

Aspen Mountain Press

Things That Go
BUMP IN THE NIGHT

LUCYND A STOREY

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Aspen Mountain Press

18121-C E. Hampden Ave, Ste 221

Aurora CO 80013

www.AspenMountainPress.com

First published by Aspen Mountain Press, October 2006

Re-released by Aspen Mountain Press, October 2009

www.AspenMountainPress.com

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ISBN: 978-1-60168-253-6

Published in the United States of America

Chapter One

Tyler Crocket leaned against the window frame, staring through the open window at the guesthouse across the yard. Summer Donaldson lived there and had given her notice, effective the first of November. For the past week he'd wracked his brain trying to figure out a way to make the sultry blonde stay. Nothing came to mind.

It wasn't just that he lusted after her. She had a body that begged a man to touch her. After eighteen months, he'd gotten used to the boners and the suddenly too tight jeans that rubbed him all the wrong ways. She was so much more than a hot bod. *Special* came to mind and that was a damn weak word.

She'd be hard to replace. Her expertise in running the kitchen with good food had pleased the ranch hands as much as a pay increase. There was economy in the kitchen, with little waste of food that satisfied him even more. She worked hard, smiled often, and made the men feel like the Bar C was home. And she did it all while masking her own pain.

Summer didn't complain. It wasn't her way, but he knew breaking up with Scot Johnson cut her deeply. Tyler had witnessed the whispers that stopped when either Scot or Summer entered the room. Knowing people were talking - he'd have busted a few chops if he'd been on the receiving end of those

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innuendoes. She, however, maintained the façade of calm, never losing her temper, never breaking down into a pile of whimpering tears.

He never saw what Summer found attractive in Johnson, but he hadn't spoken up, hadn't acted on his own attraction when he first met her, and lived with the consequences. Fortunately, Johnson left for another ranch and the easy camaraderie returned to the long tables of the dining hall.

So, why hadn't he made a move on her since? Johnson's betrayal, that's what it was, occurred months ago when he'd been caught with a buxom twenty-something from town. A kiss might have been forgivable, but the rumor mill ground out the two had been caught bare butt naked in the sixty-nine position.

Tyler squelched the rumors as soon as he heard them, but the damage had been done. She'd frozen up to any sexual interest faster than an arctic cold front dropped the temperature of a mid-winter night. The signal she beamed was loud and clear. Stay away.

She was too hurt, too damaged. Besides, rebound relationships never worked and he wasn't about to be the man who put Summer back together only to be left in the dust holding his hat and heart in his hands.

He shook his head. Summer intended to leave and he couldn't stop her. So, instead, like a mooning adolescent, he stood at his window, staring at the quarters she'd vacate in less than a week.

A light flared, drawing his attention. She'd entered her bedroom, kicked off her shoes, and sat in the wicker rocker near the window. A moment later, she put her feet up on a small table. Her heels rested near an open, face down book. She leaned forward and rubbed the top and arch of one foot, then the other.

If only he'd taken the chance with her when he'd had it, Tyler would be rubbing her feet, caressing her ankles, and letting his hands wander up the sexy legs he'd seen during the warmer months.

Already, the beginning of an erection rubbed against his briefs. It wouldn't be long before he'd have a raging hard-on without any relief but that delivered

by his own hands. Damn it. Too many nights he'd spent jerking off when he could have been with Summer.

Time was slipping away. Maybe he couldn't win the fair maiden's heart, but he could taste her, please her, then bury himself deeply inside her welcoming body.

Right, he chided himself. And I've a Pegasus on this ranch, too.

Well do something about it, loser. You still have a few days left. Who knows what would happen if you marched your ass over there and talked to her off duty. As a man rather than her employer.

Fuck, he hated it when his brain was right. If he only had five days left, he needed to make the most of each one of them, starting right now.

He shifted on his feet, adjusted the bulge in his jeans, and then froze.

Across the way, Summer was out of the rocker, swaying to a beat only she could hear. Her shoulders rolled and a moment later her shirt slid down her back, the sleeves down her arms, and then the garment fell to the floor somewhere out of sight. The swaying of her hips preceded the dropping of her jeans.

His mouth went dry and he couldn't swallow. From where he stood, all he could see was Summer's ass, a deep red strap around her hips and disappearing into the cleft of her cheeks. Holy shit, if he'd known she wore a thong he would have taken her in one of the horse stalls months ago. All those times he'd seen those sweet curves, she'd been nearly naked beneath; reality far better than what his imagination had conjured and that mind of his had been pretty damn detailed.

He should move, he should really stop gawking, but his eyes refused to look another direction and his mouth hung open like he'd busted his jaw.

His gaze glued on the scene before him, he watched as Summer continued her seductive striptease. Only, something else was going on now.

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Summer flopped across the end of her bed, feet dangling off one side, her head, neck and shoulders off the other. Reaching beneath the bed she dragged out a container, flipped off the lid and pulled out a long, green...dildo. *Holy fuck!*

She twisted until she was flat on her back, ran the toy over her breasts, and then stuck her hand beneath the scrap of material covering her pussy.

Tyler moaned even as his pulse shot off into the stratosphere. His hard cock demanded to be touched and he unzipped his jeans and freed his massive erection.

Fascinated, he watched as Summer pulled the thong down and played in what he was sure was a very wet nest of curls dampened by her sopping cunt. His hand tightened around his rod, rubbing the shaft, gliding over the cum slick head, and then returned to the root. If only he were being touched by Summer.

When she pushed the dildo into her heat and then arched her back in orgasm, Tyler came with her, shooting hot, thick globs of cum into his hand.

He didn't know if the sexy vixen was teasing him intentionally or not. All Tyler knew was that he had to have a taste of her before she left.

* * * * *

"Aaagh!" Summer moaned as she came around the dildo. Her rapid breathing quickly settled, like it always did when she she'd come with something other than a flesh and blood man to achieve orgasm.

If she didn't get Tyler in her bed soon, before the next full moonrise, she'd be fighting off the canines that'd sniff out her heat and try to force her to mate with them. Just because she was a werewolf did not mean she was available for every dog in the county to mount.

When she'd first ordered the "Orgasmatron" she'd used it to replace the feel of Scot fucking her senseless. God damn asshole bit her and turned her into one of his kind, with a nympho kick to boot. No way was she going back to him after

catching him with his tongue down that slut's snatch and his cock shoved down her throat, no matter how badly she needed the real thing driving between her legs.

After long, lonely months, though, that two-timing bastard's face had faded from her memory.

Another man's image replaced him, a man who'd shown zero interest in her as a woman. The man she'd decided was strong enough to purge Scot's territorial markings from her skin.

To Tyler Crockett she was nothing more than a good employee; the one man she thought strong enough to handle her physical changes, sexual tastes, and alpha challenges.

Even tendering her resignation hadn't prompted him to notice her as anything more and time was running out. Well, tonight, he hadn't had a choice. She'd seen his profile in the window and decided to give him a little show. Make him aware that she was not just a woman, but a horny, I-need-a-good-fuck woman.

She half expected him to disappear from the window, run out of his house, and pound on her front door, demanding entrance that she would readily give. When he insisted on knowing what she was doing, she'd capitulate to his desires, fanning whatever flames she could find.

Alas, her scenario hadn't bore fruit. No one beat on the door, raced up the steps, and fucked her silly.

Only one option remained. Go to plan B.

Chapter Two

Summer couldn't help but stare as the object of her lust entered the dining hall. Tyler looked good. Yummy, in fact. Tight black jeans enclosed his taut ass and a form fitting black tee-shirt caressed his chest. A black Stetson and matching boots made him a vision in black. But what the hell was he all dressed up for?

Well, didn't matter. Plan B was about to go into full swing. If she couldn't get him interested in a midnight fuck, maybe she could make him think someone else was attracted. If he showed the least bit of jealousy, she'd take it as a sign he was paying attention.

If she couldn't draw him to her flame she'd have to move on to a new territory; find the alpha mate who could control her during the change.

She wore a clinging long-sleeved number with a v-neck revealing a hint of cleavage. Cleavage that deepened when she leaned over to speak to one of the cowboys at the table.

Didn't they say all was fair in love and war? Well, this was war! Summer wasn't so sure about the love part.

The cowboys of her acquaintance were fickle and Scot sure as hell didn't know the meaning of fidelity. But, there was something different about Tyler Crockett; she'd seen it the first day they met a year and a half ago.

No matter. Whatever she'd seen he hadn't acted on and then she'd gotten involved with Scot.

A tiny smile curved her lips. Scot had been an amazing lover. Too bad the rest of him had been so shitty.

She tapped Stu on the shoulder, and then spoke softly. "Could you help me bring out the coffee?" Every morning she had one of the cowboys help carry the giant urn to the end of the long row of tables.

"Ah, sure thing, Miss Summer."

Stu was the brawniest of the hands and the shyest. A blush crept into his cheeks, but he pushed away from the table and followed her back to the kitchen.

One of the things she'd done away with in her early days at the Bar C was cafeteria line serving. Placing big bowls of food on the table for family style meals just seemed more cozy and friendly.

It caused more work, but the payoff in the atmosphere of the dining hall was well worth the effort. When the debacle with Scot occurred she'd been more than happy to have the longer-lasting kitchen chores fill her time.

She pushed through the swinging doors and there he was, Tyler Crockett, bigger than life it seemed, glaring at her no less.

"I'll get that, Stu."

He snarled his command and the poor cowpoke nearly shook in his boots. She laid a hand on Stu's forearm. "It's okay. I didn't realize I had help already."

"Ahh, okay, boss, Miss Summer," he stammered before he beat a hasty exit back through the swinging doors.

Summer drew herself up to her full five foot four inches of height. She wasn't tall, but she used what she had. She narrowed her gaze at Mr. Big Boss. "What," she said in a clipped tone, "was that supposed to be about?"

He advanced on her, closing the space between them. "You. Leading the poor guy on."

Summer sputtered. "Wwwhat?"

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"I don't know what game you're playing, but maybe it's a damn good thing you're leaving."

His gaze left her eyes and traveled south to rest on the cleavage she'd been so sure would cause trouble. Bingo. Jealousy. Score one for the Gipper. But, his words still stung. "How dare you--"

"No," Tyler growled. "How dare you flaunt yourself like some cheap whore. Teasing the men when they have to get out of here and do dangerous work. Their minds won't be on their jobs."

He advanced closer until she could see the tiny flecks of gold in his green eyes, feel the warm air of his breath. This *was* what she wanted, right? This man's attention?

Well, she suddenly had it by buckets. Now, was not the time to back down, not if she wanted Tyler in her bed. "And just what will their minds be on?"

"You."

"Yeah, right." She gave him her best glare. "I would have thought any of that sort of nonsense would have happened months ago."

"You weren't dressed like this months ago. Hell, even weeks ago. They're men, not eunuchs."

"You're immune."

"Am I?"

As quick as a rattler strike, Tyler's arm wrapped around her waist and he yanked her hard against his chest. His other hand cupped the back of her head and he kissed her.

The kiss was rough, possessive, and hard, stealing the breath from her lungs. God, it was just what she wanted from him. But not enough. If she were going to have this man the way she wanted, 'hard to get' was going to be the theme of the day.

With strength she was sure was super human, she shoved Tyler Crockett away from her lusting, burning mouth and slapped him as hard as she could.

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The shock she saw in his eyes was quickly replaced with a cold, icy stare.

No backing down. This is just the first skirmish in a war I'll win. "I'll thank you to keep your hands to yourself, *Mister Crockett.*" She picked up a pair of hot mitts, turned to the warming bins, and lifted a large platter of steaming pancakes from its depths. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have *dangerous work* to do."

She sauntered past Tyler, making sure to wiggle her butt. "Don't forget the coffee," she smirked as she headed out the doors.

* * * * *

Tyler paced his office like a caged mountain lion. All his good intentions of asking Summer to stay on longer fled like a tornado when he saw her in that tight, low-cut shirt and the jeans that hugged her backside like blue skin.

