Wolf’s Lady

By Maddy Barone

Chapter 1

*Omaha, Nebraska – the new Sin City of what had once been the United States*

*September 10, 2070*

Sand Wolfe looked at the distant wall enclosing the city of Omaha, hiding the distaste wrestling with curiosity in his belly behind a blank face. He had been here only two months ago as part of the group escorting a cousin’s mate to her uncle, but on that trip he had stayed outside the wall while the others took Sara into the city. He liked to run free, and stepping foot inside a dirty city was something he’d never wanted to do. Curse Snow for talking him into this.

“C’mon,” his cousin Snow muttered. “The gate is right ahead.”

They walked, leading their single horse behind them, through an area which had once been the outskirts of Omaha. Now it was empty, all buildings and trees burned away decades before he was born to prevent attackers from using the scenery to sneak up on the city unseen. Sand flicked a glance up at one of the watch towers built into the wall, his excellent eyesight finding two men there, and the long barrels of rifles aimed at him and Snow. The barrenness of the land gave the guards a clear line of fire. Sand forced his shoulders not to twitch.

The road led them directly to the gate. More guards were there, armed with rifles and questions.

“Names,” one guard barked at them.

“I’m Snow Wolfe,” Snow said in his quiet, gentle voice. “This is my cousin, Sand Wolfe.”

The two guards, beefy and well fed in their olive drab uniforms and black boots, exchanged a glance, but they said nothing about the names as one wrote them in a book. Snow was actually Snow On His Fur of the Lakota Wolf Clan, and Sand’s full name was Wolf Running In Sand. The cousins showed their Lakota heritage in their waist length braids and dark skin. They wore denim jeans and cotton shirts in deference to city peoples’ requirements, but they both wore comfortable moccasins.

“What’s your business in Omaha?”

“We’re visiting family.”

The man poised his pen over his book. “What’s the name of the people you’re visiting?”

“Sky Wolfe.”

The guard who wasn’t writing gave a low whistle. “Sky, huh? Lucky. Or does he make you pay full price?”

Sand scowled to hide his confusion. Pay full price for what? Then remembering Sky’s business, he scowled even harder. The guard writing paused with his pen above the paper. “Cute. Snow, Sand, and Sky. No sun?”

“No.” Snow’s voice was flat.

“Alright. Ages?”

“Twenty-eight,” Sand answered.

“Twenty-seven,” said Snow.

The man wrote it down. “How long are you staying?”

Snow raised his eyebrows at Sand. “Two months maybe. We’ll head out before winter comes.”

Maybe he could stick it out that long, but Sand doubted it. He was sure they could have snuck into the city and avoided all this gab. No wolf warrior liked to be interrogated by human men who were clearly inferior. One of the guards went to their horse and searched through the saddlebags, inventorying their spare clothes and scant food stores. Sand tensed with a low growl bubbling up his throat when he pawed through the sealed letters Taye, Rose, and others from the den had sent for Sky, but the guard only noted the letters down in his book too.

“No weapons?” he barked.

“We both have a knife,” Snow said, touching the grip of the knife in his belt.

The guard wrote for a while longer, then tore the sheets out of his book to hand one to Sand and the other to Snow. “Your Visitor Permits. Keep those with you at all times. They’re good until October 31. The City Guard can ask to see them at any time and if you don’t have your visitor’s permit with you, you will be escorted out of the city.”

Sand read the words on his permit. It identified him as Sand Wolfe, age twenty-eight, six feet two inches tall, 170 pounds, slender build, black hair very long, brown eyes. Nose aquiline, mouth full. All accurate enough, he supposed, folding the paper and putting it on the breast pocket of his plaid cotton shirt. He rolled his lips together, wondering what the paper meant by “full”. He hadn’t eaten anything since the rabbit his wolf had caught and eaten last night.

Once they were past the gates Sand took a deep breath and steeled himself to enter the city. “Let’s find Sky.”

