



Beth Caudill

Black Rose

InFormally Yours

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by Beth Caudill

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

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Praise for Beth Caudill

Joyfully Reviewed:

"Garden Magic has a lot of different elements. There are people with different abilities, and I enjoyed those aspects ... Beth Caudill developed an intriguing new world that I would be interested in seeing again."

~Reviewed by Katherine

Fallen Angels Review about Dragon's Mate:

"With a plot that spans a great distance in a small number of pages, readers will be pleased with the sensual journey they take ... Beth Caudill created a wonderful paranormal tale laced with honor, nobility, and dragons. 4 Angels!"

~Reviewed by Shayley

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Chapter One

Melinda wandered the store straightening clothes, checking the clock, and watching the door. Having promised her niece and nephew she would be at their house for trick-or-treating, she couldn't wait to leave. Their dad had been called away on business. That meant her sister, Susan, could only go trick-or-treating with them if someone stayed at the house to hand out candy.

Susan was president of the homeowners association and always worked to set an example. Although Melinda didn't approve of the importance Susan placed on the HOA, she liked seeing the kids, and this Halloween they were dressing up as a knight and fairy princess.

Glancing at the clock again, Melinda groaned. Time crawled—it was only five-thirty. At least she had a mere half an hour left to work. As the assistant manager at Formally Yours, a high-class formal wear store catering to both genders, Melinda could schedule her time to fit her needs.

The owner, Rachel Connley, closed tonight. Rachel gave everyone else the day off because Halloween was one of the slowest days for the shop.

At the clacking sound of heels on tile, Melinda mumbled, "Speak of the devil."

"How are things?" Rachel stepped up to the check-out counter and hung a bag of clothes on the rack next to the register.

"Quiet as a graveyard." Melinda smiled.

"Well, since you're in such a good mood, I'll let you go early if you do me a favor." She pointed to the bag of clothes. "I need these delivered today. The gentleman they're for would like them before sundown."

"If I leave now I might be able to do that before I head to my sister's. Where does he live?"

"Thanks. I really appreciate it. Here are the directions." Rachel handed Melinda a folded piece of paper. Walking Melinda to the door, she added, "I hope you have a good night and stay safe."

Melinda looked back at the closed door and wondered what just happened? One minute she lamented the slow passage of time, and the next she'd been kicked out the door. She shook her head and decided to take advantage of Rachel's unusual behavior before something came up.

At the car, Melinda hung the clothes on the hanger behind the driver's side door. Once at the wheel, she adjusted the radio volume before unfolding the piece of paper with the address.

Well crap!

This delivery was for an address in Wolfingdale—at least an hour southeast of downtown. Susan's house was a forty-five minute drive northeast and Melinda needed to be there in an hour.

No good deed goes unpunished.

At times some of the employees called Rachel a witch; right now another name came to mind. She looked down at the paper again. Mr. Woodward would just have to wait.

Under no circumstance would she disappoint her niece and nephew.

* * * *

In the twilight, shrieks of, "Aunt Melinda! Aunt Melinda!" made her smile. She had just enough time to plant her feet before her two favorite munchkins engulfed her in hugs.

Sharing a look with her sister, she said to the kids, "So, if your mom is dressed like a witch, that must mean you two are Hansel and Gretel?"

"No, Aunt Melinda. I'm a knight and Sarah's a fairy princess," Trevor told her proudly.

"Oh. Well then, I wouldn't want to get in the way of such honorable persons going about gathering goodies." Melinda laughed as the two children ran to the end of the driveway and then yelled for their mom to hurry up.

"We shouldn't be too late," Susan said with tears threatening. "Thanks for doing this on such short notice, sis. It's the part of Robert's job I hate—the last minute travel to customer sites. He misses so much."

Melinda wrapped her arms around her sister. "Hey, don't worry about it. It's great to see the kids, and it won't be long before they're too grown up to go trick-or-treating. Enjoy it. You know Robert doesn't like the travel either. Besides he has less than a year left until he's paid his dues." Giving Susan an extra squeeze, she continued, "It'll get better."

The yell was louder this time. "Mom!"

Melinda pushed Susan toward the end of the driveway. "You better hurry up, or they might put you in the dungeon."

Waving as they rounded the corner, Melinda turned to enter the stately house.

* * * *

Melinda sat on a stool at the kitchen bar, the quiet surroundings a nice break from handing out candy. She jumped as a loud bang reverberated throughout the house. Feet pounded on hardwood floors heralding the arrival of the kids, no doubt excited to show her their haul.

"Aunt Melinda, look! I got a mini-unicorn pop." Sarah beamed, holding up a small red, orange, and yellow spiral pop.

"And I got a skull pop!" Trevor stuck the white head under Melinda's nose.

"Ugh, a treat only a boy could love." Over his head, she winked at her sister even as she grimaced at the white head on a stick.

She leaned over and whispered to Sarah. "Make sure you hide that lollipop. Your mom loved unicorn pops when she was growing up and she might try to steal it."

At the dining room table they laughed and sorted candy. Melinda envied her sister's happiness. She yearned for her own children, yet she needed to find the right man first.

Crossing the room to her sister's side, she kissed Susan's cheek and explained about the errand Rachel asked her to run. Trevor and Sarah begged her to stay and she promised them a trip to the zoo. She finished her goodbyes and started the two-hour trip to Wolfingdale.

