

Pleasure washed over Reece's expression, and he grinned. "Exactly right." He nodded in Blaine's direction. "We both enjoy the outdoors and get out that way and other areas around the state where it's less civilized."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" She smirked. "You both seem a bit I don't know...beastly...in bed."

Reece winked. Blaine seemed uncomfortable, shifting in his chair. Ayana tried not to laugh at him. Reece always called him bear, and it obviously annoyed Blaine. *Yeah*, she thought, *he is like my big bear*.

“Anyway,” Reece continued, “we got into a disagreement about what was being done to preserve the wildlife in the area, not allowing rampant hunting. Humans can have tunnel vision regarding things that don’t immediately or directly affect them.”

“Humans, huh?” She chuckled. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. I can’t say I’ve been interested in that kind of thing, but I think it’s cool you are.” Ayana could have bitten her tongue when she saw the disappointment on Blaine’s face. But it cleared. He pushed his plate away and slid back from the table. When he indicated for her to come over to him, she went without hesitation and sat on his lap. His strong arms came around her waist, making her feel secure not for the first time. Reece didn’t appear to be bothered by her move. “I can’t imagine you two fighting. You get along well.”

“That’s because we’re clear on a few basic facts,” Reece commented.

“Like what?”

His eyes swept her with such a possessive look that she shivered and her nipples grew tight. Blaine’s hand splayed over her belly, his thumb pointing upward to the space between her breasts. Anticipation of another night spent between these two men took hold of her, and she searched her mind for something to distract the three of them. She wanted to get to know Blaine and Reece, not just jump into bed every time she laid eyes on them.

“So is everyone in your family nature lovers or just you?” she asked Reece.

He continued to stare at her, his attention focused somewhere beneath her eyes, but he answered anyway. “We’re all nature lovers. I guess you can say it’s in our blood.”

Behind her, Blaine grunted in annoyance. Reece chuckled. Ayana rubbed his hand on her belly soothingly, assuming he felt bad sometimes that he had no family. She empathized while not truly understanding what that must feel like. When she looked up at him, his eyes reflected his anger simmering

beneath the surface. That's how men were, always disguising their real emotions behind anger.

"You're always teasing Blaine," she chided Reece. "You two are like brothers, and I know that's how brothers act, but it's mean to toss out innuendoes about family when he doesn't have any."

Reece's eyebrows went up, and so did Blaine's. He rushed to say, "It's fine, Ayana. His comments didn't bother me."

"No," she insisted. "It's not all right. I think you owe him an apology, Reece." She sat forward on Blaine's lap to glare at Reece. His expression grew serious, but she wasn't letting it go.

Blaine's face was red with embarrassment. The two of them looked at each other in silence and then her. Blaine opened his mouth to say something else, but clicked his teeth together. Reece sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"I apologize."

She was surprised to hear sincerity in his tone as he looked at his friend. Then his gaze turned to her. Butterflies danced in her stomach. She was so relieved because she'd thought that if Reece refused, she'd kick him out, and she didn't want to do that.

"The last thing I want to do is offend you, Ayana," Reece said. "Tell me you forgive me."

"I don't know." She'd put her nose in the air and pursed her lips to glower at him. But her anger had melted away as soon as the words tumbled from his lips. She slipped from Blaine's arms, and he let her go, if somewhat reluctantly. She rounded the table and stood in front of Reece. He wasted no time in scooting back to let her climb on his lap facing him. His hands came up her sides and came around to cup her breasts. The squeeze of the small globes followed by a pinch of her nipples made her eyelashes lower and a moan escape her lips. "You can make it up to me," she panted.

"I accept your offer." The heat from his desire was almost palpable. His cock shifted under her, driving her own want to greater proportions. Reece ran a hand over her cheek, and she nuzzled into it. "You are the right one for us. I knew it the first time I saw you in the grocery store."

“For us,” she whispered, repeating him. “You were looking for someone to share? Tell me the truth, have you done it before? Shared a woman?” Dizziness assailed her. She should let it go. Somehow she wanted to be important to them, more than any other woman, but at the same time deep inside, she held back. She was looking for a reason to find fault, and she knew it.

Reece looked like he was going to answer, but his cell phone buzzed. He fished it from his pocket, and she watched his dark brows crash low over his eyes on seeing the name on the caller ID. Ayana put her arms over his shoulders and lay on his chest while he answered the call. She paid no attention to his conversation until his voice turned sharp.

“Yeah, we’ll be there.” He stabbed the disconnect button. “I’m sorry, baby, but we have to go.”

Ayana sat up. “What? But I thought y’all were going to stay the night.”

He looked really sorry at least. “Something came up. We’ll get back as soon as we can.”

“We?” She turned to look at Blaine. He was already standing, prepared to go. “As far as I know you two don’t work together, so what could have come up? Anything I can help with?”

Reece kissed her. He stood and put her off his lap, cleaning up his place setting. She waited for him to thank her for the offer and explain what the emergency was, but he didn’t say a word. Blaine cleaned up his mess as well and then took her into his arms. The kiss he planted on her lips was deeper than what Reece had left her with, but he too didn’t give her any explanations. She walked behind them as they headed to the door.

When Reece opened it, he turned. “I promise, we’ll come back as soon as we can. I hope we can come over no matter the time.”

She took a page from their book and didn’t answer the question. “Good night.” She shut the door in his face and locked it.

Maybe she was being unreasonable, but the sneaky crap didn’t sit well with her. And not answering pissed her off. She stomped back to the kitchen to finish cleaning up from dinner and to load the dishwasher. By the time she was wiping off the table and considering whether she felt like sweeping the

floor tonight or in the morning, someone rang her bell. She sighed and glanced at the apple clock over the sink. The night wasn't too far gone, but she had no idea who it could be. She doubted the men were back so soon. When she opened the front door, she grumbled finding Brooke there.

"Oh Lord, woman, really? Give it up. I don't want to hear it," she snapped.

"I have proof!" Brooke shouted just before Ayana could shut the door in her face. Ayana hesitated and swung the door wider. Brooke held up her cell phone. Ayana glared at her.

She sighed. "Fine, come in. If this is nothing, your ass is on my list!"

Chapter Eight

Brooke stepped into the house and began flipping through something on her phone. She gestured for Ayana to move closer, and Ayana reluctantly did. Brooke explained before she pressed play on what looked like a home video. “I was at a welcome to the neighborhood thing over at Janice’s place, and Reece and Blaine were there too. And I saw something that shocked me. I didn’t even think. I just recorded it.” She laid a hand on Ayana’s arm, and Ayana resisted shaking her off. She supposed it was obvious enough she couldn’t stand the woman because she was trying to warn her off her two lovers. Not sensing Ayana’s annoyance in the least, she chattered on. “You know how there’s just always someone with a phone camera or video at the right time?”

Ayana gritted her teeth. “Get on with it.”

Brooke sighed and pressed play. When Ayana couldn’t see well, she snatched the phone from Brooke to look at it for herself. The scene was in Janice’s backyard, or rather at the side of her house. From what she could make out, Brooke was standing just around to the front and aiming her phone at Reece and Blaine.

In front of Blaine was a rake or something, and a thick, deep-colored liquid stained the tool. Blaine was crouched down with his teeth bared in anguish, and his leg had blood running down it. Reece crouched beside him, cursing.

“Fuck, take care of that now before someone sees it,” Reece demanded.

Ayana frowned. The man had no patience or concern for Blaine. The annoyance for his attitude from earlier came flooding back. She pressed pause. “This is it? You’re telling me you came over here to show me how Blaine cut his leg?”

Brooke flared her nostrils. “Keep watching.”

Ayana pressed play again, and she watched Reece stand up and head off someone who came around the side of the house. Other voices from back there reached her but not clear, so she figured they were toward the other side or maybe inside the woman’s house. Reece returned. Brooke zoomed

the camera in awkwardly at first catching the bushes. But when she got her focus right, Ayana gasped. Pain tightened her chest. Blaine's cut was more serious than she thought. The gash was wide and deep. He would need stitches without a doubt. Anyone with half a brain could see that.

But when Blaine blew a heavy breath through his nose and held the two sides of his cut together, her head began to swim. The bleeding stopped. Reece brought out a handkerchief and mopped the excess away. Ayana's eyes widened in shock as she watched Blaine's skin begin knitting together.

"What the hell?" she whispered.

"See?" Brooke demanded. "They're not human. At least Blaine isn't. Or maybe they're genetically enhanced like you see in those sci-fi movies."

