

Changeling Press

*Sex and Chocolate*

**TOXIC**

BELINDA MCBRIDE

# **Sex and Chocolate: Toxic**

## **Belinda McBride**

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## **Sex and Chocolate: Toxic**

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There are three things that Dr. Briony Theale loves. Her job as a veterinarian, a good bar of rich, dark chocolate, and Rico, the new ranger in charge of the Wildlife Rescue center. When a casual dinner with the mysterious Rico turns surprisingly intimate, Briony realizes that she might just have a chance with him after all, if only she could lose a few pounds. It's the ultimate sacrifice, but Briony goes cold turkey, and swears off chocolate forever.

Rico Montgomery fell hard for Briony the first time he set eyes on the curvy little doctor. Her brown hair and cocoa skin trigger cravings that he can barely control, and her fragrance is like the sweetest, richest chocolate he's ever scented in his life. That's a bad thing for Rico, because to a werewolf like him, chocolate is literally a toxin.

Rico can't live with it, and Briony can't live without it. And when a certain wandering wolf finds a bag of chocolate in the trash near Briony's clinic, these two will find out just how toxic love can be.

## Chapter One

"I really can't believe you want to muzzle Chaucer. He's such a sweet boy!"

Dr. Briony Theale deftly placed the makeshift muzzle over the little schnauzer's head. Sweet boy or not, he was showing teeth just a little too readily. "Oh, it's just a precaution, Miss Wilson. My tech had to go home early today, and this just makes it a little easier handling him by myself."

"Are you sure that other vet isn't available? That nice man?"

Briony barely kept from rolling her eyes at the question. Like she hadn't heard that a million times over the past two years? "Dr. Sewell retired a couple years back." She bent to the dog, giving it a brief physical examination. "Now, what brings Chaucer in today?"

"He's sick."

Okay, the day was getting better and better.

"Can you tell me his symptoms? Or maybe what caused him to be sick?" She palpated the dog's belly and he grunted. Quickly, she turned to the thermometer. While holding the instrument in place, she hummed slightly.

"Chocolate?"

"What?" Briony blinked, wondering if her chocolate-heavy lunch was still on her breath. Not that she indulged herself that way every day, but still, she had to stifle the urge to check her breath against a cupped hand.

Considering where her gloved hand had just been... Her face grew warm with embarrassment.

"Well, he was acting hungry, so I shared some of my chocolate with him. There was plenty left over from Easter, and you know, chocolate is so fattening..." She broke off, eyeing Briony's abundant figure critically.

"That could be it. Chocolate is very toxic to dogs."

"I didn't know! Oh my precious..." She nuzzled the nose of the muzzled dog. Considering the muffled growls, the woman would have probably lost the tip of *her* nose if Briony hadn't taken precautions to muzzle the little beast.

"So is he vomiting? Acting particularly agitated or nervous?"

Miss Wilson bobbed her graying head.

"How much did you give him?"

"Well, not much..." She held out her wrinkled hand, which had a slight tremor. "Just a palm full."

"Dark or milk?"

"Why does that matter?" Miss Wilson was sounding decidedly irritated.

"Well, for a dog the size of Chaucer, eight ounces of milk chocolate could prove to be toxic, but only one ounce of dark chocolate would have the same effect."

Tears welled up in the elderly woman's eyes. "Oh no! I'm so sorry, Chaucer." She stroked the dog's grizzled head. "I gave him bittersweet. I don't care for that type so much."

The little dog was trembling, and Briony knew she needed to act fast. She left the woman comforting her pet and stepped away, stripping off her gloves.

"I'll need to keep him over the weekend. There's no remedy for this, but hopefully it'll work through his system without too much trauma. I'll give him some activated charcoal to help with the toxins, but mostly all I can do is support him until he recovers."

"Will he be all right?"

Briony looped a lead over his head and slipped the muzzle loose. "Well, that's difficult to tell. It'll take the toxin several hours to work through his system. If he's vomited, hopefully some of it is gone already. Unfortunately, it might take a day or two."

"If he stays here overnight, will you be with him? I don't see the point in leaving him here if he's alone all night."

"No, he won't be alone." She gave the woman a reassuring smile. "I have a tech that stays the night, and if there's an emergency she calls me at home. I live just minutes away."

She picked up the little dog, who struggled just a bit before settling. "We'll take very good care of him, Miss Wilson. I'll call first thing in the morning with an update."

She walked the woman to the door and nodded at Amy, the receptionist. Taking her cue, the younger woman came and guided Miss Wilson to the counter to begin the billing process. She sighed and returned to the back of the clinic to get the dog started on his treatment. She gently settled Chaucer into a roomy crate, checking his water bottle. No doubt the little dog was Miss Wilson's only family. She'd be shattered if Chaucer died because of her soft heart.

"So, you and me, Chaucer, we've got the very same vice."

The dog sat for a moment and then got up, circled, and sat back down. Within a few seconds he repeated the process. That was the hyperactivity kicking in. If he was at home, he'd pace and circle all night long until the effects of the chocolate toxicosis wore off. He was also in danger of having seizures that could kill him.

Slipping her hands into the pockets of her exam jacket, Briony found the half-eaten remains of a chocolate bar. She sighed and slipped a square into her mouth, letting it melt over her tongue.

Sex and chocolate were the two greatest indulgences in Briony's life. The sex might be lacking these days; luckily, the chocolate was abundant. That wasn't so bad. Maybe she was a little lonely, but how bad could it be when there was chocolate to soothe those other cravings?

She folded the wrapper around the bar and slipped it back into her pocket.

## Chapter Two

"Dr. Briony, you have a call on line two." Amy gave an impish smile. "It's Ranger Rick from the Wildlife Rescue." She waggled a pale blonde brow.

"It's Rico, not Rick."

"Well, he's a ranger and looks just fine in that uniform."

That he did. Briony's belly tightened at the mention of his name. Butterflies danced alongside the slight chocolate euphoria she was experiencing. "I'll take it in my office."

"Sure you will. Are you guys having phone sex yet?"

God, why did she keep the girl around? It wasn't bad enough that Amy was a smart-mouthed kid, but at the age of nineteen, she was the poster child for the perfect California beach blonde. She was tall and slender with blue eyes and golden hair.

Briony was brown. She didn't even have the satisfaction of saying she was African American or Latino. She lived as a chocolate woman in a vanilla community. Sometimes Bree felt like the ultimate outsider, an eclectic mix of races that left her with brown skin, brown eyes, and even brown hair. She certainly didn't have a bikini body, but she didn't let that keep her away from the water. Part of the reason she'd moved to California's Gold Country was the abundant outdoor life.

In the summers she spent every spare moment at the crystalline lakes and rivers, kayaking and swimming. In the winters, she explored the back country on her cross country skis. She'd grown up without money and had still managed to graduate from UC Davis Veterinary School. When Briony decided she wanted something, she gathered up her courage and went after it.

Well, all except for the man waiting for her to answer his call. She'd never found the nerve to pursue him.



Rico Montgomery. The first time she'd seen him, she'd nearly had a spontaneous orgasm. Her body wanted to have his children. She'd contemplated tripping him and beating him to the floor.

He was six feet two inches of dark-haired, gray-eyed, chiseled beefcake, and this beefcake had brains. He wore his tan uniform shirt to perfection, and his Smokey the Bear hat threw her into the most delicious fantasies of her life. But face-to-face with the man, she was a wreck.

She stared down at the blinking light on the phone. "I am woman, hear me roar." She took a deep breath. Her fingers trembled as she lifted the handset. "This is Dr. Theale."

"Hi Dr. Briony, it's Rico at Rescue."

"Unhh... hello, Rico." Oh, that was brilliant. Just brilliant. "What can I do for you today?" *Maybe a full body massage? Or hell, let's just go for broke... a blow job?* She shivered, imagining wrapping her mouth around his cock. Just for fun, she'd dribble chocolate sauce over it first. In fact, she'd like to cast that phallus of his in chocolate. That way, she could have the best of both worlds...

Briony's head dropped to the desk, her face hot with embarrassment. This was how she acted around the man over the phone! The idea of seeing him in person just blew her dignity out the window.

"Well, I wanted to see if you could make a house call today. I've got an injured falcon that's just come in."

She could almost hear the smile in his voice. Rico Montgomery was a walking wet dream of a man. There was no doubt in her mind he knew exactly what she was thinking. He had to be accustomed to women losing their cool around him.

"Let me see, I'm short-handed today." Briony booted up her scheduling calendar for the day. "I'm booked pretty solid for the next couple hours, but I can come out right after my last appointment... say 5:30?"

"That'd be awesome. And since it's on your own time, dinner's on me tonight."

Dinner on Rico. She imagined licking gravy from his navel and stifled a giggle. "Oh, really... that's okay..." Her chocolate-filled stomach lurched. Briony wasn't sure if it was nausea, nerves or arousal.

"No problem, I'm on baby birds till later tonight. Gotta grab dinner sometime."

Briony stood and paced a bit, dragging the phone cord across her cluttered desk. A pile of books crashed to the floor. "Damn! Uh... sorry, just dropped something."

His laugh was as rich as melted chocolate in her ear. "Is pizza okay? I usually do an all meat combo. I'm a carnivore, you know."

Damn, even pizza talk sounded sexy coming from Rico's mouth. "Yeah, that's fine. I'll see you in a couple hours then."

They made their goodbyes and Briony put the phone back into its base on her desk.

"Hot date with the ranger?" Amy was leaning against the doorjamb.

"No, an injured falcon. He's working late too, so we're just..."

"Having dinner together."

"It's not a date."

Amy followed Briony back to the clinic, hovering as the vet checked on her patients. "Debbie called while you were on the phone. She can't stay more than a couple hours tonight. Both of her kids are sick, and she doesn't want to leave them with her sitter."

"What? Oh damn!" She couldn't leave the clinic without an attendant. Even now the schnauzer was pacing his kennel in distress. "How long can she stay?"

"She said till nine or so." Amy hopped up on the exam table, swinging her legs casually. "I'll hang around till she gets here, if you want."

"Yes, that'd be good. Don't forget to re-sterilize that table when you get off."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Anyhow, you've got a labrador that needs shots and a follow-up on a cat with stitches."

"They're here?"

Amy nodded and hopped off the table. She deftly sprayed the metal surface and wiped it down.

"All right, vaccines first, then the cat. Don't let the dog leave for fifteen minutes, just in case of a reaction."

"Yuppers. Will do, Doc." She breezed out of the room, and in spite of herself, Briony grinned, glad that Amy worked for her.

\* \* \*

Rico smelled chocolate before she walked in the door.

Briony Theale always had his mouth watering; if he wasn't drooling over her ripe curves, he was fantasizing about licking her rich brown skin, of pulling the essence of chocolate from her very body.

Every human had a scent that was uniquely theirs, and Briony's was dark, sweet chocolate. Her fragrance made his skin ripple with delight, and it made his cock go hard and deliciously painful. One of these days he'd have her on her back, his head buried between her breasts, kissing a line straight to her warm, liquid core...

"Hi there."

"Hey, Doctor Bree." He didn't stand, because if he stood, she'd see just how happy he was to see her. He stayed safely hidden behind the desk, just until his hard-on let up a bit. "Thanks for coming. I think you're going to like this little lady. Some hikers in Truckee found her and brought her in."

She looked around expectantly, and Rico realized that she was waiting for him to lead her to the bird. With an inner groan, he prayed she wouldn't look down.

He rose carefully and led Briony to the aviary. It was always a little warm in here, and pungent with the scent of birds. They passed a few nursery boxes, and then he stood before the falcon's cage.

"She's pretty young still, and probably was just learning to fly."

Together they gloved up and Rico carefully removed the peregrine falcon from the cage. She panted with fear but showed no aggression.

Rico observed as Briony worked quietly with the bird. From the moment they'd met, he'd noticed that even the most skittish wildlife calmed in her presence. The falcon watched her almost as though mesmerized.

Rico felt the same way. From his vantage point, he was able to see glossy brown curls, the curve of her cheek, and the rounded swell of her breasts under the pristine white lab coat she still wore. The fragrance of chocolate made his mouth water.

"Well, I don't think it'll need surgery." She deftly braced the wing against the body of the bird. "What'll happen to her when she recovers?"

"Depends. If she's in good enough shape, she'll go back to the mountains. If she's weak, or maybe loses her fear of people, there's a falconer who might be interested in her. She'll have a cushy career chasing birds out of vineyards in Napa."

"Really? I didn't realize falconers were doing that. I know they use them at airports sometimes."

They set the falcon back into her cage. "Yup. It's an age-old use for these falcons. Growers lose a huge amount of their crop to starlings and other birds. One falcon can keep hundreds of acres clear of birds."

