

Viola Grace

Sisters of Silverwood
Book 4



Chasing Carolyn

Chasing Carolyn: Book 4 of the
Sisters of Silverwood

By

Viola Grace

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Chapter One

Carolyn Sumner strode deliberately up the walk. She moved with purpose to the ancient and haunted house and raised her fist to knock on the door. Untouched by a human hand, the door swung open before her knuckles could make contact. "Tara! I need to use the basement!" Her announcement echoed in the entry way as she moved into the house.

Her paint splattered friend moved into her field of view, her head the only visible part of her in the hallway. "How long, Caro?"

"I have the running club in an hour, so thirty minutes of hard workout should do."

"I will have tea ready when you are done."

"Fantastic, see you soon." Having Tara in the neighbourhood had been a godsend to Carolyn when her own conspicuous consumption of exercise equipment had begun to cause comment. Sixteen treadmills per year were a little above average for a single woman at home. Even if she had them replaced under warranty. Eventually,

people stopped selling to her.

Tara, on the other hand, could purchase them under the guise of Williams Haunted House, and theoretically use them to power some of the special effects that her home was famous for. If only the public knew that the twice nightly performances of the haunted house were all Tara's doing. That was her particular exercise for her telekinesis, floating objects toward and away from the squealing customers. It was win win. They got scared, and Tara got to be part of the community and use her talent in public.

"There you are my beauty." The sleek lines of the treadmill were calling to her and, in mere seconds, she and the love of her life were reunited. She engaged in a light workout until she felt ready and the machine was warmed up, then she let go. Her legs pumped, feet pounded and the machine beneath her squeaked in protest. Regretfully, she slowed down. Sixty miles per hour was not something that the treadmill was designed to take.

"Well, this one isn't smoking, so you must be using self control." Tara had come downstairs and watched the end stages of her workout.

Caro caught the whiff of oil paint and smiled. "Have you been working on your masterpiece again?"

She was drying her hands on a towel. "No. Just some small pieces for a gallery in town. Fairy splats."

"Oh. I like those, they're cute." Carolyn hadn't even broken a sweat, her workout hadn't even done much to warm her muscles up. Darn. She was going to have to hold back during the running club.

Tara laughed and threw a towel at Caro's face. "Well, they sell well and that is what matters. I couldn't keep you in treadmills if not for my modest art sales."

"And I am grateful for your treadmills. They keep me from running through the woods and scaring the locals."

"Sure. Like they could identify the streak of flesh colored human zipping through the shrubs. You are rather quick, you know."

"I know. But I still worry about the freak factor."

"Preaching to the choir. I know how you feel." With not even a twitch of Tara's eye, the towel on Caro's head began to move and in seconds it was twirling through the air to snap her in the butt. Telekinesis at its most perverse.

"Tara. Sweetie. I love you, but towel snap me one more time and I am going to use my powers for evil. Shouldn't you be painting right now?" The spot on her thigh stung where the towel had made contact. Revenge was now added to her to-do list.

"I am. I have completed one of the paintings since I came down to chat and started on the other. What have you been doing aside from running

your mouth, slacker?" Tara ducked to avoid the towel that was no longer hovering, but now hurtling toward her out of her control. It was a mistake.

Caro lunged toward her buddy and made her move, a basic tickle attack that covered Tara from ribs to knees. "Kneel before me, insignificant one!" Her own laughter was hard to stifle and so they tumbled to the floor in a sprawl of shrieks and giggles.

It was five long minutes later before they separated and moved to opposite sides of the basement. Caro was panting as she stated, "You know, we might want to outgrow that sometime. It lacks a certain dignity."

"And yet, it still takes up a goodly portion of time. We must work on that."

"Yes. We must." The giggles took her over again and it was only a few seconds before she realized that their visit was ending. "Oh crud. I need to get going."

"Yup. Get out. The running club can't start without you."

"Fine. But I won the tickle fight." Smiling to herself she made her way up the stairs. Time with Tara always relaxed her. It was so nice to be able to talk to someone who didn't view her as a freak.

Chapter Two

“Would you two freaks just get away from me!” The running club had gathered at the corner of Poplar and Oak just as it always did. The two new additions had greeted her warmly and, as she organized the running groups, they took up positions to be in her personal pack, a coveted position that only one other runner had dared to attempt. Sophie ran with the light and hobby runners, now that her leg had healed. The break had kept her out of the running club for eighteen months, and she now steered clear of any paths that took her near black cats.

Caro wasn't running full out, just enough to make her look like a normal physically fit human. The boys were keeping up easily. Axom was on her left, his midnight hair carefully braided to his shoulders, and Ranal was on her left, his light brown hair rippling in the wind as he moved. They could run next to her and still talk, which was a clear indication of their paranormal origins. No

local human could keep up with her and still keep up their end of a conversation, let alone two. If Artemis hadn't called to give her the heads-up, she would have guessed that they were definitely not normal guys. They smelled like shape shifters. Big ones.

Of course, the slightly pointed ears also gave them away.

"Because one of us is your destiny and we want you to choose." Axom was always the first to speak. His scent matched his eyes, those of a big cat. With his lean and tanned body, he moved with the lithe grace of a panther, even when getting some Gatorade.

"Choose what?" She was being obtuse. Her old camp counselor Artemis had explained everything, but she liked to test the honesty of the men that were courting her. It was her one shot after all. How often did destiny come into one's life?

It was Ranal's turn, "One of us." He had the polar blue eyes of a Husky and the scent of a large dog. She was betting on werewolf.

"Fine, I choose Axom. Now go away." Her abrupt announcement had them stumbling and she simply let her speed increase until she had left them in her dust. Finally, Caro was able to let her senses free and she smelled, tasted, heard everything that was within a mile of her location. Her awareness of the world had rocketed out of

control the instant that she had her experience at camp.