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Chapter Two

Melinda suffered an attack of conscience as she drove toward Wolfingdale wondering how upset the customer was going to be at the late delivery. She squashed the guilt. *Who ever heard of a sundown delivery on Halloween anyway?*

Not like she would have changed anything. The customer may always be right, but in this case her niece and nephew came first. If he got too uptight about the delay, she could always offer him a free dress shirt. Wave free stuff at people and they usually stopped complaining. Seeing her niece and nephew's happy faces was worth the price.

Encountering little traffic, the clock read just past ten as Melinda turned onto a partially hidden dirt driveway. A plaque proclaimed it to be Waverly Manor. Once she cleared the privacy trees, Melinda gasped at the bleak scene ahead of her. Good thing she didn't believe in ghosts. The mansion before her looked like the perfect location to stage an Alfred Hitchcock movie. In front was the typical long, perfectly manicured lawn while off to the right stood a small, decrepit family cemetery. Several of the aged, crumbled headstones lay next to the driveway.

She stopped the car at the steps to the front door and got out to look around. Dry leafless trees framed the gothic Victorian structure. The mansion appeared gray, dismal, and rundown in the dark October night. Melinda wondered how it looked during the day. She could almost see it standing

majestically in the daylight with leaves on the trees gently blowing in a spring breeze.

Above, gray clouds tinged yellow and green hid the moon and stars. A tingling sensation tickled her spine as the air around her thickened. It was as if the atmosphere developed a sudden electrical charge, yet she could see no lightning, just an eerie glow.

Shaking off the uncomfortable feeling, Melinda focused on the mansion. *Very unique*. It was an asymmetrical house rarely seen in these days of rectangular cookie-cutter homes. Reminiscent of an older time, the first two levels were relatively normal, the first a simple wraparound porch, and the second an open walkway lined by gargoyles with easy access from several rooms by windows. The unusual roofline started at the third floor. Here the house was separated into three distinct parts.

The far left was the most normal, with a typical A-structure above a third floor room. The center section's uniqueness came from the single room-width, four-story tower standing above the rest of the house. At the very top, windows faced every direction, each with its own balcony and topped with a spire. The third section was two rooms wide and tapered off. The area next to the center was a partial A-gable above a lighted room; partial because the top of a turret cut into the roof. Around the side, a glimpse of another gable gave the impression of a long house, bigger than the short front implied.

A howl broke the stillness of the night. Melinda hesitated halfway up the stone steps and glanced around. Clouds

blocked the moon from illuminating the landscape; the only light came from an upstairs window. Ahead of her, shadows covered the wraparound porch so thick she couldn't see the front door—even when she squinted. Looking up at the gargoyles, she thought their eyes glittered, giving the impression of intelligence. In a blink, she realized it was just a trick of the light reflecting off the stone. She needed to get a grip, nothing peculiar here ... just her imagination. She marched to the front door and using the heavy door knocker, gave three quick raps on the wooden door.

When no one answered, she knocked again and then tried the handle. The latch clicked when she touched the metal causing the door to swing open. Walking in, she called out, "Hello, anyone home? Mr. Woodward?" Almost to herself she added in a quiet voice, "Anyone at all?"

The faint echo of her steps was the only sound, leaving her disquieted—jittery even. Given the desolate exterior and the uncanny silence, she needed to deliver the clothes and get out of here.

Rachel was very particular about making sure all her employees knew to deliver the clothes into the hands of the customer. The last employee to just leave clothes on a doorstep ended up fired. Melinda decided to explore the first floor while looking for the owner.

She went right into a combination of two rooms turned into a library/office. As dreary as the outside had been, the warmth and hominess inside surprised her. Books lined the walls, a roll top desk sat before the side window with a view of the forest surrounding the house, and around the front

turret windows were benches to sit or lie down on. It was a lovely room with soft carpeting, wood paneling, and a fireplace. She loved it. If only she had more time to absorb everything about the cozy room.

She had trespassed enough. Melinda went back to the foyer to leave the clothes on the banister—rule or no rule. Suddenly an eerie greenish-yellow glow lit the room. An unnatural wind surrounded her causing the plastic clothes bag she held to rustle. Afraid for the first time, Melinda stood paralyzed. *How should she proceed?*

Melinda took a step toward the front door. She needed to escape. Something stopped her—a sound, maybe a feeling. Impossible to ignore, it produced an overwhelming urge to explore upstairs. As she climbed the stairs, not a single one creaked.

The second floor yielded several tastefully designed rooms but not much else. A pull toward the outside took Melinda to the uncovered walkway of the sunroom. The end of October, the air was crisp and cool against her skin. Peace settled around her as she imagined the landscape in the full bloom of summer.

A howl reverberated in the night. The tranquil spell she'd been under broke. This time the call sounded closer although she could not see any animals, or anyone else for that matter.

Melinda shook her head and wondered what she was doing. It felt as if she had just awakened from a trance. This wasn't her house and Mr. Woodward would certainly be aggravated at her for taking an uninvited tour. Yet, once she

stepped back inside, the fuzziness returned. In a daze she walked back to the center stairs. Curiosity about the fourth floor room with all the balconies beckoned, but she was drawn elsewhere.

