



*Dig Dad W/ott*

FLESA BLACK

Loose Id

*Big Bad Wolf*

*Flesa Black*



## **Big Bad Wolf**

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## About this Title

**Genre:** BBW Shape-shifter Paranormal

Vivien's had a thing for dark-haired Rex ever since he moved to town, and five years is a long time to want someone. After he rescues her in the woods from a wild dog, Vivi ends up in his bed, and finally all her erotic fantasies about the rugged carpenter come true.

Rex wants nothing more than to spend his time fulfilling all of the luscious Vivi's desires while he teaches her a few new tricks—both in *and* out of the bedroom. The problem is he knows it wasn't a wild dog that bit her, but a feral werewolf, one of Rex's kind, and he only has a few weeks to explain to the woman he loves why she's changing...and exactly what she's about to become.

***Publisher's Note:*** *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, bondage.*

## Dedication

*Dedicated to the good people at the U.M. Forums. Your knowledge is incredible, your banter hilarious, and your desire for the truth commendable.*

*To my children, who have more patience than I probably deserve.*

*And to my husband, my very own Wolf Charming, who sees my true beauty, and who makes me feel lovelier with each passing year.*

## Chapter One

He ambled down the sidewalk in the quaint, Rockwellian town, staring at the glass door of Sweet Cakes a block down and just across the street. He shouldn't be looking; he knew that. There was no use in torturing himself with things he couldn't have. But damn it, he couldn't get Vivien Spooner out of his head. The soft, generous curves that made a man sweat, the tangled curls of her red-gold hair, her snow-cloud gray eyes, her buttercream complexion, which would burn if she weren't diligent, and that cherry-lipped smile that lit up the room. How the hell was he supposed to forget all that? And her scent... Just remembering the mix of sweet and fresh and the musk that was all her had his cock twitching.

There was more, much more, than her looks. There was the careless goodness that she exhibited, something that she wasn't even conscious of. It was the kindness that had her hiring the Goth waitress and the retired wood-shop teacher. Taking casseroles to new mothers, making sure no one went without a free birthday cupcake—complete with candle, plastering trees with pictures of missing pets or town events, volunteering to do litter patrol in the park... If he hadn't watched her so closely, he'd think she was too perfect. But her imperfections—the stubborn streak, the heart on her sleeve, the independence that bordered on ludicrous, even the gentle clumsiness that she couldn't always control—made Vivien intriguing and too damned desirable.

No, he shouldn't be looking. He shouldn't even be considering. He was crazy to risk wanting the bakery owner. Problem was, he couldn't control his libido.

He was about to pick up his pace when he saw her come out of her shop. She flashed a smile and a quick hello to the elderly couple meandering by as she locked the doors. She had a blue cooler in one hand, her jacket in the other. The green, long-sleeved shirt she wore clung unrepentantly to her sumptuous breasts. He swallowed the liquid pooling in his mouth and slowed his pace, hoping to God no one noticed the raging hard-on he was now sporting.

He almost growled when she leaned across her small blue car to place the cooler in the backseat. Schooling his breathing, he bunched his fists in his pockets and shook his head. It wasn't a good night to be out. Darkness was coming fast, sneaking up like it always did in the fall. The moon would be out soon, full and bright. It wasn't a time to be out roaming around, and definitely not the night to be tromping through the woods to his house. There were more important matters than a hot redhead with a squeezable ass. Though she was fast racing to the top of his list. Right now she stood a solid number two.

He widened his stride, his gaze darting involuntarily toward Vivien's slow-moving car. It took him a moment to realize she hadn't turned in the direction of her house. Instead, she was heading straight out of town, in the exact direction he was going.

Damn it to hell, she was driving straight toward the woods.

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She'd had one hell of a day. First had come the call from her ex-husband, informing her that the woman he'd left her for had left *him*. *Quelle surprise*. The little blonde tart had raced off with a younger, hotter, richer man. Cory had expected Vivien to drop everything and hurry to him, to comfort him, to, she supposed, have a session of ego-boosting sex. Not that the sex had ever been ego boosting for her. She'd been so furious that she had told him she'd wire him the money to pay for a blowjob and slammed the phone down. Really, did he think she was *that* much of a pushover?

Then she'd called her grandmother, just to commiserate. The poor woman had sounded like she'd swallowed a cheese grater at the same time she'd inhaled a wad of cotton. After some prodding, her grandmother had admitted she'd had to find other accommodations for the couple and family who were due to arrive at her bed-and-breakfast tomorrow morning. Of course Gran had insisted she was fine, that it was just a precaution. Of course, Vivien hadn't believed her.

Other smaller irritants that she usually shrugged off had become an overwhelming landslide. The faucet in the bakery's kitchen was leaking again. The milk had gone bad, so she'd had to send Sadie out to get fresh. The lid had gotten stuck on the confectioners' sugar, and when she managed to pry it off, the white powder had flown everywhere. One of the convection ovens wasn't heating properly, so they'd had to double up in the other oven and had still been short on muffins. Mrs. Milner had changed the order for her daughter's sixteenth-birthday cake again. This time she wanted exotic fruit for the top; fruit, Vivien had pointed out, that was not in season and would add a good deal to the cost. Mr. Milner hadn't been happy about that. The squabble had gone on in her shop for twenty minutes before Vivien had finally found a compromise that suited them both.

She had been close to depressed when she'd left the shop. Then she'd caught a glimpse of slow-walking, sexy-as-hell Rex Samuels moving down the sidewalk. Her heart gave a little jolt as she remembered his rumpled dark hair and harsh features. His usual cold-weather outfit of battered leather jacket, soft-washed jeans, and worn work boots looked as right on him as robes on a preacher. Now there was a man who could boost her ego anytime he wanted.

"Right, like someone as hot as Rex Samuels would give you a second glance." She let out a sigh, then immediately shook her head and got into her car. "No, you are so not going there, Vivi. You just aren't."

She had worked long and hard to get over Cory's betrayal. Even years later it was too easy to remember his cool comments about her unappealing body,



her uncontrollable hair...her irritating habits. How could he possibly prefer her, plain old Vivien, to the sleek, slender greyhound of a girl he'd been having an affair with?

"Bastard," she whispered vehemently. "I should have let Gran castrate you when she wanted. Good riddance to rotting garbage. If you try calling again, I swear I'll sic Sadie *and* Gran on you."

She was so caught up in her furious thoughts that it took her a moment to realize something was wrong. Her car was rolling, but nothing was on. No music, no vent, nothing, and all the red lights were lit on the dash.

"No...no...oh no."

She carefully maneuvered the car to the side of the two-lane road, listening as the low-hanging branches of the trees brushed the roof. Of all the things to happen, this was not even in the realm of possibilities. But the way her day had been going, she should have guessed.

Letting out a deep sigh, she climbed out of the car, shivering against the growing chill of the early evening. She pulled out her cell phone, thankful that she'd just renewed her AAA membership. She dialed the number, but nothing happened.

"I know you have a full charge." She gave the phone an accusatory look and held it up to the muted light. "No bars? What?"

Grumbling, she walked around the car, trying in vain to get some sort of signal. Desperate, she climbed up onto the trunk, then finally the roof. There was nothing. She was in a dead spot. Just why the hell did she pay such exorbitant prices for cell phone use anyway? Weren't they supposed to have the most comprehensive coverage across the US? Apparently she was stranded in the one spot that they didn't cover.

"Of course I am." She thought about crying in frustration but figured it would only waste her time and make what was left of her makeup run. "Guess I'm hoofing it."

She slid down to the ground, grabbed the cooler full of get-well food for her grandmother, and closed and locked the car doors. She'd call for a tow once she got to Gran's house. Oh well, at least the night was clear, and it looked to be a full moon rising.

"It's a nice night for a walk." Straightening her shoulders, she began her trek down the road, inhaling the fresh scent of the woods, determined to find some sort of gold lining to her predicament.

## Chapter Two

Vivien let out a relieved breath when she saw her grandmother's paved drive. The small, hand-carved sign that proclaimed GRAN'S HOUSE was set atop a waist-high pile of brown stones. Rex Samuels had made that sign, just as he'd made all the others in town. The man was incredible with wood, creating little swirls and dips, lines and curves, even miniature animals when the occasion called. It didn't take much to imagine how his work-roughened hands would feel on her skin. Not much at all.

Absorbing the sensual shiver that rode along her bones, Vivien balanced the cooler in her grip and headed down the gentle slope of the drive. Memories cascaded around her, like ghosts playing out an ever-looping scene. Growing up here, on the edge of town, surrounded by woods and streams, had been close to ideal.

During her teen years, though, she'd gotten restless, as she supposed most teenagers did. When she'd gone off to college, she'd deliberately chosen a school in the big city. But after years away with only visits in between, she'd come right back to Bendan Town to set up her life. Time away had given her a true appreciation of the world she'd come from.

She was smiling when she saw the gracious, old two-story farmhouse sitting incongruously in the middle of nowhere. Its white wood was a bright beacon in the gathering dusk, the traditional red door decorated with a fall wreath, the rockers on the front porch creaking in the growing wind. She was only a few feet away when her grandmother opened the front door and waved. Her cropped white hair stood out in contrast to the blue robe she was wrapped

in, and Vivien wrinkled her brow in concern. If Gran was in her robe before nine o'clock, she really must be miserable.

Her slippered feet made a distinct shuffle as she shifted her delicate weight. "Vivi, what in the world are you doing here?"

"Tea and sympathy," she called back. "I knew you wouldn't feel like doing much more than opening a can of soup for dinner, so I brought you an actual home-cooked meal, plus dessert, and a helping of your own special mint tea."

Gran grinned as she dabbed at her nose with a tissue. "I should scold you for being out like this, but I'll admit it's nice to see my girl."

Vivien chuckled while she climbed the brick stairs. "Of course it is. And I wouldn't be this late if my darn car hadn't broken down. That's part of the sympathy."

The older woman's gently lined face fell into a look of concern. "You should have called someone instead of walking."

"Yes, well, let's just say I regret switching cell phone carriers." She linked her arm with her grandmother's and turned her back around. "You should be inside, not—"

Her words were cut short by a feral growl. Before she could see what had made the noise, she was shoved out of the way by a brutally heavy weight. Her head gave a loud smack as it struck the knoll post of the porch, sending a reverberation through her skull and down her spine. She lay stunned for a moment, dizzy as she tried to gather her bearings.

When her grandmother gave a startled cry, Vivien immediately shook her head and sprung to her feet, scanning the porch with blurry eyes. What she saw froze her blood.

A wild dog, dark brown hair standing on end, spindly legs quaking with intent, was stalking her grandmother. Its thin lips were pulled back over its sharp teeth, its long muzzle wrinkled in determination. Before she could panic, Vivien grabbed the cooler and smacked the animal over its head.

“Vivi! Go, run! Get away!” Gran cried.

She didn't have time to argue the point, but she sure as hell was not going to leave her grandmother at the mercy of the dog. She whopped it again, this time smacking the hard container against its rib cage. The beast turned then, its startlingly large body angling itself toward her.

Dark eyes seemed to evaluate her body. For dinner? For attack? It didn't matter. The intent was there. Vivien flexed her knees, preparing to spring in the opposite direction of wherever the animal decided to lunge. It growled again, the guttural sound an ugly echo in her head.

“Gran, go inside and get your gun.”

She didn't look to see if her grandmother was gone. There was no way she was taking her eyes off the dog. She lifted the cooler again, this time using it as a shield. If she thought it would do her any good, she would toss the food out to distract it. But somehow she didn't think it was hungry so much as angry and feral.

If she hadn't been watching so carefully, she wouldn't have seen the subtle shift of the dog's muscles. In that moment she knew Gran was standing in the doorway again. There was only a split second to react.

As the wild dog spun to attack her grandmother, Vivien launched herself. She hurled her body at the animal, wrapping her arms around its middle and yanking backward. She caught it off guard, and it tumbled back on top of her. As they landed, she felt the distinct slice and sting of teeth sinking into the flesh of her forearm. Still, she wouldn't let go.

“Shoot!”

“I might hit you!”

Damn it. Now what the hell was she supposed to do? Before any sort of plan had even formed, the heavy body was suddenly gone. She found herself staring up at the underside of the porch roof, struggling to catch her breath. Oh God, Gran!

She jumped up, her gaze going to the doorway, and found her grandmother standing there, unmolested, with the shotgun balanced in her arms.

“What?”

Vivien followed the direction of the older woman's stare. The moment the scene registered, she let out a shocked gasp. Crouched in a fighting stance, his thick arms braced wide as he and the feral animal circled each other, was Rex Samuels. She watched, mesmerized, as the dog leaped into the air. Rex didn't move as the large, lanky body sped toward him. Instead he waited until the last second before lifting his hands and smashing the animal's head between his palms. The blow must have been vicious, because the dog landed with a *thump*, whimpering as it shook its head. Rex took advantage of the animal's disorientation and kicked it solidly in the same side she'd smacked. The dog growled, but the sound was more annoyance than fury.

Rex stood and gazed at him, holding the animal's stare with a cold, unreadable look. The dog snuffed and snapped at the air; still Rex didn't move. She had the giddy thought that she might be watching an old western, where the sheriff and the gunfighter stared each other down in the middle of town before they drew their six-shooters. Only this time it was the little old lady on the porch who held the loaded gun. She turned to take the weapon from her grandmother to use herself when she heard the spinning of feet. She quickly turned back, shocked to find the tall beast had spun on its paws and was racing into the thick covering of the woods.

“Oh, my...my dear Lord.” Gran laid a hand on her chest and swallowed. “I've never seen the like.”

“Are you ladies okay?”

Vivien, still dazed and confused, shook her head before nodding. “I think so.”

Rex approached them in a few long strides, his muscled legs taking the steps two at a time. "I was coming through the woods when I heard the commotion."

Gran gave him a wavering but grateful smile. "I'm so glad you did. I have no idea where that dog came from. We've never had a problem with ferals before."

"I'm sure it was an aberration." His warm blue eyes turned to Vivien, and she could have sworn she saw a spark of heat there. "You shouldn't have tangled with him."

"He was trying to kill my grandmother," she snapped. "I wasn't going to let him—"

Her sentence was cut short when Rex grabbed her hand. His grip was gentle, but just as she'd suspected, his fingers and palm were tantalizingly rough. Languid flames seemed to curl around her bones, seeping into her system before curling in the pit of her stomach. Desire, she realized with a shock. She hadn't known a single touch could ignite want into something so potent.

"You're hurt." Rex caught her gaze again, and this time his eyes held accusation. "You let him bite you."

She didn't know whether to be insulted or laugh. "I *let* him bite me? Oh, yes, I held out my arm and said, 'Here Mr. Big Bad Wolf, take a hunk of me.'"

He let out a long sigh, as if he knew his accusation was ridiculous. "You're bleeding."

Gran gasped and stared down at the injury. "You're going straight to the emergency room, young lady. God only knows what kinds of diseases that rabid animal was carrying. I'll just get my coat."

"Mrs. Spooner, wait. I have a friend, a doctor, who'll come by if I call him. I think we should get Vivi inside and get the bite cleaned and the bleeding stopped."

“Oh well, if he'll come, then... Yes, yes, of course. I'll get some towels.”

Vivien found herself being led into her grandmother's house, Rex's gentle hand still on her arm. She didn't think anything short of amputation would make her pull herself away from him. The sudden, wildly exciting feelings were new to her, something she'd never experienced before, and she was sure, something she'd never experience again.

She was quiet as he made his way through the front sitting room, tossed his coat onto the love seat, and turned right into the kitchen. Strange how he didn't ask where he should be going; he simply went, as if he owned the house. Of course, that was how it felt whenever she saw him anywhere. He was the benevolent ruler of the town, allowing the citizens to live on the land that was rightfully his. A silly idea, she supposed, but true just the same.

“You have a head injury.”

His statement brought her up short, leaving her in just the right spot to be hit on the backside by the kitchen's white swinging door. “I do?”

He raised an eyebrow, and the corner of his very sexy mouth lifted. “Yeah, you do.”

Rex flipped up the lever on the kitchen sink, then opened the freezer with his free hand. “Here, take these, put them on the swelling.”

She accepted the pack of frozen peas without a word and placed them on the rising bump with her uninjured hand. She watched as he checked the water, nodded to himself, then carefully pulled her punctured flesh underneath the stream of hot water. She winced as it hit.

“I know it hurts. I'm sorry.” His deep voice was rough with sympathy, but he kept his gaze on the wound. “You shouldn't have been walking in the woods alone, especially at night.”

If it had been anyone else, she might take his comment as an indictment. But the soft words were thick with concern, and she couldn't. “I didn't intend



to walk. My car broke down, and since I couldn't get a cell phone signal, I couldn't call anyone to help."

He gave a curt nod and poured a slow stream of liquid hand soap onto her scored skin. "I saw your car. I figured you were probably walking, since you weren't inside."

"Oh." She couldn't think of anything else to say.

His fingers began smoothing the soap over her flesh, and the sensation nearly brought her to her knees. Little circles, over and over, rendering her incoherent. Between his woodsy male scent, the touch of his hand, and the surging adrenaline, her libido was screeching at the top of its lungs. If he decided to toss her down right there on the floor of her grandmother's kitchen and have his way with her, she'd be more than complacent. She'd be a wild participant, ripping his clothes off, tearing her own away.

"Towels." Gran's worried, efficient voice cut straight through the haze of need. "I'll do that while you phone the doctor."

Rex kept his eyes on his work when he replied. "I've already got my hands wet. Why don't you go sit down and call Dr. Zeigler for me? Just let him know I asked you to contact him."

"Oh, oh, all right, then."

Vivien turned to watch her grandmother as Rex rattled off the number. Somehow he'd known without looking at the older woman that she needed to be off her feet. Her skin was as pale as milk, her hands shaking, her red nose raw, and her eyes still wide with shock. When Gran hurried from the kitchen, Vivien gave his profile a small smile.

"Thank you for that. Sometimes she doesn't want to admit when she needs help."

Again he gave a quick nod while his fingers worked. "I like your grandmother. Whenever she thinks work might be slow, she always comes up with something for me to do for her. She even slips in free lunches."

Vivien took a tiny step closer, easing toward his heat. "Gran is a very special lady."

"So is her granddaughter."

Suddenly he was looking up, pinning her with his bright blue eyes, the hard planes of his face taut. The movement of his hand shifted from impersonal to a gentle caress, the callused tips of his fingers soft as he stroked uninjured skin. Something passed between them, something indefinable, but something that made her nerves dance a sexual rumba all the way to her center.

He moved a fraction closer, eating up what tiny space there was, and she shivered as her breasts brushed against his chest. She wanted him. The idea was amazing, incomprehensible, considering she'd never felt anything like this before. This low, constant hum that vibrated through her, the pull at her loins, the unbearable need for him to put his hands, his mouth...every piece of his naked skin against hers. She waited, breathless, as his face came into sharper focus. He leaned closer...closer...

"The doctor said he'd be here in five minutes." Gran breezed through the door, oblivious to the electrified current raging through the air.

Rex carefully repositioned the frozen peas on Vivien's head and gave her a smile she couldn't quite fathom. A moment later he turned off the water and began wrapping her arm in a clean white towel. His movements were as competent and impersonal as they were gentle. The change was so sudden that it baffled her.

Then it dawned on Vivien that she might have been misreading his intentions all along. He could have made that comment about her being special to soothe her nerves. He could have been removing the liquid soap from her skin, not massaging it. He could have been stepping closer to get the homemade ice pack back where it belonged. He hadn't necessarily been making a move. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more sure she was that she'd misinterpreted what he'd done. After all, why in the world would a hot,

burly, mouthwatering hunk of a man make a play for plump, overexcitable, ever-boring her? She felt like a wretched idiot.

“Come sit down in the living room, sweetheart.” Her grandmother put a loving arm around her shoulders and led her out of the kitchen. “We’ll get you settled on the couch with your feet up while we wait for the doctor.”

Vivien couldn't bear to look back as she left the room. She was too afraid she might fling herself into Rex's arms. And then she'd really feel like a fool.

## Chapter Three

“What are you going to do?”

Rex stood on the front porch of the Spooner house, staring out into the darkness as Marcus watched him. “What *can* I do?”

The doctor tilted his head, the bright beams from the full moon reflecting softly off his dark skin. “She's been bit by a feral, Rex.”

“I know that.”

“They'll come after her.”

“Yes.”

Marcus sighed and leaned his arms against the white railing. “You're going to have to explain it to her. Soon. She's going to start to wonder why she's suddenly craving meat, why she's seeing better, smelling more, wanting more sex—”

“I've got it!” Rex's words were harsh and short. “Damn it, Marcus, I know all of this.”

The other man's eyebrows lifted in surprise. “You like her. A person can't be in the room two seconds with you and Vivien and not realize it.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “It won't be a problem. I can't let it be a problem.”

“No, you wouldn't let it be, would you? Did you stop to think that maybe, just maybe, pretty Vivi Spooner *should* be a problem for you?”

Rex didn't reply. He didn't need to. Marcus had been his friend since childhood, his own family knowing the secrets of Rex's. It wasn't just the bond of well-kept secrets that kept them as friends, though. He genuinely liked

Marcus and his wife, Carrie. They were some of the nicest, kindest, most down-to-earth people he knew. Aside from Mrs. Spooner and Vivien.

