

## Chapter One

God, but he hated weddings. And this one had all the trappings of a mortal's dream come true. Hilarious since there were less than a handful of mortals scattered among the two hundred guests here tonight. He'd never thought his best friend would have gone for this kind of thing. Long white dress, bridesmaids.

Rafe made quick work of the fine Scot's whiskey that the groom had demanded be served along with champagne. Then Glory threw the bouquet into a crowd of squealing single women. It figured. His very pregnant lady caught it. Lacy turned toward him, her face glowing with happiness. Oh, yeah. She wanted to be next. Desperately. Shit.

"You're up, Valdez." A hand clamped on his shoulder.

Rafe caught himself before he growled and threw a punch. Of course the wedding singer would be right behind him, ready to push him into the crowd of single guys for the garter toss.

"Touch me again, Caine, and I'll take your arm off." Okay, so he did have a growl in him. Israel Caine laughed, stupid ass.

"No you won't. You can't ruin our gal's wedding. So we'll both get up there and try to not catch the fucking garter." Caine elbowed Rafe, apparently not caring that he was tempting

fate. “Look at Blade, sliding that garter down Glory’s leg. Oh no he didn’t. Copped a feel in front of God and everybody.” He covered his eyes and moaned in exaggerated pain. “Can you believe it?”

“Fool.” Rafe planted his own elbow to do maximum damage then strode toward Lacy when he saw her wince and rub her stomach. “Baby, you all right?”

“Just the babies doing gymnastics. I’m fine. But did you see? Glory aimed this right at me.” She smiled and leaned in to smell the bouquet. White roses and a bunch of other flowers Rafe couldn’t name.

“I saw you leaping for it.” Rafe grinned. “If you’d landed on your stomach, how would that have looked?”

“A cat always lands on her feet, lover.” Lacy reached out and ran her finger down his cheek. “You going to try for the garter or not?”

“Sure he is.” Caine was there again. “He can’t wait. Right, Valdez?” He nodded and the drummer on the bandstand hit the cymbals.

“Gentlemen here who are still single,” Richard Mainwaring, best man for the groom, stood at the microphone. “Come up here. Blade is ready to throw the garter. I know you all want to be next to marry.” He winked at his bride who was one of the bridesmaids. “Misery loves company, so we’re not letting any of you hang back.” He ducked when a high heel whizzed past his head. “Kidding, darling. Of course I highly recommend wedded bliss.”

Rafe snorted then realized Lacy was giving him a narrow look. “Okay, I’m going. Stay back from this, Lace, it might turn into a brawl. Because, much as we love our ladies, you know marriage isn’t exactly on any guy’s top ten list.”

“You do the crime, you should do the time.” Caine shoved Rafe forward. “Don’t worry, Lacy. I’ll put him front and center.”

“Didn’t I warn you about touching me?” Rafe wheeled on the man. “You must not care if

you lose your fangs and have to drink blood from a straw.”

“Don’t go up there on my account.” Lacy backed up, heading for the safety of the buffet table. “Thanks, Ray, but I know my guy isn’t ready to marry me. He’s still carrying a torch for you know who.”

“Fuck. See what you’ve done?” Rafe shoved Caine away from him.

“I didn’t do a damned thing. She’s not wearing your ring, is she?” Ray nodded toward Lacy who was surrounded by women checking out her bouquet. “It was me? I’d want to stake my claim. Heard it was triplets. The woman needs security, backup. What promise does she have you won’t disappear some night?”

“Like you’re a fucking expert on relationships.” Rafe seriously wanted to plant a fist in the vampire’s smug face. “I don’t owe you an explanation but I’ve got a ring in my pocket.” He turned toward the stage. Yeah, he had one. Had been carrying it for three weeks. Just couldn’t pull the trigger. Blade, the groom, was twirling the lacy blue garter over his head and looking over the crowd of men who, as one, seemed to have decided to check their pockets.

“Listen to me, all of you. If this thing hits the ground next to any man, I’m personally pounding that individual into a bloody pulp. You hear me, lads?” Blade let his brogue show as he glared at the reluctant crowd He’d imported a dozen relatives from his native Scotland and at least four of them were stuck in the single guy melee. “Now hands up. Courage. I can’t make you marry, ye ken. It’s a game, that’s all. Ready?” And he tossed the thing, straight at Rafe.