The six other girls that she had spent her evenings with had grown up with different talents, but each just as strong in their own way. It was Tara who had let her know that the strangeness was not hers alone. They had kept in touch after Camp Silverwood and Caro had moved to be close to her friend as soon as financial circumstances would allow. Valentine and Holly had been the only other girls that they had been chatting with growing up, but recent conversations had filled in the missing time. Fiona, Westa and Hannah were all now living in the growing town of Silverwood with their new spouses and fiancés. Caro and Tara had known what was coming when Axom and Ranal had started to sniff around. It only took two days to find out which one of them they had come for. Caro tried to be flattered, but it was like broccoli, you know that it is good for you, but the idea is a little offputting, at least to her.

She slowed to a more normal speed when she reached the edge of the tree line and nodded to the police car that waited at the speed trap everyday for the commuters coming down the highway. Down the side of the road she trotted until she finally reached the starting-ending point of the running club.

"So, how did everyone do today, ladies and gentlemen?" She addressed the runners who had

chosen the shorter pathways.

"We did very well. Where are your running partners?"

"They decided on a different path. Oh, look. Here they come." The men were indeed showing evidence of the different path, and a fist fight. Axom was smiling while Ranal scowled in a most intimidating manner.

"Welcome back, lads. We thought you had been lost." Sophie and the other runners were smirking at the two athletic males approaching them. It was obvious that they had been fighting, but not clear who had won as they both were moving at a solid clip.

"No, my dear Sophie, we did not get lost." Axom once again spoke first.

"Shut up, you stupid cow." Ranal was his normal charming self.

Carolyn decided to take steps. "All in favour of banning Ranal from the Running Club, say aye." Caro raised her hand and counted the number of ayes in the crowd. The shout had almost deafened her. "That is sixteen ayes and two abstentions. Ranal, you are out."

The elf had the grace to look shocked. "Why? Why must I leave the club?"

Caro fielded the question, "Because you are rude, a snot and you tend to insult people when you are feeling self-conscious. Not endearing traits. We are together in this group for support

and enjoyment of running.” She crossed her arms over her breasts, “Get bent and get lost.”

With an armada of scowling faces looking at him, he had no choice but to beat a retreat. Carolyn felt a little sad, she hated to insult people in public, but there had been no other way to get the point across. Ranal had trouble taking a hint.

Watching his tight ass stride off made her slightly wistful for the lost opportunity, but she could not imagine her life with him, or even a night of fun. He didn’t seem the love’em and leave’em type. If she let him into her bed, he wouldn’t leave it without a forklift.

But now she was left with a purring lap cat in humanish form. Damned if you do...

Chapter Three

When the cheerful club had disbanded and Caro was left with Axom, they squared off. "So, I have picked you, now what?"

"I begin to court you." He gave her a devastating smile, his full lips stretching to expose his teeth. His very sharp white teeth. "Well, technically I have already begun."

"You have? Did I miss something?"

"Proving my physical prowess with the running club."

She thought about it for a moment, "Yeah, that was impressive, but I wasn't running flat out."

"Neither was I. I think a fair race with both of us in a relaxed environment free to use our talents would be much more entertaining." His confidence was palpable.

"So, how big a cat are you?"

"Big enough." His wink lent another meaning to his words.

To Caro's horror, she blushed. "That wasn't

what I meant. Never mind." She sighed and started to walk home, unsurprised when Axom fell into step beside her.

"Are you free tomorrow morning?"

"For what?"

"A traditional human date. Are you available?"

Human. Hmm. "Yes, you can pick me up at eight if you like."

"That will suit me very well." He offered her his arm, "May I escort you home?"

"After what I just had to do to Ranal, I would welcome the company. Thank you." She took hold of his arm, absently admiring his musculature and the diffident way he kept himself between her and traffic.

They walked in companionable silence for a few minutes until it was broken by a harsh growl. The wolf bounded out of the wooded border next to the road and confronted them with hackles raised.

Carolyn dropped her escort's arm and prepared to defend herself when a black panther suddenly moved between her and the wolf. So, this was Axom's alter ego.

The two creatures squared off and crouched in silence and raised fur. She couldn't call them animals, she knew them when they walked on two feet. Ranal was obviously wearing his other form, and since Axom was nowhere to be seen it was a good guess that her choice was walking on all fours. Either that or they were filming an episode

of the Wild Kingdom in her area and had forgotten to post the notices.

"Is this strictly necessary?" She remained in her fighting stance, but if she could stop whatever was about to happen, she wanted to.

Neither animal answered, but both tails lashed, almost in unison. It was a clear yes. Answering to some signal that only they could detect, they charged at each other. There were flashing fangs and flying fur everywhere.

Ranal seemed to be a stress shedder. Clumps of grey fur were littering the grass as the creatures rolled and grappled for supremacy. A harsh yelp and a brutal growl a few minutes later, and the wolf was running back through the brush, the panther in hot pursuit.

Carolyn stood bemused, her feet almost nailed to the ground. What the hell had just happened? If she was not mistaken, that had been a fight for her hand. Weird. Shaking herself into a more alert state of being, she headed home.

She had only made it approximately half a block when Axom reappeared next to her, once again extending his arm. Sighing deeply, she took it. "Was that truly necessary?"

"For Ranal it was. He cannot simply leave because the female rejected him. He needed to be defeated." His voice was calm, his stride sure and the musk surrounding him was glaringly obvious to her. He had worked up a sweat.

"I thought it would take you longer to shift forms, you were really quick." She tried to keep her voice calm, it wasn't easy when her hormones were surging to the fore. The musk coming off of him was driving her nuts, she must be going into heat again. Damn it.

"The transformation speed depends on the magic in the area. With no source to draw on, it is likely that it took Ranal much longer than it took me."

"I am that source?"

"You are indeed. Your magic manifests in your physical form, your skills, your speed, hearing and other senses." He patted the hand on his arm in a comforting manner.