She automatically followed him to the heated boxes where tiny rescued hatchlings squalled for food. They moved from bird to bird, dribbling tiny amounts of gruel into their hungry beaks. It was a process that had to be repeated almost continuously during the day.

The Rescue Center was manned by one full time staff member and dozens of volunteers who came in to feed the ravenous baby birds. Originally they'd kept Briony on retainer, but as state funding had dried up she'd remained on staff as a volunteer. When Rico had been transferred to the center, he'd quickly fallen for the vet. He just didn't know why.

She was cute; there was no doubt about that, with her curves and those mysterious dark eyes. But she didn't encourage him, and she never flirted, though he could clearly scent her interest. Every time she came around, that fragrance of sex and

chocolate filled his nostrils, always leaving him aroused and in the care of his own hand.

"Well, unless you have any other animals for me to look at... How's that baby fox that came in last week?"

"He's good. He's learned to feed from a bottle and has his eyes open." Rico headed for the other room and led Briony to the small basket that held the tiny fox.

"Oh, he's so cute!"

He stood back and watched as Briony gently lifted the pup and gave it a quick exam. She set it down and was still smiling as she glanced up at Rico. When their gazes locked, he couldn't look away.

He couldn't move either. Well, except his cock, which was moving a bit too much in his tight jeans. The scent of chocolate rose around him, and it was all Rico could do to hold back, to not push her to the wall and take her right then and there. Her mouth was full and luscious and tinted with gloss; he saw a slight shimmer over her lips. He'd like to lick it off and see how it tasted. He started to move...

Her eyes fluttered, and then darted over his shoulder. "I think your pizza's here." She sounded slightly strangled.

"Our pizza. I ordered plenty." The spell was broken and Rico could move again, though it was a bit painful, not only to his groin, but to his pride.

Who was this woman that she could charm him in his tracks?

\* \* \*

Rico watched in fascination as Briony ate her pizza. Not that she was doing anything spectacular; he just liked watching her eat. She was dainty and cute. Now that she'd finally shed the lab coat, he was treated to his first ever unimpeded view of her figure. She was just as soft and curvy as he'd imagined. His hands ached to cup her breasts, to weigh them in his hands and feel them overfilling his palms. He grabbed his bottle of soda just to give his hand something to do.

"So, I know you transferred from out of the area. Where did you work before?" She licked a bit of sauce from her thumb and looked at him from under long lashes.

"Well, I've been with the Department of Fish and Game for about seven years now. I've spent most of that time in the Six River areas doing wildlife inventory. But I'm originally from Truckee, so when the opening here came, I put in for a transfer."

"Hmm..." She chewed and looked at him solemnly. "Do you have family here?"

"Nah... a couple foster parents that probably wouldn't remember me. When I was adopted, my folks took me to the coast, close to a town called Willits. Nice little area. They passed away a few years back."

"I'm sorry."

He shrugged. It still hurt, but there was no changing the past. "They were killed in an auto accident while they were overseas on vacation. I'm told they both died on impact, so they probably didn't suffer."

"Still, that must be painful. Then you're alone?"

He grinned and decided it was time to shift the conversation. "No, I've got friends, cousins. How 'bout you? Are you local?"

"No. I'm from the Fresno area. I came up to go to vet school and loved the Gold Country so much that I stayed in the area."

"It is nice around here. Lots of mountains and forests, but just a short drive to the city."

She wiped her lips with a napkin and then set it on her empty plate.

"There's plenty, have some more."

"No, I really can't."

"Yes, you really can." He slipped another slice onto her plate. After a few moments, she picked it up and started eating.

"I really need to drop some weight." She set the slice down.

"You need to do no such thing. Women aren't meant to be skinny poles, regardless of what the magazines say." He nodded in satisfaction as she started eating again. "So you're a vet and you volunteer here at Rescue. What else do you do?"

"I hike and swim when I can. In the winter I ski a lot. And I garden."

Indeed she did. Rico had driven by her house once just to assuage his curiosity. Flowers burst from planters, and fruit trees grew over her front lawn.

"Why'd you want to be a vet?" He sucked a bit of sauce from his knuckle, noting how her eyes followed the movement.

"I just love animals, and they seem to like me back. I'm good at sciences, so it seemed to be the right field for me. And I do love it." She finished her second piece and this time he let it go. He'd send her home with leftovers. "How did you become a ranger?"

"Oh, I love animals and I seem to be pretty good at science..." Her eyes crinkled with laughter. "I'm a biologist, and most of what I do is in the field. So while I'm assigned to Rescue, I'm also in charge of monitoring raptors in this region. It ties in closely to what we do here."

She nodded and he could sense that she was getting ready to leave. Quickly, he began gathering the leftovers and plates. "Dessert? I have ice cream..." He peeked into the freezer and pulled out a carton. "It's that type with three flavors..."

"Neapolitan!" She laughed and rose to help him clean up. "Okay, but just a little. I'll take a scoop from the chocolate side."

They ate while standing. Rico leaned against the sink, letting the cool taste of strawberry melt over his tongue. He'd rather have chocolate, but that would be a bad idea.

"When I was a kid, my mom would buy this kind of ice cream. My little brother would eat the strawberry, and I'd eat the chocolate."

"Leaving the vanilla behind."

"Mom would get so mad!"

"Well, I can have the vanilla and the strawberry, but I have to leave the chocolate alone."

"Don't you like chocolate? I can't imagine anyone not liking chocolate."

He smiled at her expression. "I love chocolate, but it doesn't like me. It makes me a bit sick."

"Wow... I can't imagine..."

"There's one way I can have chocolate."

She looked at him, tilting her head just a bit. "How?"

"Like this..." Rico bent down, kissing her lightly, letting the tip of his tongue catch the flavor of chocolate from her parted lips. Moving back slightly, he smiled at her surprised expression. "Was that okay?"

She blinked and cleared her throat a little. The warm scent of chocolate filled the air, and Rico's body responded, going hard and tight with need. "Uh... yeah... yes."

Taking that as permission, he rested the tips of his fingers on her cheek, knowing that they were chilled from the ice cream bowl. Her eyes fluttered closed; her dark lashes made a crescent against the curve of her cheek. Slowly, he kissed her again, drawing it out this time. He ran his fingers into the silky curls of her hair, supporting the back of her head as the kiss went deeper. He tasted her, absorbing the essence of chocolate from her mouth, from her very body. He shivered at the sensations that raced through his body.

Rico knew exactly when to break the kiss. "Nice," he whispered in her ear, standing up straight so she could move away. His fingers trailed from her hair, over her ear and down to her jaw. Her skin was fine and soft. "You taste like rich chocolate."

He was about to kiss her again when she blinked her eyes and straightened. "Chocolate... Oh! I really need to be leaving."

Rico stifled his disappointment, taking the bowl that she still held in her hands.

"I'm sorry. I really do need to go. My night help can't stay long, and I've got a dog in for chocolate toxicosis. I'll need to stay at the clinic tonight."

Rico turned to the sink, not liking that idea at all. He'd had girlfriends, some serious, but this protective streak surprised him. It took him a moment to regain control of his voice. "Will you be safe there alone?"

She laughed, and he was stunned by the dimples and the sudden spark of humor in her brown eyes. "Perfectly safe. I've got excellent security, plus a nice overnight room



for the weekend staff. In fact, when I first moved into town, I lived in the clinic until I found my house."

He sighed, following as she gathered her things. "Okay, Bree, but if you need anything at all, don't hesitate to call. Any time."

"Oh, I couldn't trouble you, Rico!"

"No trouble. Honest." He grinned. "If the big bad wolf comes knocking at the door, I'm the man to call!"

Her dark eyes crinkled in laughter. "There aren't any wolves in California! You told me that months ago."

Not quite true, but he wasn't going to correct that assumption. "You're right. There aren't any wolves in California. At least, not in the wild. Not yet."

"Are they coming?" She paused, her professional interest sparked. "I never had the chance to work with wolves in vet school, just some of the smaller local canids. I'd heard they'd expanded out of Idaho."

"They've expanded into Oregon, and eventually will return to California, but it'll be years before they migrate this far. They'll stay to the wilder places. Most people will never get a chance to see one, much less get close."

Briony shrugged into her lab coat, once again denying him the pleasure of her luscious figure. "I'd love that, you know." She slipped her purse over her shoulder. "Getting up close and personal with a wolf."

Little did she realize just how up close she'd already come. "I can arrange for you to visit a sanctuary someday." They walked out into the cool air of the evening. Rico took a deep breath, realizing how warm his skin had become. The breeze carried the scent of trees and wild places.

"I'd like that."

Rico glanced down at her. She smiled, and he bent down, lightly brushing his lips to hers. "Drive safely, Doctor Bree."

She stood, her eyes closed, as though his lips were still on hers. He couldn't resist. Rico kissed her again. To his delight, she took the embrace and returned it, her

hands digging into his hair, her tongue slipping into his mouth. Rico shuddered and moaned. He clasped her bottom, pulling her tighter to his hips, and his vision went hazy with lust when his aching cock was soothed by the soft cushion of her belly.

His shy Bree was suddenly an aggressive little temptress! He lifted her, setting her up on the hood of her car, pressing her knees apart. He moved closer, and she wrapped her legs behind his hips.

*Not too fast...*

He ached for her. Rico buried his face against her neck, inhaling her soft, sweet fragrance. He licked her throat, and his skin pebbled at the light, chocolaty taste. Her flavor. His cock pressed into her mons, and they both groaned in delight. He wanted to strip her, take her right here on top of the car. She was pulling at his shirt; her hands slipped inside the hem. She stroked his skin, and when he began to thrust against her, sucking lightly at the skin of her neck, her strokes became scratches.

"God, Briony, you taste so sweet..." He kissed her again, trailing his tongue over the seam of her lips. "You're so sweet... better than chocolate..."

The word brought them to their senses. Chocolate. She had a sick dog to tend to. Rico sighed, stepping back and helping her to her feet. Her eyes were huge and luminous in the moonlight. Her lips were swollen and damp from his kisses. She reached up and pushed his hair back from his face.

"We aren't finished with this, Bree."

She smiled and shook her head. "I'd kiss you goodnight, but I'd never make it back to work."

He bent to kiss her anyway; just a light brush of lips, a promise of things to come. He was hard; he throbbed painfully, but there was later. He could wait.

The wolf didn't want to wait. When she got into the car, he fought not to howl in despair.

As the taillights of her car vanished down the road, Rico stood watching. He felt the pull of the forest behind him, and the lure of the woman who'd just driven away.

“Damn.” She was a human. He was not. Rico didn’t know what had gotten into him, but this obsession with Briony was beginning to dominate his life.

Humans were good for flirting and fucking, but not for deep emotional involvement. They certainly weren’t appropriate for mating.

He’d shift and run tonight. The wolf was always his truest guide. When he gave himself to the wolf, there was no emotional dilemma, no confusion regarding humans and love, just true instinct. The wolf would only seek out others of its kind.

The Truckee Pack was small, but growing, and they allowed, even encouraged, their members to live “normal” lives among human society. Many like Rico had grown up isolated from their kind and craved companionship and understanding from the Pack.

In spite of his need to be with the Pack, Rico lived in town, spending most of his time with humans. That’s how he’d grown up. He was trying to fit in at home, spending occasional weekends at the compound in the forest. Tonight he’d go home and spend the weekend with the others. The main house still needed lots of work. It had once been an elegant resort hotel, but over the years had fallen into ruin. The new alpha had purchased it and the hundreds of acres that surrounded the place. For the first time in years, the Truckee wolves had a haven, a place where they could run freely and without fear. They had an alpha strong enough to rule and protect them.

Rico would go to lend a hand. Hard work during the day, and hard play at night: that’s what he needed.

Not a chocolate-scented human.

Still, he stood watching the road long after she’d gone.

## Chapter Three

Her lips still tingled from his kisses. Her body throbbed, and her panties were uncomfortably damp.

Briony sighed and slipped the key into the lock, hurrying to secure it before deactivating the alarm system. She had thirty seconds before it kicked over to alert the security company.

Without bothering with the lights, Bree headed straight back to the kennels and was relieved to find Chaucer lying comfortably in his cage, panting just slightly.

“Give me five, kiddo, and I’ll take you for a potty walk.”

Back in her office she read the notes from Amy and Debbie, and then pulled open her bottom desk drawer, glaring balefully at the bag that held her secret stash of chocolate. There were five jumbo, one pound bars that she’d picked up at Trader Joe’s earlier in the week. Plain chocolate. Chocolate with almonds. There was milk chocolate and dark chocolate. She’d driven all the way to Sacramento to buy these.

Bliss.

And it was the bane of her existence.

Briony resolutely pulled out one bar at a time and set them on her desk, displayed like cards on a table. Even through the wrapping she could smell the fragrance of the chocolate.