"You've kept yourself alone since your family was killed," Marcus said, his voice barely audible. "Apart from me and Carrie, you're careful not to make any real connections with the people in town. I know you're a werewolf, Rex, but that doesn't mean you don't need interaction. It just means that your DNA is slightly different than most, and that it'll take a very special woman to accept that."

"And you think Vivien is that special woman?"

"I think maybe somewhere inside *you* do." When he didn't get an answer, Marcus pushed himself back up and let out a long breath. "Keep an eye on her tonight. Wake her every hour or so, ask her simple questions, keep an ice pack on that bump. Make sure she washes the bite and puts the cream on it. She should start the antibiotics as soon as possible tomorrow; the shot I gave her was a high dose of the medicine, so she might get a little queasy."

"If there's any change, I'll call you and take her to the ER."

The doctor laid a friendly hand on Rex's shoulder. "Good luck, and call me if you need anything, even if it's just to talk."

Rex watched him as he strode off the porch, his steps long and tired. He waited until he saw the taillights of the dark sedan disappear before going back inside. Vivien and her grandmother were exactly where he'd left them, both sitting on the overstuffed couch, quietly arguing.

"You heard the doctor, Vivi. You need to stay with someone tonight."

"Gran, really, I'll be fine. It's a bump on the head and a bite—"

"A hard smack on the noggin and a deep wound from an animal that might be rabid."

Vivien sighed and let her head fall back. "You're sick; that's the whole reason I came out here. What you need is rest and quiet, not someone you have to wake up through the night and will be grouchy because of it."

"You are my granddaughter. Who better to take care of you than me?"

"She can come home with me." Rex wasn't sure who was more surprised by his statement, the women on the couch or himself.

"Home with you?" Mrs. Spooner gave him a long look.

"I...I couldn't impose that way, Mr. Samuels." Vivien's gorgeous face was slightly flushed, a small sign of embarrassment.

Hell, after what he'd nearly done in the kitchen, he could understand why she was reluctant. If her grandmother hadn't walked in, it was very likely he'd have tossed her up against the white Whirlpool refrigerator and taken her right there. He could still feel her skin underneath his hands, smell the rising scent of her, all sweet cream and strawberries. His cock twitched irritably, fighting with his brain for control.

"Marcus said someone needs to watch her, Mrs. Spooner. He also said you could be coming down with the flu. Vivien would do best if she weren't exposed to those kinds of germs, and you would do best to get plenty of sleep and drink lots of tea and soup."

Both women stared at him, their expressions mirroring uncertainty. He knew he shouldn't have butted in, but now that he'd made the offer, it seemed vital that they accept it.

"If something happens, I'll call you on the way to the hospital," he promised.

The older woman slowly turned her eyes to her granddaughter. "I suppose... It makes sense. You're just through the woods, my closest neighbor."

Vivien blinked, as if her brain were kicking into full gear. "I'll be fine at home, Mr. Samuels. I can stay up, watch some television, start baking early for tomorrow."

Irritation smacked into his swimming thoughts. “And who calls the ambulance if you collapse? What happens if you get sick from the shot Marcus gave you? What if the wound starts bleeding again?”

She couldn't give him any answers, because he knew she had none. Finally she turned to her grandmother. “You have Mr. Samuels's phone number?”

“I do. I'll call you first thing in the morning.” Mrs. Spooner carefully pulled Vivien to her feet. “I want you to rest.”

“Same goes,” Vivien said with a wan smile.

“And Rex, you keep a close eye on my girl. No working tomorrow—no, don't you argue, young lady. You are taking the day off. You make sure she doesn't go anywhere near her shop, even if you have to sit on her.”

The image Mrs. Spooner had inadvertently created sent blood racing to his crotch. “Yes, ma'am.”

“Now, you go on, Vivi.” She gave her granddaughter a deep hug and quick kiss on the cheek. “You call me if you need anything.”

Vivien looked shell-shocked as her grandmother shooed them both from the house. They stood for a moment on the porch, her staring out into the woods, him watching her. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to do now that he'd put himself squarely in the role of knight in shining armor. What he wanted to do with and to the curvaceous redhead had nothing at all to do with chivalry, poetry, and unrequited love, and everything to do with carnal desire.

“Did you walk, or do you have a car?” she asked quietly.

Her question jolted him into action. “I walked. Are you too tired—”

She shook her head, her face finally becoming animated as the corners of her lips rose. She weighed the ice pack that had been on her head with easy hands. “No, I'm fine to walk, Mr. Samuels. The air might clear my head.”

“Rex. My name is Rex.”

She licked her lips, and he bit back a growl. “Okay...Rex.”

He didn't say a word as he laid what he hoped was a gentlemanly hand on the small of her back. They descended the stairs together, then headed west toward his home.

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Vivien wasn't sure what she was expecting, but the sturdy cabin seemed to fit Rex Samuels. It was spacious, two stories, with a wraparound porch on the bottom and top. Large windows encompassed the entire structure, making it feel as if you were still outside, rather than in a cabin.

To the right of the front door, the open living area was supplied with burgundy leather couches and a television meant to be hidden behind the wall panels that were now standing open. The space to the left was elevated by three steps and had become a study of sorts, complete with desk, computer, and built-in bookcases. In front of her a fireplace stood at the end of the room, a small love seat in front of it. The stone hearth separated the dining area, with its long, glossed wood table and French doors, from the rest. A large, completely modernized kitchen was to the right of that, a pass-through bar with a gray stone top facing the dining room.

Across from the kitchen and just on the other side of the living space was a set of thick stairs that led up to the second story. The upstairs itself was open, the wooden railing exposing several light oak doors. The loft area created a U shape, leaving the front of the house exposed by tall windows.

"There's a bathroom through there." Rex pointed to a narrow door on the right side of the study, then hung both their coats on the hook by the door. "Washer and drier are down there, in a cubby behind the stairs. Bedrooms and full baths are upstairs."

Strange, but somehow he sounded nervous. And why shouldn't he? The entire time they'd trudged through the woods she'd kept up a steady stream of nonsensical conversation, all the while aware that he was watching for any signs of the feral animal that had attacked her. Between her incessant



jabbering and the scene in the kitchen, he probably thought she was a few apples short of a bushel.

"I don't want to be a bother," she said, trying for a thankful look as she put the ice pack aside.

He turned, his forehead furrowed in what appeared to be annoyance. "You aren't being a bother, Vivien."

The sound of her name said in that gravelly voice made her shiver. What would it sound like in the heat of passion? Would her name melt from his mouth like warmed chocolate, or would it reverberate like a live wire? The image of him above her, his naked, sweaty body sealed to hers, his large, rough hands squeezing her breasts, popped into her head. Her nipples immediately stirred and peaked, brushing against the material of her shirt.

"You, uh, can have the guest room." His voice had deepened, the stubbled skin over his jaw and cheeks tightening. "I'll get the clean sheets."

The thought of lying on a bed that he'd made for her, that his hands had been on, that might even still carry his scent, had her feeling crazed. She was losing it, absolutely losing it, when something like mundane house chores turned her wild. The poor man was being courteous, and here she was considering twenty different ways to have sex. She was sure he was regretting his offer of assistance by now.

Or was he?

Somehow, through the fog of her desire, she hadn't noticed where his gaze had landed. Now she could see that those heart-shaking baby blues were staring straight at her chest. Was he staring at her... Just to be sure, Vivien followed his line of sight, then let out a wavering breath when she realized that, yes, indeed, he was fixated on her breasts. A little voice in her head warned her that he might be annoyed with her physical reaction to him. That he might be worried because the sound of his voice had her nipples tight and aching. But the look on his face wasn't anything like that. In fact, it wasn't like anything she'd ever seen before.

“Rex?” His name was a whisper through the thickening air.

He licked his lips like a starving man staring at a Thanksgiving feast. Her entire body began to quiver, from the soles of her feet to the ends of her hair. Something incredibly warm unfurled inside of her, the languid waves cresting in long, slow, glorious heat. It filled her with inexplicable feelings of need. And she did need, desperately.

She wasn't sure who moved, not that it mattered. They were close now, chest to chest, toe to toe, and all she could think was how much she wanted him. She'd never been so single-minded about sex in her life, but right now she knew if he asked her to strip and do a pole dance, she wouldn't hesitate. Whatever he wanted, she'd do.

“We shouldn't.” His voice was a bare whisper.

“Okay.” Her reply was just as soft.

“We have to.”

“Yes.”

She didn't wait for another invitation. She raked her hands into his thick hair and pulled his mouth to hers. It was like an explosion rocketing through her veins. His lips, hard and sure, attacked as his tongue wrapped and parried with hers, and his muscled arms yanked her into his body. Everything inside her seemed to move at light speed, rushing and pushing. If she didn't have him, she thought she might die.

His hands, the ones she'd thought of so often, skimmed along her shoulders, up her throat, down the back of her neck. He followed the line of her spine, stopping only when he got to her bottom. He cupped the round cheeks and began to knead them in quick, sensual movements that had her gasping in his mouth. He lifted her slightly, bringing her up against his thick erection, proving that he wanted her as much as she wanted him. He was large and definitely ready, and the feel of him stole her breath.

She couldn't stand still. She undulated, rubbing herself against his shaft. She heard a moan, hers or his, she didn't know or care. He freed one of his hands from her bottom and wedged it between their bodies, where his fingers began pulling and ripping at her clothes. She obliged him, giving him the split second to take her shirt away, to unbutton her pants. She toed off her shoes as he shoved her jeans down, wrapping her legs around his waist when he bodily lifted her out of them.

"Smell good...so damn good..." His staggered words followed his mouth down to her throat.

He nipped and laved, sucking her flesh, sending the flames in her blood rippling. She bucked against him, frustrated and turned on by the solid ridge that rode between her thighs. He whipped them around, tumbling them onto one of the long couches, cradling their fall with his forearms. The feel of his body on top of hers was almost too much.

She bit his shoulder, silently demanding more as his teeth scraped along her collarbone. She moved her hands, crumpling his shirt with her fingers, pulling it from his jeans, jerking it over his head.

The skin-to-skin contact scorched her, but it still wasn't enough. His mouth moved down, laying open kisses along the swelling flesh of her breasts. His hands, those glorious hands, latched on to her ribs, then stroked upward, leaving a trail of heat behind. The rough patches on his palms were diabolical in their seduction, drawing her deeper down into the flames. Thought wasn't possible by the time his fingers reached the front clasp of her bra. Then, like magic, the thin barrier of silk was suddenly gone, and her swollen breasts were released.

He nuzzled the soft flesh, then sucked a freed nipple into his mouth, pulling and rolling it. She screamed, a hoarse sound that echoed against the walls, and arched underneath him. She could feel the dampness of her underwear, the throbbing of her clit, and let her base needs drive her. She slid

along his heavy thigh, rubbing herself into the faded denim of his pants, mindless to anything but him.

“You want it, Vivien. Say you want it.”

“Please, yes. Please.”

He skimmed his lips along her rib cage, moving like a ravenous man. He didn't stop, not even when he ripped her panties off and sent the pieces fluttering to the floor. His mouth found her, delving into her moist folds, lapping as she dug her nails into his shoulders. Her orgasm shimmered just behind her eyes, teasing her with fulfillment. She sobbed when he pulled away.

“You won't come like that, not yet.”

Then, miracle of miracles, he slid back up her body, and she realized he was completely naked. He took her mouth again, demanding capitulation with his tongue, and she gladly gave it. She felt the head of his cock as he nudged forward, barely touching her entry. When she tried to press into him, he yanked at her hair, drawing her back.

“I'll give you what you need,” he promised in a dark voice. “Say my name.”

“Rex.” The word was barely audible.

“Next time you'll tell me what you want. Next time...”

He plunged into her, stretching her so wide, she almost cried. He held on to her, resting his forehead against hers, his hands still tangled in her hair. She hadn't known he was so large, hadn't realized he would so utterly fill her.

“It's okay, Vivien. I'll go slow.”

He sounded like he was dying. Staying still and letting her adjust to his size must have been killing him. It sure as hell was killing her.

She moved, pulling her hips back, then thrusting up. The sensations were indescribable. Up, back, small jerks because she didn't have much room. But oh, it felt like heaven and hell wrapped into one. With anyone else she might have been hesitant, but here, tonight, she needed, and she would demand.

She grabbed his muscled backside and pushed, telling him what to do as she lifted her hips. There was a moment of hesitation before he growled and joined her cadence. His thick shaft was incredible, rubbing all the spots she never knew she had. She wanted release, but she wanted this to go on forever.

Her breathing was ragged, her head spinning as he took control again. He was slamming into her now, so hard and fast that she wasn't sure if there was a rhythm anymore. Didn't care if there was. She balanced on the edge of orgasm, gloried in the tight coil that ran from her core to her belly to her breasts. It had never been like this. Never.

He sucked a nipple between his teeth, and she came undone. Everything exploded at once. Her body, her blood, the colors and sounds surrounding her. It all ripped and fell, melting into liquid heat before it rained over her. The spasms rolled one into another, pulling her under as she drowned in ecstasy.

She heard him shout, felt his breathing stop, his body tense. She knew the moment he came, felt his release as it flowed into her. She opened her eyes in time to see him toss back his head and scream at the ceiling. In that moment he was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

Time stood still as he held her, precious minutes where she reveled and beamed. She had never experienced anything quite like having sex with Rex Samuels. Her ex-husband had been only adequate on his good days, and self-stimulation wasn't even close. If she died tonight, she would be okay with that; after all, she'd just had the best lay of her life, and she doubted anything would live up to the reality of Rex and his oh-so-knowledgeable body.

She felt him shift, but instead of standing, he rolled to his side, carefully repositioning her so that she lay in front of him, spoon-style. He cuddled her closer, securing her with his arms and legs. She wasn't sure what he was thinking, but until he was back in his right mind, she fully intended to enjoy the afterglow.

“Vivien...”

He was going to ruin it; she just knew it. “Please don't say it.”

"Say what?" He sounded puzzled as he began to stroke her uninjured arm.

"I don't regret it."

He became so completely still that she wondered if he'd fallen asleep. When he finally spoke, his words were tight with controlled anger.

"I sure as hell hope not, 'cause I don't regret what we did either."

"But you said we shouldn't."

"You're hurt, and you were terrified. Adrenaline can do strange things to a person."

She gnawed her lower lip uncertainly. "You think this was just an adrenaline hangover?"

He sighed and sat up, bringing her with him. Gently, he placed her on his lap and began stroking her hair. "Do you?"

It was do-or-die time. She could play it safe, lie, and walk away tomorrow morning with only a little embarrassment and the memory of incredible sex. Or she could take a risk, tell the truth, and live with the consequences. Blood roared in her ears as she made her decision. She had never been the kind to back down, and she resented the fact that she'd let her ex smother that streak of daredevil. Rex had asked, and he deserved an honest answer, whether he reciprocated her feelings or not.

"No, I don't think it was adrenaline." She lifted her fingers and began tracing the outline of his handsome face. "I think I've wanted you ever since you first came to town."

His look was dark and searching, but she refused to flinch. "Five years is a long time to want and not take."

"Yes."

"I wanted you too, Vivien. I saw you sashaying down the street, carrying groceries to your store, and my jaw dropped open. You were the hottest thing I'd ever seen in my entire life."

She gave him a doubtful smile and shook her head. "You're a flatterer."

He gave her hair a quick tug. "I'm only telling you the truth."

She shrugged, still not fully convinced. Maybe he'd thought she was passably pretty, but she couldn't imagine a man falling all over himself with lust because of her. Besides, if he'd really wanted her, Rex didn't strike her as the type of man who would've held back. But the fact was, he wanted her now, and the proof of it was in his quickly hardening shaft. She would be happy enough with that.

He leaned over and gave her a soft kiss. "I think we should move this upstairs."

"Um, upstairs. Okay."

He stood, lifting her in his arms as he went, and carried her up to his bedroom. She was too busy nibbling his neck and shoulders to enjoy the view from the windows or see the bedroom decor. Tomorrow, she thought dreamily as he laid her down. Tomorrow was soon enough for those things.

## Chapter Four

Warm tendrils brushed her cheek, coaxing her eyes open. She blinked, her gaze blurry as she slowly came awake. There was a moment of confusion; then the night before came back with blinding clarity. First came the flush of embarrassment, followed by the quick hum of sexual fulfillment. The couch had been amazing.

*Her lover...* She smiled long and slow at the thought. How long had it been since she'd had someone devoted to her sexual desires? Her marriage? She chuckled. No, not even then. Before? If that were true, she couldn't remember who it had been. But last night it had been all about her, what she wanted, what she needed. He'd done things to her she hadn't even realized she enjoyed until he'd done them.

Sighing, she sat up, bringing the sheet with her. Looking over to where he'd lain, she saw the deep indentation of Rex's body and felt a thrill race along her veins. She'd known he was gone; he'd spent the entire night with his arms around her, as if he were afraid she'd disappear. No way was she about to do that.

Feeling like the cat with the canary in its mouth, Vivien stumbled into the large master bath, stopping when she caught her reflection in the long mirror above the sinks. Her dark red hair was tangled, her gray eyes tired and bright, her delicate skin chafed from beard stubble, her lips swollen and ripe. She looked like a well-satisfied woman.

She didn't stop smiling the entire time she was in the shower, nor when she searched for her clothes, or when she gave up and shrugged into Rex's



large blue robe. Her lips were still tilted in a happy position when she wandered down the stairs toward the kitchen.

The smell caught her as she stopped in the living room. Bacon. Her stomach clenched and growled as her mouth watered in anticipation. Strange, but she'd never really craved bacon, and especially not for breakfast. She was normally quite satisfied with her fruit, cereal, toast, juice, and tea. In fact, there were times she could go for days without eating anything but vegetables and starches, no meat involved at all. But this morning the aroma of the sizzling bacon made her so ravenous, she thought she could inhale a plateful. Must have been all that nocturnal activity, she thought, and her small smile turned into a wide grin.

She continued on and found Rex in the kitchen standing in front of the stove, his big body encased in a red flannel shirt and faded jeans, his feet bare. He flipped a piece of bacon expertly, then repeated the process, the muscles in his forearms flexing as he moved. She'd never understood how men could think a woman cooking for them was sexy. Now she had to wonder if it was politically incorrect to think it about a man. Then she decided she didn't care if it was PC or not. It was hot.

"Morning, Sleeping Beauty."

His deep, lazy voice made her knees weak and her thighs tighten. Just the sound of his voice was a turn-on. Pavlov would be so proud.

"Morning, yourself." She glanced at the digital clock on the microwave and gave a little start. "Is it really nine thirty? I usually don't sleep this late. The shop—"

"I called them earlier and told them you'd had a long night." He turned to look at her, his lips crawling up into a smug smile. "You have the day off to rest and recover. And you'll definitely need the energy for tonight."

"Oh." She felt her insides run to mush as she let out a shaky breath.

He leaned over and gave her a soft kiss before turning back around to the stove. "Your grandmother called. I let her know you were fine. I think she might suspect something, though."

Vivien smiled and laid her head on his back. "If she does, then she obviously approves. The first night I spent with my ex, she started calling incessantly at the crack of dawn the next morning, giving some flimsy excuse every time I answered or the machine picked up."

"She didn't like your ex-husband?" Though his tone was casual, she could feel the tightening muscles of his back underneath her cheek.

"Not one bit. If I'd been less stubborn, I would have listened to her, but I guess I was young and way too determined to have my own life." She kissed his shoulder and pulled back. "But all that is part of the past now. I like to think of those few years as a sort of walkabout in a wasteland."

He chuckled as he scooped up the last of the bacon and laid it on the towel-draped plate. "I had a year or two of my own walkabout, so I suppose I understand it."

She lifted her eyebrows in surprise. "You did? Somehow I never pictured you as making the same sorts of crazy mistakes that a starry-eyed girl would."

"Oh no, my mistakes were of my own making." He moved around her, and she followed him out to the table, where he'd already set their places. "I learned from them, though. I guess that's the point of being young and foolish."

Vivien's stomach growled, and she snagged a strip of bacon. "You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you deliberately made those missing years a mystery so I'd question you about them."

He gave her a sneaky grin, then turned to get the rest of their breakfast from the counter. She watched him quietly as he laid out a bowl of fruit, fresh waffles, scrambled eggs, orange juice, coffee, and tea. He was still smirking as he added a tray of syrup, whipped cream, honey, sugar, and cream to the table.

"That's an awful lot of food." She eyed the extensive meal and tried to pretend her body wasn't as ravenous as her sex drive. "Do you normally eat like this?"

"Every morning."

"How in the hell do you manage to eat this and look like...?" She waved her hand in his direction, motioning up and down his body.

"Good genes," he said, then pulled a chair out for her.

As she sat, she noticed the glimmer in his gorgeous eyes. "I'm not going to question you."

He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "Yes, you are. And I'll answer everything."

Now that was a sure way to make her play, she thought, and sent him a wry look. She tried to be patient, pouring herself a cup of tea while he poured coffee into his own mug. She watched as he took three waffles, half a plate of eggs, a fistful of bacon, and a brimming bowl of fruit. She wondered if it was wrong to be jealous of a man's metabolism.

"You should eat, Vivi. I know you're starving."