Including her propensity to go into heat, but she wasn't sharing that particular with him. She wasn't due for a full on scream until the end of the week. Caro tended to go bonkers twice a year, though lately it had been growing more frequent. "You feed off that? I am not sure that I like the sound of being a living battery."

"It is not that I feed off you, but that you give out energy, like the sun or moon."

"Passive exposure gets you charged?" She meant to put in a double entendre, but he seemed to miss it.

"Indeed, Ranal had tried to get close to you on several occasions, but you moved away from him and withheld your positive energy from him. He

could not gain additional power or skills, so he knew he was not your choice before you shunned him."

"It was not a surprise? So why the attack on you?"

"It was form, as I said. Wolves challenge each other for mates, not the mate themselves."

She smiled at that thought. "It would be slightly counterintuitive to beat one's prospective mate to death."

He chuckled at that, "Indeed."

They had reached her street and passed Tara's home on the corner. Her friend was waving on the porch, looking both surprised and smug. A light pink daisy flew from her garden to land in Caro's hair. Carolyn chuckled.

"Your friend, Tara?"

"Yeah, and the only hesitation I have about leaving this town to take up residence in Silverwood."

"We will discuss that at a later time. You don't need to think about leaving today." He drew her arm closer to him and gave her a light squeeze.

"Thank you for that. This is my home." She turned and removed her hand from his possession. "I will say good evening to you then, Axom."

"And I will see you tomorrow morning for our date." He retrieved one of her hands and lifted it gently to his lips. The rasp of his tongue on the back of her hand had her shivering and he left her

with a wink and a smile.

Dear god, he had a cat's tongue in human form. Keeping up her self control would be almost impossible. And there was another question, what would an elf do on a first date?

Chapter Four

“I love your car.” She couldn’t stop the blurt, the car was amazing. It had the lines of a classic mustang with swirls of ivory and smoky blue running across the side panels. The make and model escaped her though.

Axom smiled at her as she belted up and he put the car in gear. “They have that effect on people.”

He was talking about them as a species, weird. “They?”

“The steeds of the hunt.” He was a competent driver, he kept his hands on the wheel and only glanced at her as he pulled away from the curb.

That was unexpected, she was riding in a horse? “But this is your car, not your horse.”

“She chooses to be one or the other.”

Of course it was a girl. “She?”

“Her name is Mavix. She chose me as her rider over six hundred years ago.”

He was really not the type to look his age then. “Funny, I wouldn’t have pegged you for more than

one hundred and ninety nine."

His glare was almost palpable, so she had to laugh as he gunned the engine and they were off.

"Where are we going?" Her curiosity got the better of her, she had to know.

"To somewhere I am pretty sure you have never been before, and a place that your enhanced reflexes will not help you to manage the task."

"Now you have me intrigued. So, where are we going exactly?"

It was his turn to laugh. "So, how have you and Tara managed to keep up your friendship over the years?"

"It took a lot of work, like all friendships do, but we both knew it would be worth it."

"Why did you move to be near her?"

"I can use my talents anywhere. She needs her house to hide her gifts, and the community that expects the unusual from her." Caro could hear the warmth in her voice and let it flow. Her abiding friendship with Tara was one of the cornerstones of her life. Tara had been her rock when her body became stronger and faster, and the neighbours started to notice. They hadn't been as encouraging as her friends and family. Her family had helped her buy a house near Tara in this small town the instant that she had turned eighteen. To date, the only frowns she got were from the health equipment suppliers.

"So, you are happy here?"

"I am happy to be near my friends and family. Anything else can be changed and it usually does change, all on its own."

"That is a very healthy outlook. Not many people have it in this generation."

That was creepy. He had already mentioned how old he was, he didn't need to rub it in. "A few of us do, but you are right, it isn't a common outlook. So, where are we going, Grandpa?"

That earned her a scowl. "Referring to me in such a manner is only going to inhibit our trip for ice cream on the way home."

She let out what she had to admit was a nasty chuckle. "That isn't really going to stop me. You brought up the matter of your age." She put another tip into place. "I am guessing that Artemis tipped you off that I know what you are."

"Indeed. I can tell you, it is a relief. The first few of us to try and win your kind over had to contend with a certain amount of disbelief."

"Well, you can imagine how it sounds in our modern world to hear that elves are coming back into it, and we are the gateways. How does that work exactly?"

"Each of your group was born with the seeds of natural magic inside them. Your summer at Silverwood woke the seed and it began to grow within you. Silverwood was originally a gateway between the human and elven worlds, we called our world Underhill." His tone was wistful, he was

obviously seeing something in his mind that she could not imagine.

She left him in his thoughts and tried to imagine where they were headed. She didn't recognize the route that they were taking, but there was nothing on the highway to indicate a destination or even the road that they were on. They were truly on the road to nowhere.

Three times in the next hour, she wanted to start a conversation, but fell short. The silence was nice. He had relaxed and was smiling slightly whenever he looked at her, which was every five minutes or so. She couldn't help but smile back. Unlike the jocks that had pursued her in the past, he seemed simply happy to be near her. Caro was a little surprised to feel the same.

It was weird to have a male as a companion and not just a convenience. It was a comfortable feeling.

Just as she was surrendering to the odd feeling of serenity that was taking her over, she saw what had to be their destination. An enormous silo attached to an outbuilding. The purpose of the structure was not clear, but when Axom turned in, it was obviously their destination.

"We have arrived." He turned the car off and exited to come around to her door.

"I can see that, but where is here?"

"My dear Carolyn. We are going to learn to fly."

He took her hand as she left the car and led her

bemused self to the buildings. She could not have heard him correctly.

Chapter Five

“You know, I don’t usually let a guy see me in baggy nylon on the first date.” She finished zipping up the suit and moved her arms to test her range of motion. The helmet and goggles were next. She was snugging the helmet into place when he turned her and gave her a short kiss on the nose.

