

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT

TRACEY H.
KITTS

Sex Symbol

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Lucy Harper always thought of herself as an ordinary woman, but she suddenly finds herself in extraordinary circumstances. Her sleepy hometown of Peace, Mississippi, turns out to be far from peaceful, what with shapeshifters, vampires and other departures from the “good ol’ Southern boy” stereotype cropping up. Her best friends are all hiding devastating secrets. Her ex-boyfriend is suddenly interested in making up. Her sexy new boyfriend is not only the hottest guy she’s ever met, he’s got some pretty big secrets himself, including what he really is and what he does—besides providing the best sex she’s ever had, that is.

And her new tattoo might be more than a picture of her favorite flower—according to the local werewolf pack, it’s a “sex symbol”. There may be a fight to the death over who gets to claim her as mate.

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SEX SYMBOL

Tracey H. Kitts

Dedication

To Andrew, without whom this work would not be possible.

Chapter One

Something sexy this way comes

My next-door neighbor was the hottest thing on two legs. No, really. You should see him. There is no way to accurately describe a man like this, but I can give you the basics. He's around six foot four with short, shaggy brown hair and a body that could cause heart failure. I didn't know anything about him except the way watching him each morning made me feel.

Our small, sleepy little community was what I'd always categorized as "dead". That is, until three weeks ago when he moved into town. The house next door to me had been vacant for two years. No one was murdered there or anything sensational. The real estate market was poor and no one had been interested. Most people didn't want to live in the middle of nowhere. There were two kinds of people here—the kind who were born here and the kind looking to escape from something somewhere else. I was born here.

I'd seen plenty of others come and go, but nothing like him. The privacy fence still allowed me a fairly good view. Early each morning I'd found him working. While I enjoyed my cup of coffee on the front porch he toiled away. Digging something from the look of it. I could clearly see he had a shovel, but that was about it. Three weeks of digging. What the hell was he planting? A jungle?

I had never been shy. So why was I just watching him? I couldn't say except that maybe I was just enjoying the view. He worked in jeans, without a shirt. The muscles of his back flexed and rippled beneath the skin as he bent to his task once more. I could only see from his chest up above the fence. But that was more than enough. Surely he knew I was watching? Then again, he never looked up.

At first I thought he was working on his garden. You know, new house, new start. Maybe he just wanted to freshen up the old place? But he hadn't bothered to repaint the chipping shutters and I had yet to see him bring any pots, fertilizer or plants into his yard.

He had, however, brought the most amazing body I'd ever seen. And he brought it outside every morning. I wanted to speak to him even though I didn't have the slightest idea what to say. "Hey there, I've been watching you for three weeks. Nice abs." I laughed at the very idea, then quickly put a hand over my mouth. He must have heard me.

But he never looked up and I took another sip of my coffee. Hmm. It needed more sugar. And from the way I was reacting to the sight of a little male flesh, so did I. Just as I was making a mental note to buy some more batteries, an old beat-up red truck came pulling into my yard.

"Aren't you ready yet?"

Justina crawled from the vehicle like her feet were made of lead. She was not a morning person. For that matter, neither was I. Her long black hair was pinned back in a ponytail that looked tight enough to give her an eye lift as a bonus for wearing it. Justina was not born here.

She'd moved here two years ago after a final confrontation with her violent boyfriend. He hit her for what she said was "the last time". When I asked what happened to him she only gave me a dark look in reply. I'd never asked again. It was her secret and if she didn't want to tell me, that was fine. I trusted her like I didn't trust even my family. I'd already decided at this point that even if she'd killed him it wouldn't have mattered. From what I knew, the bastard had it coming.

Her knee-high combat boots creaked as she walked toward the front steps and one of the straps on her magenta tank top slipped down her shoulder.

"Lucy! Are you even listening to me? What the fuck could be so...*interesting*?"

By the end of the question her tone had obviously changed. I looked to find her watching my new neighbor with visible interest.

"Nice, huh?" I asked. "That's my new neighbor."

"What's his name?"

"Don't know."

"How long has he been here?"

"Three weeks."

She crossed her arms in irritation and her ponytail shook. "Three weeks and you don't even know his name?"

I took another sip of coffee. "Nope."

"What have you been doing? Sitting out here and watching him?"

"Every morning, yes."

She laughed. "You're unbelievable." Justina shivered and ran her hands up and down her arms. "I haven't gotten used to the weather here yet. One day it's hot, the next cold. And how long does the goddamned summer last?"

"Welcome to the South, Stina."

Her smirk might strike some as rude, but I had come to understand that was about as close as she ever came to a smile.

"You want some coffee?"

She took one look at my purple bathrobe and put her hands on her hips, clearly impatient to get started.

"What? I'm dressed under here. I had a chill."

"Fine. Coffee, for the road. Get a move on, *beyotch*, we've got supplies to look for."

Justina and I own a decorating business. We sell all sorts of things, candles, and flower arrangements both fresh and artificial. We've got paintings from local artists,

plus we even make our own soap. Oh, and I almost forgot, we do weddings. Stina isn't too fond of that part of the venture, but it is highly profitable in springtime. Our shop, Passionate Petals, has been up and running for a year and a half now.

The old floorboards in the foyer creaked beneath our feet as we made our way back into the house. The hardwood floors were one of the few things I had not remodeled after purchasing the house. Sure they were a bit scuffed up, but I considered that "character". I liked character, whether I was looking at a home or someone's face. It needed a few flaws in order to be perfect. A contradiction by most standards, I know. But it made sense to me.

Justina followed me into the kitchen and flung herself down at the breakfast table as if she were bone-tired.

I took off my robe and tossed it onto the back of one of the chairs. I was wearing a pair of faded jeans and a tight green t-shirt that said, "I love cheese." Stina had gotten it for me as a joke. I'm lactose intolerant.

I got out some of my "to go" cups from the cabinet and started by putting a heaping scoop of sugar in Justina's cup.

"You could probably get a better look at your neighbor from here," Justina said, nodding toward the french doors that opened onto my patio.

"Probably, but I'm not going to. It's bad enough that I watch him like some kind of pervert every morning."

She laughed. "Oh, so now you're a pervert?"

"I always take my coffee on the porch when the weather is nice. I went out one morning and he just happened to be there." I snickered. "And I happened to enjoy the view enough that I went out early the next day."

I handed her the coffee and she took a sip, waving her hand as she burned her tongue. Stina never changed. Every time she drank something hot she couldn't wait for it to cool. And every time she'd say, "Burnt my fucking tongue."

I picked up my own travel mug and headed toward the door. "Come on then. You're the one who wanted to get an early start." As I pulled on my black leather jacket I asked, "Did you bring the list?"

Justina slapped her back pocket. "Yep."

While I locked the front door behind us I caught her taking in the view again.

"Does he always work without a shirt?"

I couldn't hide the grin as I turned and took her by the arm. "Yep." I led Justina down the steps while she kept glancing back over her shoulder at the hunk next door.

"I thought you switched sides," I teased.

She sighed. "I tried. Hell, I'm sick of men, it sounded like a good idea at the time." We both laughed. "I'm just not attracted to other women. I can appreciate whether or not someone is beautiful, but that doesn't mean I want to get with them, you know?"

"Yeah, I understand. I'm an artist, remember? I appreciate the human body the way people around here think is just *pre-verted*." She laughed at the way I deliberately mispronounced the word.