She was, but in the past she would have forced herself to curb her eating in front of others, even when she was ravenous. But he was watching her with such hot eyes, happily scarfing down what had to be a month's worth of calories and fat, she couldn't be self-conscious. She filled her plate and had eaten most of her fruit and three strips of bacon before her curiosity finally won out.

"So, Mr. Samuels, tell me what sorts of scrapes you got yourself into when you were a young idealist."

"I was never an idealist. I had too many run-ins with reality when I was a kid to be a dreamer."

She felt a pang of sympathy as she thought of her own childhood, the pain of never knowing her father, of losing her mother when she'd been young. "What happened?"

He paused in eating and held her gaze with unwavering eyes. "My parents and brother and sister were murdered when I was seven I'd been out playing in the woods, and I didn't realize... When I got home, I found them."

Her heart cracked as she watched him, but she was careful not to give him too much sympathy. Something about him let her know he could break too easily when he spoke of his family, and she couldn't bring herself to cause him that sort of pain.

"You lost your mother when you were a child."

She should have been surprised that he'd known, but she wasn't. "Yes, a car accident. I was lucky; I had Gran to take me in. I keep telling her she's going to be made a saint one day for putting up with me."

The tension eased from his face, and he took another bite of eggs. "Marcus—that's Dr. Zeigler—his family raised me after mine was gone. Let me tell you, Winifred Zeigler was a tough taskmistress. She took her job as a mother seriously, and we all loved her for it. There were five of us and one of her, but we didn't ever dare cross her. Not because she was mean, because we didn't want to disappoint her. There's nothing worse than seeing her face when you've let her down. No yelling, no accusations, just that look that makes you feel about half an inch high while you crawl into the nearest corner."

"Oh, I know the one you mean." Vivien found herself smiling in understanding. "I think they must teach that to all new mothers. But there's nothing like when you do something to make them happy."

"Absolutely, which is why we all did our best on everything we did. She always said her goal was to raise me as well as my parents would have."

"From what I've seen, she reached that goal." She bit into a fluffy waffle and nearly rolled her eyes in pleasure. "I wonder if you'd ever consider

dropping the whole carpenter bit and come to work for me. We could sell these by the case full.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I only make these for family.”

She paused in her chewing, watching him carefully as his words rang in her head. Had he just called her family? What exactly did that imply? If she'd hoped to get an answer from his face, she was sorely disappointed. He'd turned his eyes back down to his plate, either to avoid her questions or because he'd meant it as something very casual.

“You should call a tow service this morning.” His comment broke through her thoughts.

“Tow service... Um, yeah, I'll do that after breakfast. I still can't believe the rotten luck I had yesterday.”

His gaze swung up, his eyes so hot, she thought she heard the tea in her cup begin to boil. “It wasn't all bad, I hope.”

She licked her lips as she watched him, barely catching her breath as her pulse sped up like an Indycar. “No, not...not all. Not all of it.”

The side of his mouth curved up, giving him a devilish, dangerous look. “Which part did you like best? When I moved your legs—”

“All of it!” Vivien was surprised at the blush that crept up her cheeks. “I mean...it was wonderful. I hadn't ever... Um, it's just that...”

His eyebrows went up an inch; then he was leaning forward, his features going harsh. “I'm glad. I want to be the only one to make you scream like that. When you have erotic dreams, I want to be the one in them making you come. When sex pops into your head, I want my image, my name, mixed with it.”

“Oh.” A breathy sound that was as thin as tissue.

She couldn't move as he stood, his actions slow and deliberate. She felt as if she were being stalked, with his steamy gaze centered on her. It wasn't until she realized he was swiping the dishes to the floor that anything else registered.

“What are you doing?” she asked, her blood screaming through her ears.

“Having the tastiest thing in the whole damn house.”

He underscored his reply by prowling around the table, lifting her from her chair, then scattering her plate and cups to the ground. She was barely breathing when he plopped her onto the dark green tablecloth.

His grin became wolfish as he stared down at her. “Mmm, a smorgasbord. Where do I start?”

He yanked at the sash of his robe, making a pleased rumble in the back of his throat as he slid the slick material off her torso. She felt like a naked birthday present on display, anxious to be the little boy's favorite toy.

“Perfect...absolutely perfect...”

He took his shirt off with deliberate movements, his stare smoldering as he watched her. The flannel fluttered to the floor, and he lowered himself slowly, his bare chest brushing against hers. Her nipples, still sensitive from the night before, puckered in anticipation, sending waves of delicious pain through her system. He found her lips, fitted his mouth over hers as if he'd done it for years. The kiss was as slow and consuming as the fire kindling in her belly, the small flames of it licking out to her limbs, her breasts, and her swelling lips.

“That's right, sweetheart. Give me what I want.” His deep voice resounded in heady waves as he nipped her neck.

She wiggled underneath him, all too aware of what he was capable of. He'd brought her more ecstasy than she'd probably ever experience in three lifetimes, and they'd only had a few hours together. It was hard to imagine being able to hoard more of that wonderful feeling, but she was sure willing to try.

His cheek rubbed against her breast, nuzzling the sensitive flesh reverently. She waited—anticipating, needing—then gasped when his tongue

flicked across her hardened nipple. Her hips automatically lifted, and he groaned.

"That's it, like that," he prompted, then sucked the tip of her breast between his teeth.

The hot streak of desire bolted down and through her body, lodging into her core. She pressed up again, rubbing herself against his shaft. It was pleasure and torture all at once. He continued to suckle her, pulling harder, and she began squirming against him in ecstasy. He brought his roughened hands along her ribs, rubbing her skin in long, erotic strokes. She thought she might come just from his touch.

"God, you push a man for control." His dark voice was gravelly as he began kneading her breasts. "You're so responsive."

He licked her collarbone, her chest, her midsection, then lower, to her belly button. She was panting in need, her clit throbbing in time to her hard pulse, waiting for more. When he pulled away, she nearly sobbed.

"Shh, sweetheart, you should know after last night I'll take care of you. Trust me."

Trust him. Okay, sure, whatever he wanted. Just as long as he didn't leave her here like this, with her body so full of need, she thought she might die from it. She watched—her sight covered in a bright, sexual haze—as he undid his jeans. The denim peeled away, revealing the fact that he wasn't wearing any underwear. She had to swallow to keep from choking. She waited for him to come back, to cover her with his body. Instead he leaned down and came back up with the glass jar of honey, the small wooden paddle clinging to the inside.

She only had a moment to consider what he might do before he was standing over her. The next second a warm drizzle of the sticky liquid pooled on her nipple. She sucked in a quick breath at the unexpected feeling, her thighs tingling as he trailed the fluid stream across her chest and onto her other breast. She closed her eyes, biting her bottom lip when she felt him continue to

dribble a path of honey down her stomach and over her thighs. His fingers touched her aching lips, and she jumped, then moaned when she felt the heated trail cover her clit.

“Let's see how you taste now.”

His mouth was on her again, this time licking and sucking at the sticky honey he'd painted her with. The sensations were so incredible that she forgot to breathe. His rough tongue was skimming the warm goo off her flesh, his teeth scraping along the path he'd created. Her stomach muscles tightened as he descended, his mouth searching farther down.

“Please,” she begged when he paused.

He didn't reply, only used his fingers to separate her again. He was staring at her, his eyes dark with passion as he inhaled her scent. Finally he lowered his mouth to her, his tongue snaking out to lap in slow, languorous licks. She bowed into him, her fingers digging into the tablecloth. He sucked, pulling gently, and she felt her entire body tighten as her orgasm scrambled for release.

“Oh no, not yet.”

He moved, leaving her wet, hot, and gasping for air. She was nothing but raw nerve endings, wailing for the end of the torture, begging for it to continue at the same time. She could barely focus when he came back into her sight. Something cold landed on her nipple, the startling sensation quickly replaced by a delicious shivering. It took her a moment to realize he was covering her in the whipped cream. His fingers took the same route the honey had gone, ending when he dipped into her wet passage.

“I thought about doing this the minute I saw the container this morning.”

She could only moan in response. Once again his mouth began its taste testing, nibbling and laving...scraping the fluffy white clouds off her, kindling the flames to a scorching bonfire. He nipped one thigh, lapped at the other, avoiding where she needed him the most. When she thought she might have to



grab his head and force the issue, he captured her lips full in his mouth. He sucked gently, tonguing the sweet covering off her flesh while he gave slow licks to her clit.

She screamed as the intense ball of need tightened for one harsh, tear-inducing moment. Her orgasm broke like a storm, rolling in with such fierceness that her limbs tightened in stiff delight. He didn't stop his assault, instead flicking a bit faster to send her over an even-sharper edge. Her nerve endings snapped, smacking and dancing, delivering jolt after jolt of indescribable sensations.

The last wave of release was cascading over her when she felt herself being pulled up and forward. She was boneless by the time she landed on the chair and in Rex's lap. He kissed her, his mouth sticky and sweet from the honey and cream. He began slowly lifting her up and down, sliding his thick cock across her slit with patient strokes.

When she would have sunk on top of him, he stopped her. "I want to try something. You tell me if you want me to stop."

His face was a study of concentrated passion, the desire in his eyes so solid that she thought she might be able to touch it. She nodded, knowing that with him, she'd dare anything. He smiled, that wolfish look again, and she felt a thrill of wonder at what he might want to do.

She was only mildly surprised when he set her back a small inch from his shaft. Then he leaned down and came back with the jar of honey. Holding it up to her, he gave her a silent, questioning look. She didn't need to be told what he wanted.

She took the small paddle from the jar and carefully dripped the cooling liquid onto his cock. She watched, mesmerized, when the muscle jumped. Once she had a solid coating on the top, she put the honey aside and used her hands to smear it around the rest of his straining shaft.

His growl was frustrated when he took her hands away, then licked her palms and fingers. To her delight, she felt her body stirring again. He lifted her,

and she waited for his thick length to enter her. But instead of the traditional way, she felt him nudging at her other entrance.

She gave him a shocked look but didn't protest. She'd always wanted to try it but had been too shy to ask it of her ex, and she certainly hadn't ever thought of cornering a date into doing it. But she'd experimented herself, trying various toys, and she'd gotten plenty of pleasure out of the experience. What would it be like to have a man like Rex do this to her?

She wanted to know, wanted it desperately, and kissed him to show him her consent. He pressed farther into her, filling her inch by slow inch, giving her time to adjust, time to pull away if she wanted. Instead she found herself groaning as a whole new set of sensations curled around her veins.

He sank her down to the hilt and let out a long, hot sigh. "Oh God, you feel so good."

"So do you. Oh...so do you..."

He leaned down to take a tight nipple into his mouth, teasing it with his tongue and teeth as he began moving. She matched his strokes, caught in the rhythm and the incredible realization that her body was primed for another orgasm. He filled her over and over, stretching her in ways she'd never considered. The honey was a sticky, warm liquid that eased his way, the lines of it snaking out to settle on her lips. Every time she moved up, her lips and clit were gently pulled, teasing her.

Underneath her, she could feel Rex begin to quake. Still, he kept his pace easy, as if he were afraid to hurt her if he moved too hard or too fast. He was going to kill them both at this rate.

Then his fingers were on her, the pads burrowing in to find her clit. He pulled carefully, unconsciously mimicking what the honey and their lovemaking had been doing. Once, twice, and the third she was hurtling into an orgasm, her body shivering as her muscles gave over to harsh spasms. Everything tightened, including her hold on him, and the next moment he was gripping her ferociously, holding her while he yelled his own release.

It took a long time for the ticking of the clock to finally register. When it did, she couldn't find the strength to even care about the time. It didn't matter today. No, today was about her and Rex and all the lovely, naughty things he wanted to do to her, and the things she wanted to do to him. At the moment her bottomed-out life seemed to be climbing its way back up out of the pits.

"I think you've killed me," he grumbled before nuzzling her ear. "Not that I'm complaining."

"Um, we're dead? Then this must be heaven. I think I like it."

He chuckled and laid a soft kiss on her sore mouth. "You need a shower."

She plastered her hands on his sticky chest and grinned. "So do you."

"That's a problem."

"Sure is."

He took a moment to look thoughtful. "I've always believed in conservation. Suppose we save the rain forest and shower together?"

"Your selflessness makes my heart flutter," she teased.

The next thing she knew he'd lifted her into his arms and was carrying her upstairs. She wondered if she'd ever actually walk up the stairs instead of being carried, then decided she didn't care.

## Chapter Five

Rex stepped into the Craftsman-style house and immediately felt at home. The polished wood floors and the warm tones of the rooms were typical of the style, as were the basic furniture and tall, spacious windows. But it was more than those things that made the place feel comfortable. It was the photographs on the mantel above the stone fireplace, the mismatched couches, deep-cushioned chairs, and well-used recliners whose colors ranged from soft yellow to powder blue that somehow worked together. The sitting room, he supposed you would call it, was to the left and fed into a gracious living area through a large, wide arch. The dining room was to his right, the pocket doors standing open to reveal a dark wood table and matching chairs. He could spy the kitchen through the dining room, again through another wooden arch. Directly in front of him was a set of windowed doors that led out to a carefully tended backyard, complete with deck and a small gazebo. To the left, against the outer wall of the sitting room, was a beige carpeted staircase.

“Bedrooms are up here.”

Rex nodded and followed Vivien, finding himself in another spacious area. The floor was wood here too, and a skylight had been added to give more sun to the upstairs.

“Technically, the place has four bedrooms, but I converted this one to a study,” she said, motioning to the room in front of him. “The guest rooms are over there; they share a bathroom. The master bedroom is here.”

She stepped to the right and opened a door. He smiled when he looked inside. He wasn't sure what he was expecting; she'd never struck him as a frills and pink-lace sort of woman. He'd been correct. The room was more than

accommodating for the four-poster, king-size bed centered against the left-hand wall. The far wall was dominated by windows, the long row framed by a white swag curtain. She had tossed down a large, rectangular rug in shades of pale blues and tans, matching the colors of the impressionistic painting of a rainy New York sidewalk that hung on the right wall.

"I wasn't sure where you wanted to—"

He cut her off with one swift look. "I'll be sleeping wherever you are. Don't ever wonder about that, sweetheart."

No way in hell was he going to relinquish even one millisecond he had with Vivien. He felt a vague ache that she wouldn't have realized that.

"Oh." She wet her lips, and her cheeks flushed. He almost tossed her onto the bed right then.

Silently, he dropped his bag onto the bed and moved toward her. "I've fantasized about you for five years, Vivien. I've thought about everything I wanted to do both to you and with you. And not just sexually. Now that I have you, do you really think I'd do something as idiotic as sleep in another room?"

Her pulsed jumped at the base of her delectable throat. "I... Oh..."

He felt his lips twitch as he realized he'd left her speechless. He lifted a hand and gently stroked her cheek with his knuckles. "Maybe I should have warned you that I'm a very selfish man. Overprotective too. Territorial. Once something's mine, it's mine."

"That's very...stalkerish." She tried to tease, but her voice had a breathless quality that made his stomach clench.

"Maybe, but I can't help the way I am. I wouldn't stop you from leaving me, if that's what you really wanted to do. I wouldn't get in your way or follow you around or threaten your friends. But I can guarantee you that you'd never find what we have, not with anyone else. Just like I wouldn't find it with another woman. If you left, I wouldn't even try."

She curled her hands into his chest and leaned her body into his. "I'd call you a liar, but I know you're right."

It scared her. Hell, it scared him. But he'd promised himself he'd tell her the truth, even if he did go gently, because she deserved it. *They* deserved it. He gave her a soft kiss on her swollen lips and stroked her hair.

"Didn't you say something about lunch?"

She blinked several times, the steel gray of her eyes clearing to a softer hue. "Lunch, that's right. So I did. I can't believe how hungry I am, considering how late we ate this morning. It's only..." She paused in the upstairs hallway to consult the grandfather clock in the corner. "Twelve thirty. You know how to rev a girl's appetite, Rex Samuels."

She sent him a sly look before she glided down the stairs. He flinched as she moved away, knowing that it was more than sexual activity that had her eating so much. He'd been mulling over the situation this morning before she'd come down, and then later when she'd been dressing. How was he supposed to broach the subject of shifters? How was he supposed to tell her that she was, in the very near future, going to become something most people only thought was a legend?

Rex tried not to let his morose thoughts show as he made his way to the kitchen. He took a moment to appreciate the bright, airy room, with its impressive display of well-kept implements on shiny white counters. Vivien was pulling sandwich meat from the refrigerator, her hands moving so swiftly that she missed the counter. Rex lunged, catching the small platter before it hit the floor. Vivien didn't seem to notice.

"I hope sandwiches are okay. I have some pasta salad in here too. Oh, and some potato salad, if you'd rather. I don't know what's wrong with me; I'm usually not so hungry. In fact there are lots of days when I only have a bagel and a banana for lunch." Her head popped out of the refrigerator, and she gave him a bright smile. "But I suppose I've earned the hunger honestly."

She closed the white door, and his eyes found a neon blue paper advertising the town's annual Halloween in the Square party stuck to the surface. As an opening, he supposed it could have been worse.

"You must be busy at the bakery, getting ready for Halloween."

She grabbed a loaf of Italian bread from a wooden box and nodded. "You'd be surprised how many people have parties. Luckily most want simple things, cupcakes, pastries, so it's not so difficult. It's more about sheer numbers. Christmas is another story. Then we have numbers *and* complicated delicacies."

He leaned his hip against the counter as he watched her begin to assemble their sandwiches. "So, what are you going to dress up as?"

She held the mayonnaise up to him, and he nodded. "I'm thinking a witch this year. I'll have to make the costume, since they don't have my size."

"Hmm, then they must not have any hot would-be witches buying from these places." He saw the blush seep into her face and wanted to wring the neck of the man who'd made her feel anything less than beautiful. "Just don't put on warts and cackle maniacally. Real witches hate that stereotype."

She paused and lifted one arched eyebrow. "Real witches? You mean Wiccans? I suppose so. But no, I won't have a wart, nor will I cackle like the Wicked Witch of the West."

He snatched a piece of roast beef and took a bite. "You believe in that stuff? Witches, vampires...werewolves?"

She laughed and shook her head. "Of course not. Well, maybe a little. Most folklore is based on some sort of reality. Take vampires."

"No, thanks. I hear they're a pain in the neck."

"Oh, ouch, that joke hurt." She shook her head and continued. "Back when the whole vampire lore really began, people didn't know how the human body decomposed. They also didn't know about the diseases that spread so rapidly, or how a person healthy one morning could die so quickly the same

night. They created the vampire to explain the things they couldn't understand."

His curiosity was piqued at her very practical explanations. He had to know what she'd say about his kind. "And werewolves? Shape-shifters?"

"Moldy grain harvested and then used to make bread. It's a proven fact that the spores, when ingested, caused people to act like rabid animals, plus it's conjectured that it caused hallucinations. Clinical lycanthropy is an actual mental disorder, you know; people believe they can become animals. They can have blackouts, moments of intense rage, and end up doing God knows what. I always feel badly for them when people make light of their situation.

"Then there's the disorder that causes some people to grow thick hair everywhere, including their face. Without the benefit of advanced science, these people wouldn't have realized any of that. As for shape-shifters, I'd say it's probably something very similar. Maybe it was a way of explaining why Hans was swept overboard but managed to swim ashore while other men drowned. Or why Zoe was found wandering around in the snow in a bear pelt but had no memory of how she got there. Heck, all you have to do is realize that some American Indians used peyote to understand where some stories come from."

"So it's all about hallucinations?" he asked, trying not to squirm.

She gave him a sideways look and winked. "Unless it's real and the rest of us are too stupid to know. Just what are you trying to tell me, Rex?" She turned and laid a hand on his chest, her face comically rapturous. "Did I catch myself a very sexy, nearly insatiable vampire? No, couldn't be that; you walk around in the daylight. No, you're a witch. Or is it a warlock?"

"No, I'm a shape-shifter. A werewolf, to be precise."

She stared at him one long moment before she laughed. "You are nothing if not entertaining. Here."

She handed him a plate with a thick sandwich and a pile of potato salad on the side. As she slipped a fork onto the white surface, she leaned up to give



him a kiss on the cheek. His skin tingled underneath her touch. Somehow that small gesture was just as intimate as everything else they'd done.

"I suppose you're going to turn into the big bad wolf on Halloween?"

The shock was a cold blade slashing through his gut. "It's a full moon that night."

"It was a full moon last night too, but you weren't a wolf." She followed him to the small table in the breakfast nook and sat down. Finally, after giving him a searching look, she shrugged.

"Okay, so let's say you're a werewolf." She laughed. "I can't believe you actually have me talking about this."

He gave her a small smile. "I'm persuasive that way."

She took a sip of lemonade and nodded. "I suppose you are. So, here I sit, with a shape-shifter—a werewolf, didn't you say? All right, a werewolf, sitting having a sandwich at my table. What do I do with that information?"

"You ask questions," he prompted.

She took a moment, indulging in a bite of her food as she considered. "So, Mr. Wolf, tell me, can you control your shifting?"

"Yes. Even during the full moon, though that's because I'm an adult. Children have a harder time controlling it, and most of the time can't."

One eyebrow came up, in doubt or in surprise, he wasn't sure. "Where's your pack?"

"Don't have one." He filled his mouth with a bite of sandwich before he continued. "Most do, but sometimes... Well, circumstances leave some of us alone."