“Well, thank you for making the exception.” His grin was irresistible, the white expanse of his teeth winking at her with a just a hint of sharpened canine showing. He finished with his own suit in a dashing black and silver, then calmly fastened his matching helmet into position over his pointy ears.

They had finished the orientation at the In Fly Entertainment centre in just over half an hour and were getting ready to enter the silo portion of the facility. They were about to fly in winds that reached one hundred and twenty miles per hour, and they had all day to play. Axom had booked the facility for them for six hours.

Today Caro was going to learn to fly.

She couldn't wait.

Her hands were trembling with eagerness to jump onto the column of air, and with the help of Jenny, their instructor, that is just what she did.

Forty feet was as high as she could climb by turning her body into a pancake. The acrobatics were easier and rarely under her control. She spun, flipped and pirouetted on point while laughing and grinning herself silly.

At last she had to concede Axom his turn. The grace that he exhibited while running and just breathing carried into the air. Caro took a seat against the padded walls and just watched him roll, twist, climb and descend. It was beautiful. If she had half his grace, she would have been stunning in her acrobatics.

As if she had summoned him, Axom approached her while still flying and held out his hand. They had gone over the possibility of tandem flying, but she hadn't thought that she would go that far.

It seemed far too intimate for a first date and yet, he hovered there until she nodded, stood and joined him in the air. It was magic. They connected with their hands, separated, backflipped with their feet together and then floated in a lazy spin. Time ceased and eventually their Jenny appeared to tell them that their time was up.

Reluctantly, they descended to the mesh floor and rejoined the ground-walking society. With her

goggles off and her helmet in her hands, Carolyn looked longingly back at the air tunnel. "I really want one of those."

"I will distract them, you stick it in your purse." He was smiling and looked as enamoured with their experience as she was.

"Ha. Very funny." Her stomach growled alarmingly. "I think we may have missed lunch."

He stripped out of his suit, "We didn't miss it. It is in a cooler in the car." His t-shirt and jeans fit him like a well tailored suit. A very sexy well tailored suit. All the smooth muscles of a Grecian statue on display behind modern clothing. What a wonderful age to live in.

Chapter Six

“So, you teach me to fly and then you set up a picnic? There is nothing that I admire more than a man who can plan ahead.” Crusty breads and cheeses were laid out on the traditional chequered cloth with fruit adding a colourful splash to the array.

“I do try. It is hard to find a balance with the modern woman and romance. I believe I have done well.” He cracked the bread in half and poured her a glass of sparkling grape juice.

“You have indeed. And you noticed that I don’t drink alcohol, very nice.”

“I have your friend Tara to thank for that one. I asked her for advice on your food preferences.”

His honesty was refreshing. “That took some guts. Most men would not dare go to a woman’s best friend before the first date.”

“I am not most men.” He offered her some of the food on a white china plate, smiling when she took it.

That smile was going to be the death of her. "I think I am beginning to believe that." She toasted him with the glass of juice and grinned back at him. The next half hour was spent in silence. She took in the panorama of the field, the flowers and the pasture that their vantage point overlooked. A horse was grazing off to one side, its dark hide gleaming blue and a deep smoke as it moved slowly through the bucolic splendour.

It was a fantastic view. And the company wasn't bad either.

By the time Carolyn had finished munching, Axom had cleaned his plate and put it back in the container near the cooler. He took hers from her and, in a few economic movements, everything was packed away.

When they were sitting and looking at the horse that had decided to play on its own in the field, Axom lightly took her hand, "I am going to ask you a question, and I would like you to consider it carefully."

She blinked and met his serious gaze. "Shoot."

"I would like you to accompany me to Silverwood tomorrow. There is no running club and if you have no other plans I would like you to see the home that I would offer you." He was completely sincere.

"Wow. I need to think about this. Is that horse coming closer?"

"What?" He looked up. "Oh, that is Mavix. She

likes to graze when she doesn't need to provide transport."

She had known that the car was a shape shifter, but this beautiful horse was picking up speed and coming straight at her. The look in Mavix's eyes was pure challenge.

"Axom. This is about to get ugly." Caro got to her feet and watched the horse come. The beating of hooves against the turf was hypnotic, but she kept her wits about her as the horse charged.

Axom sat bemused as Caro began to run toward Mavix. She left him on the chequered cloth and answered the unspoken challenge that the steed was offering. If she wanted to race, it was on.

Mavix didn't slow, but matched Caro speed for speed as she began to race the horse across the field.

This was the race that she had wanted, needed. With the steed thundering beside her, trying to keep up, Carolyn raced laps around the field. Her limbs moved effortlessly and she embraced the feeling, so akin to flying that she got when she truly ran.

Mavix's breath was coming harder, she was blowing and Caro smiled. She had outlasted the supernatural horsey. One more lap and she slowed herself enough to see Axom standing with surprise in his eyes.

She dropped to the ground, breathing lightly. "Well, that was fun."

"I don't think that Mavix was expecting that."

"I wasn't expecting it, but there it was. I couldn't resist." She was genuinely tired. It was a good feeling, like her body had finally caught up to its potential.

"Have you ridden a horse before?"

"No. I haven't had the chance."

"If you are willing, I think Mavix would be a good subject for your first time. She is too tired to put up a fight and it will reinforce the fact that you are in charge."

Should she or shouldn't she? Riding the horse would be fantastic, but she didn't think that it would be fair to take advantage of the horse in her tired state. "I think I will wait until it is a fair fight." Mavix eyed her with what only could be termed relief. They were both tired and it was unmistakable that Caro had won the first round.

"If you wish. So, will you come with me to Silverwood tomorrow?"

She looked from him to the horse that had suddenly grown a horn. "I think that I might enjoy that. Yes. I will come with you." His smile blinded her. She blinked to stop the warmth blooming within her. "But it doesn't mean anything. I just want to see Artemis and the girls again."

His nod let her know that he didn't believe her for an instant. Funny, she didn't believe herself either.