We stopped for Justina to get her wallet out of her truck. She hated to carry a purse. Instead she had a colorful wallet to match almost every outfit. If she ever carried a bag it was because she was traveling or needed somewhere to put tampons.

My SUV was much more suited to what we had to do today. I'd been thinking of repainting the plain white vehicle for a while now, but couldn't decide what I wanted. I didn't want an ordinary paint job. I wanted something decorative.

Justina fidgeted on the lawn while I backed out. I don't think I'd ever seen her stand completely still. She checked her pocket three times to be sure she had cigarettes before I could get the garage door closed. Her pale blue eyes always looked haunted, but some days were worse than others. It looked as if today was going to be one of those days. I knew she'd been through a lot, but she never elaborated. Justina just wasn't that sort of person. Every now and then she'd say something about her past, but it was rare. She knew I was here for her if she ever decided to talk. However for the moment she seemed content to roll down her window and chain smoke.

"Good luck with the hole digging, hot stuff!" she yelled as we drove past my neighbor's house.

"You bitch!" I laughed. "I can't believe you just did that."

Chapter Two

Supplies and alibis

We continued to suffer from bouts of laughter until we were out of town. Peace, Mississippi, is a good ways from what most people would consider “civilization”. But it’s still within driving distance of some of the larger cities like Biloxi and Gulfport. I enjoy the isolation just as much as I enjoy an occasional trip to the city.

We were just outside of Biloxi at a little shop called Mama’s. We could have had all our supplies shipped directly to the shop, but both of us enjoyed the trip once a month. Of course there were lots of things we *did* order online, but we got all our soap and candle making supplies from Mama’s.

Edward, whose mother actually started the shop, met us at the door.

“Good morning, ladies. Is it that time already?”

His blond hair and blue eyes were enough to make anyone swoon. And the way his ass filled out those jeans wasn’t bad either.

“Yeah, it’s that time of the month,” Justina blurted out.

Edward and I exchanged a funny look and she turned dark enough to almost match her magenta top.

“I’m just gonna go look at some oil. I mean um, pick out some essential oils for the sap, um, soap. Fuck, I’m going over there.”

Edward smiled and turned his attention back to me.

“And how are things with you, little red?”

His nickname for me always made me smile. I’m five foot three with what Justina describes as “glow-in-the-dark” red hair. It reaches to the middle of my back and I prefer to wear it down.

“I’m not little, Edward. I’m fun size.”

He laughed. “I’ve got your stuff ready. You want to have a look around first?”

“Yeah. I’m going to make sure Justina found the oils.”

At the mention of my friend his smile grew wider. I had to resist the urge to try to play matchmaker. Justina was still so distrustful of men I wasn’t sure she could handle a relationship. I’m pretty sure she could handle Edward though. *Needed* to handle him, in fact. But sex and a relationship are not the same thing. He seemed like a nice guy. He deserved better than being treated like an object.

“You could just talk to him.”

Justina jumped at the sound of my voice.

“Shit, I didn’t know you were behind me.”

"Lavender essence is fascinating," I teased.

"Don't be a cunt."

"Too late," I replied without missing a beat.

"Cunt" was one of Justina's favorite words to describe other women. Even though it is offensive to some, it had quickly worked its way into my vocabulary as well. There were some people that no other word quite did justice. And right now I was being one on purpose.

"You know, every man is not your enemy. Besides, I can see that you like him."

She snorted and picked up the bottle of lavender oil.

"Everything with a dick is my enemy."

"Like your vibrator?" I was certain that my smirk matched hers this time.

"You really are a cunt sometimes." Her comment sounded harsh, but a smile was quickly spreading across her face.

"Fine. I'll talk to Edward when you talk to your neighbor."

I pretended like I'd been stung. "Bitch."

"That's the deal."

I had another smartass comeback ready. But instead images of someone I'd tried to forget came unbidden to my mind. Justina noticed and put her hand on my shoulder.

"What's wrong? Was it something I said?"

I shook my head. "No. I saw James the other day."

James was my ex-boyfriend. But that was putting it mildly, giving him a title like "ex" was so inadequate. He was the love of my life and now he was with someone else.

"What happened?"

"Nothing really. I saw him coming out of the grocery store. We made eye contact, I smiled and then he turned away."

The tears that burned my eyes could not be helped. It hurt.

"He turned away from you?" I could tell she was outraged. It was nice to know she cared...to know that someone did.

I wiped my eyes and turned back to the oils.

"I don't know what I would have said if he hadn't."

When she spoke again, Justina's voice had lost some of its usual sarcastic quality. "You dated for three years. The least he could do is speak."

I agreed. Having him turn away from me hurt like hell. Although it didn't hurt quite as much as the time before, when I saw him with his new girlfriend. Our split was mutual. I could tell that he wanted to be free. So when he asked, I let him go without a fight. I don't want to be with someone who doesn't want me, no matter how much it hurts to watch him go.

"Did he have her with him?" Justina asked.

My voice was soft and I hated the pain I could hear in it. "No."

Watching him leave...it was like watching a piece of my heart walk away. And then seeing him with someone new? That felt like being hit in the chest with a brick. I don't think James was cheating on me before we split. If he was, then I really don't want to know. It would only hurt worse and there's no point in that. At one time we really did love each other and despite what I felt now, I didn't regret anything. Still, two months seemed fast for him to move on. It had been almost a year now and I hadn't been able to.

At first I'd tried to lose myself in a hot body and a bottle of wine. But all that accomplished was getting myself a stalker for a few months. I just wasn't ready to be with someone new. Not when I still saw his face every time I closed my eyes.

James' new girlfriend was named Rachel, or so I'd been told. The first time I saw him with her...I couldn't breathe. Come to think of it, I don't think I'd been able to take a deep breath since. I guess something like that can take the wind out of a person quite literally.

Justina sighed and put her arm around me, bringing me back to the present moment and someone who actually cared. I forced myself to smile.

"I know it's not easy to move on. Trust me, I know. But you really should. Besides, it looks to me like you've got over six feet of therapy next door. Moving on might not be so bad."

After that my smile wasn't forced. "You're awful. Besides, for all I know he's digging a grave over there."

She shrugged. "Or maybe he's building a fallout shelter."

"Great, so he's either a nutcase or a murderer. Course, that still would make him nuts."

"I'm saying that maybe you should sleep with him, not become his sidekick. You know, if he really is plotting something diabolical next door."

"At least I don't see James that often. With him moving closer to Biloxi and all, I only run into him if he's in town to see his folks."

"Look at me." Justina turned me to face her. "Fuck him and the horse he rode in on."

"You're right. Fuck him." I cleared my throat and repeated with more conviction, "Fuck him."

"And the horse. Mustn't forget the horse."

Once we had finished our shopping, Edward asked me for directions to our store.

"I can't remember where you said it was. It's on Main Street, right?"

"That's right. It's straight across from a beauty shop called Creative Cuts."

At the mention of the beauty shop Justina and I both stifled a laugh. Someone kept taking a magnetic letter N and slapping it on their sign between the U and the T. Whoever it was, they were clever. Sometimes it would be there every day. About that

time the shop owner, Melissa, would have a shit fit and get the police to start patrolling more often. Then, once everyone forgot and the cops went back to late-night visits to the doughnut shop instead of Creative Cuts, the N would show back up. It was hilarious.