Hell, he'd even gotten dressed up, hoping to take her on some ranch errands, and then maybe into town later to buy supplies. All rational thought, though, disappeared when he saw her lean over and whisper to Stu, a seductive smile playing on her lips. He'd galloped the back way into the kitchen and was waiting for her when they came in.

He shook his head. Things went from bad to worse once Stu left.

He couldn't remember a time when he'd let irrational jealousy led by his cock make his decisions. His actions had not only been stupid but they could easily be construed as harassment, if Summer wanted to cause him that sort of trouble. "Idiot!"

Last night he decided he needed to do something, but he didn't have a plan. Acting on instinct this morning had been all wrong. The palm print she'd left on his cheek had surely caused a bit of discussion among the hands. He deserved every whispered word, too.

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So, okay, where did he go from here? A half-day wasted and time so valuable. He sat at his desk, opened the ledger and began to go over the ranch's expenditures. Maybe something would come to him if he followed routine.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. The day was already getting hot, unusual for this late in October. He stood and went to the window, praying something would come to him.

Mid-morning the answer winged him like a stray bullet. Apologize and ask her to the Saint Saturninus Festival that evening. If all went well, maybe he could take her to the Haunted House tomorrow night.

No, best not count those chickens too soon. Take it one day at a time—besides, he had to apologize first.

Tyler pushed away from his desk, stood, and grabbed his hat. At least he didn't smell like horses and cow shit. Most of the guys would be heading back by now too, wanting to get cleaned up.

Figuring they'd want to attend the festivities in town, he'd given them only a half-day's work. That should translate into less work for Summer, too. When he'd told the hands about the shortened hours for the day, he'd suggested they let her know if they'd be around for supper.

Ah, another thing he had a pretense for going to the kitchen and talking to her about. He rubbed his hands together, feeling better than he had in the past several hours. If he wanted to speak to her without broadcasting to the ranch, he'd have to hurry. Grinning, he walked out the door and into the heat.

The kitchen and dining hall were next to her guesthouse. A mere two minutes walk from his front door to...face his destiny? Could Summer be his fate, could she be *the one*?

Sweat broke out on his brow and his palms dampened. A burning sensation singed his stomach. *You've gone through worse. Show some backbone.*

He squared his shoulders and marched over to the kitchen, knocking once on the screen door before entering. "Summer?"

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A muffled voice from somewhere in the kitchen called back, "Yes, Mr. Crockett."

"I need to speak with you." Did he sound desperate? He hoped not. He was a man after all, not some mouse.

"Just a minute."

Her voice sounded even further away. Tyler scanned the room trying to figure out where she was and why he couldn't see her.

He rounded the marble topped island where she chopped vegetables, just as she stood, a glistening carrot in her hand.

Holy shit was all he could think as he looked from her flushed face to the orange vegetable she held.

Chapter Three

Tyler had the strangest look on his face. His eyes were wide as if he was in shock and his lips moved but no words came out. Her brows furrowed and she asked tentatively, "Can I help you?"

A long second passed before strangled sounds came out of his mouth. "Wwwhat are you doing?"

She marched to the sink and turned the faucet on. Rushing water streamed from the spigot splashing her white halter top and she shouted over the noise. "Making carrot cake." Summer scrubbed the carrot that had squirted from her hands a minute ago, peeled it, then turned to the counter where the other carrots waited to be shredded. "Is there something I can help you with Mr. Crocket?"

The stunned look disappeared and was replaced by a flush rushing up his neck and into his cheeks. Hmmm. What was that about?

"Well, I...I was wondering, that is, if you don't already..."

Whatever he was trying to say sure was difficult. Given her performance last night and the scene this morning, Tyler could be trying to tell her just about anything.

"...well fuck it."

Oh, now there was a thought. Maybe he'd throw her down on the island and use that tongue of his for oral stimulation resulting in a screaming orgasm. Mmm. That had serious appeal.

Maybe, he'd push her up against the stainless steel fridge and shove her short cut-offs to her ankles...the possibilities were endless and equally tantalizing.

"Excuse me, Mr. Crockett. Did you want something?" *Like letting me ride you hard and fast?*

"Look, Summer, I apologize for the way I behaved this morning."

She frowned.

Damn. She'd liked his behavior this morning. A man in charge who knew what he wanted and went for it.

"Okay. Is that all?" She kept her voice as flat and neutral as she could. If all he wanted was to say he was sorry for his behavior, he could flounder.

"Well, no."

He stared into her eyes and for a millisecond a flame of desire singed her stomach. Okay, he was starting to scramble out of the apology hole. She cocked her head and returned his gaze.

"I have to, well, that is I volunteered to man the kissing booth at the Saint Saturninus Festival and I was wondering if you maybe would like to come along with me."

Summer nodded and rolled her head. "To the kissing booth?"

"Yes. I mean, no to the kissing booth...yes to the Saturninus Festival."

The bewilderment in his green eyes delighted her. He was off his game, another indication that perhaps she'd made some headway. Why oh why, hadn't she thought of this whole jealousy thing before? "So you're asking me out...but not to the kissing booth?"

"Well, if you--"

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"I've never been to the Saint Saturninus Festival. Isn't it just an attempt to cover Halloween?"

The blush faded from Tyler's face. "It's easy to think that I guess. I've been around it all my life and there is an element of Halloween to it, but it's also a great opportunity to raise money for some of the local charities."

"And the kissing booth goes to what?"

"Juvenile Diabetes."

Stilling the slight shaking of her hands, Summer resumed shredding the carrots, directing her words at her hands rather than Tyler. Refusing to meet his gaze would keep him from realizing how badly she wanted to scream her acceptance of his date offer. "J.D. is a great cause. Do you expect to raise much?"

He snorted; a self-deprecating sound she didn't like. "I'm an old cowboy. The young girls would rather kiss one of the hands than me."

Pffft. They didn't know what they were missing. An experienced man had so much more to offer than an unschooled boy. A real man knew how to please a woman and didn't go off like a bottle rocket once he penetrated you. "Don't sell yourself short, Mr. Crockett. Not everyone is a giggly twenty-something attracted to a nice set of buns and firm biceps."

There let him mull that over a while. She snuck a glance from beneath her lashes hoping to catch another blush color his face and instead fought back a smile. Tyler Crockett was twisting and doing contortions to try and look at his finely shaped ass.

She went back to her work before he caught her smirking.

"So, is that a yes?"

Summer mixed the dry ingredients. "Yeah, I guess so."

"How long is it going to take to finish up that cake and fix dinner for the hands?"

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She glanced at him, pleased to see a tinge of hope in his green depths. "There's only a half-dozen hands sticking around tonight. I talked Stu into overseeing the outdoor grill." At the mention of wrangler's name she saw Tyler frown.

"Don't be getting all in a twist over Stu. He's a friend, nothing more." She shook her head. Jealousy sure was an irrational animal. "I can be ready inside two hours."

He gave her a curt nod and spun on his heels and out, the screen door bouncing shut in his wake.

* * * * *

They bounced and bumped their way off the ranch road and onto the county highway. Until they hit the blacktop, Summer regretted her choice of clothing, a flowing print skirt belted with a black fanny pack and a red peasant top. The skirt came down to her knees barely and she wore a pair of fairly new, strappy wedge sandals that accentuated her legs and were as uncomfortable as hell.

She wiggled in her seat and tried to pull her skirt down her thighs. No need in revealing her secrets too soon. If Tyler wanted to see what she wore beneath the skirt, he'd have to find out the old-fashioned way...necking.

They chit-chatted all the way into town. At First and Main a banner announcing the Saint Saturninus Festival crossed the street. Beneath, orange and white striped barricades blocked the road.

Tyler turned down First. "Keep an eye out for a parking spot?"

Easy request. Since Scot infected her, her vision had gotten better. In fact, she'd dumped the contacts months ago. "There!" She pointed down the street. "About halfway down the block on the right."

"Good eyes."

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You have no idea, Cowboy.

He parallel parked the F350 with the ease of a Geo Metro, bounded out of the cab and was to her side of the vehicle in a flash. Normally, she'd open the door herself, but this was one hell of a truck and Summer didn't mind the help down.

Especially since Tyler's hands were on her waist and wonderful jolts of desire shot through her skin where those strong fingers of his touched her.

"There," he said, setting her on her feet and releasing her.

Only, unused to the combination of the shoes and the truck's height, she wobbled. Toppled really. She fell forward positive kissing the pavement would have a personal meaning. *Oh shit. Grace in action.*

Then his muscular arms were around her, pulling her up against him, the evidence of his attraction to her jabbing her thigh. She took a shuddering breath, trying to calm the high intensity pounding of her heart even as she clutched his soft, black tee-shirt beneath her fingers.

"Be careful," he said.

"I'm sssorry," she started.

"Don't be."

How two words could drag on so long was beyond Summer. Then it didn't matter. Tyler leaned down, held her tighter, and gave her a kiss that curled her toes. Possessive, gentle, demanding, sensual, his kiss was so many things wrapped up in a tender insistence she didn't resist. Didn't want to. *Sweet mother, I want him more than I realized.*

A moment later, he broke off the kiss. "I don't know why, but today I can't keep from kissing you."

With the flat of her palm she pushed away from him. "Cowboy, if you kiss the gals at the booth like that, the word will get 'round and you'll bring in the most money for J.D."

In the dim light, she saw a ghost of a smile. Maybe they were getting somewhere. She pulled away from his hold for just a moment, wrapping her arm through his. Now that he'd instigated the touching, no way was she letting go.

Scents drifted on a slight breeze toward them. Her stomach rumbled in appreciation. "Barbeque?"

Tyler patted her hand. "Hungry?"

"Some, I guess." They walked toward the bobbling, hanging lights decorating the festival area. "But I want to smell it all, see everything before I stuff my face."

A deep laugh rumbled from Tyler. "Maybe you can check things out while I'm occupying the booth. Let me know what you find out and after I'm done we'll get something together."

Together. That word brought Summer hope. If she could show him they'd be great together, then maybe she had a chance of him sticking around once he discovered her "were" status. No matter what happened, he had to know before he shot his arrow into her creamy depths.

If he could handle her condition maybe he'd ask her to stay. If he rejected her outright then her decision to move on to more fertile grounds would be carried out with alacrity.

"Well, here we are."

There was a tinge of disappointment in Tyler's voice. Nice. "Cowboy, it won't be that long will it?"

"An hour."

She grinned. He sounded like a petulant child whose favorite toy had just been confiscated. She sniffed the air. "It will take me at least that long to detect where all the delectable aromas are coming from."

She inhaled deeply, this time smelling something other than food. *Scot.*

"Look, I should get going, so you can start serving your hard time."

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He laughed, and then glanced at his watch. "I'll send the dogs out looking for you if I don't see you back here at quarter after."

She managed a small laugh, just barely. The top dog was already out, hunting for a female. She prayed Scot wouldn't pick up her scent and track her down to reclaim her as his alpha mate.

Living with a man who thought being alpha meant he could screw any woman, any time he pleased was not a future Summer wanted. She needed another man's scent. The only way to remove Scot's territorial marking was to get Tyler Crockett to bed her down in every way imaginable.

The sooner, the better.

Chapter Four

Summer returned five minutes early. Early enough to show she valued Tyler's time, but not too early. No use appearing overeager. Hanging around would only reveal her interest.

Under the temporary lighting, the festival took on an otherworldly aura; the normally harsh lights looked as if they'd been wrapped in cotton batting, the chatter of the crowds muted and indistinct. Even their presence seemed nothing more than background color. The setting cocooned her, soft, gentle, and promising.

She smiled at Tyler, watching eager females wait their turns at getting him in a lip-lock. From the length of the line, she was sure her prediction of a great kissing cowboy had come true.

"Mooning after the boss?"

Lost in thought, she hadn't smelled Scot's approach. Damn. She had to be more careful. Thank God, Tyler was close-by...just in case she needed some help. She turned toward her nemesis. "That would be another incorrect assumption on your part, Scot."