Ayana couldn't find words to answer. In a few seconds, Blaine's leg had gone from gaping open to healed as if there had never been an injury. The only evidence was a red stain on his sock. He stood up like nothing happened and scooped up the rake. She wondered what he intended to do with it, but then she switched to watching Reece. He sniffed the air.

"Someone's there," he growled.

Behind the camera, she heard Brooke whisper "Damn!" And then the video bounced around the scene until it cut off.

Ayana walked over to her couch and sank onto it. Her breath came out in heavy pants. Her throat was dry, and her stomach ached. "So what happened when it stopped? Did they find you?"

She nodded. Her face was pale like all traces of blood had drained away. The memory of her experience or just rewatching the video must have brought back the fear she'd felt. "Yeah, but not before I emailed myself the video." Her gaze took on an expression of determination. "Blaine or Reece—I don't remember which one—broke my phone. He crushed it like it was nothing, and he said if I ever tell anyone what I saw, I will regret it. I've never told anyone or showed anyone that video. This is the first time, and I thought you should know the truth."

Ayana didn't know what to think. The video had been simple and didn't appear to be doctored. Either way she couldn't deny that Reece and Blaine

had a secret they weren't willing to share. All her doubts and fears were magnified by Brooke's video. Of course she would never have thought this.

Confusion clouded her mind. Fear made her jumpy and vulnerable. She thought about them coming back late tonight wanting to be with her. Horrible visions of weird creatures ran through her thoughts, and she closed her eyes and squeezed the bridge of her nose.

"Brooke, can you go now? I'm not in the mood for company."

"Did you see what I showed you?" Brooke yelled. "They're not human, I told you. You can't keep seeing them. Everybody knows you're having an affair with both Reece and Blaine."

Ayana narrowed her eyes at the woman. "Is that what this is about? The fact that I'm seeing both men?"

"No..." Brooke seemed to search for what to say. She dropped her hands to her sides like she was resigned. "Whatever. You do what you want to do. I told you the truth and gave you proof."

She left soon after, and Ayana locked the door behind her. Weary and depressed, she climbed the stairs to her room and took a long bath. When the bubbles did nothing to soothe her mind, she got out and fell into bed with nothing on. After midnight, still awake, she stiffened when the doorbell rang. Her heart felt like it leaped into her throat. Both longing to see them and scared to, she sat up. While her mind was still a mess, she already knew what she was going to do.

She threw on a robe and descended the stairs as she knotted it. The light outside by the door illuminated Reece's face so she could see him through the peephole. Ayana cleared her throat and swallowed before calling through the door, "Not tonight, Reece."

"Baby, open the door so we can talk. I know you were mad when we left. I want to make it up to you."

She shook her head. Oh her feelings had gone to a whole new level beyond the fact that he hadn't bothered to answer her question about where they were going. Make it up to her? He couldn't begin to, and neither could Blaine. Who'd she been kidding anyway? This thing with the three of them would never have lasted. She wasn't some kind of blind fool who couldn't

see the signs—well not now anyway. She'd known that Blaine and Reece had a good sense of smell and hearing from her time spent with them. The oddities she'd observed herself like Blaine's face changing when they were having sex added to what Brooke had showed her. Now, they scared her almost as much as they attracted her. That was the hardest part. She still craved both of them like nobody's business.

"Ayana?" Blaine called through the door.

She rested her forehead on it and closed her eyes. Every time he said her name, something inside reacted. Maybe it was because he didn't say a lot in the first place. When he did, his words had that much more power. And the longing in his tone tonight was unmistakable.

"It's over," she said.

"No, I can't accept that." She thought she picked up hurt in his voice but wouldn't believe it. Blaine wasn't the type. "Open the door, Ayana. I need to see you face-to-face."

"Hell, no!" she almost shouted and made an effort to get control of herself.

Blaine interrupted. "Did something happen after we left? Do you really want us to keep yelling through the door for all the neighbors to hear at this time of night?"

She ground her teeth. He was right. She didn't want the neighbors in her business. Blaine and Reece hadn't hurt her up until now, so there was no reason to think they would this time. She'd just tell them in their faces she was done and get it over with. Pulling in and blowing out deep breaths, she opened the door. Blaine barged past Reece and dragged her into his arms.

Ayana struggled to free herself. "Blaine, let go. Like I said, it's over. I don't think I want to see you two anymore."

Reece came into the house and shut the door. Her stomach did flip-flops. They were going to make this difficult. She'd had a few difficult break ups with guys in her life. One she'd been so frustrated with over his theatrics, she told the idiot to cry outside. Not the most sensitive, but when she'd had it, she just couldn't deal. This was different. Blaine and Reece were right in so many ways.

Reece turned her in Blaine's arms and stepped close. She found herself sandwiched between them once again with Reece's hands on her cheeks forcing her gently to look up at him. "Is this about us leaving earlier or something else?"

She hesitated. "It's about me, okay? I told you I'm not going to be the slut on the block. I feel like keeping up this relationship is not working for me, so I'm ending it before things go too far and feelings get in the way.

Reece frowned. "It's a little too late for that, don't you think?" She realized he was angry, but there was something deeper behind his eyes. With Reece behind her, she couldn't tell what he was thinking—except for the fact that he hadn't let her go. He was silent holding her too him.

"Don't," he commanded softly against her ear. The word might have been an order, but she sensed pain. Had he fallen for her so quickly? Maybe he'd been through this before. Other women might have gotten involved with them and found out they had secrets they weren't trying to be open about.

She fumbled for words to explain without letting on that she knew more than she should. Reece drew in air through his nose as if he was smelling for something, and then his eyes narrowed. When his lips tightened, she had the feeling he knew Brooke had been there. As far as she could tell, Brooke wasn't wearing perfume or scented lotion that left behind traces of her. Ayana could only smell the bubble bath liquid she'd used earlier.

"What did Brooke say to you?" Reece growled.

Her chest constricted. She stared at the floor. "I don't know what you're talking about. It's late, and I have work in the morning. I think you two should leave."

"Ayana," he began.

Her temper snapped. "What are you going to do, huh? Force me? Is that what you're planning? You're going to rape me if I don't let you stay!" Her words were ballsy but she wasn't feeling it.

Reece's eyes widened. "Of course not. We'd never do that to you. The three of us wanted to be together until tonight. In fact, from the way your

body reacted to me earlier, I know you still wanted us before we left. So the question is, what the fuck did Brooke say to you?”

She jabbed an elbow into Blaine’s stomach and hurt herself in the process. Blaine rushed to soothe her arm with concern in his expression, but she shook him off. She crossed her arms over her chest. The way her former lovers glanced down at her body, she guessed her robe had inched open a bit struggling to get Blaine off her, but she wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of looking down and hiding like she was scared. “I know you didn’t just cuss at me, Reece.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Save it,” she bit out. “I told you I want you both out. Now!”

Reece appeared ready to argue but then changed his mind. She let out a sigh of relief when he turned toward the door. “Let’s go, Blaine.” Blaine didn’t move, but Reece made a low sound like a warning in his throat. Blaine followed him out the door, and Ayana slammed it closed before locking it with both locks and a chain.

She sagged against the door. Tears fell down her cheeks. *Why, why why? Why can’t I have someone special in my life long-term? Why couldn’t I have had them?*

Sniffling, she turned off the lights and went back up to her bed to toss and turn the rest of the night.

* * * *

Ayana woke up late the next morning after falling asleep around five thirty. Her head hurt, and her stomach growled since she hadn’t finished her dinner the night before. After brushing her teeth and dressing, she went downstairs to make coffee. Maybe then she could see her way clear to do some work. What she really wanted to do was feel sorry for herself and take a couple of Tylenol PMs to knock her ass out the rest of the day.

On the way back from the kitchen, she thought she saw a cop car parked across the street. She walked to the front door and opened it to mayhem. Two police cars were parked in front of Brooke’s house, and one had pulled into her driveway.

Ayana's heart hammered in her chest as she scanned the street for immediate danger, and when she didn't see anything she stepped outside. Brooke in a scanty nightie clung to the arm of one of the officers who looked harassed in the middle of taking her statement. Neighbors dotted the street, each craning their necks to listen to every detail Brooke was telling the police.

"Didn't you hear me?" she shouted. "I know who did it. What are you going to do about it? They broke into my house and smashed everything—the TV, my glass dining room table—*everything!*"

Dramatic much? Ayana sighed at the way the woman behaved. While she felt bad for Brooke, she didn't think it took wrapping herself around the man and sobbing as loud as she was to be sure everyone heard her. Brooke must have sensed Ayana had joined the spectators. She spun around to glare at Ayana and then ran over to her on bare feet. Ayana frowned. If she was going to start something, she better know the police being there wasn't going to stop Ayana from defending herself. She took a protective stance and waited until Brooke drew up in front of her.

