**Sara & Stone Excerpt One**

Stone sat on the bottom step of the dormitory beside Snow, offering him silent support. Inside the women’s dorm the doctor was speaking quietly, so quietly that even wolf hearing couldn’t distinguish the words, as he worked on Odell Graham, Snow’s newly found mate. She had been beaten. Who would do something like that to a woman? Every time he remembered Odell’s battered body and bloody face he wanted to kill something. He didn’t know how Snow was controlling himself. Sometimes they could hear her groan, and her breathing alternated between hoarse and rough, and so soft they were afraid she’d stopped breathing altogether. Every now and then Stone heard his mate’s voice answering the doctor in calm tones.

Sara. He dropped his head into his hands. This could happen to her. If she wasn’t married in the next few weeks she would have to go to work in a house, and one of her customers could beat her up. Picturing her soft, pretty face black and swollen, with blood dripping from torn lips and a broken nose, made him spring up from the step. He couldn’t let that happen. Imagining her with other men twisted his guts up, but that was jealous hurt. When he imagined her broken like Odell, a black rage bubbled inside him, fighting to get out and find a victim.

“Stone!”

One of the Omaha men Sky hired to guard the gate to the Limit ran toward them. Snow gripped Stone’s arm in a painful clutch. “Make him shut up!” he snarled. “He’ll disturb my mate.”

Stone sprinted to the man. “What?”

“There’s a man at the gate,” he said, panting. “He’s asking for you.”

Without responding, Stone ran to the gate. He didn’t know what else could go wrong today. But it didn’t look like trouble. The man standing outside the gates holding a fabric bag in one work worn hand was Sara’s uncle.

Mr. Nelson lifted the bag. “I brought Sara a change of clothes and some other things. I figured she might be here for a while.” His lined face wore a look of concern. “How is the lady?”

Stone stood with one hand clenching a bar of the gate. “The doctor thinks she’ll be okay. He’s here with her right now for the second time today.” Sky’s orders were to not open the gate for anyone except one of them or the doctor, but he didn’t think the bag would fit through the bars of the gate. He opened the gate just wide enough for the bag to pass through. “Thanks for bringing this. I’ll see that Sara gets it.”

Mr. Nelson didn’t release the bag. “That’s not the only reason I came. I think it’s time we talked.”

The words whipped through Stone like a cold wind over water. He was pretty sure he knew what his mate’s uncle wanted to talk about. Only a coward would jerk the bag free and turn his back on the older man, and Stone wasn’t a coward. He nodded at Nelson. Maybe it was a good time to walk around the fence to be sure no one was trying to get inside.

“Okay. I’ll come out. We can walk and talk.”

Mr. Nelson let go of the bag and waited for Stone to set it inside the gate. They walked side by side in silence for a few minutes. Stone divided his attention between the brick fence that surrounded the Limit and the man he walked with. The afternoon air was brisk and clean, not obscuring Nelson’s scent, but Stone wasn’t sure what his emotions were. Perhaps nervous, but determined.

“When Sara first came to live with me,” he said in a slow, measured tone, “she was a wreck. She spent at least twelve hours a day crying. If you would have come after her then, I would have done my darnedest to kill you.”

He turned his head to look at Stone, and somehow that lined tired face was deadly. Inside, Stone’s wolf rolled over and exposed his belly. Stone refused to show his throat, but he kept a respectful silence as the man went on.

“I’ve never seen anyone as miserable as Sara those first few months. Every time she’d get to being almost normal, one of your letters would come and the tears would start again.” Exasperation crept into his voice. “If you were only going to write once every four months, couldn’t you have written more than two sentences? Did you *like* punishing her?”

That was more than he could take. “Punishing her? I wasn’t!”

Nelson’s grunt was loaded with disbelief. “And then when Amanda went to live out west with you all, you stopped writing.”

Stone clenched his jaw. He’d written now and then to let his mate know he was still alive. Amanda was her cousin. She could tell Sara he was still alive. “I didn’t have anything to say.”

Nelson stopped. “Yeah. That’s the whole problem, isn’t it? Instead of talking to her like a man, you just packed her off like a sulky little boy who didn’t want to play with a toy because it had a tiny chip.”

Tiny ch— *Sulky boy*? Stone unclenched his teeth enough to say, “Do you know what she did?”