"Another?"

"Yeah, the first was thinking I wouldn't mind you fucking your bimbo when we were going out."

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He smirked, then tipped the edge of his cowboy hat ever so slightly. "She wasn't as good a lay as you."

"Guess you should have thought of that before you made your choice."

A feral gleam entered his gaze and he stepped closer. "Well, I intend to change that. I want you back in my bed, as my rightful mate."

"Dream on."

"It's no dream. Face it, every time I came in that sweet, hot pussy of yours, my essence permeated your body, your skin, every slutty pore. You're marked and I smelled your lust, your excitement for me from halfway across the grounds."

"Another assumption." She took a deep breath, trying to control her temper. Her hands fisted at her side. Landing a roundhouse on his jaw would feel so good.

"I don't think so."

He was really pushing her buttons with his smug tone. "Scot, do you know the root word of *assumption*?"

"Assume?"

"Yeah."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Of course, I do. I'm not stupid."

She fought back a sarcastic laugh. She'd never been with him for his intelligence.

"Assume makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me'. And I'm not about to be your ass again. So get the hell away from me."

Anger flared in Scot's eyes, and then he leered at her. "I enjoyed fucking your ass and will fuck it again and again." He slapped her butt hard, his palm lingering on the burning cheek before she shifted away. "I'm *your* alpha, so you best be watching that college-educated mouth of yours."

His high-handed claim was just too much. No one was deciding her fate, especially Scot Johnson. She swung her arm back, ready to bitch slap some sense into him.

Mid arc her arm stopped, a large hand gripping her wrist. Tyler's sexy voice poured over her, soothing her ire as he lowered her tensed arm. "Kitten, velvet those claws of yours."

He spun her around and pulled her into his arms. A sparkle lit his eyes and he winked at her. "After kissing all those fillies, I couldn't wait to get back to *your* special brand of affection."

With animal like possession, he took her mouth, plundering its depths. Who cared if Tyler was putting on an act with her to ward off Scot. The masterful kiss weakened her knees and confirmed her suspicions that Tyler Crockett was indeed the man to remove Johnson's stench. Suddenly it didn't matter that his kiss was a sham.

Scot moved behind Tyler and tapped him on the shoulder. "She's spoken for Crockett."

Tyler lifted his head from her mouth. "Is that so?"

In answer, Scot landed a right on Tyler's jaw. The sound shot through the night like the retort of a rifle, loud and sharp.

The impact spun Tyler around, forcing Summer out of his arms. A wild scream left her lips and she jumped on Scot's back, trying to keep him from landing another sucker punch.

She shouldn't have bothered.

Tyler returned with a blow somewhere on Scot's midsection, hard enough to jar Summer off Scot's back and land her bottom side down in the dirt. "Stop it, stop it," she screamed, scrambling to her feet in time to see Scot knock Tyler to the ground and jump on him.

No one listened. Dirt scattered, dust lifted, and they rolled, swinging fists.

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A small crowd gathered watching the two men have at one another. "Not a fair fight," one man said. "The dude in black is way bigger."

"The other guy is at least fifteen years younger, in better shape," another male replied. "I'd still bet on the old guy, though, for his experience."

Summer whirled around looking for the speakers. Tyler could wallop Scot despite an age deficiency. How dare they talk about Tyler that way!

A black Stetson landed at her feet. Bending over, she quickly picked up Tyler's hat and gripping it tightly, she slapped it against her thigh, keeping her gaze riveted on the two dueling men.

Scot and Tyler continued swinging and rolling. Fists slammed into each man's hard body, muffled thumps followed with grunts.

Dust drifted into the fluorescent beams of the temporary lights. Bodies twisted, spun, legs kicking gravel across the ground as each man tried to find some advantage. One minute Tyler was on top, the next Scot. "Stop it," she shrieked once more.

"Break it up," a deep voice bellowed. "Move aside!"

The crowd parted as if Moses split the Red Sea. The sheriff and one of his deputies entered the fray. Both law enforcement officers were huge and easily separated Scot and Tyler.

"Scot Johnson," the sheriff drawled. "Should have known I'd find the likes of you involved in a brawl."

Summer rushed to Tyler. Dust covered his torn black tee shirt. A small stream of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. She pulled a Kleenex from her pack and dabbed at the trickle. "My God, are you okay?"

Why couldn't Scot get it out of his head they were over? Bastard.

She knew why though. In the throes of passion, the night he'd bit her, Scot told her how she was his until he either gave her up or another alpha challenged for her. How his scent covered her until that time, as surely as if she'd just had sex with him.

Until another alpha sexually claimed every orifice, she'd be stuck with Scot's territorial marking, as if she were some fucking tree. Anger boiled through her. Given the way Scot announced his claim to her tonight, she needed to have sex with Tyler soon.

"I'm fine, Kitten." Tyler's voice remained strong, not breathless like she'd anticipated.

"Keep standing behind your woman, Crockett. I can take care of both of you." He lunged for Tyler.

"That's enough," the sheriff replied, wrenching Scot Johnson's arm behind his back.

"Hey," she whispered, handing Tyler his hat. "Let's get out of here."

"Are you done?" the sheriff roared. "Or am I gonna have to haul your pathetic patooties to the pokey?"

With his arm around Summer's shoulder, Tyler nodded. "As long as Johnson stays away from the lady, I'm done."

He led her toward the midway. They'd only gone a few steps when Scot Johnson snarled. "Fucking coward." The loud whisper carried Scot's challenge. "This isn't over yet, Crockett."

Behind her, Summer heard the sheriff. "That's it Johnson. You're coming with me to cool off that foul disposition of yours."

She grinned. For the next few hours, she was practically assured of Scot remaining in the sheriff's dull company.

Still, the Saint Saturninus Festival wasn't the best place to explain her predicament; but telling a man you had the hots for that you were a werewolf really didn't have a right place or time. She worried her lower lip, soothing it with a flick of her tongue. "He's right you know."

Tyler laughed. "Not likely. Right means he might know something."

She stopped, forcing Tyler to a halt. "He does."

He frowned. "You're taking his side? Well, now, doesn't that beat all."

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"No. You have it wrong!"

"What then?"

She wasn't ready. As much as she lusted after Tyler's body, could she ever tell him the truth? Would she ever be ready?

"I don't feel comfortable talking about Johnson here.

Tyler glared. The look he favored her with would frost Florida oranges in mid-summer. "What sort of hold does he have on you?"

God, he handed her an opportunity to spill her guts. But rather than taking the honorable path, she looked away from him, ignored his angry question and chose the coward's road. "Do they have a haunted house here?"

Forcing more levity into her voice than she felt, she ploughed forward. "My family didn't celebrate Halloween. Thought the whole holiday invited spiteful spirits to prey upon innocent children. We didn't see Santa either."

He gave a subtle shake of his head. "You never sat on Santa's lap or had a Christmas picture taken with him?"

Summer widened her eyes in feigned gullibility and gently shook her head. She didn't tell Tyler the reason she'd never sat on the old guy's lap was because it creeped her out.

So did spooky things. Although, now that she knew what some of those things were, they didn't scare her as much as piss her off. But creeps like Scot headed her list above and beyond things that could jump out of dark corners and go bump in the night.

She must have said something right. The frost in his gaze thawed. "Can't do anything about you sitting on St. Nick's lap but I can do something about Halloween. We do have a haunted house and I'd be delighted to escort you through its terrors."

"Really?"

He put a muscular arm around her shoulder. Warmth suffused her skin where their flesh touched. A tremor of delight shook her body.

"Cold?"

Not really. You do this to me, Cowboy. "A little," she hedged.

His hold on her tightened and the thrill of being held by Tyler intensified.

They walked in unison. People on the midway, busy playing games nearly impossible to win but having fun none-the-less, blurred like Hollywood extras. Tyler plunked down some bills for tickets and guided her to the line for the haunted house.

No words passed between them. Words weren't needed. Each second of silence solidified the connection growing between them. Every beat of her heart, steady and strong, echoed the pure pleasure of being with this magnificent male.

"What they've done is crafted a specialty haunted house. You go through this line to get to the actual ride, but the line goes through some dark turns with terrifying surprises for the unprepared."

Nervousness shot through her, her palms dampened, and the first slivers of apprehension struck. The rhythm of her heart beat uncharacteristically fast. She didn't like surprises, didn't like things that jumped out at you from dark corners, didn't think Tyler would really take her to the haunted house. Maybe her *true confession* had been a mistake. "Rreally?"

This is silly. You have excellent night vision. There's nothing here that can hurt you and not a thing that will take you by surprise."

She took several deep breaths; concentrated on Tyler's arm around her, the way she perfectly fit against his side, the musky scent of his aftershave.

Nothing worked.

The unease didn't fade. Didn't vanish to the recesses of her mind. Didn't remove the prickly feeling crawling over her skin.

"Now don't you be scared, Summer. I'll be right here with you."

There was a smile in his voice, one that lit his eyes and accentuated the tiny crows' feet, the laugh lines at the corners.

"I guess I am a bit nervous." *A lot nervous.*

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"After we go through the crafted challenges, we get in a gondola for an actual ride. We'll be carried up and down, around and around in the blackness where more surprises await."

They shuffled forward in the line. Tyler took her free hand in his and continued his preview of the event she definitely was having second thoughts about.

"When we get off the ride, we'll exit through a few more spooky sites to eventually be greeted by the long dead owner of the house who will gift us with a special reward for surviving his house tour."

"Wonderful. I get to meet a dead guy."

"I can honestly tell you I'm much better looking."

She snorted. Actually snorted at his joke to the point the noise wasn't that far removed from one of the ranch's piglets.

"Of course, you are, Tyler. Your skin isn't moldy, or filled with maggots. You have a dead guy beat by miles."

Tyler smiled and wiggled his eyebrows. "I know the dead guy. Went to high school with him. He might let me take you on a special tour; show you some of the more private areas of his home."

Laughter rolled from her lips. God, Tyler was a tease and more fun than she'd ever imagined.

"You mock me, madam," he said in a patently false European accent, handing over the requisite number of tickets, and holding open the door into darkness for her.

Chapter Five

Her unease didn't fade despite the fact Summer's exceptional night vision perceived every person assigned to carry out the haunted illusions. Had she normal vision, the tricks would have scared her or grossed her out at the least. The illusions, though, were creative and she appreciated the attempts made to frighten the haunted house patrons. The live head on the platter she considered the best of the bunch.

Not that it frightened her. She sensed the body beneath the table, saw the cuts in the wood, the metal bolts that enabled a person to stick their head through the tabletop. A truly clever device; just the sort of thing to give children nightmares for months.

So what was it then? Despite the warmth of Tyler's body close to her, the apprehension hadn't faded. She couldn't contain the shiver that raced through her.

"Slide closer, Kitten. When this ride starts, you'll get a little colder."

She stifled a laugh. *Kitten*. Figured he'd give her a moniker having nothing to do with her supernatural state. Still, kitten sounded a hell of a lot better than puppy which would have been at least species correct.

"Why?" She needed to keep talking before she let her nerves get the better of her self-control. Something was definitely wrong.

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"The seat we're in spins around, while going up and down and traveling around in a circle. Generates a bit of wind and the air is cool."

At that, an attendant jogged through checking all the bolts on the doors and lowering the safety bars. Once he returned to his booth, the carnival ride, called 'The Spider', creaked to a start. Gradually, it built up speed and as Tyler predicted, the air circulating their basket was cold.

She snuggled closer inhaling deeply the pure masculinity surrounding Tyler. A touch of dust mingled with his cologne. His hand lifted to stroke her hair even as the machine whirled them around and sent her stomach into dizzying flips. Or was it the man next to her?

Along the dark walls, flashes of light illumined various depictions. During one of the revolutions, a wolf pack winked into view.

Fear coalesced into a hard ball in her stomach. The unease, the nervousness she'd been trying to tame had nothing at all to do with the haunted house as she'd reasoned. It had to do with Scot Johnson.