Chapter Seven

The drive to Silverwood was another trip in companionable silence. Carolyn sat in the leather seats and simply enjoyed the feel and sound of the car around her. The edges of the road grew from rural to heavily forested with a gradual shift. They were almost there.

"Have you been back since your summer there?"

"To Silverwood? No. It has never seemed right before."

"It feels right now?"

"Yep. Or I wouldn't be here." She felt more sure of that than she did of anything. It was time to go back, but only because Tara would be coming along soon. If her best friend would not be with her, she simply would not have considered it.

He turned the wheel and in seconds they were moving through the covered drive that was the entryway to Silverwood. As the trees thinned out there was only one thing for Caro to say. "Holy

shit."

"A little bit of new development has happened since you were last here."

Her sarcasm broke free, "Oh, you think?" The small city that was taking shape before her eyes amazed her. Neat and tidy homes with enormous yards spun out on spokes from the central town square which was actually a circle.

"Holy crap."

"It is easier for us to enter the modern world and integrate with a solid starting point."

"This is pretty solid. How long did it take?"

"Construction started right after you and your companions left. So, around ten years or so." He steered Mavix smoothly around the square.

"Is everyone here male?"

"There are five other women currently here, aside from yourself."

"Westa, Fiona, Artemis, Valentine and Hannah." She knew them all.

"Wow. You really have been in touch with them." They were heading into one of the spokes, the height of the trees was truly amazing.

"How did they build the houses without pulling down the old growth trees? It doesn't seem likely that they grew afterward."

"They were very careful. The houses were all made from local trees and rocks as well."

"How thorough."

Mavix glided to a halt. The enormous structure

that they were in front of had to be his home. There were balconies everywhere. The perfect place for a big cat to curl in the sun.

"This is my home."

"I guessed as much." As soon as Axom lifted her overnight bag from the trunk and closed it, the car turned back into a horse and scampered off.

"Where is Mavix going?"

"Probably to play with the other steeds. There are over thirty of them here." He opened the door without a key and she shook her head. This didn't need to be a gated community. Who would steal from one of the Wild Hunt and live to tell the tale?

Chuckling, she followed Axom as he gave her the tour of the house, including the odd hallways that led nowhere and the endless doors to the balconies. "So, I am guessing you like windows? Lying in the sun?"

"And wandering around the house naked. There is a reason that you can't see any of my neighbours' houses from here."

"Is strutting naked an elf thing? Or is it just you?"

"It's a shifter thing. The less clothing you have on, the faster the shift."

Her bag was now in one of the guestrooms. "Do you have time trials for something like that?" They were on their way to the living room. Carolyn claimed the sofa with her arms spread wide.

He laughed, a nice dark comfortable laugh. "We

do when we are learning. Now it is simply a matter of pride."

"Feline pride or personal pride?"

He barked another laugh. "Both."

"So. What is on the agenda for today? Fishing? Are you going to bake cookies?"

He sat back in the recliner. "I thought that you would like to go for a run. Full out. In public."

This was better than getting flowers and chocolates. "Are you serious? Won't anyone notice?"

"Everyone will notice, but no one will judge you for it. In Silverwood, the extraordinary is the everyday."

"You should put that on the Welcome to Silverwood sign." She got back to the matter at hand. "But seriously. I can run here?"

"You can run, jump, lift and do whatever your body tells you to do. There are no restrictions for you here."

"Just a minute." She ran up the stairs, changed into her running gear and was down the stairs again before he had gotten out of his recliner. "Okay, let's go."

"Let me get ready and I will join you."

"What?" It was too late, he was stripping off. "Oh, my." The planes of muscle as well as his semi-aroused cock were only visible to her for a moment and then the shifting began. In less time than it took for her to recover from a sneeze, she

was standing next to an enormous panther.

"Let me get the door." The cat walked up to her and rubbed against her with his head. He almost knocked her over with his enthusiasm. Caro moved toward the door and noted the large pad on the inner frame. It was a metal plate surrounded by claw marks, obviously used by Axom when he was shifted alone. "Or perhaps you should open it. I am a lady after all." She gently moved his head away and he rubbed her one more time, then hit the plate to have the door swing open.

Carolyn did not waste any more time. She had the all clear to run as fast and as far as she could, so she did. It was fantastic. Each and every step she took gained more and more speed until she knew she was a blur on the landscape. Her enhanced eyesight took in the design of the town, registered the hands raised in greeting as she whipped past, welcomed the sight of Fiona and Westa, and her hearing kept her apprised of how close Axom was.

Her blood was singing in her veins. This was the first time in her life that she was able to use her abilities to their fullest, and she wasn't going to let go of the feeling anytime soon. When a car pulled out in front of her, she vaulted over it. When a tree seemed to appear in her way, she used a grip on the bark to change her direction. As she crossed a field, a small herd of steeds decided to race her, so she let them win. Axom was running at her side by the time she left the field and she was revelling in

her new freedom as she led the way back to his house.

Sweat was coating her from head to toe and she knew that she must look a fright, but the instant that they got into Axom's home, she was on him. "Shift in to your bipedal form, I am not going to have sex with a cat."

Chapter Eight

“Normally I wouldn’t jump a guy in this state, but I want you now and I don’t want to change my mind.” She was shaking with the urge to throw herself on him.

His shift was mercifully brief and it was a very surprised Axom that caught her as she lunged at him. Since he was nude, she was fighting to get her own clothing off as quickly as she could. He helped her, and finally after thirty seconds of waiting, they were skin to skin.

“Oh yeah. That is what I want.” She ran her hands down his chest, his sides, then cupped his ass. It was only when he buried his hand in her hair and took her mouth in an eating kiss that she remembered the niceties of sex. As he let her go, she asked, “So, did you want to fuck me here or in your room?”

“I am going to *make love* to you in my bed.” He suited words to actions and picked her up by wrapping her thighs around his and walking up

the stairs.