“Of course I do. She told me every day and twice on Sundays! She kissed some other man in front of you. Yeah, she told me the whole story. Over and over. Did she ever blame you? Nope, not once. She took all the blame. Said she was stupid, and selfish, and silly.”

“She *was* stupid and selfish!”

“Yeah.” The older man began walking again. “She was. Seems to me she did it to get back at you for something you did that she didn’t like.”

Stone didn’t stomp as he walked, but he felt like it. Just like a sulky boy. That realization nearly made him stumble. “I went somewhere without her. She couldn’t come. It would have been impractical. And to get back at me she kissed another man. That’s wrong.”

“She knows it. She’s told me so about two million times. Son, she’s sorry. She’s grown up a lot since she’s come to Omaha. Isn’t it time you grew up too?”

Stone walked for a while in silence, wrestling with feelings he didn’t want to admit. “Words are easy to say,” he finally managed to get out. “What happens the next time she gets mad at me?”

“I think she’s grown up enough that it won’t happen. Oh, I’m sure she’ll get mad at you again. Probably lots of times. But she won’t try to get back at you like that.” Nelson thrust his hands in his coat pockets and looked at Stone. “Maybe I’m not an expert on women’s feelings, but I had a sister, and a wife, and a daughter, as well as a niece, and I’m telling you that girl loves you.”

Misery thickened his voice. “I wish I could tell what she feels.”

“Oh yeah. Sara told me you can tell if someone is lying, except for her.”

“I can’t feel her like that at all. It’s like being blind.”

“Can you tell if I’m lying? When I say that Sara loves you, am I lying?”

Stone felt his eyes widen. “No,” he breathed. “That’s true.”

“Darned right it is. Now you listen.” The alpha-like tone was back in Nelson’s voice. “Sara will be eighteen soon. I can’t pay to keep her home. She’ll have to go to work in house, maybe the same house that poor woman was beat near to death in. Is that what you want for Sara?”

“No.” Stone grasped the other man’s arm. “She loves me? You’re sure?”

“Yes, she loves you. You thick headed idiot. You should be ashamed. If she says she loves you, you should believe her, not rely on the word of another man.”

The clean scent of truth swept around Stone. Sara loved him, truly loved him! Elation filled him, making him feel as if he could fly. “I’ll believe her next time. Thank you,” he said fervently. “We better hurry back.”

“Uh-huh.” Mr. Nelson shook his head. “You kids make me tired. But congratulations on finally growing up.”

**Sara & Stone Excerpt Two**

Sara’s lower back ached from hours of nursing Odell, but she ignored that when Odell struggled to sit up. “I’ve got you,” she told the injured woman in the calmly encouraging tone the nuns had taught her. She braced Odell with one arm while the other hand re-arranged pillows to support her. “Water?”

“Snow.”

The name was a moan slurred by swollen lips, but Sara understood. “I’ll get him,” she said.

But of course she didn’t need to. When she stepped into the hall, the front door of the dorm was already opening. Snow walked down the hall with long, silent strides. She stepped back and he gave her a distracted smile as he passed her. He went to one knee beside the bed and took Odell’s hand gently. Sara watched him stroke his mate’s fingers as tenderly as he would a newborn kitten.

She was over tired. That must be why she felt like crying. Why didn’t Stone show her that kind of tenderness? Blinking to keep back the tears, she turned to bedside table and poured water.

“See if you can get her to take some water,” she said to Snow.

He smiled at her as he took the glass. “Sure. Why don’t you go lie down for an hour? I’ll sit with her.”

“Thanks.”

She quietly closed the door behind her. During their trip to Mel’s ranch a couple years ago, Snow had always been nice to her. He was that kind of guy. Why wasn’t Stone more like him? Sweet, kind, and tender, instead of cold, judgmental and bossy? Even before she had ruined everything by kissing Mord, Stone was often surly. She paused at the dorm’s front door to lean her forehead on the cool wood. Maybe, she admitted privately, he would have been nicer to her if she had been nicer to him. When he made eager protestations of devotion she had laughed at him. And worse. She lifted her head from the door with a weary sigh. She was such an idiot. How could she ever make him believe she had changed?

**Sara & Stone Excerpt Three**

“Sara!”

At the tiny table in the equally tiny breakfast nook in the women’s dormitory, Sara jerked awake and blinked. She stared blankly down at the remains of her lunch and shook her head to clear her mind. She stood up and crab-walked around the table to the door.

