



Accidentally Were?

ANNE DOUGLAS

Loose Id

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Chapter One

“Come on, Shaun, let me in!” Pearl put some more elbow grease into it and banged harder on her girlfriend’s front door. “Wake up, you lazy cow, and let me in before they eat me” -- she turned around to look at the yard full of adoring canines -- “or something.”

She refused to look down to find out if she had something more than slobber on her shoe. Too many of the dogs looked too happy by far. *La la la laaaa...don't think about it, Pearl, just don't think about it.*

“Goddamn it, Shaun! Let. Me. In!”

“All right, all right already. Keep your pants on.” Locks clicked, and the door swung open. A petite, spritelike creature stood in the doorway. Her coal black hair was in disarray, and her eyes were rimmed like a raccoon’s from smearing last night’s eye makeup around with her fist as she tried to wake up.

“Too bloody late for that now, isn’t it?” Pearl muttered as she shouldered her way past her kooky best friend and into the hallway, shaking off an eager paw so she could cross the threshold. “Hurry up, shut the door!”

Shaun had managed to clear her vision enough to take in the pack of dogs on her front lawn. “Hey...what’s with all the dogs?” She took a closer look at Pearl’s disheveled state and gasped. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll change before I go anywhere else today.”

Usually primly proper and schoolmarmlike, Pearl preferred to dress in skirts, blouses, and her trademark pearls. But today she wore a ratty old pair of jeans, a T-shirt on backward, and her jacket turned inside out. Then Shaun spied the big hickey on Pearl’s neck and tried very hard not to giggle, going so far as to stuff her little fist in her little mouth, but she couldn’t contain her very *big* roar of laughter.

“Ohmigod!” Goth chicks shouldn’t be allowed to squeal; it was unseemly. “Miss Prissy got laid last night!”

Pearl wasn’t amused. “Shut up, will you!” She slapped her so-called best friend on the shoulder, emphasizing her request. “I don’t really remember much about last night. What the hell were you feeding me? You know I don’t drink much!”

It was much too uncouth for a member of the Gordon household to go out drinking. Gordons drank wine to complement a meal, or a polite brandy or port after dinner to round off an evening, but never, *ever*, would they consider going to a pub and getting smashed. This was precisely why Shaun and the rest of the girls from the office had dragged her to the club and plied her with alcohol.

“So...was it good? Which one did you take home in the end? The young, blond Adonis, or the sexy, dark-haired one that looked like the devil?” Shaun contemplated Pearl then clapped her hands gleefully as she spied another mark on the back of Pearl’s neck. “Wait...or was it both of them?”

“Shaun! What do you take me for?” Pearl was horrified that Shaun would think it of her. *Two men? My God!*

“A well-loved woman, with not one, but two hickeys on her neck is what I take you for.”

“Four, actually.”

“Four what?” Shaun dragged her down the hall and into her bedroom and pulled them both onto the bed, obviously getting settled in for a good gossip about the previous night’s happenings.

“Four hickeys. The two you can see...and, well, there are two you can’t see.” Shaun chortled, and Pearl knew she was about to ask where the others were. “And, no, I’m not going to show you!”

“Prissy Pearl got *laaiid*! Yeah! Go, Miss Priss!” Pearl watched her younger friend bounce up and down on the bed with glee. “I knew you had it in you, Pearl. *See*, I *told* you that you aren’t dowdy and over the hill at thirty-one!”

“Well, I may have gotten laid, as you so elegantly put it, but now I’ve got some big problems.” Pearl slumped back onto the black silk covers of Shaun’s bed. She hadn’t seen the bedroom before and looked around with wide eyes, taking it all in.

Wow, Shaun really does get into this gothic, paranormal, werewolf, vamp thing. The bed was draped in black satin, the canopy blood red silk. Leather and lace fought with chains instead of the usual girly knickknacks.

“Oh, come on, what could be so bad? Okay, you had a one-night stand. Welcome to hell with the rest of us, Pearl.” Shaun waved a hand, gesturing at the room. “It ain’t so bad, you know.”

“Yeah, well you’re not the one who can’t remember if he used a condom.” Shaun frowned down at her. “And you weren’t the one to wake up to an empty bed -- I don’t even remember his name!”

Shaun frowned more and bit her lip.

“And...you weren’t the one to wake up with big hickeys all over your body that, when you look closer, have these really weird puncture marks in them. Like he bit me.”

That had been the worst thing. Not the hickeys so much; it had been kind of liberating to know she’d let loose -- even if it was under the influence. But the strange teeth marks...she would swear they looked just like dog bites. *Speaking of canines...*

“*And...*you didn’t wake up to a canine chorus.” Said choir raised a howl outside Shaun’s window as if to punctuate Pearl’s statement. “I think every stray in town surrounded my house and was singing to me. It was enough to wake the dead!”

The pair of them winced as a particularly ear-piercing whine cut through the yowls of the rest. “They followed me here, Shaun, and they wouldn’t leave me alone!” Pearl lifted a leg up, so she could see it while lying on the bed. “I don’t think it’s all just slobber on my shoes...”

“Ewwwww, eww, *eww*! Get those shoes off my bed!” Shaun looked horrified at the thought of canine bodily fluids having made it past her front door.

Pearl toed off her shoes and kicked them away from the bed.

“What do you mean by ‘he bit you’?” Pearl extended her neck as Shaun leaned a little closer to get a better look at the bruise marks. Her cool fingers gently pushed at the skin, making Pearl hiss. “Wow, you know...it looks just like when Vlad bit you when you tried to rescue him, but bigger -- like real dog sized.”

“Don’t let Vlad hear you say that.”

Vlad the Impaler was a stray terrier mix that the pair of them had found in an industrial-sized trash bin. Pearl had sacrificed her favorite pair of heels jumping in the disgusting mess to save him. For her efforts, he had promptly turned around, bitten the hand that had rescued him, and dived straight back in the bin. He’d reappeared five minutes later with a day-old hunk of steak and a jaunty grin. Neither of them had the heart to turn him down when he followed them out of the alley and back to the car. He was also the one

animal that refused to live with anyone but Pearl. He was top dog of all the stray animals Pearl bought home, rehabilitated, and found homes for.

“On every one there are these four extra-big tooth marks, just like you would get from a bite from an animal with large canines.” She pulled at the neck of her T-shirt. “See...”

Shaun gasped at the crystal clear bite mark on Pearl’s breast. “Ohmigod, Pearl... Who is this guy?”

“That’s what I want to know. You’re the Queen of Scream. What the hell is this, Shaun?” Pearl looked up at her friend. She was worried as hell, and she knew it showed.

Shaun was into all things freaky -- vampires, werewolves, and ghosts -- the works. As far as she was concerned, they existed; she just had to find one of them and prove it.

“Wow...*maybe...*” Pearl didn’t like the look of awe on Shaun’s face. “Maybe you got bitten by a werewolf?” *Yup, more cuckoo than a clock, but that’s why I like her.* Only Shaun could come up with that as an explanation.

“Come on, Shaun. A werewolf?” Okay, it was a valid suggestion -- if werewolves actually existed, that was.

“Well...it would explain all the dogs, right? Maybe now that you’ve been bitten by a wolf man, you’re the doggy version of catnip?” Shaun poked at the wound again, but harder.

“Ow!”

Shaun jerked her hand back at the exclamation. “Sorry! Sorry.” Shaun sat back on her haunches and visibly thought for a few minutes, while absently staring at the bruises.

“I know! My neighbor, Mr. Dixon, is a vet, and I think someone told me once he also qualified as a GP, though he doesn’t practice on humans. Maybe he can help.” She shrugged. “At least he can make sure the wounds will heal up nicely, if nothing else.”

Chapter Two

The Great Dane that Rex was treating was doing his damndest to get off the exam table and back out the door to the front waiting room. Something, or someone, had him worked up a treat. Once he had him restrained, Rex opened the door to call in the dog's owner to help to calm the animal down, and got smacked upside the head with the sweetest, most potent aroma he'd ever smelled in his life. The spicy flavor curled around his dick and demanded that he take another deep sniff to commit the smell to memory. Then his cock sucked all the blood from his brain and dragged him forward to find the source of the delicacy, screaming at him that *it needed to get some of that right now!*

"It's you! What the hell do you think you're doing, coming here while you're in heat?" The sweet and spicy smelling morsel sitting so primly in his waiting room stared back at him blankly.

"Pardon me?" Miss High Society had finally woken up to the fact that he was speaking to her, not just making noise for the hell of it.

"You should know better than to come here smelling like that. You're going to drive all the animals crazy trying to get to you." Rex grabbed the woman by the arm and started for the door. "Come on, I have to get you out of here."

Rex called out over his shoulder as he stiff-armed the woman through the doorway, “Cancel my appointments for the rest of the day, Shelly. Something urgent has come up.” He wasn’t about to impart that his dick was part of the “up” problem.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing? Let me go!” The delicious little piece tried to yank her arm out of his grip, but failed. Considering he was a Were-bear, it wasn’t surprising she didn’t get far. “Let go of me, you ass. I have an appointment with the vet.”

“Well, I’m the vet, so I guess you’re not missing your appointment now, are you?” Rex wrenched open the door of his truck, then picked up Miss Priss and stuffed her in the cab. After locking the seatbelt in place, he shoved her coordinating handbag under the seat, then slammed the door with a satisfying thud after flicking the kiddy lock so she couldn’t get out.

“You’re Rex Dixon? Shaun’s neighbor?” He paused as he climbed in the driver’s side. *What was this bitch’s connection to Shaun?* He almost had a full-time job keeping Shaun Ingstead out of all things Were and wonderful. “You’re not quite what I was expecting.”

“How do you know Shaun?” He growled out the demand. Rex let his anger get the best of him and angrily shoved the truck into gear as he roared out of the parking lot, directing the truck north, and out of town.

The only problem with being angry was that he breathed deeply, trying to keep a handle on his beast. But a deeper breath meant that more of that thick, spicy aroma of a bitch in heat went into his lungs and circled inside his head. It taunted him to take the woman and make her his, spend his seed inside her and procreate as he was born to do.

Great, just great. Nearly forty years of managing to keep his head out of the mate-and-family noose, and one prudish and proper schoolmarm was going to throw a spanner in the works. Rex could feel the beast inside rolling, like a feline in catnip, wallowing in the scent of an aroused woman.

What could it hurt? She knew the score...and he had condoms. Just because she was in heat didn’t mean he had to knock her up.

Rex cocked his head to the side and took a sideways glance at his Miss Priss. “Well, answer me, damn it. How do you know Shaun?” When she flinched, the lust subsided enough for him to take in that the woman was doing her best not to cower by sitting ramrod straight, eyes ahead and her hands clenched together ’til her knuckles showed white.

Shit, whoever the bitch was, she was scared shitless of him. He shook his head to try to clear it. *Good one, Rex, way for those Alpha vibes to play out.*

“I...” Little Miss Catnip swallowed, and his bear decided it was time to come out to play. Rex fought his beast back as his nails started to lengthen into claws. “I work with Shaun; she’s a good friend.”

“Huh,” he managed to grunt out through a semi-closed mouth while he forced his canines back. *Damn, that hurt!*

He hit the cabin turnoff in a rush, gravel spraying out behind the truck as he nailed the gas again. He had to get her out of his truck or he’d fuck her silly, she wouldn’t get a choice. *Not that it’d be any great hardship; She looks as good as she smells.* The woman stood around average height -- he could probably rest his chin on the top of her head -- and she was rather generously proportioned. Curvy as all get out, and more than likely, that glowing, creamy skin was smooth like the pearls she wore around her neck. Her golden hair would have been neatly back in a bun if he hadn’t manhandled her, pulling hunks loose to dangle around that eminently bitable neck.

Rex wondered what animal her beast was -- a golden wolf, maybe something feline? *It would be too much to hope that she was Ursus.* Looking at her face and that rounded body, he couldn’t help but think that she would make a beautiful golden blonde bear, a perfect juxtaposition to his rugged, deep black pelt.

“Where are we going?” The small voice from the other side of the cab broke Rex from his reverie. “And why are we going there?” He began to smell fear over the pervading scent of the woman’s heat.

“You *are* kidding me, aren’t you, little bitch? I’m taking you somewhere safe before the Pack descends on you, and you end up in the middle of a winner-take-all orgy.”

It didn’t take any special Were senses to feel, or see, her bristle with indignation.

“*What* did you just call me?” Her shoulders went back even farther, and a furious red flush blossomed across her cheeks. Rex found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the dirt road as it wound through the forest. “You need your eyes checked, mister! For one, I am obviously *not* little, and two, I am *not* a bitch! You can accuse me of being overly prim and proper, because I am; I can’t help it with my parents. But don’t you ever call me a bitch!”

She was winding up good and proper now, about to really yell at him. Her high temper was a breathtaking sight to behold, and Rex was no slouch at appreciating an attractive woman, even if she was more riled than a rattlesnake.

“I let loose for one night, *one bloody night* in thirty-one years, and wake up *alone* ’cause my one-night stand obviously couldn’t get away fast enough, leaving me with four hickeys, complete with bite marks.” She ripped down the tall lace collar of her blouse to expose two of the aforementioned love bites. “Then every damned stray in town wants to hump my leg, and *now?* Now, I’ve been kidnapped by a huge, sexy bear of a man, who calls me a bitch instead of asking my actual name.” When Rex took his eyes off the road, he half expected her to be rabidly frothing at the mouth, with her hair standing on end and her nails ready to take a fresh strip from his hide.

A smile grew as he stared at the straitlaced she-devil beside him. *She thinks I’m s-e-x-y*. Obviously his cheesy, smarmy grin wasn’t appreciated, as she gritted her teeth, and a rumbling growl echoed across the cab.

Alpha male or not, no one messed with a bitch in heat -- not if they wanted to find their balls right where they left them. There was no way Rex was going to try staring her into submission, so he turned his eyes back to the road.

Then it hit him; he'd never seen her at a Pack meeting. She was Shaun's friend, she'd had a first-in-her-lifetime one-night fling, and she had love bites with *canine teeth marks* in them. Holy shit! She wasn't a Were -- *yet*.

"Oh fuck..." Rex slammed on the brakes and slid to a stop in front of the old wood hunting cabin he kept as a base for when he needed some time in his fur. His head came to rest with a thump on the leather-covered steering wheel. "One of those stupid, horny pups bit you! *Fuck!*"

Chapter Three

Where did this guy get off?

So what if he was tall, broad, and sexy as hell with all that black, curly hair and that sinful goatee? It didn't matter at all that he had big strong hands and biceps and thighs like tree trunks, or that he was so huge she felt almost itty bitty beside him.

No man called her a bitch and got away with it. She was just too...nice...to ever be tarred with that brush. Her mother was probably turning in her grave to hear someone call her daughter a bitch.

Then what he'd just said sank in.

"You know...Ohmigod... You know who I went home with last night?" Pearl buried her head in her hands, and a shiver of horror ran down her back. "How? How can you know that?"

I think I might be sick. Would everyone know that she had been as drunk as a skunk and taken a stranger home to her bed? Good God, would her father find out?

"I don't know exactly who you took home last night, but I have a short list of suspects." The man she now knew was Shaun's neighbor and the local vet still slowly thumped his head

against the wheel. “Stupid, stupid pups. They were warned, but would they listen? *Ohhh* no. Rob’s going to be pissed.”

His seatbelt clicked and the door opened. He clambered down from the mile-high truck with the ease of a snake slithering over sand. “Let’s get inside; you’re going to get a crash course in Were etiquette.”

Pearl watched the man stride across to the well-used looking cabin and jerk open the screen door. The thump of his work boots across the wooden veranda faded away as he unlocked the front door and entered the building. *No way am I following him in there. I don’t care if Shaun recommended him; he could be an axe murderer.* Pearl jiggled the lock. *Besides, I can’t go anywhere anyway, stupid bloody man.*

And what did he mean by Were etiquette?

Pearl had been taught correct and proper etiquette from birth; that Neanderthal couldn’t possibly have anything to teach her, of all people. Pearl sat, back straight, eyes forward, chin up just like her mother had drummed into her, and waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

Finally, after ten minutes, the cabin door exploded open to frame a sexy, but very angry, man with his hands propped on his hips. Had she not been such a polite woman -- say like Shaun -- she would’ve had to wipe up the drool. He filled the doorway and then some. His head touched the top of the frame, and his shoulders the sides of the frame easily.

Jeans hugged thick, bulging thighs, and Pearl told herself that she certainly did *not* notice the rather full to bursting rise of the well-worn denim as it crept toward the belted waistband riding low on his hips. Her fingers definitely didn’t twitch with the desire to run their fingers along the soft flannel shirt that strained across the wide, bulky chest that flexed every time he huffed with annoyance.

Ladies didn't drool with lust, but they sure were allowed to swallow with trepidation. So, ignoring the dampness in her panties, that was what she did. Swallowed, and then swallowed again when he stepped off the veranda, making the denim and flannel he wore ripple across very *big* muscles. *Please, please don't be a psychopathic axe murderer.*

"Why the hell haven't you gotten out of the truck?" Despite the height of the cab, he was tall enough that she could look straight into his face through the side window of the vehicle as he shouted at her. "This isn't the time for getting all snooty and sulky."

Winding down the window, Pearl calmly stated her case. "Well, considering how wonderfully polite you've been and all, I *so* wanted to rush after you to hear exactly why you forcefully dragged me out of your office, stuffed me in your truck, and drove hell bent for leather into the middle of nowhere." She was still speaking politely. Loudly, but still politely. "But since you kiddy locked me in your goddamn truck, I can't go anywhere, you *officious oaf!*"

So sue her, she was screaming at someone, and damned if it didn't feel good. Seeing red flags of color roll across Rex's cheeks felt even better, though.

Pearl felt rather vindicated when he sheepishly opened the truck door and offered his hand to help her down, easily lifting her when it became obvious that, in her beige pencil skirt, the gap from the running board to the ground would be impossible without hiking her skirt to her waist.

Pearl was sure with Rex Dixon being a man and all that he wouldn't be averse to a show of leg. But even though they were her best feature by far, she wasn't up for giving the man a thrill.

"Ah, sorry about that. I forgot about having flicked the lock." She decided that chagrined looked good on the man. "Let's go inside. I --"

A chorus of howls, most likely of the canine variety, echoed out across the valley they stood in, causing Rex to cock his head and scowl. "We have to get inside now. I can't protect

you out in the open against that many of the Pack, and they'll probably be here before I can explain this mess to you." Hand wrapped around her upper arm again, he dragged her inside the cabin and deposited her on an old, worn, and still very comfy lounge chair.

Rex went to the front door and locked and barred it. Pearl studied him as he then went to every window and possible entry -- and exit -- of the cabin, making sure they were all locked soundly.

While the Paul Bunyan look-alike was nice to watch, she needed some answers. "Look, I came to your office today to see if you could help with my...umm...dog problem. I didn't have one yesterday, but today...well, after some unusual circumstances for me, I do."

She pulled at the high lace collar of her blouse as if she could hide the evidence of her indiscretion more than she already had. The blouse had been a favorite of her mother's for "correct church wear," but she hadn't worn it since the funeral because it itched like the devil -- perhaps appropriate punishment, considering what it hid.

Rex turned from the last window and stood staring at her in a most odd manner. For the first time in her life, someone was staring at her as if he wanted to eat her for dessert -- and maybe even breakfast with a little snack for supper in between. Pearl clamped her legs together as she felt her pussy heat and become wet. She'd been on edge all morning, despite apparently having been fucked senseless the night before. Now the Superman-like eyes of fire being directed her way ignited a blaze deep in her belly, sending bursts of flame through her that made her nipples pucker and harden.

Rex carefully sat down on the other side of the room from her. It looked as if he was trying hard to control himself. Odd, considering he was the one calling the shots.

"Okay, little bi --" At her tense, indignant growl, he stopped and ran his hand over his face in frustration. "I'm sorry. It's a habit."

"You call all your women little bitches?" The supercilious rise of her eyebrow should clue him in to how she felt about that idea.

“Ye -- No, I don’t.” He paused, confused. “All right, there’s no easy way to say this...last night you were bitten by one of the Were-kind. I’m not sure who; we have a few pups that have been a bit, well, rebellious lately. I’m guessing the young guy you took home last night lost his control in the middle of it all and broke your skin when he was giving you a love bite.” He stood up and started moving restlessly around the room. Pearl wondered if it was the way he processed. Walked and talked. Thought and paced.

Since the guy was starting to sound eerily like Shaun with her kooky theories that werewolves and vampires existed, Pearl began to get a bad feeling about the situation.

“I’ve heard about this from other Were-kind doctors. A human woman bitten just before or as she ovulates is forced straight into heat -- even before her first change. I hadn’t ever thought to see it happen...”

Speechless at what she was hearing Rex mutter to himself, Pearl shook with not a little bit of horror. Too many things were piling one on top of the other for her to not believe what she was hearing. The man was a doctor twice over, surely that had to count for some amount of sanity -- or insanity, depending on how you looked at it.

“Excuse me...Rex?” Lost in his musing, Rex had tuned out any external stimuli, and Pearl’s scared voice was no exception.

“*Rex!*” Her sharp reprimand jerked him out of his thoughts and back to her. *Maybe that hadn’t been such a good thing.* Rex’s intense body language was back, and this time he wasn’t on the other side of the room. His pacing had jerked to a stop about two feet away from her; he was definitely encroaching on her personal space.