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Chapter Three

Walking along the third floor hallway, Melinda could hear the grandfather clock chime downstairs. At a door with a soft yellow glow around the doorframe, she knocked several times. No one answered. As the last strikes of the clock chimes echoed through the house, the door swung open. In the silence that followed, Melinda entered the brightly lit room. Signs of life were all around: nature prints hung on each wall, clothes thrown without care across a chair next to the antique four-poster bed, books piled on a nightstand, and a tower of CDs beside a stereo on the far side of the room. The clutter in the bathroom showed recent signs of use.

Back in the hallway, Melinda closed the door behind her and said, "Well, that was anti-climactic."

Laughing, she decided to take the clothes she still carried downstairs. She would leave them in the front hallway and go home. If Rachel asked, she could honestly claim no one was home when she came to deliver. No reason Rachel, or the owner, needed to know she strolled around the house.

From behind her a growl shattered the quiet. She turned toward the noise and gasped. A large gray wolf stood at the end of the hallway. He stalked toward her, his large teeth bared in a snarl while she inched toward the stairs hoping to beat him there. Just before she reached the staircase, the wolf leapt. Melinda swung the bag of clothes and slammed the animal into the wall. She lost her grip on the bag as the plastic became entangled in the wolf's feet.

It was the break she needed. As she turned and dashed down the stairs, the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Her only thought—a chair to hold the wolf off. At the bottom floor she turned the corner toward the back of the house where she'd earlier seen the kitchen and dining room. It occurred to Melinda there were no stools at the bar so she quickly moved to the dining room.

"Crap!"

She skidded to a stop in the center of the dining room. *It couldn't be.* Earlier on her tour, there had been a dark walnut table large enough to seat eight people. Now the room stood empty. Even the matching china cabinet and buffet table were gone.

Not good. She had to escape.

Halfway to the opposite entrance, she stopped when a growl once again came from behind her. She turned slowly. Beautiful, glowing milk chocolate eyes captured her gaze. Those luminous eyes terrified ... and restrained her. At the wolf's mercy, Melinda had nothing but her hands to defend herself and no hope of out running the wild animal. She screamed as the wolf leapt at her, sinking its teeth into her shoulder and clawing her stomach. The sting in her belly and the strange warmth emanating from her shoulder were nothing compared to the pain that erupted as her head hit the hardwood floor. Darkness descended and she knew no more.

* * * *

Gray light filtered through the windows as consciousness returned. It was sometime in the early post-dawn hours.

Melinda tried to sit up. Pain and nausea made her lie very still on the hard floor.

"I'm glad to see you're awake. Let's get you someplace more comfortable."

Melinda jumped at the unfamiliar male voice and banged her head. She groaned at the pain. A pair of arms wrapped around her and she could do nothing to prevent the stranger from carrying her to the sitting room where he laid her on the couch. She ached all over, particularly on the shoulder where the wolf's teeth had pierced her flesh.

Now that she was lying on something comfortable, her thoughts started to clear and embarrassment flared. It occurred to Melinda while the man carried her, she'd sniffed and cuddled close to him as if she liked his smell and needed to have it on her.

She averted her eyes from him and asked, "Who are you?"

He laughed. "Shouldn't that be my line? I'm Connor Woodward and this is my home."

A blush raced up her face. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have wandered around. My name's Melinda Jenson. I had some clothes from Formally Yours to deliver. I knocked and called out before entering."

"Yes, and I told you to drop them by before twilight. Here, have some tea."

Melinda flinched at the sound of Rachel's voice. Sitting up to take the cup from her boss, she stammered, "Ra ... Rachel, what are you doing here?" She took a sip of the sweet-smelling tea.

Rachel ignored her. "Connor, I told you I would find you a mate. What do you think?"

Melinda was confused. Mate? She wanted to ask questions but her thoughts were jumbled. She sank into the soft cushions and her eyelids drooped closed. She heard Connor say, "She's definitely curious and has plenty of spirit."

"She loved the house, if the amount of time she spent wandering is any indication," Rachel said before Melinda passed out again. "Now, we'll have to see how she adjusts to the change."

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Chapter Four

Melinda awoke to brilliant sunlight. The red numbers on the bedside clock told her it was three in the afternoon; long past time to be up and moving around. She got out of bed, closed the blinds, and tried once again to remember what happened last week on Halloween. She recalled going to her sister's house so the kids could go trick-or-treating, and then driving to Waverly Manor to drop off clothes for a customer. After that—nothing—just a disturbing gray fog.

Lost in thought, she didn't notice her lack of clothes or failure to turn on the bathroom lights. Staring at her reflection in the mirror over the sink, vague memories of a wolf chasing her through a strange house went through her mind. *Had to be a dream.* Just a dream, she decided even as her green eyes glowed in the mirror.

Cleaned up, she went downstairs to the kitchen to fix a meal. When she noticed how bare the shelves of the refrigerator and pantry were, she made a mental note to stop by the grocery store later. It would be her third trip this week. *When would her increased appetite level off?* She only ate like this around her period, still a week away.

In short order, she had a large, rare steak, baked potato, and corn on the cob sitting on a plate. She stared at the steak for a long moment. Until last week medium-well had been her preference. Right now the rare steak tasted like ambrosia—all tender and juicy. She ended up eating twice her normal amount, but at least she felt human again.

With a pint of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice cream from the freezer, Melinda went into the living and sat down on the sofa to watch television. Unable to find anything of interest, she tossed aside the remote, threw away the empty ice cream container, and grabbed her keys. She hopped in the car deciding on a drive.