"This is your fault," she spat. "You told them, didn't you?"

Ayana's eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I know you told Blaine and Reece about what I told you, and they broke into my house last night and destroyed the place. All I could do was hide in a closet and pray for help! I couldn't even get to my cell phone, I was so terrified." She whirled between Ayana and the police she'd left standing in front of her house. "I want them arrested. I am pressing charges."

She continued to rant, but Ayana was no longer listening. Was she right? Had the two men left her place only to go over and get revenge on Brooke? Reece had somehow known that Brooke had been at her place last night, and she could see the anger in his eyes when he demanded to know what Brooke said. The woman had claimed Reece and Blaine threatened her if she ever let their secret out. Was Ayana that much of a poor judge of character that she didn't know these men were capable of traumatizing a single woman, of destroying her property because she showed a video of them?

“Why aren’t you going over there to arrest them?” Brooke yelled, capturing Ayana’s attention again. She pointed toward Blaine’s house, and Ayana turned to look. Blaine’s truck wasn’t there. The officer walked over to Reece’s house where his SUV was parked in the drive. He knocked, and it seemed that the entire block including Ayana waited on baited breath to see if he would answer. After several pounds on the door, no one came. Brooke hugged herself and shivered visibly. “I can’t stay here. I’m going to stay with my parents.”

With that announcement, she marched back across the street. Ayana wasn’t surprised to find that she commandeered another officer to come with her inside the house because she was “too scared to go by herself.” The two women Ayana had met on the first day sidled up to her shaking their heads.

“I suspect this is a scheme of Brooke’s to get her parents to pay her bills,” one of the women said.

Ayana made a noncommittal sound. The woman needed no more than that to continue gossiping.

“She couldn’t find a man to pay them for her, so she cooked up this idea as an excuse to go back to living off her folks. They’ve got money, and Brooke has never been the same since her divorce. Guess she loved that guy a lot, but he ran off with a woman half his age.”

“Hmm,” the other neighbor chimed in, “either that or she loved *his* money. Alimony only lasts but so long.”

Ayana excused herself. She didn’t want to deal with Brooke’s mess. Whether it was a ploy or not, she didn’t know. Hell, she knew people did desperate things when it came to money even when they could just be straightforward about it. Her family had once accused her aunt of a plot when she claimed a man had climbed her fire escape, broke into her apartment, and raped her. Ayana thought it was horrifying that her own family wouldn’t believe her, but her aunt was so wild normally, one couldn’t put anything past her. Everyone thought she’d done it to avoid paying the rent.

Either way, none of it changed her situation with Blaine and Reece. She headed back up the walk to her door. Behind her, she heard Brooke's chatter as she exited her house. Someone said, "Who is that?" and Ayana couldn't help looking to see.

Would the drama never end? Brooke stopped cold at the end of her driveway, eyes wide as the third officer, who had driven off in a hurry while she was out acting a fool in the middle of the street, returned with a man cuffed in his back seat. Apparently, Brooke knew him from the look on her face.

She put a hand up to her mouth. "Cal?"

The man sneered at her. Against her better judgment, Ayana scooted back to the end of the drive to hear better what was being said. The officer asked Brooke, "What connection do you have to this man, Miss James?"

Brooke's face went red but she didn't say a word. The man must have heard what the officer asked, because he started yelling. "I'll tell you. That bitch showed up at my house after we had some fun together. She's the cause of me losing everything. My wife took the kids. She's gone. You satisfied, you slut?"

Brooke started crying. Despite what she'd done, Ayana felt sorry for the woman. To be called on the kind of life she led right to her face and in front of everyone must be humiliating. "I-I-I," she stuttered. "I have to get out of here."

A minivan pulled up then, and Brooke ran to it even before the old man behind the wheel pulled to a complete stop. The officer yelled for her to wait, but she jumped in and shook the driver's arm mouthing something to him Ayana couldn't hear. The old man calmly threw the minivan in reverse and eased out of the fray. The officers shook their heads. Ayana imagined they weren't about to give her crazy tail a chase. They'd catch up with her later. Ayana could guess now just like she supposed everyone else did about what happened. Brooke thought she could get one of her lovers to leave his wife for her. When he didn't, she thought she'd cause trouble by going to his house. His grief at losing his family made him retaliate on her. Now he was even more screwed getting arrested for breaking and entering and destruction of private property.

“Well,” one of the neighbors said, “Lawnwood Drive is not a dull place. I’ll give you that.”

“Amen,” another replied.

Ayana hurried inside her house and shut the door behind her. Blaine and Reece were innocent of this crime, but where were they? *What* were they? She hated more than anything that she still missed them. *I might be an even bigger idiot than Brooke.*

Chapter Nine

Days had passed, almost a week, and Ayana had caught a glimpse of Reece coming and going from his house, but she hadn't seen Blaine. His truck was now parked in his driveway, but it had been Reece who returned it, and Blaine hadn't been with him. She wondered where he was and what he was doing. She ached when she caught sight of Reece. He'd stopped outside his house and stared in her direction where she hid peeking through the blinds. She didn't think he saw her, but such an intense look of longing had come over his expression, it shook her. She'd stumbled away from the window, confused and depressed.

She puttered around the house, made herself some lunch, and then went back to work. Her productivity was way down, but Kevin hadn't complained as yet. She knew it was a matter of time though. He'd demand she either talk about what her issue was or get over it and do what he hired her to do. Kevin didn't pull any punches, and she was okay with that.

Around six in the evening, someone pounded on her door. At her desk on the second floor, her heart began to beat in cadence. Brooke hadn't been seen since the day of the break-in, so it wasn't likely to be her. No one else visited, not since she'd shown herself to be less than eager for the whole gossiping thing. Figuring she better see who it was only to get some peace, she went downstairs. Reece's handsome face met hers through the peephole, and she began to shake. Not from fear—or not from fear *alone*—but from missing him.

She opened the door. He stood there saying nothing, just looking at her. She stared back, taking in his unshaven appearance, his eyes red as if he hadn't slept the last week. Even with wrinkled clothes and tired, he was sexy as hell. "I need to talk to you, Ayana. May I come in?"

She hesitated. "I don't know."

"I want to tell you everything—about me and Blaine."

She gasped and then stepped back to let him pass. Healing fast like she'd seen in the video was nothing he was going to pass off as a trick of the camera or slight of hand. He better come with something real, or she'd kick

him out on his ass. Funny enough as she followed him to the couch in her living room, she prayed he would give her a good excuse, anything that would allow her to let him back into her life. Him and Blaine.

She stayed on her feet in case she had to jet, but it was everything she could do not to go over and sit on his lap when he sat down. She folded her arms over her chest and leaned against the side of the stairs to keep herself in place. Glancing at Reece through her lashes, she noticed he seemed just as hungry to get close to her. He laced his fingers together and rested his elbows on his thighs.

“What I’m going to say will be hard for you to believe. Even that bi...Brooke doesn’t know this about Blaine and me. It’s not the kind of thing we ever tell anyone who is not like us.”

“Like you?” Her stomach flip-flopped. “What do you mean like you?”

He continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “The reason I’m telling you is because I care about you—deeply. So does Blaine.”

“Hm, funny, if he cares so much why isn’t he here too?”

“Because I care,” he said, pinning her in place with those eyes that could look deep inside her and know what she longed for, “I know you’re the one for us. We both knew it the day we met, but we didn’t want to scare you.”

She blinked at him.

He sighed and leaned back to run his hands through his hair. “I think I should show you. Don’t be scared. Please, Ayana, not for a million years would I ever hurt you.”

She watched him move her coffee table into the doorway between the living room and the kitchen. He glanced around as if to judge the space. Ayana worried her bottom lip. What the heck was he about to do?

Her eyes bugged almost painfully when he began taking his clothes off. “Uh, dude, what do you think you’re doing?” she demanded.

Despite his seriousness earlier, he smiled and winked. “You missed my naked body, didn’t you?”

That goes without saying.

“I don’t want to rip apart my clothes and maybe have to slough home naked if you reject me.” Although he joked, she heard the emotion behind

his words. Whatever she said, however she reacted to what he was about to show her, Reece would be hurt if she turned him away. This could be all an act, him saying he cared, but she believed him. She admitted to herself that she *wanted* to believe him which made it that much more difficult.

He watched her face, an expression of tenderness in his until it began to change. Ayana gave a sharp cry when his nose grew out like a snout, and his eyes stretched farther apart. His entire being enlarged, and hair sprouted from seemingly every pore. Ayana knew why he'd needed the space because all of a sudden a frickin' nine hundred-pound brown bear, give or take, filled her living room.