“Can you please, *please*, explain to me further? Are you telling me that I was bitten by a werewolf, and now I’m going to get all furry once a month?” The sarcasm was ripe, with just a little undertone of fear that that was exactly what he was telling her.

“Yes...*God*, you smell so good...” His voice had gone a little whiny. *Were his eyes crossing and his nose twitching?* Rex took a step away from her. “Anyway, as I started to say,

I wasn't calling you a bitch because of your attitude, but as a designation. It's an old-fashioned Pack term, and sometimes we males slip and use the term with females we don't know."

Rex stopped staring at her, looking away as another blush colored his cheeks.

"Ah...what *is* your name? I do apologize; I'm not usually this abrupt, but your scent..."

If the deep inhalation and his following growl were anything to go by, her scent was good. Pearl wondered what he smelled on her. Her perfume? Her shampoo? *Please don't let it be my soaked panties.*

"Pearl. Pearl Gordon." She held out her hand in a nice-to-meet-you gesture, and was surprised when Rex backed away hurriedly. "What's wrong?"

"Pearl, you're in heat. For every male Were in a ten-mile radius you're like a tasty piece of rib eye -- delicious, juicy, desired, and to be fought over." Eww, he thought of her as a piece of meat? Well, at least it was a prime cut. "I *am* trying here, Pearl, but I'm having a hard enough job coping with your scent. If I touch you..."

"So, you're a Were, too?" Time for him to show her exactly what he expected her to believe. "Show me, then. Show me some proof that what you say is really true."

Startled, Rex looked frantically around as if trying to find an escape route, but he had quite capably locked them both in the house. She watched him gulp, and after a shudder ran down his spine, he turned back toward her.

"You...you want me to change?" He seemed pretty distressed about the whole idea.

"Well, yes. If you want me to believe this whole cockamamie story of yours...change. I'm a 'proof with my own eyes' kind of girl. Despite Shaun's attempts to drag me out vampire hunting." A dark, icky feeling shivered its way down Pearl's spine as she remembered the one and only time she'd conceded -- the local cemetery at two a.m. on a dark, stormy night was not somewhere she wanted to be ever again. "As a rule, I'm not *any* sort of believer in the supernatural -- but if you can show me the proof, I might be convinced."

Pearl sat, and Rex stood stock still, one contemplating the other -- one doing her best with a skeptical eyebrow to goad the other into doing the impossible.

Impossible. Yes, impossible, she thought to herself over and over again, doing a wonderful job of ignoring the hand that changed to a very large paw, the muscled, denim clad thigh that became a thick, fur-covered haunch, and the mouth that became a snout full of large -- *very large* -- teeth. *All the better to eat you with, my dear. No, that was the big bad wolf, wasn't it? Goldilocks was the one with the bear problems.*

"Holy shit!" Pearl didn't swear all that often, but watching a man change into a fully grown black bear standing well over seven feet tall on his back legs surely was an occasion to warrant it.

Terrified, she burrowed back into the lounge chair, trying to make herself as small and innocuous as possible, hoping, praying that the beast would forget all about her.

The bear -- *ohmigod, Rex* -- fell down onto all fours and shuffled his way across the wood floor, his nails clicking on the worn surface and his nose snuffling and scenting something that drew a rumble from his chest. The bear made no obvious move to attack, but snuffled its way up her legs, a coughing grunt blowing hot air along her exposed skin and a very rough tongue rasping its way over her thigh as he forced his snout between her thighs.

Too late, Pearl, it looks like you just became the main course.

"Like hell I am...they tell you to hit back if attacked." Pulling her arm back, she clenched her fist. "Here goes nothing," she forced between gritted teeth as she slugged the bear over the nose with everything she had, lashing out in fear and frustration. "Take that, you stupid bear!"

Chapter Four

The scent was sweeter than any fruit, soaking his senses, calling to him. He shoved his nose into the damp crevice where the glorious smell was strongest. He tasted the treat before him with his nose and his tongue, edging his way slowly closer to the female that tantalized him so with her perfume.

She was what he'd been seeking all these years. None of the other females had felt right. They hadn't smelled right either, but this one...this one was what he'd been waiting for. He wanted to dip his tongue into the delicious honey, wallow in her fragrance, and mark her as his own...

"What the fuck?" Rex fell back onto his ass, pinching his nose and trying to stem the flow of blood as another clenched fist in front of a damn good right hook smashed into his cheek. "What the hell do you think you're doing, lady?"

He managed to get a hold of her wrist as she wound up for another strike and pulled her forward into his chest, landing them both on the floor with a loud "oomph." Pearl lay perfectly nestled between his legs and across his chest. Rex flipped them over, his powerful thighs falling to either side of her hips as he held her hands above her head while she struggled to get free.

“Get off me, you brute!” *You brute?* The woman was such a contradiction, Miss Manners one moment, then modern attitude and vernacular the next.

“*Me?* I’m a brute? Lady, I’m the one with a bleeding nose.” It didn’t matter that part of his dual nature was the ability to heal a lot faster than a normal human, and the blood flow from his nose was now a slow ooze, not the gushing river it had been when she shocked him into changing back from his bear form. “What did I do to you to make you lash out like that? I might not have been Mr. Congeniality the way I bundled you up here -- but I apologized -- and I even changed just like you asked. Why’d you smack me over the snout?”

Rex pulled one hand away and poked at the cartilage running along the ridge of his nose, grimacing as he hit a particularly sore spot. “I don’t think you broke it.”

The struggles had stopped, drawing his attention away from his injury and back to the woman lying beneath him. Her face was pale, but bursts of color brushed her cheeks and she panted shallowly. Following her gaze, Rex realized, courtesy of her unexpected punch, he’d transformed back sans clothing and now straddled her buck-naked with a raging hard-on. Usually the transformation included clothing, but sometimes when you had to do it fast, the clothing got left behind.

“You’re...” Pearl cleared her throat, making her breasts jiggle as well as heave from her panting, “ah...you’re naked.” *And turned on* went unsaid, but acknowledged anyway.

“Yes, it does seem that way, doesn’t it?” *Quite an enviable state, considering the circumstances*, Rex thought to himself.

Pearl’s skirt rode up around her waist, and the very puritan blouse she wore had lost a couple of buttons in the scuffle. His cock, larger than it’d ever been in his life, nestled in the vee of Pearl’s legs, framed by pretty blue lace hipster panties.

He wasn’t particularly inclined to make haste and move off the lovely plump bundle that had set to struggling again. Her mons rubbed along his dick as she tried to buck him

loose, and her breasts strained the remaining buttons of her blouse before another popped, revealing the bra matching the panties.

Like a bear to honey, Rex couldn't hold back any longer. She was like nectar to both of his forms, and he wasn't on any sort of sugar-free diet. Leaning down, he ran the slightly stubbly edge of his cheek along the now exposed curve of her neck, scenting her, marking her with his own. He nipped at the bruise on her shoulder with his canines extended, drawing a heated gasp from her as he ground down with his hips, giving pleasure with the pain of the bite.

His brain feebly told him to stop, but nature took a hold, pushing logical thought to the side, letting the instinct to mate with a suitable female roar to the front his consciousness. The smell of fear was easily overridden as he felt moisture seep through the lace pressed against the underside of his cock, dampening his skin.

As he laved the bite mark, she made small whimpers of pleasure. The beast recognized this woman as his mate -- the woman who would bear his cubs and be his to protect. Unable to suppress a groan, he took her mouth roughly with his kiss. The smooth heat of her lips slid over his, and she opened to him, caressing his thrusting tongue with her own as she invited him into her body, mimicking the thrusts of his hips against hers.

With his free hand, he stroked down Pearl's side. Palming her breasts, he pushed the cups of her bra to the side so the flesh overflowed into his hand. He kneaded at the soft flesh and plucked at her nipple until it stood hard and proud. Pulling away from her lips, he rasped the prickly hair of his goatee over the tender morsel of her nipple, making his woman cry out as her body arched, seeking more of the delicious pleasure.

Buttons tore loose as his hand ripped open what was left of her blouse. Rex pushed aside the fabric so he could feel more of her plump, sweet flesh against his as his tongue and lips suckled at the other breast, teasing and taunting it into hardness.

“Ohmigod...*ohmigod*...don’t...don’t stop!” Pearl writhed beneath him; loosing her bound hands, he slid further down her body and tugged at her panties, ripping them free to bare her to his gaze.

Rex pushed the fabric of her skirt higher, exposing her belly. His tongue swirled around her navel as he made his way down her body. Pearl’s fingers threaded through his hair, holding his head to her body, not letting him move away.

“I don’t intend to stop any time soon. In fact, I intend to be doing this for quite a long time to come.” What in God’s name did he just say? Did he just make a declaration of intent to mate with a woman he’d met just a little over an hour before? His beast made its presence known with a growl, telling him he indeed had. The bear had been waiting for this woman, whether the man knew it or not. Hours, days, years -- it wouldn’t have mattered to the bear. Ever since the first waft of scent had crossed its muzzle, the beast had been trying to break free of the man to claim its mate.

The man, at least, showed a small measure of sense and recognized that once this moment of claiming was over there would be hell to pay. With an equivalent form of a chuckle, the bear agreed and didn’t envy him the inevitable wrath of his mate, especially as she was in heat.

While Rex had been internally debating with himself, he had moved slowly down, licking a path to heaven. His nose and tongue found the source of the sweet scent that had taunted him in his surgery, and even more so in his truck. With a rumble deep in his chest, his fingers opened the petals of her sex wide, gently stroking them as he nuzzled into the slippery slit that beckoned him to taste.

He circled his tongue around Pearl’s clit, making her moan louder, and the sting of her fingers pulling at his hair as she dragged his head ever closer to the source of her pleasure made his beast howl with satisfaction.

This woman was his for the taking.

Why was she letting this happen?

Because he is sexing you up just like in those books you keep hidden in your wardrobe, and though you might be prudish, you're not dumb! Ah yes, that was the reason why.

There was a big, brawny man using his big, strong hands and extremely talented tongue in certain important little places, determined to drive her entirely insane.

That same man had changed into a bear in front of her. A bear, for God's sake! Then he'd ambled over to her and shoved his snout in her crotch -- just like the dogs that had followed her around all day. Then in an instant, he was human again.

Buck naked, and oh-so-stunningly erect -- and of all things, totally hot for her -- *because biologically he can't help himself. Crap!*

Pearl couldn't stop the roll of her hips as she pressed closer to Rex's mouth. Biological imperative or not, this handsome -- if a tad uncouth -- stranger was driving her toward something no man ever had: an earth-shattering climax.

Pearl's fingers clenched in his hair and tugged; her brain told her to pull him away, yet her body screamed at her to lie back and let him do as he willed. Her own biology fought with her intellect and ingrained need for propriety, and started to win.

Rex growled as she moved him slightly away from her mons, the growl fading to a needy whimper as he pressed back. Surely the tug on his scalp smarted? His tongue pressed harder against her, moving faster the more she tugged against the dark curls.

He liked her being rough! Pearl hadn't had enough sex of any sort to be experienced with rough play, but that he enjoyed the sting of her demands gave her quite a heady sense of power.

Rex's chest-deep rumble was all the warning she got that her perceived control was pure fiction. He pulled up, scooping her legs into his arms, and tugged her to him. Pearl felt her blouse and skirt ride up even more as he towed her along the floor.

She should have been yelling and screaming at him to stop, that this had gone all too far, but when he thrust his hips forward and plunged deep into her, she screamed for an entirely different reason. Pure pleasure.

“Yes! So tight, so perfect...*mine*.” Rex growled out the words, surprising Pearl with their possessiveness. She arched as Rex moved her legs down and around his hips. His hands tunneled under her waist and raised her until she sat in his lap, impaled on his cock as it thrust deeply into her core. Her nipples hardened more as Rex pressed her close, abraded against the triangle of curls on his chest; he nipped at her exposed neck as he left a moist trail of kisses on his way to her ear. He bit down on the lobe, making her shudder. “Mine, do you hear me.” The rasped declaration made her shake.

His declaration, his lovemaking felt so perfect, like the final piece of a puzzle clicking into place, as if she had been searching for him all her life.

This can't be happening. I've only known this guy for what? An hour? Now I'm letting him fuck me senseless, and he's claiming ownership?

Her body swept away her logical thoughts as Rex spread his knees and took her ass in his palms. For the first time, she felt her ass was the perfect size -- his large hands held her easily, lifting her up, tilting her pelvis so she was forced to wrap her arms around his neck, drawing them even closer. She felt the clench of his thighs beneath her as he thrust upward, dropping her the last inch to meet him, slamming their bodies together on a groan.

“Baby, you’re so hot...so tight, you fit me so well...” He changed his grip slightly, and his fingertips crept into her pussy from behind. One finger gathered up moisture where he thrust into her, then pressed against the rosebud of her ass.

The thickness of Rex’s cock, the rasp of her nipples against his chest, the rub of his pelvis against her clit, and now the gentle penetration of his fingertip in her ass proved too much.

Pearl's body tensed, her eyes closed, and she threw back her head and screamed as her orgasm rolled through her body. Rex's howl joined her cry, and he thrust against her, burrowing as deeply as he could as he came, the warm rush of his seed coating her channel. Her skin tingled as if an electric current ran under her skin. Pearl shivered against Rex as she struggled for control of her body, making him whimper and pull her tightly against him.

"Don't move, Pearl. I can't take anymore; I'm on overload." Rex wound his arms around her. One slipped under her arm and up along her spine, his palm pressing her head into his shoulder. The other held her pelvis pressed to his, keeping him buried in her depths, her legs around his waist.

Pearl opened her eyes and saw a blue haze sparking from their skins. Darker royal blue hovered around Rex, and when she raised her hand in front of her face, crystal-like sparks of a cool ice blue jumped from her fingertips. As she looked down, a mark she didn't recognize flared on her belly, then faded away as if it hadn't existed.

"My God, what did we just do?" she whispered as she rubbed her fingers together. The blue sparks felt fluid, like they were a layer over her skin.

Rex only pulled her tighter and sighed.

"I'm glowing! What...what have you done to me? There are little blue sparks coming out of my fingers. What the hell is happening to me?"

Frantic was usually not an option for a Gordon; you were supposed to button down your emotions and show the perfect face to the world. This time her mother's training let Pearl down, and she started to shake for all the wrong reasons.

"We are mated." Rex's words were solid, final, but a little despairing at the same time. "You're now my mate; no other shall have you."

The woo-woo weird crap proved too much, and like the good, well-mannered lady she had been brought up to be, Pearl swooned.

As Pearl slumped in a faint, Rex grabbed her tightly, and gathering his breath, he moved to his feet. He was almost glad that Pearl had fainted -- he didn't need her to see the way his legs wobbled as he stood. It was a telling gesture of how much she had affected him, and it didn't rest well with his ego, since he was used to being the biggest and the strongest.

At the same time he was in awe. This one woman had shaken his world and pulled the foundation out from under his feet. She'd left him gasping and teetering on an unknown precipice -- he, the confirmed bachelor, was now mated. It shocked him. Angered him. *Scared him.*

No longer was he the lone bear; he had a mate, and eventually, *possibly*, cubs to protect and provide for. But first he had to survive the fallout from what had just happened.

He also needed to figure out what the fuck all that magic crap was at the end. Why had there been the rush of magic rippling under his skin?

Reluctantly, he freed himself from the snug fit of Pearl's body and laid her down on the bed in the small room off the main living area. The irony wasn't lost on him as he gently covered her in the old wedding ring quilt his grandmother had made when she'd formally mated with his grandfather.

The usually invisible magic runes on the quilt flared to life for an instant as he leaned down to softly kiss Pearl's forehead. "You and I might not have expected this, Pearl Gordon, but it seems my ancestors approve." The runes faded again as he moved away, no longer physically touching the quilt.

Rex turned back toward the living room and his clothing, quietly pulling the door nearly closed behind him, leaving it cracked so he could hear if Pearl needed him. He reached for his pants, jerking his cell phone from the pocket. He pressed the numbers with one hand while awkwardly pulling his jeans on with the other.

He needed to get some information from the Elders; they had some explaining to do.

Chapter Five

“I did *what?*” Disbelief tinged Rex’s voice as he gulped back an epithet. You didn’t swear around the Grande Dame if you could help it; she might be heading toward her seventies, but she could kick any Alpha’s ass like he was an overeager cub if he had the stupidity to misbehave in her presence. “I made her Ursus? Her beast is going to be a bear?”

The Grande Dame hadn’t been surprised by his call. Straight off the bat, she’d asked what he had done that had such powerful magic in the wind. When he explained he’d been trying to do the responsible thing for the Pack but ended up mated instead, she’d laughed -- cackled, in fact. Then she told him he was well overdue for giving up his free and easy bachelor life.

But even she had been surprised when he asked about the magic he had seen and sensed when they’d climaxed. Once he explained more about Pearl’s situation -- some young Weres were about to get a Grande Dame ass-kicking once she got off the phone -- she had distractedly muttered to herself about old ways, deep magic, pregnancy rune marks, and preserving a species.

“I said, since she had not yet released her beast, at the time of conception she became Ursus. You made her into your perfect mate. All your cubs will be Ursus, not a hit-and-miss

chance amongst your children of not being magic carriers.” The Grande Dame sounded rather pleased. “I also think that since the magic has taken it upon itself to create your perfect mate, there must be more Ursus out there to be found. After all, why give you the perfect mate to carry on your line, and take it away in the next generation when they, too, can’t find a mate?”

“I made her beast a bear, *and* I made her pregnant?” Desperation and disbelief made his words louder than he’d intended. “And somewhere there’s another family of Ursus for my kids to mate into... *Christ*, she’s going to kill me.” Rex slumped back into the chair with a gulp. “I was going to have a hard enough job explaining the I’ve-just-met-you-let’s-shag sex, but now I have to explain she’s a Were-bear *and* she’s knocked up?” The Grande Dame only laughed in his ear as he growled out his frustration from deep in his chest.

“You did *what*?”

Rex bit his tongue as a voice sounded from the bedroom doorway. He’d been so preoccupied with what the Grande Dame had been telling him, he hadn’t heard Pearl awaken, or open the door. So much for being the big, bad protector. Rex gave himself a little leeway. It wasn’t every day you found out you were mated, essentially married, and going to be a daddy -- all at the same time.

The back of his neck prickled as he felt Pearl’s animosity pounding at him from across the room. “Grande Dame, I have to go...she’s awake.” *And angry as all hell*, though he wasn’t about to say that out loud. He could almost see the Grande Dame rubbing her hands together with glee while she cackled at his downfall.

“I want to meet your mate as soon as possible. I want to see just who the magic decided was the best woman to carry on the Ursus line.” With no preamble, the Grande Dame closed the connection, leaving Rex holding the phone -- quite literally.

When he turned, he came nose to nose -- or was that muzzle to muzzle -- with his mate. His very sexy, very naked, and very angry mate, who dragged his grandmother's quilt along behind her, barely covering her front with one of the corners.

"Rex, what have you done? Did I hear you right? You turned me into a Were-bear and you got me pregnant?"

Rex had never felt as uncomfortable in his skin as he did right at this moment. "Umm...yeah. I think so." He had no chance; he didn't even see that great right hook come out of nowhere until it connected with his nose.

Since they were standing this go around, Pearl didn't connect as well as she had when he'd been in bear form. Her fist glanced off his cheek then into his nose, making it smart and his eyes water, but it didn't start bleeding again.

"Owww!" Quickly, he took a step back. Pearl followed, collapsing into his arms as she unbalanced from throwing her punch. She stood on the edge of the quilt, dragging it down so she stood plastered along his front, naked as a jaybird.

"Oomph!"

As she clung to him, Rex felt time stand still as his body recognized the woman who was his perfect mate. The beast quickly mewled, confused, as it lost the joy of the embrace when its mate started to cry, her emotions doing a three-hundred-and-eighty-degree flip from her anger.

"What have you done? What have *I* done?" Pearl's shoulders hunched, her hands covering her face as she quietly sobbed, and it just about broke his heart. Women crying and the big, limpid eyes of an animal in pain sucker punched him every time.

"Pearl, baby, it's not that bad." Rex did his best not to let her go, and reached for a corner of the quilt, wrapping it around her shoulders and swinging her into his arms. Her head burrowed back into his chest as he sat down on the sofa, cradling her on his lap, his

arms pulling her in close as he rocked, trying to calm her. "Would it help if I told you something about our history, about what happened to you?"

Pearl tried hard to stifle herself with a sniff, and Rex felt bad for enjoying how her breasts heaved against his arm.

"Let's start by saying magic exists, and that's a lot of what being a Were-kind is about -- magic. Not that we, in the majority, practice it, but it's what makes us what we are. In every long-established Pack, there are a few people who've learned some skill in manipulating magic. But for the rest of us, really, it manipulates us." Rex paused and brushed a fall of hair back from Pearl's face. "That's what happened today...the magic made some big changes to our lives."

"Really? Do you think?" Rex smiled and gently kissed the top of Pearl's bent head. Some of the sassy woman he had seen before was shining through.

"Let me finish before you start beating me up again." He tilted her chin, lifting her lips toward his for a soft kiss before pulling away. "Okay?"

Pearl nodded and tucked her head under his chin again.