Feeling like a wide-eyed boy from the country made Sand scowl. The city was said to have twenty-five thousand residents. What were they all doing on the street at this very moment? He could see only a few yards ahead of him on the sidewalk because it was so crowded with pedestrians. Some of them were women, and as far as he could tell they had no male escort.

Women, walking alone? What were their men thinking? Were they crazy? Anyone could snatch them away!

Well, maybe not. The sidewalk was full of people. If a woman screamed for help, there were plenty of men to step in. The women dressed differently, some in skirts and some in pants, but he noticed every one of them wore a silver whistle around her neck. To make a call for help? It made sense. The sound of a whistle could travel farther than a human voice. He saw more men in the olive drab uniforms and black boots standing at corners, watching the people on the sidewalk with sharp attention, noting each wagon or rider that passed on the street.

“I don’t like this place,” he muttered to Snow. “What is that noise?”

His cousin grabbed his arm. “Look! It’s the bus!”

A large wooden rectangle on wheels rolled laboriously up the street toward them, accompanied by a roar, like a fierce wind in January. A team pulling a wagon on the opposite side of the street shied, half rearing, until the driver jumped down to pull them to the side of the road out of the way of the box. He soothed them with gentle hands until they stood quietly, only little shudders rolling through them.  Sand felt kinship with them. He didn’t like the noise either. He didn’t see horses pulling the box, and when it passed them he saw no one pushing it. The stench it emitted made him want to gag.

“Isn’t that marvelous?” Snow said enthusiastically. “I saw it last time I was here, but I didn’t get to ride it. Let’s go!”

Ride in the belly of that thing? “What about the horse?” he said, keeping his tone mild so Snow wouldn’t know he was unsettled by the evil thing. With the noxious odor lingering behind the bus, even Snow’s keen nose wouldn’t detect his unease.

“Oh. Right.” Shoulders slumped, Snow watched a door open in the box and steps lower. A dozen people crowded around the opening, and one by one they disappeared inside. “Well, I’ll ride it later, after we stable the horse.”

Sand started walking again. “Why do you want to ride it? It stinks.”

“But it goes all over Omaha. Omaha is big! Instead of walking from the river to the outer wall you could sit and ride.”

Sand slanted a glance at his cousin. “We have feet for a reason. How hard is it to…?”

He trailed off as something caught his attention. He was riveted on a splash of color on a pale bare arm, a hand with long fingers tipped with red paint holding a railing as a woman stepped up into the bus. Sand’s heart stuttered. Long brown hair, glossy with health, rippled in the breeze as the woman disappeared into the box. He’d had only the briefest glimpse of her, but the sight was seared into his brain. He watched the box roll away, almost too stunned to register his wolf’s frantic attempts to burst out, almost too stunned to be able to think. But one piece of knowledge swirled in his belly.

His mate was in Omaha. His mate was in that noisy, stinking box and she was going away from him. The hell she was going away from him! He tore at the buttons on his shirt to strip, but Snow grabbed his arm hard, keeping him from ripping his shirt off so he could release the wolf. His wolf clawed at his insides, demanding to be let loose so he could follow his mate. Sand tried to jerk free but Snow held on.

“What are you doing?” Snow hissed.

“My mate!” was all Sand could get out. “Let me go! My mate is in that box thing.”

For an instant Snow’s hands loosened, surprise flashing over his face, but he tightened them again. “Hold on, you can’t change here in the street. The City Guard—” he nodded at the uniformed men “—will shoot you if you do. Calm down. We’ll find her. Omaha is big, but there’s not that many women here, and half of those are too young to be your mate or too old. What did she look like?”

It took effort, but Sand forced himself to take his fingers away from the buttons on his shirt. He drew a deep breath and closed his eyes, calling up the image of his mate. He’d seen her only from the side, but he knew he would recognize her again in an instant. “She’s about six or seven inches shorter than me. Soft, and round in all the right places. Her hair is down to the middle of her back. It’s brown and a little wavy. Not plain brown. The glowing brown like that polished wood desk Taye got for the Lupa.”

“Walnut,” Snow supplied.