She threw herself against the stairs, fingers hurting from gripping the spokes so tightly. The bear took a few steps toward her, and she bit off a tiny scream. He stopped, eyeing her with small round brown eyes. Ayana's throat dried. She was too scared to move. Because she just wasn't scared enough, her stupid gaze landed on the bear's paws. Long and thick claws curved into her carpet. One swipe could cut her to ribbons.

She licked her lips. "Please..."

His head went down like he was ashamed, and he began to shrink. The hair receded, muscles and bone taking on the shape of a man. Soon Reece knelt on the floor just as naked as when he started. He didn't move, didn't threaten her in any way.

"You're," she began.

He nodded.

"Are you a man who can turn into a bear, or a bear who can turn into a man?"

He cast her a confused look. "I believe I am equally both, as is Blaine."

She sank to the floor, her limbs no longer able to hold her. What she should be doing was hightailing it out of there, but somehow she didn't want to go. "Tell me."

He stood and moved as if to come closer, but she held up her hand. He respected her wish to keep distance between them and went to put his clothes back on. She watched his every move, fascinated by his body and what he could do. Sure, it still scared the crap out of her, and she didn't

know if she should be grossed out that she'd essentially had sex with an animal. But this was still Reece, the man that made her laugh and knew just how to touch her. He enjoyed cuddling, and he loved her food. Now she knew why their appetites were so huge. Who could afford to feed a bear every day?

"How long have you been like this? Did someone experiment on you?"

He laughed. "No, I was born this way, and so were most of my brothers and sisters. Some carry the gene but never change. We don't know why. The day I met Blaine, I knew he was like me. I could sense it. But he's a black bear."

Her eyes widened in awe. A black bear. Was he bigger than Reece when he changed? She guessed he was. Blaine was built like a powerhouse. A shiver of fear rippled over her skin.

Reece took his seat on the couch and glanced at her before looking away. "Another thing that will be hard for you to accept."

Ayana ran a hand over her face. "More? I don't know if I've accepted what I just saw with my own eyes. That bear terrifies me. I want you to go, but I want you to stay. I'm scared and confused. I don't want any of this to be true, but I don't think I can take anymore." Without warning, she started to cry and scrubbed an arm over her eyes. "Stupid. I hate crying in front of others. I never..." She sobbed to her shame.

Reece got up and walked over to draw her into his arms. Ayana resisted, but she was all out of strength. He picked her up and carried her to the couch to sit her on his lap. She tried to resist sinking against chest but failed. His scent was all man, nothing even hinting at a wild beast. His skin was warm and taut across solid muscle. She pressed her lips to the pulse at his throat and closed her eyes. From head to toe she shook and couldn't stop.

Reece held her close and stroked her back all the while crooning something to her she couldn't quite hear. The tone of his voice soothed her frazzled mind to a degree. Her hands crept up around his neck, and she pressed against his chest.

"What's the other thing you have to say?"

“We—our kind—have certain people that are meant to be our mates. Unlike humans, we don’t have divorce. We choose someone, and that’s it forever.”

She lifted her head and stared at him. “No divorce. Like none at all?”

He shook his head.

“Weird. But aren’t male bears like polygamous?”

He grinned. “Do you know that from study, or are you guessing?”

She flared her nostrils at him. “Answer the question. If—and that is a huge, *huge* if—if I accept you for what you are, I’m not going for the I have an excuse to cheat, baby. Bears have more than one mate!”

“Remember I said I believe we are wholly bear and wholly human. We are different from humans in that we can shape-shift and different from bears obviously in that we can reason as men even taking a bear’s form. Fate has sorted out how we mate and with whom. If Blaine and I had been simple bears, when we met you, we would have fought even as long as a month to see who was the more powerful Alpha male who earned the right to mate with you first.”

She rolled her eyes and tried getting off his lap, but he held on. “I don’t appreciate being looked at as if I’m nothing but a body.”

“Baby, I promise you, you are much more than that for both of us. We are not just bears. We knew you were our mate, destined to be ours. The circumstances are rare but not unheard of. Oddly enough in the same way that I’m sure you are mine, I’m sure you are Blaine’s. That’s why we never fought and why we will never look at another woman.”

His words didn’t instill a lot of confidence. Sure, a warm, fuzzy feeling came over her having two sexy men claim her, but the terminology—their mate? Theirs? She frowned at him. “I don’t know. I’ve never gone in for the destined thing. I think there are many people we could end up with and be happy together, but that *one*, a soul mate?” She wrinkled her nose. “Sounds too orchestrated. And shoot, women outnumber men. How greedy could I get snagging up both of you? It’s too good to be true.”

He pulled her back to his chest and wrapped his arms around her waist. His face alongside hers with little kisses planted on her skin sent tremors

coursing through her body. His breath warmed her. “Baby, tell me how it could be that Blaine and I are what we are.”

She squirmed. “How should I know?”

“If there could be shape-shifters like Blaine and I and my family, and as you can see that’s not too good to be true, then it stands to reason anything else regarding us is possible. It’s possible that there’s one person that can complete us. And it’s also possible you are that one.”

Her mind refused to accept it even though her heart beat faster with excitement. Leaning on the belief that this was meant to be felt kind of good. She wanted to go with what he said, but she wasn’t quite ready. “When you left that night and didn’t tell me where you were going...”

“A family member was in a fight. I’m sorry. I could hardly admit that we were leaving civilization for a bit.”

She blinked at him over her shoulder. “You’re telling me it was a fight between...” She swallowed. “It was an animal fight?”

He nodded. Ayana shivered. She settled into his chest again clenching her fists against the tops of her thighs. Whatever she’d felt she had accepted a minute ago, flew out the window. Them shifting into beasts and going at it head-to-head with other animals was too much. A woman had concerns like another woman turning her man’s head or work taking too much of his time, but this was crazy.

She pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes and drew in sharp breaths then blew them out. Nothing worked to calm her. “I don’t know about this, Reece. I-I like you a lot. I don’t want to let you go.”

“Then don’t.”

She started to protest, but he covered her mouth. His hand slid down her front to press gently against her mound. A shiver chilled her bringing goose bumps to her skin. Reece squeezed between her legs, and she moaned, arching her hips toward his hand. She rested both her hands over his to stop his movement. “Maybe we shouldn’t.”

“Why not?” He pushed her hand aside and lowered the zipper on her shorts. She didn’t get a squeak past her lips before he’d reached inside and

inched around her panty line to finger her clit. Ayana gasped. Her head fell onto Reece's shoulder.

"Reece," she breathed.

"Hmm?" He added more fingers to his gentle massage. Her bud swelled at his touch, and he pinched it. Ayana's ass came up off his lap, but he held her in place while rubbing her. She was so wet so fast. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth and shut her eyes. Reece teased her mouth with the tip of his tongue until she parted her lips. He invaded, filling her mouth just as he pushed digits deep within her wet snatch. After a few moments, he drew back. "Aw, baby, you've been neglected this week, haven't you?"

She keened, fighting her attraction to him, but nothing could stop how hot she was. And when Reece tugged her shorts off her hips and lowered them down her legs, she didn't give much of a fight. Her panties soon followed the shorts to the floor. Reece slid out from under her and turned her to lie on the couch. He knelt so that his head was between her thighs. She caught her breath.

"Reece, I don't know—"

He squeezed one of her thighs and raised it. "Do you have any idea how much I've missed touching your smooth cocoa skin? Do you know how I've longed to taste you?" He didn't wait for her to answer but delved between her legs to give her pussy a swipe. She writhed under him.

She put her hand on his shoulder, torn. The question she wanted to ask didn't fall from her lips. She didn't know how he'd react and didn't want to hurt him. Her mind spun when he gave several swipes along her slit and then drove his tongue deep into her creamy entrance. For an instant, she rode his mouth, fast losing control.

He raised his head. "Don't worry, baby. I'm going to make you come once just to ease your need, and then we will go get Blaine."

Her mouth dropped open. "How did you know?"

"Because as I said, just as I know you are mine, I know you're his too. It's hurting you to be away from him. Trust me, he needs you too."

She looked away from him. "I'm not sure of my feelings."

“You will be. I have faith. Now then where were we?” His eyes sparked with lust. The man was willing to knock the edge off her desire, but he must be ready to explode. She couldn’t help noticing the strain in the front of his jeans and recalled how much she enjoyed his cock. She wanted it in her now, but he was right, she’d been worrying about Blaine. Was it genuine hurt that she felt with him gone? Or just lust for her second lover? She wasn’t even positive yet if she could move past the fact that they were shape-shifting bears, for Pete’s sake.