"Here's all of the soap stuff," Edward said, setting a large box onto the counter. "I'll put everything in your car if you like." He turned to Justina then. "Oh, and I've got that other thing that you asked for."

She shook her head and gave me a strange look, like she didn't know what he was talking about. Whatever it was, she obviously didn't want him to mention it in front of me.

Edward set another, smaller box onto the counter.

"Fifty of them."

Justina just smiled and handed over the cash for whatever it was she had ordered.

After Edward helped load everything into the SUV and we were back on the road I asked, "That wouldn't be a box of fifty letters would it?"

She shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'll bet you don't."

We decided to stop just outside of town for a late lunch. Our favorite place was The Flaming Fig. I went to school with the owner, Chase. Yes, he was gay, but the bar wasn't. He just gave it the "gayest" name he could think of to keep out all the homophobes close by.

"Well, if it ain't my favorite two bitches."

Chase's voice carried from behind the bar and once my eyes had adjusted to the dim light, I smiled in greeting. If you were his friend, he referred to you as his "bitch". I'd gotten used to this in high school, but it had taken Justina quite a while to realize she wasn't being insulted.

Chase's shoulder-length brown hair was pulled back in a low ponytail and he was wearing a blue tank top to match his eyes. He tossed a towel over his shoulder, apparently giving up on polishing the glasses in front of him.

"You guys look hungry," he commented as we took our seats at the bar. "What'll you have?"

"Cheeseburger with extra cheese and extra onions."

I stuck out my tongue as Justina ordered, faking a gag. Chase laughed and turned to me.

"And what about you?"

"A chicken sandwich."

He gave our order to the cook, walked back over and propped on the bar directly in front of me.

"You want a beer?"

I laughed. "Chase, I've got to go back and work today."

"I didn't ask if you had to work, I asked if you wanted a beer." When I didn't respond he crossed his arms, flexing his perfectly toned biceps. His glare said it all, but he still felt inclined to explain. "James is still in town and I suspect that's why you just crawled in here looking like a whipped dog. Now, why don't you let me make you a drink and your whole day will be brighter? I promise."

I reached across the counter and Chase moved to hold my hand. Just that simple contact from an old friend made me want to cry. Maybe I *should* be drinking.

"Look, I'll come back tonight and you can make me whatever it is you think I need. But this afternoon I've got things that require concentration."

Justina snorted around a mouthful of peanuts and nearly choked. "Soap and candle making don't require concentration. Not as many times as we've done it."

"Maybe not, but operating that old gas stove in the back of the shop does. I don't want to burn my stupid ass."

At that they both laughed and Chase released my hand to go back to polishing the glasses.

"You won't come back," he said.

"I will. I promise."

He raised a brow. "If I give you what I think you need, you'll want a driver."

"Fine, I'll bring Justina."

This time he raised both brows. "Someone who can pick you up and carry you around if need be."

"She's not that heavy," Justina said around another mouthful of peanuts. "Besides, I'm like five inches taller than her I think I could get enough leverage."

She did have a point there. Justina was around five foot nine and outweighed me by about twenty pounds. Of course that didn't make her big. She looked slender and curvy to anyone who cared to take notice. As a matter of fact, I thought she was one of the most beautiful women I'd ever met.

"You should probably bring Ozzy," Chase suggested. "Besides, I don't think he'd mind getting to put his hands on you."

"Ozzy is a gentleman," I said at which point they both raised their eyebrows and turned away from me.

Ozzy was the one who put up the money for Passionate Petals. He bought the building and the first round of supplies. People say he's my sugar daddy, but that's not the case. He's my closest friend besides Justina and he's never once made an inappropriate gesture of any kind. It used to piss me off that people thought we had something going on, but I've learned to ignore it. Well, mostly.

Justina went to stand outside and smoke while I waited for our food. After disappearing in the kitchen for a few minutes Chase returned with more advice.

"Why don't you just sleep with Oz for a while? It'd probably be safe."

My face must have given away how shocked I was by his suggestion, because Chase started to laugh.

"What?" He shrugged. "Don't pretend you never thought of it. He ain't half bad looking and he's got plenty of money. Besides, anybody with eyes can see that he cares for you."

I took a deep breath, but stopped short because of the pain in my chest. It must be stress.

"That's right, he cares for me which is exactly why I could never use him. I care too much about Oz to mess with him like that."

Chase smiled. "You reckon he'd mind if I messed with him a little?"

I laughed, grateful for the slight change in subject.

"I really don't think he's your type."

He leaned forward conspiratorially. "Oh, honey, you'd be surprised who's my type." When I gave a skeptical look he winked and said, "People *you* know."

"Well, I don't doubt that. But I do doubt that Ozzy is one of them."

This time Chase gave *me* the skeptical look. "And why is that?"

The words came tumbling out before I could stop myself. "Because he's got the lips of a world-class pussy eater."

"Ah! So you *have* thought about it."

There really was no arguing with Chase.

After lunch we drove back to the shop with our supplies. While Justina went to unlock the door, I walked around and started unloading the boxes. When I looked up I saw that the sign across the street read "Creative Cunts" once again.

"Where were you last night, Stina?"

"I was down at the Fig, you can ask Chase."

But there was a smile in her voice when she answered. A perfect alibi meant only one thing—he'd helped her do it. A few kids had stopped on the sidewalk to laugh at the sign. The instant they started pointing at it Melissa stormed out front and shooed them along.

"Son of a bitch!"

She pulled out her cell phone and started dialing. No doubt she was calling the police *again*. Her frizzy blonde hair bounced as she paced on the sidewalk.

"Charles? This is Melissa. Those assholes have vandalized my sign again!"

She turned in my direction and I pretended to be busier than I was.

"Well, maybe you should get your fat ass out here and check it out!" she yelled at Charles.

Poor Charlie. He was a little bit chubby, but I wouldn't say fat. He was actually kind of charming in a clueless sort of way. The sign was right. Melissa really was a cunt.

Chapter Three

Put a little umph in it

Business was fairly steady once we opened the shop. Even though we got a late start that afternoon, we'd already done several hundred dollars' worth of sales. And since most of those sales were candles and soap, that's what I was in the back making more of. People drove for miles around for our stuff which made Stina and me very proud.

At the moment there was a lag in customers. I was melting down a large pot of ingredients for soap while she mixed some fragrances in neat little bottles on the table behind me.

"God, I can't seem to wake up today," I said, yawning as I stirred the mixture.

"Well, while I pour these into molds, why don't you go down to Morrison's, get us some more coffee? I could use a little more caffeine myself."

Morrison's was the name of the coffee and doughnut shop on the corner of Main Street. It was the only place in town open twenty-four hours and it always had business. The owner worked during the day and hired someone to work at night. I could taste their espresso just thinking about it.

"Fine, but no more penis molds, okay?"

Justina laughed. "That was just that one time. See, nothing vulgar."

She held up a few seashell molds and I smiled at her before turning for the door.

"Be right back." As I left I called back over my shoulder, "No peckers!"

The day was turning stormy and the wind was even cooler than it had been that morning. Leaves were already starting to turn and you could smell fall in the air. How is it that fall always smells like fresh baked pies and burning leaves?

When I entered Morrison's I wasn't surprised to see Charlie there. His aunt owned the place.

"Well, hey there," she greeted me from behind the counter.

Mrs. Morrison was pleasant enough, but nosy as hell. I did my best to speak politely and go on about my business.