You could only be an alpha werewolf if you had a wolf pack to lead. Right?

Were the members of his pack waiting, ready to pounce on them at some unexpected moment? She had to be extremely vigilant in order to prevent Scot from ambushing them.

A high pitched screech pierced her eardrums, followed by a metallic banging. The ride slowed to a halt. Around them, lights lit up the interior of the house containing the carnival ride, effectively destroying in their harsh, bright light any spooky effects intended.

Their basket stopped at the apogee of The Spider's circular path. Tyler gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Nothing to worry about, Summer. They'll get us down."

Now what prompted that? "I'm not afraid of heights, Cowboy. Don't worry about me."

Suddenly, the emergency lights popped off, as if all the bulbs had blown simultaneously. Around them, Summer heard a couple of women scream and sharp gasps unchecked by other patrons. She held out a hand. If it hadn't been for her enhanced vision, seeing her fingers would have been nearly impossible.

"Damn, its dark."

"I'm not afraid of the dark, either."

He squeezed her shoulder again, this time his long fingers outlining the edge of her peasant blouse, trailing lightly up her neck. "Maybe you should be," he whispered in her ear.

Oh dear God. He was making a pass at her. Finally, realizing she was a woman, an available one at that, and here they were stuck at the top of some stupid ride, in the dark for who knew how long.

He turned her head and swept his lips over hers for a chaste kiss. It only stayed that way a moment. Tentatively, she let the tip of her tongue touch his mouth. He took it as the sign she'd intended. Her mouth opened to let Tyler into its warm confines.

Her heart beat in an erratic tempo, the rhythm coursing through her bloodstream to lodge in a longing throb between her legs. Tyler's hands tangled in her hair, holding her tightly to him. Each sweep of his tongue delved deeper, exploring her mouth as if searching for treasure.

She wrapped her tongue around his, answering his possession, pulling him deeper into her.

He pulled a hand away from her hair, let it rest above her knee before he started stroking her thigh, sliding his fingers higher until he was under her skirt and close to discovering the naked surprise she'd prepared for him.

Encouraging him, she trailed her hand over his spectacular pecs, playing with his nipple. God, she wanted him. Wanted to drink him, wanted him to screw her within an inch of her life, wanted him to make her come until she passed out.

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She shifted in her seat just as his fingers grazed her bare ass. Oh dear lord, that hand caressing her was blistering hot and so close to her drenched pussy she could easily impale herself on his fingers.

She let her wandering hand descend to his belt, quickly unhooking it and then unfastening his jeans. Through his briefs, she caressed his burgeoning erection with the palm of her hand.

Frantic with need to be possessed, shock ran through her when he broke their kiss. "What? What is it," she gasped, trying to catch the breath he'd stolen from her.

"Are you sure this is what you want, Kitten?" The husky voice coming from his mouth left her no doubt as to what he wanted.

Carefully, she wiggled free of the restraining bar and lifted her hand to balance against the rear of the seat and straddled his legs, the gondola swaying with her movement. "Are your fingers as talented as your tongue?"

He leaned forward and nuzzled her neck before responding. "Ready to find out?"

She eased back a bit, and pulled the neck of her blouse down, then the cup of her bra. Lifting her breast, she offered it to him. "What do you think?"

A wild flare erupted in his eyes. "I think you want me to take you right here." He glanced around. "But, if you rode my cock the way I want you to, this boat would swing like crazy and everyone would know we were fucking."

His finger slid up, then down the crack of her ass, until it rested against her slit. "But, much as I'd like that right now, I'll satisfy myself with touching you."

He slipped a finger into her heat. Summer shuddered and moaned at the sweet, intimate invasion. "Oh, yes. That feels so good."

Another finger, then a third filled her, pumping slowly in and out of her. His thumb rubbed her clit. "I'm bigger than this," he growled against her breast. "Will you take me later? Can you?"

"Oh, yes," she moaned. She rode his fingers, clenching around the digits, forcing back the moans rising in her throat. He thrust deeper, she clamped around him harder. His thumb rubbed harder, more insistently until tension coiled tightly within her core. God yes, she'd take him, all of him, every single glorious inch, in any opening of her body he wanted.

"Come for me, Kitten. Come right now."

At his husky words, coupled with another deep thrust, Summer's orgasm burst upon her like jolts from a high voltage power line. Her ragged breathing caught in her lungs and she grasped the back of the car so tightly she thought her hand would surely bend the metal. Pleasure rolled through her, dissipating until her upper body finally collapsed against Tyler's shoulders.

He withdrew his fingers from her and held them to his nose. "You needed that, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess you could say that." Coherent thought was out of the question.

He traced her lips with her cum, then licked her juices from his fingers. "Mmm. Think I can have some of that later, once we get out of here?"

The thought of Tyler between her legs, tasting her essence was enough for another rush of moisture to her creamy pussy. Oh, yeah, he could eat her out, then she'd blow him, then he'd mount her and take her the way a man was meant to take a woman, spilling his seed deep into her.

The thought brought her up short. Tyler couldn't penetrate her until she explained the risk. He had to know who and what he was dealing with before he emptied himself into her.

Sobered, she started to reply. "Tyler, there's nothing—"

The lights came back on in a blinding flash. Summer scrambled from his lap and hastily rearranged her clothing. From the corner of her eye, she watched Tyler re-zip his jeans. When he finished, he kissed her again. "We're almost out of here."

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Summer swallowed the lump in her throat. Here she was with the hottest cowboy around, getting her wish, and she couldn't jump on his nice boner before she revealed the biggest secret of her life.

* * * * *

What the hell had come over Summer?

The answer eluded Tyler as he helped her into the truck cab for the ride back to the ranch, but he didn't regret the end result. Her musky scent covered his fingers, tantalizing him as he drove with her unspoken promise of more.

Suckling her breast in the gondola ignited a fucking forest fire of desire to see her naked, in all her glory, in his bed, for him alone. To watch his cock sink into her as she took in every inch of him made him hard all over again.

The ride operators had brought in a ladder. He was about to let Summer descend first until he remembered the bare skin beneath her short skirt. Nope. No one but Tyler Crocket was getting a view of her fine ass. Ever again if he could help it.

Now that he'd somehow, miraculously, broken through her icy armor, he wasn't about to let her slip away from him. She'd earned his respect for her work ethics long ago. Won his respect too, for the way she made the hands feel comfortable and at home. This crew had been the most stable, consistent, dedicated bunch he could remember. Summer had been a big part of it, he was fairly certain.

And now that he'd experienced just a part of her hot, willing body...well, a man just didn't give that up. Not without a fight.

A fight. Scot Johnson. Summer still hadn't revealed what Johnson had on her. Pictures? A video tape? What about him set Summer on edge?

"Summer, we need to talk."

"About what?"

There was a tint of fear in her voice. Did she think he was going to have a good time with her and let her slid out of his life once her notice expired?

"Tonight."

"Oh."

The hands in her lap curled into fists, as if she were steeling herself for something hard.

He couldn't do this driving. They'd have to find a place to pull over so they could talk properly, so he could hold her if necessary.

A short distance ahead was a wayside picnic area, complete with a small copse of trees planted by the department of transportation back in the Roosevelt era before the days of the Interstate system. They could talk here, in relative seclusion, and keep their fresh start going in the right direction.

Gravel crunched beneath the tires as he pulled onto the dirt road. The truck illumined a picnic table before he switched off the lights, then the engine.

"Come here."

Summer scooted closer and so did Tyler. Putting an arm around her shoulders, he broached the subject she'd delayed, turning her head toward him. "You were going to tell me about Johnson."

A shiver ran through her at the mention of that bastard's name. He tried to stay cool. Tried to keep the frustration from his voice. "Summer, what's going on with him?"

She looked at him and her eyes glistened with moisture. Tears? Over Scot Johnson?

"I thought you were over him, Summer. You're not?"

She snapped her gaze to meet his. "It's not like that at all Tyler. Scot..."

"Scot what?"

"He changed me. And not for the better necessarily."

Tyler's forehead furrowed. Riddles? He wanted straight-forward, not word games.

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"Did he impregnate you? Did you have an abortion? Is that how he changed you?"

She snorted. "If only it were that simple. No, I've never been pregnant, with anyone's child."

"My God, Summer. Just tell me. What did Johnson do to you?"

"He bit me."

What? Bit her? How the hell did that negatively impact someone's life? "I don't understand."

She sighed deeply. "Know much about wolves?"

"Wolves?" Now that was a random, rapid change of subject. "The typical stuff a rancher has to know, I guess. Not like I've studied them in any great depth."

"Ever hear of werewolves?"

"You mean like the Michael Landon, 'I Was a Teenage Werewolf' spook movie?"

She shook her head, the movement barely perceptible in the night. This was not at all how he'd envisioned the conversation to go. He'd expected a simple frank discussion of Johnson, and then maybe, some heavy petting. The kind that led to sex in a truck.

"No, Tyler, I mean like *real* werewolves."

Now this was just too weird. "There's no such thing, Summer. It's a Hollywood invention."

In response to his statement, she pulled down the shoulder of her blouse. "You couldn't see this in the dark." She reached up and turned on the dome light. "Look at this scar?"

Tyler nodded. There were several punctures, reminding him of the bite of some sort of dog.

"Scot Johnson did this. And when he did, he infected me."

"Infected you?"

Summer grasped his hands between hers and nodded. "Scot Johnson is an alpha werewolf."

"What? Have you lost your mind?"

"Tyler, I need you to believe me. Every single word is the gospel truth." She swallowed hard, but didn't break her gaze. "When he bit me and all the times we had sex afterwards, he marked me as his alpha mate."

"So what you're telling me is..."

"I'm a werewolf, too, and if you make love to me, you run the risk of being infected as well."

Chapter Six

"Do you have any idea how insane you sound?" Tyler couldn't stop the question from firing out of his mouth. This whole cockamamie story was certifiable. "If you didn't want to have sex with me you didn't have to make up this crazy story."

Tears spilled from Summer's eyes. Ah shit. He was frustrated, true, but he didn't mean to make her cry.

"That's just it, Tyler. I want to make love with you. I want to get all hot and sweaty in the sheets and see how many times we can make each other come." She sniffed. "I just couldn't do that; take that risk, without you knowing ahead of time."

Something clicked in Tyler's brain. Scot fighting over Summer, telling them this wasn't over. "What did you mean by the alpha comment?"

She sniffed again and Tyler opened the glove box and pulled out a Kleenex for her. She wiped her nose. "Wolves run in packs and there is an alpha male in charge of the whole group. In the wild, the alpha leads the pack to hunting grounds, eats the kill first, chooses the female he mates with. The only way to disagree with the alpha is to challenge him for pack leadership."

Bits and pieces of the conversation he'd overheard between Scot and Summer began to make sense. "Okay, let's say I believe this werewolf shit. What does that have to do with you and me?"

"Scot told me the virus is transferred via bodily fluids. I wasn't much of a biologist, but I'd have to think semen qualifies."

"Yeah, well so would swapping spit. Think about it. When did you really become a...a...werewolf? How long after your first intimate relations with Scot?"

The light of understanding lit Summer's eyes. "A couple months. Nothing happened to me until after he bit me."

"So, isn't it more logical to think that perhaps it was his bite that infected you as opposed to just any ol' body fluid? That this *virus* has to be injected into the bloodstream?"

"It does. God, Tyler, it does!" She threw her arms around his neck.

She rained passionate kisses on his face, lips, mouth, but he had to stop her. There were more questions to be answered. "Stop, Kitten. I heard him say something about a claim on you. What does that mean?"

"I haven't been with another man since Scot. So, in essence, I'm still marked as his regardless of the fact I haven't slept with him in months."

Her statement made an odd sort of sense. "So, despite your choice, he considers you his private property, some sort of sex object he can have at will?"

"And nothing can stop him," she whispered.

"Except a challenge to his leadership."

Her eyes widened and filled with fear. "Don't. You have no idea how strong he is in wolf form. I've seen him fight. He'll hurt you Tyler."