Instinct took over, a thousand years of it. Rafe snatched it out of the air before he could stop himself. Caine clapped him on the back. The other men sighed in relief then roared with laughter, probably at his look of pain. Rafe glanced toward the buffet table and saw Lacy’s eyes fill with tears. What the hell? Did that mean she was happy that fate was pushing them toward the altar? Or something else? He was damned if he could read her moods as her pregnancy progressed. He slid the garter up the sleeve of his suit and stopped next to the happy couple for a

quick picture. Of course there was a wedding photographer. Just one more freaking tradition. Lightning streaked the sky and thunder boomed even though it was a clear night. Glory's parents, excited and a little upset by the whole vampire thing, kept it lively with their Olympus magic. Score one for the nontraditional side.

"Anyone seen Lacy?" Rafe couldn't find her once the photo ops were over.

"She went toward the fence. Wanted some air, she said." One of the other clerks from the shop where Lacy was manager helped herself to wedding cake. "She left the bouquet on the table. So I know she'll be back."

Rafe strode toward the fence that bordered their vampire host's lavish estate. It was on a hilltop with a view of the city of Austin. Other couples had strolled over to enjoy the view and there were benches where you could sit if you wanted to stay a while. He finally spotted Lacy on one under a tree.

"Hey. I was looking for you. Are you feeling okay?" He sat next to her and picked up her hand. It was a chilly December night, the winter solstice, so this party could go on for hours yet. But her hand was warm. Shape-shifters, even were-cats like Lacy, ran hot.

"Physically, I'm fine." She sighed and kept gazing at the lights of the state capitol building in the distance.

"What's that supposed to mean? Talk to me. I'd think you'd be happy. It was a nice wedding, your boss is finally hitched to her soulmate and you caught the bouquet. What's wrong with that?" He started to turn her face toward his but remembered she hated for him to do that. Women. Mysterious creatures. And when they were a cat too? Impossible to understand. Which was part of the excitement too.

"Are you upset? That Glory is married now?" She finally looked at him. "I know you love her."

"Aw shit. Are we going over that again?" Rafe dropped her hand. This was an old issue

and getting older. “I love her like a friend now. Once it was more. You know we hooked up. But she loves Blade. Enough to marry him. I’m not so stupid that I’m going to pine after a woman who loves another man. I’ve moved on. To a woman I know loves me back. Who sees me as someone who can be number one in her life. I *am* your number one, right?”

“Yeah. But maybe that makes *me* stupid.” Her eyes glittered and she looked back at the city lights.

“No, it makes you wonderful. I love you, Lace.” He put his hand over her burgeoning stomach. “I love that you’re carrying my babies.” He squatted down in front of her and tugged on her hands. “Look at me. I’ve been holding onto this for a couple of weeks, waiting for the right time.”

She looked down at him. “What?”

He dug in his coat pocket. “This. Will you marry me?” He popped open the ring box and showed her he’d gone all out. He’d asked her sister to help him and the ring was vintage, which Lacy loved, and set in platinum. The diamond was a good size and the ring should fit.

She stared at him then stared at it. The silence stretched until Rafe was beginning to wonder if she was sick or something.

“Your timing sucks.”

“Why? I was going to do this the other night but you came home with a headache. Then I had that emergency at the club and had to stay late. You were asleep when I got home.”

“Excuses.” She snarled. Yeah, just about let her cat out. He knew the signs. “You waited until Glory tied the knot. Is married to Blade and off the market. Then, then you can commit to me.” She jumped up, knocking him on his ass in the grass. “Sorry, Rafe, but I won’t take Glory’s leftovers.”

“Wait.” Rafe jumped up and took off after her. She did go cat on him then and leaped over the fence. Shit on a stick. It was dangerous for her in her condition to take off over that

pointed iron and he knew the thing was electrified. Luckily she cleared it by a foot. His woman. She was powerful and beautiful in her red-gold fur. After he tucked that ring back in his pocket, he shifted himself, choosing a large bird that soared overhead. He kept track of her, aggravated that instead of heading to the home they shared on Sixth Street, she was going toward her family's compound further south.