“Yeah. Her cheekbones are high. Her chin has a shallow little dent in it. Her face is soft, her mouth is wide.” How he wanted to stroke a thumb over her lips! “I didn’t see her eyes, but I think they’re light. Green, maybe. Or blue. Her skin is very pale. She was wearing a skirt down to her ankles, light flowered fabric, floaty. Her shirt …” He swallowed, remembering the scrap of green fabric that barely covered the most beautiful body he’d ever seen. “She has a picture painted on her shoulder. It goes from her upper arm, across her shoulder down to her –er, under the neckline of her shirt.”

“Uh-huh.” Snow reached to pat the nose of their horse. “She sounds distinctive. I bet Sky can help us find her. “

“Yeah.” Sand began walking briskly in the direction of the river, where his cousin lived. “Let’s hurry.”

It was an hour long walk, even hurrying as they were. There was a tall stone fence around Sky’s house. That wasn’t unusual. A man had to take steps to protect his property. The gates were made of fancy black iron twisted in ornate shapes. They were pretty but wouldn’t do much to keep attackers out. A rectangle of metal hung on the pale stone wall. It said:

**The Sky’s The Limit**

**A Gentlemen’s Club**

**Open Tuesday through Thursday 5:00 pm to 1:00 am**

**Friday and Saturday 6:00 pm through 2:00 am**

**Private Entertainment by Appointment Only**

A man he didn’t know came to the gate to ask their business. He looked tough, and was armed to the teeth. He was polite though, and became politer when Snow said they were Sky’s cousins, come to visit for a few months.

“Mr. Wolfe has been expecting relations to come,” he said, opening the gate. “Y’all sure do look alike. I’m Keith Henderson. Stables are around back. There will be a boy there to take the horse. Mr. Wolfe is probably in his office this time of day.”

As they passed through the gate Sand nodded approval when he saw a pair of secondary gates that were made of stone. Not so pretty, but much stronger. Then he looked forward. The gravel drive was a tan ribbon cutting through green grass that stretched like a well-tended carpet a good quarter-mile to a tall, three story red brick house sitting on a rise. The drive split and one fork became steps that marched up to the fancy front door, and the other curved away to the back of the house.

“This is where Sky lives?” he asked Snow. “This is his house?”

“Yep. Wait ‘til you see the inside.”

As they led their horse down the drive around the house, Sand got a good look at the place. It was huge! Had Sky suddenly become rich? Only a rich man could afford to live in a house like this. It had a fancy porch with white columns, and lots of tall narrow windows with white woodwork around them, and rounded sections Sand didn’t know what to call. He couldn’t believe his little cousin lived in a house a hundred times nicer than the den.

“He’s got humans living here, right?” he muttered to Snow. “Must be a pain to heat in the winter.”

“Oh, not so bad,” Snow disagreed. “Most rooms have fireplaces, but with the electricity generated by the river, it keeps pretty warm anyway. The ladies’ appointments wouldn’t appreciate coming into a cold room to do their business.”

Appointments. The sign on the wall said private entertainment was by appointment only. Sand was pretty sure what the private entertainment consisted of, but thinking about it put a sour taste in his mouth.

“Paint!” Snow called joyfully.

Sand hung back a minute, examining the two men coming around the back of the house. His cousin Paint was familiar, but the other man was a stranger. He stood an inch shorter than Paint’s six feet, with brown hair and eyes. His face behind its close-clipped beard was hard and expressionless. Sand noted the burly shoulders and long arms. He could be trouble in a fight, Sand judged. Then Paint was pounding on his back.

“I’m glad to see you two!” he said, adjusting his eye patch. “Now I can head back to the den for a while. I don’t mind helping Sky out, but this place gets to me. You’ll know what I mean after a week or so.”

Sand suppressed a sigh. He hadn’t wanted to come in the first place. Except … His mate was here. In his amazement at seeing where Sky lived he had almost forgotten that. He had to find her!

“This is Neil Marzek. He’s head of Sky’s enforcers. Neil, this is my cousin Snow and my cousin Sand. I’ll take ’em in to see Sky. You’ll take care of their horse?”