The second Reece started lapping at her clit, running his tongue across the sensitive bud in a rhythmic dance, she forgot everything else. She whined and groaned, raising her hips to meet his mouth. Her orgasm escalated until she was at the precipice.

“Yes, oh, yes,” she cried, encouraging him. “More, Reece. Don’t stop!”

He gripped her thighs on both sides until it hurt, but she rode his mouth faster. He closed his lips over her clit and sucked hard. She screamed in ecstasy. The orgasm was so powerful it drove her to sit up with him still on her. She held onto the back of the couch and tangled her fingers in his hair while she pumped against his face. Reece didn’t let up until the aftershocks rocked her body, and she fell back down.

Panting, eyes slitted, she watched him rise and wipe his mouth. Now she saw the slight change she’d seen that first night. Reece’s eyes were still russet brown, but shaped slightly different. Danger lurked in the depths, but she was less afraid.

“Now,” he said in a voice that was gravely and unlike his own, “you get cleaned up so we can bring Blaine home.”

“Yes, the sooner, the better.”

Chapter Ten

The ride out to where Blaine was took an hour and a half. All Ayana saw on both sides of the street at one point were trees and more trees. At least between them the sun had less opportunity to bake her during this early summer, but what the heck was she going to do if they wanted her to spend time out here. She was a city girl through and through.

“Where is he?” she asked. “Why couldn’t you have just called him?”

Reece hesitated. He reached across to take her hand in his, and she let him thread his fingers between hers. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but Blaine is a bit wilder than I am. He is influenced more by his animal instincts.”

“Uh, yeah, I think I noticed that. Are you saying he’s lost in the woods?” Trepidation kicked up her heart beat.

“No, not lost.” He turned his attention to the winding road. “We have an area out there where we stay. I’d say it’s halfway between civilized and living in the wild. Just a plot of land to get away from it all. Members of my family use it most of the time, and periodically when Blaine and I feel the need to stretch our legs, we drive out.”

Ayana said nothing. She looked out her window as he spoke. For the second time since she knew the truth about them, she felt separated. “So he’s there?”

“More or less,” he responded. “Blaine sometimes goes off alone. He leaves everything that ties him to the city and humans at the area I mentioned, and he goes off. He doesn’t return until he’s ready. Usually that happens when something is bugging him.”

“Meaning me this time, right?”

He lifted and kissed her fingers. “This isn’t your fault, baby.”

“But if I hadn’t broken it off he wouldn’t have needed to leave. Why do I have the feeling he’s been out of touch longer than normal?” Reece said nothing. She chewed her lip. “You can track him, right? You can like sniff him out?”

He grinned. “More bear facts?”

She stuck her tongue out at him and rolled her eyes.

Reece pulled the SUV onto a well-worn dirt road between the trees. He stopped outside of a large cabin that looked like it could certainly house his family and more. A young boy chased another one across the opening and into the trees. She wondered if they shifted into bear cubs.

Her lover came around and helped her out of the vehicle. He kept his arm about her waist as they walked toward the cabin. “For your information,” he said, “a bear can smell up to twenty miles. Pretty useful. But we’re not going to hunt Blaine down. He’s coming to us. That’s why you’re here. So wiggle your sexy little ass to get your scent going.”

Her eyes widened when he smacked her on the butt. “Really?”

He burst out laughing. “No, he’ll smell you here whether you move or not.” Reece tapped the side of his nose. “Good for tracking down food, wandering cubs—and mates.”

She followed him into the cabin not knowing what to think. The loud debating among the inhabitants of the cabin came to an abrupt halt as soon as she stepped inside. If what Reece had told her was true, his family already knew they were coming. To act like they were shocked annoyed her. The sharp eyes of an older couple, a middle aged couple, and various other men and women nearer to her age stared at her. At that moment Ayana remembered that many of them could shape-shift into bears. She had visions of them ripping her limb from limb, and she bolted around Reece to run for her life.

He caught her and held her in his strong arms. Gentle words poured into her ears, but she couldn’t hear him beyond the blood rushing there. Her heart beat so fast it hurt. Not until the old woman put a small, soft hand in hers did she calm down.

“It’s okay, dear. You don’t have to be afraid. I’m Granny.” She grinned showing a gap on the top right side of her smile. Somehow that and her wispy gray hair and tiny frame struck Ayana as comical. Her fears ebbed even more.

“Hello, Granny,” she said. As much family as she had herself, both her maternal and paternal grandmothers had passed before she was born. “I’m Ayana.”

“Beautiful name,” someone else chipped in.

Ayana turned to face them. Reece kept his arms wrapped around her and held her back against his chest. “This is my and Blaine’s mate, Ayana. I’m sure you’ll welcome her to the family?”

If she wondered about Alpha attitude before, she knew right away Reece was it and no doubt Blaine too. Reece might have raised his voice on his statement’s end, but it was far from a question. His words had been a command. Heads bobbed yes all around. No one questioned, at least in her presence, who he thought he was taking a human as a mate or in being fine with sharing her with Blaine. For all she knew if they didn’t mate outside the family, they’d have to inbreed. *Em!*

While Reece introduced her all around the family, including his parents and his grandfather, the door opened. Another woman walked in. This one was drop-dead gorgeous with thick black hair that extended down to her butt. She was small built with big boobs and a tiny waist. The only flaw Ayana saw—or it could have been an asset to a man—was the fact that her eyes were creepily almost black. She was an exotic beauty. The woman was dressed scantily with a tube top covering her breasts and a miniskirt that looked more like a strip of cloth, covering her lower parts. “We’re back,” she announced as if she needed to for anyone but Ayana.

Ayana couldn’t help but look up at Reece to see his reaction to the woman. Her lover’s lips had tightened, and his eyes narrowed. She wondered why he wasn’t pleased to see her. She should have been happy that he had that reaction and not one of lust. His reasons for being irritated became all too clear when Blaine walked in right behind the woman. If Ayana’s heart had been pounding earlier, it felt like it stopped then. In the few days since she last saw Blaine, she’d somehow lost touch with how stocky and sexy he was. His muscles strained against any material that had the nerve to cover his perfect body. Not that he had on much. He’d apparently drawn on a pair a

sweatpants, which hung low on his lean hips, and he carried a T-shirt in his hand. His feet were bare. Come to think of it, so were the woman's.

She remembered how Reece had needed to remove his clothes to shift if he didn't want to ruin them. Reece had said Blaine was out in the wild in bear form. He'd gotten back quick. She expected him to take his time, but then if he could smell twenty miles, than he might have picked up that she was coming long before now. But what concerned her was this woman. She'd come back with him. Reece had told her Blaine went off alone when he was in a funk. She couldn't blame him since she'd broken it off, but damn the man anyway.

Ayana went to move, but Reece kept her where she was. She gritted her teeth staring between Blaine and the woman. Reece lowered his face next to hers, covering his words with a kiss to her cheek. "Easy, baby."

"Who is she?" she bit out low.

"My cousin." He answered the unspoken questions she had. "No relation to him, but she wants him for her mate."

Blaine's dark eyes shifted to her. They seemed to burn her skin. She couldn't tell if the look he had was one of anger or desire, or both. Energy rolled off of him in her direction making her short of breath. He didn't move from his spot near the door, nor did he call her to him. But he never took his gaze from her face.

Resolved to go to him, Ayana took a step out of Reece's arms. This time he let her go. Before she could get very far, the woman moved in front of her, blocking her vision of Blaine. A wide insincere grin spread over her beautiful face. She held out a hand. "Hi, I'm Gwen. You're my cousin Reece's mate, right?"

Ayana's eyebrows went up. From years of practice she did her best to wither Gwen with a look from head to toe. Then she moved around her to go to Blaine. She stopped inches from him. He towered over her, that big chest looking so lickable. He still held the shirt clutched in a large fist at his side. With boldness she didn't feel, Ayana laid her hand on the center of his chest, and unless she was mistaken, he flinched like she'd burned him.

He didn't say a word, and neither did she. The entire room had gone silent again. At least she knew now they were just nosey as hell and it wasn't about her being human when she walked in. Blaine took her hand and pulled her outside. She heard Gwen protest, and from the heavy footsteps behind her, she figured Reece followed.

They walked off the porch and into the trees a ways. Blaine stopped at a particularly old one where the trunk had bent so low it formed a chair. He gestured as if he wanted her to sit, but she ignored it. She put her hands on her hips facing him. "You were out with that woman?"

I should calm down and not get an attitude. What right do I have to get pissed off at him? I broke things off. He had every right to see whoever he wanted to see. Please tell me they haven't been together all this time.