“Damn. Damndamndamn!”

She couldn’t sit and stare at the candy, hoping it would give her dieting advice or something. She stacked them up and dropped them into the garbage can where they landed with a *thunk*.

Dropping them in the can was a noble gesture, but only part of the solution. There was no three second rule for wrapped chocolate bars in a brand new trashcan liner. She pulled the bag out and carried it with her to the kennel.

“Okay, Chaucer. Let’s take a quick walk and then I’m hitting the hay.”

It wasn’t that late, but she’d be up later checking the two cats that were in for the weekend, as well as monitoring the schnauzer. He seemed to be doing well, but chocolate toxicosis could be fatal. She didn’t want to take his recovery for granted.

She took the little dog out to a secure run and set him down to do his business. In the meantime, she carried the bag of chocolate to the trash can by the side of the building. When the bag hit the bottom of the big, empty can, the sound seemed much more permanent. Maybe a little ominous as well.

“Oh well. Every journey begins with a single step.”

What a step! Chocolate was one of the defining features of Briony’s life. From the time she was a little girl, she’d been devoted to her chocolate. Unfortunately, her loyalty to her confectionary love showed on her body, it probably even oozed from her skin.

However, she’d make the sacrifice if it meant more kisses from Rico. Guys like him just didn’t fall for chubby women like her. The attraction was there, that much was clear, but if she dropped a little weight... Oh hell, it was going to take more than a little dieting to get to where she should be. Her bra had crept to a double D, and her weight wasn’t worth mentioning.

She dropped the lid on the can and locked it securely. That would keep out any marauding raccoons or dogs. Perhaps not a bear, but if a bear came along and wanted her trash, it could damn well take it.

“Chaucer, are you almost finished?”

She stepped into the kennel and peered into the dark shadows of the run; the little dog stood completely still, looking out toward where the trees came down to the edge of her pasture.

“What’s out there, Chaucer? Is the big bad wolf coming to get you?” She scooped the little dog into her arms, careful to step around the mess he’d made. Clearly, he was

still sick from the chocolate. "Well, I have it on the best of authority that the wolves aren't here yet. You can relax; it's probably just a mountain lion. Or a bear."

She chuckled at her own joke, but still, there were goose bumps on her arms when she locked the clinic door behind them, and Chaucer was unusually quiet.

She'd clean up his mess later.

\* \* \*

Bracing himself against the music that already hurt his ears, Rico stepped into the Fool's Gold Bar and Grill. He'd never grow accustomed to the level of noise that humans were so fond of. In fact, he could never understand why this place was a hangout for the local shifter population. The atmosphere was good; sort of a combination of biker bar and local museum. The walls were studded with antique gold mining pans, pick-axes and other accoutrements of frontier life.

The wooden floors were ancient and scarred with years of use. The tables and chairs were a motley mix of styles all thrown in to make a harmonious, if eclectic decor. Still, the live music was a bit difficult to take.

He wound through the milling crowd, finally reaching a fairly isolated table in the back of the room.

"Dude!"

"Hey, Tex!"

The other man stood up and wrapped Rico in a rough embrace. "It's been awhile, Rico, we were starting to worry." They parted and slipped into their chairs. Tex waved to a waitress and held up two fingers.

"It's high season for the Rescue Center. Little birds need to be fed, and volunteers need to be supervised."

A waitress delivered two mugs of beer to the table, pocketing the bill that Tex handed her. He winked, his outlandish dimples flashed, and the woman's interest spiked. Tex took a deep breath, savoring her scent. She walked away with a little extra sway to her hips.

"My God, if they only knew..."

Rico chuckled. He gazed over at his irrepressible friend, noting that Tex's sun-streaked hair was more blond than usual. His vivid blue eyes sparkled against his summer tan. His coloring made no sense for a man of Latino roots, but like Rico, he wasn't quite what he seemed. They tended to resemble their wolves rather than their human bloodlines, and Tex Teixeira's wolf was gold and white.

"So is the big house mostly finished? I was thinking about coming out this weekend to give a hand."

"Still plenty of work to go around. Why not just run up with me tonight? I've got the truck; you can leave your bike here till Monday."

"Here? You kidding me?"

"You know what I mean. Leave it somewhere safe. I'll follow you to your house."

"I don't know." He took a sip of the cold beer, enjoying the bite of the locally brewed beverage. "I think I've got a problem. That's why I called."

Tex was a lifetime friend. They'd met when Rico was in foster care and didn't know what or who he really was. As children they'd immediately gravitated to one another, and from kindergarten to the fifth grade, Tex's family had been the only real home that Rico had known.

Tex's parents had taught him how to control his physical changes, and how to think as Rico, whether he was human or wolf. They'd also taught him to trust the wolf when he couldn't see his way clear of a problem. Because he was caught in the system, the Teixeiras had known that the little boy had to function in the human world until he could break free and return to the Pack.

Tex leaned forward so he could hear over the music. Thankfully, the band was finished and the jukebox had kicked in. "So what's up? I've been worried about you. We all have. The Alpha was getting ready to send someone to check on you, make sure you weren't in trouble."

Maybe he should have gone to the Alpha with his problem, but somehow, Rico didn't think that the Truckee Alpha or any of his betas would have any expertise in the

area of human relations. They'd all spent their formative years in labs. They were strong men, good leaders, but there'd clearly been a missing link in their development.

On the other hand, Tex had gone to public school, dated human girls as well as Were females. Tex had also been known to have relationships with other males as well. Bisexuality was more accepted among the Were than in human society. If it had to do with sex, Tex probably had the answer.

"Is it possible for a Were to mate a human?"

Tex straightened up and put his mug down on the table. "Did you get some human female in trouble? Or give her your mark?"

"No... no, I'm just asking. Is it possible?"

"Is it a female that's been keeping you away from the Pack?" The smile had fled Tex's handsome face, and he frowned at Rico. "You know getting involved with a human is nothing but trouble. You've heard it a million times, and I know you've seen it as well."

"I know, Tex, I really do. It's just..." He sighed and dropped his head a bit, avoiding his friend's searching gaze. "...I'm in love. I swear it was love at first sight. We've never even dated." He looked up at his friend. "I want her; my wolf wants her. Just being near her is enough to make my control slip. Tex, I don't know what to do."

"Aw hell, Rico." His friend slumped back in his chair, idly pushing his mug around in a circle on the polished surface of the table. "Yeah, a human and a Were can make a go of it. It's not a popular mating among the Pack, though I don't know how the Boss will take it. He's allowed some of the mixed families to move onto the compound." He lifted a blond brow. "Who's this lady of yours? And why didn't I know about this earlier?"

"Dr. Theale, at the vet clinic."

"What? The Queen of Spay? My God, Rico, what are you thinking? The first time she sees your wolf, she'll have your balls!"



Rico laughed at the comical look of dismay on his friend's face. "No, Tex, Briony treats the animals in Rescue. She knows better than to spay a wolf." His friend had a point... sort of. How would Briony react to his wolf?

"Well, it makes sense, in a weird sort of fashion. Every member of the Pack who has met her half falls in love with her. It's like she's got some sort of mojo with us. I wonder..."

"What?"

Tex frowned, looking down at the half-finished beer in his mug. "I just wonder if maybe she's from one of those programs we've been hearing about... the labs that are experimenting on us."

"She grew up in Fresno, has a mother and a brother, lived a fairly normal life. The only unusual thing about her is that I can't stop thinking about her. Also, she smells like chocolate."

"Oh dude... that's bad. Damn bad." Tex shook his head and picked up his beer, draining it. "Chocolate's bad stuff. You need to come home and visit some of the Pack women."

"Which ones? The married ones or the ones that the Alpha rescued? You know, the ones that are frightened of their own shadows?"

Tex's mug came down on the table hard, his blue eyes sparked with anger. "If you spent time around them, you'd see that they're trying. They need males around who treat them well, so they can learn."

Rico felt sorry for the comment. He lowered his eyes in submission. "That was a stupid thing to say. I'm sorry. I just never really felt a part of the Pack, and now when I go up there, I always worry about frightening someone."

"Rico, you really need to come home more. I know you've got your job and all, but it's not that far away. You'll never be part of the Pack for real when you stay away from us. If you want a place of your own, we can get to work on a house. Or you can share with me or one of the other single males. I've got an extra room and the cabin's plenty large."

That might not be a bad idea. Getting out of town, away from all the humans, would help clear his head. Granted, in the past he'd spent his evenings running back toward town and Briony. He dreamed of her while he slept, and thought of her constantly when they worked and played.

"I'll be up tomorrow first thing."

"Tonight. Right now, Rico. I'll drive you up."

He shook his head, worrying about Briony at the clinic. "She's bunking at the clinic tonight; her weekend tech is out sick or something. I need to run by and make sure she's okay. I'll come up early."

"Whatever. Just be sure to come up. We can use your hands. It'll be good for the girls to see you again. Really, you just need to give them time."

Rico pushed his chair back, getting ready to leave. "I'll be there."

"If you aren't home by noon, I'll come looking for you. Understand?" Tex threw an arm around his shoulder, hugging him tight. "Even if I have to drag you out of the doctor's bed!"

That brought an involuntary growl from Rico's throat. Tex gave a shout of laughter. "Get a grip, little brother! If you're in her bed, I'll just leave you be. You can deal with the Alpha on your own time."

They exited the bar and the cool night air was a blessing to Rico's senses. "I'll see you in the morning, bright and early." Rico threw his leg over the back of his motorcycle and started the engine. He pulled on his helmet and buckled the strap under his chin. With a wave, he gunned the engine and put the bike in gear, roaring out of the parking lot.

Tex stood watching his oldest friend drive away, and he worried. He dug a cell phone from his pocket, and dialed a number. "Hey, Chase, it's me. He says he'll come up in the morning."

There was a brief pause on the other end of the line. And then Chase Montenegro's voice came over the phone, sending chills up Tex's spine. "Is he all right? Do you have any idea why he's staying away?" The Alpha's voice was deep and

compelling. Automatically, Tex dropped his eyes, even though the man was on the phone and not facing him in person. "Do I need to send Sage out to talk to him?"

"God, no! It's a female. He's in love with a human, and it's pulling him to stay near her. He wanted to know if a human and a shifter could be mates."

Bringing the feral beta in to deal with Dr. Theale would be a disaster in the making. Like the unstable females, Sage was trying, but he was still damn terrifying.

"And what did you tell him?"

"Just that it can happen, but doesn't usually work out. I told him to come home so he could talk to you. He'll be up tomorrow."

"Do you believe him?"

Tex scuffed the toe of his cowboy boot into the gravel of the parking lot. "I think he intends to, but I get the feeling things are heating up between them. I smelled the female on his clothing."

"Damn. Well, let's just keep the lines of communication open. Several of us are part human, myself included. Did he say who the female is?"

"Yeah, the vet down here in town."

"Dr. Theale? She's a nice woman. A very nice woman. She might be human, but I guess we have to remember that Rico grew up with humans. I don't think he's ever felt too comfortable with us."

No, Tex had to agree with that. When Rico had been pulled into the foster care system, the Truckee Pack had been weak and disorganized, without a strong leader. No one had stepped forward to foster the young Were. A few years ago, Chase Montenegro had arrived in the area with his betas. They were strong, they had money, and Chase was a natural alpha. The Pack had eagerly accepted his leadership, even though Chase and his men had their drawbacks.

Sage was one of those complications. They'd been firmly in power when Rico had returned, and he'd never quite felt comfortable with the new Pack.

"And, Tex, they work in similar fields. There's a lot to be said for that."

"I think you might need to talk to him, sir. I told him she'd be nothing but trouble. If it could work..."

"It can, but a lot will depend on Dr. Theale and how she deals with the shock of finding out that we exist. It's a big risk. A very big risk."

Unfortunately, Rico would be the one to pay the price if Dr. Briony Theale was not to be trusted.

## Chapter Four

Rico watched from the tree line as Briony took the small black dog out to the kennel run. He'd driven home and promptly shucked his clothing, shifting to his wolf form. He lived just a few miles from the clinic, and this late at night, was unlikely to be seen by motorists as he ran up into the forest that bordered the town.

The run was good; he stretched his muscles and took the time to chase a pair of deer just for the fun of it. Instinct pulled him back on track, and within minutes he was lying on his belly, watching the woman he wanted so badly.

She dropped something into the large garbage can at the side of the building. Even at this distance, he was able to scent the can and all of the interesting smells that it contained; that might bear more investigation.

The little dog knew he was there and was sensible enough to keep his mouth shut. Rico had very little tolerance for yappy little dogs. Its scent told him this was the sick dog she was monitoring for the weekend. The odor of illness hung over the animal like a miasma. It willingly went into her arms, and as he watched with a bit of disappointment, they vanished into the building.