Neil’s face still showed no warmth. Sand could respect that. They were strangers in his domain. “Sure,” Neil said in a gravelly voice.

Snow grabbed the saddlebag to carry into the house before following Paint up the back steps to a mudroom and on to the kitchen. Sand looked carefully around as the three of them passed through the kitchen to a narrow hall that led into an office. A man in a suit and tie sat at the desk, his dark hair cut short, his hands pale and pampered, holding a pen. Who wore a suit to sit at a desk?

The man looked up, blue eyes narrow under black brows, then he stood. He was as pretty as a girl, Sand thought derisively, before amazement unhinged his jaw.

“Sky?” he yelped.

The man grinned, a dimple biting into his cheek beside his mouth. “Sand. I know it’s you by that broken tooth.” The grin deepened. “Breaking that tooth is one of my happiest memories.”

“It’s only chipped,” Sand said with dignity as Sky came around the desk to crush him in a hug. Then he did the same to Snow, before lightly punching Sand’s shoulder. “You! Sand, you are the reason I was on kitchen duty so much back at the den. Whose idea was it to sit out in the hall outside the Lupa and the Chief’s room when they made love?”

Sand laughed. “That was a long time ago! We were all just kids back then.” He sobered, running his gaze from Sky’s glossy black shoes to his gray-blue slacks with their perfect creases to the matching coat, crisp white shirt, and navy blue tie. “You cut your hair. You don’t look like yourself. What’s happened to you?”

Sky’s face retained the smile, but somehow it seemed to Sand as if a door had closed. Sky propped one hip on the edge of his desk. “Like you said, it’s been a long time. People grow up. So, are you here to work with me or just visiting? I can always use more muscle to keep the visitors in line.”

Snow bounced on the balls of his feet. “We’re here for a couple of months. We can help you out. But Sand—”

Sand cut him off. “I found my mate, Sky. She’s here in Omaha, somewhere. You have to help me find her!”

Sky stared for a moment, his level brows pulled low. “Of course.” He looked down at his feet, crossing one ankle over the other and apparently examining the shine on his shoe. “You realize, don’t you, that if she is in Omaha she is probably either already married or working in a house?”

That had been the thought circling his mind like a caged beast ever since he’d found his mate. He joined in Sky’s contemplation of his shiny shoes. “I know,” he said softly.

Sky reached out to give him a comforting slap on the arm. “But you never know. Maybe her family is well off and they’re able to afford to pay to keep her single.”

They would have to be very rich to afford the yearly Single Status tax. She hadn’t been middle aged, but she didn’t look like a teenager, either. Sand didn’t know anything about rich women. Had she been wearing rich woman’s clothes? “Yeah, maybe.”

Snow dug in the saddlebag. “Before we get into Sand’s mate, here’s the letters from home.”

Sky took them and leafed through them until he came to the one with Rose’s handwriting on the outside. As far as Sand knew, this was the first letter Rose had written to Sky since she’d found out he was running a whorehouse in Omaha. Sky’s hand clenched on the envelope so tightly his knuckles shone white, and that invisible door over his face opened just enough to show the edge of raw emotion before it slammed shut again. “Thanks.” He set the letters casually on the desk behind him. “So tell me about your mate.”

“She’s beautiful,” Sand said immediately. “I know every man says that about his mate, but mine truly is. Her hair is long and brown and it shines in the sun. Her skin is very pale.” Words failed him when he remembered her soft, curved body. “She has a painting on her arm and her shoulder.”

“A tattoo,” Snow put in.

Sky nodded, using one finger to scratch his chin. “What was the tattoo of?”

Snow shrugged, looking at Sand. Sand shrugged too, helplessly. “I don’t know. It went from here,” he touched his biceps and drew his fingers up the outside of his arm, over his shoulder to his heart, “and went here. Do you know her, Sky?”

Sky looked at Paint. “Maybe,” he said at last. “I know of a few women who fit that description. We’ll find her, Sand. Not now; it’s late in the afternoon. But we’ll find her, I promise. Why don’t you get them settled in, Paint? I’m going to my room to read my letter. My letters,” he corrected himself.