The friction of his rock hard cock against her pussy was maddening. She angled her hips slightly to get more direct pressure on her clit and mewled when she was successful. He groaned as she worked herself against him.

The distinct pressure of a door at her back made her groan with relief. The bed was imminent. A few seconds later, he tilted her back onto the soft and silky surface with another groan. She had locked her legs behind his back and was dragging him with her. He almost slid into her through the slick moisture that she was copiously producing. He stopped just as he entered her.

"Carolyn."

She barely heard him through the pleasure that that one inch was giving her.

"Carolyn."

"What?"

His face was serious with beads of sweat dripping onto her as he breathed deeply, "With this action, we are mated."

"Yeah, sure. Whatever." She arched against him, "More, please."

He gave her what she wanted, slow and hard. He pulled almost all the way out of her and then slid to the hilt over and over until she was panting and squealing with each thrust. Her body was a coil of muscle and sensation being drawn ever tighter. Finally, it snapped and she screamed in

relief as her body trembled and shook in reaction.

Axom grinned in triumph and increased the speed of his thrusts, drawing out her aftershocks and reaching for his own release. Caro could feel her body climbing the sensation mountain again when his face contorted and he jerked into her, hard. The shudder and groan that he emanated was rather gratifying for Caro, she wasn't sure that she had been the only one having a good time.

As Axom collapsed onto her, she wrapped herself around him. Her arms were around his back, her thighs around his hips and his head tucked down on her shoulder. It was nice.

Her body was still humming with energy, but she could wait. Maybe. As their bodies cooled, she smelled something aside from their joining, the scent of blood. Had he bitten her? Had she bitten him?

"You grabbed my back. It felt good at the time." He kissed her neck lightly.

Obviously, she had been speaking out loud.

"No. You were speaking in your mind. I can just read your mind at this range, now that we are mated."

"We are *what*?" Wait, she remembered. He had said something right when she had been begging him to screw her.

"Yes. That was the moment. I had to warn you before, or you would have been able to challenge our mating in front of witnesses."

"So, you are saying that we are mated."

"Yes."

"Is this a for life thing?"

"Yes."

"What are your duties in this arrangement?"

"To maintain a home, to keep you well supplied with whatever you need and to keep you satisfied when you go into heat. Those are the basics."

He was still speaking into her neck, and as he spoke, he began to lick the sensitive side of her neck with a tongue that was just as raspy as the big cat's. "I can keep the attributes that I wish to."

"That is getting annoying."

"Sorry." He seemed distinctly unrepentant as his spent shaft slipped out of her while he worked his way to her breasts. That rough tongue was going to be the death of her.

"I will remember that."

He learned each and every curve and texture of her breast, her nipples were worshiped in turn and she climaxed twice while he learned her body. By the time he made his way down her belly and between her thighs, she was exhausted. Her body flared to life under his touch and tongue once again as the dexterous appendage parted her lower lips and lapped at the moisture that her body was still producing.

Caro could only moan as he worked her body's reactions with a delicacy and precision that left her gasping. When she threaded her fingers through

his hair and tried to pull him up, he decided to oblige her, surging into her as he took her mouth with his own. He maintained the kiss as his hips rocked his shaft into her and he took her scream for his own as he spilled into her again.

Instead of slumping on her this time, he rolled to put her on him. Caro couldn't move. Her entire body was limp, the product of the run, the exertion, and the elf under her. She couldn't remember ever being this tired.

Clearly, she got one thought in her mind. *Dude, I need a shower.* In seconds he had rolled to his feet and carried her into the bath. This psychic thing may not be all bad.

Chapter Nine

“Carolyn, Westa and Henry have invited us over for dinner. Would you like to go?”

Axom was towelling her dry and she had to smile. He was asking her if she wanted to go out. That was so cute. “Thank you. I would like to go. But after this afternoon, I don’t know how long my legs will hold out.”

“If you need it, I will call Mavix and she can carry you home.” His smile was impish.

“Right, do you want my thighs permanently splayed.” She realized what she had just said, “Don’t answer that.”

“Oh, but I want to.”

“Shut it. When do we need to leave?”

“About ten minutes.”

“You really left it until the last minute, didn’t you?”

He was slightly sheepish, “I was hoping you wouldn’t want to go and we could continue learning each other.”

“Axom, the only thing I would learn tonight is how you change your sheets. We got blood and, uh, stuff all over the ones on your bed.”

“Good point. I am going to change those while you get dressed.”

Leaving the comfort and delicate ministrations of his long fingers and the fluffy towel, she wandered naked into the guest room and grabbed a pair of jeans and a button down blue cotton shirt that made her look both classy and competent. Underwear was her normal practical cotton and lycra mix, not that Axom had noticed its lack of style. She did wish she had brought some of the prettier selections of her lingerie drawer. Well, she could not have anticipated jumping a werecat after a run.

She was just finishing her toilette when Axom appeared at her door looking good enough to eat. She would have to try that later. His smiled indicated that he liked the idea.

“You look lovely. Shall we go?”

“Sure. It will keep my muscles from locking up.” Axom extended his arm and she took it, leaning on him a little more heavily than she would have if her thighs were able to meet in the centre again. She waddled and she knew it.

It was a short waddle. Two streets over and they were at the home of Lucky and Henry. Westa’s face lit up when she saw Caro, and Carolyn could only marvel at the happiness that glowed from her

friend's face.

Henry was doing his own glowing, only with a sort of dark moonlight happiness. But together they looked fantastic.

"Carolyn, I am pleased to meet you." Henry immediately took over as host since Caro and Lucky were squealing and hugging.

As they parted with them both wiping happy tears from their eyes, Caro turned to Henry. Impulsively, she hugged him. He had made Westa happy, and that was good enough for her.

Axom let her hug his friend for thirty seconds, then he pulled her away. "You are going to give Henry a headache. He won't know which one of you to comfort first."