"So you don't have an Alpha? Or are you the Alpha? How does that work?"

"I wouldn't be the Alpha. My brother would have, since he was the oldest."

He watched as uncertainty set in, recognized the dark shock that he would bring his family into a conversation she thought was a joke. But damn it, he had a chance to give her bits of information that she'd need later. He

would answer her questions as best he could, and she would have to deal with the truth of them.

"It's a succession thing, like kings and queens," she said slowly.

"Yes."

They were quiet for a few minutes, both tucking into their food as the word hung between them. He could practically hear the gears in her head turning. He was almost done with his meal when she spoke again.

"In your fantasy world"—she emphasized the last two words—"how are werewolves made?"

"You mean, are we bitten or cursed?"

"Are those the only two options?"

He shook his head and sat back. "No, they aren't. A majority of us are born with the shifting gene."

"The shifting gene? Okay." She blinked, sipped her drink, and sat back as well. "Wait. You said a majority. Does that mean there's another way?"

He was almost afraid to say it. He caught her gaze, held it, and said quietly, "You can be bitten."

"Bitten?" Her body had become tense, and her hand reached over to touch the gauze at her injury. Then she let out a laugh. "Nice one, Rex. With an imagination like that, you should be writer."

He could have pressed the issue, but he knew she wasn't ready to believe him. Just like he wasn't ready to have her attitude toward him change. "I'd only make an adequate writer; I work better with my hands."

Her look became seduction itself. "Tell me about it."

She popped the last bite of her sandwich into her mouth and grinned. His appetite was gone, half-satiated by the small meal, half-doused by what he knew was going to have to happen. But not today. Definitely not today.

"You know, taking the day off isn't such a bad idea." She stood up and walked around to where he sat, then plopped down into his lap without hesitation. "Especially if I get to enjoy it with you."

He pulled her to him, nuzzled behind her ear, inhaling her warm fragrance. "You are so special, Vivien, so sweet, so good..."

"You make me sound like a Girl Scout."

"Um, does that mean you'll put on a little beret, a green skirt, and knee-high socks?" he teased.

She laughed and wiggled on his knees. "Pervert!"

"Only where you're involved." He nipped her throat, and she yelped. "But before we can explore my perverted side, we need to get your medicine filled."

She sighed and pulled back, pouting like a kid who'd lost her candy. "I hate the real world right now."

"Don't worry. We don't have to stay long. I don't know if I can. I'd hate to shock everyone by tossing you down on the sidewalk and taking what I want in front of the whole town."

Her wicked look almost undid him. She ground her bottom against his expanding cock and bit her bottom lip. "Then let's hurry, 'cause I don't know if I'd stop you."

## Chapter Six

It had been one of the best days of Vivien's life. Even the perfectly ordinary had been extraordinary, thanks to Rex's presence. When they'd walked from her house to the main street, Rex's arm protectively around her shoulders, there had been open gawking. She wouldn't have been surprised if some people ended up with whiplash. And through it all, Rex had simply smiled, nodded, greeted them as if he'd been escorting her around town his whole life.

Mrs. Holcomb, the pharmacist, had looked at them, first with shock, then with growing delight. She'd beamed down at them while she took the prescription, chatting as she stared at them with knowing eyes. Her daughter-in-law, who ran the cash register, had been speechless but had also seemed as pleased as Mrs. Holcomb.

Though she'd been ordered not to go to Sweet Cakes, Vivien had convinced Rex to stop by, with the promise that she'd stay no more than ten minutes. It had been a surprise to find the place running like clockwork. When she should have been a tiny bit disappointed that they didn't need her, she'd instead been relieved. She decided then and there that if Rex stuck around long-term, she would hire a fourth person, part-time, just so she could have some extra time away from the shop. Sadie and Pauline had looked to be full of delighted questions, while Sadie had blushed profusely and sneaked glances at them.

She didn't know why she had been so surprised by people's reactions to her having a boyfriend. She was sure they all knew the truth, though; he was her lover, and every move he made seemed to scream it. They'd stopped to stock up at the grocery store, and his hands had been in constant contact with

her body. A hand here, the stroke of knuckles there, a thigh brushing hers, and the sly smiles and sweet endearments left no question as to how he felt about her.

And all anyone had done was grin, looking wholly satisfied with them. Strange, but she'd never thought that anyone would so openly approve. Oh, she didn't think they'd point and sneer, but someone like Rex with someone like her—it seemed such an odd pairing. She'd at least expected more raised eyebrows, more unspoken distaste, at seeing a hunk with someone other than a supermodel type. Someone who was far from a supermodel type, if she were honest with herself.

But Rex liked her body. In fact, it apparently drove him to the brink of desire every five minutes, if his reaction was any indication. He didn't wince when he touched her curves; he didn't ask to turn the lights out or hurry through his perusal of her body. Instead, he lingered over her, kissing and exploring and growling with need. It was a revelation to her, this wild passion she evoked in such a self-possessed man.

The only gray cloud had been that strange conversation over lunch. Why in the world had he been so insistent on talking about that stuff? And werewolves of all things? She had taken it in stride, handling it as a joke, until he'd mentioned his brother. That had definitely jarred her.

He'd told her before that his family had been murdered, and she'd been too sensitive to probe too far into the whys and wherefores of their deaths. But he'd dragged them into the conversation, and that had been very close to offensive from her point of view. She might have been insulted on behalf of his deceased relatives if she hadn't seen that glimmer of sadness in his blue eyes. Maybe it gave him some sort of comfort to mention his family, even in a teasing dialogue, just to speak of them and have their memory out there in the universe. She could understand it. There were times she spoke to her parents, even though they'd been gone for so many years now.

“You're off in another world.”

His deep voice broke into her ramblings, and she cracked her eyes to gaze at him. “Just thinking about today.”

The water sloshed in the claw-foot tub as he moved, sending waves up around her breasts. The suds had given up, but the thick cast iron and porcelain coating had kept their bath warm. She wiggled her toes against his chest and smiled.

“I'm glad you had a good day,” he said, taking her leg in his hands. “I did too.”

“Really?” She didn't say anything when he began to lather her leg.

“You sound surprised. Yes, it was a good day, a very good one.”

She felt the stroke of her razor and gave a little start. He held on firmly, keeping her from being accidentally nicked. She stared as he made another pass on her leg, then finally settled back, deciding it wasn't so bad to have a man shave her legs.

“We'll have another good day tomorrow,” he continued, his eyes on his job. “I know you'll need to be up early for work; I'll walk you.”

“But what about your work? Don't you need to head home?”

He made a noncommittal sound. “Your car should be fixed by the end of tomorrow. We'll stop by and get it after you've closed the shop.”

“The timing belt, of all things,” she muttered. “At least it's only the one thing. I was afraid the engine had imploded or something.”

Rex propped the leg he'd been shaving on the lip of the tub, then lifted her other one to give it the same attention. “You should really keep a manual with all the dates in it. That way you'll know when it's time to deal with a new timing belt, transmission fluid, oil change, tire rotation—”

“I suppose I should, but I just never seem to be organized enough to do it. Besides, I take it in every six months for an oil change, and I have them look over everything then.”

"But they didn't catch the timing belt." His words were filled with male annoyance, as if Jeff, the poor mechanic, had deliberately not told her about a problem.

"No, they didn't. I promise I'll make a note of the date and the mileage tomorrow when we pick my car up, okay?"

He grunted, and she felt him move closer. She opened one eye and watched, mesmerized, as his hands moved up and he began to shave her thighs. Suddenly his careless chore was feeling much more intimate, and her muscles quivered at the feel of his work-roughened hands.

He was still looking down when he spoke again. "I just don't like the thought of you being in that situation again. I warned you I was overprotective."

"Uh." It was all she could manage as his hands worked their way up.

"I know you're an independent woman. You've taken care of yourself, and you've done a good job of it, apart from the asshole you married. I can't blame you for that, though; you're the kind of person who needs to give love and be loved."

The razor was at her bikini line, the soap cartridge surrounding the blades soft and pliable in the water. He moved carefully between her spread-eagle legs, making sure to move so that she wasn't hurt.

"I'm sure the women's rights groups would have my head on a platter if they knew what I was about to say." He was so casual as he chatted, moving the razor up...then across. "You need to be taken care of. I don't mean locked in a cage or told what to do or ordered around. I mean you need someone who understands who you are, appreciates it, and knows when to help you out, even if you don't think you need it."

She stared down at his hands as he shaved her, smoothing one hand over her suddenly smooth lips as the other made quick work of any stubble that might be left. What was he saying? She was independent? She needed someone

to take care of her? Shouldn't she be protesting that idea? She thought she should be. Only she couldn't bring herself to argue at the moment.

"Anyway, I know I need someone to take care of me," he said, his tone slightly self-mocking. "I'm too stubborn sometimes. I don't know when to let things go when I should. And if it's not a one-on-one conversation, I tend to be too quiet. It'd be good for me to have someone who'd hurl a book or a pan or even a cake at my head every once in a while."

Hurling pastries. Okay, sure, she got it. Food fights. Whatever he wanted. She'd cover herself in chocolate sauce and wrestle with him, if that's what he'd like.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Vivien?" His gaze was still between her legs as he finished what he'd started with gentle strokes. "I know it's probably...Vivi?"

"Huh?" She tore her gaze away from his hands, her mind spinning with images.

A crooked smile crept across his lips. "Did I shock you? I suppose I should have asked first."

"What? Oh, no. No, I don't... It's okay." She hadn't even known she wanted to be shaved until he'd started doing it.

"I was thinking about how much pleasure you'd get from this. Everything, every touch, every kiss, will feel twice as good as it did before." He stood, pulling the plug as he went. "Let me show you."

He held his hand out for her, and she took it, eager to feel what he was promising. She stepped out of the tub and stood beside him on the blue bath mat, waiting as he wrapped her in a white bath sheet.



## Chapter Seven

He was sitting in the corner of the bakery's kitchen, watching her as she worked. Vivien had told him that he didn't need to come with her this morning, and he'd let her give her protests. Then he'd simply followed her out of the house and meandered down the sidewalks with her. She supposed she could have forced the issue, but she was enjoying his attention.

Sadie leaned over, her blue-tinted hair covered with a net, the stud in her eyebrow lifting. "I like the new decoration, boss. How long is he staying?"

Vivien felt a flush sweep into her face. "For another hour or so; he's finishing up a bookcase for the Lamberts today."

"And then he'll be back to pick you up." Sadie chuckled knowingly. "It's about time."

Vivien's hands went completely still in the dough she was kneading. "Excuse me?"

"Oh come on. Like we haven't seen you watching Rex Samuels when he comes into town. Like I can't tell that he's trying not to look like he's watching you. I was beginning to wonder if we'd have to lock the two of you in a hotel room for a weekend."

Vivien stood, stunned. "You mean this whole time...you and Sarah and Pauline knew...but you didn't say anything?"

Sadie's smiling brown eyes came back to her. "I hate to burst your bubble, boss, but the whole town knew."

The whole town? Everyone? So the expressions she and Rex had gotten hadn't been ones of shock, but of pleased surprise. Was that possible?

“Am I really that dense?” she asked herself.

“No, you're just a woman in the throes of... We'll call it passion. Sounds nice, and it's not too scary.”

Vivien began working the dough again, this time her hands moving in a slower motion. “Let me ask you. If Rex and I hadn't figured this out on our own, would you all have continued to watch and speculate?”

Sadie snorted. “The show was fun for a while, and after the first year we even started taking bets. But Pauline and I had agreed that if you two hadn't cozied up by the end of the year, we were going to do something drastic.”

“Drastic?”

“Absolutely. Kidnapping and bondage was discussed.”

Vivien choked on laughter and shook her head. “My heroes.”

“Ain't we just?”

She wasn't sure how to reply, or even how to feel, now that she'd found out that what she thought was a well-kept secret had really been fodder for the gossip mill. She supposed she could have been upset, embarrassed, righteously indignant, but at the moment she was too filled with warm happiness to care. Rex had staked a claim on her, ordinary Vivien Spooner, and life was definitely looking bright.

She spun, reaching behind her for the rolling pin. She wasn't sure how it happened. One moment the bowl of pitted cherries was on the counter, the next they were hurtling toward the floor. She heard the scraping noise of metal on tile before she saw the container shifting. The world seemed to pause for a moment, then head on in slow motion, as if her eyes were seeing faster than the world could move. She reached out, almost before she'd realized her intention, and caught the fruit before it splattered on the ground. She was even able to stabilize the tiny red balls, rotating the bowl to catch them before they escaped. The world around her suddenly sped back up, like a tape fast-forwarded, until it hit normal speed.

“Wow!” Sadie was standing, staring down at Vivien's hands. “That was one quick catch. I didn't realize they were falling.”

Vivien knitted her brow. “Yeah, quick. And very lucky.”

“Must be the proverbial weight off your shoulders,” her friend commented with a sly smile.

She couldn't help but smile back. The thought that finally having sex with Rex could bring about such a sudden change in her not-so-graceful status was almost ridiculous. But only almost. After all, it was the only logical reason she could think of for what had just happened. Maybe her mind really *was* more at ease now, freeing her up in ways she'd never considered.

With a bright grin, she gazed over at Rex, who had an odd, slightly worried expression on his rugged face. She sent him a wink before she turned back around to finish her work. She'd have to see if he'd come into the shop more often, if she reacted like this in his presence.

\* \* \* \* \*

“It's the incident with the cherries that concerns me.” Rex ran the brush over the smoothed side of the bookcase, leaving behind a gentle streak of light stain as Marcus leaned against the workbench and watched. “Vivien moved so fast that if Sadie had been paying more attention, she would have seen a blur instead of Vivi.”

“You were able to follow her, though. You saw it all, and it was...”

He nodded briskly. “From the second she turned to snatch the bowl midair, to her balancing the fruit so perfectly that not even a drop of juice lapped over the edge. I don't think she realized what she'd done, though. She's progressing quicker than I'd anticipated.”

“Sometimes people do, I suppose.” Marcus shrugged. “It's not like you have a measuring stick for this sort of thing. I mean, us poor nonshifters aren't bitten every day. From what I understand, it's actually a rare occurrence in the werewolf community.”

"Only ferals attack nonshifters." He continued to move his hand, hoping the repetitive movement would ease his tension. "But ferals, those cases are few and far between. The damaged DNA that makes them like they are isn't the norm."

"But it *does* happen, obviously. I remember my father telling me about a case he'd seen once, when a girl changed. Said her shifting went horribly wrong. She went crazy that first time, and her body just shut down until she died the next morning."

"You never told me Doc saw that."

Marcus shifted his weight and tucked his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "He wanted me to understand the responsibility I was taking on when I agreed to work with weres. He also explained about the herbal medications, how the ones with the damaged DNA that survived their first shifting took them to keep from changing. Said the medicine was a blessing rather than a curse; I've only seen one in my career that needed it, when I was working in the city. He didn't seem to mind."

Rex knelt down to work on the bottom shelf. "Most don't argue the fact that they need to be controlled. They aren't shunned by the community; most become protectors for the ones too young to control their change. Besides, shifting is painful for them because the damaged DNA doesn't allow for the anesthetizing hormones during shifting to be produced."

"I always wondered what would happen if we used the weres' natural anesthetizing agent on a nonshifter. But then I start thinking about Frankenstein and decide it's not worth it." Marcus gave him a lazy smile that Rex knew was meant to ease him.

"No, it's not. You could very well have someone like Vivien on your hands."

When his friend spoke again, his voice was grave. "This one that bit her... I'm surprised he hasn't been found and put down, since he refused the medication."

"I know you don't like the idea of it, Marcus, but it has to be done. You see what happens if it's not."

"Holding cells—"

"Don't work. You know that's nothing but long-term torture for a werewolf. Besides which, when they change, they rip their way out. Keeping them drugged out of their minds isn't very humane either, and trying to run herd over them in an open enclosure is impossible." Rex stood, brushing the inside of the bookcase with the stain. "These aren't kids who've been naughty. They are natural-born killers, and they can't help themselves. They're put down because they are too dangerous for other weres, and deadly to nonshifters. Their minds are splintered. There's no sense of right or wrong, no real humanity. They run on base instincts. That's why they're called ferals."

"And once they've bitten a human, they come back at the next full moon, when the diseased DNA has embedded itself into the human host." Marcus's words were soft now, barely audible over the wind and the birds. "The first several times, the change can't be controlled, and the ferals know that. If the new shifter's mind breaks, then they'll want to take them into whatever pack they have, or as a mate. If they refuse, then they're killed. Is that right?"

Rex didn't realize he was gripping the brush too tightly until he felt it snap in his hand. Grinding his teeth, he tossed it aside and took a long breath, turning to stare out the open door of his work shed.

"I wish I knew what would happen to Vivien," he replied in a thick, rough voice. "It's beyond just getting her to accept the facts of shifters, in particular that she's becoming one. She's going to be mad as hell when she finally realizes I've known it since she was bitten. Then there's the risk that she won't be able to handle the change. She could very well die the first time. Worse, she could become a feral."

"And she'll have to take the medication, because you couldn't allow her to run wild."

“Damn it!” He bit the words out as he ran his hand through his hair. “No, I can't, but like you said, hers is a very rare case. I've only heard of this happening four times in my life, and two of those were overseas.”

Marcus let out a long breath rife with sympathy. “What happened in those cases?”

“One died, one had to be put on medication, and the other two transitioned to were without any incidents.”

There was a long, telling silence before the other man spoke again. “Vivien is a strong woman, and I don't just mean physically. She's one of the warmest, most level-headed women I know. We'll hope that's enough.”

“Yeah. We'll hope.” But Rex didn't feel as much hope as he wanted. Being in love was scaring the crap out of him. “I asked her to marry me, you know. I just don't think she realizes that's what I did.”

The change in subject had Marcus staring for a moment, completely lost, before he laughed. “Damn, boy, you work fast.”

Rex turned and gave his friend a small smile. “Maybe it's the deadline looming. Maybe it's the fact that I feel like I've been waiting for Vivi my whole life.”

“No, just the five years, but that's long enough in my book.”

“Apparently she's been waiting for me for that long too.”

Marcus clapped him on the shoulder. “Momma would approve of her. Wait a minute, did you say Vivien didn't realize you'd proposed? How in the hell did you manage that one?”

Heat suffused his neck in an uncharacteristic blush. “Well, we were, um, busy at the time...”

“You were in bed with her? What, you waited till you had the woman busy to pop the question?”

“Bed? No, not the bed. The tub, actually, and I was... Uh, well, I think she was focused on something other than words.”

Marcus tossed his head back and let out a guffaw loud enough to scare the birds from the trees. “Wait until I tell Carrie. She's going to love this. Now, you know you're going to have to do better than that, right? You're going to have to actually ask the poor woman in one of those rare moments when you aren't tangled around each other.”

Rex felt suddenly sheepish and turned away to search for another paintbrush. “Yeah, yeah, I know. But I have to figure out exactly how to do it. I don't want to repeat the old traditional flowers, dinner, ring, and down on one knee.”

“Hey, it's worked for most men. Carrie sure loved it.”

Rex swiveled around to look at the other man. “No, I have a feeling Vivi's been down that route before. When I ask again, it's going to be the way she'd want it. So when you tell Carrie tonight—and I know you will—tell her to keep it quiet.”

Marcus lifted his eyebrows and shook his head. “Okay, I'll swear my wife to secrecy. But you'd better not wait too long. Carrie will be sending out the invitations for you before you've even asked Vivien.”

The two men laughed, for the moment, fear of what was coming tamped down by the promise of a happy future.

## Chapter Eight

Vivien was floating by the time she started walking home. Only a few short weeks ago she'd been oblivious to how much Rex wanted her. Then that disastrous day had given root to something special, something she had only dreamed about. She had become Rex's lover.

Just the thought if it still made her sigh. She was certain she was acting like a hormone-riddled teenager, but she didn't care. Maturity was the last thing on her mind. If she was acting like a sex-crazed teen, fresh in the throes of new love, it was because she *felt* like it. Not that she'd ever told him that she loved him. That would come in time, she supposed, when she felt a little more secure in looking to the future. She'd been bold enough to tell him she wanted him, brave enough to face dismissal and ridicule, and she was proud of herself. For now, she was content—no, she was ecstatic—to think about the man who would come home to her.

She wondered if they were living together. In the strictest sense of the word, she guessed they were. It hadn't been something formal; he hadn't presented her with a key to his cabin, and she hadn't asked him over a candlelit dinner if he'd like to share her house. He'd simply brought a duffel bag after that first night and hung his clothes up beside hers. They'd gone to the cabin that next weekend, and he'd suggested she pack a bag as well. Since they stayed at his cabin through the weekend, something her friends-cum-employees had insisted she do, more shirts, pants, and underwear had ended up there. So now she had stuff at his place, and he had things at hers. It was a remarkable feeling.



"I'm living with Rex Samuels." Even saying it out loud to herself made her giddy.

Her grandmother hadn't said a word against it. She'd taken it in stride when Rex had begun to show up with Vivien, visiting, helping out, having meals. It was almost too good to be true, and if it were happening to someone else, she might look around to find the string attached. Maybe she was fooling herself into thinking it wouldn't all unravel like so much yarn from an old sweater, but it was nice to indulge in a one-day-at-a-time mentality when it came to her love life. Or sex life. Whichever was more apt. She was feeling lucky enough to think it encompassed both.