Sand’s wolf didn’t want to wait even another minute to start the hunt for his mate, but Sand forced him down. His mate was here in Omaha. He would find her. Sky had his letters in his hand, running his thumb over and over the one with Rose’s handwriting on it. Sky must be anxious to read Rose’s words.

“Sure,” Paint said. “I’ll get them beds out back and then show ‘em around.”

Sky pushed away from the desk. “I’m glad you’re here,” he told Snow and Sand with fervent honesty. “I’ll see you tomorrow and we’ll start the hunt for your mate.”

Sand watched him go out. “He’s not the same, is he?” he asked Paint in a low voice, knowing how good wolf hearing was.

“No,” Paint agreed. “Come on. I’ll show you the house. We need to keep our voices down. Mostly the ladies nap in the afternoon.”

Sand wanted to ask about the women, but decided to wait. The house was like nothing he’d ever seen before. The Clan mostly roamed all over the Plains in search of good hunting during summer, and lived in lodges. In the winter they lived in the Sacred Lands, some of them in small houses. Some of the Clan had chosen to live settled, staying in one place outside Kearney, Nebraska. Their den had once been a motel that the Pack had converted to their home. One or two wolves shared a room, but spent most of their time in the rec room or outdoors. The den was comfortable. This house, for all its fancy woodwork and furniture, didn’t feel comfortable.

He followed Paint and Snow through the kitchen into a short narrow hall that opened to a large room with a long narrow table in it. The dining room was connected to what Paint called a receiving room. Apparently there were two large receiving rooms divided by a staircase, and the next floor was open, with more of the fussy railing from the staircase to keep people from falling into the reception room below. Sand could see doors which must lead to room upstairs.

“The ladies’ rooms are on the second floor, and Sky’s suite is on the third floor.” Paint opened the door in a spacious entry area. “There are dorms for the workers in back. You’ll be in the men’s dorm, of course.”

Of course. After they walked around the house and past the stable, Sand saw three long single story buildings. “Three? How many men fit in one of those?”

“There are ten bedrooms in each, plus a lounge, kind of like the rec room back home.”

“Sky has thirty men working for him?”

“Nope.” Paint tossed a grin over his shoulder. “Fourteen, with you two here. We’re in the middle dorm. The other two are for the women workers.”

Snow stopped so suddenly that Sand bumped into him. “What? How many ladies does Sky have working in his house?”

Paint stopped and turned around. “There are eight who do the kind of work you’re thinking about. There’s another twenty who do other types of entertainment and do the laundry, cook the food, do the shopping, clean the house and all the rest of that. Do you know how many times the bed sheets have to be changed in one night? That’s a lot of laundry to do every day.”

“I thought all women in Omaha who didn’t get married had to work in a whorehouse,” Snow protested.

“Yep.” Paint started walking again. “No one said what sort of work they had to do. Here at The Limit no woman has to do work she doesn’t want to.”

A tension he hadn’t even been aware of eased up on Sand’s heart. His mate might not be a prostitute. Not, he hastily assured himself, that it mattered if she were. He would love her no matter what.

Chapter Two

Sand shrugged unhappily. “You want me to just stay out here in the hall and listen for a woman’s voice to say ‘monitor’?”

“Yes,” said Paint patiently. “That’s the word the ladies use when their appointment behaves in a way she doesn’t like. If you hear a woman call for a monitor, go right into the room and be sure the man isn’t hurting the lady.”

Sand hadn’t met any of the ladies yet, but already the knowledge that they were members of Sky’s Pack made his hackles rise at the thought of any harm coming to them. He nodded crisply. “I’ll kill him.”

“No! The lady will tell you whether the man should be escorted out or given a warning. OK? You don’t have to stand. You can sit here. The appointments will begin arriving in about fifteen minutes. Your shift is three hours long. I’ll relieve you then.”