"Hi, two espressos to go please."

While she prepared the coffee she started talking. Mrs. Morrison wasn't the kind of woman who could resist conversation.

"You know James was in here earlier. He seemed so happy. Rumor has it he's talking about starting a family and everything. I never would have thought that..."

But I was no longer listening. The knife in my chest just twisted and broke off at the hilt. James was thinking of having babies? With *her*? The whole room spun. It took me a minute to realize Mrs. Morrison was looking at me and the espresso was sitting in a neat little carrying case on the counter.

"Lucy, are you okay, hun?"

I hurt so bad. It felt like my insides were being twisted by some cruel torture instrument. Was I okay? Humph. I pushed a bill across the counter without looking to see what it was and took the coffee.

I walked numbly for the door and as I left I could hear Charles asking his aunt, "Are you completely retarded?"

It wasn't that I wanted children so badly or anything. I'd never really given much thought to starting a family. What upset me was the thought of a part of him and a part of her walking around. Would it have his smile and her eyes? I imagined the combinations in horror as I trudged back to the shop.

I don't remember walking through the door or going to the back. All I remember is sitting the coffee down in front of Justina and hearing her voice.

"What the hell happened? Sweetheart, you're crying. Did someone do something to you?"

She walked away from the cooling soap and tipped my face up to hers.

"What's wrong?"

"Mrs. Morrison said that..." But I couldn't finish it. I could not repeat what she had said. It hurt way too much.

"Mrs. Morrison is a nosy old bitch, now what did she say?"

I opened my mouth a couple of times, like a fish trying to get air after flopping up onto a river bank. But nothing came out. When I finally found my voice I said, "I'm going back to the Fig. Can you handle things here?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Do what you need to and call if you need me."

I cried the whole way home. You'd have thought that after a while a heart couldn't break any more, but that's not true. I didn't bother pulling into the garage because I was only there to change.

For the first time in three weeks I didn't bother looking next door before going in my house. Whatever my neighbor was doing didn't matter right now. Normally when someone is in shock, they don't feel pain. Maybe that was only true for the physical kind. Because I was definitely still in shock from what Mrs. Morrison had said and I was most certainly in pain.

My bedroom had recently been redecorated along with the rest of the house and it usually made me smile. But I was oblivious to the luscious red and gold bedcovers and the fresh new honey-colored paint. I was also oblivious to the fact that the curtains on my french doors were wide open. By the time I noticed I was already in my underwear.

Fuck it. If my neighbor was out there, let him look. After all, I'd been ogling him for weeks. Maybe I could return the favor.

I pulled on a pair of my favorite jeans. They've got slashes all down the legs and one that falls just short of indecent exposure under the left butt cheek. I considered wearing a skirt. But I planned to get stinking, falling down drunk tonight. I wanted something that covered my crotch. My breasts are too large to go without a bra, so I picked one that I felt enhanced what I had without making them look like they were jacked up underneath my chin. Lifting and separating is all well and good, but when you're a D cup you don't want them lifted too high. It just looks unnatural. The black thong I was wearing already matched so I didn't bother changing panties. Yes, I think my bra and panties needs to match. Even the skuzzy ones I wear when I don't feel well.

The black shirt I picked out had just a little bit of sleeve and slashes across the midriff to match my jeans. It was made that way. I feel the need to explain since so many people in the South can't seem to figure out that it's okay to wear clothes with holes in them sometimes. In fact, some even come with them on *purpose*. My grandma has been offering suggestions for years on how to patch up my favorite jeans. I've given up trying to explain fashion to her.

Since the jeans were cut low, the shirt just barely met them. This showed off my new tattoo quite nicely through the decorative slashes. I'd gotten the long-stemmed red rose along my hipbone about a month ago and hadn't properly shown it off yet. I'd always wanted a tattoo, but never could decide on a design. Finally, I just walked into a tattoo parlor and let the artist pick one for me. James would have disapproved. Fuck him. I like roses.

A pair of low heeled black boots completed the outfit and I was good to go. I had no intention of redoing my makeup or doing anything different with my hair. I'd let my hair dry naturally the night before, which meant I had curls galore. I did spare a quick glance in the mirror though and realized that my eyes looked more red than brown. I took a minute to use some drops and then reapply a little bit of eyeliner before grabbing my jacket and heading out.

When I walked back into The Flaming Fig Chase seemed surprised to see me. He checked his wrist, then realizing it was bare, looked up at the clock on the wall.

"It's six o'clock. What happened?"

I sat down at the bar and threw my jacket onto the seat beside me. The place wasn't that busy yet, but it would be. This was one of the few locations you could buy beer on Sunday. I'd always thought that was a stupid rule. "No beer sold on Sunday", so many signs read. Why the hell not? It just drove up sales for Saturday night. Then again, this was coming from the same people who banned many beloved children's books that contained "magical elements" and said they were evil or "devil worship books". Some days I'd love to bibbidi-bobbidi-boo their stupid asses into dog shit. Man, I was in a bad mood.

"Are you going to answer me or just sit there with that frown on your face?" Chase asked.

I leaned forward and propped on the bar. "I'm just keeping my promise."

"It's early. Someone must have pissed you off."

"Oh, so it's too early to keep my word?" There was definitely more venom in my tone than Chase deserved.

His voice was kind when he replied, kinder than my rude remark deserved. "You had no intention of keeping your word. You said you'd be back so as not to hurt my feelings. Now, how about I fix you that drink and you can tell me who pissed you off?"

Halfway into a pitcher of key lime margaritas I had nearly concluded my rant about Mrs. Morrison.

"That stupid fucking cunt. Oh, hi Charlie."

The policeman sat down beside me and slapped his badge onto the counter.

"You must be talking about my aunt Jackie."

"Look, don't take it personal."

He waved off my comment. "No, she's retarded. I can't believe what she said to you today."

"Oh, so you were there," Chase said, moving closer. "Was your aunt dropped on the head as a child?"

Charlie laughed. "She needs to be dropped on her head as an adult if you ask me. Can I buy you a beer, Lucy?"

I toasted him with my margarita. "I'm good, thanks."

"Well, give me one then, Chase. I'm officially off duty."

Charles was just a few years older than me. He didn't think I noticed, but I'd always known he had a thing for me. For some reason tonight, that didn't bother me at all and neither did the thought of being close to him. Normally, I kept my distance just a little bit so as not to give a false impression. Damn, those margaritas were strong.

"You're not planning to drive home now are you, Lucy?"

Before I could answer Chase said, "No sir. She turned in her keys to me almost an hour ago."

"Where's Sam?" I asked out of nowhere.

Sam is the other cop that works with Charlie. Actually, he's the sheriff. We've only got a few cops and they are the only two who work regularly. Sam is around six feet tall with shaggy salt-and-pepper hair he keeps tucked neatly underneath his hat. But I've seen him around town riding his motorcycle and I know what his hair looks like down or in a short ponytail. I also knew what he looked like in leather pants and the thought made me so wet that for a minute I thought I'd peed in my pants.

I'd had a thing for Sam since I hit puberty, but no one knew that except me.

"He's probably back at the station listening to the radio. Why?"

That really made me want to place an obscene phone call. But what I said was, "No reason," and smiled.

As I poured myself another drink from the pitcher, Charlie turned toward me and seemed to take a good look for the first time that night.