She was grinning when she opened the door. The scent of beef stew permeated the air, and she stood for a moment in appreciation. It was always nice when you didn't have to cook for yourself, and doubly nice when it was a sexy man slaving over a hot oven for you. Heck, slaving over a hot phone for takeout was good too. As long as Rex was attached to it, she'd be blissfully happy.

She took off her light coat, hung it on the hook beside the door, and meandered into the kitchen. Sure enough he was there, bare feet, worn jeans, and a nearly threadbare denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. She let out a sigh that made her sound like a tween staring at a picture of her favorite rock idol.

"Welcome home, gorgeous." His smile was warm and oh-so-heart-stoppingly sexy.

She walked into his arms and rested her head against his warm chest. "You're here early. I didn't expect you until later."

"Got the Watts' dinner table finished sooner than I expected. Hope you like stew; I had a craving for it, so I started it at the cabin and brought it here to finish up."

“Mmm, food.” She inhaled his woodsy scent along with the deep aroma of dinner. “Seriously, I think you've done something to my metabolism. I don't ever recall eating so much in my life, let alone wanting meat like this.”

She looked up at him with a teasing smile, but his face had become unreadable. “Maybe, or maybe you're just...changing.”

“Changing?” She chuckled and snuggled closer. “Is that what you call it? I can't seem to get enough of you, or your company, or your food. If this were a fairy tale, I'd wonder if you'd bewitched me.”

He began stroking her back—long, languid lines that relaxed and excited. “Sometimes fairy tales are true. You've said that before.”

“No, what I said was that most folklore had its roots in distorted truth. There's a big difference.”

“So the truth is distorted when it comes to lore, I guess I can give you that.”

She pulled away and gave him a long look. “You are obsessed with this whole folklore thing.”

“Obsessed?” He tried to look innocent, but his eyes betrayed him.

“Okay, maybe not obsessed but extremely interested. You have a habit of bringing it up in our conversations.”

He shifted his weight and brought her head back down to his chest. “I do?”

“Yeah, you do. But I suppose as far as quirks go, it's not so bad. As long as you don't ask me to dress up like Buffy and stand over you with a stake.”

“Fantasies from fairy tales.” His voice was half amused, but she could sense the underlying tenseness in him and wondered about it. “Do you have a favorite in the make-believe world, Vivien? Any fantasy creature that gets you all hot and bothered?”

She pressed closer as she sighed mockingly. “I have to confess, I do.”

“Let me guess...vampires?”

"No, not vamps, though they do have a certain appeal. I mean, all that seduction just with a look, plus thousands of years to perfect their bedroom moves. It's intriguing. But—and you're going to laugh after that little talk we had a few weeks ago—I have to admit that I've always liked werewolves, myself."

His entire body went taut. His hands stopped moving; there was a sudden hitch in his breathing. She knit her brow in worry and was about to step back when his arms became tight, anchoring her to him.

"You...you have a thing for shape-shifters?"

"For werewolves, yes. I know, it's sort of sad, really. It's been that way since I was a teenager and figured out what sexy was." She tried to inject some humor into the conversation, uncertain about his strange reaction. "I'm a big-time wolf girl. There's something about them that makes me melt. Human most of the time, but with a beast held tight inside. The strength of the man to hold the animal at bay, then to turn all that pent-up wildness onto a woman. Plus there's the power of it. All that brawn, usually mixed with a good brain. It gets me every time."

He didn't reply for a long while, just stood and held her, his hands beginning their movement again. Maybe she should have asked him why it was all so important to him, but she had the uneasy feeling that if she did, some part of her happy little bubble would burst.

"You must be starving." He laid a gentle kiss on her head and carefully set her back. "I know I am. But I'll feed my appetite after dinner's over."

She licked her lips as his blue eyes raked over her body with hot deliberation. She wasn't sure how they were going to make it through the meal without jumping each other. The memory of their first breakfast together came back to spike the heat in her veins. Who cared if they didn't make it to the bedroom...or the living room...or the stairs...or even the floor?

“Eat first,” he said, his dark voice hard with desire but tinged with tenderness. “I don't want you uncomfortable while I'm in the middle of taking you.”

She didn't speak when he ladled up a bowl for her and steered her toward the table. She sat, dipped her spoon in, and took a bite of the delicious stew. When he joined her, he brought a loaf of warm, buttered bread with him, promptly tearing off a large piece for her.

She wasn't sure how she ate. She was so busy watching his mouth, his hands, the muscles in his arms, that it was all automatic. All she could think of was what he wanted to do to her, and what she wanted to do to him. The past few weeks had been all about glorious discovery. What she liked, what she didn't, what she wanted, what she needed, and he'd been right there with her. There had been no embarrassment, and she was surprised by that. She hadn't ever been as demanding with any other man, because of her shyness in the bedroom, but Rex had somehow made it seem so...natural. She didn't think there was a piece of her body he hadn't tasted and explored.

“I'm done,” came a rough voice.

She realized he was staring at her, his eyes so intense that they could have melted an Antarctic ice pack. His bowl was still half-full; he hadn't even touched his bread, but his glass of milk—somehow it was endearing that he drank milk—was completely empty. It was as if he was feeling the same heat she was.

“I'm through.” She tossed her spoon down and stood.

They lunged for each other. She was sure she heard tableware hit the floor, and she was just as sure she didn't care. But instead of stripping naked right there, which she was silently pleading for, he pulled her out of the kitchen and to the stairs.

“I have an idea, but we need to be upstairs for this.”

She nodded her consent, taking his soft kisses as they stumbled their way up to the bedroom. He tumbled her down onto the bed, his hands skimming her figure, pausing here and there before moving on. His cock was a swollen ridge that rode between her legs, pressing and taunting. Glory just a few pieces of clothing away.

“Too damn many clothes,” he muttered.

He yanked on his shirt, and she helped him, absently listening as buttons popped loose and sailed across the room. His jeans were next, the pliable material shoved and kicked until they'd hit the floor too. She paused to sigh, her hands running over his muscled shoulders, down his broad back, coming to rest on his tight butt. She squeezed and he growled.

“Naked. You need to be—”

He didn't finish; instead he pulled at her burgundy top. She should have been surprised that he'd already unbuttoned it, but she knew his clever fingers too well. Her jeans didn't take much effort either, though there was a moment when he jerked her shoes off and one hit the window that she was afraid he'd shatter the glass. Once the barrier was gone, the denim and flowered underwear disappeared to join his things.

His mouth was in constant motion, licking and biting, nibbling her like a delicacy one moment, lapping her like a feast the next. She dug her nails into his body, held on to him while the feelings slammed and rocked through her system. She wanted more...more...and she thought she might die if she didn't get it.

“I want to try something,” he said in a tight voice. “Trust me, Vivi.”

It wasn't a question, but she nodded anyway. Whatever he wanted, she was more than willing to try it once. Twice, if she really liked it. He grinned, turning his face into the guise of a wicked pirate, and the sensual waves went from electric to molten.

One of his hands left her body, and a few seconds later came back holding a toy she should have been embarrassed he'd found. But the way he was staring at her, all fire and heat, took away that need. The rubberized plastic of the Jackrabbit gleamed in the dim lighting as he held it up for her to inspect.

"You've been nosing around," she accused lightly.

"Yes, I have. I found a little stash that looks like it hasn't been used in a while. I've been walking around in a half-crazed state ever since."

He flipped the remote, and the device came to life, humming as it vibrated and rotated in a slow fashion. She thought of using it while he watched her—or better, while he helped—and nearly came at the very idea. Then she remembered the long-buried fantasy she'd had involving this particular toy, and knew she wouldn't be happy until she'd done it.

"I have an idea," she whispered, grinning.

His eyebrows lifted in surprise and obvious glee as she took the vibrator from him. She sat up, and when he reached for her, she shook her head. Silently, she slid from the mattress, landing on the floor in a kneeling position.

"Come sit on the edge of the bed." She was surprised by the husky sound of her voice, but the excitement that was building inside of her tinged everything she did.

She waited until he was sitting in front of her, his feet on the hardwood, his legs slightly parted. She leaned over and licked his solid thigh. He jumped at the contact, and she hummed in delight. She could make him feel as incredible as he did her, she thought. She could make him groan, make him beg, make him scream for her. The power of it was a heady aphrodisiac.

She moved closer to him, bringing her mouth in alignment with his shaft. She watched as the thick muscle jerked, smiling at the knowledge that she had him on edge and she hadn't even touched him. Then, slowly, she took him into her mouth, easing down until she'd nearly covered him. He was too big to swallow whole, but from his reaction it was enough.

While she held him captive, she carefully positioned the Jackrabbit between her tingling folds. She slid her mouth up his cock, and when she moved back down, she pushed the vibrator into herself. She hummed in painful pleasure at the feel of having both parts of herself filled. The toy was wedged between her and the floor, her ankles holding it steady, while Rex's silky shaft was hot between her tongue and palate. This was something she'd always wondered about, and the idea of it was nowhere near the incredible reality.

She pressed the control without looking, sending the Jackrabbit moving. She gasped as the sensations shot through her, bringing her clit to hard throbbing. His cock twitched inside of her mouth, and she began to suck with slow, deliberate motions.

"You have it inside you, Vivi? Oh God, it's on." He hissed and dug his fingers into her hair. "Your mouth is so good."

She sucked harder, then pulled up on his shaft, lifting her body as she went. The small, extended nub tickled her clit as she moved away, making the pleasure more intense as she sank back down. She lifted and fell, lifted and fell, over and over again, until there was nothing left in the world but the two cocks filling her and the sensations they created, which were consuming her body.

"I want to hear you come. I want to watch you do it to yourself."

His voice was dark and raw, rippling tendrils that smacked her inner core to the point of mindless need. She could feel her orgasm building, tight and hot as it coiled between her legs. If she stopped, she would lose control, but she didn't want to let go too soon. It felt too good to stop.

She lifted her hand and cupped him, kneading him as she drove him in and out of her mouth. He screamed, his big body tightening in barely controlled passion. It was too much.

She descended again, but this time her body stayed down. The vibrator was pressed perfectly, and in a hot flash she was yelling, the sound muffled by

his shaft as her muscles knotted. The orgasm was a long, hard release, filling her to the point of breaking as she bobbed her head.

He came with her, his hands fisted in her hair, his back arching as he pushed into her moist mouth. She stayed with him, whimpering as her own orgasm stretched even further. The waves slowly receded, leaving her limp and pleased.

Rex leaned down and pulled her back up, the motion freeing the now-quiet toy from her quivering walls. Once she was on the bed beside him, he eased his fingers into her, holding them there while he felt her quake. She sighed with happiness, curling into the crook of his arm.

"I've always wanted to try that," she admitted quietly.

"I'm awfully glad you did." He nuzzled her throat and groaned as her body clenched his fingers. "I love your mouth, sweetheart. You are so...talented. Anytime you get the urge to do that again, you don't even have to ask." He licked her distended nipple and gave her a long, hot look. "Next time, I want to be inside you when you come."

She didn't object when he began caressing her again. She didn't think about strange conversations about folklore or her stomach's growling or her tired body.



## Chapter Nine

“Only two days until Halloween,” Pauline chirped happily. “You have everything you need for the festival in the square?”

Vivien continued to spread the chocolate icing on the cupcakes as she nodded. She thought about the party that was held in the square the afternoon of Halloween; it had become a tradition back when she'd been a teenager. It was meant for the little ones, and for the older ones, who wouldn't be going out in the dark to trick-or-treat. All the local businesses participated, giving out candy, small toys, and coupons for treats after the children had played whatever game the owner had set up. This year Sweet Cakes was doing a treasure dig in a sand-filled kiddie pool.

“Yep, everything's ready to go. Setting up shouldn't take too long, and I already have the coupons printed out and in the bags with the candy.”

“And Mr. Hunk will be helping set up, right?” Pauline's green eyes gleamed, and the crow's-feet around them deepened. “You don't mind if I take a few snaps of your man bending down, do you?”

Vivien laughed as the plump, gray-haired woman wiggled her eyebrows. “As long as your husband doesn't take offense, I suppose I shouldn't either.”

The other woman snorted as she dusted the surface of a baking pan with flour. “Like Harry doesn't stare at you every chance he gets. He swears you're a young Sophia Loren.”

Vivien paused and turned to stare at her friend across the kitchen. “Me? Sophia Loren? No wonder Harry needs glasses.”

Pauline sighed and put the pan down on the counter. "You're much too hard on yourself, Vivi. You are a beautiful woman with a smart business sense and a great sense of humor. You have breasts most women get plastic shoved into their chests to get, lips that even more women get shots to achieve, eyes that most other people have to buy colored contacts to have... In short, you have all sorts of nice parts. Or is it that you think Rex Samuels is an idiot? A blind idiot with no taste?"

"Hey!"

"Exactly." She gave a curt nod and turned back to pour cake batter into the pan. "You just think about that, Vivien Spooner. It's obvious that one of the hottest men in town finds you absolutely irresistible. And don't go saying it's all about the sex, because if it were just about that, he wouldn't be escorting you everywhere, showing you off, and licking his lips every time he sees you."

Vivien opened her mouth, then snapped it closed. She couldn't think of a valid argument. Pauline was right. Warmth seeped into her, bold and sure, and filled her with a contentment she'd never had before. Rex did care about her. Of course she'd known, but somehow, strange as it was, now she was wholly convinced of it. She'd been waiting for the end of their run, supposing he'd eventually move on to someone who Vivien would consider more in his league. But he wasn't. In fact, he'd done the exact opposite. He'd dug himself into her life and didn't seem interested in budging.

Sarah chose that moment to breeze in, her caramel-toned skin slightly pale. "Uh, Vivien. You have a...visitor."

She watched the young woman fidget, as if there was something more to it. And there had to be for Sarah to announce she had a visitor. If it was someone coming in for something other than a purchase, her employees would simply tell her so-and-so needed to talk to her. It was never this formal.

"Okay, thanks. I guess I'll go out and—"

"You might want to see him in your office." Sarah's eyes spoke volumes.

"My office... All right, then. I'll go on back, and you can send him up."

Vivien wiped her hands on her apron and headed toward the back of the kitchen, where a set of stairs led up to her office. There was another set, out in the common area beside the restrooms, which led upstairs as well. That's why she'd chosen to renovate the upstairs stockroom and make it a common area for herself and the employees. There were no walls, just tall wooden filing cabinets that separated her office area from the break room. The attic style, with its slanted roof and rows of windows, suited her just fine, and the openness created an open-door policy that couldn't be ignored.

She rounded the corner, slipped off her apron, and laid it across the banister. She couldn't imagine who in the world could have caused practical, competent-minded Sarah to react as she had.

A moment later she understood. The shining golden crown of her ex-husband's head appeared, followed by his suit-covered body. There had been a time when she'd thought Cory was decently built. Not as broad shouldered as she'd have liked, and just under six feet, but still not bad. Now she had Rex to compare him to, and the blond man fell very short. He flashed her a toothpaste-ad smile when he saw her. She tried not to cringe.

"Vivien, where have you been?"

Though he'd asked in a light tone, she knew he was irritated. "What does it matter to you, Cory? We *are* divorced, you know."

He waved that away with a flip of his manicured hand. "I still think of you as my responsibility."

"Your responsibility? I'm not a puppy."

He chuckled as if she were a cheeky schoolgirl. "I never said you were a dog."

"You did when you left. As I recall, you compared me to a loyal, but boring, pound mutt."

His smile faltered at that particular memory. “We were both upset. I'm sure we both said things we regret.”

She shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. “I didn't.”

He sighed and tucked his hands into his pockets, trying for an aw-shucks act that didn't cut it with her. “That was six years ago, Viv. I was younger, more volatile.”

“And had a sexy blonde waiting in the corner. That didn't work out for you, though, did it?”

“That was low.”

“No, it was the truth.” Vivien took a deep breath and slowly let it out. Somehow she thought there'd be more boiling anger on her part, but there wasn't. “Look, Cory, I have a business to run. What is it you want?”

His lips tilted up, and his eyes became sly. “You, Viv. I want you.”

She had to shake her head to make sure she wasn't hallucinating the whole thing. “Whoa, what?”

“We were good together.” He moved closer, reaching out his hand to touch her arm. “You and me, we make sense. I don't even mind if you have your little business.”

“You don't mind...” She took a step back, breaking contact with him, and turned to leave. “Go away.”

“No, wait! I made a mistake, okay? We're all entitled to screw up sometimes. I realize now that what I did was wrong, and I just want...I want...”

“You want to have that malleable, shy, insecure girl back. You want to have someone to take care of you, to feed you, wash your clothes, and not complain whenever you're—what was it you called your affairs?—oh, yeah, networking at the club.”

His mouth twisted in annoyance. “I've already apologized.”

“As a matter of fact, you did not. You admitted you made a mistake, and that's great. You're one step closer to being a decent human being.” She stared

at him but didn't see one shred of guilt. She had the jolting revelation that he just didn't matter anymore. "You know you didn't come here to clear the air or clean your spiritual slate, Cory. You came here out of purely selfish reasons."

"I want you back, damn it! You know you can't do better than me. When's the last time you had sex, Viv?"

She gave him a smug look, pleased that the fury was gone and she'd gained enough confidence to walk away from his verbal blows. "This morning, after breakfast. On the stairs, to be precise. We couldn't make it to the bed."

"Ha! Now you're lying." His hands were fisted, and she could see him shaking underneath his tan suit.

"No, I'm not. I don't want you, Cory. Not now, not ever again."

"Yes, you do. You're just letting that fucking pride of yours get in the way." He grabbed her shoulders and squeezed. "Admit it, Vivien. There is no man, there never could be. No one could want you. I'm the only one who would ever put up with you."

"Don't touch my woman."

The voice was thick with barely controlled rage, and she saw Cory give a quick start of shock. His eyes narrowed as he looked down at her, but he still didn't let her go. She knew she was grinning like an idiot, but damn, it felt good to hear Rex's voice cut into her ex's whining.

"Are you deaf? I said to let her go."

Cory's fingers popped open as he did a slow turn. She could see his back straighten in surprise. The tension in the air was thick as ice water and twice as cold. She peered around her ex, hoping to give Rex the reassurance that she was fine. But he wasn't looking at her. He was staring at the other man, his face so rigidly controlled that it was terrifying. She wondered what tack her ex-husband would take when faced with a man so intent on his purpose.

Cory chose belligerence. "Who the hell are you?"

"The man who made Vivi scream on the stairs this morning."

Cory shifted his weight, plainly annoyed. “Vivien is *my* wife, damn it! You will not tell me about...about screwing her, whether it happened or not.”

Rex lifted one eyebrow, showing no signs of irritation other than a strained voice. “Wrong, you're her *ex*-husband. Vivien and I are lovers, together; I don't have to own her to keep her. If you don't believe I've had my hands all over her, then she has the choice to show you the marks my mouth made on her neck, and her stomach, and her thighs. Or I can show you the claw marks all over my back and the bite marks on my shoulders.”

Cory strode over to him, cocky as he ever was, not smart enough to sense the danger he was strolling into. “I will not have someone like you waltz in and think you can ruin my life. Vivien knows she has it best with me, no backwater woodsman could possibly change that fact.”

“Why don't you go balls to the wall and actually ask the lady who she wants.”

“Because right now she'd say whatever she needs to in order to salvage her damn pride. I know what's best for her!”

“Buddy, you don't even know your way around the female body, or else she wouldn't have been sexually starved.”

Cory's hands tightened even more as he stared at the man in his jacket and jeans. “If she told you that, she was a goddamn liar.”

Rex gave him a cruel half smile. “She didn't say a word. She didn't have to. Her body did the talking.”

“You'll pay for that!”

“Please, give me a reason.”

Vivien knew she had to stop this before she had a full-fledged brawl over her store. “All right, enough, boys. While it's very flattering to have someone defend my honor”—she gave Rex a pointed look—“I really don't want to have to explain how my office area was trashed to the insurance company. Besides, Cory would just end up suing me over his broken bones.”

Her ex turned to give her a stunned look. "I can't believe you. What's happened to you, Vivien?"

She didn't answer his question, only let a slow smile creep across her mouth as she stared at Rex. "I believe I asked you to leave, Cory. Now I'm telling. Leave, before I have you escorted out of my *little* store."

He huffed, opened his mouth to argue, but saw she was paying no attention to him. "He'll dump you, Vivien. He's only using you to get his jollies. When he's done with you, don't even think about begging me for another chance."

She roused enough to prop her hands on her hips and shake her head in bewilderment. "I could have said the same thing when you left me for your playmate."

He gave an annoyed grunt, obviously about to begin haranguing her again, but she lifted her hand and pointed down the stairs. He stomped all the way down, like a child having a fit.

Rex gave her a steady look. "Hello, Vivi."

"Hi, Rex." She waited a beat before she winked.

He chuckled and pulled her into his arms. "I can't believe you married that guy. He's an ass."

"Well, I was young and naive. I didn't know what I was doing. One minute I'm wondering if I'm doing something wrong in bed, because I just didn't enjoy it, and the next I'm in a chapel in Vegas."

"I'll bet your grandmother was not happy." He anchored her tighter to his body.

"Oh, she didn't say a word. She didn't have to."

He pulled back and gazed down at her. "The face?"