Once the outside light went off, Rico rose and trotted down the hill, making a wide perimeter of the property. There were no prowlers, no threats that he could discern, so he started back up to the tree line, in spite of his desire to lay in watch all night. He wanted to sing, to tell the moon of his love for Briony. His human side intervened, reminding him that there were no wolves in California. He couldn't sing where he might be heard. Instead he whined sadly.

On his way past the building, he caught the faint but unmistakable fragrance of chocolate. Briony. The knot of his erection swelled in his cock and lust shot through every cell in his body. Briony. His mate.

He veered off course, heading for the trash can. His eyes had seen her go into the building, but his nose was telling him she was out here waiting. As his need rose, the man receded; the wolf took control with smooth efficiency.

The can was made of heavy plastic but was empty, so it tipped easily, landing with a loud *thump*. He fussed at the lid for a moment, finally pulling at the handles with paws and teeth. He dug until the lid fell loose, and the intoxicating scent of chocolate floated from the can.

Quickly, he pulled the bag from the can, ripping it to find the source of the mouthwatering scent. It wasn't Briony, but greed quickly overtook lust, and he lay on his belly with the chocolate bars between his paws, tearing the paper away to reveal his treasure.

He ate carefully, deliberately; his almond-shaped eyes were half-closed in bliss. This was the sort of indulgence the wolf dreamed of, but had never encountered! Within minutes, all five bars were gone, and he pinned the foil wrappings to the ground with his paws, carefully licking every crumb of chocolate from the paper.

He rose, shook, and trotted up the hill in search of water.

\* \* \*

When the trash can tipped over, Briony had Chaucer on the exam table, popping activated charcoal tablets down his throat. She jumped a bit at the sound of the can hitting the pavement, but continued with her task. "If it's raccoons or a dog, they won't be able to get the lid off. I imagine it's just the wind."

Chaucer whined in distress. She'd checked his vitals. His heart rate was still high, and there was a significant risk of him having seizures. There was no blood in his stool, and he hadn't vomited since earlier in the day, but it was still early. Carefully, she returned him to his cage and disinfected the table.

The wind had picked up outside. She could hear it whistling through the trees. That's probably why the trash can went over. Briony paused for a moment and decided against going out to check. It probably hadn't been the greatest idea in the world to put five pounds of chocolate in the trash, but she had to get it out of here!

In the little room that was reserved for the overnight staff, she undressed, exchanging her jeans and blouse for a pair of loose scrubs. She crawled between the covers of the twin bed and stretched, her mind returning to Rico and his kisses.

She ran her fingertip over her lips, remembering the feel of his mouth against hers, the faint taste of strawberry mingling with the taste of chocolate.

Tears burned her eyes, and a thick lump grew in her throat.

He was so right! All these years of being alone, always on the outside, and suddenly Briony found herself in love with a man who understood her career, her passion for animals. He was a beautiful, wild creature himself; it was easy to picture him in the forest, carefully observing a nest of fledgling falcons.

It was even easier to imagine herself on her back, looking up at the sun shining through the trees, Rico's strong body over hers, loving her just right... She cupped a heavy breast in one hand, ran her other hand down her soft belly. She was curvy, all right, a bit too much in the hips and chest, but when she closed her eyes, her body felt good to her hand. Her hand slipped between her legs, probing for the slick fluids that had started to gather the moment her thoughts strayed to Rico.

He'd kiss his way down her body, nipping and biting with just the right amount of pressure, never hard enough to leave a mark. He'd then lick away the hurt as his fingers trailed through her curls. Would he like her bare instead? Her eyes fluttered open. If she went in for a Brazilian, everyone in town would know. Her cheeks heated. There were no real secrets in a town this small.

He'd seek out her moisture while his mouth latched onto her breast, his tongue lashing over her nipple. She was so sensitive that sometimes she could bring herself to climax just with nipple play.

Briony wished she had her nipple clamps. She loved the bite of pain that settled down to a dull throb. She pinched her nipples hard, imagining that they were clamped now, and that Rico was between her legs, his hungry mouth kissing her inner thigh, his fingers opening her wide to his sight.

He sighed in ecstasy, and lowered his head...

A crash from the lobby brought Briony upright in the bed. It sounded like a car had driven through the front windows! She struggled up from the bed. Her drawstring pants were down to her knees, and she stumbled, pulling them up and tying them quickly.

She darted from the room, and then turned back, shoving her feet into her shoes. If the glass was broken...

Another crash. It wasn't broken then, but what the fuck?

She darted to the lobby and then skidded to a halt. The doors were closed and locked, and no one was at the door.

Had she imagined it?

Briony stood rigid and still in the middle of the room. Should she call 911? She started to the desk phone when a huge body lunged from the darkness against the glass.

"Shit!" She backpedaled and scooted behind the reception desk, crouching low. When she stood up, Briony could see a large black dog in the floodlight that illuminated the door. He circled, obviously in distress. Its body suddenly hunched into the rhythmic movement of an animal on the verge of vomiting. The result was dark and copious, and Briony had a sudden thought.

The chocolate.

She groaned. The animal was huge, maybe malamute crossed with Irish wolfhound or something. When she'd heard the trash can go over, she was thinking of a small animal, not a brute like this!

"Oh hell." She edged from behind the counter and gingerly approached the glass doors. "This is my fault." She reached the glass and crouched, putting her fingers to the glass pane of the door. "If I bring you in, are you going to hurt me?"

As though in answer to her question, the dog turned and pressed its nose to the window. If the glass hadn't been there, he'd be touching her fingers with his nose.

"I have no doubt that I'm going to regret this." She shook her head and rose, snagging a slip lead from the coat rack. She disarmed the security system and unlocked



the door, opening it an inch to see how the dog reacted. He sat on his haunches, shivering and looking miserable.

"All right, big guy, let's get you in here." She opened the door a bit wider and the dog stepped right into the room, wedging his big head between her thighs.

He groaned, and her heart melted.

"Come on then." Briony locked the door and didn't bother with the leash; the dog leaned against her hip as they walked back to the treatment room. She flipped on the overhead lights and looked him over.

If Rico hadn't told her that wolves weren't in California, she'd have sworn this was a wolf. Hell, it could be; there were probably enough people in the state that kept wild animals as pets. This one didn't display the xenophobic behavior that she'd expect to find in a wolf. Maybe it was a hybrid?

For a moment she considered going outside to check the trash can, but the smell of chocolate wafted from the animal's mouth. "So you just had to have it, eh? Sort of like me."

He gave her a soulful look and dragged his tongue across her cheek.

"You can't possibly be a wolf unless you're tasting me instead of kissing me!" She grinned and checked him for a collar. His coat was glossy and well tended, so he wasn't a stray. There was no ID. She even ran a scanner over his body searching for a microchip, but nothing was detected on the screen.

"Well, one more option here..." She coaxed him to the floor and rolled him to his side, examining his underbelly for a tattoo, and came up with nothing. Well, except for the obvious.

"You're damn well hung for a dog!" His tail thumped on the floor. "Well, I hate to say this, but your owners aren't very responsible. You should be neutered and wearing a collar."

The tail went still.

While he was on the floor, she checked his vitals, laughing as his ears dropped when she slipped the thermometer in. "Hey, it's lubed. You should be enjoying the attention." He groaned and his head thumped to the floor.

"OK, so chocolate on the breath, vomiting, elevated heart rate and temp. I think you're about to join Chaucer in our sleepover. You're about to get the house specialty, one slurry of activated charcoal coming right up."

He liked that even less than the thermometer up his butt.

After an hour of tending first the wolf dog, and then rechecking Chaucer, Briony was once again ready to try to sleep. She put the big animal into a kennel and flipped off the lights, visiting the bathroom on the way to her little bedroom.

She briefly considered getting on her knees to say a little prayer; she really didn't want any more late night visitors.

\* \* \*

He knew he shouldn't howl... He just knew he shouldn't...

Rico threw his head skyward and let out the saddest, most mournful howl he could muster. He didn't sing a happy song. It was a sad song because his belly hurt, his chest hurt, and every time he tried to settle down, his legs just wanted to keep going.

He rose, walked in a tight circle, going around and around and around. He curled up on the floor, burying his nose under his tail, and then rose once again, walking in circles.

He couldn't stop! It was like the caffeine overdose from hell! At least he wasn't voiding himself anymore. Nothing like a little vomit to charm the woman of his dreams.

He threw back his head and howled. If he'd been able, he'd have laughed when the little dog joined in; his voice was a harsh, screeching accompaniment to Rico's beautiful song.

Unless she was wearing earplugs, surely Briony would come get him.

She did come back, looking sleepy and cross as a wet cat.

Speaking of cats, the two in the cages across the room were looking at him warily. That pleased him.

"Chaucer! And you! Knock it off!" She looked adorable in her baggy scrubs and sleep-tousled hair. She shuffled back to where her room must be, leaving Rico alone once again.

Well, alone except for the dog and a couple cats.

He decided to change tactics. If Briony wouldn't come get him, he'd go to her. In spite of his earlier illness, he'd smelled the sweet scent of her juices on her hands; she'd been pleasuring herself. She didn't need to touch herself when he was around.

On the other hand, he wouldn't mind watching.

That was undoubtedly why she was so unhappy; he'd stopped her before she'd climaxed. He wondered if she'd been thinking of him when she'd plunged her fingers into her slick, wet pussy...

He went instantly hard, his erection a taunting accent to his other discomforts.

He needed to go outside. Now.

Whatever had been in that nasty drink she'd forced down him was rushing through his body.

Rico leapt at the gate, trying to pop it open. When that didn't work, he peered carefully at the latch, using his large paws to work it till the gate opened. He charged out of the kennel, skidded around a corner of the slick floor and nearly ran down Briony as she shuffled sleepily from a small room.

"Wolf, what's your problem?"

He raced for a door at the end of the hall, leaping against it, looking at her beseechingly over his shoulder. Thankfully, she got the message and let him out.

Humbled and mortified, Rico returned to the open door, head down, and feet dragging. Now he felt like shit again, and passively followed her to the kennel. When she locked the gate behind him, adding a snap hook to the latch, he simply lay down with his head on his paws, watching sadly as she left.

\* \* \*

In her dream, Rico was nuzzling her neck, stroking her hair, working his hands under her clothing. His breath was warm and moist, his body hard and muscular... and furry?

Briony sat up and the big dog sat next to her bed, his tail waving happily along the floor.

"Oh, good grief, did you just lick me?" The dog blinked sleepy gray eyes. "Do you need to go outside again?"

He set a foot on the edge of the mattress, his intention clear.

"No. You are not getting on this bed. Absolutely not!"

The side of the bed dipped as his weight settled down onto the bed. Briony was trapped between the wall on one side, a mountain of wolf dog on the other.

"No! This is a twin bed! You wouldn't even fit on a double! No!"

The dog reluctantly moved back, eyeing her resentfully.

"How'd you get out this time? Do you have opposable dew claws or something? Did you scale the fence? Thank goodness you aren't on an IV." She rolled over onto her side, propping her head on her fist. The huge animal turned in a circle, settling onto the floor. Within minutes, he was up again, turning tight circles. She watched in concern. She sighed and flopped down on her back, guilt eating at her.

"If I hadn't been so worried about impressing Rico, this wouldn't have happened."

The dog paused and looked at her.

"I've been crazy for him for months. Oh, I'm talking about Rico Montgomery, the ranger who runs the Wildlife Rescue Center. Anyway, he's gorgeous. Just like you." She reached out and stroked the animal's broad head, rubbing his heavily furred ears. He was jet black, with just a hint of silver running down his nose.

"You see, he kissed me tonight. I never even thought he'd noticed me. But he kissed me, twice. And we very nearly let it get out of hand... Not that it would have been a bad thing. So when I got back here, it occurred to me that if I took better care of myself, maybe lost some weight..."

She sighed, amazed that she was pouring her heart out to a dog. In Briony's experience, animals were the best listeners. "I thought if I lost weight, that he'd maybe be interested in me for real. So I threw out my stash. Well, most of it anyway. So it's my fault that you're sick."

The dog rested his head on the edge of the mattress, gazing at her sadly.

"So now I'm lying here and I can't sleep, and it seems that if he kissed me, maybe he really is interested in me? What do you think?" The dog blinked and licked her hand. "And if that's the case, I shouldn't be trying to change for him. If I want to change, it should be for me. And you know I really don't want to give up chocolate. So I really screwed up tonight. And I'm very sorry."

She yawned and curled up on her side. "Now if you promise to pace very quietly, you can stay out here. Just make sure to tell me if you have to go outside. Deal?"

The dog rose and paced in circles, turning several times before settling on the floor next to the bed. He exhaled, the breath coming out in a sigh.

He was asleep before Briony was.