"No," he said. What the heck did that mean?

Reece beside them opened his mouth to speak, but she held up a hand. He fell silent. "I don't want to hear it from Reece. I want to hear it from you, Blaine. You don't owe me an explanation at all, but..." She licked her lips and willed herself not to cry or beg. Had she said she liked them? *Like* was so not the word with all this emotion.

"I was out alone as I always am when I'm upset," he responded. "She looked for me as she always does. She found me only as I was coming back when I smelled you."

She reached up to run her fingers over his cheek. His jaw was so unyielding, so strong and male. Like Reece he hadn't shaved in a while. "Have the two of you ever—don't answer that!"

She looked at the ground, but he lifted her chin and kissed her. "No, never. And we never will. You are my mate."

Ayana didn't pretend to get this mating stuff, but Blaine looked even surer of that fact than Reece. She knew looking into his eyes that it had messed him up thinking he'd lost her. How could he be that into her that fast? Was it really built into their makeup, the person they were meant to be with forever? Blaine and Reece appeared to be convinced it was.

Blaine didn't ask her if they were all back together. He assumed she was when he hoisted her onto his lap as he sat on the tree. Her legs hung over his

thighs as she faced him with her arms around his neck. She let herself be consumed by his hungry kisses. When they were both out of breath, Blaine released her swollen numb lips. "I have to have all of you, Ayana. I have to touch you without these clothes."

He tugged at her blouse as if he was just short of ripping it from her flesh. Ayana squeaked and pushed his hands away. "Let me do it."

She leaned back and crossed her arms to pull her shirt over her head. Blaine's eyes shifted a little at the sight of her breasts still half hidden behind her bra. He cupped them, and she yelped when he ripped the bra apart like it was paper. "Blaine!"

"You don't need that. You have your shirt." His expression showed no apology whatsoever as he dropped her bra on the ground.

Ayana looked around for Reece, and he stood behind her, his stare riveted to her body as Blaine exposed her. She wanted them both so much, she didn't care they were within walking distance from the cabin. If her mind was clearer, she'd realize that every member of Reece's family probably knew what they were up to. But damn it had been days since they'd been together. She was getting hers.

Blaine ran his hands up and down her thighs. She wriggled off his lap to take her own skirt off before he could destroy it. She let the denim material fall and followed it with her panties. Blaine's eyes blazed. He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, and looked like he was going to drop to his knees. The man loved eating her out like nobody she knew, but she stopped him with a hand in the middle of his chest.

She leaned in and kissed his lips just as she felt Reece gliding his palms over her ass. He squeezed each cheek and delved between them to massage her anus with his finger. She moaned arching her back. Reece stepped closer. He rested a hand on her hip and rubbed her rear entry faster. She dug her nails into Blaine's shoulders and broke the kiss. Her lips parted in a gasp as she closed her eyes and put her head back.

"Mm, that feels so good," she murmured.

Not to be outdone, Blaine reached between her legs and pushed his fingers into her pussy. She almost wept at the pleasure. Her legs trembled,

and she would have collapsed if Blaine hadn't added support to her other hip. They were just using their fingers in the front and back, and yet, she was going to come.

She held onto Blaine tighter and hoisted a knee onto his thigh. Here she was in the middle of the woods, between two sexy men who were fully clothed while she was stark naked. She didn't care. This felt too good to get all shy and nervous about who would see. For the moment, she felt just as feral as her men were.

They didn't let up in their attacks on her body. She could only hold onto Blaine and ride it out. Their fingers stroked and pumped, wrenching every sensation of bliss in her core. She panted and cried out. Her voice echoed for miles. She squirmed between them, and then she screamed. Her orgasm erupted, making her sag into Blaine.

"You're so wet," her stocky lover murmured as if in awe.

Reece tugged her from his arms and turned her. "Let me wet myself with you, baby."

She didn't question him, knowing what he planned. With acceptance and excitement, she watched him unbutton his pants and lower the zipper. He pushed his boxers aside to let his cock loose. She bit her bottom lip. Reece was so turned on, he didn't waste time. He gripped her around the waist and jerked her up. His hard shaft impaled her. She gasped. He pushed as far as he could go, holding her up like she weighed nothing. Crushing her against his chest, he ground in and out of her, rough and good.

Her forehead dropped onto his shoulder. He finished and then set her down facing Blaine. By this time, he'd opened his pants too and settled better on the tree so he could have back support while he took her weight. Reece raised her again, this time to rest her in Blaine's arms. Ayana arched her hips to lower down on Blaine's cock. He growled low in his throat.

"Easy," Reece snapped.

Blaine gentled his hold on her and held her still while Reece swung his leg over the narrow tree trunk. He stepped closer to her from behind. Ayana grabbed her ass cheek and pulled one side apart for him. She watched in

anticipation as Reece guided his rod to her anus. She couldn't help shouting "Yes!" when his cock head popped past her barrier.

Both men gritted their teeth, hissing like they were close to blowing. They'd better not. "I want it until I can't bear it anymore. You know how I like it Blaine, Reece," she demanded.

At her sass, Blaine smacked her ass cheek. She moaned.

Blaine moved her up and down his cock, and soon Reece matched the rhythm. Together, they pounded into her from both ways. Ayana bounced on Blaine's lap while she watched Reece's shaft disappear inside her from the back. Her lovers grunted their enjoyment, neither one of them looking up from her slender form. She'd always thought she wasn't that much to look at which was why she tried showing it off a bit more to look sexy. But Blaine and Reece looked at her like she was a supermodel, one that had been given to them alone as a present.

Blaine tugged lightly on her hair to make her put her head back. When she did, he covered her mouth. His tongue slipped between her lips, and she surrendered to him, allowing him to explore her warm depths. She swirled her tongue with his until Blaine demanded attention as well. He reached out and took hold of her chin to turn her head. Reece released her mouth, and Blaine claimed it. His kisses were rougher, more insistent. His tongue filled up her mouth so much she sucked on it, and he groaned.

They pushed into her until she was weak and sore. She'd come half a dozen times. Blaine had come once, yet he never stopped. His cock was rigid inside of her. Reece didn't let off, but when he was ready, he pushed her toward Blaine's chest. Blaine hugged her to him. The two of them stilled. Reece pounded into her ass, squeezing her hips. His muscles were all tight and glistened in the sunlight that reached them between the trees. He shouted her name. His warmth filled her rear.

Panting for breath, he pulled out. She rested her head on Blaine's shoulder. His body jerked, but he pulled out of her and held her close. She knew he had reached a second orgasm, but she also recognized he'd have to force himself to be gentle. She'd have to grow stronger if she was going to be Blaine's lover long-term.

Behind her, Reece stroked her head. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." She had her eyes closed and didn't have the energy yet to get up.

The tree trunk sagged a little. "Give her to me," Reece said. "Her thighs are probably aching from being stretched across you so long." She sighed. Her heart swelled while Blaine handed her over like precious cargo.

Still they didn't argue, except for that small something when Reece had reminded Blaine to be gentler with her. How could they be so convinced when she was so scared? Anyway, now that her lust had been sated, she remembered that they had to go back to the cabin. All those nosey folk would be looking at her, knowing she'd just jumped not one but two men in the woods like a slut. *Great.*

After some time, Reece set her on her feet. "Come on. We should get back. It's getting late."

Ayana sighed again. Well, time to face the music. They walked the way they came with her in the middle and the two men on both sides of her. If she didn't know anything, she knew that this relationship was not natural. Not natural at all, and she might not ever get used to it.

Chapter Eleven

Blaine had been silent all night. Ayana kept waiting for him to say something, to discuss her dismissal of them or to have him demand to know what she wanted to do, but he just sat there at her side. And it wasn't like she thought he was at peace or accepting either. She didn't know how she knew, but she was sure Blaine was furious. He fairly bristled with it, and her suspicions were proven right by the way Reece's family—including Gwen—tiptoed on eggshells around him.

She touched his arm and looked at him, waiting for him to meet her eyes, but he stubbornly kept his head down. Hurt even though she had no right to be, she opened her mouth to say something to him. Someone else grabbed her hand, and she glanced up to find it was Reece's mother.

"Come on and dance with us," she invited.

Ayana couldn't help her lips curling up and drawing back a bit. "Uh, yeah, I don't really do the dance around the fire thing."

The woman wouldn't take no for an answer. She kept a huge smile on her face while pulling Ayana onto her feet. Embarrassed, Ayana scanned the scene around her. The family had elected to barbecue outside. They had huge spits going with meat covering every spot. At least they cooked it, she thought, considering they were half animal.