"Yes, the face. I disappointed her, but she never pointed it out. She never said 'I told you so' whenever I called her in tears because Cory and I had fought. She didn't even gloat when I signed the divorce papers and moved back

to Bendan Town.” Vivien reached up and brushed her fingers through his dark hair. “She likes you, though.”

“Yes, she does.” He laughed at her disgruntled look and gave her a hard, predatory kiss. “I’m sorry about your ex, sweetheart.”

“I’m not.” She snuggled against him again. “I think I’ve been spoiling for that particular fight for a few years now. Did you know he started calling me, trying be friends? Like I didn’t know he wanted to make sure he had a safety net.”

“You hung up on him.”

“Every time. Though now I’m wondering if I should have invited him over to dinner, maybe pureed some mushrooms and slipped them into a sauce. He’s allergic, you know. Makes him very gassy.”

Rex nipped her earlobe and chuckled. “Remind me never to get on your bad side.”

“I don’t think you could ever do that,” she said honestly.

His relaxed body became tight again, a gradual progression of muscles going taut that mystified her. She couldn’t imagine what she’d said to make him upset. Or maybe it was just a sudden memory of what had just happened. That had to be it. He hadn’t been able to let his anger out, and so it was built up, waiting for some sort of physical release. Too damn bad she didn’t have a private office, or she’d let him have any sort of release he wanted.

Sighing, she slipped out of his embrace and gave him a gentle kiss. “Well, as a distraction that certainly did the trick. Now I have to get back to work. We have a busy few days ahead of us.”

“That’s one of the reasons I stopped by,” he said in a much-too-serious way. “We need to go out to the cabin tomorrow evening.”

“The day before Halloween? Why?”



He stared at her, as if he were trying to silently show her how important it was to him. "Maybe I need to warn you about all the boogeymen who'll be out on All Hallow's Eve."

"Boogey—very funny, Rex. You never seem to need total privacy when you're in one of your what-if-legends-are-real moods." She sent him a teasing look. "I already know to wear a cross for vampires, carry a lighter for witches, and have a silver bullet handy for werewolves."

There was an almost imperceptible twitch around his eyes as he stared down at her. "You watch too many movies."

"Maybe I do. And maybe you read too many horror novels. A great imagination is one thing, Rex, but taking all of that seriously...it's quite another." She didn't want to argue, not after what had just happened, so she grabbed his hand and squeezed. "I'll make sure the place is all cleaned up and set for the night by six o'clock, okay? You can pick me up here. Just remember I have to be back to help with the setup on Halloween morning."

"Since I'm going to be helping you, I'll be sure we're here in plenty of time to have your booth ready." He hesitated, as if there was something more he needed to say. Instead he cupped her cheek and let out a long breath. "Sometimes I wish you weren't so practical about things. It's nice to think that there's more to life than what your logical mind can see. Surprises, Vivien, are what make it all interesting."

"Um, I might have argued with you a few weeks ago, but since life tossed you at me *very* unexpectedly, I'll have to agree."

"Finally, the woman agrees with me on this." He picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder. She almost protested that she was too heavy, but his easy manhandling proved her wrong, so she swallowed her words. Instead she squealed, and he gave her bottom a little smack. "Now let's go surprise Pauline and Sarah and make their day a little brighter with some gossip for the rumor mill."

## Chapter Ten

Rex maneuvered his beat-up truck into the horizontal parking space, deftly wedging between a four-door compact and an SUV. The day was fading into evening, filling the sky with bright reds and blues, a beautiful sunset for his grim mood.

He'd put it off for as long as he could. He'd tried to prepare her, talking about things she still considered lore rather than truth. To be honest, he couldn't blame her. After all, the were culture had done its best to hide in plain sight for hundreds of years. It had been the best way to keep from being found out. The idea of being hunted, murdered, subjected to constant testing, not to mention biased attitudes and mass subjugation, was a terrifying one. Unfortunately it was based in experience. Mass hysteria had taken over anyplace where a were had been found, and even in those places where they weren't. Innocent people had died—both humans and weres. History didn't need to be repeated.

So what was he going to do if—no, it would be when—Vivien lost her composure? She was too grounded in reality for even a small part of herself to believe in the what-if game she thought he was playing. When he explained it all, she was going to be lost as to what to think and how to react. She wasn't going to have much of a choice but to believe him, though. Especially after the full moon tomorrow night.

“Halloween,” he said to himself and let out a quiet sigh. “Why'd it have to be Halloween?”

Well, there was no use whining about it, he decided, and slid from his truck to the pavement. At least he had a plan that would completely relax her

before he started his explanation. Plus it had the added benefit of bonding her to him even more. It would be harder for her to lose it with the memory of their lovemaking and his other confession fresh in her mind.

He strode into the bakery, taking in the strong scents of the pastries and cakes. Sweet and deep and full, and underneath it all he could scent Vivien, the layered aroma of spice and cream. He would be able to pick her out in a crowd of thousands.

“Hey, Rex.”

He smiled as Sarah looked up from the counter. “Hi, Sarah. How's business?”

“Brisk,” she said. “Our peanut-butter eyeballs and witch-finger cookies sold out just a few minutes ago.”

He felt a laugh tighten his chest. “Sounds delicious.”

“The kids thought so.” She brushed her hands down her white butcher apron. “Don't worry; we made sure Vivien is ready to go.”

“That must have been a chore.”

“Not really. We just pointed out that you'd be waiting for her.” She grinned and held up what looked like a fluffy black spider. “Want one?”

He lifted an eyebrow and shook his head. “No, thanks just the same.”

“Don't tell me fake arachnids make you squeamish.” Vivien stood in the kitchen doorway, her face luminous as she watched him. “Not the man who attacked a wild dog. I refuse to believe it.”

“You are the only thing that scares me,” he replied.

He hoped he looked as if he were teasing, and he tried to smile when both women chuckled. But he hadn't been lying. She did scare him. She was the only thing in the world that could really, truly hurt him. And he was afraid he was about to be smacked, full force, with the pain only Vivien could bring him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vivien stole a glance at Rex as they drove toward his cabin. She chatted aimlessly, all the while wondering about the strange tension that was tangled in the air. His responses to her were no more than three syllables, and his jaw was so tight, she could have sworn she heard the tendons cracking.

By the time they pulled into the drive, Vivien's shoulders were stiff with uncertainty. He'd been so adamant about tonight. He'd been so serious about it that, for a moment, she'd almost pushed him to find out why. The revelation she'd had about their relationship being more than day-to-day made his attitude that much more intriguing. Was he considering making some sort of official statement of intentions?

*Official statement of intentions?* She nearly laughed out loud at her old-fashioned thought. The excitement it brought, though, fluttered in her stomach like a pack of crazed butterflies. Then she reminded herself that she had been content taking it all one step, one hour, one day at a time. No expectations, just the warmth of having Rex in her life for however long it lasted. Moving from point A to point Z without looking at the middle wasn't exactly wise.

"You're thinking deep thoughts," he said softly, breaking into her musings.

She turned, listening to the night close in when he shut the engine off. "I was wondering how to convince you to dress up in an Arabian costume. I've always been a sucker for Valentino."

He ran a finger down her cheek, his lips tilted crookedly. "Whatever turns you on, Vivien. I'm willing to try it."

One hot, sure bolt raced from the tip of her head straight into her center. The electric shocks that followed played havoc with her reason. "Remind me not to call you on dares."

"There are some you'd love for me to take, whether you know it or not."

She couldn't disagree. She was practically wiggling in her seat when he came around and opened her door. He held a hand out, and she took it, biting

her lower lip when her body came into hard contact with his. He led her inside, and she followed, no longer worrying why he'd wanted to bring her here.

He had barely closed the door before he was whispering in her ear. "Go upstairs and get a nice, long shower, sweetheart, then meet me in the bedroom. Don't bother with clothes."

She stared up into his eyes, the depths dark and molten, and she shivered. She made some sort of sound meant to be acquiescence; instead it came out more of a cracked moan.

She climbed the stairs, listening to his heavy steps as he followed her. She stepped into the master bedroom, her eyes on the bathroom door as her heart pounded in her ears. He stopped for a moment to give her a soft kiss, then patted her bottom and gently pushed her into the white-tiled room.

She tried not to rush; he'd specifically said a long shower. But it was hard not to hurry through washing and shaving her body when she thought of him in the next room waiting for her. She did take the time to pamper her skin with lotion, smoothing it on with unsteady hands. She brushed her hair, cleaned her teeth, and moisturized her face. That was as much as she could stand of the anticipation. Taking a deep breath, she turned off the light and stepped out into the bedroom.

The room glowed softly, lit by a few well-placed candles. The sun had disappeared below the mountainous horizon, leaving a pale, nearly full moon to shine in its place. The silvery light reached in, gently illuminating the darker corners and the white sheets of the bed.

"Feel better?" His question was a deep murmur in the quiet air as he stepped up behind her.

"Y-yes." She licked her dry lips and tried to remember to breathe.

"Good." His large hands cupped her shoulders, and he walked her to the bed. "Lie down on your stomach."

She lifted her eyebrow in surprise but didn't question him. She did as he asked, carefully crawling onto the massive surface. She was easing down when his arm came around her stomach, stopping her.

"No, stay just like this, on your knees."

Her lungs hitched, and her heart smacked a quick, hard beat. His fingers played down her spine, and she arched into him, feeling her flesh heat instantly. His hands played over her bottom, down her thigh and calf, stopping at her ankle. It took her a moment to realize he was fastening something around her foot.

She whipped her head around, staring at him with wide eyes. He looked at her, his question hanging in the silence. When she didn't protest, he moved over to her other ankle and cuffed it as well. The feel of the soft material against her skin was incredibly sensual, and she couldn't help but pull at the binding.

He chuckled and gave her bottom a pat. "Like that, do you? I promise, you'll like everything else too."

Her folds were already tingling with anticipation, and she could feel herself moistening. She didn't protest when his arm came back around her waist. Then he was slipping underneath her stomach a strange, wedge-shaped pillow that, when he let her go, held her lower half in the air while allowing her upper body to rest at a downward angle.

"I made this myself. Took me a few days to get it just right." His tongue reached out to lick her neck. "I've been going crazy thinking about you lying across it, just like you are right now."

She quivered at the idea of it. He'd been thinking of different ways to pleasure her, to the point of taking time to create his own props, even while he'd been satisfying her raging libido. She was still starry-eyed when he lifted another pair of cuffs from beside the bed. With a quick intake of breath, she realized he was going to bind her hands as well.

She was swollen with eagerness when he slid the cuffs onto her hands and buckled them. When he moved away from her she gave a little groan of disappointment, but the kisses he trailed down her spine reassured her. His mouth smoothed its way over her flesh, following the curve of her hip, down the outside of her thigh, then, slowly, to the inside of the sensitive flesh. By the time he reached her wet lips, she was shaking.

He licked her, one long, easy stroke, gently probing between her folds. The angle of her body intensified the feeling, mixing it with the strangely erotic feeling of being vulnerable and completely open to whatever he wanted. She wiggled toward him, but the bindings kept her in place, another sensation that was as foreign as it was dark and glorious.

His perusal was a slow burn that made her struggle against begging. Her entire focus was on that small contact, so when she felt something nudge at the opening farther up her body, she nearly jumped.

"It's okay, Vivien. I found your collection, remember? I just thought we might enjoy them together." He pushed carefully, easing just the tip of the rubber cock inside. "You'll like it."

He plunged his tongue between her walls and pressed the toy farther in. The scream that erupted from her throat was loud and raw. The sensation was absolutely incredible. Penetrated twice, she couldn't keep her hips still. Then the vibrator was in motion, the pulsing of the device throbbing through the thin wall to mix with the heat of his tongue.

Her clit was pulsing against the sensations, trying to hold on to them, fighting for release. She wanted to come, but she wanted it all to go on forever. His tongue began plunging harder, pulling away completely before coming back. Her hardened nipples bounced and brushed against the smooth cotton of the sheets, creating a friction she gasped at.

She was pulling at the ropes, the bindings heightening the desire rolling through her veins. When she felt something thicker and smoother than his tongue slip into her, she cried out.

"That's right, sweetheart. You can take it."

She didn't deny it, and he pushed the new toy all the way to the hilt. She was panting now, desperate to bring her legs together, turned on when she was denied it by the cuffs. She was drowning in the vibrations of both devices now and nearly didn't realize that he had reached under her at her breasts.

He pulled one nipple, tweaking it with his fingers. Her response was immediate. She groaned and screamed at the same time, grinding her body as best she could against the toys. He grinned, took the hard peak in his fingers again, and slipped a small ring around it. With a careful twist, she felt the ring tighten, and she gasped in pleasure.

"That's my girl."

"Oh, God!" she groaned.

She could feel the dampness running down to her thighs and over her clit, making her flesh so slick that the air was suddenly too cool. And even that was a pleasurable torture.

He kissed her cheek, a gentle gesture that brought her orgasm into clear focus. He licked her throat, her shoulder, nipped down her back, and finally her bottom. The smaller vibrator was eased out, and she moaned in protest.

But she was empty only for a moment. She felt something a bit larger, the edges slightly nubbed, sliding into her, stretching her even farther.

"I'm going to come!"

"Not yet," he demanded softly.

She gritted her teeth against it, fighting down her body's intense need. He pushed the toy into her completely, then laid his tongue on her aching slit. He began lapping again, this time with cruel intent. He teased her clit, darting around it, giving it butterfly attention before moving away.

Her nails dug into the bed, the cuffs rattled, and the tension against her limbs pulled. At the same time his tongue found her again, attacking with a gentle touch. The world contracted to a tiny bit of space, with no air, no light,



no sight or sound, only feelings. Then just as quickly as it had collapsed in, the world exploded, expanding in her body as heat coursed over her in long, thick waves. She came against his mouth, screaming his name, her nipples rasping against the bed.

The last ripples were just subsiding when he pulled the vibrator from between her folds, easing it away and lapping at her quivering flesh. She wasn't surprised when desire began building again, her body responding to his unspoken demands. She rolled her breasts deliberately against the bedding, absorbing the shocks that rocked her body.

His mouth pulled away, but she felt his body rise behind hers, his muscled thighs pressing against hers as he positioned himself.

"Do you want me, Vivien?"

Her throat was dry, and her words barely audible. "Yes. Oh please, Rex."

She felt his cock rub across her slit, nudging her stirring clit, teasing her with his length and his thickness. She groaned as need clawed through her blood, sending her heart racing all over again.

The vibrator still inside of her rotated, and she gasped. He pulled it out, inch by inch, then sank it back in, once, twice. The third time, he filled her with the toy and slid his shaft into her other opening.

"It...it feels so big."

"Easy, sweetheart. I'll go easy. You're stretched so tight this way."

His words were hoarse as he guided himself the rest of the way, filling her so thoroughly that she thought she might not be able to take him. But she did, and the feeling was so incredible that she cried.

"You like that, don't you?" His voice was husky as he squeezed her bottom.

"Oh, yes, I love it."

He stayed where he was for a moment, his tip just touching her womb, his breadth stretching her past anything she'd ever felt. Then another vibration

was added, this one directly on her clit. She reared up and screamed, her body pitching headfirst into the wild need for release.

He began moving then, his shaft sliding in and out, the vibrator on her clit moving with him. He took the other toy with him, keeping pace with his own rhythm. She tried to rise with him, to keep both shafts inside of her and the vibrator on her throbbing core, but the bindings kept her in place on the pillow.

He pushed her to the edge of breaking, overloading her senses with everything he was doing. The world was gone again, her breathing was ragged, her skin humming as it burned. Sensation crashed into sensation, smacking and tangling together until she was wild with them. There was no sense of self, no sense of place or time. There was only the absolute need for release.

“Please! Rex...please!”

He pushed into her, pressing one vibrator against her clit and the other all the way inside her. The orgasm grabbed her, holding her tight in its grasp, shattering every piece of her body as she came. She heard him behind her, his roar bouncing around the darkened room as his cock strained inside of her.

Her orgasm seemed to go on forever, finally easing from hard waves to warm eddies. Rex slid from her body, carefully removing the vibrator before leaning up to nuzzle the small of her back.

She lay, limp and spent, as he undid the cuffs around her ankles and then her wrists. When he scooped her up, she curled her arms around his neck and held on. She heard him push the cushion out of the way, and then he was lying down with her, holding her against his damp chest.

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” he said softly. “I have so many things that I want to do to you...and with you.”

She couldn't seem to open her eyes, so she just smiled. “I’ve told you before, you have a great imagination. I’m more than willing to be your guinea pig for these sorts of experiments.”

He chuckled and kissed her, his lips soft against her mouth. "I've wanted you for so long, Vivien. I've had hundreds of fantasies about you. I can't count the number of times I've woken up hard as a rock because I'd dreamed about you."

"Um, you know something? I dreamed about you too. These rough hands of yours"—she traced her fingertip along the line of his knuckles—"your lips, and the package in the front. I had a heck of a time trying not to stare at your crotch every time I saw you. I wanted to know if I was just imagining the size, or if it was for real."

"Oh it's for real. And it's all for you."

"For little ol' me?" She ran her feet over his thick calves and pressed her breasts against him. "I have to say, I'm flattered."

She felt him shift and realized he was staring down at her. Reluctantly her eyes fluttered up, and she looked at him, only to find herself caught in his sharp blue gaze. There was something there again, that same tense expression that she had yet to figure out.

"Rex, what is it?"

He was quiet for a moment, studying her face; then he lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "Vivien, I have something I want to say to you. It's important that I say it right now, because... Well, it's just important that you know it tonight."

Panic ripped through her as she tried to imagine what could make him seem so suddenly desperate. "Oh God, are you married?"

His lips twitched as he shook his head. "No."

"Gay? No, not after what we just did. Bisexual? You have another lover?"

He placed his fingers over her mouth. "Hush, sweetheart. It's nothing like that."

"Oh." She breathed the word against his hand.

He pulled his fingers away and tucked a strand of her wild hair behind her ear. "Vivien...Vivi...the fact is, I love you. I know you might think it's too soon; we've only really known each other for a few weeks, but you have to trust me when I tell you that I *know* you're the one for me."

She lay stunned for a moment; then tears pooled in her eyes. She should say something—she knew she should—but her brain was numb from the shock of their sex and his words. So she just stared at him, looking like a blubbering idiot, she was sure.

"Vivien? Sweetheart, no, don't cry. If you don't love me, it's okay. Take your time. I can slow down—"

"Don't you dare!" She almost laughed at the startled expression on his face. "Wonderful. The declaration I've been waiting for, and I scare the man."

"Wait, what? You've been waiting for?"

"Yes, Rex, the one I've been waiting for." She leaned up and kissed him, a hard, sound smacking of lips. "I love you too. Do you think I just go around sleeping with any man I run into? Trust me, this isn't about gratitude."

"No, it's not." His words sounded thin now, almost guilty in their quality. "Vivi, say it again. Say you love me."

She held his face between her hands and stared into his eyes. "I love you, Rex Samuels."

He gave a curt nod, then leaned away from her. She wondered where he was going before she realized he was reaching down on the floor for something. If it was another toy, she didn't know if she could take it. Oh, who are you kidding? she asked herself. Of course she could. When it came to Rex, her sexual appetite seemed to be endless. But when he was back leaning over her, there was nothing but serious intent in his face.

"I'm going to ask you something, but I don't want you to give me your answer right now. I want you to think about it, and then you can tell me after...after we talk."

“Talk? Rex, what are you—”

He flashed a small leather box in front of her eyes and popped the lid open. Inside was a beautiful square-cut emerald ring, simplistic in its setting, with only the faceted cut to enhance its beauty. Vivien was suddenly faint as she stared at it, the muscles that had been so lax after their lovemaking quickly tightening.

“This has been in my family for generations. It's an heirloom. It's supposed to go to the oldest male when he picks his mate.”

“His... Rex, are you?” She swallowed, elated and terrified at the same time.

“Don't answer me yet, Vivi. Hold on to this.” He closed the box and pressed it into her hands. “Keep it, and think about us, as we are, right now. Promise me.”

“I promise,” she whispered, reverently balancing the gift in her palm.

“Good.” He stood, beautifully naked, and pulled her to sitting position. Wrapping a sheet around her body, he ran his hands through her hair and held her gaze, his features grim. “Now, come downstairs. There's something I need to talk to you about.”

## Chapter Eleven

She followed him down the stairs, the white sheet dragging the ground behind her. The ring was held carefully in her hand, the weight of it burning her palm. Her first reaction had been to say yes. Of course she wanted to marry him, to be with him, to build a life with him. But this odd, cryptic attitude of his had stopped her. What in the world could be so bad that he wanted to give her a chance to say no?

When they reached the living area, he took her arms and eased her down onto the couch facing the television. Without a word, he sank down beside her, then pulled a heavy leather album from the coffee table. She glanced up, saw the hard set of his jaw, and looked back at the book in his hands.

He flipped the cover open, and she smiled when she saw a chunky toddler version of Rex, flanked on one side by a tall, dark-haired boy, and on the other by a slender, dark-haired girl. She didn't need to ask to know they were related.

"This is my brother, Alex, and my sister, Caroline. Alex was six years older than me; Caroline was four years older."

She understood the gravity then; he was sharing his family with her, a family he'd lost in such a terrible way that he would never get over it. "You all look so much alike."