"No one really knows how Were-kind came to be. It's all rather mysterious, really. The one thing for certain is that all Were-kind are predators -- bears like me, wolves, jungle cats and other felines, and the like. And despite modern literature, we all actually get along...most of the time. There are fights for Pack leader, but not usually to the death; Pack Alphas have a harder job controlling themselves around other Alphas, but not overly so. Many mate for life -- it's something to do with the magic -- but it's not unknown for couples to go their separate ways, just unusual."

Rex felt happy as he gently petted her hair, running it through his fingers. He knew Pearl's vulnerability wouldn't last, but he wanted to make the most of her little breakdown for his own selfish pleasures.

"Packs can be made up of all one type of shifter, but here in Rockville the Pack is cross species. And that leads us to you. There's a lot more to tell you about Were culture and history, but you deserve to know exactly what's happened to you."

"Damn right I do, mister." Had she been a cat, Pearl's hair would've bristled. So much for the wounded waif he had been comforting. "We can start right at the beginning, then you can skip very quickly to the 'you made me a bear and knocked me up' portion of the explanation."

"Look, Pearl, I truly didn't know that was going to happen. I'm the Pack doctor, so I've heard of lots of different things, but magic has a way of rearing its head and taking us all by surprise at times." Rex pushed her away a little so he could look her in the eye; he wanted Pearl to see he genuinely was apologetic. "I know it's worse for you. What with becoming Were, and now" -- his eyes dropped to her stomach -- "other things. But this has changed my life, too. I'm your mate and the father of your baby -- a pretty big change, considering everyone thinks I'm the ultimate bachelor."

"And just *why* do they think that?" There was a wealth of sarcasm in that sentence alone before he saw, or in his case felt, the body language. Obviously, his actions that afternoon and his remarks were enabling her to tar him with a brush he didn't much like the feel of.

"That's not very nice of you, Pearl. There's a good reason for it, and if you let me finish explaining, you'll see that your sarcasm is unjustified." It stung to think his new mate thought so little of him, yet she had cause. "Well, in the most part," he muttered.

"Like I said earlier, last night a young Were bit you. He broke your skin and let the virus, or magic -- there are two schools of thought on this -- into your system. As you're in the middle of your cycle, you had just, or were just about to ovulate. This, combined with the Were bite, put you instantly into heat." In a corner of Rex's brain, the doctor was trying to work out the odds of this happening; there was literally a window of minutes, hence the reason why this phenomenon happened with so few bitten women.

“All right, I understand that -- it was the *wrong* night to go out with the girls and blow off steam. Where does the turning into a bear come in?”

“That...that is something new to me. Umm...please don't take this the wrong way -- I'm not good with human patients. That's why I practice as a vet except for Pack business. When I came inside you, the magic took my beast and gave it to you. Usually, if you're bitten and not born Were, at your first change you find out what your beast is -- the magic exposes it, you could say. If you're born to a matching Were couple, you will be born as your parents are. If you are born to a Were/human couple, it's a hit-and-miss affair that you will even be Were at all, and in a mismatched Were couple, the chances are a third either way of being Were like one of your parents, or having no beast at all.”

“So it's a bit like human genetics, brown and brown won't usually beget blue eyes, and so on?” He was heartened that Pearl was being so rational.

“Essentially, yes. I've never heard of a bitten Were taking the beast of another before, but the Grande Dame had an answer for that, too.”

“This Grande Dame seems to know a lot that she doesn't tell people.”

“Don't think of messing with the Grande Dame, Pearl. She can kick both of our asses all the way to China and back.”

“Let her try. I was trained by the best.” Judging by the way Pearl's face froze up and her haughty expression, Rex thought she just well might have been. “So, just what was her grand rationale?”

“Well, you know how my beast is a bear?”

“Yes, and now so is mine.”

“Yes, well...I've no family. And to the best of my knowledge, I'm the last of my kind. If there is a group of Ursus, they are hidden well, and it's extremely rare for a bitten Were to take Ursus as their beast.” Rex was well used to his lonely existence, but the gradual loss of his family still ached deep down in his heart, alongside the knowledge that, until today, he

would never have had the opportunity to watch his cubs grow to adulthood, and in turn have cubs of their own.

“Ursus have proven over the years to not throw bear cubs in a mixed Were relationship, and in a human mixed relationship, cubs were nonexistent. The Grande Dame believes the magic has given my line a chance. That extinction is not our fate when I die.”

“So, I was bitten by a Were...person, and I ended up having great sex with a Were-bear when I came to find out why I had every man and his dog sniffing my tail. Then, voilà...insta-bear, insta-knocked up, and I’m the savior of a species.” Pearl sighed dramatically and carried on with a dry tone. “Well, I guess it sure beats the hell out of what I had planned to do today.”

Chapter Six

How ironic. All the years her mother had held her to a standard dedicated to illusions of grandeur were finally paying off; she had become the savior of a species. *Well, hurrah. Go, me.*

Once Rex had finished telling her of her new fate, and more about the Were community in general, she'd somewhat reluctantly peeled herself from his lap and showered. Alone. Just to torment the horrible ache between her legs that cried out to drag Rex in there along with her and make him do obscene things to her body, all the while performing daring feats of strength to hold her up against the shower wall as he fucked her senseless...yet again.

Cut off your nose to spite your face is more like it, Pearl my dear. Her wayward thoughts made her blush again. Even the cool air from the freezer she was rummaging through wasn't helping a lot.

"Oh, thank God! Bread, bacon, and liquid eggs...not high-quality dining, but hungry beggars can't be choosers." Pearl scooped everything into her arms and turned back to the bench, bumping the freezer door shut with her shoulder as she swung around. *At least the freezer was stocked, even if the fridge was bare.*

She could still hear the thump of the water against the shower walls as Rex bathed. He'd been more kind and courteous than she'd been expecting, finding shampoo, lotion, and soap for her to shower with, and when she'd emerged from the bathroom, she'd found a worn but comfortable robe on the bed for her to wear.

She lifted the collar of the robe to her nose, scenting its previous owner -- Rex. Her nipples peaked, and her tummy twisted with possessive gratification at the knowledge that when he next wore the robe, it would smell of her. Pearl shook her head in disgust as she caught herself reveling in the dominant, preening behavior Rex had said would rear its head often with becoming the female to his Alpha male.

Just lovely. As if I weren't already thought to be cold and aloof, now everyone will think me cold, aloof, jealous, possessive, and that I have a daily case of PMS. Although people who didn't know her that well tended to think she was a snob, it was really just her reserved nature around strangers and little known acquaintances that made it look that way. It took her a while to open up, and people took it as standoffish snobbishness instead. Pearl had a suspicious feeling that for the next while she was going to have more than enough on her plate getting accustomed to the changes in her body and the unbelievable new world now exposed to her to care all that much what everyone else thought.

Lost in her thoughts, Pearl didn't hear the soft pad of bare feet as they entered the kitchen, and jumped with a startled cry as an arm wrapped around her belly and warm lips brushed her neck.

"Well, this gives new meaning to barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen. I think I like this."

Her eyes and nose crinkled up as she shot a look of disgust in Rex's direction. *Oh, that so did not come out of his mouth.* Maybe it was her spine straightening up like a flagpole that gave her away, but Rex pulled her back into his chest with a growl.

“It was a joke, Pearl, a joke. The last thing I expect is a woman to be waiting on me hand and foot, tending to all my desires...” The nuzzling at her neck took a rougher turn as she felt his teeth gently clamp over his previous bite mark. “*Although...* I have a few desires that would be mutually pleasurable that you could attend to right now.”

She’d been standing at the bench, staring out the window when he had come up behind her, so she could feel exactly what his desires were; they pressed hard into her backside as he crowded her against the bench. The lust that had been simmering in the background while she thought things over came out to play with a rush, heating her core, making ladylike a thing of the past. Wanton, uninhibited Pearl was here, and she was planning to stay.

“How?” The question came out on a gasp as one of those large hands came around from behind and slid under the crossed front of the robe, plucking at a nipple.

“Just hang tight and let me show you.” Rex pulled at the knot in the robe’s sash, freeing it easily. He separated the fabric and pushed it off her shoulders, trapping her as he let it sit around her arms. Her shoulders and breasts were now bared to him.

“You have the loveliest skin, Pearl. Your name suits you well. You’re smooth and creamy, yet behind that cool exterior, I get the idea that there’s a lot of fire hidden away. A lot of strength, too.” Rex peppered his words with kisses and licks along her shoulders and neck. He cradled her breasts in his hands and gently kneaded them, pinching the nipples slowly between his thumbs and forefingers.

The dark green of the pine trees at the edge of the clearing had turned the window in front of her into a murky mirror, and Pearl watched their reflection. Rex stood tall behind her, his head bowed to her shoulder, his beard tickling at her skin. His broad shoulders eclipsed hers; his arms were long, and strong enough to wrap around her and hold her tightly, making her feel secure and protected. The gentle scrape of his teeth along the mark on her neck made her shiver, then press her ass back, rubbing along his erection as he growled in her ear.

“You’re a tease, Pearl, one of those librarian types with a sassy slut all leashed up on the inside, aren’t you?”

How did a man that she had known only for a matter of hours have her pegged so quickly?

“How do you figure that?” *The extra little arch of your neck exposing your most vulnerable spots to his teeth and mouth might have given you away, m’dear.* Her internal voice echoed her mother’s dry, supercilious tones; even her own conscience mocked her.

“Could it be the way your nipples pucker even harder when I do this?” Rex gently suckled the soft, sensitive skin at her nape into his mouth. “Or maybe it’s the way your skin has flushed so attractively?” A hand left her breast and smoothed down over her belly and through the curls at the apex of her legs; from behind, his foot nudged at her legs, inching them apart to open her sex to him. “*Maybe* it’s the way I can scent your pussy heating up, flowing, readying for me?”

Thick fingers dragged over her labia, opening her so Rex’s thumb could gently rub across her clit. His fingers swept deeper, swirling in the moisture they sought, then pressed into her opening, making her gasp.

“Yet, even with all that, I can’t help but remember the woman in the prissy clothes, all buttoned up tight, the one who looked down her nose at me with her brow in the air and didn’t collapse into a screaming heap when I turned furry -- at her insistence, I might add.”

Rex’s fingers continued to work all too slowly as he talked, stroking, petting, gently thrusting. She dropped her hands from the bench and started to shake free of the robe. She wanted to be free to touch him, too.

“Keep your hands where I can see them, Pearl.” Pearl obeyed the low and possessive command instinctively and released her arms from the robe, bringing them up and linking them around Rex’s neck. “Well, that wasn’t quite what I had in mind, but it works.” Looking up, Rex finally saw their reflection and growled out, “Oh yes, that works indeed.”

Rex took a small step back, dragging her with him, and bared to both their view the more intimate parts of her body that had been hidden below the bench. An arm snaked up beside hers, pulling her shoulder back more until her back arched and her breasts thrust forward.

She was entranced by their joined image. Her nipples were pointed and her breasts taut. Her skin was flushed, and she looked like a courtesan presenting herself for Rex's pleasure. His hand kept up the exasperating slow dip and thrust between her legs, making her frustration worse as she not only felt, but also saw what he did to her.

Strangely enough, all recent changes considered, she wanted to purr like a cat and rub all over him. Touch all the spots he hadn't yet reached with his mouth. A low, sexy rumble rolled up from deep in her chest, and Rex groaned in harmony. She turned her head and bit down on his earlobe, and he growled again, then pulled her tighter, his voice and manner rougher than before.

"Oh, hell yeah, baby..."

Remember, he likes it rough; do it again and you might just get what you need. But before she could react to her slutty subconscious, Pearl found herself in the air, turned and lifted, then deposited on the table behind them. "What the...?" Her question was cut off by a hard kiss that gentled in its possessiveness to a caress.

Rough, working man's hands trailed down her sides and slid over her hips, then angled down her thighs. He lifted her legs and tucked her heels behind his back, leaving his thick cock resting along her cleft. Pearl's belly twisted as she pushed her mons toward him. Her hand crept between them to guide him to where she ached.

"That's it, honey; show me how you want it." As eager as she, he pushed forward into her fist, encouraging her to grasp him firmly, guiding her with his hand over hers. Rex's head fell back as he made an involuntary hiss of appreciation; his eyes closed as he showed her the

best way to stroke him, where to hold tight, where to let loose. His head came forward again, and he opened his eyes, taking in their conjoined bodies with a smirk.

“*Oh yeah*, I can’t wait to see your mouth around my cock, honey.”

“I need to taste you...” And she needed to wipe that smirk off his face. Pearl reared up from the table, not feeling at all the rational, cool librarian he claimed she was, and pulled him closer. An arm around his neck dragged him down so she could lick along his straining shoulders, and she bit down when she reached the tender crook of his neck, making him jerk, making him finally thrust his cock deep inside her.

She bit me! Oh, hell yeah!

Instinctively she had bitten down on the one spot destined to make him crazy. The one spot that would make him forget all about slow and sweet, and go straight to full speed ahead, damn the torpedoes.

Rex’s beast reacted. He ground himself against Pearl until she whimpered and set him free, theoretically proving that he, the male, would fill all her needs as she submitted to him.

Yeah, sure. Like she was really going to knuckle down and transform into the perfect little homebody wife...not in this lifetime, buddy. There was no way in hell this was going to be some easy, hey-we-love-each-other-happy-ever-after, not after all that had happened that day. Love was earned -- he felt a great, *great*, deal of lust, but he had no idea who Pearl really was. And she had no clue about him either.

Rex stared down at where they were joined, his hips working on autopilot, nature taking control to do what it did best. The drag of her flesh against his mesmerized him as he tunneled in and out. Her blonde mixed with his dark hair as he pressed up tight, Pearl’s sex opening with each thrust like the old-fashioned euphemism of a flower’s petals furling open. The beast inside wanted to reach out with claws bared and mark her as his, to make it obvious to both man and beast alike that Pearl was taken, mated.

“Harder, Rex, *please*. It feels so good; *you* feel so good,” she pleaded with him.

Rex shook free of his daze and took his time tracing his way up Pearl’s body with his eyes. Her body strained, her muscles taut as she reached eagerly for her peak. Still holding her in his instinctive grasp from when she bit him, Pearl arched over his forearms, her head resting on the table yet thrashing from side to side. Her breasts pushed forward again, inviting him to lick and suck and bite, to tease her as badly as she teased him.

“What do you need, Pearl?” Rex knew all too well what she wanted, but he would draw the wanton out of her inch by inch if he had to. There was going to be no place for prim and proper between them when it came to sex. “Tell me, Pearl, should I fuck you hard and fast, or should I make love to you, slowly, surely?”

The frustration on her face as she stilled and stared back him was beautiful; she was caught between a rock and a hard place. Abandon her restraints and ride the rush of endorphins to a sharp, fast explosion, or wait and enjoy the delicious build toward an orgasm that would roll from her belly, making her fingers and toes tingle as it ebbed its way through her body? He planned to make her feel all those things, repeatedly, satisfying her like no other, but right now he needed one or the other.

He withdrew from her body, pushed her legs to the ground, and pulled her body up ’til she stood on her feet. “Which is it, Pearl?”

With the way she looked at him, Rex figured if there had been another cock close by, she’d have ripped his head off for stopping when she’d been begging for completion and moved on to the next guy.

Pearl didn’t know it, but her claws had extended, and she gripped his arms so tightly she scratched him. He wasn’t any sort of masochist, but a little rough Were lovin’ was a big turn-on for him -- besides he just plain liked the idea of wearing this woman’s mating marks.

“You think it’s funny, do you -- this whole, make me beg for it deal?” Her lips sneered at him, while her body teased him.

“Funny, no. Sexy as hell, oh yes.” He was done with talking. Pearl was beating him at his own game, and that meant his dick wasn’t where he wanted it to be -- right back inside Pearl, where it should be.

Rex broke free of Pearl’s hold and twisted her around, quickly reversing his earlier movements so they stood at the kitchen bench again. “I think I’ll make the decisions this time around; we can save nice and slow for another day.”

He bent her face first over the bench then kicked her feet apart, making space for his legs between hers. A hand held her wrists behind her back as he pressed her chest to the cool surface of the bench; his cock slid along the wet channel of her sex as it invited him in.

“Do it! Do it now, or so help me God, I’ll --” Pearl’s demands cut off in a strangled cry as he thrust hard into her core.

Chapter Seven

Rex had wrapped her back in his robe as she'd recovered from the mighty orgasm he'd given her, gently escorting her to the table when her legs had failed her. Then he'd quietly taken himself off to quickly shower again and change into fresh clothes. What had felt like hours, in reality had only been twenty minutes, so the items she'd taken out of the freezer were still frozen solid.

Pearl set the small container of liquid eggs in warm water to defrost and the bacon in the microwave to do the same, then set to working the bread slices loose from where they had frozen together. When one of the slices jumped free from her wrangling to land on the windowsill, she automatically reached out to grab it back, and then paused, her hand left hanging in midair.

It felt like every hair on her body stood to attention, like the hackles rising on a dog's back when it prepared to protect its territory.

"Rex..." Pearl heard the squeak she had noted previously as the shower door opening; her senses had changed dramatically and small sounds now reverberated like church bells. Rex called out her name questioningly, his reply muffled by the cabin's log walls.

“*Rex!* Get out here, *now!*” The high tone and the fear in her voice must have echoed through the thick walls just fine that time. Pearl heard the bathroom door slam open, and then Rex came flying around the corner as fast as a man possibly could while trying to drag jeans up over wet legs.

“What? What’s wrong?” He hopped to a halt beside her, questions written all over his face. “Did you hurt yourself? *What?*” Then he looked away from her face long enough to follow her outstretched arm and pointed finger. “*Oh, shit.*”

In the clearing behind the cabin stood a man and three animals -- a wolf, a jaguar, and an overly large bobcat. All three animal species could have been imported into the local area, but Pearl had a feeling none of them slept in a cave or on a tree branch, but instead a nice comfy innerspring mattress and blankets kept them warm at night.

“Fuck.” Rex stepped between her and the window, pulling her behind him and blocking her from view, growling all the while. “The Pack’s found us.”

“The Pack’s found us?” Pearl had readily absorbed Rex’s basic lessons on Were history and understood what he meant by the term, but she was confused as to why they would be standing so confrontationally on the back lawn. “Am I in trouble or something? Don’t they realize this isn’t my fault? Why do they look so angry?” Pearl shut her mouth with a snap as she literally saw the back of Rex’s neck ripple and the short hairs at his nape bristle. “*What?*”

As she looked around his shoulder, she saw that the man had stepped closer to the cabin. The three predators snarled at each other, tactically staying out of reach of each other’s claws, but making their presence felt with coughs, growls, yowls, and screeches. While they seemed engrossed in each other as they fought, the palpable sense of their attention never wavered from her.

“It’s not your fault, and it’s not anger. It’s sexual frustration. So I guess, yeah, you’re right: they’re pissy. A few hours ago, I was feeling the same way.”

If Pearl hadn't seen his previous frustration and his consequent battle to fight it, along with his attentiveness and eagerness to please, she'd be running for her life. Instead, she was battling her own new and potent urges to defend against a perceived threat.

"Rex! We know she's in there; you need to bring her out before someone sticks their claws where they're not wanted." The tall, dark-haired man, rakishly attired in classic studly-man clothing of tight, worn jeans and a formfitting black T-shirt, walked forward until he stood at the bottom of the porch stairs. "No one's about to harm her."

Mr. Tall, Dark, and Studly crossed his arms across his chest and flexed. The muscles between his clasped arms bulged in a display of prowess; no doubt the move was designed to cow those of a lesser status into obeisance. Unused to the beast now prowling her subconscious and the innate need to protect her mate and cub, regardless of how little she knew of him or how minutely she was pregnant, Pearl saw red.

Before Rex could stop her, Pearl had charged to the door, flipped up the locking bar, and stormed out onto the porch and down the stairs. She used the height of the second stair to stand face-to-face and theoretical toe-to-toe with Rob, the Pack Alpha. Rex had no clue if she actually realized she'd bared her teeth and snarled.

"Who are you, and why do you think you can come barging in here demanding Rex 'bring me out here'? I'm quite capable of making my own decisions, thank you very much." Pearl didn't realize it, but she had mimicked Rob's stance and turned it back on him with deadly effect. With her arms crossed under her breasts, the robe gaped open yet clung tightly to her flesh as her arms forced her breasts up and out, presenting quite an eyeful of a display to the males present.

Rob, the man who'd fought his way to Alpha leader status, and who had only moments before been posturing with the best, was reduced to a gulp and an intimidated shiver as he

watched Pearl's chest heave in indignation. Having made his way onto the porch -- just not with Pearl's dramatic flare -- Rex stood along with him, awed at the display.

"Ahh..." Temporarily speechless, Rex watched Rob make his second wrong move -- or his first right one, depending on which side of the male/riled up female debate you stood on -- and stepped back. It looked to Rex as if it took a lot of effort on Rob's behalf to find a part of his brain not fried by the sight and scent of a potent woman on the warpath. "Robert Deidrickson, Pack Alpha, ma'am."

Rex smiled as he watched his best friend hold out his hand in introduction. It took balls to offer an appendage to a displeased female. Especially one that all the men in the clearing could tell was a born protector. Pearl positively reeked of dominance and the need to suppress the interlopers and protect what was hers.