There were more people around the tables and fire now, some of which she suspected had come in from the woods. A man at the edge of the group flipped the switch on a CD player, and music filled the air. For some reason, she'd thought they'd be playing the banjo or a harmonica or something. White boy music is what she called it, but the beat wasn't bad.

Reece's mother dragged her to the line of women who were dancing in the middle of the group. They shook their hips and stomped their feet. Most of them were barefoot. Ayana tossed a meaningful look toward Reece, but he only raised his beer and grinned. She rolled her eyes at him and tried catching Blaine's eye. He didn't look at her. Her heart sank. Why wouldn't he look at her? They'd just had sex in the woods for Pete's sake. She knew he wasn't

regretting it. She didn't. But all she could think about was what would happen when they got back to the city.

"Dance for them," the older woman commanded.

Ayana decided she wasn't getting away without at least an attempt, so she moved in her own way. Soon she got into it and knew she was showing those women a thing or two about how it was done. Her sandals hindered her movements, so she kicked them off, raised her arms, and gyrated over to Reece barefoot. When she spun around, dipped to touch the ground, and came up slowly with her ass in his face, the man looked like he was about to drool. She laughed snapping her fingers to the music.

By that time, Blaine was looking too. She danced over to him and pushed her fingers through his thick dark hair. In the firelight, his eyes grew darker, but she wasn't the least bit afraid. She shimmied in front of him, this time capturing his stare. His desire for her was plain and so much more. He loved her. There was no mistake about it. The knowledge terrified her, and she pivoted on her heel to return to the women.

When the song blended into another, some of the men jumped up and joined in. One particular man, tall and cute—although nowhere near as sexy as her lovers—danced over to her. He put a hand out to take hers, but before his fingers could brush hers, she was jerked backward into a hard body. Two growls rose above the music. Ayana gasped. Both Reece and Blaine had moved like lightning to make sure the man didn't come near her. She broke from Reece's hold in time to catch Blaine from jacking the dude up.

"Blaine, stop!" she yelled. If she expected everyone to get worked up and the music to stop, she was so wrong. They all kept having a good time while they watched. This madness must be normal. Ayana shook her head and tugged on Blaine's arm. "It's not a big deal. He was just asking for a dance."

Blaine didn't comment.

She sighed. "Not tonight, okay? Thanks anyway," she told the guy. He backed off, and she dragged Blaine into a hug. She rested her hands on his hips trying to force him to move. That was like making a boulder dance—it wasn't happening.

After some time, he relaxed. He drew her tight to his chest and kissed her. She nuzzled close.

"I know you're mad at me," she began, "and I know you want me to say something, but I can't yet. I...just can't."

His expression remained closed. Reece drew up behind them, and she was sandwiched between them. An embarrassed scan of the group brought relief. No one was paying them any mind. Probably because there hadn't been a fight. As she continued to look around, her gaze met Gwen's. The clear animosity was there, but Ayana was too tired to care. She rested on Blaine's chest and closed her eyes. Tomorrow was soon enough to figure everything out.

* * * *

Ayana woke up in the morning between her lovers. They'd shared a huge bed like someone knew they'd need one of its size for three people. Either that or Reece's family got freaky on a regular basis. She was exhausted beyond belief, having not slept well. That was always the case when she stayed anywhere but at home. She guessed she was a homebody, which was another strike against this relationship.

Ayana left Blaine and Reece still sleeping and showered. By the time she stepped outside the cabin, the sky was just growing light. At the edge of the clearing, Gwen came from the trees. She wore another scrap of clothing that didn't hide how beautiful she was. Ayana's insides turned. She started to head back inside, but the woman caught sight of her.

"You're not gone yet?" she sassed.

"Nope, I decided to delay it just to piss you off," Ayana snapped back.

Gwen growled. Her eyes shifted, and Ayana did everything she could to hide how it freaked her out. She remembered all too well how massive Reece had been in her living room. Gwen's smirk told her she knew Ayana was close to wetting her pants.

“Don’t think Blaine is going to sniff around you long?” she said. “He was mine before, and he will be again. Remember, we’re the same, but you...you’re just a lowly human.”

“And you’re a dirty animal,” Ayana countered. “Look, I’m not holding Blaine to anything. He can do what he wants. But he wants me, and if that puts your nose out of joint, all the better.”

Gwen looked like she was ready to take the argument to the next level, but the door behind Ayana opened, and Reece stepped out. He drew her into his arms, casting Gwen a warning look. She sucked her teeth and flounced away.

Ayana turned in Reece’s arms. “Oh Lord, if you didn’t come when you did. I’m not sure I can handle all this. I mean a regular relationship is fine, but this? I don’t know.”

“I thought we’d settled things yesterday,” he said, staring down at her.

She smiled. “You mean in the woods? Yeah, women don’t settle things like that.”

He grinned. “I felt very settled. But now that you mention it, I’m getting worked up again.” The hardness on her belly attested to the truth of his words. She shook her head, and he grew serious. “Things will be better once we’re back home.”

“You might be right, but I’m beginning to think that’s not reality. Not yours and Blaine’s anyway.”

They were on the road in an hour. Ayana elected to take the back seat of Reece’s SUV so she could stretch out and try to get some sleep. She must have dozed off because the next thing she was aware of was being carried toward her house. She wiggled to get free of Blaine’s arms in case someone saw them. He set her on her feet in time to catch sight of a moving truck in Brooke’s driveway. Her things were being carried out one by one. In the other direction, on the same side as Brooke, another truck occupied the driveway of a different house. These people were moving in.

Ayana held her sandals in her hand and strolled barefoot to the end of the drive. The two women she’d met on her first day were strolling by.

“Hey, Ayana,” they called.

She put up a hand. "Janice. Rose."

"Looks like we got another one," Janice commented.

Ayana wrinkled her nose, and the woman was all too eager to explain. "A hottie, of course. Well, he's no Blaine or Reece, but he's something to look at. Yummy!"

Of course they would have the scoop. She was surprised they weren't over there right now making a play for the new neighbor. Janice was quick to explain.

"After our walk, I'll clean up and go over to say hi. I hope there's no wife or girlfriend." She looked pointedly at Ayana. "This time, there shouldn't be any problem. I mean you can only handle so many, right?"

Oh hell no! Did she just accuse me of—

"Ladies," Reece greeted with clear dismissal in his tone and a bit of something extra. He wrapped his arms around Ayana, letting the entire neighborhood know, if not directly, surely through big mouths Janice and Rose, that they had something going on. *Like they didn't know already.*

The two women scurried along obviously afraid. Ayana glared at Reece. "Why did you do that?"

"Because they have no idea when to keep their mouths shut."

She felt his anger. Reece and Blaine were protective of her, but was it enough? Could she ignore everything she believed in coming up about choosing that special man and letting him be the one? About society's unspoken rules and what a woman should and shouldn't do?

"Come inside," he instructed.

"Reece."

"Come." He tugged her along gently leading her toward her house. "You're tired. You hardly slept last night."

"How do you know that?"

Once he got her inside the door, he whipped her up into his arms and carried her upstairs to her room. When he laid her on her bed, he leaned down over her. "We're both very aware of you at all times. You know how we feel, and we'll wait patiently for you to decide how you feel—even if it kills us."

She stroked his face. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He kissed her. "You have a right to decide for yourself."

"You're so understanding, Reece." She almost said she loved him. "Thanks."

Blaine came in behind him. She expected him to ignore her, but he too leaned down, taking Reece's place, and he kissed her lips. Shivering delight rocked her body. If she wasn't so exhausted, she'd ask them both to stay. But there wasn't a doubt in her mind that they'd never let her rest.

"I'll talk to you two later, okay?" she told them.

Blaine's thumb caressed her belly as he held onto her side with one big hand. She knew he didn't want to let go or leave. Reece thumped him on the back. "Come on, bear. Let's give her some time."

Now she knew the significance of that nickname and why Blaine had been annoyed every time Reece used it. She watched her bear rise and walk toward the door. She missed them both and wondered how she'd handle her feelings if she decided to break it off. At last, she was alone in her bedroom. She lay still with her eyes closed, waiting for sleep to take her. Peace was a long time in coming, but when it did, she prayed it would bring a final decision one way or another.

Chapter Twelve

Ayana wandered through the pasta aisle at Bloom grocery store wondering if she wanted to make spaghetti for dinner. The way her mother and older sisters made it when she was a kid coming up meant lots of cheese and ketchup among other ingredients. She'd scarcely had an appetite over the last couple of days, and since she hadn't called for Blaine and Reece, a big pot of food was unnecessary.