A small smile played at his lips. "We look like our father. At least our coloring. Carol had my mother's build, and I inherited her eyes. Alex was a replica of our dad, though."

He flipped the page, and she saw a beautiful couple, very earthy in their appearances, grinning at the camera as they held up strings of fish. The man was dark-haired, dark-eyed, and was very much like Rex looked now. The woman was curvaceous, her golden brown hair pulled back into a braid that hung loosely over her shoulder.

“Mom and Dad, on one of our camping trips. They were always competing to see who could catch the most. Mom usually won.”

“Sounds pretty typical,” she teased and was rewarded when he laid a hand on hers.

Another page, another shot of the family, this time during the winter. Rex was a bit older, the other children were taller, and his parents were all smiles. A snow fort stood behind them, big and sturdy. And behind that, she recognized the cabin they were sitting in.

“This was our vacation home,” he explained. “I loved it here. Still do. There are too many good memories for their...”

His voice faded away, and she knew he was thinking about their deaths. Their murders, she remembered. As if she could absorb his pain, she squeezed his hand.

He flipped another page over, and there, staring in the lens, was a beautiful, if a bit odd-looking, dog. It had to have had some wolf blood, judging by its size. Its coat was thick, the dark gray color surprisingly rich against the nighttime background. She waited for another explanation.

“This...” He stopped, looked at her, grabbed her hand tight. “This is Alex.”

She snapped her eyes back to the picture, then swung them to Rex. “You named your pet after your brother?”

“No.”

It took a moment for the implication to sink in. “Rex, that's...that's not funny. In fact, considering what happened to your family, I think it's pretty sick.”

“Vivien, I swore to myself that I wouldn't lie to you, not ever, and especially not about this. Look at him. Look at his eyes. Then look at the other pictures, the ones of my sister.”

She didn't want to. He was going too far in his fantasy about werewolves, and she didn't want any part of it. But a part of her was compelled, as if drawn by some perverse part of her psyche. She stared at the photos, shaking her head. There were other images, some of them of a beautiful silver-maned wolf hybrid playing with the gray-coated pet. She tried to look, to find some way of convincing Rex that he was being a fool. It was hard to focus as her brain swam in confusion.

“This is my family, Vivien.” His voice was hard and brooked no denial. “I'm a were.”

“No.” The word was a raw syllable choked from her throat. “No! Rex, stop it. Just...stop! This isn't right. I know you're still upset about their deaths.”

“They were murdered by a pack of rival werewolves.”

Her eyes went large with this new bit of information. “You can't just go around saying these things. It's no way to deal with your loss!”

She jumped up, and he came with her, still holding her hand. “It's the truth, Vivien.”

“Werewolves are a myth! You can't possibly think... You aren't some sort of shape-shifter, Rex. If you think you are, then we need to get you some help—”

“Don't make me do this.”

The harshness of his voice surprised her, cutting through her growing panic. “Make you do what? Hurt me?”

“Hurt? I would never hurt you, sweetheart. But I think I'm about to scare the hell out of you.”

“Rex!”



He pulled away and took one step back. She watched him, uncertain of his intentions. Then, slowly, she saw what was happening. His eyes appeared to glaze over, his pupils dilating slightly. His jaw began to distend, the muscles in his back tightened, pushing him over onto his hands. His legs and arms transformed into thick appendages, his hands and feet transforming into large paws. Hair shot out of every pore, layering his skin, until he was covered in a heavy black coat. When he looked back up, she was staring into the face a huge wolf who had Rex's beautiful blue eyes.

She stood, transfixed, as he moved closer. It wasn't real; it couldn't possibly be real. She was asleep, or hallucinating. Maybe all the sex had finally fried her brain, or left her so exhausted she had fallen into a coma. Anything made more sense than Rex Samuels turning into a...a...

"Werewolf." The word sounded strangled as it forced its way past her lips.

He chose that moment to touch the palm of her hand with his nose. She screamed. She couldn't seem to stop herself. The next thing she knew she was racing through the woods, claspings the white sheet over her naked body, tears streaming down her face as she tried to outrun the creature she was sure was behind her.

But it's Rex, her mind whispered. Rex, who loves you, who wants to marry you. He would never hurt you.

It didn't matter. Her fear was in control, pushing her away from perceived danger and toward her grandmother's house, where she was sure to be safe. Where she could lock the door and keep the werewolf at bay.

She was nearly crazed with terror by the time she bounded up the steps of Gran's house. She pounded on the door, frantic to get inside. A moment later she saw the beloved face and sobbed with relief.

"Why, Vivi, what's wrong? What's happened?"

"Oh, Gran!" She rushed inside and collapsed into her grandmother's arms. "A wolf... There's a werewolf...Rex..."

“Shh, now. Come on in, honey. Let's get you calmed down, and then you can explain everything to me.”

“The door! Lock the door.”

Her grandmother gave her an odd look but did as she asked. “You're safe, honey. It's okay.”

“Safe...I don't know if I'll ever feel safe again.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Vivien sat in her grandmother's kitchen and sipped the whiskey-laced tea Gran had pressed into her hands. Luckily there were rarely customers during the weekdays, especially through the school year, so she hadn't created as much of a stir as she could have.

Her grandmother hadn't said anything about Vivien's state of nudity. She had simply reminded her about the extra set of clothes that Vivi kept there for emergencies. And this was definitely an emergency.

Rex had changed into a wolf. Oh God! She gulped at the tea and winced against the sting of the alcohol. He'd also proposed. She had the ring box in her pocket as proof. Strange how she'd run from him but hadn't dropped that small token of marriage.

She felt like she had taken a slight misstep out of reality and had somehow slipped into a bad fifties B movie. *I Married a Werewolf*. *I was a Werewolf Bride*. *Mated to the Werewolf*. The last title had her giggling in a half-hysterical laugh.

Her grandmother slid into the chair next to her and laid a consolatory hand over hers. “Okay, Vivien, tell me what's happened.”

“You wouldn't believe me if I told you.”

The older woman lifted one finely arched eyebrow and crossed her arms over her chest, crinkling the soft material of her blue robe. “You'd be surprised what I would believe, honey. Even more surprised at what I actually know, I suspect.”

“Oh, trust me, this is a humdinger, Gran.” Her hands were still shaking so badly that she nearly sloshed the tea over her I Heart London T-shirt. “I don't think you'd believe me. I barely believe it myself, and I saw it.”

Gran cocked her head. “Now you have me curious.”

Vivien took a deep breath and carefully put the teacup down. “I guess you wouldn't let this one slide, just this once?”

“No, I guess I wouldn't.”

“All right, but don't say I didn't warn you.” She stared straight at her grandmother as she said, “Rex Samuels is a werewolf.”

She waited for some sort of outburst, a denial, an accusation, or loud laughter. What she'd just said made no sense, not by any stretch of the imagination. No logical person could possibly think she was sane after that statement.

Instead her grandmother nodded her head. “Yes, and?”

Vivien's mouth fell open. It took several tries before she was able to shut it again. “What do you mean 'yes'?”

“Exactly what I said. Rex is a werewolf.”

“You don't find this...strange? You aren't freaked-out? You don't want to go get your gun and hunt him down?”

Gran did laugh then, heartily. “Good heavens, no! Oh, Vivien, honey, I know you've had a shock. To be honest, I thought you knew by now.”

She blinked and shook her head. “You thought I knew that my lover was a werewolf? In what universe would I possibly guess that?”

“I thought he'd told you. I suppose it's not easy to try to explain it to someone you love.”

“Wait, hold it.” Vivien brought up her hand to stop her grandmother. “You also knew he *loved* me?”

“Of course. I might be old, but I'm not stupid.”

“And you knew he was—he is—a...”

“Shape-shifter? Yes. I figured it out not long after he'd moved in.”

“Figured it... How in the hell did you figure it out?” She couldn't stop the sudden volume of her voice.

Her grandmother shrugged. “Simple deduction. Whenever I saw the black wolf roaming around, Rex was never at home. If I mentioned that I thought I saw a wild animal, something that might be dangerous, hanging around the woods, it wasn't long until I saw the wolf, and the other animal was gone. I also took note of the wolf's eyes. A gorgeous dark blue, just like Rex's.”

Vivien swallowed and tried to remember to breathe. “This didn't upset you?”

“Well, at first it was a little...strange. I'll admit I wasn't sure how to react to it. But he never attacked anyone, didn't even come near people as a wolf, and he seemed to be taking care of me and my customers. He was invariably nice, always courteous, and never walked away from anyone who needed help he could give. In fact, as I recall, I even saw him following you one evening when you were taking a stroll in the woods. Protecting you, I'd imagine.”

“This is crazy.”

“Maybe. But it's obviously a fact of nature.” She waited until Vivien had taken a sip of her drink before she continued. “Animals evolve all the time. So do humans. We adapt to our surroundings, becoming what we need to be to survive. Scientists are finding new species of creatures every day, not to mention new information about the human body and how it all works. Who's to say that Rex isn't one of the many possibilities in human evolution? Perhaps his ancestors took one path, while ours took another?”

Vivien was quiet as she weighed her grandmother's words. Gran did have a valid point. Or maybe it was just that Vivi so desperately needed something to believe in, something that would give her an excuse to grab at the happiness she'd only just found, no matter how dangerous it might be.

"Vivi, do you love him?"

She was surprised by the question. "What?"

"I asked if you loved him. Because if you do, then all of this doesn't matter."

"How can you say that, Gran?"

"I say it because it's true. Look, Vivien." She scooted closer, and her tone became warm with empathy. "I understand that you're afraid to care for a man again. Cory was a horrible husband, and as a man he was one of the worst examples I've ever come across. But Rex is different, in more ways than one, I suppose. He's never been anything but good to you. He's been patient, he's made you laugh, and I've never seen you glow the way you have been the last few weeks. So he can change into a wolf. Your grandfather had enough hair on his body to be considered a bear, but I still loved him."

"A werewolf, Gran."

"He's a werewolf, just like you're a natural baker. It's part of who he is. If you love him, really, truly love him, then you have to accept every piece and part of him. Even the gorgeous wolf."

She sighed dejectedly and slumped back in the chair. "Can I, Gran?"

Her grandmother placed a soft hand on her cheek. "You are one of the most loving people I know, Vivien. You're an accepting, understanding woman who has so much love in her heart, it can't help but spill over onto other people. I know you'll make the right decision, honey. He loves you. You love him. There are bound to be things that you'll have to get used to with each other, just like for everyone else who falls in love."

"Sure, other women have men who toss their socks on the floor, or are anal about oil changes, or forget to take the garbage out. I get one who becomes a wolf."

Gran's smile was wide and bright. "I always knew you were meant for someone special."

Vivien shook her head. She couldn't stop the chuckle that rose from her chest. "If there's a word to describe Rex, I think special just might be it."

## Chapter Twelve

"Wow, you screwed that up."

Rex took a long pull from his beer and eyed Marcus, who was sitting in the Adirondack chair beside him. "Is there really a way to do it right? How in the hell was I supposed to explain to her what I am?"

Marcus continued to watch him through the growing light of dawn. "But you didn't bother to tell Vivien what's happening to her."

"I was going to. I'd planned to explain to her about weres, then I was going to very carefully break the news about her changing."

"And you thought, what? Having sex with her until she couldn't see straight, then proposing right after, would put her in the right frame of mind?"

He sighed and laid his head back, letting the cool breeze play over his face. "I don't know. I'd hoped it would. I wanted her to know... I knew she'd be upset. I knew she wouldn't understand, not at first. But I didn't realize she would react like a girl in a horror movie."

Marcus looked back at the woods. "That's probably how she felt, Rex. The man she'd just slept with, who handed her his mother's ring, grows fangs, paws, and a tail. I might go screaming into the night too."

"Damn it." The words were soft and had no real heat. "I followed her to her grandmother's, just to make sure she was safe. I can't leave her there. I need to go talk to her, to try to explain. Then there's Mrs. Spooner to deal with."

"Hard enough for a nonshifter to convince the family he's good enough for their baby." He swirled the ice in his tea. "Sucks to be you, buddy."

"Doesn't it just."

The scent came to him before he heard the rustling of brush. His body reacted automatically, hardening into tight lines. He sat up, suddenly alert, as he stared out at the thick foliage. A moment later Vivien stepped into the clearing.

He couldn't stop himself from devouring her with his eyes. Her red-gold hair was wild, her gray eyes tired and unsure, her usual peaches-and-cream complexion pale. Her oversized T-shirt hung to midthigh, her jeans were threadbare, and her thick white cable-knit sweater had seen better days. She looked like paradise.

"Vivien." Her name was raw when he said it.

She walked up to the porch and stared up at him. "I'm ready to talk."

"I'm ready to explain."

Marcus stood and cleared his throat. "I'll just, uh, mosey on along home."

"Wait." Vivien turned to look at his friend. "You know, don't you? About Rex and his family."

"Yeah, I do. It's hard to miss when you live together."

"Don't leave," she said. "Or at least, don't go far. I might have questions."

"I might have the answers." Marcus tucked his hands in his jeans pockets and slowly walked down the stairs. "Why don't I go pick us all up some breakfast? I'll be back in a bit."

Marcus stopped behind Vivien and lifted his cell phone, waving it in silent signal over her head. If Rex needed him, he was only a call away. He waited until he heard Marcus close his car door.

"Why don't you come inside?"

"No, I'm not ready for that. Not yet." She took a deep breath and eased up the stairs. He was relieved when she didn't demand he step back from her. "Last night..."

"I did it all badly. I'm sorry." He ran a hand through his hair and shifted his weight. "I just didn't know any other way to tell you."



"So the 'ripping off the Band-Aid' approach seemed like the best answer?"

"It's all going so fast. You, me, *us*...you needed to know."

She leaned her hip against the wooden rail and nodded. "I agree I did. I'd like to say you should have told me before we slept together, but that would be ridiculous. I can understand the need for privacy, and you didn't really know me."

He sighed in frustration. "I did know you, Vivien. I still do."

"But you were afraid to scare me?"

"Yes...no..." He struggled for his words, searching for the right ones. "You're an amazing woman. You don't see differences in people as detrimental; you embrace them and appreciate them. If someone doesn't fit the mold of the norm, it doesn't bother you in the slightest. You see the whole picture, outside of the everyday box, and you thrive in what you see. I wanted you so much that I was acting like a lovesick teenager, going out of my way to walk down your street in the hope of catching a glimpse of you."

Her eyebrows came together in consternation. "Then why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you come in, talk to me, ask me out?"

"How could I when I am what I am?"

Her eyes softened at the new knowledge. "You thought I'd run away from you if you told me."

"I knew I loved you, Vivi. I knew it, and I was afraid of it." His fingers itched to reach out and touch her, but he kept them firmly in his pockets. "I thought if I had a taste of you, and you found out and left, how was I supposed to survive it? And how could I expect you to accept me, to ask you to step into a world you didn't know existed?"

She tilted her head and studied him. "But you did tell me. You got involved with me. Or maybe you wouldn't have, if Gran hadn't been attacked by that dog."

"No, eventually I would have come to you. I was close to breaking down and taking my chances." She'd left him an opening to ease into the subject of her own situation, but as he looked at her he knew he was only at the crossroads. There were still things she needed to know before he explained that. "You have more questions, and I'll answer any of them that you have."

"Good." She sat in Marcus's vacated seat. "I'm a little confused about this whole were thing. It *is* were?"

"Yes. Actually, were is used to describe a whole species, not a specific one. I'm a werewolf, but there are others."

Her eyes grew wide, and he watched as she fought an inner struggle. "Others? As in, what, werecows, werechickens?"

Her offhand remark made his lips twitch. "Nothing that exotic. There are bears, cats, that sort of thing."

"No dolphins?"

"Weres are humans who change into one specific form, an animal form. You're talking about something different, something that really is mythical."

She wet her lips and gave a short nod. "Okay, so, there are weres."

"Or shape-shifters, whichever you prefer. Of course, shape-shifter usually denotes someone who can change into more than one thing, but the phrase has become fairly bastardized, so we go with the culture."

"Bastardized...right...werewolves, werebears, werecats...but no wereporpoise. Got it." Her hands came out to fidget in her lap. "You're going to have to give me a minute to absorb that."

He sat silently, waiting with as much patience as he could find. He would do whatever she needed, act in whatever way made her the most comfortable, as long as she didn't leave again. He couldn't let her go. She could curse him and hate him and wish him to hell and back, but there was no way she could be left alone today.

"Your family," she said softly, "they were weres."

"Yes. My father was the Alpha of a small group of werewolves. They were peaceful, lived quietly, didn't put themselves into the politics of other packs. Even when the area Alphas and their seconds met once a year, my father was careful not to be seen as being on any one group or person's side."

"So the Samuelses were like Switzerland."

He couldn't stop his small smile. "I guess you could say that."

She bit her bottom lip in hesitation. "Someone didn't like that."

"No, they didn't. They wanted my father's backing, because his opinion was considered a valuable one. If Luke Samuels believed in you, then you were almost guaranteed unanimous support by the rest of the Alphas."

"What happened?" The note of sympathy in her voice helped to ease the dulled ache of memory.

"Another were was trying to establish his own pack. He wanted my father to give his approval, but dad was reluctant to give it until he had more facts. I don't think he trusted the ones who wanted to split off." His mind drifted back, bringing back flashes of that day, of how those hours had played out. "I was seven. I'd gone out with Marcus to fish. We were supposed to be back by lunch, but we were an hour late. I was afraid I'd be in trouble, but I didn't want my parents to worry either. Marcus left me at the driveway. I remember thinking how quiet it was. I couldn't hear my brother's radio, or my sister talking on the phone, or my mom and dad chatting. And I could smell blood. I didn't know what it was then. I just knew something wasn't...right. I found them..."

Her hand was there, gently touching his arm. "You don't have to tell me."

He lifted his hand and cupped her cheek. "I thought I'd be alone forever. They found the ones who did it, and they were executed. The pack chose to be absorbed into a larger group instead of haggling out who would be the Alpha until I came of age. I could have stayed with them, of course, but I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to be reminded. There was a time I hated what I was, because that was what killed my family."

"But Marcus's family was there," she prompted him. "You told me they raised you."

"Doc Zeigler had been the physician for my pack. He worked with other small groups too, but my parents were his closest friends. I stayed with them while everything was being sorted out, and when I decided to leave the pack, his family took me in."

"And they didn't treat you any different."

He gave her an incredulous look and laughed. "Oh, sweetheart, yes they did. They all understood what I was, what I'd become, but it was treated like a matter of course. Sort of like the fact that I have white skin and they have dark skin. When I first started changing, they made sure I was always out in the woods so I could have free rein. They worked with me on learning to control it, since I was still refusing to join a pack."

Her face became quizzical as she looked at him. "You couldn't control the shifting? But...you did last night."

He took her hand and hoped he could find the right way to explain their evolution. "Vivien, weres are born with different genes than nonshifters. We don't call it a mutation, because for us it isn't. We aren't sure why it's there, but it's been in our blood for thousands of years and it's never changed."

"Genetic...like having blue eyes."

"Right. The shifting doesn't kick in until puberty starts, so it's pretty obvious that it's hormones that trigger it. Anywhere between eleven and fourteen we have our first change. But we can't control the shifting. Once a full moon comes out, there's something about the way the pull affects our bodies that can force it. When a were is young, or when they're inexperienced, they can't stop what happens. It's as we get older that we gain more control, so that we can shift when we want to and prevent ourselves from changing during the full moon."

Her eyes grew owlsh. "Tonight's a full moon."

"Yes, it is. And there's something else we need to talk about."

She leaned away from him and twisted her lips together. "I don't know if I can take any more surprises, Rex."

His heart twisted, and his gut tied itself into a knot. "I know, sweetheart, and if we had time, I'd be a lot gentler with it."

"This sounds ominous." She tried to laugh but failed miserably.

"Vivien, look at me." He waited until her gaze was holding his. "I love you. That hasn't changed. When I gave you my family's ring, it wasn't something I did lightly. I want everything that emerald stands for. I need you to know that. I need you to understand that it all would have come to this, no matter what, though it might have taken a little longer for me to screw up my courage."

Her hesitation sent a shaft of cold misery through him. He was about to stand, when she finally spoke.

"I love you too, Rex. God help me, I'm probably crazy, and right now I feel like I could still be in the middle of some strange, psychotic dream. But the truth is...I want to be with you too. Gran pointed out last night that, no matter what your DNA was, you are who you are. Just because you can turn into a wolf doesn't mean you aren't the same Rex I fell in love with."

His breath rushed out in a long gust, a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. "I'll do my best to make you happy, Vivi. I swear I will."

Her smile was slow but luminous. "I know you will. And so will I. You'll just have to help me with the whole shifter thing. I'm sure there's plenty you still haven't explained, and if we ever have kids—"

"Four," he said and felt the hot desire to make love to her right there on the porch, to maybe create a life between them.

"Four?" She laughed in surprise. "Then you're definitely going to have to help me. How do you deal with a house full of children who literally howl?"

It was time to get the rest out. He hated to ruin the perfect moment, but he'd pressed as far as he could without telling her everything.

“Vivien, about that other thing...”

She straightened her shoulders. “Okay, I guess I'm ready for anything now.”

He swallowed and waited a beat, gathering the words in a way that might ease the shock. “The feral that attacked you and your grandmother. It wasn't a dog.”