He gripped her arms, holding her away from him. "One more question. Why have you been trying to seduce me?"

Beneath the dome light, he saw the color leave her face. His words were icy daggers. "It wasn't about me, was it? It was about Johnson, about trying to break his hold over you."

She didn't answer and Tyler was glad. He didn't want to hear the truth from her lips, that he was some sort of salvation to her, a way to purge Johnson from her life. He was supposed to be tough, but the realization burned like a

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branding iron. All those nights jacking off, thinking of her as some sort of goddess.

Fury churned through him, at himself, at her. God he was an ass. Thinking maybe the two of them might be able to have a real relationship based on something more than lust. An ass and a fool. An intolerable combination.

He ripped open his jeans, pulled down his briefs and shoved both garments to his ankles. Gripping his cock he growled, "If this is what you want baby, take it. Use me to get his claws out of you." *And then get the fuck out of my life.*

"Tyler, it's not like that, not how you're making it."

The tears in her voice made her begging all the more pathetic. If all she wanted was a good fuck, he'd give it to her, enjoy it even. She just wouldn't have his heart and he wouldn't hope for any sort of a future.

"Summer," he said tersely, "it's apparent to me that you need me to fuck you. So get on with it. When you're done we'll both have what we want without regrets."

He said the words, but how come he felt as if he'd just jabbed a Bowie knife into his gut?

She pulled away from him. Understandable. The prospect of having sex under such ludicrous pretensions would be enough to stop anyone. He closed his eyes and placed a hand on his forehead, rubbing his temples. Fine place his fucking libido had taken them.

Warm air tickled his cock. He peered between his fingers and saw Summer's head over his lap. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Giving you what you gave me back in town." Her tongue licked up and around his shriveled prick.

Damn cock was a fucking traitor, hardening at her touch. She licked again and he hardened more. Fine, damn it! She could have his cock, any way she wanted it. When he came it would be over and he'd help her pack and get out of his life.

Her hand fisted around the shaft, while her tongue kept busy licking and sucking at the head. Somehow she'd maneuvered herself onto her knees, her ass in the air and the tiny skirt slipping toward her waist. The scent of her pussy juices rushed back at him. And the little fucker between his legs grew harder still.

He wouldn't make this enjoyable, he wouldn't. Summer was using him that was all. So why did his hand drift to her shapely ass and caress it? Why did his fingers slid toward her pussy to test her readiness?

Because, as angry as he was, he still wanted to know her, intimately. The knowledge punctured the balloon of wounded pride he'd blown up once he discovered why she really wanted him. Did it matter? They were both getting what they wanted and her tongue, mouth, and hands sent erotic shivers through his body.

"Oh god," he groaned, giving in to the sensations she aroused. "That feels so good. Keep sucking me."

She did. Her little mouth worked wonders on his shaft. But, the steering wheel was in the way and he wanted her sucking him deep. "Just a minute, darlin'."

He pushed a switch and the seat moved backward, another lever lifted the steering column out of the way, and then he flipped a handle to tilt the seat, reclining as far as possible. As if understanding what he wanted, Summer changed angles and deep-throated him.

His balls drew up ready to spew into her hot mouth. "No," he gasped, pushing her away. He didn't want to come in her mouth, not this time. He wanted to be inside her.

He leaned over and fumbled with his dropped jeans before pulling his wallet from his rear pocket. Flipping it open he grasped the foil packet he'd tucked away. He tore it open and slipped it over his cock.

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In those few seconds, she'd tossed her red blouse over her head and removed her bra. Man, she had beautiful tits and her nips were already in hard peaks. "I'm gonna fuck you if that's alright."

She nodded and positioned her knees on the seat next to his thighs, sinking onto the head of his penis. With a forceful thrust he entered her, every stiff inch surrounded by hot cream.

"Fuck, Tyler!" she gasped, the words ones of surprised delight.

He knew what she meant; they fit one another perfectly as if they were created for one another. Her body enclosed him in a tight grip. She lifted, then sank again onto his cock. He reached behind her, found her tiny pucker and teased it. Pleased with the fire he saw in her eyes, he leaned forward and drew her breast into his mouth, until the entire aureole was encased and he felt the nipple enlarging on his tongue.

He thrust up and she pumped down. Her pussy rhythmically grasped him as her orgasm ripped through her. His balls drew up and this time he was helpless to control the jism exploding through his cock.

Summer might not be his, but she sure as shit wouldn't be Johnson's either. There had to be a way to help her, to make her his, too.

She moved to get off him and he stopped her. He liked the feeling of being buried in her. Liked the idea he'd made her pussy weep for his possession. "Stay."

He wanted to say more but the words wouldn't come. Everything they'd said had been harsh and far from the peaceful evening he'd envisioned.

She was crazy. Werewolves didn't exist and she wasn't one.

An idea flashed through his mind. He'd marry her, protect her from Scot, and get her the help she needed. When she was strong again, he'd give her the choice to stay or leave.

His cock stirred within her. Reaching up he flicked off the dome light, and then turned in his seat until he could lay with his head near the door. Summer

swiveled with him and when he stroked her back from the nape of her neck to her sweet ass, she relaxed. He shifted so she could feel his cock, ready to fire again.

"I'm sorry, Kitten. Sorry I didn't accept what you told me." *I still don't believe you're a werewolf, but I promise I'll find help. I swear it.*

Tears fell anew. "I wanted to make love to you from the first day I laid eyes on you. But you ignored me. I figured you weren't interested, then Scot came along. I should have waited." She sobbed. "If I had, he wouldn't have done this to me...to us."

"Shh, shh. We'll make it all turn out, just wait."

They would. He'd find a way to put that bastard out of her life, find a way to keep her safe with him, find a way to show her he would take care of her.

He wiggled within her again. "This time I want to make you come my way."

He rolled her over onto the seat, slipping out of her to remove the condom. He kissed her lips, her cheek, her neck, working his way down to the hollow of her breasts until he had to change positions and kneel on the passenger seat. The scar on her shoulder snagged his attention and he traced it with a fingertip. "I won't let Scot hurt you, Kitten. Know that."

"I believe you, Tyler."

She moved sideways, placing her ankle on the top of the seat. Opened wide, all he had to do was lean down and partake of her offering. He did so.

He swirled his tongue around her engorged clit. He dipped a finger into her, trailing the juices to her back door. Back and forth he slid his finger, until the tight hole was lubricated. "Very munchable."

She moaned and held his head tight against her snatch. He went wild, licking, biting, sucking until she writhed beneath his onslaught. His finger entered her anus easily and he worked it in and out to the rhythm of his oral ministrations.

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"Tyler!" she screamed.

"Marry me!" he yelled back.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god!"

"Is that a yes?" He pumped his finger in and out the tight hole and resumed his licking.

"Yes!" she screamed once more.

Around the finger in her ass, he felt the convulsions of her pussy. Damn! He should have stashed some condoms in the truck.

Twenty hours later, they stood in front of a Justice of the Peace in Las Vegas, making their pledges. They'd stopped on the drive to have sex three more times, once in a changing room stall while they looked for more appropriate wedding attire.

Summer was insatiable. The thought made him smile. A nice hotel room for the night and they could truly make love, talk about what the future held, if anything.

* * * * *

White! He'd insisted she wear white. Summer shook her head. Pink or deep red would have been more to her liking and more appropriate. She was no virginal miss and after the long ride to Vegas, Tyler Crockett should have known so.

Something wild resided behind his eyes, as if he were doing his damndest to claim her as his and erase Scot from her body. Tyler's efforts could only partially succeed. Scot had turned her into a werewolf and nothing would change that.

Tyler also insisted on the honeymoon suite at the Bellagio. "Never been married before," he said by way of explanation. "We aren't having a fancy wedding, but that doesn't mean we can't do the night up right."

He carried her over the threshold and marched her straight to the bedroom, placing her on the bed like a revered, priceless jewel. The tenderness he exhibited touched her deeply.

He straddled her, his hands framing her face, his fingers tracing the column of her neck, lingering on the swell of her breast.

God, how could she look into his eyes and see his heart there knowing his actions were just the beginning of an ill-fated act of chivalry?

"You're beautiful, you know. Sexy, too."

She swallowed back the automatic retort she gave men who called her beautiful. Tyler was her husband now. He'd claimed her legally, and, if she were honest, he'd taken her heart, too.

Every time he spoke, shivers ran through her. Every time he kissed her, she reminded herself they had great sexual chemistry. Every time he stroked her skin she longed to forget the past and forge a future with him.

"Do you want babies?"

The question came out of left field. "Sure," she answered honestly, trying to ignore the way his hand snaked under the clinging sweater dress she wore. "But I don't know that I can now. I don't know if I should."

"I want to give you babies, Summer." He pushed the hem of the dress to her waist and gasped, fingering the thigh high hose and garter belt. "Lots of them. As many as you want."

Alarm spread through her. "You can't be serious, Tyler. We don't know what would happen to any child we created."

"If they're as beautiful, intelligent, and caring as you it won't matter."

She had to set him straight. The past two days turned her life upside down and she wasn't making sound decisions. Then his fingers stroked her sweet spot and he nuzzled her breast through the material, rubbing and sucking the tip of her nipple against the rough knit.

God, he knew how to touch her. She came with his name on her lips.

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"My turn," he growled, a possessive gleam in his eyes. He pulled her to her feet and pulled the dress off her until she stood before him in a lacy white bra and the garter-topped stockings. "I do love the way you avoid panties."

His trousers fell to the floor and he, too, had gone commando. His impressive erection jutted forth, demanding attention.

She crawled back onto the bed, staying on her hands and knees, thinking only how good it would feel to have him take her this way. Reaching beneath her, she spread her lips in invitation, watching as he covered his arousal with a condom. "Right here, Cowboy."

He bounced onto the bed behind her, gripping her waist, sliding his massive cock into her. He stretched and filled her channel before slowly pulling out and then pushing back in.

Summer matched his rhythm, letting him ride her at his pace. He increased speed, driving into her relentlessly. It felt so good the way he took her. Sure, confident, his hands stroking, grabbing, rubbing. Then his fingers were on her clit, teasing the hard pebble until waves of pleasure coursed through her body. "Harder, Cowboy, harder."

He obliged and then she was flying over a precipice, milking his cock, feeling his hot cum through the latex shoot deep inside her clutching walls.

Her arms gave way and she collapsed onto the bed, Tyler covering her with his large, hot body. "Am I hurting you?" he gasped.

Just shattering my heart, Cowboy. I know this isn't real; you're only trying to protect me from him.

"I have to be." He rolled over her, and then pulled her into the crook of his arm. "Kitten, I know you never planned on marrying me, but I intend to do all in my power to protect you until you're free from Scot's claim."

Bless him, he still didn't understand. All Tyler had done wouldn't matter if Scot wanted to fight for what he thought was his and Scot would challenge Tyler, she was sure of it.

Lucynda Storey

"I'll make love to you every night, every hour if it will remove his alpha status. And when he's gone, you can have your life back on your own terms."

The words barely registered as she stared at his skin. Summer couldn't speak as horror filled her. She'd changed Tyler's life irrevocably and no way would he ever find happiness in her arms again.

An ugly scab dotted Tyler's shoulder. He was infected, too.

Chapter Seven

Tears spilled in an uncontrolled flood from Summer's eyes. What the fuck had he said?

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nnnothing," she finally managed.

Like hell. When a woman said nothing, it meant something. He pulled her closer, tucked the blankets around them, and stroked her hair. She still smelled fresh from the quickie shower she'd taken at the truck stop shortly before their wedding, but a musky scent drifted to his nostrils, too. The unique smell of their union.

All he'd done was make love to her, talk about kids. Kids. "Ah, honey, I didn't mean to upset you with my talk about babies. If you don't think we should have them, we won't. I want you to be safe and happy is all."

God, it was so true. She'd gotten under his skin, even if she belonged in a padded room somewhere taking heavy duty psychotic medication.