"Fine. But you have to stay next to me all night in case I get the urge to hug someone." Caro tried to be serious, but she kept Axom's arm around her as they went into the dining room. She just liked the feel and smell of him to be close.

It was a new addiction and she was willing to feed it.

Dinner was a friendly affair—salads, pasta, a nice grilled and spiced chicken breast. There was wine, but Caro and Westa did not drink. Carolyn knew that her metabolism burned the alcohol quickly, but with Westa, there could be one very likely reason. She inhaled deeply and asked with a grin, "So, Lucky, how pregnant are you?"

She was astonished. "How did you know?"

Henry was looking shocked and pleased at the same time.

"You smell pregnant, and you weren't drinking wine. You used to love wine."

Henry was taking Westa's hand and rubbing the palm. "I smell pregnant? How good is your nose?"

"Pretty darn good. You used to smell like oak and lilac, now you smell like acorns."

"Thanks, I think." Westa looked over to Henry. "I was going to tell you as soon as I was sure. I can't be more than two weeks along."

His smile was still wide and genuine. "I didn't think you would hide it from me, I am just excited and pleased that it has happened. Our race does not have a high birth rate in general. Children are cherished, no matter when or how they appear."

With the other couple firmly engaged in their own meeting of hands and hearts, Carolyn turned to Axom. "Is what he said true? About your birth rate?"

He kept his voice low as Henry placed his hand over Westa's abdomen. "Yes. For years we were afraid that we would die out as a species. When we left the Earth into Underhill, we hoped for the day that magic would decide it was safe to return. That day has finally come. It has come in the form of psychics, people of exceptional ability, and those who carry pure magic in their blood. You seven are the latter. To anchor our species to this time and place, we need you, and will do whatever it takes

to get you to accept us.”

“You are serious.”

“Oh, yes. Nothing here occurred by chance. This town was created to blend in with the local communities, dozens of males were considered for each of you with only your best match being chosen to actually meet you in person.”

She was getting a little irritated at their highhanded behaviour. “And who made this choice?”

“That would be your friend Valentine. She came here after she was attacked by the Lios who tried to take her. She has been instrumental in choosing the right elf for the correct woman. With Westa, Fiona and Hannah, she is branching into matching the rest of the males here at Silverwood.”

Carolyn looked over at Lucky and Henry. They were watching her. “Is this true?”

Henry answered, “We cannot lie, but yes, it is true. Westa spends the better part of each day helping Valentine and the others find matches for the unmated males who volunteered to be matched to a human.”

“Some didn’t volunteer?”

“Some consider humans beneath them and they will remain in Underhill while the rest of us meet this new world head on.” He shrugged. “They will have a chance to reconsider in a few hundred years.”

“Okay. That seems like a long time.”

"You will get used to an enhanced life expectancy. The magic in you will not let you die for several hundred years."

That was a bit of a shocker. "Enhanced life expectancy?"

"A minimum of four hundred years." It was Lucky talking now, perhaps to calm Caro who had let a shrill tone creep into her voice. "The magic that we carry wants a chance to develop and grow. Tell me that you haven't felt like a million bucks and never even gotten the sniffles since you came into your power."

Caro thought for a long moment. She could remember getting a sniffle when she was eight, but nothing since the summer that she spent at Camp Silverwood. Her talents had become glaringly obvious as soon as she got home, her speed increasing exponentially until she was no longer allowed to participate in school sports. They couldn't figure out how she was doing it, so they disapproved of her ability to participate. It sucked.

"All right, I will concede that I have not felt ill, injured myself, and that I have a peculiar energy that has been growing in intensity lately. But living that long? Come on."

Axom took her hand. "Well, since part of our tradition is to not outlive our mates, I hope for all our sakes that you live a long healthy life."

"You are joking."

"I am not. If you die before me, I will follow you

within days. It is simply the way we are. It is why the males who are entering your world have a true commitment to the expansion of magic. They know that they will not outlive their mates to try again."

Even Westa looked shocked at that. Apparently Henry hadn't told her that one either.

"Okay. On that note, Axom and I are going to call it an evening. It looks like you need to beat your fiancé. Night, Westa! Henry!" Caro grabbed Axom by the hand and had him out the door by the time she was finished talking.

Outside she still wasn't sure what she would say to Axom. Sure he was fun, sexy, caring and made her heart beat faster when he walked into a room, but to bind her lifeline to his permanently? It was something to think about.

He would not let her mull it over in silence, however. "It is our choice, you know. We know that our long lives can end when we marry a human. We do it for love. Love of our race, love of magic and love for our mates. That one most of all."

"But you hadn't even met me when you were sent to me."

"I knew that they would not send me to a woman I could not love, and the instant I saw you I knew that you were the right woman for me." He took her hand and brought it to his lips, then released it.

“And my choice? Where was that?”

“You have had years to date, to make up your mind. Many women your age are married with children. The magic within you was calling to something else. Something like me.” A smile spread across his face as she took his hand in hers.

“You are right. It would only answer to someone who could run with me. Could fight with me and could survive sex with me. I broke two of my boyfriends and then gave up on the species.”

“Broke them?”

“One arm and one penis.”

“Oh my.” His laughter was contained, but only for a moment before it broke free to run through the streets of Silverwood.

Chapter Ten

The welcome warmth of his home wrapped around them the instant that they arrived. It was nice, but she wanted something that wasn't warm, but hot. "Axom, are you up for another round of *getting to know you better?*" She was suiting her actions to match her words and stripping as she spoke. She was down to her serviceable underwear when arms wrapped around her from behind.

"Of course I am. But I was thinking that perhaps you needed some time to get a grip on every thing you learned this evening."

Her hands moved behind her, between their bodies, "I think I have a pretty good grip right here."

He turned her in his arms after carefully disengaging her hands. "Are you sure?"

"Axom, I am action, I am impulse. I am definitely sure. I was sure when I said I would come with you to Silverwood, and I am sure now."