## Chapter Five

She had a dream while she was on the cusp of waking. Rico was pressed up against her body; he was hot and naked against her skin. His hand roamed over her belly, cupping her breasts, pinching the nipples.

"Harder," she whispered, squeezing her thighs together.

He pinched, causing a sharp pain that brought the juices flowing. Briony gasped and arched her back, bringing her bottom into contact with his hard, hot cock.

"You like it a little rough?"

She grinned, knowing it was a dream. "I have nipple clamps."

"What else?" His fingers rolled her nipple gently, and he nipped at her shoulder. "Blindfolds? Ropes?"

She nodded and groaned as he rewarded her with a sharp pinch to her hardened nipple.

"Wax play?"

"No caning. Don't like that."

"Maybe you'll like it if I do it."

Briony smiled and shifted. Hardly anyone knew of her fetish for rough sex. It was a secret that she rarely shared. "I won't call you Master though."

"Will you call me Sir?" His hand was playing between her legs now, coming up from behind. He trailed fluid through her cleft, reaching up to circle her clit with firm, indirect strokes.

"Sir Rico?" She giggled. Then she gasped as his fingers worked her wet flesh faster, harder.

"If you call me Sir, I'll let you come."

"If I want to come, you can't stop me."

He proved her wrong by moving his fingers just the slightest bit, teasing, but denying her gratification. She reached between her legs to touch herself, but he growled in her ear.

Growled? Clearly she was mixing up Rico and the black dog.

"Don't touch." His teeth bore down painfully on her shoulder, and she moved her hand away from herself.

"Call me Sir, and I'll let you come."

"Please... just a little harder."

"I like you begging, but do what I told you to do."

Briony grinned, loving the games her subconscious mind created. "Please, Sir, make me come."

His hand moved a bit, his thumb slipping inside her channel to press firmly on her G-spot as his wet fingers returned to her clit. His other hand came up to pinch her nipple hard. Briony shrieked when all three points of sensitivity caught fire at once.

"Come for me, Bree!"

Her body rocked into orgasm. He never let up the pressure on her G-spot, even as the pressure built and fluids flowed from her channel. The climax was hot, wet and deliciously messy. She quivered and groaned, feeling loose and warm and infinitely relaxed.

"Sleep, Briony."

"I am asleep." She snuggled against him again, not thinking to question how she got naked.

\* \* \*

Briony woke to the early morning sun in her eyes and a foot in her back.

"Oh, fuck." She pulled the blanket over her head to block the light, and then remembered where she was. That's when she remembered her dream.

"Rico?"

No, Rico wasn't in her bed, but the dog was. He lay stretched out against her back, reaching from head to foot on the bed.

"Dog, you'd better not have fleas!"

It had better not have been the dog who'd helped her along in a blazing wet dream. That was just a little more kinky than Briony was comfortable with.

She groaned and sat up, setting her feet on the chilly floor. She shuffled to the bathroom, did her business, and then went to check on Chaucer and her feline patients. The big dog paced along beside her.

"Someone's going to be missing you very soon, I imagine. Let's see how you're doing today."

His pulse was still elevated, and judging by his separation anxiety, he was probably still hyperactive. She'd phone in a lost and found report to the radio station and newspaper. Frankly, part of her hoped he went unclaimed.

That made her think of something else.

"I really need to call Rico over to come and look at you. He's more familiar with wolves than I am. Maybe he has an idea where you belong." He waved his tail in apparent agreement.

She spent the next hour doing chores. The kennels needed cleaning and the cats needed their boxes emptied. She administered medications and fed everyone. By seven o'clock, her stomach was growling, and there was nothing to eat at the clinic.

"Okay, dog, here's the deal. I need to go home, shower and do a few chores. You obviously can't be trusted in the kennel alone, so you're going to have to stay in one of the cages. Thankfully, I have a giant crate just for big boys like you."

He balked when she guided him to the door of the gigantic crate. It was made of heavy duty aluminum and took up the entire bottom portion of the kennel banks. Unless he transformed into the Incredible Hulk, he'd be safe there. It also gave him plenty of room to move around.

"I promise I'll be back in a few hours. You just lie down and go to sleep."

Gingerly, the dog stepped into the crate, his toenails clicking on the metal floor. Briony found a large synthetic sheepskin for him to rest on.



“Okay, big guy, here’s the water bottle. You’ve probably never used one, but you’ll figure it out. Just lick the button.”

Now that sounded nasty. It reminded her of her dream. There was nothing she wanted more than to feel Rico’s tongue on her buttons... all of them.

Damn! She had a permanent case of horniness going on! Her breasts were achy and swollen, and for a moment, Briony wondered if maybe she was ovulating. It was the wrong time of month though.

It had to be the memory of those kisses keeping her aroused.

“Okay, guys, just take it easy till I get back. No howling, no escaping from the crates. No wild parties either. I’ll be back by noon.”

Briony turned off the lights and headed out the doors, locking up as she left.

\* \* \*

God hated him. That was the only explanation for the catastrophe that had befallen Rico Montgomery. He’d spent most of the night stuck in his animal form, sick as hell, and just inches from Briony. And she was coming into heat.

Well, maybe not a heat cycle, but close enough. She’d be fertile very soon. Her fragrance made him hot and aroused and unable to do anything to help himself. That little episode in her bed didn’t make things any better. He’d like to take matters into hand, but at the moment, he didn’t have hands!

He was still as jittery as an over-caffeinated speed freak. He rose, turned a few circles, and then tried to relax. The latch on the cage was clearly wolf-proof, maybe even man-proof. He tried to relax and ease into the shift, and was rewarded with the feeling of chilly metal against his ass.

“Oh, fuck.” This was certainly not better. A six foot two inch man was not suited to life in a dog crate. He hunkered down, his feet hitting one end, his back resting against the other end. Rico lifted his ass, trying to spread the sheepskin out to lie on.

Now this just reeked.

No clothing meant no cell phone. Tex would be mad as hell about now. In another hour or so, he'd be on his way into town looking for Rico. He wrapped his arms around his body, not that it was cold, but he just wasn't used to sitting on hard metal.

Across the room, Chaucer barked, and he glared at the little dog. "Somehow, I think this is all your fault."

The dog whined and curled up, his back to Rico. "Fine. Be that way."

He wasn't sick to his stomach anymore, but he was still hyper and aching. He needed to be up walking, not sitting here in a metal dog cage.

"I suppose if I'd been a good dog and stayed in the kennel, I wouldn't be in this situation." Then he'd have missed teasing Briony into that beautiful climax. She'd been as responsive as a dream, reacting to his commands eagerly. Somehow he didn't think she was a trained sub, just a woman who liked to spice things up with a little kink.

Well, that worked for him just fine. He replayed her confessions over and again, rubbing his hand over his heart. She felt the same way that he felt about her!

Like so many women, she was riddled with insecurity about her body and her appearance. Right then, Rico made it his life goal to show Briony that she was a female to be cherished and loved. Even feeling like crap, his cock was hard and erect at the memory of the night.

Well, except for the part where he'd been sick in front of her. That hadn't been so cool.

He had to plan his campaign. She was interested; he'd known that from the start, but now he'd heard it directly from Briony herself. Flowers? Traditional dates? Candy? His stomach lurched sickly.

Maybe he should just jump her bones.

He shivered, a wave of chills running over his body. Damn chocolate.

For the thousandth time, Rico wondered at just how stupid his wolf could be.

\* \* \*

Briony was on her knees pulling a few stray weeds when a truck pulled up in front of her house. She straightened up, shaded her eyes and watched as a blond man

gazed at the house, and then at Briony. He gave her a smile and a wave and drove away.

For a brief moment, she wondered if he was looking for the dog.

The dog!

She checked her watch and cursed. She'd meant to be back at the clinic by noon, but it was now 12:30. Briony lurched to her feet and rushed into the house, kicking off the rubber clogs she wore for gardening.

She was hot and sweaty, so she jumped into the shower, finishing in record time. She pulled on fresh underwear and her favorite jeans, topping it with a form-fitting tee shirt. She was going to call Rico about the dog; maybe he'd come by and check the animal out.

If he did come by, she meant to look her best.

The rose color of the shirt looked good against her dark skin, and the neckline dropped into a vee that gave a hint of cleavage. She left her shoulder length hair down to air dry into ringlets, and put on a hint of eye makeup.

Checking herself in the mirror she turned, looking at her ass. Yes, she was a bit curvy back there, but some guys liked some junk in the trunk. While her belly was soft, her waist was still fairly narrow. Not a size four... hell, not even a size twelve, but who cared?

She made the drive back to the clinic quickly and rushed inside to check the animals. Chaucer and the cats were sound asleep, and the black dog was on his feet, looking distressed.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I lost track of time." She opened the cage and he rushed out, rising to his back feet, setting his feet on her shoulders. The animal was a monster! His head rose higher than hers!

"Off."

Obediently, he dropped back to all fours. He followed her to the door, and she let him out into the kennel yard. She grimaced at the evidence of last night's illness; she needed to hose and disinfect the front of the clinic as well. First, she wanted to call Rico.

Instead of using the office phone, she dialed him on her cell so she could monitor the dog as he did his business.

Somehow she figured this dog had never met a fence he couldn't climb.

The call went through to voicemail, and she bit her lip, waiting for the beep.

"Hey Rico, it's Briony." She winced; wondering if that was too familiar. Well hell, he'd kissed her, hadn't he? "Look, I've got a dog here at the clinic; he showed up last night. I know you said there aren't any wolves in California, but this sure looks like one to me. He's very tame and friendly, so I was wondering if maybe he was from a sanctuary or a pet home or something. Anyhow, call me when you get this. Bye."

She disconnected, slipping the phone back into her pocket. The dog came up and joined her on the steps of the clinic, looking up toward the tree line. She reached out and rubbed his chest.

"You are a very lovely boy." He lay on the concrete and rested his head on her leg. Clearly he still felt bad. The sun felt good on her skin, and she dozed for a few moments, enjoying the feel of warm fur under her fingers. She roused herself. She had all day to hang out with the dog. However, she still had chores.

"I have an awful lot of cleaning to do. Better get to it." She went inside and pulled on coveralls and boots. No sense in getting dirty again.

\* \* \*

Briony stepped out the front doors of the clinic, blinded by the afternoon sunlight. She nearly screamed when she collided with a big, strong male body.

"Sorry! Sorry!" He stepped back, giving her space. Briony looked up... and up... He was nearly as tall as Rico and blond where Rico was brunet. A roguish smile set off twinkling blue eyes, and he held a battered cowboy hat in his tanned hands.

"I'm sorry; we're closed for the weekend. Do you have an emergency?"

"No. Well, I'm not sure if I do or not." His blue eyes went serious. "I'm looking for a friend of mine. He was supposed to come out to my place first light, and he never showed up. I talked with him last night, and your name came up. I was wondering..." He flushed a bit, and she knew where this was headed.

"Rico?" He nodded. "I haven't seen him since I left the Rescue Center at about 8:00 last night. Did you check his house?"

"I did, and both his motorcycle and his truck were there, but he wasn't. I have a key."

Worry began to register in her gut. "I tried calling him earlier today, but he didn't answer. Of course, he didn't mention any plans so I assumed he was just out enjoying his weekend. Maybe he's doing fieldwork? Or down at the center? I know he covers for the volunteers that can't make it."

The man shook his shaggy blond head. "I'll run down there and check around. It just seems odd that his vehicles are at home, but he isn't. I saw him last night, and he went home alone..." He flushed again, and Briony wondered exactly what had been said about her.

"Well, it's too early to file a missing person's report, but I'm sure if you phone the sheriff, they'll put the word out. I'd hate to think he's in trouble somewhere." Briony reached for her pocket and realized she was wearing the baggy coveralls. She went hot with embarrassment. She unzipped the front and reached into her jeans pocket, pulling out a business card. "My phone number is on here, as well as my cell number. If you hear anything, would you call me?"

He took the card. His eyes sparkled with a smile again. He'd clearly enjoyed the strip show.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd do the same." He drew his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans, fishing out his business card. She took it and read it. "Daniel 'Tex' Teixeira, Contractor." She glanced back at him. "You don't look Hispanic."

He grinned. "Couple generations back. The family's originally from New Mexico, moved here when I was a little kid. Rico and I went to school together till he was adopted. Before that, he practically lived in my mom's kitchen, begging for cookies."

"What happened to his parents?"

Tex went serious again. "Don't know about his dad, but his mom was killed in a hit and run accident up off Santo's Mine Road. They were out walking, and she was killed on impact. He was just a little kid, and some trucker found him sitting by her body. They don't know how long he sat there, but it was probably a couple hours."

"My God." She shook her head in shock. She knew that road well. It was dangerous and twisted around the mountain, but a vehicle could still travel fast enough to cause major damage in an accident.