“Stone. What’s wrong?” She looked down the narrow hall towards the door of Odell’s room. It was closed. She looked back at Stone. “Is Odell okay?”

“Sure, she’s fine.” His eyes, the color of raw honey, held excitement. She loved his eyes. “I want to talk to you. You have time to talk right now?”

She’d already wasted half of her sleep break at the little table in the nook, but if Stone wanted to talk to her, she wanted to hear what he had to say. “I’d love to talk to you.”

He took her hand and led her out to the small entryway of the dormitory. “Let’s talk outside, so we don’t disturb anyone. Is it too cold for you? The sun is out and there’s no wind.”

She didn’t want to take her hand out of his and so she reached one-handed for her coat hanging on a hook. Drat. She would need both hands free to put it on. Stone seem to feel the same way, but he let go of her hand and helped her put her coat on. He stood close behind her smoothing her collar down with a hand that seemed… gentle. She felt his breath warm on the back of her neck. For a moment she stopped breathing, wondering if he were going to brush his lips over her nape. She waited for a moment but he stepped around and began fastening the buttons up the front of her coat. He paused for a moment looking down into her eyes. She gazed back up at him, knowing her eyes were wide and her lips dry.

The moment passed. Stone took her hand and put it in the crook of his elbow covering it with his other hand. “Sara, I’ve been thinking…” He trailed off and opened the door to the outdoors. “Let’s walk. I think better when I walk.”

Sara allowed him to lead her down the step to the backyard. Butterflies were doing their very best to create a whirlwind in her stomach. They strolled for several minutes without speaking. She began to wonder if he would ever open his mouth.

“It’s a nice day,” she ventured. “Odell is doing better today.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s good,” he muttered. Suddenly, he stopped walking and looked down at her. “Sara, I know I’ve been mean to you.”

“No, you haven’t. At least, not more than I deserve.”

“Yeah, I have. I accused you of being a bratty little girl, but I haven’t been so grown up either.” His hand tightened over hers where it lay on his arm. “I never gave you a chance to explain or apologize.”

No, he hadn’t. “I wish you had. What I did was stupid. I was sorry for it right away. But you know what? Until a year ago I didn’t really realize just how stupid it was. So maybe if you would have given me a chance to apologize it wouldn’t have meant as much as it does now. If that makes any sense.”

“I guess it does. Maybe both of us were too young then.”

He didn’t return her trembling smile. His free hand, warm in spite of the cold October air, lifted to cup her cheek. She savored the connection, awed by its sweetness. “Stone, I am so sorry,” she whispered.

His other hand lifted to caress her other cheek. “Sara, tell me one thing. If you say it, I’ll believe it.” His eyes gleamed in the week sunlight, burnished by a shimmer of tears. “Sara, do you love me?"

Tears rushed to her own eyes and spilled over. “Yes, Stone,” she said as clearly as tears permitted. “I love you.”

He lowered his head until their foreheads touched. “Sara, will you be my mate?”

A giggle choked its way out of her tight throat. “We’re already married.”

He didn’t laugh. “Will you accept me as your mate?”

Sara swallowed. Her cousin Amanda had written to her about this. To Stone and his kinsmen, mating was much more than marriage. “Yes, Stone, I accept you. Do you accept me?”

“With my whole heart.” His face was solemn for a long minute before a wide smile broke through. “If it wasn’t for Odell needing quiet, I’d howl loud enough for Taye to hear me way out by Kearney! Can I kiss you?”

She looped her arms around his neck and dragged him down to her lips. The kiss started out hesitant, gentle, even awkward, but the tenderness of his lips made her want to cry until heat flushed trough her body and made her want something else. When he lifted his head she found herself panting.

“Oh,” she said weakly.

“Bad?” he asked, anxiously.

Pure joy made her laugh. “No, *good*!”

His smile bloomed again, wide and full of the same joy she felt. Something must have caught his eye. She quickly looked around, and saw Katelyn waving from the step of the dorm. “What is she saying?” she asked. “Is Odell worse?”

Stone, with his superb hearing, shook his head. “Odell wants you to come help her with something, but it doesn’t sound dire.” He smiled down at her. “I want a wedding night.”

“Me too!” she said instantly. “But when? Where?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll figure it out.”

“Okay. I better go.”

He walked her back to the dorm. With a quick touch of his hand on her arm, he whispered, “I love you.”

She went inside with his words held tightly to her heart. He loved her.