Sand watched Paint go down the stairs. He looked around the hall with its doors at regular intervals. The second floor was built like an open rectangle. Doors were set at regular intervals along the outside wall, two on each side, with a bathroom in three corners and a linen closet in the fourth. He glanced over the ornate rail that hugged the open edge of the upstairs in a graceful curve and saw the reception rooms below. If necessary, he could easily leap over the rail and land without difficulty. If he needed to get to the opposite side of the upstairs area he could possibly leap it.

At the top of the stairs was a small alcove with two chairs on either side of a small table. He moved over to one of the chairs and gingerly sat. The next three hours were going to be the hardest of his life. He closed his eyes and called up his memory of his beautiful mate. Soon, he assured his prowling wolf, they would find her and claim her.

The door at the far end of the hall opened and Sand sat up straight as a scent came to him. There were a multitude of sickeningly sweet scents crowding his nose, but this one was clean and light. Deep inside, his wolf gave a mighty howl. Sand was so shocked by his wolf that he almost didn’t notice the woman stepping out of the door. She had walked right up to him before he wrestled his wolf into a semblance of submission.

Her hair, the glossy brown of polished walnut, was looped up and fastened in an intricate style that showed off her soft white throat. Sand’s gaze found the line of a tattoo under the sheer fabric of her robe and followed it up her arm to the neckline of her ruffled nightdress. Breath got tangled up with the thundering beat of his heart. His mate. His mate was here!

“Well, hello,” she said in a throaty purr, looking him up and down with obvious approval. “You’re the hall monitor for tonight?”

He nodded dumbly, barely able to keep his wolf from screaming his victory, taking in her luscious curves with awed eyes. If he touched her, even a graze as light as air with his little finger, he would seize her and carry her off to ... To where? There was nowhere in this ugly city to take his mate. His fists curled as he fought with his wolf. The wolf didn’t see why they had to take her anywhere. Here was a perfectly good place to claim her.

“You must be one of Sky’s relatives?” she asked.

The seductive huskiness in her voice sent a shudder down his spine. He nodded again.

“I knew it. You’re all so buff and handsome. I’m Miss Amanda. You can call me Amanda.”

“Amanda,” he breathed, leaning a little closer to draw in a lungful of her scent. “I’m Sand.”

She almost knocked him off his feet when she ran the tip of one soft finger down his nose to tap his lower lip. “And you all have such fun names. You’re adorable! I would love to play with your hair sometime. In fact, on my next day off, I’ll give you a freebie.”

She turned to saunter back to her door. Sand’s gaze fixed on her lush, swinging hips, pretending his feet were glued to the floor so he wouldn’t leap on her and take her to the carpet. He wanted to feel her soft body under his so badly he shook. She paused and turned back.

“Oh, I forgot what I came out for. I was going to tell you that my first appointment tonight is Terry Askup. Last time he was here he was given a warning for being too rough. If it happens again, I’d like you to escort him out.”

Sand stared at her closed door with cold goo swimming in his guts. Miss Amanda was his mate. His mate was a business woman. In a few minutes she would be entertaining a man with a history of roughness, and she might ask him to escort her appointment out.

Escort him out? The man would be lucky if his wolf didn’t rip him to pieces.

This was not good.

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 Amanda glanced at the clock and stretched out on her side on the bed, allowing her robe to show a hint of her filmy nightdress in a demure but subtly sensual pose she knew Terry would like. It was her job to know what her appointments would like and provide it to them. Terry preferred his women to be submissive and present a façade of innocence even while they drove him wild in bed. Submissive and innocent wasn’t Amanda’s thing, but she took pride in her reputation as a woman worth every penny of her fee, so for Terry she’d be submissive and innocent.

 How much longer should she continue in this life? She didn’t mind the sex; she liked sex. But it was getting old. What would sex be like with someone she cared for? Really cared for? She was fond of some of her regular appointments, and they seemed to be fond of her, but fondness wasn’t love. What she wanted was a husband who loved her completely. To give herself to one man alone would be nice.