On autopilot, Melinda found herself in front of Waverly Manor. In the afternoon light, the setting no longer spooked her. Instead the violet-gray manor with accents of cream, topaz, and silver blue seemed to welcome her. Refusing to spend a lot of time examining the house or the feelings it invoked; she got out of her car, climbed the stairs, and knocked on the door.

It opened to reveal a good-looking man in his early thirties dressed in a dark green polo shirt and khakis. He looked familiar although she could not remember meeting him. Their gazes locked, neither of them moved. An intimate connection seemed to develop. Melinda fought an incredible urge to run her fingers through his wavy shoulder-length, dark-brown hair.

"Mister ... Woodward?"

"Yes, and call me, Connor. Please come in, I've been expecting you." He opened the door further. His smile was welcoming as she walked past him into the house.

"You were expecting me? Why? I don't even know why I'm here."

He motioned her toward a sofa in the sitting room. "What do you know about werewolves?"

She shrugged. "Not much. I've never lived in any of the cities with a pack so I've never met one. I've read some of the paranormal stories, but I don't believe half of what's written."

He nodded but did not continue. Vibrating with contained energy, he paced the room. She had the sense if she reached out and touched him—something she found herself fighting against—there would be an electric shock.

Without warning, he stopped in front of her. "Werewolves are a mixed bag. Some are lucky enough to have a pack of family and friends living in the same place for generations. Others are loners, only able to live with their mate. Loners have a harder time finding mates than those in packs because the pool of potential partners is limited to humans. And finding one you can trust not to go running when you tell them that not only do you turn into a wolf, but you want them to do that too, is almost impossible."

She stared at him as snippets of forgotten conversation came back. Uneasy, she stood to confront him. "Are you trying to tell me I'm a werewolf?"

Connor took a deep breath. "Yes, a werewolf, and my mate. No one else, human or otherwise, will be able to make you feel like this."

Melinda gasped as he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. Her open mouth allowed his tongue to invade. Without conscious thought she molded her body to his and her hands came up to run through his hair. Their tongues dueled, at first Connor's leading hers before she fought to take control. She wanted to rip off his clothes, shove him down to the floor, and

mount him. She needed to have him inside her, to claw his chest while she rode him into oblivion.

Her breathing labored, Melinda pulled away and stared at her hands. *Could it be? It had been so real; she could have sworn her fingers and nails had elongated into claws.*

His voice interrupted her thoughts. "Now you understand. No one else will make you lose control like that. You were drawn here tonight so your mate could help during your first change."

His arrogance was maddening, but it also left her fearful. *What if what he was saying was true?* His breath had come in erratic bursts, but he had not lost control. Had they been naked, she would have had sex with him. She didn't know anything about him, and yet even now, she wanted him.

Her doubts aside, she put on a brave front. "How do you know what I'm feeling? You're very conceited to think you're the only one to make me feel something from just a kiss."

He trailed a finger along her cheek then used it to tilt her chin up. "Darling, you may have felt something in other kisses but it wasn't anything like what we have. And I know what you're feeling because we're tied as mates. When werewolves mate, they can't hear thoughts like vampires, but they will always feel their mates."

He picked her up and carried her back to the sofa, sitting down with her in his lap. He smiled. "That's why you came here tonight. You felt a need to be with your mate. As you adjust to your new powers, you'll be able to know what I'm feeling as well."

Quiet descended as he finished and she realized she'd been rubbing her face against the side of his hand the whole time. He laughed as she jerked her head back. Heat warmed her cheeks. Where did this sudden lack of control come from?

She went on the offensive. "So you decided you were ready for a mate and took the first available woman?"

This time it was his face up in flames. "Not exactly."

She raised an eyebrow, a touch of jealousy coloring her words. "Oh, and just how many women have you tried to mate with?"

"You are the fourth and last." Holding a finger to her mouth to forestall questions, his brown eyes darkened as her tongue flicked across his flesh. Rearranging her on his lap so his hardening member rested fully between her thighs, he continued, "Just because I bite a woman doesn't guarantee I'll end up with a mate. After failing with my third choice, I sought help from Rachel, the strongest Earth witch in the area."

Unable to hold back anymore, Melinda asked, "Were these other women given a choice?"

"Yes."

She didn't know what to say. Melinda was stunned by the revelations. Her only consolation was he didn't seem to be sugar coating the truth. *Not very comforting.*

"After establishing we weren't compatible, I found places for them in packs further north. Rachel felt it best we not discuss this with you before the change took place."

"And why was that?" she snapped, angry with him and her boss, a woman she had come to trust.

"I don't know. She said it needed to happen this way." Shrugging, he went on, "It didn't really matter to me either way as long as I ended up with a mate."

As if knowing his statement would anger her further, he distracted her with a kiss.

Connor slid her off his lap and stood up. He held out his hand. "Come. It's getting dark and we need to get outside. The time has come for you to find out what it feels like to be a wolf."

Fear doused the desire he raised and pushed aside her anger. She never doubted what he told her; there would be no point in lying. Until now she'd not allowed his confession to touch her. As of this moment she had no choice. In a short time she would become a wolf under the light of the full moon.

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Chapter Five

Connor led her through the kitchen to the back door. With her hand in his, he drew her down the stairs to the concrete patio. Melinda glanced back to the safety of the house.

This was crazy.

But it felt right to follow his lead. His warmth and energy heightened her perceptions and spirit, as if inside her a contentedness circuit closed at the touch of his skin against hers.