"You're Rob?" Pearl's words were definitely no compliment, yet in the next moment her attitude reversed a hundred and eighty degrees, leaving all of them stunned. She reached out and took Rob's hand, shaking it in a ladylike manner. "My name is Pearl Gordon. I'm glad to meet you. In the, umm, short time I've known Rex, he's said a lot about you. Good things...for the most part."

Rob's eyebrow rose as he looked at Rex over Pearl's shoulder. "He has, has he?" Rob turned Pearl's hand over, then kissed the soft skin at her wrist. Rex watched Rob's nose twitch as he covertly sniffed her skin, smelling her transformed state, and also Rex's claim of ownership on the woman none of the rest of them would ever know as his mate, and made his sardonic reply. "I wonder where he found the time."

Caught in the reprimand in Rob's gaze, Rex wasn't as aware as he should have been of his surroundings, and he flinched when he heard a yelp from the jaguar. The Weres in animal form had slunk close, rubbing themselves against the bare skin of Pearl's legs that the robe left exposed, their animal natures demanding they press their suit to mate despite Rex's recent claim. The beast Pearl didn't yet know how to control had flexed its claws, digging

into the sensuous tail curling around her thigh, reminding the three Weres just who was now an Alpha bitch.

All three Weres slunk away from the stairs and to the edge of the clearing, their noses finally understanding Pearl's scent. Mated and pregnant, she was not to be trifled with.

Rob's cell phone rang; pulling it from his hip, he flicked it open.

"Grande Dame, I hope you're well." With his recent conversation with the same woman still echoing in his head, Rex understood the flags of color that flashed over Rob's high-cut cheekbones as he was given no choice but to listen to the older woman. Leader of the Pack or no, you listened to the Grande Dame. "I see. A very interesting situation for Rex to find himself in --"

The loud click of the old-fashioned rotary telephone the Grande Dame used was audible to all of them as she hung up on Rob in mid-sentence. Rob sighed and pocketed his phone.

"Will the day ever come that she understands that *I* run the show around here?" Rob's frustrated glower made Rex want to laugh.

They had grown up together, fought together, even gone so far as to share women together. It had been a surprising friendship, since they were both considered Alpha males -- prime males capable of protecting and leading the Pack into the future. But Rex hadn't the desire to lead. His nature was satisfied by his hunger for science and medicine -- there would have been no way to balance his devotion to science and the dedication needed to lead the Pack.

It definitely hadn't been a problem when there was no way he would have been mated. The Pack was more like a clan than an animalistic hierarchy. While, yes, there were upsets now and then due to the nature of their beasts, in general they got along well, sometimes better than their full human counterparts. A little like the Mafia, the Pack looked after its own.

But now? He had no idea how Pearl would react to the situation when Rob finally found his partner. What would happen when she was asked to bend her head to the leader's mate? She seemed so correct, so prim and proper, yet she had this wild dictatorial streak.

While that might make his dominatrix librarian fantasies come to life, Rex knew so little about this woman he had no idea how she would act in response.

Rob turned back to Pearl and gestured toward the cabin. "It seems there's a lot for us to discuss, shall we go inside?" He stepped forward and held open the door for Pearl, earning himself a smile from the lady.

"Rex?" Pearl turned back to him with her brow raised in question. "Are you coming?"

"In just a second." The door clicked shut behind the pair, and Rex quickly strode toward the Weres, coming to a halt in front of them with a growl.

"You know I love you guys, and you're my family, but if one of you so much as sniffs her way again, it won't be her leaving a few scratches on your tail -- you'll be lucky if I let you walk away with your head." All three Weres ducked their heads at the chest-deep rumble and took note of Rex's partially formed claw.

Rex could, and would, protect what was his to the death.

* * * * *

"Where's Pearl?" Rex trusted his friend implicitly, but that didn't mean that he had to like that Pearl had been near enough to naked in front of Rob while he'd been out of the room.

"Changing, I think. We walked through the door and she hustled past me with an apology, straight into the back room."

Rob's eyebrows rose as Rex smirked. "Good."

"*Oh*, it's like that, is it?"

Rob's full-blown smile wiped the smirk off Rex's face as it sank in that it *was* just like that. Shit, four hours and he was already pussy whipped.

The door handle rattled, and both men turned toward the sound, gaping as an almost perfectly dressed woman emerged. Her skirt fell sleekly to her calf, and her blouse was buttoned primly, though, Rex noted, not quite to the top as there were a few buttons missing. Her hair was chicly captured in a bun at the nape of her neck.

"I'm sorry to delay you, but I really needed to repair my dishabille." She looked at Rex, then to Rob as they both gaped at her. "What?" she said, one eyebrow raised. "You go around meeting people in your bathrobes?"

Rob's smile came back in full force, and he asked with all the eagerness of a small child, "Can I be there when she meets the Grande Dame? Please?"

Rex humphed his disgust at his friend and moved to where Pearl stood, cradling her elbow in his hand as he courteously squired her to the settee. Rob tried to hide a bark of laughter behind a cough when Rex nearly sat on top of Pearl, pulling her tightly to his side in an unconscious claim of ownership to the other prime male.

Rob took a seat opposite them. "Pearl, I must apologize on behalf of the Pack. Weres usually don't go around randomly biting people and causing mischief. I'm pretty sure I know who bit you, and he will be reprimanded."

Rex held Pearl's hand in his, like some teenager showing his defiance while being lectured to by his girlfriend's unreasonable father, so he felt the telling twitch of her fingers when Rob mentioned the pups that had let loose the night before. Little spots of color that he figured would usually be covered with discreet makeup blossomed on her cheekbones.

"Is that really necessary? After all" -- her voice choked and she cleared her throat -- "I was there too; he wasn't the only person involved."

Pearl was politely trying to say it took two to fuck, so she was as equally to blame. Rex's temperature jumped at the thought of someone else having had Pearl so recently. But

the twenty-first century man on the inside insisted he ignore the beast. He couldn't judge Pearl when he'd blown off steam the same way in the past -- but that didn't mean he was going to be nice to the kid the next time he saw him.

"That's true, Pearl, but your behavior was no more or no less than normal; the man concerned did something rather more unusual, something he'd been warned not to do." Rob looked at them both with sympathy. "His actions have far-reaching implications for you and Rex, while he gets to walk away. But I will make sure it's not unpunished."

Rex watched the byplay between Pearl and Rob with interest. This was the first test -- would she bide by her new Alpha?

Pearl's eyes dropped just a fraction below Rob's forthright stare, and then flicked back up to look at him directly. "I just didn't want you to think I was expecting someone to be punished for both of our actions. I was a willing participant --"

Rob raised his hand and politely waved her apology down. "It's okay, Pearl, having to deal with Rex in your life for the foreseeable future, I think, is punishment enough for your, albeit small, sins."

Rob was laughing at him, and judging by the expression on her face, Pearl knew it.

Pearl looked around the room. "The other...ahh...what do I call them, Weres? Shape-shifters? Animals?"

"Weres is fine, honey."

"Well, that must make for some confusing conversations." A little sarcasm came through as she raised her brow. "Where did the other Weres go?"

Rob answered the question. "The wolf and bobcat headed home. But Jacob's probably in the back of my truck nursing his tail -- he's the jaguar you clawed. My cousin's a bit of a drama queen when it comes to his pelt, but he's only twenty; he'll get over it."

Rex was suddenly enamored with a certain shade of pink; the shade of pink that was currently tinting the pearly complexion of the woman beside him. She was embarrassed that she'd marked the cat.

"I...I'm sorry about that." Her chagrined whisper did perverse things to his dick, and he wondered if she would use that same husky, embarrassed tone if they were to play dominance games in the bedroom.

Rob laughed, and Rex laughed along with him, drawing Pearl to his side in a hug. "Honey, you gave him the equivalent of a kitten scratch. Really, there is nothing to be embarrassed about. Any of the other bitches would have taken his tail right off, not just left him with a few claw holes."

When Rex tilted Pearl's head up to give her a quick peck, he saw her frown. "What? What's wrong?"

"Do you have to use that word? It's disgusting and degrading." Pearl's lips pursed into a delectable pout that had nothing to do with being coy; it was all about being peeved.

He sighed. Getting to know Pearl wasn't going to be easy. He could see before him even now the volume of misunderstandings waiting to unfold. "I told you about that, Pearl. We don't mean it as a term of disrespect."

"I know you don't, but please don't call me that. It makes me feel...I don't know, dirty."

And she did look uncomfortable, which was the kicker. He had a funny feeling that if he slipped -- and with nearly forty years of the habit under his belt he was sure to slip -- that she would look at him with those wounded eyes and upset pout and he would give her anything to make her happy again.

Silently, he cursed magic and biology and fate for having dropped him in it this time, right up to his damn neck.

Pearl seemed to perceive the change in his demeanor and shifted on the seat, moving away slightly. It was his turn to frown as he slid over the few inches she'd put between them.

She sensed a change in the air, but was unsure of its direction, so she changed the topic. "So, Rob, if your cousin is a Jaguar, does that mean your...what do you call it...beast...is too?"

If the man's silky black hair and gold-green eyes were all she had to go on, she'd have judged him a panther. He looked to be someone who'd be able to slink through the shadows when needed.

"Yes, black jaguar, to be exact." Rob's smile was suddenly toothy. "Much more exotic than a hulking bear, that's for sure."

She'd tried to put space between her and Rex, but no sooner had she moved than he'd leaned back into her, his thigh pressed along hers -- perfect for feeling it tense as though he was about leap.

"I don't intend to hulk." It was pleasing to watch Rob swallow his smile with a gulp as he realized that he'd just insulted her.

"I...ah...I meant Rex...*hell*." The poor guy was red in the face as he tried to backtrack.

"Ha!" Rex's snort of air expressed his disgust. "Good luck digging yourself out of that one, Rob."

"Yes...well." While it was nice to sit and chat, there was a lot more she needed to know from them both about the new world she was now a part of. Plus, there was this Grande Dame to deal with -- she seemed to know a lot about things no one else did. "I believe this *Grande Dame* called you before -- did she have anything interesting to say?"

Rob took the peace offering she handed him with good grace. "Only the basics, I assume. That you got bitten and went into heat, and Rex here wasn't able to keep it in his pants, and some freaky magic stuff happened." *He's succinct at least.*

“Something like that.”

“Though she didn’t explain how you ended up out here -- took us hours to track you down. Damn distracting that scent of yours was, by the way. Nearly ended up in my pelt myself.”

Rex growled beside her and snarled at his friend. “Just be glad you didn’t.”

“Hey!” Annoyed, she stood up and let her temper get the best of her. *Sorry, Mother.* “I didn’t choose to be here either, you know!” She lashed out with her foot and caught Rex’s shin with the pointed toe of her shoe. “You’re not much of a prize either.”

Pearl put her hands on her hips and turned to Rob to question him. “I got the idea from Rex’s earlier phone call that this Grande Dame wants to see us at some point. Did she say anything of the sort to you?”

“She did, actually; she asked to see you Friday night.” Nearly a whole week away. Rob screwed up his nose. “For post-dinner drinks were her exact words.” As he rose, Rob straightened his jeans and muttered, “Thanks to you guys, I’m expected too. So much for the hot date I had lined up.”

Chapter Eight

“You’ll need to give me the address.” They pulled up beside her car, which had been left outside Rex’s practice.

“Whose address?”

“This Grande Dame person.” *Who else would she be talking about?*

“Why?”

“So I can meet you there on Friday, of course. I assume Grande Dame is a title not a name, so I doubt I can look her up in the telephone book.” She nearly rolled her eyes, but remembered her manners and sighed instead. *Men.*

“I’ll pick you up.” Rex was looking at her oddly, like he was getting annoyed.

“No, that’s okay; I’d rather take my car.”

“No, that’s not okay, Pearl.” He *was* annoyed.

“I’d really prefer --”

Rex cut her off in mid-sentence. “No. This is the way it works: I collect my date. I drive my date. I bring my date home.”

“Oh.” Well, that took her a bit by surprise. She hadn’t pegged him as the old-fashioned type when it came to dating. “You do that all the time, then?”

“Yes. I’m a gentleman, damn it,” he ground out thorough teeth just this side of clenched. “I open doors and pay for dinner too.”

“Okay, then.”

“I might not like the ballet or going to art museums, but I do know how to treat my women right.”

“All right.” Rex wasn’t listening to her, so Pearl reached for the door handle.

“What do you think you’re doing?” The man nearly gnashed his teeth as he broke off from his ranting.

“I can’t drive my car from here, now can I?” This time she did roll her eyes. How the hell did this guy manage to reduce her to plain snarky?

“What have I just finished telling you?” Rex looked at her, frustrated, when she stared at him blankly. “Just...just wait there.”

Rex exited the truck and came around to her side. He opened the large door, then took the keys that dangled from her hand and lifted her down from the cab. She’d swear he muttered “stubborn woman” under his breath. With a hand under her elbow, he escorted her to her car, opened the door, then passed her into her seat before handing her back her keys. Had it not been the day from hell, she would have been impressed. Instead she didn’t quite know what to say.

As Rex leaned on her open car door, he looked at his watch. “It’s four-thirty.”

That startled her. She hadn’t been watching the clock, and the day felt a lot longer than it actually had been. “Is that really the time?”

“Yeah. I guess that means I won’t get to your place ’til after seven.” Distracted with calculating how long his work would take him, he didn’t see her surprise.

“My place?”

His attention jerked back. "On the drive back I was thinking. We've talked about everything but us, and what all this" -- he eyed her belly in such a way that she looked down in case she'd expanded like a balloon and was showing already -- "means to you and me, personally."

The man did have a point -- quite a valid one, actually. Pearl sighed, resigned to the fact she wasn't going to be able to go home, bury her head in the sand, and pretend that this...*madness*...wasn't real. "All right, then. I'll see you later on."

Rex waved good-bye and turned on his heel, heading for a door to the side of the main clinic entrance. A joyful chorus echoed out as yips and yowls welcomed him back. She wondered if being a Were gave him an extra affinity toward the animals. *He's probably a regular Doctor Doolittle.*

Pearl made it to the first intersection before she realized Rex hadn't asked her address, so she quickly made a U-turn and headed back to the clinic. She figured he'd still be out in the back, and she headed for the same entrance she'd seen Rex use.

She pushed open the heavy door and found herself in an area filled with large kennels and wire mesh runs enclosing a big grassy open area. As she walked past the runs, she realized most of them were empty, their gates hanging free. When she rounded the corner and saw the whole green space clearly for the first time, she found out why.

Rex was surrounded by dogs. Big ones, small ones, ones with cast limbs, others with bandages, but they were united in one thing: getting a piece of the lovin' up Rex was dishing out.

Pearl stopped and watched a minute, absorbing how Rex interacted with the animals.

Animals were her greatest love, and her greatest downfall. She'd craved a pet her entire youth, but her mother wouldn't allow it, although she'd never figured out why. As an only child, she'd felt alone amongst the bustle of her mother's society-wife life, and a pet would have been a source of friendship. She hadn't been in her own place a week before she'd

brought home the first stray. Others quickly followed, and other than Vlad, she'd found them all loving homes.

Having worked with animals in her own small way, she'd found they were great personality meters. They wouldn't seek out those people who wouldn't tolerate them; instead they honed in on the people who would. And judging by Rex's reception, they liked him a lot. He couldn't receive a better recommendation in her book.

"Rex?"

Surprised, he spun around, nearly tripping over a Labradoodle that was bounding around his legs. "Pearl?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt, but I just realized you don't have my address."

"Oh, of course." He rubbed his forehead. "I didn't even think. So much has happened today that it didn't cross my mind; it sort of feels like I've known you a lot longer, so I'd have known that already."

"Yeah, it has been a bit like that." She shrugged, acknowledging she felt the same way.

"Okay, fire away. I've got a good memory, so I won't need to write it down." A few of the more outgoing dogs had sidled over to sniff her hand, and then sat down at her feet with wagging tails and doggy grins. A much better reception than this morning's lusty overeagerness from the neighborhood's stray, and not-so-stray, dog population.

"546 Magnoli --"

She broke off as a pair of doggy paws landed smack bang in the middle of her chest, and Rex yelled out, "*Donkey, no!*" Stumbling, she tripped over one of the dogs sitting beside her and fell on her bottom with a thump. Happy doggy breath washed over her face as the 'Doodle gave her a big kiss, swiping up the side of her face with a rough doggy tongue.

"*Donkey*, I said no!" Rex hauled the dog away by her collar. "Pearl, are you okay?" Gentle hands ran over her limbs, checking for bumps and bruises. "Should I take you to the hospital? Is the baby okay? Pearl?" The poor man was getting more upset by the minute.

“Stupid mutt, she should know better by now, but *nooo*, she won’t remember any of her obedience training.”

“Rex.” He was still muttering to himself when she yelled in his ear. “*Rex!*”

He jumped as he finally took notice of her and saw that she was laughing. “You’re okay, then?”

“Just fine, I might have a sore bottom tomorrow, but I’m just fine.” Rex stood and reached out a hand, pulling her upright with ease. He waited awkwardly as she brushed the dirt off the back of her skirt. “Did I hear you right? Is that dog named *Donkey?*” she asked, partly distracted with rectifying her clothing.

“Yeah, it wasn’t originally, but her last owner had a toddler that couldn’t say her name properly, and since she’s such a troublemaker, ‘don’t’ featured in a lot of her commands. Don’t Kyria, turned into DonKey for the two-year-old, and Donkey’s all she’ll respond to now.”

“But she’s a Labradoodle; they’re very good at training and obeying commands.”

“Not Donkey. Her last family couldn’t handle her enthusiasm for, well, everything, so I’m trying to find her a new home. But as you can see” -- he waved a hand in her direction -- “she’s not making it an easy sell.”

“She’s just high-spirited is all.” Donkey was straining her head forward so she could lick her hand, her doggy grin a mile wide. “She just wants to be friendly.”

“Well, friendly would be good if she wasn’t so good at friendly destruction.”

Stepping closer, she gave Donkey a good, strong scratch behind the ears. “She’s a cutie.”

“Yeah.”

“Anyway, I’d best go and let you finish up. It’s 546 Magnolia Lane. There’s a big blue front door and a red barn off to the side.” Pearl paused a second, a little anxiousness bubbling in her tummy. “If you’re going to be tied up here for the next while, would you like to join me for dinner?”

Rex's slow smile made her butterflies fly away to be replaced with a totally different type of fluttering. "Sure...I'll see you soon."

Pearl exited the way she came in while Rex began to gather up the dogs, but she turned back for a second to watch as Rex kenneled the animals. Each one received a scratch and some encouragement before Rex moved on to the next dog. He really cared about them all -- happy or mean, big or small, ugly or immaculately groomed, it didn't matter.

Pearl had always figured you could tell a lot about a man by the way he treated his animals. Her hand brushed over her stomach for a second. Here's hoping she was right.

Chapter Nine

Pearl had gone with easy for dinner: rolls, fresh salad, and big, thick, juicy steaks she'd developed a taste for on her dash through the supermarket.

Rex had requested his meat medium rare, and she'd turned up her nose -- usually she ate her beef on the burnt side of the spectrum -- but she'd taken one look at that thick, red hunk of meat dripping juices down into her grill so it sizzled and flamed, and pulled hers off at the same time.

Now she sat back with a quite contented, full belly and wondered if she could get away with licking her lips like a three-year-old trying to get the last of the chocolate smeared around her mouth. She couldn't even work up the energy to fake a shudder of disgust that she'd eaten meat that may as well have mooed at her.

"So..." Rex sat opposite her, rolling his glass between his hands. A newcomer might think he looked relaxed with his legs splayed and his elbows propped on the arms of the chair, yet she thought she saw a certain amount of tension.

"Hmm?" Stuffed full, she just wanted to curl up in a ball and go to sleep. *Wonder if that's a pregnancy thing?* After all, if the magic could render conception that quickly, she was sure there were other things it manipulated. With her luck, Weres carried babies for

twelve months, not the normal nine. It'd be too much to ask that it be shorter; her luck didn't usually run that way.

"We're going to be parents."

Well, if that statement didn't wake her up, she didn't know what would. "Yes." Pearl drew out the word as she contemplated it. "We are."

"I don't know if I'm ready to be a dad. Hell, what do I know about raising a kid? I'm a nearly forty-year-old bachelor!"

Pearl sat upright. "And you think *I* am?"

If the way the man started chewing on his lower lip was any indication, he was nervous. Nervous or not, it was as sexy as all get out. "Well, you are a woman. Women are just better at these kinds of things -- it's just the way it is."

Did he just...? "I really hope you aren't as selfish and biased as you made that sound."

Rex took in her raised brow and the tone of her voice, and frowned. She could almost see him mentally rewinding what he'd said, trying to find why she'd be upset. Obviously, he'd seen his faux pas, as he blushed. "Ah, that wasn't what I meant."

"I should hope not, but I agree with the statement before that." Now it was her turn to fiddle with her glass; she ran her finger around the rim as she carried on. "I started the day with a dog problem. Now, I'm pregnant, will at some point in the future turn into a bear, found out about a whole other paranormal community I didn't know existed...Lord, the list goes on and on. But one thing I do know is that I'm not ready to settle into some June Cleaver life where I shift into your place and raise five kids and clean the house. I barely know you, and even though this *magic* has decided we're a good match, I've no clue if we can stand one another long enough to get through a date, let alone a relationship."