Her face was blank for a moment, then color flew into her cheeks. “It was—that thing was—a werewolf?”

“He was. He *is* a feral, just a werewolf feral.”

“But how is that possible?”

“Sometimes, when a werewolf first shifts, his mind, and at times his body, can't handle it. He becomes wild with it, a crazed animal, and his human side becomes distorted. There are times when the body becomes overloaded too; when that happens, they die.”

“Dear heavens! Rex, that's awful!” She looked horrified, sad, and mystified at the same time.

He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “I know, but these are rare cases; the death even rarer. When a werewolf's mind breaks from the change, there are medications, natural plant-based medicines, that can be taken to prevent them from shifting again. One pill every day and they don't have to suffer again. They join the older shifters, watching out for the young ones when they change; they aren't snubbed or ridiculed. It's important for you to know that.”

“So it's not a completely barbaric society?” she teased, though her voice was weak.

He gave her a small smile, glad that she wasn't in complete denial with the facts. “Not completely. But sometimes, again, rarely, these shifters leave the pack. They go off on their own, usually convinced that being wild is the best way to honor being a werewolf. Without the medication, they can't control their

shifting, and anytime they change it's horrifically painful. From what we've found out, it all comes down to the fact that they have damaged DNA."

"Hold it. That isn't something I thought about. The pain."

"If everything goes well, shifting isn't painful. Your brain produces a chemical that deadens it, sort of like a narcotic agent."

"Good, I'm glad. You won't have pain when you become...well, what you become."

He took her head in his hands. "Neither will you."

Her brow wrinkled in confusion. "Of course I won't. You'd never hurt me, I know that now. After all, you could have easily come after me last night, kept me from getting to Gran's house, forced me to stay."

"You're right, I'd never do anything to hurt you, not deliberately. But that wasn't what I was talking about." He prepared himself for her reaction, hoping this wouldn't undo everything they spent the last few minutes fixing. "The feral bit you."

"Yes, he did, but I survived."

"And his saliva has his damaged DNA."

"I don't understand. What does that have to do with me?"

He didn't say a word, just waited for the implications to sink in. When they did, he watched what color she'd gained drain completely from her face, her mouth going lax, her gaze stormy with denial.

"No, no, oh no." She pulled away and stood, pacing along the porch. At least she wasn't running. "This is crazy. You said it was in your genes. You're born with this."

"Yes, we are. But we still don't wholly understand what happens in the ferals. All we do know is that when they bite someone, their DNA attacks the victim and somehow manages to bind itself... Vivien, sweetheart, here, sit."

"Sit? I can't sit down! Isn't there something you can give me? Something to stop it? Control it? Change it all back?"

He sighed, his heart breaking as he watched her. "I wish there were. It isn't like we have our own research facilities. We've had to be careful not to be found out. Whenever we are, innocent people end up being murdered, and the weres end up being blamed and hunted."

She whirled toward him, her feet skidding to a halt. "This has happened before, or else you wouldn't know what was going to happen. I would think that would make it important for someone to come up with some sort of cure."

"To be honest, these sorts of incidents are so few and far between that what resources we have aren't used to manipulating nonshifter genes. They're focused on the ferals, and how to manipulate their damaged DNA in order to prevent another shifter from becoming one." He desperately wanted to hold her, to give her some sort of comfort, but he was afraid that if he touched her right now, she'd hurt herself trying to get away.

"What you're saying is...what you mean is, no one knows precisely what happens to cause a human's genetics to be changed. And that I have...that I am..."

"Tonight is a full moon. This will be your first shift."

She sank to her knees and covered her face. "I can't believe this. I just can't believe it."

He went to her, hurriedly pulling her into his arms. To hell with whether she needed her space or not. She needed comfort more than control right now.

"The feral that bit you, he'll come back. He'll be drawn to you. He will either make you his mate, or he'll kill you if you refuse him."

"What?" She jerked away, but he held on. "Are you saying this creature is going to... He's..."

"He's not going to touch you, Vivien. You are *mine*. You are *my* mate."

She must have seen the deadly intentions in his eyes, because she relaxed enough to wrap her arms around his neck. "I'm scared, Rex. I don't think I've ever been more scared in my life."



"I know, sweetheart. But I'll be with you, and Marcus won't be far away. If anything goes wrong, he'll be there to help." He smoothed her hair down, nuzzling down into the crown of her head. "I'm sorry, I know this is a lot to take in. You've been going through so many changes the last few weeks."

She stayed safely in his arms, quiet, until she finally spoke into his shoulder. "Changes... Yes, I have, haven't I? My appetite, my craving for meat, the way I... That day with the cherries, I was so fast."

"Your reflexes are getting faster."

"And my sexual urges." She struggled against him, but he didn't budge. "Oh, God, I've been using you because I... My libido's been..."

He chuckled. "Sweetheart, you can use me anytime. And that first night we were together, that wasn't about your changing. That was about us, and how good we are together."

"Really? You weren't sleeping with me just so you could keep an eye on the newest member of the were family?"

He tried to remember she was confused, uncertain, and that she wasn't intentionally insulting him. There was still rough anger in his voice when he replied. "If I'd wanted to keep an eye on you, I could have done it from a distance. But the fact was, and is, that I want to keep a hell of a lot more than my eyes on you. I meant it when I said I love you, Vivien. I didn't say it for any other reason than that it's the truth."

He felt her nod her head and burrow closer. "So is there some sort of ritual with this change? I mean, do we have to light incense or say some strange incantation?"

"No, nothing like that." His heart was thundering as he held her, humbled and amazed by the woman he loved, who, miracle of miracles, loved him too. "It's going to be okay, Vivien. I swear to you, it will be all right."

“Since I have no clue what's going to happen, and since I feel like my brain and my emotions have been sliced, diced, and whirled in a blender, I'm going to trust you. But you're the one who's going to tell my grandmother.”

He squeezed her tighter and knew he would never betray her trust, no matter what he had to do to ensure it. “It's a deal.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Rex hefted the bags of sand from the back of his beat-up truck, balancing them on his shoulders. It felt like half the town was bustling around the square, hanging signs, putting out fishbowls full of prizes, covering bare surfaces with fall-colored cloths. And there, laughing and chatting, was Vivien.

When he'd suggested she stay at the cabin, she had adamantly refused. Once Marcus had come back with breakfast, they had all talked about a game plan, and the one thing she absolutely wouldn't budge from was the town party. She'd said she wasn't going to let anyone ruin it for her, nor was she going to allow some feral stranger to make her life miserable. No, she wouldn't be the type to hide, not once she'd set a course.

He walked toward her, watching her pretty face with a careful eye. He could see the fine tension just underneath the surface, could even smell the sulfur-rich anxiety rolling from her pores. But no one else noticed, and he understood how important it was for her to keep her game face.

"Thanks, Rex." Sadie grinned at him, her skull-shaped nose ring catching the sunlight. "So, can we expect you to join us this year?"

"No, sorry. I have things I have to take care of." He almost laughed when she gave him a long, speculative look. "Not another woman, I swear it. I'm not so stupid that I'd screw up a good thing."

She shrugged and appeared placated. "I wouldn't think you were that dense, but we love our boss lady, and it wouldn't do to have her all upset."

"No, it wouldn't."

She winked, and he grinned back. "Well, back to the grindstone."

He waited until the blue-haired girl had walked away to bend down beside Vivien. "Need any help, sweetheart?"

"I actually think I could have carried that sand myself."

"Don't push too far too fast, Vivi. You're getting stronger, but your body's still adjusting. It's going to take a few months for you to be able to estimate your new abilities."

"I suppose." She reached over and dragged a bag to her, then proceeded to easily rip into the enforced bag, peeling the top away. "Or maybe I'm just a fast learner."

He felt a jolt of surprise and a keen sense of pride. "How about we don't scare your friends with your sudden aptitude?"

"Um, true. They'd ask a lot of questions." She dug into the sand, scooping it out and into the small pool. "I still have questions, I just haven't thought of them yet."

He laid a gentle hand on her shoulder, hoping to soothe her. "I'll answer all of them. But right now I have to go take care of my end of the plan."

She nodded, her hands stilling as she peered over her shoulder at him. "Marcus is here, right across the square. I won't leave this area, I promise."

"I know you won't." He gave her a kiss, one that was quietly assuring. "He'll bring you out in a few hours, before the moon comes up."

He felt her body shake and knew she was nervous. Who could blame her? She wasn't prepared for any of this, not the way he'd been made ready. Less than twenty-four hours ago she hadn't even believed in weres. Now she'd found out she was one.

"I'll be there for you, Vivien. I'll help you."

"Yes, but I can't help but be..."

"We'll talk again, go over everything that will happen, step by step." He kissed her again because he couldn't help himself. "I won't let anything happen to you, not when I've finally got you where I want you."

“Or maybe I have you exactly where I want you.”

He looked down at her bare ring finger but said nothing. When she was ready, he thought and ran a tender hand over her hair. He stood, his eyes still on her.

“I’ll see you soon, sweetheart. Don’t let Marcus con you out of too many cupcakes.”

She graced him with a smile. “Only three. He’ll have to win coupons for any more.”

He kept his head turned so he could watch her as he strode away, absorbing everything about her. Tonight was going to be hell for her, and most likely for him too. But he’d keep this picture of her in his head, and it wouldn’t seem so bad.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun was sinking behind the tree line, and the scent of the woods was changing. It became darker, richer, as the heavy air began filling with the sounds of nocturnal creatures. Rex stood in the small circle he’d created, his hands tightened into hard fists. He’d done everything he’d set out to, setting up the traps, making it difficult for the feral to get to them. Rex could hope the traps would stop him, but he couldn’t count on it.

But first he had to help Vivien shift.

He sensed her like a vibration in the air. Her scent overrode the others around him, bringing waves of lust, of need, of want. He turned as she came through the trees, the red cape she had wrapped around her body gently blowing in the breeze. Marcus came behind her, escorting her to him.

“No one knows where she went,” his friend said softly. “I won’t be far, and I’m armed. Let me know if you need my help.”

He appreciated the fact that Marcus understood his need to deal with this by himself. He was asserting his dominance, making the point that Vivien was his, and his alone. It was the way it had to be settled. If he got into deep

trouble, Marcus would be there; but he would only ask for help if it came down to saving Vivien's life.

"Thank you, Marcus," she said, her voice strained.

"Anytime. Good luck." He gave them both a nod and stepped into the woods, disappearing in the growing shadows.

Rex turned to the woman in front of him and felt his entire being reverberate with longing and rightness. "You're beautiful."

A blush seeped from her neck into her face, giving her a sweet aura. "A few weeks ago I wouldn't have believed you. Part of me still doesn't. It's...it's hard for me to see myself as beautiful. But I believe that you see me that way, and that's what makes me feel like I am. For you."

He didn't want to argue; he'd work to convince her of the truth later. For now he was glad she was here, and she knew he loved her. Slowly, he held out his hand to her and waited. There was no hesitation as she walked to him and slipped her hand into his.

"You'll feel the pain, but only for a minute," he said as she moved closer. "Your body will stretch in some places, but it'll tighten in others. Your senses are going to jump, and your vision is going to change. It'll feel more like night vision, and colors will turn into shades of greens, blacks, and grays, sometimes burgundies. Hearing will hurt for a few seconds; everything is going to be louder, so it'll take a few minutes for you to adjust, especially your first time."

She leaned up and kissed him, cutting his explanations short. "You'll be here. That's what I need to know."

He felt ripples of disbelief that she would trust him so completely. "Yes, I will. And after tonight we'll change together. I'm only sorry I can't do it with you this first time."

She ran tender fingers down his cheek. "We'll have years for that."

Years...the idea made him feel invincible and vulnerable at the same time. Yet he couldn't quite stop the fear that she wouldn't be able to handle the

shifting. He didn't know if he could bear to watch her suffer, and he didn't know if he could even survive if her body rejected the change and shut down altogether. He swallowed his fears, knowing they'd do Vivien no good.

Without another word he unclasped the cape and let it flutter to the ground. She was completely nude underneath, just as he'd told her to be. She looked like a goddess standing there in the dying light, her creamy skin glowing, her soft red curls lying over her shoulders.

"The moon is rising," she said, her quiet voice laced with tension.

"I'll hold on to you for as long as I can."

Her hands began to tremble as they stood together, waiting in the magic where neither day nor night occupied the sky. When the first silvery rays of the moon cascaded down, he felt her body start to shake.

She gasped, that startling moment where the pain was so sharp. Her head fell back, her mouth gaping with surprise. Then her gray eyes eased, and he knew the flow of were hormones were pouring through her, allowing her bones to become more pliable and slackening the agony of shifting. When she would have fallen, he went down with her, carefully taking her to the ground. He held her, watching her as her body bowed and contorted. The process was a slow one because her body wasn't used to it, and he cringed at every twinge of her muscle and bone.

Finally he saw that her limbs and posture were in wolf position, so he moved back, still on his knees, and waited. He watched as her coat began to form, carefully covering her body from head to foot. It was thick and luxuriant, and, most surprising, white. The rarest of colors.

She finally fell back, breathing heavily, and he knew she was exhausted. He held his hand out to her, palm up, and she shook her head in confusion.

"It's okay. Your sight will clear in a minute." She nuzzled his hand, and he stroked her muzzle, grinning as his heart smacked wildly against his ribs. "You're the most gorgeous were I've ever seen."

She snuffled and he laughed. Leave it to her to make a derogatory noise about her looks, even now. When he stood she whimpered, and he hurried to reassure her.

“No, I'm just taking a picture. Posterity's sake, sweetheart.” He pulled out his digital camera and took three quick snaps, careful not to aim it directly at her gray eyes. After he pocketed it, he sank back down. “I knew you'd come through it, Vivi.”

The sound of a trap springing echoed through the trees. He jumped to his feet and turned, peering in the direction it had come from. He could smell blood, fresh and hot, but knew the feral was only injured. He hadn't had time to set more than one trap in every direction, so if he'd made it through alive, Rex had no choice but to face him.

A moment later the other were appeared out of the darkness. Rex held his glare, refusing to move, silently staking his claim on the newly shifted female. The feral understood and snapped his disapproval in the air.

“She's my mate. She goes nowhere with you.”

The challenge was set, and the feral growled in anticipation. He was in midflight when Rex changed, his body quickly morphing itself into the familiar wolf form. The shift took the other wolf by surprise. He ended up sailing just inches above Rex's body and landing awkwardly on his paws. If there was an advantage, it was that Rex was in control, while the feral was using only an animal mind.

The gray wolf lunged again, biting at the air, his lips curled back from his teeth. Rex waited until the last second to move, skirting away from the attack. The feral snarled, annoyed that he'd missed his target again. The intent to kill was in his eyes, and Rex had to keep a tight rein on his own desire to answer the dare.

When the other were jumped again, Rex met him in the air, carefully positioning himself underneath so he could snap a leg between his teeth. When he felt the flesh in his mouth, he bit down and heard the crack of the bone



giving. The feral yelped, and when he landed, he immediately sprang again. Rex was ready, and this time ran across the grass, grabbing his opponent's tail and dragging him down, hard, to the earth. The other were's body smacked and bounced, but he was still enraged with the need to fight.

He twisted his body and snapped, managing to nip Rex's thigh. But Rex withstood it in order to sink his own teeth into the feral's ribs. A loud howl of pain rent the night, and Rex dug in deeper, the coppery slickness of blood running over his tongue and down his jaw.

The other wolf grabbed Rex's muzzle with his mouth, pressing down until Rex had no choice but to let go. He skidded away, watching and waiting for the feral's next move. And then the wild were did the unexpected.

He ran toward Vivien, his teeth bared and his intent obvious. He would kill her if he couldn't have her. Rex didn't hesitate as he raced to her, managing to slide in at the last second to take the vicious tearing bite the feral gave.

He felt the flesh of his foreleg muscle ripped away, torn like a ragged cloth from his body. His legs were trembling, but he stood, guarding his mate, refusing to yield.

The feral's muzzle was like a sudden flash, nipping, snapping, tearing, and Rex dodged as best he could. When Vivien would have moved to save him, he pressed himself down against her. If she went anywhere else, he wasn't sure if his injured body could follow quickly enough to save her.

Rex took the punishment for another moment, then lashed out, sinking his teeth into the feral's breastbone. The other were howled in pain and defiance before he began slamming his head into the top of Rex's. He didn't care how much damage the other wolf might be inflicting, there was no way he was letting him get at Vivien.

He was just about to twist the other wolf's bone with his mouth when a deafening report blasted through the night. A split second later the feral's body became limp, slumping down onto the wet ground. Ground, Rex realized

dazedly, that was wet from blood and gore. Marcus, he thought, and was grateful that his friend had stepped in.

He shook his head and looked up. Marcus was there, but his hands were hanging at his side, his gun dangling down as he stared at something across the circle. Rex swiveled his head and nearly collapsed with disbelief.

There, standing just inside the tree line of the circle, stood Mrs. Spooner. Vivien's grandmother was holding a shotgun, and he could clearly see through his wolf eyes the red glow of the barrel. She let out a long sigh and lowered her weapon against her long beige coat.

"I owed him," she explained to Marcus. Then she turned her eyes to Rex and Vivien. "Thought I didn't know, I'll bet. You young people always underestimate us more experienced folks. Marcus, I expect you need to have a look at Rex's wounds. Oh, and there's my sweet Vivi. Look how gorgeous you are."

Vivien rumbled a greeting to her smiling grandmother but refused to leave Rex's side. She nuzzled him, pressing him toward Marcus. The message was clear: *get yourself taken care of*. He turned and ran his muzzle against hers in silent acknowledgment.

He waited for Marcus to get to him before he looked back at Mrs. Spooner. He could see where Vivien had gotten her spirit. God help him, he was going to be surrounded by women who probably had more sense in their little fingers than he had in his whole body. He found himself hoping for a little girl to join the group.

"All right, buddy, let's get you bandaged up." Marcus crouched down in front of him. "I was racing through the trees like Sir Galahad, but Vivi's grandmother beat me to it. Guess I get to play hero some other day."

Rex relaxed his body against his friend's, gratefully accepting his help. When he felt Vivien's precious form brace against him, he felt a satisfying wave of contentment that helped to glaze over his pain.

“Now,” Mrs. Spooner said, walking to them, “I guess we should start planning a wedding just as soon as possible. You might be the big bad wolf, young man, but I refuse to let my granddaughter have my great-grandchildren out of wedlock.”

## Epilogue

The snow was thick on the ground outside, the diamond surface glinting in the moonlight. Inside Gran's house, the atmosphere was warm, the fire cheerful, and the small group laughing. Vivien had wanted a small wedding, and Rex had told her that he'd decided a long time ago that his weakness was his desire to give her whatever she wanted.

She'd worn her grandmother's wedding dress, a vintage, tea-length, cream-colored gown from the late forties. Sadie had run white ribbons through Vivien's upswept hair, and Pauline had studded the curls with blue violets, to match the bridal bouquet. Rex had worn a dark suit, a new addition to his wardrobe that Carrie had helped him pick out, along with a dark blue tie. The tie had come off about thirty seconds after they'd been pronounced husband and wife.

The small basket-weave cake that Sarah, Sadie, and Pauline had made and decorated sat on the dining room table, half-eaten, and the platters of hors d'oeuvres had been demolished. It had been one of the best evenings she'd ever had, second only to the first time she'd made love with Rex.

She was surrounded by her family, which now included Marcus and Carrie, and her friends. In this moment, watching everyone, feeling the love in the room, she felt a glow that truly did make her believe she was beautiful. Red hair, lush curves, stubbornness, and all.

"What are you thinking about?" Her new husband slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her against his chest.

"How happy I am," she said, and leaned her head back onto his shoulder.

“If having them around makes you happy, I’ll ask them all to move in with us. Though they’ll have to double up in the rooms, even on the weekdays when we’re living in town.”

“If it’s nice weather, they can pitch tents in the woods when we’re at the cabin on the weekends. I think it could work.”

He chuckled and dropped a kiss on her neck. “I love you, Mrs. Vivien Spooner Samuels.”

“I love you, Mr. Rex ‘Big Bad Wolf’ Samuels.”

He growled in her ear and nipped her lobe. “I’ll show you just how big I am later, but only if you’re bad.”

She wiggled her eyebrows and spun around in his arms. “Oh, didn’t you hear? I’m a very bad wolf too.”

His blue eyes began to smolder, and he pulled her tighter, claiming her mouth in a kiss that she thought could have set the rug on fire. Finally, her mind whispered, she was where she belonged. She’d only had to find herself smack in the middle of a legend. But discovering her very own werewolf, and becoming one herself, was really only the start of the story. Now, she thought, the real fairy tale could begin.

THE END

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*Joey to the World*

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## Flesa Black

Flesa Black is a married thirty-something mother of two. She lives near Atlanta, Georgia, where she is lucky enough to frequently enjoy Braves baseball games and tours of antebellum plantations and historic homes, including Margaret Mitchell's house. Flesa has always been a determined writer ever since she learned how to hold a pencil. She particularly enjoys romance genres and the freedom they give her to create interesting characters and intricate worlds. When she isn't writing, you can find her reading romance and science fiction novels, playing numerous board and card games, wandering in the woods, and fishing. She is currently hard at work on her next book.

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