"Yeah, it was pretty awful. I know my folks felt really bad that we couldn't take him in ourselves, but they'd just moved here and money was tight. I was mad at them for months when Rico got adopted and moved away. Felt like he should stay with us."

That explained his concern. She didn't know many people who would go searching for a friend who'd been missing for just a few hours.

"Well, it was nice to meet you, Dr. Theale."

"Call me Briony."

"How 'bout if I call you Bree?"

Was he flirting? She smiled. "Bree is fine. And please, let me know if he turns up."

"You too." He turned away, heading for the street. She could see his pickup truck parked up the road. Had he been canvassing the neighborhoods?

Briony shrugged back into the coveralls and began to spray down the sidewalk with disinfectant. She'd scrubbed it down with an anti-microbial soap, but since she was at it, she figured it might be a good idea to take care of the walkways as well.

People could carry lots of nasty bugs in on their shoes.

\* \* \*

Tex hopped into the cab of his truck and studied the veterinarian as she sprayed down the clinic sidewalks with a powerful chemical. Even this far away, it stung his nose, causing him to sneeze.

It was certainly good practice for a veterinary office, but the stuff was so pungent he couldn't pick up a scent anymore.

He'd followed Rico's trail from the trees down to the clinic, but it had become fouled by her cleaners. He thought he could scent Rico when she unzipped those silly coveralls, but it was faint and just not right.

It was a sick smell, which made no sense.

Something just wasn't right. Rico's scent might be lingering from the night before. He'd recognized the woman from the chocolate fragrance that had clung to Rico last night at the bar.

Tex started the truck and pulled away from the curb. He'd try a few more places, and if Rico didn't show up, he'd call for reinforcements.

## Chapter Six

Briony was incredibly grateful for the utilitarian shower that was tucked into the tiny bathroom. After sanitizing the grounds, she'd felt sticky and smelly. She'd slipped past the hospital kennels, not wanting to expose the sick animals to the chemicals that hung on her clothing.

She was back in fresh scrubs and had thrown everything else into the laundry. Her tennis shoes squeaked on the freshly mopped floors. Briony dropped into her office chair and was suddenly assailed by the need for chocolate. It was a stress reaction. This was the first time today the craving had hit.

Where could Rico be? She checked her phone. Tex hadn't called with information, and she resisted the urge to call him. She glanced at the clock and realized it was time to check on Chaucer and the other dog.

She rose wearily, heading for the kennels. Barely any sleep last night, and another long night stretched in front of her. There would be no break until the following weekend.

Maybe it was time to advertise for a part-time vet to help out. Maybe a student from the university would be interested in a position. She'd love to be able to have someone available for after-hours emergencies.

"Hey guys, time for more yummy... char... coal..." She stood, stricken dumb by the sight in front of her. "Rico? Is that you?"

He lay curled up in the largest kennel, naked and shivering. Even from where she stood, a light sheen of sweat was visible on his skin.

"Rico, what the hell are you doing in there?" She rushed over and fumbled with the catch of the kennel, reaching in to pull him out.



He was barely conscious, his skin was hot and sweaty, and his pulse was rapid. "You hold on. I'm calling for an ambulance."

"No hospital." His voice was raspy and harsh. "Can't... they'll find out..."

Find out what? At the moment, it didn't matter. She helped him to his feet and guided him to the stainless steel table. Thankfully, it was hydraulic and lowered so he could easily sit.

He shuddered at the cold metal, and she dashed to a cupboard, pulling out a blanket. "You're burning up."

"My temp is normally high."

She pulled out a digital thermometer and slipped a cover on it. When she held it to his mouth, he balked. "I know where that thing's been."

"Okay, is that where you want me to put it? Because if you don't open your mouth, it's going in the other end."

He glared, but opened his mouth. After mere seconds, it beeped.

"Damn it, Rico, you need to be in the hospital!"

"I told you, my normal temperature is high. It's not that big a jump."

Well, if it went any higher, he'd be brain damaged.

"Okay, so why don't you tell me how you got into my locked clinic, and then into that cage. It only locks from the outside, and you couldn't have gotten your hand through the slats in the cage."

He didn't answer, so she stood, arms crossed over her chest. "I have a pair of scrubs that'll fit you. If you tell me, you get clothes. If you don't, I'm calling 911 and you can explain it to the sheriff."

He pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders. She wasn't certain, but he seemed to be recovering from whatever had him so sick. It was almost like... she glanced over at Chaucer.

"How did you get into that cage, and where's the black dog?"

"It isn't a dog; it's a wolf. And I got into the cage when you put me there."

"What?"

He groaned and rolled onto his side, curling up into a fetal position. "Do you realize I had to lick that stupid bottle to get water? That was just... humiliating."

She circled the table to face him. "Say it again."

"I had to drink from the bottle."

"No, Rico. What you said before."

He sighed in resignation. "Well, I was going to have to tell you anyway. I was in the cage because you put me there."

"I put that big black dog --"

"Wolf."

"Fine. I put that wolf in the cage. Not you."

"Yes, Briony, me."

She stepped back, not sure whether to run for the phone or just keep humoring him. Unfortunately, the view she was getting of his sleek, muscular body derailed her thought process.

"Explain." Her throat felt tight, and Briony felt that her heart weighed a ton. Trust her to fall in love with a freak -- an exceptionally hot freak.

"You put me in the cage. I was the wolf."

"You aren't a wolf, Rico."

"Well, technically, that's true. I'm a different species. When I'm in this form, I'm human. But otherwise, I'm wolf. If you'd done blood work on me, it would have come back abnormal."

"You're a werewolf? Is that what you're telling me?" She might as well humor him. Maybe then he wouldn't kill her.

He seemed to be recovering again. Rico sat up on the table and rubbed his hand over his face. He needed a shave. "This chocolate poisoning is like the world's worst caffeine overdose. I thought after last night that it'd passed out of my system."

"The toxin stays behind. The charcoal I gave you binds the theobromine from the chocolate and carries it from the body." She stared at him. "That was really you?" She really did want to believe. In fact, setting aside her scientific mind, her instinctual mind

was comfortable with the notion. There'd always been something wild about Rico, and his eyes were so similar to the dog's eyes.

"I came down to check on you last night. You always smell so good, like chocolate. The wolf took over when I smelled the chocolate in the trash can. To him, it was like being closer to you."

Briony suddenly remembered that she'd used the bathroom without shutting the door. Even as she held that thought, he flushed a dark red, and she remembered all of his moments in the dog yard.

Hell, they were even. At least she hadn't awakened buck naked in a dog kennel!

"My God, Rico, what am I going to do with you?" She folded her arms tightly around her body, backing away from him.

"Just get me those scrubs. I can get home."

"No, I don't think so."

The rebellious look was back on his face, and to her amazement, it looked just like the expression the dog... wolf had on his face when she tried to put him in the cage.

"Rico, you're very sick still. You need to stay here so I can watch you."

"I'm not getting back into the cage. Not even if I shift back."

Briony rolled her eyes and went to the laundry room for a pair of large scrubs. Unfortunately, she didn't have shoes for him.

"There's a bed in the back, but you know that, don't you?" Then she remembered her dream. It hadn't been a dream. She flushed again, feeling moisture gathering at the memory. "Just go get in the bed. I'll bring you water and something to eat."

To her surprise, he obeyed without protest. When she came into the room with the sandwich she'd packed for dinner, he lay on his back staring at the ceiling. She set the plate on the small table by the bed and went to her office, dragging a rolling chair back into the tiny room.

"So the chocolate affects you the same way it affects a dog?"

"Wolf. And yes." He sat up and took half the sandwich, eating it carefully, as though he still felt ill. "We're warned off it from the time we're young. I can have a little, but what I did last night..." He shook his head in amazement at his own behavior. "The wolf just took over when I scented you. I guess my control isn't as good as I thought."

He set the unfinished sandwich on the plate and opened the water, drinking deeply. Setting down the empty bottle, he gave her a mock glare. "I can't believe you put me in a cage."

"I can't believe you got into bed with me."

He gave her a grin that was distinctly licentious in nature. "Was it good for you?"

She reached out a foot and kicked his leg.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry."

She laughed in disbelief.

"Okay, so I'm not sorry. Not at all. And if I get the chance, Briony, I'll do a hell of a lot more next time." He sat up and reached out, grabbing the edge of the chair to pull it closer. "So much more, Briony." He pulled the rolling chair between his spread legs, and when her knees came into contact with his groin, she knew he wasn't teasing. His cock was long and hard under the thin fabric of the scrubs.

His skin was a bit flushed. It might be from the poisoning, yet it might be from arousal. Rico leaned forward, clasping her hips, pulling her from the chair to straddle his lap.

"Damn, Bree, you smell so good." He pressed his face to the crook of her neck, inhaling deeply. "You always smell like chocolate."

"I haven't had any since yesterday." Her voice sounded breathless and husky.

"It's not from eating it; it's your fragrance. If you never tasted chocolate again, you'd still smell that way to me." He licked her neck, a slow, lingering stroke. "I can taste it as well. I have to wonder, are you as bad for me as chocolate is?"

She pulled away and looked at his face. He wasn't teasing. "You mean that."

"My pack has warned me off you."

She reached up and stroked his bristly cheek. This close, she could see that the gray iris of his eyes was woven through with black and silver. His lashes were thick, both top and bottom. She ran the tip of her finger over his finely etched lips.

"Your pack?" She suddenly remembered. "Tex? Do you have a friend named Tex? He came by looking for you."

His face went still. "Tex came by? Was he alone?"

"Yes, just him. I told him I'd call if you showed up."

"Don't worry, I'll call him. Not right now, it's going to be unpleasant enough explaining to the Alpha that I spent the weekend with you. When I tell them about the chocolate and the cage..." He trailed off. His gaze dropped away from her face. Impulsively, Briony leaned into his body. She smiled when his arms wrapped around her waist.

"You have to tell?"

"Yeah. The Alpha's powerful. Like, supernaturally powerful. He'll know if I'm lying or leaving anything out."

She pulled back and looked at him again. "Do you live with them?"

"No, not all the time. It's complicated." He bent just a bit, angling his head to find her throat again. She felt him go warm, and wasn't certain if it was the toxin or his arousal. Either way, he seemed a bit euphoric.

She felt a bit high herself, feeling his lips travel down the most sensitive spots on her skin. She gasped and shivered when he nipped at the lobe of her ear.

"I want you, Briony. I need you..." His mouth came to hers, taking her in a kiss that was deep and desperate and so unlike the teasing kisses of the night before. He tasted her, inhaled her, and she held on for dear life.

Between her legs, she felt him grow harder. He rocked his shaft up into her mound, and Briony suddenly became one with her need. His hands cupped her bottom, rocking her against him, pressing their fabric-covered flesh together.

She needed him now... all of him. Briony broke away from the kiss, tugging at the cotton of his shirt. It came off over his head and she stroked him, her hands sampling the texture of his skin. She bent down and tasted the curve of his ear, feeling the beat of his pulse in his neck.

In frustrated need, she struggled from his lap and untied the drawstring of his pants, watching in fascination as his engorged cock came into view.

"I guess this is yes?" Rico shifted on the bed, resting back on the pillow. He was naked and delicious, his body as beautiful as she'd fantasized. He had broad shoulders, narrow hips, and an intriguing vee that led from his hips to his groin. He wasn't ripped or overly muscled, but smooth and sleek. To her surprise, he didn't have a great deal of body hair, just a treasure trail that led the eye downward.

"Is it a yes for you, Rico?" Maybe she was moving too fast? Oh hell, she'd wanted him for months. Out of respect, Briony stopped, looking at him anxiously.

"Bree, if you don't get out of those clothes, I can't promise that I won't change shape and strip you with my teeth!"

With a saucy grin, Briony unsnapped her jeans and slipped them off, leaving her pink silk panties in place. She crawled back onto the narrow bed, one knee on either side of Rico's muscular thighs.

"Shirt, Briony." His voice brooked no disobedience so she left it in place. Instead, she ran her hands up his thighs, letting her thumbs trail into the curls of his pubic hair. His cock gave a slight jerk and she ignored it, trailing fingers lightly through his hair, massaging the skin at the base of his shaft.

"Breeee..." He gasped and groaned when she slid her fingers under his balls, gently massaging their weight in her hand.

"Very nice, Rico." She ran her fingers further back and laughed as he jerked a bit when she brushed his anus. "A little touchy there?" He growled, and even that sound choked off when Briony ducked down, burying her face between his legs, dragging her tongue over the skin behind his balls.

"Fuck, Briony!"

She stifled a giggle; there was nothing as fun as reducing an alpha male to jelly in her hands! She grasped his cock in both hands, squeezing firmly as she sucked the head into her mouth, swirling her tongue all around as though it were a lollypop.