She'd thought long and hard about it from the moment she'd left his office, trying to figure out how on earth they were supposed to go on from here. She wasn't about to jump

into a marriage just because she was pregnant. Hell, she'd only known the guy a day, and this wasn't the 1800s where just being caught alone with a man meant you had to marry him.

"I couldn't agree more. I didn't start out the day thinking today was the day I'd find a mate, let alone knock someone up. I..." Rex stumbled to a halt. "This talking stuff is hard, isn't it?"

"Yes." There wasn't much more to say than that, really, and she was a bit miffed over the tone of Rex's "being knocked up" comment. He didn't need to put it quite so baldly.

Rex stood up and began pacing again, just like he had earlier in the cabin. "Biologically, we might run into some problems along the way. Mated couples tend to get itchy, sexually speaking, when they have to spend extended time apart." As he paced, he ran his hands through his hair. Pearl couldn't help but think that his slightly ruffled exterior made him look even sexier. "But that aside, I thought, maybe, that we could ignore the pregnancy thing for a month or two, and just get to know each other...you know...date."

He was chewing his lip again when he stopped in front of her. "Do you think you could do that? Date me, that is?" He fiddled with his cufflinks and looked away. "I *am* supposed to be a catch..."

Pearl was beginning to think that he might be more of a catch than he realized -- hardworking, solvent, endearingly earnest -- even if he did drive her nuts.

"That was pretty much the conclusion I'd come to. After all, this isn't the dark ages -- you don't have to get married if you get 'knocked up.'" Rex frowned at her discreet mockery. "Can we just not announce it to the world that I'm in the family way? I know in a few months it'll be obvious, but I'd prefer it if people weren't just assuming that we're together because I'm pregnant."

Rex was still frowning. "Why do you think people would assume that's the only reason I'd stick around?"

"I don't exactly burn up the local nightlife, Rex. I've a few close friends -- like your neighbor, Shaun -- but everyone else thinks I'm a cold fish. Last night was the first night I've ever just gone out and let loose." A wry laugh slipped out. "Maybe my mother was right. I mean, look where it's gotten us."

"Well, I don't think you're cold, and I'd like to think that if I'd met you in any other situation I would say the same." She'd like to think so, too, but she kept her skeptical side to herself. "In fact, after this afternoon in the kitchen, I'd have to say you're the least cold person I know -- and pretty to boot."

Rex's pensive frown had turned into a leer. He was making fun, but at the same time, his eyes burned with something a lot darker than humor. That heat made her nervous, as one of her other decisions had been to resist him at all costs until she knew him better. *That might not have been the best of all your ideas, Pearl.*

Flustered, she stood, joining him on his feet with a rush.

"Whoa, Pearl, where are you going?" Rex reached out to steady her as she wobbled. "Surely that's not the first compliment you've received?"

"Ah...no. Of course not." Thirty-one years on the planet, and his *was* the first genuine compliment she'd received from a man. How galling was it to come to that realization?

Rex tilted her chin up so he could see directly in her eyes. The man exuded the vitality of a man much younger, yet small crow's-feet that betrayed his age crinkled out from around his eyes as he concentrated on her. Pearl hoped she'd managed to hide her emotions. A wry smile tilted his mouth to the side, and he leaned in, touching his lips to hers.

It started off soft and gentle, but in moments they groaned in unison and opened their mouths to one another. Rex scooped her closer, pressing her bottom forward until her mons rested against the fly of his trousers. She raised her arms around his neck and dragged him down to her as her belly arched into him, her back curving over his arm.

Her light dress let the heat of his body soak quickly through, and she wished the cloth would disappear. She was ready to take him again, with no preamble, as if she hadn't already had him twice that day.

Pearl felt his body quake as he pulled away with a curse. "Damn it, Pearl. How do you do this to me?" Rex's hands wrapped around her forearms and he broke her hold on his neck. He took a step back, his hands dropping away as if scalded before wiping the back of one hand across his lips. "Lady, believe me when I say you are no cold fish."

Embarrassment raced across her cheeks. Years of fake compliments were shown for their true worth by one man's genuine, if impolite, reaction.

Chapter Ten

Pearl woke after a strangely lonely Sunday to Monday morning and the weirdest craving for breakfast. She wanted, no *needed*, a burger with a double meat patty, cheese, bacon, egg, and jalapeño sauce. Her stomach grumbled its discontent as it told her she needed it, now!

The alarm clock hadn't yet buzzed, and its numbers glowed green -- 6:35. If she showered in a hurry, she could be out of the house by 7:15, and could stop in at the Greasy Spoon, have Dave make her a burger, and not be late for work.

The rumble of her stomach had her throwing back the covers, but a wave of dizziness and nausea when she went to stand had her grabbing for her headboard.

"How can I be hungry and sick to my stomach at the same time?" She really needed to talk to Rex more about Were pregnancies, or find another female Were to ask. She was sure the cravings and nausea weren't supposed to hit 'til way into the fourth week or more, not just after two days.

"What a bloody mess. I'm going to have a lot of questions for this *Grande Dame* woman come Friday." Though Pearl had a funny feeling the mysterious Grande Dame wouldn't be all that forthcoming when it came to bodily functions.

The shower set her on her feet again, and it had taken her only ten minutes to get to the Greasy Spoon and take a solo seat at the counter. Dave had a busy weekday clientele, and as he was one of the few friends she'd made in high school, she knew better than to take up booth space.

Dave had looked twice when she'd asked for the special order, and then looked twice again when she fell on the burger like a woman who hadn't seen food for a month. The clink of the jalapeño sauce bottle brought her head up.

Her eyes rolled back in her head as she managed to swallow the huge mouthful of burger then lick her lips. "God, thank you, Dave, you have no idea how much I needed this."

"Hmm..." Dave looked at her speculatively, his claw tap, tap, tapping on the countertop. "I think I might."

Wait, *his claw*?

Pearl watched, fascinated as the claw morphed back into the short, tidy nails she knew he usually sported, then looked back up, mouth agape despite the big bite of burger she'd just shoveled in.

"Now, now, Miss Priss, you know better than to chew with your mouth open." Her smart-arsed friend reached over and pushed her jaw shut with a clunk.

"Dave?" Pearl swallowed with an audible gulp and wondered if her eyes were goggling like a flabbergasted cartoon character's.

"There's not much need to keep my secret any longer." Dave shrugged and smiled like he'd just gotten one up on her with the best joke in the world. "Welcome to the Other Side."

Pearl looked side to side and saw that the counter was empty except for one woman down at the end who waved her tail in a friendly manner. *Her tail. Oh crap.*

"You know?" she hissed at Dave, and he nodded in reply. She set her burger down with a little whimper and pushed the plate away. "Everyone knows what happened over the weekend?"

“Yup.”

“Great. *Just* great.” She reached for the coffee the waitress had poured earlier, but Dave beat her to it; sweeping the mug away, he replaced it with a glass of milk. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“You shouldn’t drink caffeine.” Dave pushed the plate toward her again. “Don’t let your burger get cold; you’re eating for two now.”

Her horrified gasp was no doubt heard around the world. “Everyone knows I’m pregnant, too?”

“No, only those of us actually there know about the” -- Dave’s voice dropped to a whisper, and he leaned right into her ear -- “baby.”

“Rob asked us not to discuss it with anyone, though; he figured there was family who needed to know first, and that you and Rex needed some time to figure things out.”

He chuckled as she buried her head in her hands. “Oh God. Ohmigod, everyone knows.”

“You have to be fair, Pearl. It’s pretty hard to keep that kind of thing a secret in the Were community; other Weres can sense the beast in another. Plus, you caused quite a stir on Saturday.” Dave came around the counter and took a seat beside her. “I did my best, once I figured out it was you, to keep them off your tail.”

And there it was, the moment to make her misery complete. “You were there?” Then she thought back to what Dave had already said: only those who were *there* knew about the baby. *Oh, just wonderful, Dave knew exactly what had happened up at that cabin. How freaking embarrassing.*

“Uh huh -- the bobcat.” Strangely enough, that didn’t surprise her. Dave was a compact, wiry man with ginger hair that stuck out at all angles, just like the tufts of hair on his beast’s ears.

“Ah, thanks...that can’t have been easy. That wolf and jaguar looked twice your size.” All these years her friend had been running around in golden, spotted fur, and she hadn’t had a clue. It explained his frequent camping trips, though.

“Well, what they have on me in size, I’ve got all over them in cunning.” A devilish glint sparkled in his eye. “I loved it when you yanked on Jacob’s tail, by the way.” He patted her on the shoulder, awkwardly trying to give comfort. He muttered under his breath, “Pretentious ass had it coming.”

Dave stood up as the front bell dinged again, announcing the next wave of morning customers. “Oh well, back to work.” He reached around, pulled her plate forward again, and tapped the side. “Finish your burger; you need your protein.”

She managed not to gawp, but her eyes stayed wide as Dave whistled on his way back to the kitchen. Pearl pursed her lips ruefully when she recognized the tune -- *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*.

* * * * *

Tuesday -- Rex checked his watch -- Ten a.m. and he’d been here since seven still catching up on the backlog from Saturday’s cancelled appointments. He was tired, grumpy, and a cat that had decided that a piece of cake full of fruits with a laxative effect was a great dietary choice had crapped all over him.

And he was horny.

Tired, grumpy, literally crappy, and just to top it all off, horny. *What a great combo.*

Rex clipped his cell phone onto the waist of his recently donned clean jeans, and after double-checking his pockets, dumped his soiled pants in the washing machine. “That damned bathroom was worth every cent.”

Accidents happened frequently in a vet practice, so when he’d purchased the building he’d spent an enormous amount of money installing a bathroom with two shower stalls, so

two staff members could clean up at once if necessary. Today had been his day to use the facility.

“Hey, boss, there’s a Pearl Gordon on the phone for you, shall I transfer the call to your cell?” His assistant, Colleen, stood at the door with her hands over her eyes and her nose wrinkled up in disgust. “Phew, I think you might need to add some bleach. That stinks.”

Colleen had been working with him since she was thirteen. Her dream was to become a vet, and she was now in college earning her degree. She only worked for him during the holidays, and though she didn’t know it, he’d made a substantial donation to the school to fund part of her scholarship. He’d known the girl was going to be good at the tender age of sixteen; now at twenty-one she was shaping up to be an excellent veterinarian.

“It wasn’t wonderful from this side of the fabric either.” He sniffed his sleeve. His clothing was all new, but he’d swear the scent lingered. “And, yeah, transfer her through.”

Rex held back a laugh as he saw the glint of Colleen’s eyes as she peeked between her fingers, only to find he was fully dressed. Her hands dropped with a small sigh he was sure she didn’t expect him to hear before she left the room.

His phone chirped, and segued into a new ringtone. Rex laughed as he picked up the phone -- Colleen had reprogrammed it with *Don’t Cha*, by the Pussycat Dolls. *Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me?* It was a running joke. She programmed a new song just before he went somewhere -- like the supermarket -- then called him and managed to embarrass the hell out of him. Her timing was uncanny. Like when *Call Me When You’re Sober* sounded out while he’d been standing in the line at the liquor store. Colleen was the kid sister he’d never had.

Only this time it’d backfired -- his new...err...girlfriend?...was as hot as he could handle right at this moment, thank you very much.

Don’t cha wish your girlfriend was a freak like me? Ha, if Colleen only knew...

“Pearl?”

“Hello, Rex, how are you?” The woman had a sexy phone voice: a little deep and husky, and with a slow, measured tempo. He figured she’d make a killing as a phone sex operator -- not that he was about to tell her that.

“Well...” He drew out the word as he figured out a way to say his day had been shitty -- no pun intended -- without coming off whiny. “It hasn’t been a great day so far. Are you calling to tell me you’re going to whisk me away from all my problems?” Maybe -- now that she’d called -- his crappy day might take a turn for the better.

Pearl gently laughed. He could imagine her sitting behind her desk, buttoned up in a suit, her hair primly back the way it had been Saturday morning, politely laughing so the rest of the office wasn’t aware she was making a personal call. “Well, I can’t guarantee that, but would lunch maybe make your day more acceptable?” Her already intimate voice dropped a little further into libidinousness, making certain parts of his anatomy perk right up out of their smell-induced slump.

“Lunch would be great.” He wanted to suggest his place, but since they’d made the decision to get to know one another -- at Pearl’s insistence -- suggesting he could eat *her* would no doubt be bad form. It didn’t stop his imagination from picking up the ball and running with it, though. A quick image of Pearl spread out on the table up at his cabin sprang to mind. “I’m still playing catch-up from the weekend, so I can only be gone an hour. Can we meet at The Italian Stallion on King Street?”

“The Italian Stallion?” There was true laughter in her voice now, along with a bit of shocked disbelief.

“Yeah, despite the name, it’s this little family-type place that has great pasta. I think I read on their menu that it was named after their great-grandfather who lived to a ripe old age and fathered about fourteen children.”

“Good Lord! His poor wife, she would have been worn out!”

“He probably wore out more than one.”

Pearl choked back a snort of laughter at his comment. “More than likely. So, midday, then? And will I be able to find this place easily?”

“Midday’s good. Look for a blue sign with a rearing black stallion, like on the Ferrari logo. It’s not big, but if you’re looking for it, you’ll find it easily enough.”

Pearl quickly made her good-byes, and soon enough he was left in stinky silence. He was a vet; bad smells weren’t anything new, but *eh, that smell*.

Moving into the hall, he turned toward the front desk and yelled out to Colleen. “Col, can you turn the AC on, *please?*”

Her sniggering was muted by the sound of the air conditioning starting up. Rex felt the slight breeze as he stood under one of the ducts. “Thank God, I’ve smelled bad smells before” -- disgust shivered down his spine, and he tried to work it out of his system with an exaggerated shimmy-shake and a face twisting “ewww” -- “but this is beyond gross.”

* * * * *

Pearl piled more pasta on top of what she’d already pushed to the left side of her plate, and hoped Rex wouldn’t notice that she’d only eaten four to five mouthfuls.

It was a beautiful fettuccine Alfredo. The sauce was divine and the pasta perfectly cooked, but her stomach was doing its best fighter pilot impression as it did high-G loop-the-loops. She’d bypassed the fizzy soda and the caffeine of a coffee, and ordered an unsweetened tea with the hope that the bland flavor would help settle the nausea.

Unfortunately, it hadn’t.

“Don’t you like it?” When she looked up, Rex was watching her curiously.

“It’s perfect...but my stomach’s not.” She had to swallow hard as she watched Rex stuff a large forkful of lasagna into his mouth. It was red and meaty. Cheeses, vegetables, and pasta fairly burst from the serving, making it look appetizing as well as healthy.

I think I’m going to hurl.

“Oh?”

“Ever since Saturday I’ve been starving. Yesterday I had this whopping big burger for breakfast of all things, but right now you couldn’t pay me to eat it.” Her deep, cleansing breath didn’t help much as her head was filled with the glorious smells of handmade pasta and sauces. Glorious, vomit-inducing smells. “Is there a Were-midwife or -doctor I can talk to about this pregnancy stuff? I looked the normal human stuff up on the Internet. All the things I’m feeling seem to be weeks ahead of schedule.”

Rex paused, fork halfway to his mouth, his eyes getting round as he inspected her face, which she suspected looked rather pale, if not in fact biliously green. “You’re really feeling sick, aren’t you?”

“Umm...” Pearl pushed back her seat and plotted the fastest way to the front door. “I need to get some fresh air.”

She was up and out the door before Rex had a chance to say anything more. Her car was parked right in front of the restaurant, but she couldn’t face the claustrophobic feeling of sitting in the car just yet, so she propped herself up against the bumper, leaning back ’til her butt hit the bonnet. With her eyes closed, she took more deep breaths, managing to force back the taste of her roiling stomach without hyperventilating and flaking out in the parking lot.

She heard the restaurant door swish open then clank shut, but didn’t open her eyes. She felt Rex’s presence as he stood in front of her. His big shoulders blocked the sunlight and put her into shadow.

“Pearl? Are you feeling better?” He sounded truly concerned, which if she hadn’t been feeling so doggoned sick to her stomach, would have made her feel nice.

Pearl hugged her arms to her chest and nodded, then realized her mistake. With her eyes closed, her brain felt like it was being buffeted about in a big bottle of blackness, where

she couldn't see the walls until she crashed into them. Her eyes popped open, frantically seeking a reference point to cling to while her brain stopped spinning.

What she saw were white plastic bags filled with polystyrene containers that obviously contained the remnants of their lunch -- Rex'd had their orders packed up to go. Her stomach gurgled its discontent.

"Pearl?" His worry was touching, and so were his hands. With horror, Pearl realized that Rex had grabbed her shoulder with a hand that still dangled a takeout bag from its wrist. The smell of the food hit her senses with the force of a freight train, and she lost all control she had on her stomach. With an inelegant "yurk," she instinctively leaned forward and lost what little lunch she'd eaten, along with the remains of her breakfast...*all over the front of Rex.*

One more lurch and her stomach fully emptied itself, and she wiped the back of her hand over her mouth. "Oh, that feels so much better." She reached out behind her for the car and used it as support as she stood upright again.

Rex hadn't moved. He stood on the sidewalk in front of her, his arms out to the side, a plastic takeout bag dangling from each hand as he looked down at himself with what seemed to be fascinated disgust.

His jeans were soaked from the knees down and coated with half-digested lumps of food, but his sneakers had taken the worst hit. His feet fairly swam in a lake of vomit -- no doubt his socks would get squishy when they began to soak up the liquid.

"Ohmigod. Rex! Oh, I'm so sorry," Pearl gasped out. Appalled at what she'd just done, her hand flew up to cover her mouth as she gaped in shock.

Rex sighed overdramatically as his feet squished in his shoes. "So much for turning my day around."

The older, dark-haired gentleman that'd seated them at their table came rushing out of the restaurant with a bucket, and a kindly looking lady about the same age followed him

with a bottle of water and a handful of damp napkins. With comments about his pregnant wife doing the same thing to him many years ago, and motherly pats and encouragement to drink, the pair proceeded to clean them up.

Her perverse digestive tract -- now emptied of what ailed it -- rumbled and told her it was now hungry. Pearl eyed the take out bags as she took another sip of water and wondered if Rex still wanted his lasagna.

Chapter Eleven

“You’re shitting me?” Shaun couldn’t have looked anymore shocked if she’d tried.
“Werewolves really exist? *Ohmigawd!*”

Pearl watched as the stupefaction on Shaun’s face died a nasty death, slain by her rabid insatiability for all things weird and wonderful. Shaun’s eyes fairly glazed over, and had she been an animal -- *oh, say, like her* -- her tongue would have been hanging out as she panted with glee. Instead she was bouncing in her seat, squealing like a stalker fan girl who’d just cracked her favorite obsession’s alarm code.

“Shaun...” But Pearl’s interruption went unheeded.

“I was always sure they did, but now it’s really real. *Oh. My. God.* Pearl -- do you know what this means?”

“Shaun...” Shaun didn’t pause in her babbling when Pearl tried to interrupt again.

“What it means is that vampires are probably real, too! Are they real, Pearl? I mean, if anyone’s going to know it’s going to be you, right?” She made a moue of disappointment when Pearl shrugged her ignorance. Vampire, schmampire, she had enough on her plate already. “I’m going to have to spend more time at the cemetery hunting them down --”

“*Shaun, stop*, for goodness sake!” The verbal diarrhea dribbled to a stop as Shaun focused again on the here and now and fixated on Pearl again.

“What? This is big stuff, Pearl. B-I-G, big!” Shaun’s heavy gothic makeup was no match for the way her face had lit up, and Pearl wished she could harness a little of that glow for herself. She was feeling decidedly unglowy after her last bout of afternoon sickness.

She spent her mornings stuffing herself full ’til she felt like she would burst, and the afternoons heaving it all back up again. She knew what the afternoon would bring, but couldn’t help herself.

“Yeah, it’s big, but did you hear the rest?”

“Ah, I kinda tuned out there for a bit.” Shaun’s feet moved restlessly against the floor, and Pearl knew Shaun was itching to wiggle out her excitement at having finally gotten proof that paranormals existed. This was her personal Area 51.

“I said I’m expecting.”

“Expecting what?”

Pearl sighed and wondered if she’d ever get a lick of sense out of Shaun today. She really needed someone to talk to, and Shaun was it. “You know...I’ve got a bun in the oven.”

“I can’t smell anyth -- *Oooh...*” Shaun’s eyes got round, and even her foot stopped tapping. “You’re pregnant. Wow.” Her final exclamation was delivered with awe.

Pearl’s shoulders slumped, her grin rather wry as she nodded. “Yeah, I’m having a baby.”

This week had rated right up there with losing her mother in terms of stress; accepting there were paranormals in the world was a piece of cake compared to trying to accept the fact that she was pregnant. Her mother had been a taskmaster, yet Pearl had loved her, and could only wish she was here now to ask if she’d felt this overwhelming fear of failure when she’d found out she was pregnant with Pearl.

Then Shaun asked the question Pearl had been dreading giving the answer to.

“But...who’s the father?”

“Ahh...you know how I made that appointment to see your neighbor about the dog problem I had on Saturday?”