"I'm not saying that there aren't good things about James. But he ain't the kind of man worth getting drunk over."

"This has nothing to do with James," I lied.

Chase fanned with the towel he was holding like the heat of my lies would burn him right up.

"Oh, it doesn't? You planned on getting stinking drunk before Jackie opened her mouth?"

I raised my arm and took a sniff. "I don't stink."

Charlie laughed. "It's an expression, honey. Are you all right?"

"Fine. Chase, could you help me move to that booth over there?" I placed my hand on Charlie's arm and said with a smile, "Nothing against you, Charlie. I just want to be closer to the jukebox. You're welcome to join me."

I didn't really want company, but I didn't want to hurt his feelings either. Hell, I'd known him since I was six years old. No sense making enemies now.

"That's sweet of you. But I'm gonna finish my beer and head on out. I should be able to catch the last of the game on TV."

"Suit yourself."

I picked up my coat and glass while Chase took the pitcher and brought it to the corner booth. The bar had started to fill up by now and I wanted to get to the jukebox before it already had three days' worth of country songs selected. I hated country music, aside from a few slow classics. It was all too damn sad for my taste and especially too sad for my mood. "My wife shot my dog so I had to shoot my wife before she ran off with the mobile home" was not my idea of entertainment. Actually, it hit a little too close to home sometimes.

Chase took a wad of quarters out of his apron and slapped them onto the table in front of me. "Knock yourself out. Dance, drink and have fun." He turned to leave, and then looked back over his shoulder. "And babe, put a little *umph* in it."

With a smile I took his quarters and started selecting every R&B song on the list.

Alcohol had never made me so horny before. Ever. It just did not have that effect on me. Normally I just got relaxed and if I drank enough I'd pass out. Although that had only happened twice in my life. I wasn't a heavy drinker. At least, not on a regular basis. Every now and then, like tonight, I'd get good and liquored up. Rarely was this done in public either. I should have stopped after one pitcher, I really should. But I didn't.

Chase had just delivered a second pitcher of key lime margaritas to my booth as I started a particularly nasty little dance routine. I loved to dance, but I saved the really

raunchy, crotch grabbing, breast cupping stuff for when I was alone. Except for tonight. I had no qualms about running my hands up and down my legs as I bent over and rested my ass against the jukebox. I flipped my hair back with a violent sort of motion, running my hands down my breasts and over my slowly rotating hips.

I stroked the seam of my pants and could feel the lusty grin spreading across my face. My makeup was probably running, but I didn't give a damn. Up until then I had tuned out the crowd, but when I looked up I saw Ozzy coming my way. He was not quite six feet tall. His short red hair was darker than mine, so dark that it almost looked brown. Ozzy is short for Oswald. All I really knew about his past was that his family used to be rich, but they weren't anymore. Despite that fact he'd come to town six years ago with lots of money. I didn't ask and he didn't offer to tell. He did say that paying for my shop to get started might help to change his karma.

Ozzy always looked like he'd escaped from a dinner party somewhere and just started to loosen up. No matter where he went he wore black slacks and a white dress shirt. In six years I had never seen him in jeans and now I found the thought of seeing him in nothing at all very appealing. I had a weakness for redheaded men. Not the kind with freckles all over, but the kind who had a normal complexion and just happened to have red hair. It did something for me.

Aside from the hair I liked so much, Ozzy had deep brown eyes and a nice body. Oh, and let's not forget his lips. They weren't particularly large or full or anything you hear about in romance novels. They were just sexy and right now they looked fun to touch.

He approached me slowly and his smile matched mine. When he was close enough to touch I pressed my body against his and reached down to cup his balls in my hand. To my surprise his expression didn't change. A low, anguished whistle could be heard somewhere in the crowd as I said, "Hello, Ozzy."

Chapter Four

Unfriendly ideas

I squeezed gently and his expression still remained the same. Damn it felt good to touch him like this. His pants were soft and to my delight, his cock was growing hard.

"Have I ever told you how much I like your lips?"

I leaned forward as if to kiss him and Oz pulled back, but not enough to remove my hand.

"You really have been drinking a lot tonight."

He put his arm around me and with his hand against the small of my back, led me to my booth.

"How did you know where I was sitting?"

He smiled. "Because your coat is here."

I refreshed my drink and took a sip. "Have one with me?"

He dangled my keys over the table. "I'm your designated driver, but I'll watch you drink all you like and if I have to, I'll carry you out of here over my shoulder."

Oz could have said that to me any other time and I'd have thought nothing of it. But tonight it sounded more sexual somehow...and I liked it. He reached across the table and took my hand. Where I normally found comfort I now found an almost painful state of arousal. Why had his touch never done this to me before?

"What's gotten you so worked up?" he asked softly.

"The touch of your hand for one thing."

"You know what I mean. You don't usually drink like this."

"Chase called you, didn't he?"

"Yes."

We sat there in silence for almost a full minute, Ozzy quietly waiting for my answer while I continued to drink. I couldn't tell Chase or Justina what had happened, but I could tell Oz. He had joked with me before that he must look like a priest because I had no trouble confessing my sins to him. I'm not sure why, but I could tell him things sometimes that I couldn't tell anybody else. Like how I felt right now.

"I saw James a few days ago and he didn't even acknowledge me." I blurted it out before I had time to really think. Here I was thinking that what Jackie Morrison had said was the worst of it, but apparently that wasn't so.

"I smiled at him and everything, Oz, and he just turned away like I wasn't there at all."

I could feel the tears burning my eyes and knew that the instant they fell my mascara would run if it wasn't already. Ozzy put his hand back over mine and I looked down as big droplets of tears hit the table.

"Mrs. Morrison said that he was thinking of starting a family."

"Fuck Jackie Morrison."

I snapped my head back up and couldn't help but laugh. It wasn't that Oz never used bad language, he just didn't normally use the f-word when talking about old women.

"I'd rather not," I said with a laugh.

"No one would, and that's part of her problem. She never thinks before she opens her mouth. I bet that old bat hasn't had anything nice to say in thirty years."

I laughed harder and it felt really good.

"Don't listen to what she has to say and don't let yourself get worked up over a moron like James."

Ozzy had remained quiet on the subject of James and our breakup. He had refrained from offering an opinion of any kind before now. I wasn't sure how to take his comment.

"You think James is a moron?" I giggled just a little bit, further evidence that I'd had too much to drink.

"He left a smoking hot redhead with a beautiful body and ended up with a mediocre blonde with no tits. Are you kidding me? The man is obviously brain dead."

To my surprise I could feel myself blushing at his words. Grabbing my crotch in front of a room full of people hadn't made me blush, but Ozzy's compliment did. Imagine that.

"You think I'm hot?"

"I think you're gorgeous, but that's not news."

When he spoke his smile reached his eyes and I wanted very much for him to hold me.

"What can I do to help?" he asked.

"Dance with me." He didn't hesitate. Ozzy rose to his feet and took my hand, leading me back in front of the jukebox. "One of these days all this crap with James is gonna be like water under the troll."

Oz busted out laughing. "You mean under the bridge, honey. Not the troll."

"Shit, there's trolls under bridges."

He continued to laugh softly as he pulled me to him. "Well, I suppose it would have to go under them too then."

The song playing was slow and every beat seemed to make my heart thump along with it. I pressed myself against Ozzy and could feel my nipples grow hard with the contact.