Rico's head jerked up from the pillow, and then dropped back. "Fuck... fuckfuckfuck..." His hips thrust upward, but she controlled him easily.

He was uncut so the skin slipped over his cock like silk, and Briony began to pump him as she sucked, squeezing him tightly at the base. She massaged his perineum, and teased his anus again, using the flats of her fingers so he didn't get flinchy again.

They'd work up to that slowly...

"Get up here!" Rico reached down and grabbed her shoulders, tugging her off his shaft and up to his belly. Roughly, he pulled the shirt from her body, leaving her in nothing but her lacy pink bra and panties. "Oh, babe, look at this!" He pulled her up until she straddled his waist, offering an unimpeded view of her full breasts and rounded hips. He cupped her breasts, squeezing through the fabric of her bra.

He found her nipples through the lace, rolling them to hard points. Briony pulled a deep, shaky breath.

"You like toys, don't you? Toys and nipple clamps and cock rings. Nasty little tricks to make you hot." He pinched and she cried out, her pussy clenching hard. "You're so wet I can feel you creaming right through your panties."

He tugged at the bra till she spilled out of the cup; her single breast beckoned like an offering. He coaxed her downward, and Briony held her breath as his tongue flicked out, teasing her nipple. She leaned forward, bracing her weight on her hands. Even as his sharp teeth bit into the sensitive skin of her nipple, he pulled the fabric of her panties aside, his fingers slipping into her cleft.

Without warning, he spanked her hard, prompting her to squeal in protest. She couldn't move, though; she was held in place by teeth on her breast and fingers buried inside her channel. He slapped her bottom again, and Briony felt her muscles clamp

down hard on his hand. It wasn't a climax, but a gut-wrenching reaction to his domination.

He let her nipple loose. "That's your punishment for disobeying me, Bree."

"What?" She could barely think, and since he'd freed her nipple, she was moving, trying to fuck his fingers.

"I told you to take off your shirt."

"And you're spanking me for not taking it off? You pervert!"

She squealed as he slapped her ass again.

"And you love every second of it!"

"Fuck you, Rico!" She dropped to his chest and caught his nipple between her teeth, nipping hard. He hissed in pain and arousal.

"That sounds like an excellent idea, Bree!" His fingers left her pussy, and then she felt his hands clasp her hips. He raised her, arrowing his hardened cock to the entrance of her body. His cockhead slipped, nudged, and then slid into place. The fabric of her panties kept her labia pressed together, keeping her tight, and she whimpered, trying to coax more of him into her body.

"Take them off!" Her voice was harsh with frustration, and with an evil grin, Rico drew out, returning just enough to heighten her arousal. She tried to take control, rising on her knees, but when she came down on his cock, he slipped away. When Briony began to pull at her panties, trying to tear them off, he trapped her hands.

"Just because you're on top doesn't mean you're running this show, Bree."

He brought his face to her breasts, worrying first one nipple, and then the other. She fought, squirmed on his hips, trying to rub, to twist... anything to relieve the torment. Her hands were trapped in his, and the crotch of her panties was a barrier between her clit and his body.

"Come on, Rico... please?" She was panting and sweating and completely at his mercy.

He let loose of her breast and let his head fall back to the pillow, looking up at Briony in question. "Please what?"



"Please, Sir," she added primly.

He rolled his eyes at her insincerity. "Okay, Bree. Get up off me and take off your panties. Leave the bra on. I like the way your breasts look right now."

She glanced down to see that both were bare now. The pink lace cradled them, thrusting them outward. As quickly as possible, she scrambled off of him, pulling the underwear off and kicking it away.

"Don't move; just stand there. I like looking at you."

It took a bit of discipline, but Briony resisted the urge to stomp her foot in frustration. Instead, she put a finger in her mouth, wetting it, and then reaching down to circle her nipple. His eyes grew bright and his cock twitched.

"Come back here." He rose up, and when Briony reached the bed, Rico moved her to her knees, pushing her face down to the bed. Without ceremony, he mounted her, plunging deep into her pussy. He filled her so deeply, so completely, that Briony moaned, thrusting her hips up to meet him.

She wanted fast and hard; he gave her slow and deep. Briony buried her face into the pillow and screamed her frustration.

His hands wandered, pinching, stroking, reaching around to cup her heavy breasts. He covered her, kissing a trail up her spine and then moving her hair out of the way.

She turned back to watch; her breath caught at his raw male beauty. His eyes were hooded and intent. His body flexed as he thrust. His dark hair fell down into his face. When he saw her watching, Rico grasped her jaw and kissed her hard.

"You are so beautiful, Briony, so perfect." He unsnapped the bra and it slipped down her arms, letting her breasts swing freely as he pounded into her body. She was close, and every thrust brought her closer still.

When he pulled out, she moaned, twisting to her back, winding her legs around his hips. Rico curled his hips into hers, pressing into her again. Every time he filled her, she met him, grinding into his body, her nails digging into his ass. Her muscles went tight, her toes curled...

"Oh... now, Rico, oh God..." The orgasm lifted her from the bed up into his body, and he met her tempo stroke for stroke. As Briony peaked, holding at the highest wave of her climax, Rico cursed, his body shuddering, his cock filling her body with his seed. Again they crashed together, and again the spasms rocked them.

When it was finished, Rico braced himself over her body, his muscles shaking, sweat beading his skin. His gray eyes were bewildered as he looked at her, and suddenly Briony felt a deep throb on her shoulder. She reached up to touch, and her fingers came away bloody.

"I bit you."

"I didn't even feel it." It didn't feel like a severe wound, but Rico looked so shaken. "Just... it's okay, baby. Just lay down with me for a minute." She needed him in her arms. She needed to come down, to know that she was safe and grounded and not alone. Rico stared at her for a moment, and then shifted to his side, lying next to her. He spooned up behind her body, holding her tight. Somehow, he pulled the covers up over them both.

"I didn't use a condom."

She went tense, a flutter of anticipation mingled with fear. Instead of speaking, she pulled his arms around her a bit tighter. She bit her lip. It wasn't disease that frightened her. Somehow, the thought of a baby wasn't that bad. She'd never wanted a child before. Now she suddenly did.

As though he read her mind, Rico's hand drifted down to her belly, stroking her softly. He gently kissed the bite mark on her shoulder. "I didn't mean to mark you, Bree."

"It'll be okay. It doesn't hurt." It didn't hurt. The wound stung a bit, but even that little discomfort faded as Rico first kissed, and then licked the pain away.

## Chapter Seven

Rico was gone when Briony woke up. He'd let himself out the back entrance of the clinic, which faced the tree line. She walked through the clinic, forlorn and naked, feeling his seed slip from her body.

They hadn't used protection.

Briony took a quick shower and skipped the underwear, slipping on the scrubs she'd worn earlier.

Werewolf. She nearly laughed. Yet the big dog was gone, and Rico had walked barefoot through the wet grass and onto the sidewalk. His fading footprints had changed from human to paw prints in mid-stride.

She sat on the back steps until past dark, waiting for him to return, but he didn't. She sat as the moon rose and the stars glittered in the sky. When Saturday night edged close to Sunday morning, Briony got up, changed the sheets on the bed and then tended the animals one last time. Chaucer had finally crashed after his sustained high and was sleeping like a rock. Rico was probably sleeping it off as well.

Without the big dog... wolf... Well, without his howling, she'd be able to sleep tonight. Tomorrow he'd call, they'd laugh about it, and he'd feel bad about the bite mark he'd left on her neck. Things would get back to normal. She'd see Rico on her weekly trip to the Rescue Center. She'd just pretend that this hadn't happened, that he hadn't made that confession.

Briony crawled into the narrow bed, relieved that she couldn't smell Rico anymore. Not on her body, not on the bedding. She lay with her eyes wide open until the moon shone directly in the tiny window up high on the wall.

A mournful howl carried on the wind, followed by another, and then another. It couldn't be wolves, because there were no wolves in California. Not wild ones, anyway.

Unable to sleep, Briony rose, checked on Chaucer and the cats, and then wandered, finally opening the back door to sit on the steps and watch the night sky. She propped her chin on her hands, letting the sad, heavy feeling settle in her chest. After all, what good was denial? She could deny all she wanted to, but that didn't change the fact that she'd just had sex with the man she loved, and he'd cut and run at the first opportunity.

A tear trickled down her cheek, and then another. Angrily, she wiped them away. When she looked up once again, her heart jumped. "Rico?"

The wolf that moved slowly into the circle of the porch light wasn't black, nor was it Rico. The color was a deep rust red shade, and its ears lay back in wicked anger. Another wolf stepped into the light, and then another.

Slowly, carefully, Briony moved up a step, pushing up with her feet and her bottom. As she moved higher, the wolves moved closer.

"Tex?" She looked at one she took to be white, but the light revealed its coat to be light gold and white. His eyes were blue. He was angry. Briony's mouth was dry, her skin prickled in fear. She pushed up one more step, and then jumped as the door swung shut.

The man who stood just feet from her had moved so silently that she hadn't seen or heard him. As she met his gaze, Briony had the instinctive need to cower, but she kept her chin up and met his gaze directly, holding it for a long moment. She was the first to look away.

He was well-dressed in a suit and tie. His dark hair was unfashionably long and tied back from his face. What should have looked dated and silly was sleek and slightly wild on this man.

His face was ruthlessly handsome, with dark eyes that sparked with anger. Slowly, he circled to stand directly in front of her. The floodlight haloed out from his body, and the wolves crept in to surround him in a semi-circle. The red and white brute sat close enough that his fingers tickled its ears. It leaned its head against his thigh.

"You're Dr. Theale." His voice rumbled, and Briony suddenly recognized the man. She'd met him at a meeting of community business leaders. He'd been dressed down then, in jeans and a tee shirt.

"Chase Montenegro. It's... nice to see you again." Her eyes flicked to the wolves. "You have such interesting companions. Rico told me there were no wolves in California."

He smiled then, and gestured to the red wolf. The animal approached her, slowly sniffing her, starting at her crotch. She held her position, knowing that he was seeing with his nose. When he reached her tennis shoes, he sneezed.

The wolf turned away, and as he moved toward the alpha, he melted upward; suddenly a tall, sinewy man stood in place of the wolf. Briony swallowed hard, but said nothing.

"They fucked, but it's not fresh. Her shoes stink of disinfectant." Slowly, the red-haired man looked over at Briony, and for the first time, she stifled the urge to scream. Even in human shape, he was more animal than man. She instinctively knew how hard this one fought to maintain his self-control.

Danger.

"She smells good enough to eat. Like chocolate." He grinned and spoke as though it was a dirty word. It was then she noticed that he was stark naked, and his cock was hard in response to her. He gave her a wicked grin.

Not knowing what prompted her, Briony smiled back.

His grin faltered. "I'm Sage."

"Hello, Sage. If you're a friend of Rico, then it's nice to meet you."

She saw a look flutter through his eyes, a look she'd seen a million times in frightened, aggressive animals. She forced calm through her body, and as she watched, his cock went soft and his posture relaxed. Without looking directly at them, she sensed the other wolves slinking closer, their muzzles twitching.

A nose nudged at her hand, and she casually let her fingers trail back until she felt a broad, furry head and thick ears. She stroked, never looking at the animal. If she

looked, it would shy away. She'd heard that wolves were incredibly shy, and that seemed to be the case with these. Even Tex was slow to approach her.

"I take it that Rico didn't call you?"

"No. No, he didn't." Chase snapped his fingers and the wolves returned to their positions behind him. "Tex told us that you hadn't seen him."

Her cheeks went warm. Automatically, she knew they'd scent anything she felt, so now they knew that she was embarrassed.

"I... uh..." She cleared her throat and glanced at the trash can. "Friday night, I threw about five pounds of chocolate in the trash can. While he was in wolf form, Rico ate it."

Sage rolled his eyes and snorted in amusement. He casually leaned against the alpha. It wasn't sexual; the gesture was more comfortable than that. Another wolf sat pressed against his leg.

"Later, I found this dog at the front door. He was sick, so I took him in and treated him. After Tex left, I figured out that it was Rico. That's when we were together. When I woke, he was gone." She screwed up her courage and looked at the alpha. "He meant to call you, but the chocolate toxicosis might have hit him again. The toxin doesn't leave the body all at once, and he might still be sick."

"He was healthy enough to fuck you." Sage's amber eyes glittered in the cool fluorescent lighting. "He left his mark behind too."

She rubbed her neck; the mark didn't show under the neckline of her shirt...

"When we mate, we leave a mark that warns others off. His saliva combined with your blood. We can scent it."

"Mate?" She stared at the alpha in shock.

Sage lifted a brow and laughed. "Wolves mate for life, Doc. In case you thought he'd run off and left you? Not gonna happen." His eyes glittered in angry warning. "And you aren't gonna run off and leave him either."