“Oh, Pearl. You didn’t?” Shaun had reverted back to her overactive self again as she bounced on the spot and clapped her hands. “That guy Friday night and then Rex Dixon? All in one weekend? You go, girl!” She broke off and bit her bottom lip as she realized, “Oh. Oh Lord, Rex is the one that knocked you up, isn’t he? But it’s only been, what, four or five days. Are you sure you’re preggers?”

Pearl nodded again and sniffed, the tears she’d been able to keep away all week finally falling. Shaun moved from her chair to the couch beside Pearl and wrapped her arms around her friend.

“It’ll be all right, Pearl.” Small hands patted her back in comfort. “I know he’s only my neighbor, but Rex’s never seemed like the type of guy to shirk his responsibilities. I’m sure he’ll be there to help.”

Pearl rested her head against Shaun’s shoulder and made an unladylike sniff, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. Since she’d met Rex, her manners had gone to hell.

“That’s not it, Shaun. He’s already said he’ll be an active parent.” Pearl sniffed again, and more tears pooled up. “I’m pregnant, Shaun, and this...this *magic* that’s made me pregnant has turned me into some human hybrid that will turn furry on command.” The rest came out in a rush of nonsense. “I’m ‘mated’ to some guy I don’t even know and don’t know if I even like, and ohmigod, yesterday I puked all over him after he took me out to this really nice restaurant for lunch, and there’s something odd about how all this happened, and I had the best sex of my life on a bloody kitchen table, then I said that we had to get to know one another so no more sex...” Forced to take a hiccupping pause so she didn’t flake out from lack of oxygen, Pearl wailed out, “And *I’m having a baby*, Shaun.”

After a lifetime of rules and rigid social strictures, it felt good to finally let it all out, but Pearl wondered if her total meltdown might have scared the ever chatty Shaun into never-before-heard silence.

But her friend carried on patting her back, and said with a little chuckle, "Oh, Pearl. It feels good, doesn't it?"

Pearl sat upright and rubbed over her cheeks, sweeping away her tears. She asked in a confused voice, "What?"

Shaun smiled at her, sort of in that way mothers in Lifetime movies do when their wayward daughters have just made some sort of emotional breakthrough. "To let it all out, of course."

Pearl stared at the young woman with her dramatically painted face, black clothes, and excess of silver jewelry, and wondered just when she'd gotten so damn smart.

"You're right." Pearl nodded as she spoke, her mind doing double time as it raced ahead. She stood and straightened her skirt with a brisk brush of her hand, then tugged her blouse back into place with a snap. She could do this; she would let everything out that she'd been holding in -- well, within reason. She didn't want to get too carried away; people might think she'd been abducted by aliens or something. *They'd be damn close to right, too.*

Pearl grabbed a tissue from the box on her sideboard and dried her eyes, then blew her nose with a great honk -- just the way her mother would have hated -- before turning back to Shaun. "You know, Shaun, when you're right, you're bloody well right."

She marched over to Shaun and hauled her out of the chair. Her friend gave a little shriek when she fairly flew up in the air. "Wow, you have gotten a lot stronger, haven't you?"

"A side effect, I think," she said with a shrug. "Anyway, come on, I've got a date tonight, and you, Goth Girl, have got to make me sexy while using the most proper wardrobe in the world."

Shaun gaped as Pearl tugged her along behind her. “Wow, when you make a move you don’t muck about with it, do you?”

“My mother drummed a lot of things into my head, but the number one rule was, ‘If you’re going to do something, do it well.’ And since I made the rules of this engagement, I’m changing them. But first” -- Pearl threw open the double doors of her wardrobe with a bang -- “I need some...ahh...”

“Long, hard lovin’ from a good man? Sexin’ up? Some sexual healing?”

Pearl felt her cheeks flush at Shaun’s playful teasing, yet at the same time she wanted to laugh. So she did, then queried with a raised brow, “How about some clothing advice first, then I’ll take a little of all of those, thank you!”

* * * * *

Caught between a rock and a hard place -- a very, very hard place -- Rex wondered what he’d done to deserve the torture Pearl was currently putting him through.

They’d made plans to see a movie together and get a late meal, hoping to avoid the disaster that had been lunch earlier in the week. He’d duly arrived on her doorstep, dressed to impress in a new pair of dark blue denims -- he’d had to replace the ill-fated jeans from Tuesday, not that he really wanted to wear them again -- and a crisp, freshly ironed white shirt. Rex didn’t consider himself a slouch in the clothing department, but knowing that Pearl tended toward more modest clothing, he’d not wanted them to stand out looking like the redneck and the slumming society miss.

That’s why he’d been so damn flabbergasted when Pearl answered the door. While he’d stood gaping on the veranda, Shaun had snuck between them and squeezed past, pausing only a moment to contemplate him like an ant would an elephant.

“Of course you’re a bear, I mean...just look at you.” Her brow pushed down into a frown. “I see that I’m definitely going to have to rethink the whole werewolf thing.”

Rex groaned. All the years he'd spent living next to the nosy teenager who'd turned into an unusual young woman and keeping her out of the Were world were rendered useless. Her curiosity would now be unstoppable. He half expected that he'd find her up front and center at the next Pack meeting.

It's Rob's problem now. Now that -- that idea made him want to laugh out loud till he cried; Rob wouldn't know what hit him. *Poor bastard.*

She punched his arm as she slipped away, admonishing him. "And that's for keeping it a secret all this time!"

With Shaun gone, there was nothing distracting him from the woman that waited on the other side of the doorframe. It was Pearl, but it was a different kind of Pearl than he'd seen all week. This was the woman that he'd had glorious, hot, sweaty, monkey sex with on his kitchen table.

Long, shapely legs were encased in jeans as dark blue as his, and her feet were ensconced in red, *oh Lord, fuck me* red stilettos. She wore a gray vest that had obviously been designed for a woman's suit, judging by the fabric. Instead of a proper blouse, she wore nothing underneath. She wore her usual pearls, but rather than a single demure strand, two wrapped tightly around her neck.

When she turned so he could follow her down the hall, he nearly swallowed his tongue -- the vest was a halter, much like a man's tuxedo vest, and her pearls weren't two short strands, but one extremely long one that looped around her throat like a choker then down to a knot that swung lazily against the exposed skin of her lower back.

Everything she wore was indubitably from her wardrobe, but he sensed Shaun's Goth Girl hand in its execution.

Rex had been knocked on his arse, and stayed there for the rest of the evening as she slowly but surely did her level best to seduce him out of his nice, new Levi's.

* * * * *

Rex jerked back to the present and pulled Pearl's hand away from where she stroked along the very hard length of his cock. Pearl's antics had taken a progressive turn from G-rated to R. *Very R*. He muffled his groan as he attempted to straighten his legs. As he tried to rearrange his cock into a more comfortable position, he thanked every god he could think of that they were sitting in a dark movie theatre.

"Pearl, what do you think you're doing?" He leaned in close so his hissed words weren't heard by all, but Pearl took advantage of his proximity and turned into his lips. Her hands threaded up into his hair and tugged him closer. The sweet pleasure-pain of her yanking on his hair made him hiss for a different reason altogether, and he made no complaint when her lips pressed roughly against his. Lost to the movie, it was only when a voice came from behind them that they remembered where they were.

"For God's sake, get a room, why don't you, or at least go find a chick flick to make out in. How's a guy supposed to enjoy blood, guts, and gore when he's got a live porno playing out in front of him?"

Pearl's gasp of righteous indignation was enough to have Rex on his feet. She was a new Were, and a pregnant one, dumped in at the deep end; confrontation would only bring out her beast, and *that* could only cause problems.

"Damn good idea, man." Rex yanked Pearl to her feet and hustled her down the row of chairs and into the aisle; looping her arm under his, he practically carried her out the emergency exit door and into the parking lot.

When he pushed her back up against the side of his truck, her little angry growls stopped, and a low sexy rumble started up instead. "I wasn't sure there for a second, but I think you're right. This *is* a damn good idea."

How she did it, he had no idea, but somehow she turned him around so he was the one up against the truck. Rex barely had time to brace himself before Pearl climbed her way up his body and wrapped her legs around his waist. As he wasn't quite balanced, they fell back

against the truck with a panel-popping thud that pressed Pearl up against him like she was a stripper and he was the pole. Quite apt, really, considering his dick felt like a bloody steel bar.

Pearl's hands wound through his hair again, holding him tightly as she fairly ate at his lips. Pearl made a cacophony of sound as she mewled and growled, and moaned and groaned, while she rode his cock like a cowgirl on a prize bull. She tore her mouth away and shouted to the sky, "Yes! More, just like that!" and Rex had to wonder what the hell alien had taken over the woman who was usually so uptight and proper she'd make a Hells Angel quake in his boots for being too loud in a library parking lot.

His hands clenched into the generous flesh of her arse -- he loved that she was well padded there -- and he jammed himself as close as he could get. He rubbed the stiff column of his shaft against their combined zippers, relishing the dig of the metal against his flesh in a sick, sick way, and then captured her mouth anew. He made sure this time to leave no doubt that it was he who was the aggressor. Pearl went soft and limp in his arms as she let him fist a hand in her hair and tug her head back to expose her throat.

With a growl, he latched onto the tender area with gentle force, just letting his canines graze Pearl's skin as he gave her his love bite.

"Aw, for Pete's sake, you two, I said get a room, not a back seat!"

Rex snarled as he looked over Pearl's shoulder and saw the man who'd been sitting behind them in the theatre standing at the exit door. The stranger's eyes were dilated and his breathing fast, so Rex figured the way he was holding the door so it didn't bang shut had nothing at all to do with politeness. He'd been getting his rocks off by watching them.

Pearl's head was buried in the crook of his neck, and he heard her whisper, "How embarrassing!" in a mortified voice.

It was then he knew that Murphy's Law had struck again, and the only date his dick had at the end of tonight was with his hand.

Chapter Twelve

Her doorbell rang at six-twenty, and when she opened it, she was floored to see the man she'd been privately referring to as Paul Bunyan standing comfortably in a dark, single-breasted dinner jacket. The fit of his suit was perfect, from the drape of the trousers over his thighs, to the width of the shoulders. He'd dressed the suit down by leaving the top two studs of the formal, wing collar shirt undone, and he wore no cummerbund. He appeared relaxed, assured, and rakish. *Oh, so very rakish.* Another new side to Rex Dixon she hadn't expected.

"Good evening, Pearl." She stepped aside and let him through the door. When he moved past her, he sniffed appreciatively. "Mmm, you both smell and look wonderful."

Pearl had done plenty of entertaining, with her parents and now as a hostess for her father, so she had plenty of clothing options. But this tea dress was new and a little different, with its old fashioned elegance, and it pleased her no end that he liked it.

Tiny pleats followed a deep V-neck into a loose, empire waist yoke. Puff sleeves with a thin band finished off the bodice, while pretty lace inserts fell from the yoke to a delicate hem. The dress was made from a thin batiste --scrunched up, there wouldn't be more than a handful of fabric -- and came with its own risqué slip to wear underneath. It was dainty and

demure, elegant and old world, and with its daring, modern-day, plunging neckline, absolutely oozed sex.

The dress had hung in her closet for months, an impulse purchase that she'd had no idea if she'd ever wear, but tonight, it had been the first and only thing she'd reached for.

"Thank you, Rex. You scrub up pretty nicely yourself." He blushed as she leaned back against the now closed front door and inspected him from head to toe. "You look all playboy dangerous, like James Bond..."

Rex smiled and stepped forward, bringing her hand to his lips, but turning it palm up. "Dixon, Rex Dixon, at your service, ma'am." He parodied the famous lines, then brought her wrist to his mouth and pressed hot lips to her pulse point.

Rake, indeed!

* * * * *

The Grande Dame lived in the Forest Estates, the second of two overpriced subdivisions that the town sported. The rest of the plebian folk, like Rex, were quite happy to not live behind high walls and iron gates.

Besides the beautiful houses with perfectly manicured lawns, sparkling pools, and garages large enough that no car would ever, horror of all horrors, be parked on the road, the other thing that the Forest Estates had going for it was that it was a Were-only subdivision.

Not that the general populous knew that.

Pearl spoke. "My mother tried to convince Dad to buy a house in here when this development originally came open for bids. They'd even offered on a place, but at the last minute decided to back out -- something about it being too big with just the two of them after I went away to college." Pearl looked around the subdivision with curious eyes, taking in the opulence and the green spaciousness. Perfect for a Were with a need to run around in its skin now and then -- not that she knew that at this point.

He'd found out through the grapevine that Pearl's father was Judge Gordon, so it didn't surprise him that the cash was there, but that they'd gotten as far as contracting on a house here did. Considered Rob's unofficial second, Rex had been privy to a lot of things, but he'd always wondered why any Weres up for judgment came up under Judge Gordon's gavel -- though, until now, he'd had no reason to ask Rob further about it. It'd turned into a busy week. He hadn't been able to touch base with Rob, and every time he'd tried to phone he'd gotten a busy tone, so he still knew no more than what he'd started with.

"Really? It costs a bucket-load for a house here." As soon as he said the words, he realized how crass they sounded, especially when they were dressed to the nines. Rex winced as they passed under a streetlight, and he saw how Pearl's cheeks had flushed.

"My dad has a lot of money, not me. I won't say I'm not privileged. I grew up with the quintessential silver spoon in my mouth, but I earn my money just the same as you do." Pearl looked out the window, and he saw the hand that rested on her thigh jerk as a wolf ran from beneath some trees. "Was that a...?"

"Yes, a wolf."

"So Weres live in the Forest, too?"

"*Only* Weres live in the Forest." Pearl's lips made a little "O" of understanding in reaction to his statement before she frowned. He figured, as it had for him, her parents' near purchase of a house here raised more questions than it answered for her.

But soon enough, she shook it off and went back to the last part of their conversation. "I won't apologize for owning my house outright. I had a mortgage just like everyone else until my mother died. And, frankly, I'd rather have my mother back than have the money she left me."

"I'm sorry, Pearl. I really hadn't meant it the way it came out. I know all too well what it means to lose a parent."

Silence reigned for the last few minutes of their journey, broken only when they turned into the tree-lined driveway that led to the Grande Dame's home.

"Who's going to be there tonight?" Pearl had shifted in her seat, her knees tucked together politely as she turned her body toward his. "Anyone I know?"

As he turned the key and the headlights turned off, bathing them in the murky darkness, Rex put his hands back on the steering wheel and tried to relax his suddenly stiff arms. Tonight was going to be a first for him. He'd never come to one of these evenings with a date, knowing exactly how it'd be perceived -- he might have left with a woman on his arm, but never arrived with one. "Rob will be there, usually four or five Elders and their spouses, and other people by invitation. It sort of depends on what's been happening recently." He shrugged, trying to express nonchalance to Pearl, while also trying to loosen up his shoulders -- like talking about emotions, shedding his playboy image wasn't easy.

Pearl didn't say anything, but gently laid her hand on his forearm. He let his arms go slack as the comforting warmth of Pearl's palm sank through his shirt.

"You're not the only one who's feeling nervous; I've never walked into a predator's den before." Her uncertain smile put him in his place. After all, this might be considered a statement of intent to his Pack and the cessation of his free and easy lifestyle, but for Pearl, this was literally like hanging onto the end of the pirate's gangplank with some alligators snapping below her feet.

He figured she would handle it with aplomb, though, so he took the conversation breaker she'd lobbed at him and ran with it. "Well, not that you've ever known about anyway..."

Pearl blinked a couple of times as she processed what he'd said, then laughed. "After all the people who waved a 'paw' at me on Monday morning at the Greasy Spoon, I'd have to agree with that."

Rex chuckled; he'd heard from Dave that same evening when he went in for some dinner that the Greasy Spoon had outed itself as a Were hangout. "I heard about that."

Rex opened his door and exited the car, then made his way around to Pearl's to do the same. She took his proffered hand and slid elegantly out of the vehicle, and Rex was reminded again of how classy Pearl had been raised to be. Her manners, in public at least, were perfect. In the bedroom, though, she'd proved more than able to let go of her propriety.

"There is one good thing about all this..."

With one hand still in his, Pearl shook the dainty edges of her dress with the other, so that her hem hung the way it should, then looked up at him. "Oh?"

"I got to meet you, and despite everything that's happened since, I'm really glad about that."

She cocked her head a little and looked at him with assessing eyes that angled up a little at the edges as if she was holding back laughter. Slowly, a very genuine smile bloomed on her face, and she went up on her tiptoes to place a kiss gently on his lips. "I am, too."

For a few minutes, he let himself forget about magic and babies, and just felt the comfortable feeling of having a lovely woman -- his woman -- on his arm as he walked up to the Grande Dame's front door.

* * * * *

No doorbell for the Grande Dame, only a large, imposing, cast-iron, owl-shaped door knocker that represented her beast and that of her family line. Its loud, reverberating knock was quickly answered by the Grande Dame's man-of-all-things, Geoffrey, her genuine English butler.

Pearl got a weird look on her face when Geoffrey spoke and she heard his posh London accent, but she didn't say anything further.

Geoffrey welcomed them into the house and took the delicate knit wrap Pearl had added to her outfit at the last minute, carefully placing it on the crossbar of a hanger and depositing it in the large coat closet that was discreetly hidden behind the opening arc of the front door.

Rex wondered what the man would do if Rex had been as uncouth as to arrive in his stained, crapped on, and puked on clothes from earlier in the week. Rex had a feeling no problem was insurmountable for Geoffrey, and that if needed, he would be able to produce a perfectly fitting, three-piece suit at the drop of a hat -- no matter who the guest might be.

Truth be known, over the years Rex had grown to be more than a little in awe of the Englishman. His intuition was uncanny, and his problem solving skills were unsurpassed. Theoretically, Geoffrey was a servant by trade, but by nature, he was a problem-solver, and the respect he garnered from the Grande Dame and the Pack showed it.

"Milady is in the Red Room." The butler directed them down the wide hallway that ran down the center of the house, but rather than up the large staircase, they turned to the right and into a decadent, red, Victorian-styled parlor. There were a number of Elders present, along with Rob, their Alpha, and Dave, Pearl's longtime friend. They turned as a group as Geoffrey announced Rex and Pearl, and Rex felt a burst of pride as he handed Pearl over the threshold of the room for his Pack's inspection. Smug even, as he took the step to stand beside her with his hand linked in hers as they presented a united front.

His bitch...scratch that, his *woman* stood beside him, his child growing in her belly, and his archaic sense of manly pride, along with his beast, wanted to stand up and crow. Instead, he let his smile say it all.

Until the man standing in front of the Grande Dame turned, and Pearl uttered the fateful word, "Daddy?"

Nothing makes a man's pride and conceit flail like a half-inflated balloon farting its way across a room than to realize he's facing the father of the woman he'd only met a week ago, knocked up, and hadn't made plans to marry.

But it was what happened next that nearly knocked him on his ass.

Pearl called out, "Aunt Lydia!" and she and the Grande Dame hustled toward each other like long-lost lovers on a train platform and exchanged a big, gushy hug.

Both Rob and Dave stepped up beside Rex and questioned, "Aunt Lydia?"

Oh yeah, tonight was going to be a perfect ending to his perfect week.

Chapter Thirteen

“Pearl, it’s been so long since I’ve seen you.” A hushed rush of words followed up the warm exclamation into Pearl’s ear as Aunt Lydia wrapped her in a hug. “Your father was an unexpected visitor, and, no, he doesn’t know anything about the baby.”

Pearl was surprised when she stood back and proclaimed, “Welcome to my home, my dear.” Since he stood slightly behind her aunt, her father didn’t see her dramatic wink.

Then it hit her. *My home*. That meant the Grande Dame was her Aunt Lydia! Good Lord, could this web get anymore tangled? Pearl was sure a pretzel had fewer kinks in it than she did right at this moment.

“It’s wonderful to be here, though I have to say, Rex hadn’t told me your full name, so I hadn’t realized this was your house. Besides, I thought you lived out of town, not here in Rockville.” As she glanced to the side, she saw a tic flare for just a moment along Rex’s jaw. He didn’t look very happy with the revelation that she knew the Grande Dame -- familiarly -- and that her father was in the room.

“I did for a number of years, but I moved back recently.” There was a slight tilt to one of Lydia’s eyebrows as she carried on, “I’m surprised your father didn’t say.”

“Pearl, sweetie!” This time it was her father that pulled her into a hug, though this one was a little more restrained, as befitted a father and daughter. “I dropped in on Lydia unannounced, and she convinced me to stay; now I see why -- she had a surprise guest!” The easy way he stood told Pearl he was on his second drink. Oh, not drunk by any means, but having served as his hostess on evenings just like this before, she could see that his forthright, staid judge persona had thinned, and he was behaving more like the man she knew as her dad. Dad was a lot easier going than the judge.

“Daddy, you never told me Aunt Lydia had moved back to Rockville.”

Her father looked a little chagrined as he spoke. “Sorry, love, I really meant to.” Typical of her father, he owned up to his mistake but offered no excuse, choosing instead to change the subject. “And who is your escort tonight, my dear?”

Rex’s hand hovered at her elbow, and her father had noticed. Now, she just had to figure out how much she could say -- or more exactly how much her father knew, if he knew anything at all, about the Were community. There was a little stabbing pain near her heart as she wondered if he’d kept knowledge of Were-kind a secret from her.