"Touch me, Oz. Put your hands on me."

He moved his hands to my waist and pulled me harder against him. One leg slipped between mine and I ground my crotch against his thigh.

"You sure you want to do this in public?" he asked.

"Everyone in town already thinks we're fucking. Let's not disappoint them."

Oz started to move with me then to the unapologetically naughty song. His hips moved and I gasped, imagining so many other things. I put my hands on his waist so that I could feel him flex as he moved and I could feel my eyes rolling to the back of my head. I was so wet now that grinding against his leg made my panties slip just a little and the slight friction almost made me come.

I could feel everyone's eyes on us, but I was more concerned with Ozzy's hands.

"You know," he whispered against my face, "this sort of dancing doesn't go over well in the Bible Belt." I knew he was teasing me. Ozzy hated the puritanical notions that still ruled the South just as much as I did.

"Well, I think that belt needs to be unbuckled every now and then." I ran my hands underneath his belt, just inside his pants. "Maybe you could even take it off and spank me with it."

"I think I should take you home, honey. You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. And I *want* you to take me home. Do you know what I'd like you to do next?"

His eyes had darkened with desire until they appeared black. I knew he wanted me, but I also knew that Oz would never sleep with me if he thought it was just the alcohol talking.

"What did he put in those margaritas?" he teased.

"Oz, I want to tell you something. I know that we're friends and I want to continue to be friends. I cherish our relationship, I really do. But right now I've got some very unfriendly things I'd like for you to do to me and I really think I'll be all right with that in the morning." He hesitated and I added, "I'm not saying this because I'm drunk. I want you, but if it weren't for the alcohol, I probably wouldn't have the courage to tell you."

"So, you'd just like to fuck me and go back to living your life?" He said it so matter-of-factly, yet it didn't sound harsh at all. "Why didn't you say so before now?"

Well, that was not the response I had expected.

"I didn't want to hurt your feelings. I love you, Oz. You're my oldest friend besides Chase."

His smile was the most wicked thing I'd seen in a long time. "Darling, I'm a sociopath. I don't think you *can* hurt my feelings." He ran his hands down my back, but stopped just short of grabbing my ass. I had no such inhibitions about touching him. "Tell me what unfriendly things you'd like for me to do to you."

I leaned in close enough to appreciate the soft smell of his cologne. "I'd like for you to take me home and then I want you to take your cock and put it inside me. I want you to give it to me hard and rough until my screams rattle the floorboards. I want it until I tell you to stop. I want you to remember all the times we talked about sex and I want you to do all the things you know I like. Because we both know you paid attention."

"Yes, I did. When would you like to do this?"

"Right now."

* * * * *

The ride home was a mixture of hands and lips and tongue. It's a wonder I didn't run us off the road.

"I don't know what's come over me," I panted.

"Well, in just about a minute it can come over me, we're almost there," Ozzy said.

He parked in front of the garage and I almost got out. But then I remembered that he always opened my door. As he walked around the car, the thunderclouds overhead finally burst and he was soaked by the time he opened the door. My first thought as I saw him standing in the rain was that I didn't have any other neighbors for miles. There was no trace of the mystery man next door when we drove up and I really didn't give a rat's ass about any traffic. I was far enough off the beaten path that we shouldn't see anyone.

"Hand me the umbrella, I'll keep you from getting wet," he said.

"Too late."

I wondered how it seemed to be raining only around my house. But as he opened the door wider and reached for me, I didn't really care if frogs fell from the sky and splattered on the pavement. What I did care about was how warm and real his hand felt as it completely covered mine.

"Are you a criminal, Oz?"

He seemed surprised. It was the closest I'd ever come to asking how he got his money.

"Why do you ask?" he replied smoothly.

"Because I've heard that criminals will fuck you like they might go back to jail tomorrow."

He only laughed in response.

I stood up and saw him slip my keys into his pocket, before either of us could forget that we would need them later. It occurred to me then that I hadn't seen Oz in two weeks. As I stood there, feeling the heat rising from his body, breathing in his familiar scent, I realized how much I had missed him. How much I had longed to run my fingers through his hair, although I never had. But that didn't stop me from doing so

now and enjoying the way his eyes closed almost involuntarily every time that I touched him.

Some time over the past two weeks he'd cut his hair. It was always short, but now it was back to being a bit more orderly. Still, there was enough length to fall down over his forehead and the stray hairs I brushed back looked black instead of red. Ozzy looked great wet.

It occurred to me as I deliberately messed up his hair that neither of us had spoken in several minutes. Not a word. I stood on tiptoe to kiss him but he beat me to it, meeting me halfway.

I have never in all my life been so aroused. I thought I would be finished before he ever really touched me. I moaned as he pressed the front of his body tight against mine, letting me feel the full extent of his erection pressed against my belly. The kiss that had begun so softly was now a deep, penetrating tangle of lips and teeth and tongue. I began to suck on his lower lip and he completely lost it, moaning as he took me in his arms.

Faster than I would have thought him capable, he picked me up, slamming me against the car. I growled and wrapped myself around him. I thought this would shock him, but it only seemed to provoke him further.

He pinned me to the car with his hips as he gracefully shrugged out of his wet shirt. I had never seen him without a shirt before. Ozzy is exactly ten years older than me. That would make him thirty-eight if you were wondering, and he was in damn good shape. I ran my fingers up through the back of his wet hair, pulling hard enough to cause his head to tilt, exposing his throat.

I began biting gently along his neck, barely controlling the urge to bite harder. The thought of leaving teeth marks briefly crossed my mind, but I decided against it. I'll be honest, I really don't remember how my shirt and bra got off. I was wearing only a very wet pair of jeans, chewing on Ozzy's neck in the darkness like a vampire. What had possessed me?

I'd always thought he was attractive, but never acted on those feelings before. It was like I had suddenly gone wild. Whatever beast I had managed to keep at bay for so many long years came unleashed as I began to unbuckle his belt. I actually snarled, becoming frustrated with the button on his pants.

He smiled ever so slightly as he lowered me to the ground, unbuttoning them himself. I ran my hands eagerly into his pants and wrapped my fingers around his throbbing cock.

"Mmm, silk," I said.

I'd never been with a man who wore silk underwear before. He pressed me back against the car again, spreading my arms out like he was searching me for weapons. His hands and mouth were warm in contrast to the rain that fell like cold needles against my skin. I tilted my face upward in an attempt to cool the fever burning inside me. His mouth made a warm trail down my body before finally stopping at my jeans.

He unbuttoned them with practiced ease and slid them off. Being naked in the rain was sweet relief. It felt wonderful to be out of my clothes. I couldn't imagine why I'd wanted to wear them in the first place, much too restrictive.

Oz put his hands on my ass, lifting me against the car again. Only this time he hooked my legs over his shoulders and buried his face in my pussy. I growled and arched against him, my hands losing their grip on the wet metal I tried to use for leverage. He licked and sucked at my clit like a pro while I left angry red nail marks on his shoulders where I clung desperately as if trying to pull myself through him.

Finally he lowered me to the ground again, and I could barely stand.

"What was it you wanted me to do again?"

"I want you to put your cock in me." My request came out as more of a moan, but that didn't matter.

He grabbed me around the waist, lifting and slamming me against the car for the third time. I reached between our bodies as my legs wrapped around him and placed his cock right over my opening.

"I need you to fuck me good and hard, Oz. You think you can do that for me?"