Not that she hated being a businesswoman. The money was good. She had plenty put aside, far more than enough to pay the marriage fee if she found someone she wanted to marry. There had been men over the years who had asked her to be their wife, many men. None had tempted her to say yes. They had been successful men who would have treated her well. She would have had a fine house to live in, fine clothes to wear, and fine food to eat. But she knew that to them she would be only a trophy. She didn’t want to be a trophy to be shown off to her husband’s friends; she wanted to be the woman her husband couldn’t live without. If she could find a man like that she’d leave this house and go live in a shed with him. Finding such a man was the problem.

 Footsteps paused outside her door. She adjusted the neck of her nightdress to show a hint of cleavage and looked at the door with wide eyes, trying for a surprised expression, as innocent as a schoolgirl and as provocative as Eve. It was exactly the expression that would get Terry turned on.

 Surprise became real when Sand stepped in and slammed the door behind him. She jerked into a sitting position on the bed, thinking he was gorgeous. Out in the hall he had been cute, with that one imperfect tooth and tongue-tied stammer, but now, with his hip length black hair gleaming in the lamp light and black eyes fixed fiercely on her, he was a beautiful, deadly animal.

 “Sand! What’s wrong?”

He was silent, staring at her like a wild animal who had cornered its prey. What a ridiculous thought! She shook it off with a twitch of her silk clad shoulder. “Sand? Where’s Terry?”

 “Terry,” he snarled, his upper lip lifting. “He won’t be visiting you tonight. Or ever again.”

 “What?” she began. “Why?”

Sand dragged her up off the bed and held her while he looked her over thoroughly. His gaze was hot enough to brand her. She couldn’t miss the bulge straining the front of his jeans, and an answering heat lit in her. That was strange. She didn’t usually become aroused so easily. Sand was amazingly compelling.

“What happened to Terry? Did you hurt him?”

“He’s alive.” His voice sounded more like a snarl than polite conversation. “He’s lucky to be alive.”

His hands weren’t hurting her, not quite, but they were tight around her arms. “Let me go, please.”

He shook his head slowly, sending all that long shiny hair gliding over his shoulders. “No. I want to kiss you.”

*This* she knew how to deal with. She feathered her fingers down his cheeks, to stroke through the black waterfall of hair streaming over his shoulders. It was like the most expensive raw silk, textured but sleek under her fingers. “Not tonight, but Saturday is all yours, handsome,” she promised in a whisper.

“Saturday is too far away. Tonight,” he corrected her hoarsely. “I’ve cancelled your appointments for tonight.”

He pushed her against the wall and leaned his weight into her. His body pressed deliciously against the place that burned for him. “Sand,” she gasped, sounding ridiculously like a virgin. “I don’t think—”

Then his lips smothered her words, turning her voice to a moan, and for a moment she forgot what she didn’t think. It was a long hot minute of dueling tongues before she managed to draw her mouth from his.

God, he was gorgeous. Amanda couldn’t look at him as sternly as she’d planned. “I don’t think you have the right to do that.” She tried for a kind smile while she wedged her hands against his chest to try to lever a little distance between their bodies. He didn’t move, not a millimeter. “Sand, step back.”

“No.” He pressed his nose to her throat and inhaled deeply. “You smell like heaven. Your scent is sweet and fresh. It doesn’t choke me like some of the odors here.”

By the end of the night she wouldn’t smell fresh, she reflected ironically. His breath was warm on her throat. The tongue he used to caress her pulse was hot and wet, like the place between her legs. Maybe she could re-schedule her appointments for Saturday night. She didn’t want to, not really. She’d been looking forward to having Saturday night off for weeks so she could go to the concert at the CLC.

Amanda wavered until Sand pulled two inches away, just enough to brush the edge of her robe open. She missed the warmth of his body, but the heat in his eyes warmed her nicely as they examined her. The flimsy cotton nightgown hid nothing. His face showed curiosity, and the curiosity turned to something like reverence. His hand was inconceivably gentle when he brushed his fingertips over cotton covering her nipple.

“Sand—”

He cut her off, in a tone so raw it made her shiver. “Will you deny me?”