She followed the lake front until she hit the wooded acreage that surrounded the cluster of homes where the were-cats lived. Then she shifted again. He saw her look down to make sure she was still presentable, brushing her hair back behind her shoulders, before she strolled toward the porch lights of her mother's mansion.

Rafe landed behind her, shifting again so they could talk. "Stop! Lacy, please don't go in there."

"Why not? I'm always welcome even if I was stupid enough to get knocked up by a common shifter." She sniffed, flinging her hair like a flame-colored banner. "I guess I'm just one of those women who never learn. Always picking emotionally unavailable men."

"That's not fair. I'm available. I laid my heart at your feet not five minutes ago." Rafe stepped in front of her and put his hands on her shoulders. God, she was beautiful—tall and graceful even when swollen with pregnancy. She had slim legs under her short skirt and creamy shoulders that were set off by the emerald green dress she'd chosen for the wedding. The shawl she'd thrown over the skimpy dress must have been left on the bench when she'd shifted. She shivered and he tried to put his arms around her. She shook her head.

"Stop it. I didn't see your heart at my feet. What I saw was a willingness to commit. Good for you. Am I supposed to pin a medal on you? You *are* willing to step up." She must have read something in his face. "Oh, yes, I heard that's what you said. That you were stepping up." She looked away, her eyes glittering. "I won't be your pity partner, Rafe. If you'd offered me a ring even a month ago, when Glory was still missing, I would have taken it gladly. But now?"

She shoved him out of the way. "I'll have to think about it."

"Those babies are mine, Lacy. No matter what you need to think about, know this. I am their father and I will be in their lives from the minute they are born." He followed her all the way to her mother's door. No surprise when the door flew open before Lacy could reach for the doorknob.

"Get out of here, shifter. My daughter has come home where she belongs." Mama Cat showed her claws. "She will let you know if she wishes to see you again."

"Mama, stay out of this." Lacy turned and faced him one more time. "Of course you can see the babies. But I know your kind. If these children are were-cats, you won't care to raise them. They will repulse you. Can you deny that?"

"Damn right I deny that." Rafe didn't bother to respond when Mama Cat hissed. "They are my blood. Which means something in my world. You will not keep me from them. Cat or not, they will know their father. Learn from me. And, Lacy, I meant what I said." He reached for her again, refusing to let go when she tried to squirm away from him.

"Blame it on hormones or something but all of this resistance is crap. I know you love me and I love you. Marry me and let's raise these children together. Make a home together. Stop this foolishness and accept my ring. You want a big wedding like Glory just had? We can do that. Whatever you want." He pulled her close and kissed her, putting everything he had into it. He could feel Mama Cat about to pounce but knew she wouldn't hurt her daughter. When Lacy's mouth opened under his, he knew he was winning.

"Rafael, son of Emiliano, grandson of Matias. You must come with us." The voice boomed out of the darkness.

Rafe jerked back from Lacy and turned to put her behind him. He knew that voice even though he hadn't heard it in a hundred years or more. He looked around and saw at least two dozen pairs of gleaming eyes in the darkness. The cats. They'd heard what they'd consider a

threat and clearly were ready to rumble. Not to help him but to protect Lacy and her mother.

“Tomas. What do you want?” He had come away without a weapon. Shit. Damian, who owned the estate where the wedding had been held, had made them all surrender their weapons at the door when they’d arrived. It had been a wise precaution considering the variety of paranormals attending. Rafe could shift now, get away, but he knew Tomas and his backup would just shift after him.

“Your grandfather commands your presence. Come with us.” Tomas stepped into the pool of light from the porch. Of course he looked the same. Immortals didn’t age after thirty or so. He was still dark, dangerous and cocky. A real bastard.

“You know I don’t serve my grandfather now. We came to an understanding more than a century ago.” Rafe nodded as the cats moved closer but held up one hand. Tomas toyed with a pistol that looked like the handheld version of a machine gun, the kind that could shoot many rounds, fast. Rafe wasn’t about to let the cat family be slaughtered.