He slammed into me full force. My cry of passion sounded more like triumph as I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on tight. Ozzy was not small. It was hard to take at first, but it was exactly what I wanted. I adjusted quickly. The wet slapping noises our bodies made was driving me crazy. It was most likely from the rain, but just imagining my pussy being that wet was enough to get me there.

I arched against the door, thrusting my hips toward Ozzy, giving back as much as I could of what he was giving.

"I'm gonna come, Oz. Grind against me, it rubs my clit at the same time and... *Oh!* That's it!"

As my muscles clamped tight around him his voice was strained in my ear. "Should I pull out now? I didn't bring a condom."

"I'm on the Pill. Come inside me, Oz. I want to feel your cum running down me."

I felt his muscles go stiff with effort and his labored breathing stop for a split second as he came. It was wickedly sexy to hear him come, even though he didn't say a thing. To feel the way his body moved against me and the warm spill of his cum between my thighs. When did I become such a nympho?

Chapter Five

Noises in the night

The moment was perfect. I closed my eyes and just enjoyed it for a while. When I opened them again Ozzy was looking at me. He began rubbing my rain streaked mascara out from underneath my eyes and seemed to be very relieved when I looked up at him and blinked.

He smiled. "You okay?"

I nodded.

He sighed loudly and a tension I hadn't previously noticed seemed to slip from his shoulders.

"Had me worried for a minute."

I've always heard that people show you who they really are during sex. Maybe Ozzy was just a little bit insecure at letting me see the real him. My legs were still wrapped around his waist and he was still partially inside of me. Oz never broke eye contact as he lowered me to the ground, but didn't quite let go. My knees weren't exactly what they should be.

He finally took a step away from me and started picking up our scattered clothes. His pants were still around his knees. He pulled them up, but left them open as he collected our things. The smile on his face seemed to express what I was feeling. Who'd have thought that we would ever have sex?

Well, the whole town thought it, but not us. It was funny. There we stood, myself wearing only a black lace bra and him with his pants pulled up but still unzipped, soaked to the bone and freezing. He looked hot. I probably looked like a drowned rat with my goose bumps, wet hair and smeared mascara.

It was like he read my mind and wanted to get rid of any insecurities I might have.

"You look sexy when you're wet," he said.

Ozzy put his arm around me and we walked toward the porch. Just as he turned the lock in the door we both froze.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

We looked back toward the SUV, to the spot where we'd both been standing only moments before and saw what looked like a large black dog. Only it was much too big to be a dog. Its golden eyes glowed in the darkness and I practically clawed the paint off the door to get inside.

"Hurry up," Ozzy said, pushing me in ahead of him.

He slammed the door and locked it behind us, tossing my keys onto the nearby table.

"What the fuck was that?" I asked.

It was the first time I had ever seen him look rattled. Ozzy ran a hand through his wet hair and walked into the living room as he spoke.

"I don't know if you've ever seen a werewolf in person before. But if I had to make a guess, that would be mine."

"A w-werewolf? You think there's a werewolf in my front yard?"

Since they'd come out a few years ago I hadn't seen one. To my knowledge there were no werewolves in Southern Mississippi. Then again, I didn't exactly hang out with the kind of people who would know about such things.

Ozzy was in my home often enough to know where I kept everything. He went down the hall to the guest bathroom and came back with a couple of towels. One he draped over his shoulders, the other he wrapped around me.

"Come here," he said softly. I was still shivering as Oz hugged me to him.

"Shouldn't we call somebody? I mean, isn't there a place you're supposed to report werewolf sightings?"

"What if he was just out for a stroll and we sic the hunters on him? Besides, he's probably gone by now."

"You're sure that's what it was?"

He nodded. "Fairly certain, yes."

"Doesn't that bother you?"

He smiled. "I told you, I'm a sociopath. Why don't we take a hot shower? That should warm you up."

"Lead the way." As I followed Ozzy upstairs to my bedroom I asked, "What does it mean exactly when you say that you're a sociopath? I've heard the term, but I don't really understand it."

"Well, I'm not going to start killing people or anything like that."

"I never thought you would." If I had to make a list of people most likely to do such things, he would have been the very last one on the list.

"I believe my mother's shrink described me as 'lacking the basic ability to feel guilt or remorse of any kind' and 'with a limited range of emotional capabilities'."

"Really?"

He paused at the top of the stairs and looked down at me.

"I've never told anyone before."

I placed my hand on his chest and felt the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. "You don't seem incapable of feeling to me."

He laughed. "I am capable of feeling. I just have a limited emotional range. It's the reason that I don't date much, that I'm not married and that you are my closest friend."

Ozzy turned toward my bedroom and I hurried to keep up.

"What has me being your closest friend got to do with having limited emotions?"

He paused in the doorway to my bathroom and smiled. "You never ask nosy questions. You're the perfect friend for someone who doesn't know how to give answers."

I was still shivering when I walked over and closed the toilet so that I could sit down. Oz turned on the shower while he continued to talk.

"Let me give you an example. Like tonight, when you said you wanted to fuck me. Well, that's fine by me. The fact that you don't want to date me doesn't hurt my feelings at all. Your choices are perfectly logical. You needed relief and I'm glad to provide it."

It just dawned on me what Ozzy was trying to describe. I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it before.

"Oh my God, you're like one of those androids in a sci-fi movie. You base your decisions on logic and what you think people want to hear."

He smiled. "Exactly. I'm also fully functional."

My laughter echoed in the large bathroom. "But you have a sense of humor."

"A very dry one."

"Well, that could just make you British, not sociopathic."

At this he laughed too. Oz helped me to my feet and pulled off my towel.

"When I'm with you, it's the closest I've ever come to being...real. You make me feel normal. I hope I haven't said anything that upsets you."

I shook my head. "You're still Ozzy to me, nothing will change that. Hell, I'm not sure I would know normal if it slapped me in the face."

* * * * *

After a hot shower we each changed into one of my bathrobes. Ozzy took the black one and I wore the red. He was busy building a fire in the hearth near the foot of the bed when I told him, "I don't normally bite people."

He laughed. "Why not?"

"Oz, I'm serious. I don't usually act the way I did tonight. Having sex where people might see, clawing, growling, talking to you the way I did. I just don't behave like that."

He tossed another log on the fire and stood up. He seemed to be considering my words as he came over and sat with me on the edge of the mattress.

"Maybe it was because you didn't have to worry about hurting my feelings."

"I wasn't worried, but I think it was more than that. Something just...came over me."

"Well, from what you've told me it has been a while. Maybe you were just overdue." After a minute he asked, "Do you want me to stay tonight, or should I go?"

"Stay," I answered, looping my arm through his. "I'm afraid to sleep after seeing that thing outside. Besides, I couldn't send you out in this storm, even if I hadn't seen that..."

"Werewolf," he supplied. "I really think it was a werewolf."

I scooted back on the pillows and my robe fell open.

"That must be the tattoo you were telling me about. Can I look?"

"Sure."

Oz leaned over me carefully before lying down between my legs. Even though the contact was very intimate, it didn't feel sexual. He traced his fingertips across the stem of the rose on my right hipbone and smiled.

"You have the stem pointing at your bush on purpose?"

I laughed. "It's not really a bush."

He observed my pubic hair more closely and agreed. "You're right. It's more of a landing strip. But the stem is still pointing at your pussy."