“No.” She wouldn’t. She couldn’t. She’d had perhaps a couple hundred different men in her bed in the last seven years, and none of them had ever looked at her with such an expression, as if she were infinitely wondrous, utterly precious. “Would you like to go to the Red Rockers concert with me on Saturday?”

“I’ll go anywhere with you,” he murmured.

He dipped his mouth to her collarbone, but she lifted his face to her with a hand under his chin. “Then I need to keep my appointments tonight so I can have Saturday off.”

The sweet expression on his face froze into wrath. “No more appointments,” he snarled. “Never again. You said you wouldn’t deny me.”

Amanda jerked her robe closed and pulled the sash tight. “I’m not denying you,” she pointed out reasonably. “I’m giving you Saturday. Other men made appointments for tonight. I’m booked three weeks out, so they’ve been waiting. It’s not fair to cancel on them at the last minute.”

“No!” he howled. “No man comes before me. You are mine!”

Disbelief dropped her jaw. “Excuse me?”

“I saw you today on the street. I’ve known since that moment that you were mine.”

Amanda exhaled a breath. What a pity. Sand was so handsome, so masculine, and so damn stupid. “I don’t belong to you, Sand.” She jabbed a finger at the door. “Get out.”

He jerked her hard against him and backed her into the wall, trapping her. “No.”

Her mouth fell open. Was he crazy? All she had to do to get rid of him was call the monitor … Ice slid down her spine. He was the monitor. And right now he looked angry enough to alarm her.

Pain passed swiftly over his face. One finger at a time, he released her arms, and then stepped back. “You’re afraid of me?”

“No,” she lied. Well, it wasn’t a total lie. She was sure someone would come if she screamed.

“You are afraid of me.” Something close to shame was in his voice. “I would never hurt you.”

“Then leave me alone.”

“I can’t.” The words were simple and quiet. He turned his back to her, showing her all that long sleek black hair falling down his back. “You’re the only woman I can ever love.”

Amanda barely restrained an eye roll. Like she hadn’t heard that a thousand times before. “Please leave, Sand. We’ll talk about this tomorrow if you want to. My invitation for Saturday is still open. But if you don’t leave me alone now I’ll never speak to you again.”

An almost invisible shudder went down his spine. After a moment he walked to the door, opened it, and left. The latch fell into place with a quiet but distinct click.

Amanda stared at the door. Well, that went easier than she’d expected. A small part of her was almost disappointed he’d given in so easily. Not even a demand for a last kiss!

With a twitch of her shoulder she went to her vanity to re-do her makeup. Her next appointment was still over an hour away, but she could get ready for that, and then go downstairs to mingle until Paul arrived. The makeup she applied was darker and more dramatic, and she took off the erotically prim nightdress and put on the black leather shorts and bustier that showed off her dragon tattoo, then pulled on the thigh high black boots with the four inch needle heels. It took her only a few minutes to release her hair from its feminine arrangements of loops and tease it into a mess. This was Paul’s favorite look. He liked being dominated by his partner, and Amanda knew she did it well.

With a last glance in the mirror, she went to the door to join some of the other girls to mingle and flirt with the guests. She hadn’t gone one step before she saw Sand leaning crossed-armed next to her door. When he saw her, he jerked straight with his eyes springing wide. She gave him a small smile and sashayed to the rail to wave down at the people below. They applauded enthusiastically. Knowing her legs looked a mile long in the boots, she sauntered to the stairs.

Somehow, Sand got there first. “Where are you going?” he demanded in a growl so sexy she shivered.

“To play with the visitors,” she replied.

“Play? Will you kiss them?”

The jealousy would have been cute if he wasn’t so damn scary. “Of course not.”

“Will they try to kiss you?”

“Not if they’re smart.”

He eased up on the scary. “I’ll go with you to be sure no one bothers you.”

She tapped a glossy red nail against her chin. “You know, that could work. Every dominatrix needs a sub. Wait here a minute while I get a collar to put on you.”

“Collar?” he said, but she was already turning away and didn’t see the outrage on his face or the eerie shimmer of gold that filmed his eyes. He roared after her, “Do you think I’m a lap dog?”