“Rex Dixon, sir.” Seeing she was caught off balance, Rex had picked up her conversational slack and had extended his hand to her father, shaking it twice in that strong, solid, sharp way certain men have. Not discourteously, but in the way that said, “I respect you, but don’t fuck with me, ’cause I’ll hand you your ass in a dry cleaner’s bag.”

“Ah, the veterinarian. I believe I’ve heard Lydia and Robert speak of you before.”

Pearl felt heat race across her cheeks as her father inspected Rex from head to toe. It came to her in a flash that this was the first time her father had ever been introduced to a man she was dating -- there hadn’t been *that* many, although she wasn’t a total hung-up-to-dry spinster with no social life, but why right now? Didn’t she have enough on her plate?

“And your reputation precedes you also, Judge Gordon.”

“Now, now, enough with all this formality, gentlemen.” Lydia swept up to Judge Gordon’s side, giving him no choice but to offer his arm. “How about we mingle? Aaron, George Trimble wanted to discuss a matter with you. Rex, if you’d be so kind as to introduce Pearl around.”

And just like that, the woman who’d always reminded her of Grace Kelly with that cool, golden charm and strong sense of propriety had maneuvered her problem guests to opposite ends of the room. Pearl almost clapped and cried, “Bravo!” but Rex’s quiet question brought her back to the here and now.

“Aunt Lydia?” His surprise was evident in his raised eyebrows, which looked suspiciously like the twin arches of a McDonald’s sign. “You already know the Grande Dame?”

“I know her as an old friend of my mother’s from college. She’s not really my aunt, but my godmother. She used to visit us a couple of times a year, but now that Mother’s gone...” The rest went unsaid with a small shrug. Pearl glanced back over her shoulder and questioned out loud, “I wonder if Daddy knows she’s a Were? I had no clue she had that strong of a tie to Rockville.”

“When her father passed, she took his place on the Elder’s Council.”

Pearl nodded; it made perfect sense now, with Rex’s information about the Elder’s Council. Lydia had spent a long weekend with Pearl and Aaron after her father’s funeral, taking some time to relax -- obviously, there had been more to the situation she’d not been privy to.

“As for your father, I think he probably knows about Were-kind -- any Weres that get in trouble tend to come up on his docket. I can’t tell you for sure, but I’ve always thought there was a reason for that.”

“Aunt Lydia whispered to me that he didn’t know anything about the baby, but that doesn’t mean he knows nothing.”

“I can answer that.” Rob’s low timbre sounded from beside them. “Yes, he knows; yes, most Weres come up in his court; no, it’s not so they get off scot-free, but so they don’t serve out punishment where they could turn around and hurt humans. Otherwise, he’s not that involved with the Pack, and his association is not well known to those outside the Elders.” Rob filled them in quickly as they moved toward the first group of guests, and then made quick introductions to cover up Rex’s momentary lack of poise.

Once the conversation had started to flow, Rob leaned in close. “I’ll catch up with you a little later; I see two young ladies who are sure to be mourning the demise of Rex’s bachelorhood.”

Caught not knowing whether to frown or to laugh, Pearl watched him saunter off like the two women were lizards sunning themselves on a fence, and he was the hungry cat who liked to play with his food before he ate it. Her giggle as she realized just how apt the analogy really was brought Rex’s attention back to her again, and she settled on a frown as she contemplated him.

With no idea that Rob had just gotten him into trouble, he looked at her with some affection and a whole lot of lust, and she was caught between making him suffer for having once been a player, or rewarding him for being the kind of man who acknowledged that his little black book was closed once and for all.

Of course, there was the pesky fact that if he suffered celibacy, she suffered right along with him. And she *had* decided that her no sex rule was just begging to be broken. So she turned that frown upside down and blinded him with a sexy smile of such brilliance that any aliens tooling around on Mars would’ve been able to decipher her intent without any sort of intergalactic translator.

His casual smile cracked a little, and that small tic flared along his jawline again as her intent sank in and made its presence felt. And just to bedevil him a little more, she carefully placed her hand on his arm and leaned into him with a breathy, Marilyn Monroe type of sigh and said, “I’ll make breakfast.”

She thought he did rather well to recover from swallowing his drink down the wrong way and nearly choking in front of the mayor.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Pearl was startled to look around the room and find that all the guests, bar her father, Rex, and Rob, were gone. She'd been sitting off to the side engaged in conversation with Lydia, their little alcove cutting them off from the majority of the room.

"Ah, I see Geoffrey has been his ever-efficient self. He knows I hate for these things to go on into the small hours." Lydia stood and patted down her skirt so it sat flat again, not a wrinkle to be found. When she looked back up at Pearl, she smiled. "Did I tell you how pretty you look tonight, dear? If I was twenty-five years younger, I think I'd be jealous."

Her father, having seen they were making a move, walked across and caught the tail end of their conversation. "But if you were twenty-five years younger, Lydia, I'd be accused of being a lecherous old man for admiring your lovely form." With a few more whiskeys under his belt now, Pearl could see her father had reached a comfortable, happy place. "But she's very right, sweetie, you do look lovely tonight." His eyes twinkled with merriment. "I even told that nice young man of yours the same. Quite an interesting conversation we've been having, Rex, Rob, and I, rather interesting indeed." Pearl was surprised, but not unpleasantly so, when her father took Lydia's arm in a particularly familiar fashion and began the walk back to Rex and Rob. The pair of them seemed to fit rather well together, and she was reminded that in this day and age, her father was by no means an old man.

"Oh, yes?" she asked hesitantly, concerned about just how big a disaster she might have to avert.

"I think your mother would have been quite pleased to see you involved with a Were like Rex." Unaware of the bombshell he'd just dropped, Judge Gordon walked on while Pearl came to a standstill.

"Daddy?"

Obviously, the querulous, shaky tone of her voice must have rung bells, as he turned and cringed. “Ah...I meant --”

“What he means is it’s time to get this all out in the open once and for all.” Lydia’s forthright response turned not only Pearl’s head, but Rex’s, too.

“Pearl, is everything okay?” The man who’d so dramatically changed her life moved across the room and came to her side. He slid his arm around her waist, and, though she was quite capable of dealing with whatever life threw at her on her own, she was comforted and leaned in a little closer to Rex’s warmth.

“I’m not too sure...” There was more to this conversation, she was sure of it. She’d never once seen her father hesitate with her, yet here he was, nervous as all hell.

Lydia took the reins once more. “Aaron, it’s time she knew it all. Grace is gone, and though I loved her dearly, you know that I thought her decision not to tell Pearl that she was half Were was a mistake.”

“I’m what?” Incredulity made her voice high, screechy almost. She blinked, trying to contain the shock that flooded her system.

She watched, wide-eyed, as her father shook off the effects of the liquor he’d drunk, his nervousness disappearing as he transformed back into the man known as the judge -- serious, concerned, and capable. “You’re right, Lydia. It’s time she knew.” The judge threw a glance toward the man who stood protectively beside her. “Perhaps past time.”

“Let us adjourn to my office; it will be more comfortable.” Geoffrey stood beside the twin doors of the salon, waiting, it seemed, for his mistress. “Coffee and tea, I think, Geoffrey.”

Pearl’s stomach decided that it should rumble to fill the awkward silence that had settled over the party as they changed rooms. She couldn’t have felt more embarrassed if she’d tried. She pressed a hand to her stomach and hoped that her face didn’t look as hot as it felt.

“Maybe a cheeseboard also, milady?” How he managed to keep a straight face she’d never know, but he did. Not a twitch of a muscle on his face showed the humor that sparkled in his eyes.

“I think that might well be a good idea.” The Grande Dame’s laughter was barely veiled. “Unless, of course, anyone has a preference of late-night snack?” With Lydia’s pointed look at her, there was no mistaking to whom she was giving the choice of food option.

Pearl shook her head slightly, thanking the fates that her father had moved ahead of them so he didn’t see the looks Rex and Rob directed at her stomach. “A cheeseboard would be lovely, please, Geoffrey.”

Her father, now halfway across the expansive foyer, led the way, looking dapper in his tuxedo, with Lydia on his arm. His forthright walk brooked no argument, the same way his manner in the courtroom allowed for no grandstanding by the lawyers who argued their cases in front of him. Any chagrin or nervousness he’d shown was a thing of the past.

“Pearl, do you have any idea what this is about?” Rex walked beside her, the warmth of his hand soaking through her dress as it rested against the lower curve of her spine.

She fairly hissed her reply to Rex’s question. “No idea at all. Until this evening, I had no idea my father even knew Were-kind existed, let alone that my mother was a Were. I just hope to God he hasn’t guessed about the baby.” She felt bad, though, when Rex paled again and gulped. Even though his collar was open, he pulled at it like there was a noose around his neck.

“I’m not so happy about all these revelations myself.”

The study -- it was much too austere to be called an office -- was as formally furnished as the little she’d seen of the rest of the house, but it looked more worn and used, and ultimately less imposing. Her father indicated they should take a seat in the cluster of chairs gathered in front of the fireplace. He loosened his tie and the buttons holding his jacket closed before he sat.

Rex chose not to sit, but stood behind her, his hands resting on the back of Pearl's chair, just inches away from her shoulders. His presence there reassured her. She had nothing to fear from her father, surely, but nonetheless, she appreciated Rex's protective stance.

Pearl had never brought a man home to meet her family. It wasn't that she had made a conscious choice not to, but none of her relationships had felt permanent enough to go to all the effort of introductions and fancy family dinners. Nevertheless, having Rex in that place of importance, bolstering her, there and ready to protect her if she needed it, flooded a little piece of her psyche she hadn't realized had felt neglected.

"Daddy, what's this all about?" Pearl wanted to say more, to ask why his association with Were-kind had been hidden, but she held her tongue -- she damn near bit right through it to hold herself back from flinging questions about her mother at him and Lydia.

Rob took a seat off to the side of the group. His interest looked piqued, even though this seemed to have little to do with him personally. Lydia took the chair closest to her father, and with her legs crossed elegantly, waited for Pearl's father to speak.

"It seems odd to be having this conversation without your mother being here, but I'll do my best." With a wistful look on his face, he started into his story.

"Thirty-seven years ago, I met a young woman who literally blew me off my feet. I was, of all things, at a traveling carnival with a date -- Lydia, actually -- when this slip of a girl came flying out of a fortune-teller's tent as if her pants were on fire. We ended up in a heap on the ground, me winded and head ringing, and your mother straddling me, mumbling about the Moonstruck Prophecy."

A feminine voice interrupted. "What he's not telling you is that their meeting could grace the pages of a romance novel. They took one look at each other and sparks flew, quite literally, in fact; big blue ones. I figured at that point that our date was a bust and graciously conceded the field." The smile Lydia wore and laughter in her voice surprised Pearl. "I have

to say I didn't lose out, though. I ended up with two wonderful friends and a beautiful goddaughter."

A quick, fond look sizzled between Lydia and Pearl's father, and Pearl thought there was a possibility that they'd picked up where they'd left off all those years ago. Pearl had been trying to slyly suggest that her father needed to get out and date. Her mother had been gone five years now, having succumbed to her second battle with breast cancer.

"Lydia's right, love at first sight, for all that it's a cliché." The creases around his eyes looked a little deeper than usual, his eyes tired as he remembered the girl he'd fallen in love with and had lost. Pearl felt for him keenly, having felt love of her own for her mother.

"I already knew about Were-kind -- I'd managed to be in the wrong place at the wrong time and wandered into the middle of a Pack celebration just as they all changed. I was sort of adopted by the Pack, and in the end, they offered me a scholarship to go to law school and become one of the humans that ran interference between Were-kind and humans. But your mother was a surprise again."

There was a polite knock, and Geoffrey's entrance into the room gave them all a moment to pause and gather their breath. Lydia rose and went to the trolley Geoffrey had pushed into the room, and began to serve.

"What do you mean, Mother was a surprise?"

"Grace was a Were, too, but she was different than anyone I'd met before. You see, her family line floats in the ether that lies between human and Were-kind. Genetic misfits. Not human, but unable to release the beast caged within. They hear the call of their beast, but can't call forth the magic to turn. Moonstruck, they're called."

"I've heard of them. They're quite the conundrum, especially if you believe that pure magic is what rules Were-kind, not science in any form." There was a healthy dose of curiosity in Rex's voice.

Lydia then weighed in, handing Pearl her cup of tea, then giving a quick squeeze to her shoulder to let her know that all would be okay. “Yes, quite the puzzle. Moonstruck family lines have always been on the verge of ridicule, pitied for not being able to run under the moon and hunt with their Packs. But they made the best of what they had -- becoming the most upright of citizens, stalwart members of society who showed everyone, human and Were-kind alike, that they were every bit as good as them. Slowly, Were-kind came to trust in them as their guardians, and they became the obfuscators, protecting our Packs the best way they knew how -- by being human.

“They are not the strongest of the Pack physically, but their strengths lie in their perceived normality. The Moonstruck became the stopgap between the two races, protecting one from the other, although the humans in general don’t know it.” Taking the last cup as her own, Lydia took her seat again. “Then, of course, there’s the prophecy, and the whole reason why your mother and father ran into one another that night.”

“A prophecy? What, like ‘the child born with two heads shall lead us to victory’ type of thing?” All of them smiled, appreciating Rob’s attempt at lightening the mood.

Her father sobered again. “I found out later, once your mother explained it to me, that there has been a prophecy handed down amongst the Moonstruck families that said, and I quote, because Grace made me memorize it: *To one struck by the moon shall be born a girl. She will be the first. She and those like her will become the rescuers of those who walk on four and stand on two, whose line flickers and wavers like a candle before it’s snuffed.*

“Magic will lead their way to new life. It shall burst on them like a flame, blazing blue as it burns brightly, and they shall take it into their bodies and from them we shall bloom.

“Teach your sons and daughters wisely and well; make them sure of their place in the world, for time may come to pass where one of the Moonstruck may lead us all.”

Pearl’s father blinked as he finished, and the sheen that had glistened across his eyes was gone as he pulled himself together. “It’s been years since I’ve recited that,” he said with a

wistful sigh. "God, it seems so long ago that a girl with skinned knees and the most beautiful big eyes I'd ever seen knocked me to the ground, and then told me the wackiest tale of how the fortune-teller had insisted her daughter would be the first Moonstruck to live the prophecy."

"Got to love the whole ambiguous prophecy line -- how the hell are we supposed to know what any of that means?" Rob's affability was slowly eroding, and he stood and began to pace the room. "I've heard about Moonstruck Weres, but I didn't know there were any of that line in the Huntingdawn Pack. I'm the Alpha, for Christ's sake. How can I run a Pack when information like this is being kept from me by the Elders?"

"Grace was the last of her family line, Rob, and Pearl has never exhibited any of the full moon effects any of the other Moonstruck have -- we assumed the old woman was wrong, just a kooky old lady. Though it'd always been in the back of Grace's mind and the reason why she was so insistent on raising Pearl so strictly and so properly, even though she chose not to tell her of the hidden side to her family tree. She'd told me that if she was wrong, she wanted to make sure her daughter would be able to stare adversity in the face. But other than proving the first line correct by having a girl child, we didn't know really where the rest of it would lead, if anywhere at all."

Pearl looked at Rex as the last notes of her father's voice echoed around the room, and saw that he had connected some of the same dots about the prophecy. A chesty "humph" came from Rex, and both men turned to him. "Care to share something, Rex?"

Pearl nearly laughed when Rex colored up a more reddish shade than his usual tan, and fidgeted. "I...um, that is...we..."

"I think Rex is trying to say we know what at least two of the lines mean, and they were real, not just imagination."

"Oh?" Rob questioned them, but her father looked curious as well. She figured he'd lived with this for nearly forty years; his interest would be well and truly piqued.

“I believed myself to be the last of my beast line -- I’ve search for other Ursus, and been unsuccessful. I could only hope that if there were others, they’d seek me out. So I think that where it says ‘flickers and wavers like a candle before it’s snuffed,’ it refers to family lines where only two or three remain.”

“Why two? Why not one?”

“Genetically speaking, and as the Grande Dame suggested to me, if there were not more than one alive, where would my children find mates? I can only assume the magic means to repair my family line -- if it gives me a mate, but none for my children, what’s the sense in that?”

Rob chuckled. “Ever the logical scientist, aren’t you, Rex? Magic is not necessarily reasonable; in fact, it can be downright irrational most of the time. What makes you think this time it is?”

Rex shrugged and his lips crooked into a wry, sad smile. “I don’t know, maybe I’m just living on a hope and a very nonscientific prayer?”

Every person in the room knew exactly what emotion motivated Rex’s hopes -- who would be so selfish as to hope for their own salvation, only to pass on their nightmare to their children with no hope of a cure of their own?

“And the other? Pearl, you said you understood more?”

“Umm...yes.” Oh Lord, all of this, and now she had to discuss sex, of all things, with her father? “When, ah...Rex and I were...umm...together, shall we say...” Out of the corner of her eye she saw Rob bite his lip as if to hold back his response, and on her other side a strangled groan came from Rex. He was embarrassed? She should hand the explaining over to him, and watch him go down in a highly combustible pile of flaming cow patties.

“It’s okay, honey, I know what you mean.” Even her father said it with a twinkle in his eye. Was there no one who didn’t think this was a great joke at her expense?

“Well. Anyway, there was a point where a blue, and for the want of a better word -- aura -- surrounded us. I figure that’s when the ‘taking into her body and bloom’ part happened. That’s when all this magic stuff happened, and I became a full Were.”

“So, you’re telling me the prophecy came true?” Her father leaned forward in his chair, projecting his disbelief. When she nodded, he sat back with a thud and a slack face, and muttered, “I’ll be damned. Grace was right after all.”

A snigger to Pearl’s right had her glaring at the man who was now considered her Pack leader with her hackles rising.

“Blooming, is that what they’re calling it these days?”

Chapter Fourteen

She'd been the one to start the teasing earlier, but at the evening's surprising revelations on her family history, lust had taken a backseat -- until she'd gotten back into the car and her new senses had decided to kick into high gear when Rex took his seat. The seductive smell of leather, cologne, and virile man had her trapped with nowhere to go. Prophecy be damned, she couldn't change anything that had happened to her tonight, and she was horny as hell. There was no way Rex was going to get a chance to leave her at the doorstep with a polite kiss goodnight.

Caught in her own game, Pearl hooked her fingers in Rex's waistband and dragged him over the threshold into her house. She reached around him and shoved on the front door, slamming it in Vlad's face. She didn't need a canine cheering squad tonight, and she figured he'd come in the back doggy door once he'd gotten over his Napoleon complex-sized pique at being locked out in favor of the big hunk of man who could do a whole lot more than just keep her feet warm in bed.

"Rex?" Metal pinged as she worked her way down his shirtfront, nibbling and licking her way to his navel, then ripping the remainder of the shirt free from his pants. Thank God he hadn't been wearing a cummerbund and bowtie to go with the tux -- too many hooks to

have to fight through. Though a nice image of Rex in nothing but a bow tie popped into her head, and made her already thumping heart race like Seabiscuit going for the finish line. The one small part of her brain that hadn't switched across to "got to get me some now!" mode wondered if that was how guys felt when it came to bra hooks -- difficult, and a total waste of time that could be better spent getting your jollies.

A big hand reached out, fingers sliding under her chin as he tilted her face up to his. "Pearl, if you don't stop this, I swear, I'll take you on the hall table."

Those big, rough fingers that did such delicate surgery shook, and the tic in his jaw was back and working overtime. Daring him, she stared into his eyes, never once losing contact. With a lazy lick of her lips, Pearl slid her tongue from her mouth and along his nipple.

Mmm, tasty!

There was a long, hanging pause as Rex preternaturally stilled, then a flurry of action as she was bodily moved, her skirt shoved to her waist and the brief lace of her panties torn away as he set her on the table.

"Has no one ever told you baiting bears is bad, Pearl?" His roughened voice worked over her skin, making her shiver as he wrenched her legs apart and forced his way between them. "Taunting the wildlife will only get you bitten."

Pearl's stomach clenched at the sound of the zipper in his pants being jerked down, and when he tugged her butt to the edge of the hall table and tested her readiness with a slow moving thumb and a primal growl, he found her wet and wanting.

"What's the matter, Rex? Has Goldilocks gotten one over on Papa Bear?" Not letting him get the best of her with his superior strength, she teased him further. Leaning back on her arms, she tilted her head back and looked at him with hooded eyes.

The deep, dark rumble in his chest and the twist of his hips as he thrust into her made her scream. He was so thick and hard, the silken skin of his cock burning molten hot as he brutally pounded into her. Instinct had her reaching out for him. She wrapped her legs

around his waist as the table rocked against the wall, and the small metal plate she used for her keys crashed to the ground with a resounding clang.

“Don’t start what you’re not going to be able to finish, Pearl.”

Moving harder and faster still, Rex drove into her, the scratch of the fabric of his pants and the zipper in his fly stinging against her inner thighs. What little there was left of her sanity said ouch, but the rest of her body and beast purred, enjoying the little bite of pain as it was deliciously pummeled by the being it had taken to mate.

Her stomach twisted tightly as her release raced up on her, and her breasts ached behind the pretty lace of her dress, unable to be eased. Big hands clenched into the flesh of her buttocks, the thick finger pressing against her anus sending more sensations spiraling through her system.