To their left, wood paneling cordoned off a privacy space. As they entered the enclosure, he pointed to a cubby system built into the wall, "You'll want to take your clothes off and leave them here."

"What, they don't just travel with us?" She tried to disguise her unease.

"That's a myth perpetrated by the movie industry. Since nudity isn't allowed on screen, they invented a way to keep their characters clothed." He glanced up at the sky before allowing his gaze travel up and down her body again. "Unless you want your clothes torn to shreds, I suggest you start stripping."

Afraid to move Melinda could only stand there and stare at him. She didn't think she would be able to undress in front of him; he was, after all, a relative stranger.

He wiggled his eyebrows and offered, "I could always help if you're having problems."

That did it. Galvanized into action, she smacked him on the chest. "Stop that. If you insist on this nonsense, then you get undressed while I stand over here." She marched over to the opposite end of the area and faced the house. Looking back over her shoulder, she commanded, "And when you're done, leave so I can change."

Connor came up behind her to slowly run his hands up and down her sides, and caress her breasts with his fingers. He whispered in her ear, "But it will be more fun if we undress together."

Her pulse quickened and she leaned back against him. A part of her, a very large part, wanted to believe him and let him have his way. But the rational side would not let her give in that easily. With reluctance she pulled away and turned to face him. "That's the way it's going to be. Either you go first and leave me alone, or I get in my car and drive away."

Connor chuckled. "You could but then you wouldn't get very far before the change came upon you." After leaning in to lick her neck with his warm, wet tongue, he locked gazes with her. "You don't really want to leave do you?"

Melinda gulped. His eyes bored into hers, daring her to deny what she felt. *She couldn't.* With a shake of her head, Melinda surrendered. "I'll stay, but I can't change in front of you."

Searching her face, he must have been satisfied by what he saw there. "Okay. We'll do this your way, but you need to hurry."

"And why is that?"

He began unbuttoning his shirt. "Because once the moon rises above the trees, you'll begin transforming. You won't have any control, it will just happen."

It was as if the air had been knocked out of her as his hands pulled the shirt apart and off his arms. Staring at his bare chest, she had the urge to run her hands over his muscles. She imagined his salty taste as she licked the sweat off his chest with her tongue. Heat began to race up her face again and she whipped around so she couldn't see him any longer.

She jumped when his chuckle sounded closer than she expected. Fingertips brushed her sensitized skin as he lifted the hair off her neck, sending little electric shocks through her system. His breath was a soft caress. "I don't mind you watching me. In fact, I like it."

Melinda shivered as the cool night air flowed across the nape of her exposed neck. Afraid of saying, "take me," she clamped her lips shut and prayed he would leave before she gave into her impulses. At the sound of his retreating footsteps, her shoulders relaxed. She sank to the bench, her head in her hands. *What was happening?* Her attraction to him was so unusual.

Her clothes off, Melinda paced the enclosure for a few minutes before joining Connor. When she finally emerged, he was waiting for her at the tree line. She walked over to him, her steps slow and even. Melinda sat down next to him. "How does this work?"

"I'm not exactly sure how things go for someone who's been converted." Holding up a hand to forestall her argument,

he went on. "Those born as werewolves instinctively know how to change. It's something we learn to control growing up, like learning to walk. You, on the other hand, have been converted. I know it takes at least a year for a converted adult to gain the same control natural werewolves posses. The general rule is you'll be able to change anytime you want, but will need to do it at least once during the three days of the full moon. During the first year, you'll change all three days. Eventually you'll master it and be able to pick the times."

"Great—so no profound words of wisdom?" The words barely left her mouth when the moon cleared the trees and bathed them in silver light. Energy drained out of her body, dropping her onto her hands and knees. Her head exploded in pain as a ravenous presence clawed through her. She realized this presence had been in her head since last week, watching and waiting. Now it worked to take control, and the harder she fought, the more it hurt. The blinding pain became too much. Melinda passed out.

When she regained consciousness, Melinda opened her eyes and looked around in wonderment. The world had changed. The woods emitted a dark green glow that pulsed as if it were alive. She could hear insects burrowing and small animals scurrying away. The cry of an owl sounded as close as if it were next to her, yet she could see it circling high above the trees.

Unfamiliar with her new body, her movements were slow as she gained her feet—all four of them! Stunned, she fell back on her haunches and examined her paws. They were

covered in a cream-colored fur, and if she concentrated, she could force claws to extend.

Suddenly a nudge from another animal almost knocked her over. Looking around, she nipped at the large gray wolf next to her. It nuzzled her face as if in apology. The wolf ran off a few feet, stopped, and looked back at her. She ignored him. She wanted to sit and examine her new senses. Smell and hearing were the most affected, while sight was crisper but essentially the same. The other wolf returned growling, then nipping at her behind until she got up and followed. She gave a half-hearted growl. She would go for a run if it would get him to leave her alone.

Her limbs seemed to know what to do, carrying her faster than she could imagine. Although she had been following the gray wolf, the fresh scent of a rabbit scurrying across the trail snared her attention. Yipping to let the other wolf know she stopped, her wolf senses filtered out the smell of moss and pine forest. All that remained was a fresh rabbit trail to follow on the right. With stealth, she picked her steps with care where moments before she'd been bounding through the forest.

Eventually she came upon rocks where the rabbit sat licking its paws. Melinda crawled into position ready to pounce.