She picked up her favorite pasta brand and played with the box. She couldn't decide. What was the point anyway? She missed them so much, she couldn't think straight. A decision this simple didn't take a lot of brain power, but she had just enough to keep herself pushing the cart.

"Ayana," someone called from behind her.

She turned, recognizing Janice but surprised Rose wasn't glued to her side. Ayana grunted inwardly. She was so not in the mood, but rather than just wave and move on, Janice was coming toward her. That could mean one thing only. She wanted to gossip.

"Hey, Janice," she muttered without enthusiasm. Maybe the woman would get the hint.

She didn't. "How's it going?" Janice leaned her weight all into one leg and propped an elbow on her cart handle. "Did you hear?"

Okay, so you don't give a crap how I'm doing? "What news?"

"We got Brooke back," she announced.

Ayana's eyes widened. "Brooke moved back? What is she playing musical houses? Good Lord, hasn't it only been a few days, a week at the most that she moved out?"

Janice laughed, obviously happy she'd gotten a rise out of Ayana. "Well, not Brooke exactly. But Brooke-like. Remember the sexy man that moved in on the corner. Well, he moved in with his sister of all people." She nodded as if Ayana had asked a question. "He's single. Anyway, his sister is almost as pretty as he is, I have to admit, and she's already making the rounds. She's got half the women hating her guts because she wears these outfits that leave nothing to the imagination. And the men are all chasing behind her. Brooke

was a slut, but she didn't look like much, so you didn't have to be too nervous about your man, you know?"

"I guess," Ayana said, still not too interested and trying to think of an excuse to get away.

"But that's not all." Janice's tone of voice changed, alerting Ayana that she was about to bring up something that did interest her. The eagerness in her eyes made Ayana want to smack her and tell her to shut the hell up. Janice plowed on. "Even though it hasn't been long, everyone knows things have cooled between you and your two love toys."

Ayana gritted her teeth and flared her nostrils. "My love life has nothing to do with anyone but me."

"Tell that to Abby." Janice paused for effect. "As I drove by on the way here, I saw her talking to Blaine and Reece in front of Reece's house. They looked like they hung on her every word. Or I guess it could have been they were busy staring at her double-Ds. Who knows? Well, gotta go. See ya later."

Ayana stood where she was a good ten minutes trying to get her emotions under control. One, if Blaine and Reece were going to cheat with the new neighbor, her rushing over to their house demanding what they thought they were doing wasn't going to keep that from happening. Two, she'd brushed them off and didn't give them any indication she would accept their relationship any time soon. Technically, they hadn't broken up either, but she should trust them.

She sighed. Miserable and having come to no conclusion whatsoever, she dumped the spaghetti ingredients in her cart along with a few other items and headed to checkout. She purposely chose the longest line and walked slowly across the parking lot to her car. When her things were packed, she guided her cart back to the front of the store rather than use a convenient storage place on the lot. At this point, she didn't know if she delayed going back so she wouldn't catch sight of them talking and zap out, or if she hoped they'd be dumb enough to reveal themselves as cheaters and invite the woman into the house.

She was pathetic, and her heart ached to be with them. After sliding behind the wheel of her car and turning over the engine, she reached a hand to her cheek. Tears had wet them.

A few minutes later, she pulled into her driveway. They were still out there. She gritted her teeth. Janice's description of the woman had been an understatement. She was gorgeous with a voluptuous figure and long flaming blonde hair. On a cool breeze, her laughter reached Ayana.

She slipped out of her car with her eyes lowered in annoyance and moved toward the trunk. To her surprise, she bumped into Reece's broad chest. When the hell had he left Ms. Thing's side? The stir of her bags beside her caught her attention. Blaine was already pulling the groceries out. Ayana glanced over toward Blaine's lawn. The woman stood there, mouth hanging open, brows in her hairline. She couldn't believe the men had left her so fast to run over to Ayana.

Ayana's lips twitched as she tried to keep herself from smiling. "You two seemed happy where you were just now."

Reece nabbed her door keys from her hand. "Baby, you should have told us you were going to the grocery store. We could have helped you with the bags. Did someone assist you with getting them in the trunk?"

"I'm not so frail." She waited for them to say something about the half-naked tramp in front of Blaine's house, but then she began to see as they unpacked the food that the woman wasn't a blip in their existence. She wondered if they'd been out there so long only so they wouldn't miss her return. "Um, you really didn't think twice about that woman, did you?"

Blaine looked up from contemplating the ground turkey she'd bought. Crap she knew she should have gone with beef.

"Why would we?" he asked.

Reece took the package of cheese she held and set it on the table. He tugged out a chair and drew her onto his lap when he sat down. "You are our mate. I don't know how many ways we can say it or how we can convince you. Ayana, there is no other woman for us. Ever."

She blinked. "Ever? You mean like no divorce or change of mind or growing out of love?"

“Pretty much.”

Ayana stared from one handsome face to the other. She wrapped her arms around Reece’s neck and rested her head on his shoulder. “This scares me. I can’t get over the fear.”

“And you won’t. Not yet,” he assured her. “All relationships are that way at first. It’s exciting but scary. I can tell you that our kind mates for life, but with the society we live in, it’s incomprehensible to you. You feel like no one could know that up front, that it’ll last.”

“Yeah. You hit it on the head.”

“Okay, think about it a different way.”

She watched the confidence leave his expression and something deeper, more emotional take its place. He studied her face, stroked her skin, and even seemed to breathe in her scent as if he wanted to write it on his memory. Blaine’s expression wasn’t so open, but once again, she saw the anger and couldn’t understand why he was so upset.

“You are human,” Reece announced.

“Uh, yeah, I knew that.”

He smiled at her. She could lose herself in his smile the rest of her life.

“You are not like us,” he said simply. She was almost offended until she realized what he was saying. “At any time, your feelings could change. You could decide you’re tired of us and want something different. You could meet some other man and want to be with him. Our very makeup directs us toward bonding with our mate. It’s a lock that can’t be undone except in death. You are not bound in such a way.”

Ayana pressed her hand to her mouth, eyes wide as the full impact of what he was saying got through. She looked at Blaine and knew now why he was angry. Not because he was mad but because he was vulnerable—to her and her human whims.

Blaine didn’t like having his control wrenched from his hands, but that’s basically what happened. Her two lovers had waited around for her not because they decided to, but because they had to. They had no more existence without her. Their full happiness was wrapped up in whether Ayana accepted what she felt for them and what they felt for her.

She cried a little more than she had earlier in the grocery store parking lot. “Your risk is way more than mine, isn’t it?” They didn’t say anything, but she knew the answer was yes. The weight of it was a lot to put on her, and deep inside she wanted to high tail it out of there. But she’d been miserable without them.

Ayana hugged Reece and reached her hand out to Blaine. He took it and held it in his huge palm. “As unusual as our relationship is, it’s like any other—scary and exciting, and uncertain in a way. I know what I feel now.” She smiled at Blaine, and the anger disappeared from his eyes. “I love you. And I love you too, Reece. I want us to be together no matter what anyone says or thinks.”

Reece crushed her in his arms until she yelped, and he loosened his hold. Blaine scooted his chair closer. He reached out and drew her onto his lap facing him. His rough kisses and hands running along her sides got her worked up. He buried his face in her hair. “I love you, Ayana. I’ll protect you and take care of you.”

“I know.” She nuzzled closer to him while watching Reece over her shoulder. His hand rested on her back, a thumb massaging her skin through her blouse. “What I don’t know is how we’ll pull it off, but damn it, I’m willing. I’m not letting either of you go anymore. That means no skank gets to come on your lawn and shake her wares in your faces.”

Reece threw his head back laughing. “Yes, ma’am. Whatever you say.”

She glared at Blaine too. “Got that, bear?”

He grinned. “Loud and clear. We’re all yours. Forever.”

Satisfied, Ayana leaned back from Blaine and lifted her blouse over her head. Her small breasts strained at her bra, they were so achy for her lovers’ touches. At the moment, she had not one shred of jealousy for the woman outside. The two sexy shifters had chosen her, and there were no trade backs.

She stood up and stripped off the rest of her clothes as she walked toward the kitchen door. At the entry, she paused and glanced back at the shocked men whose eyes were riveted to her naked figure. “So who wants to seal it with a kiss?”

They scrambled after her, and with a full heart, Ayana jetted for the stairs, content with who she was and what she wanted at last.

The End

About the Author

Tressie Lockwood has always loved books, and she enjoys writing about heroines who are overcoming the trials of life. She writes straight from her heart, reaching out to those who find it hard to be completely themselves no matter what anyone else thinks. She hopes her readers enjoy her short stories. Visit Tressie on the web at www.tresslock.webs.com.