“Ready to come for me yet, Pearl?” The slurred heat in his words made her look up; Rex was having trouble speaking around a long pair of canines, his face pulled into a grimace of desire as he tried to keep a hold on his beast and still chase his own orgasm. Caught in his stare, beast to beast as their animals fought to come forth, she didn’t have a chance to deny him, to make him work harder for her release. Her back bowed, and the ripples of her orgasm shook her spine as she screamed; her nails elongated and raked through the thin cotton of Rex’s shirt, ripping the fabric and scoring him as the next wave hit her.

Rex powered through it all, his hips twisting and angling, hitting every hidden spot of pleasure in her pussy as he thrust and parried the roll of her hips. Moments later, the pain of his teeth sinking into her shoulder as he came sent her spinning back into the high that she’d hadn’t yet left behind.

Rex violently pushed himself away from her, and she gasped at the loss. Hurt rushed in, replacing desire as he swore vehemently and a cloud of blue sparkles surrounded him. In seconds, the man who’d just fucked her nearly into oblivion was gone, and in his place stood

a very large, dark bear, rendered inky black in the dim hall lamp she left on to welcome her home when she went out at night.

“Rex?” The bear raised its nose and sniffed the air, and Pearl snapped her legs shut as he turned toward her with a grunt.

Mine! whispered through her brain -- she was certain she hadn’t said it, and a bear sure as hell couldn’t talk, so that left her with one option. Well, one option her post-sexual, hazed brain could come up with.

“Rex, can you talk to me in my mind...telepathy or something?” The bear nudged at the hall table and sent it rocking again, and Pearl grabbed hold with an anxious squeak.

Mine! This time the fluttering word was stronger, louder, more direct. The bear went back onto its hind legs and bracketed her the same way Rex just had. *Mine!* This time it was a veritable shout, and she winced.

“Okay, I get it, Rex, yours, okay? Yours.” A clammy nose, on top of a mouth of long, sharp teeth, sniffed its way up her shoulder, bullying its way into her hair and resting, cold and damp, behind her ear.

Take mine!

It took a second to register what the beast meant. “Ewww! Hell no!” Her loud shriek made Rex’s beast rear back, falling to four legs in the hallway again. “No way, Rex. No freaking way! I can get over the whole turning furry deal, I can get over near enough to Immaculate Conception, but there is no way on God’s green earth I’m doing an animal!” Pearl slid to the ground and held her hand out as Rex moved toward her again with a loud coughing grunt. “No, Rex. Nowhere, no way, no how. Never.” The bear took a step forward, and she a step back. “N-E-V-E-R, Rex, *never*, do you hear me?”

The bear kept coming, and she kept time with it, one step backward to his step forward. Intense eyes bored into hers as the beast stalked her.

Mine!

When her legs hit something wooden with a thump, she tore her gaze away and started -- he'd herded her all the way into her bedroom and run her into the bed. A wet nose along her thigh got her attention back to where it shouldn't have left, and with a yelp, she backed up onto the bed.

The bed creaked and groaned as Rex, still in his bear form, followed. Thankful that she'd forked out the extra cash for the solid wood antique, she kept moving back until she was pressed along the headboard.

Protect mine!

With that last thought, the bear slumped down beside her, his body effectively trapping her against the headboard so she couldn't leave without him knowing about it.

Five minutes later, a loud grunting snore started up. *Bears snored -- who knew?*

Rex's beast didn't seem to be out to hurt her, but Pearl figured she was stuck for the duration. She managed to wiggle herself out of her pretty dress and draped it over her headboard; the delicate dress was a little worse for wear, but not damaged.

Trapped with nowhere to go until Rex's beast let her, Pearl's mind wandered as she drifted toward sleep, and her fingers twiddled in the fur that brushed against her, finding it silkier than she'd expected. All the while, the bear snored on. *Typical bloody male; dead to the world after they get theirs, leaving us staring at the ceiling.*

Pearl twisted herself around a little and snuggled into the furriest blanket she was ever likely to sleep against. *I wonder if Rex snores when he's not furry?*

Good Lord, the father of my baby probably snores!

I can't say I pictured that when I was imagining the Prince Charming who'd come and sweep me off my feet.

Damn, he's noisy...can I live with a man that snores?

And that was the last question she remembered asking herself until morning rolled around.

* * * * *

Rex made his way quietly out of Pearl's bedroom and to the kitchen, where he found the coffeemaker, the elixir of life known as fresh coffee, and all the fixings for a dose of reality.

He'd woken up this morning still wearing his half-on, half-off clothing from the night before, and wrapped around Pearl like she was a favorite childhood toy that the boogeyman had threatened to pinch. Then, the memories of his actions in his beast skin from the night before slammed him upside the head like they were a baseball bat and his head was the ball -- in high-definition color, no less.

So turned on by their foreplay, he'd fucked -- there was no way that could be called making love -- the hell out of Pearl on her hallway table, and for the first time, a woman's scent had aroused his beast so much, it'd forced his change. But that hadn't been the half of it; he'd stalked her, *stalked her*, into her bedroom then boxed her in so she couldn't escape.

He'd totally lost it.

Now he had to figure out how to apologize.

Rex remembered her coffee as being creamy when they ate out, but unsure if she always preferred it that way, he found a tray and placed on it two mugs of freshly brewed coffee, the dainty sugar bowl he'd found in the fridge, and a little jug that he'd found with the other cups and mugs and filled with milk. He winced when the pair of spoons clanged together as he dropped them to the tray.

He was just about to head back to the bedroom when a low, canine growl erupted from behind him, followed by a series of yaps that became muffled as a set of sharp doggy teeth buried themselves deep into his ankle.

"Holy fuck!" The tray slammed back down on the counter, hot coffee hit his hand, and Rex heard himself scream embarrassingly like a girl. The ball of fur attached to his ankle stayed with him as he turned. "Get off me. That's my ankle, you mutt, *get off me!*"

“Vlad! Vlad, *no!* Leave him alone, Vlad!” To make his misery complete, Pearl came flying around the corner after her words and grabbed the snarling ball of viciousness that’d attacked him. Pearl snapped him on the nose with her fingertips and upbraided him again, “No, Vlad! Bad boy!”

“What the *hell* is that thing?” Rex limped across the kitchen and flicked on the cold tap, shoving his burnt hand under the stream of water.

“You’re the vet; I would have thought you could have figured that out. Though I’m the first to admit Vlad seems to have a rather dubious parentage, I’ve never quite figured out what he’s supposed to be.”

“Dead meat, if you ask me,” he muttered under his breath, hoping the sound of the rushing water covered it up so Pearl didn’t hear.

Behind him, the back door clicked open, and there was a scrabble of claws and a whispered doggy admonition before it shut again with a clunk. A small click, which he assumed was the lock being thrown on the doggy door, was followed by the hollow sound of the refrigerator opening, and he heard the rattle of ice in the tray as Pearl reached in.

“Here, this will be better for the burn.” Soft fingers pulled his hand out from under the water and patted the area dry, and then she laid a small icepack over the burn. Pearl took his other hand and led him to the kitchen table. “Sit down so I can have a look at your leg.”

He sat and watched as she reached up into a cupboard and pulled down a respectable-sized first aid kit.

“So this isn’t the first time, huh?” When Pearl turned at his question, he nodded at the box of medical paraphernalia and tried to look stoic.

“It doesn’t happen often, but he lives up to his name; quite a few of the strays that end up here don’t necessarily like it when you get too close. I’ve had to patch up a bite or scratch or two of my own, so I keep a decent first aid kit around.”

She tsked as she lifted the leg of his pants to find a perfect set of puncture wounds on his leg. Vlad had missed his Achilles heel, but had managed to get a healthy grip on the lower part of his calf.

“What do you mean, he lives up to his name?” Pearl sat on the floor wearing her dressing gown, mussed up hair, and Rex figured not a stitch more, and when she went a pretty shade of red, his cock twitched and showed much too much interest in the woman before him, considering the situation. *“Pearl?”*

“Ahh, his full name is Vlad the Impaler.” Pearl buried her head, hiding, as she took a closer look at the wound and pressed a cotton ball soaked in antiseptic to the bite.

Rex hissed as it burned, and barked out a choked laugh. “Someone named him after Dracula?”

“I named him after Dracula; after all, he bit me first.”

That made him frown. He loved animals, and he knew all too well that poor behavior usually stemmed from animals being treated badly, but a continual biter was only asking for trouble -- like animals that started hunting humans or dogs that started culling sheep and calves.

Pearl looked up and saw his frown. “Oh, no, you don’t. Vlad is perfectly fine. He’s just protective. He saw a strange man in his house, and he went to protect it, and me, too. He’s very protective of his ‘harem.’”

“His what?”

“He’s top dog around here. The horses, the other dogs, and the cats know it; even the chickens know it, and they all love him for it. Any animal that comes along that I haven’t personally introduced to him, he’ll do his best to scare off.” With a soft pat, Pearl sealed off the pad she’d put over the wound and sat back on her heels. “Damn thing is, he does it, too. Seems in his world, his bark and bite are pretty damn big, and the others believe it.”

When Pearl stood, her robe parted, and a rush of early morning lust flooded Rex's system as a long, creamy leg was slowly exposed then hidden again as the fabric folded back over itself. *Bitten, burned, and embarrassed, and I'm still acting like a horndog. How pathetic.*

Of course, that didn't stop him trying to get another glimpse when the robe flared out as she turned back toward the bench.

"Were you bringing coffee before you were rudely interrupted?" Pearl's head dipped toward the slightly worse-for-wear tray. Figuratively putting his sensitive-man-needing-to-win-brownie-points pants back on, he nodded, noticing Pearl looked a little pale.

"Yeah...are you okay, Pearl?" He frowned a little, his head tilted to the side as he contemplated her. "You're not going to hurl on me again, are you?"

"Well, I don't plan to -- that's why I'm standing by the sink."

Oh.

"Any chance you could either drink the coffee in a hurry, or dump it outside and have tea instead? Yesterday coffee was good, but today it...oh God..." Pearl's lips pressed together, and she spun around. Knuckles white, she clung to the edge of the bench and retched into the sink.

Rex picked up the cups, careful not to slop them and burn his hand again, and threw his jumpstart to the day out on the lawn. He set the cups down on the bench, but well away from Pearl, and went to her side, scooping back her hair as he reached for the cold tap and set it running.

"Seems like we're both in the wars this morning." There was a little soft, ironic humor in his voice as he spoke.

Between dry retches, since she'd already lost what little she had in her stomach, Pearl managed to agree, "Seems like it."

A moment or two more and her stomach upset was over as fast as it began. Rex hooked his arms behind Pearl's back and legs and swept her up into his arms. He marched out of the kitchen and back to the bedroom, and tucked her back into bed.

"Tea and crackers?" He figured Were or human, the old wives' tales standard for morning sickness would still apply.

"*Please.*" Rex nearly smiled. Pearl's sickened pleading was kind of cute -- not that he planned on telling *her* that.

Cleaned mugs, sweet tea, and a plate of Ritz crackers later, Rex sat down on the edge of the bed and watched the color start to come back to Pearl's cheeks.

"About last night..." Rex swallowed his nervousness. "I'm really sorry about that; I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Pearl paused, a cracker halfway to her mouth. "No, you gave me a hell of a fright, especially with that whole mind-talk thing, but I never thought you were going to hurt me..." She looked everywhere but at him. "I did debate your intentions, though."

"Oh." It took him a second or two to follow her hint to its logical, horrifying conclusion. "Oh, good Lord, no. Oh, no way, never. Skin to skin, or fur to fur, and never the twain shall meet...well, in my book anyway."

Pearl smiled at him, laughter twinkling in her eyes at his repulsion. He felt like he should go wash his mouth out with soap. Yuck, furies were not his cup of tea.

"Sooo...does that kind of thing happen often?" Pearl's brows rose as she sounded him out. Her pretty face was back to normal again.

Figuring she was looking for reassurance, he made his voice firm, strong like there was no debating the issue. "No, definitely not." Only to shoot himself in the foot when he followed up weakly, "Well, not *that* often anyway."

"Oh? Why's that?"

Rex had a suspicion he was somehow on the losing end of a discussion that he didn't really understand.

"It usually only happens when one of a Were couple gets too sexually excited. You haven't changed yet to feel it, but it's like we're two halves of a magical whole. It's not entirely organic. At times of extra high excitement, the magic seems to flicker, and the beast, with its much more simplistic and strong base urges, forces its way out."

"So, in other words, you were so desperate to fuck me last night that you lost it?" Only one curious brow was raised at him now, and when the corner of Pearl's mouth crooked a little smugly, Rex finally figured out what he'd walked into.

"Err...I guess, yes."

Pearl sat back into the pillows he'd propped up behind her earlier and sighed out on a self-satisfied breath, "Really?"

Chapter Fifteen

It felt weird to be sitting in the same spot again, quite a wicked sense of déjà vu, really. But Pearl had a feeling the answers she sought this time around were going to be a little less life changing -- for her and Rex, at least.

For Vlad and Donkey, not so much.

Two months previously, Rex had come to her with puppy dog eyes and pleaded Donkey's case. He'd had no luck in finding the overenthusiastic dog a new home, and he refused to put such a happy-go-lucky dog down, so would she, with all her room, and menagerie of animals, take Donkey in?

A sucker for a sob story and in the grip of pregnancy hormones -- which, courtesy of Rex digging out his medical books relating to Were-kind, she now knew a whole lot more about -- of course she'd agreed.

Vlad had taken one look at Donkey the day she'd been dropped off and run out the back door. She'd been disappointed that it seemed the two dogs would not get along, but ten minutes later, Vlad had crashed back through the doggy door and laid his three-week-old, rotting beef shin bone at Donkey's feet with a reverent, paws out front, chest to the ground bow.

It hadn't been 'til today that Pearl had questioned Donkey's increase in food intake and Vlad's overprotectiveness and thought to check a few things out. Donkey was rather rounder in the belly, and her stomach was extremely hard -- she also had no scars that would reflect she'd been spayed. Caught up in the changes in her own world, Pearl hadn't thought to ask if Donkey had been fixed, and she knew Vlad hadn't been neutered.

But until Rex gave her firm proof, she wasn't going to think about the irony of the situation. *Not at all.*

* * * * *

Half an hour later, the irony was all she could think about.

"You're certain? She's really pregnant?"

Appearing shocked by his findings during his hands-on examination, Rex had pulled in his portable ultrasound and triple-checked what his hands and eyes told him. "Seven heartbeats."

"*Seven?*"

Pearl sat down on the consulting room chair with a thump and started giggling. Tears soon followed, along with large hiccupping gales of full-blown laughter.

Rex hefted Donkey down from the table, and they both came over to her, identically cocking their heads to the side as they watched her. Donkey sank down on her belly with a solo, inquiring, "woof" and put her head down on her paws, while Rex hunkered down in front of her and took her hands in his.

"Pearl?"

"Do you not see the irony in this? You knocked me up, now my dog knocked your dog up. How fucking perfect is that?" Ignoring Rex's shocked look at her use of the word "fuck," she tried to sniff back the tears that were now flowing in earnest. "Donkey and I can be unwed mothers together."

Rex's arms came around her, and even though she was still on the chair, he started to rock her against him, smoothing down her back with his hands and whispering quiet nothings meant to soothe her.

"Pearl, what's wrong, love? This isn't about Donkey -- even I'm not that much of a relationship dunce."

She sniffed, wiped the back of her hand under her nose, and washed over her eyes with her fingers, trying to get herself under control. "People are noticing that I'm fatter than normal...and the cashier at the supermarket suggested I might like her gym...and at work people keep looking at me funny when I have to do an emergency dash to the toilet 'cause I'm going to be sick...and...and we need to tell my daddy." And that alone was enough to make her start crying again, never mind the rest of it.

"Oh, Pearl, honey. Forget about those people. When they find out you're pregnant, they'll be the ones kicking themselves; and as for your father, yes, we should tell him."

"We should?" Well, she hadn't expected *that* answer.

"Yes, we should." Rex stood and pulled her into his arms. He walked them one-hundred-and-eighty degrees around, then sat in the chair, pulling her onto his lap, his arms back around her as he pushed her head down onto his chest and carried on rocking her. "We are well into a viable pregnancy, and I think we two muck along well enough that we can safely say that being together will not be the end of the world. I think it's time we started telling people."

"We should?" She knew they should, but after keeping mum for so long, it was kind of hard to grasp.

"And I think that you should finally say yes."

"Yes? What am I saying yes to?" A finger under her chin brought her head up, and she stared into a very soft, caring pair of brown eyes and sniffed. To his credit, he didn't even flinch.

“Marry me, Pearl.” Those dark eyes were dead serious. “I’m tired of a night here and a night there. When I leave here I want to be with you, not at my lonely house, and I don’t want to worry about racing off early just so I can get home to change clothes before going to work. I want to tell everyone you’re having my child, and not have you believing people think less of you for not being married.” He paused, his lips gently covering hers and caressing them. His request was just a whisper over her skin as he asked again, “Marry me?”

Red-eyed, snotty-nosed, and crying so hard she was hiccupping, and the man still proposed marriage. *What’s to turn down?* “Okay.”

His eyes crinkled at the edges, and his lips turned up as he tried to stop the laughter that burst out. “Okay?” His lips took hers again with no gentleness this time. Staking a firm claim on her body, his arms pulled her in tightly and one hand wound its way into her hair, while the other slid under her shirt to stroke the soft skin at her hip before he pulled away. “Okay sounds damn good to me.”

His eyes blanked out for a second, and one brow came down in a frown as he contemplated something. “You know I don’t practice medicine on humans, even though I’m trained, but most of the equipment I have is the same. Since I have the ultrasound here, would you like to take the first look at our baby?”

“You can do that?” Pearl had never thought to ask him if he could do anything like that, and the Were-kind midwife she’d started seeing hadn’t yet scheduled her for a scan. “And it won’t hurt the baby?”

“No, it won’t hurt either of you.”

“We can really see it?” Now that he’d suggested it, there was no way Rex was getting out of the room without delivering the goods.

With only a small “umph” as he stood, he rose from the chair and let her down by the metal examining table. Rex reached for the disinfecting spray then went over the table and the machine thoroughly, wiping it down since he’d just used it on Donkey. When the table

was clean, Rex carefully lifted her up. Pearl scooped her butt back and swung around before she laid back on the cool surface -- the table was a bit short, so her knees dangled over the edge.

Rex grabbed the bottle of blue gel from its spot on the side of the ultrasound machine and turned back with a maniacal grin on his face. "Now, my lovely specimen. Time for my experiment!"

Right there and then Pearl realized she hadn't said yes to Rex's marriage proposal because society said she must; she'd said yes because she'd gone and fallen in love with the big lug.

"Pull your shirt up, love, and get prepared to have cold, gooey, blue stuff smeared all over your stomach."

She smiled up at him, her upset tears a thing of the past, and looked over to the monitor. "Will you be able to tell the sex or anything?"

"No, not at twelve weeks -- at least not with this machine -- but we should see a heart beating and some fingers and toes if I can get a good image." Rex's cheekbones went a little ruddy and his tone apologetic. "It's been a while since I did my obstetric rotation."

The cold gel squirting on her belly made her start, but it soon warmed up as Rex used the head of the ultrasound to move the gel around. "I might have to press a bit just to get the fetus in the ultrasound arc, but it shouldn't hurt." There was pressure, like she was leaning against something, and then the static on the screen became less dense, forming into a black oval shape with a baby shaped blob in the middle, its little heart beating butterfly-wing fast.

Neither of them said anything; they just watched the screen, so wrapped up in what it showed them the fire alarm could have gone off and they wouldn't have heard it.

"Wow, we're really having a baby..." The slightly hysterical edge to Rex's voiced turned to awe, and he turned to her for a kiss. But just before his lips found hers, she saw something else on the monitor, moved her head away, and pointed to the monitor.

“Rex, what’s that?” When Rex had turned to kiss her, the angle of the transducer had shifted. Now there were two black blobs, one slightly larger than the other, and two fluttering hearts. It was an image not dissimilar to another she’d seen recently -- when he’d used the machine on Donkey.

Rex muttered under his breath as he moved the transducer to get another view. “Surely not...nah...can’t be...*shit*, it is!”

“Rex?” She thought she understood what she was seeing, but his distress now had her worried, and her heart began to pump more rapidly. *Was there something wrong?*

“There’s...there’s...” His face blanched white, and he latched onto the table with his free hand, his face paler than his knuckles.

“*Rex? Tell me!*” There was a knock on the door, and Colleen called out, asking if they were okay -- she’d learned to knock after catching them making out in Rex’s office a few weeks back.

“It’s --”

“*It’s what, damn you, what?*”

“Twins!”

And that was all she wrote. Her flannel-clad, Paul Bunyan look-alike hit the ground like a granddaddy spruce that’d finally met its match.

 THE END 

Anne Douglas

I started writing with the encouragement of my friends (who tell me I always have a tale to tell -- I think that's a good thing) to support my growing Erotica/Erotic Romance habit. Writing, along with the Handcrafted Boutique Children's Clothing business that is my "day job", is what my husband calls my "excuse for not doing housework" -- too right, mate!

I am a transplant New Zealander currently living in Florida, so my American friends get a laugh out of translating "Kiwi-speak" to American for me -- car park...parking lot...elevator...lift...Oy!

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