An image came into her mind of her attacking the helpless animal, sinking her teeth into tender skin, breaking bones, and eating the tasty morsel. Acting on instinct, her body lunged for the rabbit but a tiny voice in the back of her head

cried "NO!" The thought of eating Thumper was too disturbing.

Melinda lost her concentration and ended up falling short of the rabbit. She crashed onto the rocks. As she watched, the rabbit dashed into the safety of its burrow. She picked herself up and worked her way to the forest floor before issuing a frustrated growl.

It would take a bit to adjust to this new body. She enjoyed running through the forest, but devouring cute little forest creatures would take a little more time.

A howl shattered the peaceful night leaving the area around her silent and watchful. Short barking commands sounded harsh in the quiet stand of trees. She woofed and shook her body trying to deny the call of her mate. A twig snapped behind her. She started and growled in warning. The large gray wolf stalked in front of Melinda. He stared her into submission.

She held his gaze for several moments before she lowered her eyes and bowed her head. The he-wolf came around behind her to nip at her heels. She ran and this time he followed her to make sure she went where he wanted. Each time she slowed down to investigate, he would take a bite at her. As the night wore on, there was one thing Melinda decided—her mate was a pain in the ass.

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Chapter Six

Melinda opened her eyes to see three wolves staring at her from a large portrait across the room. The room was familiar, but she couldn't remember sleeping here before. She dropped her head to the pillow, closed her eyes, and hoped when she opened them again she would be surrounded by her own furnishings. No such luck. The large bed with four wooden ornate posts and silk sheets did not belong to her. Neither did the warm, heavy body lying next to her. Then the events of yesterday came back.

Oh lord, last night she'd changed into a wolf and gone running through woods.

Lying awake in bed was such a normal activity, yet suddenly her life was far from normal. Instead of panic, she felt energized and a bit restless. Another presence shared her mind and she realized it had been there since Halloween—though she'd blissfully ignored it. Now the entity roved the edges of her consciousness, teasing her and fluttering away whenever she tried to grasp it. Even still, she sensed it was waiting for something.

Connor chose that moment to roll onto his back and fling off the covers. The movement caused Melinda to roll onto her side with an arm across his chest. Her body tingled where his bare skin touched hers. She laid her head on his stomach to evaluate his manhood. Surprisingly, it was normal. *Okay, that sounded bad even in her head.* But the truth was, she didn't know what to expect from a werewolf. Really, it was slightly

hairier than others she had seen. Maybe he was a bit bigger in the balls, and definitely thicker, but overall relatively normal.

As if her contemplation of his sex was a signal, the other presence pushed against her consciousness. In a blinding explosion, worse than any migraine headache, a thin light blue filament seemed to connect her with the other presence. They were still separate entities but images and feelings flowed between the two, faster than Melinda could process. Hungers and drives she remembered from her time as a wolf overwhelmed her—the strongest of which was the need to mate.

"Yes, it is time." The seductive whisper came from the wolf inside her. She looked over at Connor again and experienced an overwhelming urge to feel his flesh in her mouth ... to ready him for mating. She climbed over his legs and positioned herself so that she could see his face. She dropped her head and licked his length before taking him into her mouth and gently sucking.

He moaned and she looked up through her lashes to see if he was awake. His breath was quick and his eyes seemed to be half open. *Good.* Melinda smiled as he responded to her ministrations. Soon he became too thick and long for her to suck comfortably. She had no experience with deep-throat, but the anticipation of practicing on him in the future added to her already wet core.

Lightly blowing warm air along his member, she wrapped her hand around him while cupping his balls. Concerned about how long it'd been since she'd last had sex, Melinda

slipped first one then a second finger inside slowly stretching herself. Anxious for something bigger, she moaned as she withdrew her sticky fingers. Mounting him was all she could think about—having him thrusting and pulsing new life into her.

She held him and lowered herself inch by inch onto him. Once fully seated, she stopped moving to allow herself to adjust to the tight fit. She opened her eyes to find Connor staring at her. He smiled showing canines that last week would have frightened her. Now the sight spiked her arousal as she imagined the sharp points sinking into her flesh.

He reached up and caressed her breasts, gently kneading them before brushing her nipples. She gasped and arched into his touch. The movement caused him to shift deeper. His fingers pinched and pulled at her nipples, the pleasure incredible. Melinda undulated up and down, taking him further inside, clenched tight around him as their pace quickened. Her hands on his shoulder for support, she leaned down and kissed him, their tongues dancing together.

She moaned, resting her forehead against his as he thrust in and out of her. He was so deep inside. Painful yet pleasurable, she couldn't control the sounds emanating from her. The feral being she now shared a body with surged to the fore, demanding control. Taking his hands from her breasts, she placed them at her hips.

Melinda stared at the pulse in his neck. How she wanted to taste his blood, to feel it coat her throat. He moved in and out of her faster and faster. As she bent over and licked the pulse

point she winced as his control slipped and his nails turned to claws that dug into her flesh.

Nipping and licking, he whimpered and growled. Something built and then between one thrust and the next, she exploded. Her muscles contracted around him and for a moment she stilled. Then she struck at his neck to sink her canines in deep. Melinda drank his blood.

Ecstasy.

He continued to ram in and out, prolonging her orgasm. At last, she felt him expand followed by three quick thrusts before his seed erupted into her. At the same time, a bright light flashed in her mind. She collapsed on top of him.