“Things have changed. Grandfather is dying. He calls you to his side. We have no time to waste. Will you come on your own or do we make this happen the hard way?” Tomas smiled like he hoped Rafe chose to make it hard on all of them.

“How can an immortal be dying?” Lacy decided to get involved.

“I don’t answer to a cat.” Tomas spat on the ground and the answering hiss from a dozen cats made the hair on the back of Rafe’s neck rise.

“Manners, Tomas. This is my fiancé, Lacy Devereau. You are on her parents’ property and should show respect. If you can’t manage that, then leave.”

“Not without you, brother.”

Rafe heard Lacy gasp. Yeah, she hadn’t a clue about his family. For good reason. “All right. I’ll come. But Lacy asked a valid question. How is it that my immortal grandfather is dying?” He said it calmly but part of him, a part deep inside where he’d buried it long ago,

stirred and moaned. Grandfather, who'd made him into the man he was today. For better or worse.

"He was poisoned. It's a new weapon developed by an old enemy. We've tried everything but can find no antidote. So he's been wasting away. Time is short now, Rafael. Come." Tomas sneered at Lacy. "Marrying a cat? That should finish the old man if nothing else does." He turned on his heel and a half dozen men, who had blended into the trees, emerged to surround him.

"Rafe!" Lacy ran to his side and threw her arms around him. "Be careful."

"I will." He kissed her one more time. The babies kicked him in the stomach and he grinned. "My children just told me good-bye. I have a lot to live for. Of course I'll hurry back. Start planning our wedding."

"Or your funeral." Mama Cat had to have the last word.

Rafe ignored her and strode after his brother. A huge SUV that had been left on the road leading into the estate roared to life as the men piled inside.

"We aren't shifting there?" He'd been given the front passenger seat and his brother was driving. The other men were crowded into the two back seats.

"You know how far it is. This isn't the dark ages, brother. We have a chartered jet waiting for us. The old man has plenty of money so we go in style." Tomas glanced at him, taking in the custom tailored suit he'd worn to the wedding. "You seem to be doing well except for your choice in women."

"Don't start, Tomas." Rafe held on when Tom took a corner too fast. That was his brother, always reckless. "As I recall, you never stuck with one woman long enough to make a commitment." That got a laugh from the men in the back. "What?" He looked back and recognized one of his cousins.

"Just wait, Rafael. After you left, your grandfather arranged a marriage for Tomas. To

Lucia Escalante. Tomas is whipped, I tell you. He has seven children and we lost count of how many grandchildren.” His cousin nudged the man next to him. “Lucia makes sure Tomas is true to her or there would be hell to pay, eh, cousin?”

“Shut up, Nico.” Tomas jerked the car to a stop at a red light. “Lucia is plenty of woman for any man.” He glanced at Rafe. “And she gave me fine children. I saw that cat is carrying. Yours?”

“Yes.” Rafe gave his brother a hard look. “I know what you’re thinking. Whatever they are, I will raise them and accept them.”

“Grandfather will never have another half breed in the camp. You were bad enough but at least your mama was a higher level demon so you brought something special to the table. But a were-cat?” Tomas glanced back at his men and let out a cat-like howl. “*Pobrecito*. Grandfather will never let you keep her.

Lacy paced the floor. “I can’t believe they just dragged him out of here.” She turned when the front door flew open, sagging when it was just her sister, Amy.

“Well, you don’t have to look so disappointed. Are you wearing it? The ring?” She snatched Lacy’s hand. “What the hell? Has Rafe proposed yet or not?”

“He made it clear he wants to marry you.” Lacy’s mother jumped up from her seat on the couch in front of the fireplace. “I’m pleased you obviously turned him down.” She grabbed Lacy and kissed her cheek. “A marriage would be unthinkable. You will have the babies of course. We will be happy to raise them. But then you must take a suitable mate. Leo--”

“You can’t possibly think to start that again. Not now.” Lacy threw off her mother’s hands. “I love Rafe. We fight. So what? All lovers fight. At least around here.” She sank down in an upholstered chair and, to her horror, burst into tears.

“Lacy!” Her sister sat on the chair’s padded arm next to her. “What happened? Did he

propose?”