"Don't you think," she hiccupped, "I know what you're doing? You can't protect me from the likes of Scot."

"The hell I can't," he exploded. "I married you, I've made love to you, I'll meet his challenge if that's what I have to do."

"You'd have me see you killed?" Sadness filled her eyes. "You'd rip my heart right out and stomp it into the mud. That's what you'd do to me if you fought him."

"Damnit, Summer. You come to me with this outrageous story and I'm acting on what you've shared."

"Yeah, fucking me was a real hardship. You got your jollies."

Her words slapped him, stung his heart. How could he explain, tell her he'd wanted her from the first day she drove onto the ranch to answer the ad he'd placed in the paper for a cook?

She pushed out of his arms and rolled away from him, stalking off toward the bathroom, her shapely ass swaying as she walked.

He shook his head. Maybe he'd fought it for eighteen months, but damn it, he was in love with Summer Donaldson and he'd do what he had to do to keep her in his life. Even face down the bastard who'd hurt her so badly she had to make up wild stories to keep Tyler at arms length.

He jumped from the bed, determined to explain his scattered thought process to the woman who set him off kilter so easily.

The shower pounded against the glass enclosure; steam rose, then condensed, rivulets ran down the side of the door and between the plush robes hanging outside, he glimpsed the woman within. His heart ached. Ached to take away her torment, ached to possess her again, ached to tell her he loved her.

She looked up at him when he opened the door and stepped in. Haunted. Sorrow filled her eyes along with a haunted, frightened look. "Wwwhat do you want now?"

Honest. Just be honest. He stepped closer and took her into his arms. "I want to hold you."

"Well, I don't want you to." She backed away.

Now was not the time to back down. He cornered her, bracing his arms on either side of her head. "Too fucking bad."

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"Tyler," she managed, before weeping took over in earnest.

He pulled her to his chest, wrapped her in his arms and let her cry. Naked, her vulnerability was blatant. He'd protect her, come hell or high water and from the sound of things, hell was coming first.

They stood in the shower until the water turned cold, quite a feat given their opulent surroundings. He turned off the stream and grabbed a thick terry robe from outside. "Here now, slip your arms into this." She didn't argue, just docilely followed his directions.

He donned a similar robe, then took her by the hand and led her to the sitting room of the suite. Stretching out with his back braced in a corner of the couch, he pulled her onto his lap, holding her against his chest. Her wet hair tickled his skin but he refrained from laughing. She was in his arms, where she belonged. Ruining the moment was not an option.

"Summer," he whispered against her hair. "I—"

She stretched up an arm and laid a finger against his lips. "Don't. Don't say anything. Just keep holding me like you care."

He pushed her back and stared into her eyes. "That's just it, Summer. I do care. A lot. I don't want him hurting you ever again. I love you."

She blinked and he watched her eyes grow round like a barn owl's. "Please, don't."

He inhaled deeply willing himself to stay calm. "Don't what? Admit the truth? I didn't think you'd want anything to do with an old cowboy like me. Younger men like Johnson...I thought they were more to your liking. It didn't stop me from wishing you were in my arms, from wanting to make love to you."

He kissed her. A brush of his lips against her forehead, her temple, and finally, her mouth. If not for the werewolf thing, they could be normal newlyweds celebrating the future ahead of them. But, they weren't normal. Far from it.

She ducked her head down, laying it against his chest. "Please, don't say anymore, Tyler."

Pretenses. They'd married with no true affection, no hope of a happy future together, just his promise to keep her safe. If what Summer said were true, it might even lead to a showdown with Scot Johnson.

A light bulb clicked on in his mind. "Summer," he whispered. "Look at me."

She did and everything he could hope for was in her eyes. Love.

Hadn't she said he'd stomp her heart in the mud if he fought Johnson?

Okay, so they'd done everything backwards. Got married, had sex, figured out they loved one another. At least, Tyler figured it out. She knew too, just hadn't admitted it out loud.

"Summer Donaldson Crockett, I love you."

She gasped and shook her head. She might not accept the truth, but she would listen to it. Tyler loved her, damn it, and he'd do what was needed to prove it to her.

He swung his legs off the couch and carried her to the bedroom. When he set her on her feet, she started to remove the robe.

Gently, he pulled the collar back together and cinched the belt. "I love you, got it? I want to sleep with you in my arms and wake up with you there for as long as you'll have me."

Panic flashed through her eyes, for only a moment, but he'd seen it. "We'll be fine. I promise."

"Tyler. I'm so sorry. I've dragged you into this whole mess. I never intended anything to go this far. I thought if you had sex with me, I could remove his alpha status."

She paced away from him, back toward the sitting area. He followed, reluctant to let her shoulder the responsibility for their current status alone. "I

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chose to marry you Summer. You didn't have to accept, but you did. In my mind, that means you care. Maybe more."

She turned and fixed a sad gaze on his face. "You've done more for me than I've ever had a right to expect. I do care for you."

He felt the smile spread across his face and he took her in his arms and swung her around. "That's the best news I've heard in a while."

"Please, oh god, please stop." She clung to his shoulders when he set her down. "It's not good news. I've ruined your life."

"Kitten, being with you is already better than what I'd imagined standing alone in my bedroom back at the ranch."

She parted his robe and her soft fingers traced his collarbone, —

"Ouch!" He winced. "Man, that's tender." He tipped his head to see the sensitive spot her fingers found. Marks in the form of an oval marked his shoulder. "Must have gotten them in the fight," he remarked.

Summer nodded her head. "Those are teeth marks. He bit you."

Tyler shrugged. He wasn't giving more credence to her belief that Johnson could turn either of them into a werewolf. "Come to bed. We need to rest."

* * * * *

"Fellas," Tyler called. "You may be wondering why Miss Summer is moving into the house." He motioned for her to stand next to him. "We're not shacking up, not leastwise the way you might think." He lifted her left hand. Warm, autumn sun glinted off the simple golden band. "Miss Summer is now Mrs. Crockett and our shacking is permanent."

The ranch hands whooped and hollered. Congratulations resounded off the barn walls and house. "Hey boss, are we gonna celebrate proper?"

"Well, now that you mention it, I thought we might have a reception of sorts on Saturday."

Summer gasped. The coming weekend would be the height of the full moon. Tyler would be in no condition to host a party. She had no idea what the change would be like for a man, but if the transmorphing was anything like hers, the last thing he'd want to do is celebrate.

"Tyler, darling," she sweetly intoned. "Don't you think that's a little too soon?"

"Nonsense, Kitten. We don't have a thing to hide and if we put it off the neighbors *will* talk."

He leaned over and kissed her. Another raucous cheer went up from the assembled cowboys. "Got to get busy, darlin'. Don't worry your head 'bout the party."

With a wink, he stepped off the porch and headed toward the barn.

* * * * *

Deep men's voices woke Summer late Friday night. Exhausted from party preparations she'd allowed herself the luxury of taking a little nap after dinner.

The sounds were hushed, as if the speakers were trying to stay quiet. She stood and looked for her husband to ask if he'd check and see what was going on when she realized Tyler wasn't there.

She ran to the window and glanced outside. The orange light of a fire in the pit and the muted light of a rising moon failed to reveal him. Several ranch hands were laying the iron racks for the pig roast. Burning oak permeated the air. Tyler, though, wasn't among the group making the roast ready for tomorrow's soiree.

Summer glanced at the sky again. Stars popped out in the sky, twinkled in the darkness as the moon began its ascent. *Oh, god. Where is he? The change...*

Summer's mind whirled. The first time you needed someone with you. Even Scot had been there for her during her initial transmorphing. She had to

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hurry, get to the small patch of trees beyond the barn where she could strip and change to wolf form without being seen.

She rushed out the front door, pausing briefly at the roasting pit. Anxiety knotted her stomach. "Any of you see Tyler?"

Stu smiled and tipped his hat. "Headed out north on Diablo. Said something about checking on a late dropping heifer."

Tyler was a good horseman but what would happen when the spirited Diablo discovered he carried a wolf on his back? The knot twisted tighter and nausea threatened. "Thanks, Stu."

Summer took off at a run for the corral. The last two nights the horses occupied the fenced area in lieu of the newly cleansed barn. She grabbed Glory's halter off the fence and searched for the paint. All Summer had to do was get Glory away from the hub of ranch activity and head north. With Tyler on horseback, changing so near the house was out of the question.

Like the devil chased her, Summer on Glory's back, raced away from the corral into the deepening night.

Glory's hooves pounded on the hard ground, eating up yard after yard of scrub covered prairie. Pain shot through Summer, gripping her innards in a vicious cramp. "Woah, girl."

She slipped off the horse and led her toward the faint sound of tumbling water. Scraggly brush dotted the sandy edges and she tethered Glory near enough the water the horse could drink.

Another spasm tore through Summer and an agonized groan left her mouth. She fell to the ground writhing, crawling away in an attempt to distance herself from the horse. No use sending it running. Glory would only head home riderless, and then the ranch hands would be out searching.

She inhaled deeply, trying to stay relaxed as the muscles and bones in her body shifted. Fighting only created tension which led to pulled muscles and more pain than necessary.

A moment later, Summer lifted her snout and sniffed. Her ears perked and she listened. Listened for the mournful howl of a man who didn't understand what he'd become.

She caught his scent and stepped out of her clothing to lope away leaving Glory white-eyed and wild. The horse would calm once Summer cleared the area. Following the creek bed, she ran, nose and ears high, seeking any sign of Tyler.

When the moon had risen above the horizon, she found him, curled in a heap, whimpering. His clothes were on the dirt nearby and she spotted his wedding band. She lay down next to him and licked his muzzle. *Relax, Tyler. It's the only way to get through the change.*

He lifted his canine head. Even as a wolf he was devastatingly handsome.

Summer? You're...you're...a wolf?

It's been what I've been trying to tell you, Einstein. Come on, you need to try and stand and figure out how to walk on four legs.

I'm not a werewolf.

She looked into his brown wolf eyes flecked with green, and then nudged him until he stood. *Slowly. We'll get you some water at the creek. And then you'll see the truth.*

How can I talk to you?

Telepathy mostly. If I howled or yipped, you'd understand that too.

She pushed behind his shoulder and he made a few staggering steps in the direction of the water. *Not bad. You'll catch on in no time.*

This isn't happening to me, he messaged. You're the one that's delusional, not me.

Something in his mental tone pushed her anger button. *When are you going to believe me Tyler? You saw the mark on my shoulder, the bite on yours, and moments ago you were curled up on the ground in agony.* She shoved him again with her snout, refusing to relent until he saw his reflection in the water.

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He stared into the barely moving stream and she knew he tried to comprehend his new were status. He sat back on his haunches and shook his canine head. In the night, a wolf howled. Several bayed back.

Johnson?

She had to be honest. They had a lot to do before Tyler's attempt to challenge for pack leadership. *Yes. And you're nowhere near ready to face him. Another howl rent the air. From the sound of it, he's not too happy I'm unavailable. You'll be getting the crash course, on the run.*

Chapter Eight

Tyler woke in the antique four-poster bed he'd inherited from his grandparents. He rubbed his eyes. The hellish nightmare faded. Every muscle in his body ached, as if he'd been performing calisthenics for hours on end.

"God, what happened to me? I feel like I had a night on the town with none of the fun."

To his surprise, a sultry voice answered his rhetorical question from across the room. "You *were* out all night, Tyler. You've only slept four hours."

"Summer? I thought you'd be in the kitchen."

He twisted his head and glanced at the clock. "Shit it's eight. I should have been working hours ago. I've never been late to chores."

He started to push out of bed, then collapsed, another groan escaping his lips. "What's wrong with me?"

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I'm so sorry, I should have been with you from the very beginning."

"Beginning of what?"

"Do you remember anything from last night?" The worry in her voice matched what he saw in her eyes.

"I dreamt I was running through the scrub." Hazy pieces filtered into his consciousness. "I fought a wolf." He let loose a chuckle. "Must have been all that werewolf stuff you've been telling me about."