Melinda drew in air as awareness returned. Propped up on one elbow, she gazed at Connor's face. He was licking blood from his mouth. She looked down, surprised to see two holes above her own left breast slowly closing.

Connor rolled them over and she experienced a sense of loss as he slipped out of her. With her head on his shoulder, she heard him rumble in a deep voice, "Go to sleep, my love." She burrowed closer, closed her eyes and did just that.

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Chapter Seven

"Thank you for shopping with Formally Yours. Come again," Melinda called to the departing customer. She looked up at the clock and sighed—an hour until closing. Maundering the racks of clothes to occasionally straighten a dress or coat, she bemoaned being stuck in the silent store. Usually being alone didn't bother her, but tonight she had too many thoughts running through her head.

Rachel had been called away right after Halloween to help at the Bhernha Dwarf Cave when an earthquake took out half the supports. It was particularly distressing for everyone as this cave was one of three in the country to house female dwarves and their children. Rachel's earth magic helped with recovery efforts and would make the rebuilding safer. Circumstances left Melinda to manage the store alone with no time to build a relationship with Connor.

"Deary, you really should let go of that before you ruin it."

Melinda jumped at the sound of someone so close.

"Madame Rosewell. I didn't hear you come in. How may I help you?"

"I don't need anything, deary. I just stopped by to see how you handled the change." Her gaze on the semi-crushed clothing display, Madame Rosewell continued, "Apparently not that well."

Following Madame's gaze, Melinda was shocked to realize she'd crushed the metal tubes with her bare hands. Her

checks grew warm and she moved in front of the stand.

"Thank you, Madame. Is there something I can show you?"

Madame Rosewell patted her on the shoulder. "No, dear. I just stopped by to check on you. Huge changes like this require time. Really, I'm just glad Rachel found someone like you to be Connor's mate. The man has no taste of his own."

"Would have been nice if someone asked me if I wanted to be his mate," Melinda grumbled under her breath.

"What was that, deary?"

"Nothing, Madame. Have you seen our hats? We received a new shipment earlier this week." Melinda directed Madame Rosewell to the other side of the store in the hope it would distract the woman. It didn't.

"These are exquisite, particularly the purple. Rachel has good taste, but then so do you, my dear. The jewelry display improved greatly when you took over the ordering. She might know clothing but her selection of pendants was atrocious, unusual in an Earth Witch of her stature."

Melinda smiled and thought back to the first piece she'd replaced, a large princess cut ruby outlined with pink diamonds. Too big and gaudy. "Yeah, nobody's perfect."

"Exactly, my dear. Remember that as you deal with Rachel in the future." Looking like an old school teacher chastising an errant child, Madame Rosewell continued, "It takes a lot of trust to leave someone in charge of your business for any length of time."

"I know. But how do I trust *her* again?" Melinda's shoulders slumped.

"That I cannot answer child, but you will find a way. Had you been someone else, you could have chosen to deliver the clothes before seeing your family. Or, you could have failed to deliver the clothes and made up an excuse. Every decision we make is another step on the path of life." Madame Rosewell gave her a hard stare. "But make no mistake, every decision is a choice, Melinda."

Their conversation was interrupted by the ring of the tiny shop bell over the door. Melinda held her breath as Connor walked in. The she-wolf perked up from the corner of her mind where she spent the day curled up asleep.

Her mate's presence called to her and the wolf started pacing in Melinda's mind adding to her tension. "Connor, what are you doing here?"

He approached with slow steps. His smile and dark smoldering look was just for her. When he reached Melinda's side, he pulled her against his hard body and placed a kiss on the top of her head before he addressed the elder coven member. "Good evening, Teresa. I hope you aren't causing too many problems for my mate?"

Ignoring the veiled threat, Madame Rosewell laughed. "Of course not. I merely stopped by to chat and do a little window shopping."

Melinda turned and gave him a punch to the shoulder. "Leave my customer alone." To take the sting out of her reproof, she leaned up and kissed him on the lips. The wolf in her head made a happy rumbling sound almost like a purr. Her hands slipped under his forest green polo shirt to caress

the muscles along his back. She wanted to rip his shirt off and rub herself against him so his scent would cover her.

She pulled away and walked around the counter to put distance between them. "Is there something I can help you with? Or did you just stop by to torture me?"

"I need to order a new tuxedo. The last one had a mishap; there are quite a few tears in it."

Melinda smiled, quite pleased at how she'd used his last tux to throw his wolf form against the wall during their first encounter. She accessed his record on the computer. "We should be able to get one within the week."

"I also need to order a dress."

Melinda stared at him. "A dress?" She was proud her voice only squeaked a little.

"Mmmhummm." He rested his arms on the counter and stared into her eyes. "Now that I have a mate, she will be accompanying me to the parties I must attend."

"She will, will she? Perhaps you should try asking your mate if she is willing to attend said events before spending your money."

She moved away, annoyed at his assumption she would come at his beck and call. *Not that she wouldn't go, but it would still be nice to be asked.*

Connor rocked back on his heels and stuck his hands in his pants pockets. "Well, if she cannot attend, then I shall have to find another date." He turned to leave.

Melinda saw red and the wolf growled baring her teeth. Melinda snarled, "No. Mine."

Connor turned to her again, a triumphant smile on his face, "Good. Then you will order a dress and join me at the Paranormal Council Celebration in two weeks."

Angry at herself for falling for his trick, Melinda nodded. "I'll need new shoes as well."