“Yes.” Lacy took the tissue from the box her mother threw into her lap. It was all the sympathy she’d get from Mama and she knew it. “After Glory was safely married to Blade. I told him to shove it.”

“No!” Amy punched her on the arm and got up to sit beside her mother on the couch. “How stupid can you be? He loves you. We went ring shopping together. He wanted you to have the perfect ring. Did you at least get to see it?”

“Yes.” Fresh tears. Of course she’d seen it. It *had* been perfect. Exactly what she would have picked for herself. Did that mean he really did love her? Would he have married her even if Glory St. Clair had suddenly dumped Blade and come running to Rafe for a hot reunion? Lacy buried her face in a wad of tissues. Who was she kidding? Glory had powers, first dibs, a lot of things *she* would never have. And years of history with Rafe.

“Stop it.” Amy was next to her again, her hand on Lacy’s shoulder. “I bet you’re comparing yourself to Glory. Have you looked in a mirror lately? You’re beautiful, smart and any guy would be lucky to have you.”

“I’m carrying forty pounds of kittens in my lap, which has disappeared completely. I can’t see my feet and I’ll probably have stretch marks. As a bonus my hair is falling out.” Lacy heard her mother sigh. “What?”

“I gave you that cream to rub on your stomach. You should use it.” Her mother got up and pulled Lacy to her feet. “You need to go to bed. Give yourself a chance to rest. That man is gone now and his absence will give you time to see things clearly, without all cat-passions clouding your mind.” She smiled. “Oh yes, I know your blood runs hot, my sweet girl. But be wise. Don’t tie yourself to him just because you let your hormones rule your heart.”

“Mama...” Lacy knew her face was flaming. She was in no mood for this lecture which she’d heard too many times now.

“Very well, pine away for your lover.” Her mother stepped back when she noticed Lacy had let her claws show. “But, trust me, tomorrow everything will look better. And the longer Rafael is away, the easier it will be for you to see that he is wrong for you.” She held up her hand, her own claws showing now. “One last thing. I don’t mind Glory since I believe she’s been fair to you. But if her relationship with Rafael worries you, quit the job in her shop and cut ties.”

“No, I like my job. I’m the manager and she’s leaving tonight for her honeymoon. She counts on me to keep the shop running smoothly while she’s gone. I’m even cat-sitting for her. Boogie is at my house, *our* house, right now.” Fresh tears. That had to stop. “I’m going home. Where I live with Rafe. I do love him and I’m going to marry him as soon as he gets back.” She kissed her mother’s cheek. Of course Mama was frowning now. “I want to know how his brother found him here. Someone tracked him and I think I know who did.”

“Uh oh. I see that look. Are you on the warpath now?” Amy grinned. “Okay, I know, not funny. But surely Rafe’s family won’t hurt him. If his grandfather is dying, Rafe may want to say good-bye.”

“Maybe. But I don’t like the fact that someone I trusted was obviously sent to Austin from wherever the hell his home is to spy on him.” Lacy stepped closer to the fireplace. “Can you drive me to my apartment, Amy? I’m tired from shifting and cold.”

“You should have worn something a little warmer, darling.” Her mother picked up a throw and draped it around her shoulders.

“I wanted to look good for this wedding.” Lacy sighed. Foolish of her. Glory had been radiant and Rafe had watched her walk down the aisle with love in his eyes. He insisted it was a friend’s love. She had to believe him or turn into a jealous witch.

“You look beautiful even if more appropriate for a June wedding instead of a winter one. And I’m sure you outshone the bride even with forty pounds of precious babies in your stomach.” Her mother smiled, as usual reading her motives accurately. “Go. Take care of your

boss's cat and sleep. We'll talk more later." She nodded at Amy. "Drive her home."

"Sure. Maybe I'll spend the night. That okay with you, sis?" Amy picked up car keys from a table by the door.

"Yes, I'd like the company." Lacy shivered again. Where was Rafe now? How were they getting there and what was his family like? How far away was this mysterious shifter enclave? They hadn't talked about his past and she hadn't pushed. Which she now realized was a mistake. But she suspected she knew exactly who could and would give her answers. First thing tomorrow she was getting some. Or that spy was going to regret ever coming to Austin and worming into their lives.