She swallowed hard. What the hell had she gotten herself into?

Chase glanced down at the wolves, and two broke from the group, loping easily up to the forest beyond the pasture. "They'll track him. We picked up his trail leaving this door. You'll come up to the compound with us."

She shook her head. "No. I'm sorry; I've got sick animals inside. I can't leave them unattended."

"You won't need to." He glanced to the side of the building.

"Hey, Doctor Bree." Amy walked into the light, smiling uneasily. "I'll cover for you the rest of the weekend."

"Amy, are you..."

"Yeah. You met my brother earlier today."

"Tex? Tex is your brother?"

"Yeah." She stuck her tongue out at the golden wolf. "I live at the compound on the weekends." She stepped up on the concrete porch and plopped down next to Briony. "They don't mean to scare you. Well, Sage means to scare you, but the others don't." She shot a grin at the tall redhead. "Sage, put on some pants or something." She tossed a pair of sweats at him; he caught them before they hit his scowling face.

"Since you and Rico are together, you need to spend time up there so they can get a feel for you. They don't trust easy."

"They shouldn't." Briony looked from wolf to man. "I promise I won't betray you."

"You might not mean to, Dr. Theale, but we need you to understand what's at risk. You also have to understand what Rico is to us."

"He's part of your pack." Instinctively she understood how the structure worked. It was a simple, organic family structure.

"Rico came back to the area to be near us, but he can't seem to integrate back into the pack. He's too connected to humans."

"And by... mating me, he's cemented that link to humans even more."

"I suppose you do understand." Chase held out a hand, and reluctantly, Briony took it, rising stiffly to her feet. She'd been so rigid with tension that her muscles were

sore. She swayed and staggered, and Sage caught her around the waist, holding her steady.

None of them were prepared when a huge black form shot through the darkness, catching the redhead by the throat, carrying him to the ground.

In a heartbeat, the man shifted to wolf, and the two writhed and scrambled, teeth flashing in feral snarls, lunging and grabbing. Blood splattered the ground in a fine spray, and Briony started forward, stopping when Chase held her back.

"Sage! Rico! Now!" His harsh voice cut through the air like a sword, and for a moment, Briony thought the wolves would ignore him. The fight continued, and then came to a slow, agonizing stop. Both wolves had a savage grip on the other.

"Shit," Chase snarled, and Briony felt a wave of power. She doubled over, grabbing her stomach, and in the place of wolves, two naked, bloody men sprawled on the concrete.

"Are you finished?" The alpha spoke in a low, ominous growl. Sage was the first to break away and rise to his feet, stepping behind the alpha. Rico rolled to his feet, stepping directly in front of Briony.

"She's mine." The wolf was still in his voice, sending a thrill of fear up Briony's skin.

"We don't dispute that, Rico. Sage was simply helping her. He won't touch her again without your permission."

His broad body blocked her view of the others, but in the darkness, Briony could see a deep rip on the meat of Rico's shoulder, perilously close to the jugular. She put a hand on his arm, gently moving around him to check his wounds.

"I need to check you over, Rico. I need to check Sage too. He's bleeding more than you are."

Sage growled at the implication that Rico had bested him. She ignored him, comfortable knowing that he was under the firm control of the alpha. Rico still fought the connection. She knew now that he'd choose her over the pack, and wasn't sure how she felt about that. Not good, that was for sure.



"Come on." She tugged his arm, and he turned away stiffly, following Briony into the clinic. Amy hurried ahead. She was setting out emergency supplies by the time the rest of them arrived. To her consternation, all the wolves followed them inside and Tex wandered to the largest cage, sniffing inside and then looking up at Rico with an expression of lupine humor on his face.

"Not a word, you asshole!" Rico's voice still wasn't fully human. Chase's lips quirked in a smile, and Sage coughed out a laugh.

"Amy, work on cleaning the blood off him. You..." She looked at Rico. "You nearly had your head taken off, so I'd suggest you shut up and sit still while I look at this."

She worked in silence for long minutes, checking Rico's vitals once again, and then cleaning and stitching Sage's wounds. When Rico growled under his breath, one glance from Chase silenced him.

Finally, both men were patched and bandaged, and once again, Briony was digging through her dwindling supply of surgical scrubs. Chase was leaning against a wall, waiting with seemingly infinite patience. "Are we ready to go?"

She balked for a moment, and then looked around the room. Two wolves lay relaxed on the floor, staring across the room at the cat cages. Chaucer was licking Sage's fingers through the bars of his cage. Rico was looking pale and exhausted, but otherwise healthy. Like Chaucer, she was certain that he was out of the woods, so to speak.

"Give me a minute to get a couple things." She gathered her toothbrush and a few other supplies from the bathroom, as well as a change of clothes that she kept at the clinic for emergencies.

"Ready." She followed the alpha outside. All the wolves had faded away. Rico stepped up close. After a moment's hesitation, he slipped his arm around her shoulder.

"Where'd you go?"

He leaned down and kissed her forehead gently. "I just needed to be a wolf for awhile. While you were sleeping, I realized what I'd done."

Automatically, her hand rose to the mark on her neck.

"Do you understand what that is?"

"A marriage proposal?"

Shock registered on his face, followed by laughter. "Well, that's sort of closing the barn door after the horses escaped! I tied you to me permanently, and now you're talking marriage." He stopped, letting the others load up in the trucks they'd ridden down in. "But yes, Bree, now that you mention it, I'd love to see you in a wedding dress, walking down the aisle to me. I want the music and the cake, the rings and the bridesmaids and the groomsmen." He stepped in front of her, clasping her hands in his. She watched in delight as Rico dropped to one knee.

"Briony Theale, I love you with all of my heart, with all that I am. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

She was gobsmacked. Flabbergasted. Just over a day ago, this man had been a dream, an unattainable fantasy. Now... now... the marks throbbed on her shoulder. Slowly, she dropped to her knees in front of him. "This means no more chocolate."

"No, Briony. You eat as much chocolate as you want, just don't leave it lying around where the pups can get to it. Besides, if I can lick you, who needs a chocolate bar?" He leaned forward and nuzzled her jaw, dragging his tongue along her skin. "I love you."

Briony wrapped her arms around him, drinking up the sensation of Rico in her embrace. "Yes. And I love you too."

"Thank you."

It was a quiet moment, just Briony and Rico and the stars and moon. They didn't pay any attention to the wolves that watched from the darkness, or the men waiting in the big pickup truck just feet away.

It was the most romantic moment of her life.

## Chapter Eight

The main building of the compound was nearly finished. The old resort hotel had been renovated and brought up to date, and the Pack had customized it for their special needs. Chase had a suite of offices on the ground floor where he ran their various businesses. His private quarters were on the top floor. His betas' apartments were on the top floor as well, and while there was some gossip about the close relationship between the four men, Rico never participated in it. Those men had come out of hell together, and frankly, he was glad someone was keeping an eye on Sage.

Even for a shifter, he was off.

The wedding had been a larger event than either had expected. They'd married outside under the sun, a gathering of Pack and community members who'd been longing to see the restoration of the grand old hotel. Following a quiet reception, the humans had been escorted off the property, and the wolves had come out to play. Out of necessity, Briony's mother and brother had been told the truth, and had taken it well. True to their expectation, neither were particularly surprised that the world was just a little more wonderful than they'd known. They both carried a palpable air of power about them, just as Briony did.

It had been a bonding moment, not only for him and Briony, but for the Pack itself. It had been the first wedding since Chase had taken over the Pack. There would be other firsts coming soon as well.

Rico wandered through the common hall. There was a giant fireplace on one wall. Couches and game tables were scattered all over. A giant Flat Screen TV was hidden behind a sliding panel. They rarely watched TV, but movie nights lured even the most shy of the pack members into the warmth of the main house. Lately, the

spooky girls had fixated on Jim Carrey's Pet Detective movies. The youngsters were fans of the X-Men.

Outside, a broad porch wrapped the building and Tex was sprawled in a chair, his booted foot on the rail. He was quieter than usual, watching a tableau on the lawn. Rico sat next to him and followed his gaze.

"Did you have any idea that she could do things like this?"

Briony was on the lawn, stretched out on a reclining chair. A wolf lay at her side, its chin propped on her knee. Several children were in her vicinity, and as he watched, another wolf hesitantly approached her, sniffing her hand. Briony didn't look at the skittish animal; she merely allowed it to examine her fingers.

"Tilda and Emma were rescued from a lab in Europe. They're scared to death of anyone they don't know. They're the worst of the lot."

"Like true wolves." As he watched, Briony's hand came up and she stroked the wolf. The first wolf had shifted and was now a blonde woman. She leaned her head against Briony's shoulder.

"She's always been amazing with the wildlife at the Center. I've always found that when she chooses, she can have a very... calming effect on me."

"Not calming, mesmerizing." Sage pulled up a chair, and Chase wasn't far behind. "You watch sometime, Rico. She takes these deep, calming breaths, and it's like she just sends out these vibes." Sage's eyes were painful to look at. He was brash and feral, but under the animal was a tormented soul. He was watching Briony with an expression of longing. "I felt it. I'd have hurt her that first night, but she brought me down."

Chase looked from Briony to Rico. "Was one of her parents a shifter? Or gifted in some way?"

"We don't know. She never knew her father. Her mother never put a name on the birth certificate, and never told Briony anything about him. She assumed it was a one-night stand."

"Shit!" Tex whispered the expletive softly. Rico looked down and grinned to see a doe step cautiously onto the lawn. She appeared unfazed by the women and the wolf. "She's toxic, you know. It's a damn good thing she's an animal lover, because if she wasn't, we'd be up shit creek."

Chase was sitting upright in his chair, a dark look on his face. Rico swallowed past a lump in his throat.

"She's like a virgin set out to lure a unicorn." Rico didn't miss the look that passed between Chase and Sage.

"Rico, you know that those women came from labs. They were used for breeding. Some were the offspring of older programs."

He nodded. "Do you think Briony is part of some project?"

Chase sighed. "Frankly, no. However, they'd be interested in her. Very interested. Have you talked with her about moving here?"

"Actually, she asked about it this morning. She wants to be closer to the women. She wants to help."

"Good. We need her." What Chase didn't say was that she'd be safer at the compound as well. It didn't need to be said.

As they watched, she stood and clasped the hand of the woman who'd shifted. Briony had given her a light dress to wear. They walked together to the porch, slowly climbing the stairs.

Briony was beautiful in the sun. Her brown skin glowed, and the sun caught glints of red in her chocolate brown hair. It was her face that captivated him most. The smile.

On the lawn, the wolf followed them slowly, a few feet at a time.

"You can sit here, Tilda."

The blonde woman settled nervously onto the chair that sat facing Tex, and Briony sat on Rico's lap, leaning back into his arms. She sighed and laid her head on his shoulder. Rico closed his eyes and breathed deeply as the scent of chocolate wafted from her skin.

The second wolf finally finished its trek up the stairs and settled near Rico's feet.

"I'm glad you joined us, Emma." Chase's voice was infinitely gentle.

The woman who preferred to be a wolf sighed and stretched out on the wooden floor, settling her head on Tex's booted foot. She gazed at him, her golden eyes darting away, and then returning to his face.

A group of children tumbled about on the lawn, quickly shifting to puppy form and back, and another doe had joined the first, both grazing calmly, as though they weren't surrounded by predators. The early autumn sun crept down toward the western tree line, and Rico wrapped his arms around his woman.

He'd never been more contented in his life. He rubbed Briony's tummy where their child was just beginning to form, and she leaned in, kissing his neck.

Nobody had much to say, and Rico recognized this as one of the most perfect moments he'd experienced in his entire life.

Glancing around, he knew the others felt it as well.

## **Belinda McBride**

Belinda was born in Inglewood, California, but grew up far to the north in the shadow of Mt. Shasta. While her upbringing seemed pretty normal to her, she was surrounded by a fascinating array of friends and family, including a polyamorous grandmother, a grandfather who is a Native American icon, and various cowboys, hippies, scoundrels, and saints.

She has a degree in history and cultural anthropology, but in 2006 made the life-changing decision to quit her job as a public health paraprofessional and stay at home fulltime to care for her severely disabled, autistic niece. This difficult decision gave Belinda the gift of time, which allowed her to return to writing fiction, which she'd abandoned years before.

Belinda's hobbies include soap making, collecting gemstones, travel, and martial arts. She has two daughters, six Siberian Huskies, and an array of wild birds that visit the feeders in the front yard. She supports no-kill animal shelters, and donates platelets twice monthly at her local blood center.

As an author, Belinda loves crossing genres, kicking taboos to the curb, and pulling from world mythology and folklore for inspiration. She is committed to taking her readers on an emotional journey and never forgets that at the end of the day, she's writing about love.

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