He leaned over the counter and took a quick nip at her bottom lip, then soothed the area with his tongue. "Whatever you need. Just add the amount to my account."

Melinda wanted to melt into a pile of goo at his touch. She needed to get control. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yes. You can have dinner with me tonight?"

"Dinner?" She stared at him. Where he was going with this? She unconsciously licked her lips even as the wolf flashed images of eating deer and rabbit—something she was still squeamish about.

Connor looked down at the floor. "Yes, I thought we could go out and talk. Get to know each other."

Madame Rosewell, apparently taking pity on her, walked over and stood next to Connor "Of course, she'd be happy to join you." She pulled on Connor's arm, "Come. Let's leave her alone to finish her shift and close the store. You can return in two hours to pick her up."

Melinda shook her head and laughed as Connor beseeched her while the elderly woman pulled the powerful werewolf out of the store. With an extra bounce in her step, Melinda walked to the table with notebooks of example dresses. She sat down and began to flip through the special House of Pixie

book. Her heart felt lighter. The talk with Madame Rosewell and the prospect of seeing Connor energized her.

A picture of a low cut backless dress with slits up both sides made Melinda stop. She would look great in it. She balked at the price a moment before remembering Connor's offer to pay. Shrugging she filled out an order for the dress in silver with coordinating purse and shoes. She already had jewelry and a sparkling thong to match.

This would be the first outfit her mate would buy her and boy would he pay. At one time, she might have found it weird wearing a dress someone else bought. Right now, the thought of Connor's reaction to her in the dress was exciting. She wondered how long it would take him to get her out of it?

Maybe things weren't so bad after all.

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Chapter Eight

Snow covered the ground behind the house Melinda now shared with Connor. No longer worried about the cold, she wore a comfortable sweat suit. It was enough protection against the wet snow and easy enough to remove if she decided to go for a run. Melinda sat cross-legged in the middle of clearing enjoying the solitary night. A thin crescent moon provided enough light to see by with her wolf-enhanced sight.

A little over three months ago she lived a normal human life. Now she had no job, a new residence with a built-in mate, and she literally howled at the moon. Life had become interesting since Halloween.

Rachel came back from the Bhernha earthquake with a new apprentice in tow. The store could not support another full-time employee so Rachel let Melinda go. Connor offered her a guest room and with no immediate income, keeping the apartment would have been a waste of money. She smiled as she remembered their first few nights together—the separate bedrooms hadn't lasted long. Living together forced her to move beyond how she became a werewolf and to see Connor for the decent and loyal man he was.

Slam.

The sound of a car door being shut disturbed the silent night. Melinda shifted into a crouch, ready to attack whoever invaded her territory. A soft growl demonstrated her agitation.

A ball of white light floated into view. Melinda tilted her head up to examine it. The crunch of boots on the snow pulled her attention away from the white light and back to the possibility of a threat. As a figure in black stepped into the light, Melinda rose and crossed the clearing to stand a few feet from the intruder.

"Hello, Rachel. Out a bit late aren't we?"

The witch hesitated. "I just finished with a coven meeting and thought I would stop by and see how you are doing?"

"Long drive just to check up on me." A bit catty, but Rachel had been a coworker and friend. Her betrayal still hurt.

A gust of wind blew Rachel's knee length dress coat. "H ... How goes the job hunt?"

With a shrug, Melinda avoided eye contact with her former boss. "I haven't had a chance to look around." Not a total lie although she would need to find something soon. Connor might be wealthy, but Melinda couldn't sit around and do nothing all the time.

"I showed these sketches to a friend of mine. He would be interested in a partnership."

Rachel handed Melinda a packet of crumbled pages. Unfolding them, Melinda saw the matching purse, bracelet, necklace, and earrings she'd designed while at the store alone. "I don't understand. These are just something I worked on to pass the time."

Rachel held out a business card. "Give him a call. It can't hurt."

The name of the card gave Melinda pause. "This is for one of the biggest Dwarf families in jewelry!"

"Morgan does great metal and gem work but couldn't design a stick. It lowers his status in the family. A partnership could benefit you both."

Melinda's heart beat faster. To be able to draw again, aside from doodles, was exciting. "What's in it for you?" As pleased as she was about this turn of events, Melinda had to wonder about the witch's motives.

"I get first look at any merchandise and a 10% discount for two years."

Unlike Melinda, the cold night was making Rachel shiver. Melinda walked away from her and toward the front of the house. "I'll think about it."

Next to her car, Rachel nodded before opening the door. "You'll stop by the store when you come into town?" Her voice held a note of wistfulness or maybe hope.

"Yeah. If nothing else, I'll need to get out just to keep from snapping at Connor when he gets on my nerves. He's male after all." Their stilted conversation needed a bit of levity though they still had a way to go before an easy camaraderie would be reached again.

Melinda waved as Rachel turned the car around and headed back to town. As the red tail lights disappeared, she pulled her keys out to open the front door. Already her thoughts turned to the idea of a drafting table in the library. She knew just the right spot with enough light and a view of the woods.

She bounded up the stairs to get ready for bed. Her feet seemed to constantly move these days. She realized they were happy—both the she-wolf and Melinda. They had a mate and partner, a nice house with plenty of room to run, and now a potential job to keep them occupied.

A giddy smile was on her face as Melinda laid down and closed her eyes. Only one thing left to do tomorrow night when Connor returned ... tell him she was pregnant. He would have the family he desired and she couldn't be happier.

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