She had her head tilted back to meet his serious gaze, but it was no use. She saw his mouth and wanted it on her. She decided to make an effort. She slid her hands up his chest and wrapped them around his neck to bring his head to hers. The kiss seemed to get his mind off her delicate emotional state, especially when she reached down to stroke his cock through his trousers. "Do I seem upset to you?"

"Um, no."

He trailed his lips down her throat to the delicate area on the side of her neck that made her shudder in reaction. She loosened the fastenings of his trousers as he worshipped the spot on her neck that made her knees buckle. "We need to get you on a more stable surface."

He tugged her over to the couch and pushed her down on it in a seated position. Then things got serious. He touched and tasted all of her, without moving her bra and panties, and finally her frustration got the better of her. "My turn."

He had the grace to look surprised as she used her greater than average strength to push his shoulders away from her. She stood and switched their positions. His pants came off with a few deliberate tugs and she smiled as his erection rose to almost touch his belly. She leaned forward to give him a kiss as her hands stroked his pecs and biceps with appreciation. "Nice."

"Thank you." His face was bemused as if this

was the last thing he had planned, but that he was pleased it was happening.

She decided to get right to the point and lowered her head to take his cock in her mouth. His dramatic inhalation was encouragement enough and she continued her exploration with her tongue. The heat of him in her mouth was intoxicating, as was the scent and taste of him. She drew her head back almost to his tip and then moved forward again with a steady beat until his shaft moved to meet her mouth. At that moment she took her mouth from him and stood.

With his heated gaze watching her every move, she removed her bra and then her panties with few wasted movements. It felt like the longest striptease ever.

She stood before him, nude, for only a few seconds until her instincts got the better of her. She moved to stand between his legs and mounted him without further ceremony. He slid easily into her, her body having been primed by his foreplay and hers. She rode him with abandon, his hands gripped her hips and pulled her onto him as their bodies slapped together with a ferocity that she had been unable to engage in with her previous beaus.

Sweat began to run down her body as she moved faster and faster on him, peaking with a gasp that froze her in place while she tried to hold him fast within her. As she relaxed, she let her

body fall softly against him. Caro nestled her head between Axom's neck and shoulders. "That was nice. Did you want something else?" She clenched around him and was answered with another growl.

"My turn."

It was all the warning she got before he separated their bodies and placed her on the carpet on her hands and knees. He was inside her again before she could blink and she arched to meet his thrusts. He pounded against her relentlessly with his own pleasure on the agenda, so they were both caught by surprise when she climaxed again, her upper body sinking to the carpet as she waited out the aftershocks.

His orgasm finally struck as he gripped her hips to keep them accessible. He jerked against her once, twice and then bore her down to the carpet. "That was what I wanted." He breathed heavily in her ear, then rolled so that he was on the bottom and moved her so that she was lying across his chest.

"Me, too." She snuggled down against him. He made a fantastic mattress.

Chapter Eleven

Breakfast in bed had been wonderful, even though Axom had insisted on eating it off and out of her. A shower fixed everything and he had held her up so that her wobbly knees wouldn't be a problem.

"So, Axom. I have to ask you. What would I do here? I mean, there is no business that I need to take part in, the girls are handling the matchmaking and my skills are physical anyway. There is nothing for me to do here."

He stirred his coffee leisurely. "Actually, there is a task that Artemis would like you to take on."

"What would that be?"

"She would like you to agree to become the human etiquette counsellor and instructor for the men coming through the gate to Underhill."

"They are still coming through?"

"One or two every day. Each one of them last walked the human world over three hundred years ago. They need help." He took a few long

sips of his coffee and eyed her carefully. He didn't know how she would react and it showed.

"What would I need to tell them?"

"How the modern world works, money, food, shelter and social mores. There is a basic curriculum available from what we were trained with. Even with that, it took us five years to be competent in local customs."

"Wow. Five years." Was that the kind of time that she was willing to give to training a group of ancient elves and whatever? She had to be honest. It was an interesting proposition. "I will do it."

She had surprised him. "What?"

"I will do it. I want to make a life here, with you, and this is the one thing that I need to do to make it happen. So, for better or worse, I will stay here with you and train the newcomers."

Something she had said triggered him into motion. He ran out of the kitchen and up the stairs, only to return in a matter of half a minute. He skidded to his knees in front of her and held out a small leather box. "Carolyn Sumner, will you be my mate, er, wife?"

"What is your last name Axom?"

He flushed crimson, "Adilik. I cannot believe that I haven't told you that."

"I can." She took a deep breath and answered his original question, "Axom Adilik, I will marry you. Be your mate. Shorten your lifespan. All of the above."

Tears in his eyes, he drew her to him. "I promise to be the best mate I can be."

"So do I." She smiled and opened the box. "Holy hell!" The rock was the size of her thumb nail and it practically hummed with age. She was afraid to put it on, so Axom did it for her.

It was a perfect fit.

"Don't worry about losing it, it is enchanted to be found by the owner. Which is now you." He smiled at her and gave her a light kiss on the lips to help warm her out of her shock. "Let's go for a run."

If anything could have shaken her out of her stupor it was that one word. Run. She looked over at him. "Well, are you coming?" And with a sudden burst of speed, she was out the door and heading down the street.

Axom, in panther form, caught up to her because she let him. She continued to run and passed through the paddock holding the steeds. Together, she and her herd ran from one end of the paddock to the other.

This is what she wanted.

Running, life and her chosen male chasing Carolyn. Perhaps she would let him catch her.

About the Author

Viola Grace was born in Manitoba, Canada where she still resides today. She really likes it there. Her hobbies have included cross-stitch, needlepoint, quilting, costuming, cake decorating, baking, cooking, metalwork, beading, sculpting, painting, doll making, henna tattoos, chain maille, and a few others that have been forgotten.

Her writing actively pursues the Happily Ever After that so rarely occurs in nature. A brilliant mind, with a twisted sense of humor.

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