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She lifted his hand and kissed it. "Tyler, it wasn't a dream. Look."

Summer turned his hand until the palm faced him. "Those scratches are from your run-ins with ground cactus."

Thin scratches and small punctures dotted his hands. "I don't understand."

"You morphed last night. The wolf you fought with was me." She unbuttoned her blouse and let it slip down her shoulder. An ugly bruise colored her skin.

"I did that?" He shook his head in denial. "I'd never hurt you."

"I was trying to teach you...help you adjust to your new form."

"My new form..." He jack-knifed into a sitting position. "Owww." He rubbed the small of his back. "Where's Diablo?"

"He's okay, just a few scratches on his back from where you tried to hang on in the early stages. Stu found him outside the corral and tended him. He had a lot of questions; I answered the best I could."

"I must have taken a hell of a fall to hurt like this. Every muscle aches."

He watched her open a jar on the dresser and return to sit next to him on the bed.

"This liniment stinks, but it will help your muscles." With soothing, firm motions, she rubbed the cream into his skin. "Tyler, you didn't fall. The more you morph, the easier it will be on your body."

"Look, I fell. I didn't morph and I sure as hell didn't put that bruise on your shoulder."

Summer sighed. "You were there and still you refuse to believe what happened. You saw the evidence yourself when you looked at your reflection in the creek."

He gripped the bedclothes. No way could she know what he dreamt or what happened to him after his fall. Summer wasn't there. "What did you say?"

"I said you saw your wolf reflection last night in the water. Afterwards you sat back on your haunches and heard Scot's howl. I taught you some

rudimentary things about fighting as a wolf. You caught on real well, as my shoulder proves.”

Fury and sadness mingled in his chest. Johnson had done this to him, to her. She’d been telling the truth and he hadn’t believed a single word. It was the only explanation for how she knew what had been in his head. Remorse filled him. “Kitten, I’m sorry. I really didn’t believe this was possible.”

“If it means anything, I had a hard time with it too.” She kissed his temple. “Now, turn over. I’ll work on your back. You need to let the ointment work and you need your rest. Tonight’s another full moon and the party.”

He groaned and turned over. How the hell were they going to explain turning into wolves? “The party. What’s going to happen tonight?”

Her hands rubbed the ointment into his back. Damn, despite the stench and aches, the way she massaged his muscles actually helped ease the pain.

“I’ve been thinking about that. First thing is once we’re done talking we need to sleep. We’ll need every advantage we can have if Scot shows up.”

“Johnson? Why would he show his face around here? If he knows we’re married, then he can’t make a scene and he can’t make possessive claims.”

“No, not in human form. But, based on his howls, he was mighty pissed last night when he couldn’t find me. He’ll show tonight in wolf form and claim me.”

Great. Another thing to deal with. Wasn’t the whole wolf thing enough? “Are you sure? About it all?”

The sigh he heard was exasperated. “Yes. Now, what I’m thinking is this...”

* * * * *

The smell of roasting pig drifted on the air, scented with oak coals. Picnic tables arrived from surrounding ranches and were soon filled with side dishes and hungry guests. Beer and wine flowed generously. All in all, it was a great

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reception, but it didn't stop Summer from worrying when Scot Johnson would make his appearance.

Someone clinked something against a cattle bell. "Kiss, kiss, kiss," rose from the throng.

Tyler managed to grasp her hand and spin her into his arms. He appeared quite recovered from his exertions the night before. Tilting his head, he slid his lips across hers for a small eternity, to the roar of the crowd.

When Summer finally managed to break off the kiss, her cheeks were thoroughly heated. "Scoundrel," she playfully whispered.

"Mrs. Crockett, you're entirely too delectable," Tyler returned with a smile. He nuzzled her ear. "I can't wait to have my way with you later tonight."

Delightful shivers ran through her, heating up a much more private part of her body. "Is that so, Cowboy?"

"You better believe it, ma'am," he drawled.

"Hey, you two lovebirds," a wrangler called. "Before you go off beyond the trees to do whatever it is you, ahem, do behind trees...how about we all get a chance to welcome the new bride to the ranch properly?"

Tyler led her closer to the group of ranch employees waiting to personalize their congratulations. "Be gentle on her fellas, she still needs to make you breakfast."

The hands laughed and surrounded them. Stu, first in line, gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. "Be happy Miss Summer," he wished her.

The simple statement blanketed her in warmth. Despite her fondest hopes and deep seated fears, she'd found unexpected inner peace. There was ugliness yet to come, but with Tyler by her side, she was confident she'd see it through.

A group of ladies surrounded Tyler, no doubt congratulating him in similar manner. Summer accepted the well wishes of their guests. Long minutes passed. She adored the hands, really, but the need to be with Tyler consumed her.

The afternoon waned and it wouldn't be long before the moon rose; she'd be with him during the change tonight no matter what. Finally free, she started toward Tyler.

"Summer." The low voice froze her mid-stride.

Swallowing hard, she turned to face Scot Johnson. "I didn't think you'd have the balls to show up here."

"Do you think a piece of paper makes a difference? I'm your alpha mate and I'll be waiting for you tonight." He sniffed. "He hasn't had all of you yet. My scent isn't entirely obliterated."

The smile he gave lifted the tiny hairs on her skin in alarm. He stared at her chest a long while before tracing his forefinger down the side of her mouth. "I look forward to fucking you later, darlin'."

Frozen to the spot, all she could do was stare as he turned and stalked away, past the barn and into the early dusk.

Dusk! They had to get a move on if they didn't want their guests to see them turn into animals.

She found Tyler still ensconced in a bevy of beautiful women. She smiled, concealing the ball of fear Scot's threat created in the pit of her stomach, and focused on remembering how many women waited for him in the kissing booth line.

Then she recalled the fight and Scot's insinuations. "Excuse me ladies." She sidled up to Tyler, purring. "But my husband promised me a special surprise..." she winked, "...upstairs."

A few women nodded knowingly and the younger ones grinned. "You go girlfriend, get some for me," said a woman she didn't recognize.

If only it were that simple. They needed to get to the creek and prepare for the change. The making love subterfuge would see them through the late evening hours until the hands ushered straggling guests to their vehicles.

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In their bedroom, she slipped her wedding band off her finger, thankful she'd been able to recover both gold rings when the sun rose this morning. "Leave everything valuable here on the dresser," she whispered. "It's too easy to lose things out there."

Summer wanted to run. Run from Scot, run from Tyler, run from the situation she'd created at the Bar C, the danger she'd placed Tyler in. But she couldn't run. Tyler was too vulnerable. He didn't know enough about fighting as a wolf. She'd seen what Scot was capable of in wolf form.

If she left Tyler now, even in an attempt to lure Scot away, she knew, deep down, the damage to Tyler physically and emotionally would devastate him.

It wouldn't do her much good either. Running wasn't an option. His dedication to her while laudable was more. In Vegas, she'd seen it in his eyes, heard it in his confession. Tyler Crockett was truly in love with her.

To be honest, she just hadn't been bold enough to believe his confession was anything more than a heroic, selfless act to save her from Scot. She'd acknowledged neither her feelings nor his.

She spun on her heels and into Tyler. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry," he uttered at the same time, surrounding her with his strong arms. "I was following through on your suggestion." He moved his arm and opened his hand. In the palm was his wedding ring. "I really don't want to take it off."

"I understand." A lump formed in her throat, but somehow she managed to squeak out her next words. "I feel the same."

"Do you," he queried softly.

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. "Yes," she answered simply.

The answer seemed to satisfy him. He lightly kissed her. "What next?"

"Get down to the creek and follow it as far as we can before we morph."

* * * * *

They hadn't gone far. A couple of miles, three at the most. Summer insisted they strip and hide their clothes, another step to slow Johnson's pursuit, if the coward would actually show his face. Tyler doubted the man would be so brave.

Let's keep to the water, she telepathed.

He nodded his snout in agreement and trudged forward. Changing into a wolf hurt like a bitch but was easier this time. Adjusting to this alteration of his life would take some time to get used to and a hell of a lot more mental acceptance than he felt he had in him right now. It was too fucking weird.

Stop right there, Crockett. The gravelly voice vaguely sounded like Johnson.

Tyler glanced in the direction of the growl. Just ahead, a large wolf stood with several other canines behind him. *Stay behind me, Summer. I'll handle him.*

The wolf leapt from the top of the shallow creek gulch, preventing Tyler from moving forward. A feral growl rose from deep within, curling his upper lip back.

You have something that belongs to me, Crockett.

I don't have a thing that belongs to you, Johnson.

Johnson growled. *She's mine. You know it.*

She is not a thing. And Summer is married to me. Get the fuck out of here. You're not welcome in our lives or on my ranch.

I'm the alpha. I have rights you're violating.

You can't own a person.

Yeah, well, in case you haven't noticed Crockett, we aren't exactly people right now.

Low growls drifted from the top of the shallow canyon. Three large wolves stood like sentinels overseeing them. Tyler didn't know much about wolf protocol...would Johnson's gang descend and come to their leader's aid?

I noticed you bastard. Don't give people a choice in this werewolf business do you? Seems you don't care much for the concept of freedom at all.

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In the wild, Crockett, there is only one law. Mine. And my word goes. Johnson snarled. *Unless you want to challenge me for rule of the pack.*

One on one? Finish what we started at the Festival?

Johnson nodded with his snout. *Unless you're too chicken and are going to hide behind your bitch again.*

Behind him, Summer growled. *I'll take you,* Tyler responded, *one on one...as long as your pack doesn't interfere.*

So you challenge me?

Yes.

Don't do this Tyler!

He hated hearing the begging in her voice, but if he didn't deal with Johnson right now, his shadow would taint every moment of their lives; they'd never have a chance to be happy. Summer needed this resolved once and for all.

Tyler turned to explain. *I have to –*

Summer yowled a warning, long, loud, intensely high.

Turning around, Tyler met Johnson's leap with the heavy side of his body and was knocked to the ground. Johnson's jaw snapped at Tyler's neck.

Regaining his feet, Tyler sought an opening. Johnson surged forward his teeth gleaming in the moonlight. With a snarl, Tyler avoided the attack and circled his adversary.

He kept focused on Johnson, waiting for an opportunity to capitalize on a mistake. Carefully, Tyler edged them further down the creek bed, toward an area where the arroyo edges weren't quite as high and where scrub pine and other plants grew between small boulders. Maybe he could gain some leverage over the more experienced wolf.

For a split second, Johnson turned his head and Tyler lunged forward. Fur flew along with unrestrained yelps of pain. Tyler's teeth sunk into Johnson's left shoulder. Blood seeped into his mouth and he quickly relinquished his hold.

The other wolf limped away a few steps, blood trickling down his fur, his hate-filled eyes fixed on Tyler's.

This time, Johnson attacked. Tyler dropped his head slightly and swung upward, catching Johnson under his jaw. A sickening crack echoed in the shallow canyon.

The strike left Tyler dazed. He shook his head and tried to focus on Johnson, tried to clear the double image he saw of two wolves coming at him.

He leapt toward the right wolf and landed in a rolling heap on pebbled-studded sand, his weight driving the larger of small stones into his skin beneath the fur. Damn! He jumped to his feet in time to avoid a lunge from Johnson.

Give up, Crockett. Johnson's voice was loud but slurred, as if he couldn't talk correctly. Had Tyler managed to dislocate Johnson's jaw?

Not a chance, Tyler answered. Too much was at stake to quit now.

With a snarl, Tyler jumped again, this time landing closer to the widening of the creek and the tools he hoped to use. The pack moved down the ridge, keeping their distance and watching the fight from above.

They circled one another again and each pass brought Tyler closer to the rocks. If he could get Johnson to follow him up and then—

Johnson jumped, his jaw clamping onto Tyler's front leg and breaking the bone just above his paw. Johnson released the limb quickly, howling in pain from the bite Tyler inflicted on Johnson's leg.

Tyler joined him, their howls echoing off the banks of the arroyo.

Climbing the rocks would be damn difficult now, but he had to do it. If he could knock Johnson out...

He leapt to a fallen ponderosa pine. Long, sharp needles poked at him, but the thick fur kept them from embedding in his skin. Landing on the broken leg sent a wave of pain through his body and a subdued cry issued from his clenched jaw. Hopefully, there wouldn't be many more jumps.

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Johnson followed suit, a cry of pain coming from his mouth as well. They both had bad legs now.

Tyler scrambled up the next series of rocks until he was on the edge of the narrow canyon. At the top, he held his breath, waiting for his opportunity to pounce on Johnson.

He didn't wait long. As soon as Johnson got his rear legs onto the top of the arroyo, Tyler barreled into him. Together, Tyler and Johnson flew over the precipice.

Chapter Nine

Tyler woke with the sun streaming into his face, cold water soaking his feet. He ached liked he'd been hit with a cattle truck. Slowly, the events of the night came back to him. He sat up looking for Summer and the other wolves and gasped as a spasm of pain coursed through his body.

He saw her next to another man and heard her voice drift over the air. "He's got a couple broken ribs I think. A nasty shoulder cut, and his mouth doesn't look right to me."

A male voice he didn't recognize responded. "We'll get some pants on him and then get him some help."

"Is this over," Tyler called.

Summer hurried over to him, her eyes filled with emotion he couldn't define. "Good to see you awake handsome," she whispered. "Yeah, it's over. Everyone who saw the fight saw you beat Scot." She gave him a once over. "What do you say to letting me get some pants on you?"

He nodded and looked at his swollen arm. "I think it's broken."

"We have to be careful with it. You might have gotten a concussion, too. We couldn't do much but wait until all of us morphed back to human form."

Summer led him to a low wall of sand where a part of the arroyo collapsed. At the top was his truck. "How —

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"Most of us have been back to *normal* long enough to start getting help. Our story is the two of you were out racing your horses to settle your dispute. Your horse threw you when it stepped into a hole...his threw him when he unexpectedly surprised a lone wolf...had to explain the bites somehow."

He let her help him into the truck. Every clump of dirt they drove over jostled his arm though Summer had done her best to immobilize it. Thank heavens the blacktop wasn't too far. Even the doctor in the emergency room commented on the good job done.

"Not the best way to start a marriage," he'd commented, giving Tyler some Vicodin along with a prescription for more of the same right before he went to work setting his arm. "Damn foolish."

What could he say? Fighting with Johnson hadn't been his idea and didn't do much for the honeymoon period newlyweds were supposed to have. "Won't find an argument there, doc."

He winced as the plaster wrap was applied, the pain throbbing through his arm. Hopefully, the analgesic would kick in, the sooner the better. But not before he took a look at Scot Johnson and had a few final words with him.

Heat engulfed his forearm quickly followed by intense cold. The plaster dried and Tyler's arm was put into a sling. His release papers sat on a rolling hospital cart. This ordeal was about over. He stood and a wave of dizziness crested over him.

"Do you have someone here that can drive you home?"

"Yeah, my wife."

My wife. He was married, to Summer, to a remarkable woman, a woman who'd done her best to right her life and keep him from succumbing to the unnatural affliction now possessing his body. Their disease had brought them together, nearly tore them physically apart. What did the future have in store?

"Mrs. Crockett," the doctor called. "Your husband could use some help."

Could he ever. He needed her to deal with this werewolf-ism, needed her to keep him grounded in reality, to help him maintain the ranch, but more than that he needed her to love him. But he couldn't force that from her, not when she hadn't told him what he could see was in her heart.

He'd made a promise to himself that once Scot Johnson had been dealt with he'd let her make her own decisions regarding her future.

"Yes, Doctor?"

Her sweet voice, full of concern, wrapped gentle tendrils around his heart. It would hurt to let her go, now that he had a small taste of what loving her was like.

"I'm releasing Mr. Crockett into your care as soon as you sign these papers. He has his prescription for pain meds and he'll need them for a day or two, which means he shouldn't be operating any mechanical equipment. His judgment isn't going to be one hundred percent while he's on them."

Tyler watched her sign the release papers. A smile tugged the corner of his mouth upward.

She'd signed them Summer Crockett.

* * * * *

"I don't want to leave town."

Tyler's slurred words concerned her. He needed to get home, recuperate in his own bed, go through another night of the change.

"We can't stay here, there's still one more night—"

"Find a hotel. I just want to sleep...not in that truck."

She stifled a smile. Other than this last drive they'd done a host of things in his truck and sleep hadn't been one of them. Maybe staying in a place with a Jacuzzi wouldn't be such a bad idea. Once Tyler went through the change a final time this month, his muscles would appreciate a bit of pampering.

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"Good idea, Cowboy. We could both use some rest. I'll pull into the first decent place I see."

In the passenger seat, Tyler nodded.

After checking several hotels, *The Horseman's Holiday* was the first place that met her requirements. At the front desk she'd discovered a honeymoon suite housed a deep tub with Jacuzzi jets and a king-sized bed and she rented it on the spot. A bellhop volunteered to bring their bags up and Summer just smiled. "We won't be needing them."

The young man blushed three shades of red, nodded, then went back to his post at the end of the desk. With key in hand and an arm around Tyler's waist they were able to make it to the lush room.

Sitting Tyler on the bed, she stripped what she could of his clothes off him. "Your cast is going to be a problem during the change."

"What do you mean," he asked over a yawn.

"Your body mass changes shape. You could conceivably slide out of your cast."

"Won't happen, Kitten." He yawned again and stretched out. "Too tired to move."

With that he turned over and closed his eyes.

There was nothing Summer could do except prepare herself. Naked, she crawled onto the bed next to him where she could keep watch, hold him still if necessary.

* * * * *

They made it through the last night of the change for the month. A single shaft of bright light entered the room through the gap in the curtains, illuminating Tyler's face. His jaw, clenched tight, revealed the pain he held in silence.

Summer sprung from the bed. "We didn't fill the script. I have some Tylenol if you want to try that."

"Yeah, that would help," he moaned.

"I'm all for staying here another day and letting you rest. I can get to a pharmacy and get your prescription filled."

"Good. I need to see Johnson before we go back to the ranch."

Tyler slept most of the day. It took a while to get his pain under control, but once he'd fallen deep asleep, Summer soaked in the tub, the bubbling streams of hot water pummeling her aching muscles.

What further could Tyler want with Scot? He'd wrested leadership status from Scot and would now reign as the pack's alpha.

After a forty-five minute soak where her fingers and toes shriveled and looked like prunes, she climbed into bed with Tyler. To her surprise, he was awake.

"How ya feeling, Cowboy?"

"I've been better."

She gave him a wan smile. "I can imagine. You should still be sleeping. It's the best thing for your body right now."

He shook his head. "You're the best thing for my body right now."

"Cowboy, that just isn't smart. You're not quite yourself with that Vicodin in your system."

"Stay with me tonight."

"I'm not going anywhere, Tyler." She kissed his forehead, his cheek, then brushed her lips across his. "Now go back to sleep."

* * * * *

Things That Go Bump in the Night

Tyler insisted on calling the hospital to check on Scot Johnson, and then he insisted on visiting him once they checked out. Summer didn't get it. Why would he want anything to do ever again with Johnson?

They pushed open the door to Scot's room shortly after a doctor and nurse left and two of his buddies entered. Scot looked up at them through a healing black and blue eye. "What do *you* want?"

Summer wasn't sure who he was directing the question to but she didn't get a chance to answer.

"I want you to acknowledge that you lost, Johnson. That you no longer have a *claim* on Summer. That you'll never set foot on the Bar C again, that you'll head north...to Wyoming."

A sneer erupted on Scot's face. For a moment, Summer thought he would continue his claim, promise another confrontation. He took a deep breath and moaned. The fight left Scot's face. "Fuck," he gasped as he gripped the sheets of the hospital bed, his knuckles turning white. "Yeah, I'm outta here as soon as they let me go."

"Take whoever wants to go with you, too. But know this, Johnson," Tyler advanced closer, a deadly glare in his eyes. "I don't want to hear about a new pack starting there. *People* have choices. *You* aren't God; *you* don't infect someone for the hell of it because you can. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Scot mumbled. "Get the fuck out of my room."

Tyler turned toward the visitors in the room. "You two," Tyler commanded. "You heard the man; you're witnesses to his," he took a deep breath, "his surrender. "If he breaks his word and shows back up in our pack territory he'll pay the ultimate price."

The two men nodded vigorously, the taller of the two staring at Tyler with a slack jaw, as if he'd been shocked that Tyler would show in Scot's room. Would they stay with Scot, or submit to the new pack leadership?

Summer placed her arm around Tyler and led him from the room and to the truck.

She drove back to the ranch during the late afternoon. The trip, outside of the low volume of the radio, had been completed in silence. Every time she glanced at Tyler, his eyes had been closed. At first, she thought he slept, but as they neared the ranch she saw grimaces of pain etch his face.

Why did he keep his silence? Between the pain and the final showdown with Scot, he surely could have said something. Just after sunset she broke the unnatural stillness. "We're almost home."

Home. Now there was a concept. A few weeks ago she'd given her notice, ready to move on in order to escape the life foisted on her by Scot.

Tyler still kept to himself. She winced on his behalf for every bump they hit on the dirt road leading to the ranch house. How many more times would she drive this road?

He'd fulfilled his promise to protect her. Now that Tyler had rid her of Scot, would he get rid of her, too?

She pulled in front of the house, her stomach clenched. She should go. His life was complicated enough without keeping her in the mix.

What would be her fate with this man? Without him?

She reached over to unbuckle the seatbelt and he stopped her with his good arm. "No. Before we go back in, we have something to resolve between us."

A lump of fear formed in her throat. "Look, the doc said the medicine—"

"I'm not impaired. This has nothing to do with my injury. It has to do with you. With a promise I made."

"I see," she whispered, unable to look Tyler in the eyes.

"I don't think you do. I promised I'd keep you safe from Johnson when I married you. I also made a promise to myself...that I'd let you go once I took care of him."

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"I'll pack my things," she sniffed, fighting back her tears. Leaving Tyler sliced her heart. In a short time, they'd been through a lot. But a promise was a promise and he'd kept his.

"Is that what you want, Summer?"

Her gaze snapped to his face. Unshed tears glistened in his eyes.

"I don't understand. You want me to stay?"

"Hell, Summer, I meant it when I said I loved you. That wasn't a yarn to make you feel good about having sex with me or a tall tale to make you stay."

"But what about your promise?"

"I promised myself you'd have a choice in leaving or staying. You're free from Scot, but I don't want you obligated to stay with me because of it. I'll grant you a divorce if that's what you want, if that's what will make you happy."

She sidled closer to him. "What I want is you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, Tyler Crockett. I love you." She ran her hand along his thigh. "Every glorious inch. I love your old-fashioned chivalry, the way you insisted on making sure there was an understanding between you and Scot, the way you run the ranch, the way you get out there and work next to the cowpokes."

Her hand drifted higher and caressed his groin.

"Is that all you love?" he gasped.

Beneath her palm, she felt him swell. "I love the way you protected me, the way you touch my body, the way you make love to me."

She eased the zipper of his jeans down. "I love the way you respond to me." She reached into his briefs and gripped his growing erection.

Tyler's moan of pleasure set her heart beating quickly. There were so many things to love about him. She could spend hours delineating the traits that attracted her to him. But doing so would get in the way of her showing him her love. "I love how you taste."

Lucynda Storey

She withdrew his length. Each firm stroke brought another grunt. "Am I hurting you," she teased.

"You will if you don't stay here, with me, as my wife."

"I promise, Cowboy, I'll do my best to never hurt you."

With that, she wrapped her lips around his cock and pulled him deeply into her mouth.

The End

Things That Go Bump in the Night

We hope you enjoyed this erotic western by Lucynda Storey. Lucynda has several stories available in our virtual bookstore at www.AspenMountainPress.com Please stop by and pick up another of her scintillating tales.

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