I reached down and tousled his hair. "I think I understand now why I can say anything to you."

"Why is that?"

"Because it doesn't matter to you one way or the other what I say. Nothing upsets you."

"You matter to me and that's why I listen."

I ruffled his hair again. "Thanks, Oz."

He crawled up beside me and I rested my head against his chest.

"Are there a lot of gravediggers in this area?" I asked.

Gravediggers are what people call those who date vampires or werewolves or other creatures of the night just because they get off on it. Fang bait was the generally accepted term for those who preferred vampires. But gravedigger was an all-inclusive term for those who sought preternatural company.

Ozzy pulled back to look down at me. "Why would you ask me something like that?"

I shrugged. "Because I figured you would know."

Without hesitation he answered, "There are more than you think."

"Are there werewolves in Southern Mississippi, besides the one we saw tonight?"

"Yes."

I wasn't sure what scared me more, his answer or the fact that he was so sure of it. About that time I heard something over the sound of the rain.

"What was that?"

I lifted up and turned to face the french doors. The curtains were still open. When I slid off the bed to have a look Oz followed me.

"What did you hear?"

"It sounded like a big machine, like a tractor or something."

I pressed up against the glass, cupping my hands to try to see past the rain.

"There's something in my neighbor's yard, but I can't make it out."

Ozzy leaned over me and stood there for what seemed like several minutes. I was about to give up and go back to bed when he said, "It's a backhoe. He's digging a huge hole beside his house. It looks about..." He paused. "Thirty by thirty and close to ten feet deep."

"Good grief. He's been digging something out there since he moved in."

"When was that?"

"Three weeks ago."

Ozzy looked up toward the sky, but the only thing visible was rain. Apparently, that wasn't what he wanted to see.

"Who is he?"

"I don't know, but I watch him every morning."

Oz was the only man I could have sex with and then make a confession like that. It didn't seem to faze him in the slightest.

"You watch him dig? Why?"

"Because he works without a shirt and he looks damn good in jeans."

Ozzy laughed and finally turned back to face me. "He's probably just digging a wine cellar."

"A wine cellar? And that's so important that he has to work at midnight in the rain? Bullshit."

"Well, that's how mine was built. Not in the rain, of course, but my wine cellar was dug the same way and connected through a tunnel to the house basement."

"Or it could be a storm shelter," I suggested. "We do get a lot of hurricanes here."

"It could be anything," he agreed.

"But you don't believe that." It wasn't a question.

"No, and neither do you."

* * * * *

About three o'clock I woke up dying of thirst. I was going to ask if Ozzy wanted anything while I was up, but he was sleeping soundly. When I got to the kitchen I found myself gravitating toward the french doors rather than the refrigerator. My neighbor was nowhere to be seen. I guess he'd finished. There was also no sign of wolves or big dogs or anything else.

It was odd for houses to be as close as ours were, at least around here. From what my grandpa said, years ago this land used to belong to one person, but he decided to

sell the lot in two pieces. On the other side of my neighbor's lot there was nothing but woods for miles, same thing on the other side of mine. There was a paved road that ran about fifty feet in front of our houses and on the other side of the road was a farm. Whoever originally purchased the land must have been good friends to build their houses so close together. A school teacher had lived beside me before Mr. Sexy. He got transferred to another district. The teacher was cute, quiet and occasionally would come to my barbeques.

I shook my head as I remembered how jealous James got every time I talked to him. He said he was "after me". Well, the teacher wasn't after me...but I found myself wishing that this new man was. And I didn't even know his name.

Thunder rumbled in the distance and from the sound of it there would be more rain coming. The lightning storm was fantastic. I hadn't seen one like it in a while. But no matter how great it was, I couldn't pull my mind away from thoughts of my neighbor and the werewolf I'd seen earlier. Was he okay? Did the werewolf hurt him or just go on about its business? And why hadn't my neighbor noticed me?

I walked to the sink and poured a glass of water.

"No one is after you," I said to myself. Honestly I couldn't decide if I was relieved or disappointed by that thought.

There is a bay window in front of the sink, the short kind with a shelf to put plants and such. I had left the blinds open and was watching the lightning when I heard someone enter the kitchen. He put his arms around me and rubbed provocatively against my ass.

"What are you doing awake, Oz?"

He pressed his face against mine, brushing back the hair so that he could touch his lips to my cheek. His voice was soft when he answered, "You're wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I am after you," he whispered.

I can't put into words how sexy that was. He reached to cup my breast and whispered, "Please." Damn that was hot. I'd never had anyone ask quite that way for my affections before. And Oz had never really asked me for anything at all. It was his only request and I didn't want to say no.

Chapter Six

Smoke rings in the dark

He reached around and pulled the tie on my robe. As it fell to the floor he pressed his cock up against my ass at the same time he pushed me gently forward, bending me over the sink.

"Stand on my feet," he said.

I did as he instructed and Ozzy moved to spread my legs. Though he entered me slowly this time, he quickly picked up the pace. I'd done it in the kitchen before, but never like this right against the kitchen sink. Ozzy ran his hand up through the back of my hair and pulled it tight like I had done to him before.

I gasped and he said, "Do you like that?"

"Yes. Pull it hard."

He thrust into me again as he pulled back on my hair and I shuddered. This was exactly what I needed. Nothing like some good hot sex to make you feel better. Or so Justina always said.

"Anything else you'd like?" he asked.

"Squeeze my throat just a little bit."

I had never asked a man to choke me before, but I'd fantasized about it. Besides, I was in the mood to try something new. The fact that it also scared me made it even more arousing.

"I won't hurt you," Oz said as his big hand closed over my windpipe.

"You've done this before?" I whispered.

"Yes."

He just seemed to know what I wanted and how I wanted it. Maybe he was that good at reading people or maybe he had just paid very close attention whenever we'd talked about sexual preferences. Everybody who has close friends talks about sex with them. It's just a natural thing that people do. Either way, it didn't take him long to bring me to the verge of another screaming orgasm.

"I'm going to come."

He applied just enough pressure to make me feel dizzy, but not enough to make me pass out. I came so hard that my knees buckled and only the force of his body pressing me against the sink held me up.

Just as Ozzy came too an ear splitting howl broke through the storm. We both went still, listening to see if it happened again. There was a crash and a yelp.

"It came from next door," I said.

We both scrambled to the window, pulling on our robes as we went. There stood my neighbor bare-chested, his wet skin glistening in the faint light of the moon. He looked like he was breathing hard, but didn't appear to be injured.

"Should I say something?" I asked.

Lightning flashed and he looked right at us. I flinched, but Oz stood his ground.

"I wouldn't go out tonight," he said. "Asking him tomorrow will make you look like a concerned neighbor. And it will give you a chance to find out his name."

Ozzy put his hand on my shoulder and gently ushered me back upstairs. Once we reached the stairs he realized that I forgot my water and went back and got it for me. I was glad to have him there. I wasn't afraid of my neighbor, but I certainly was shaken up by the thought of a werewolf being outside.

"Thanks." I took the water and sipped it while we walked back to the bedroom.

I set the empty glass on the bedside table and decided I needed one more trip to the bathroom before going to sleep again. When I came out I found Oz sprawled across the covers and looking a little nervous. Now that he'd explained his emotional issues to me, it made perfect sense that he never overreacted. Sometimes, he didn't react at all. Still, I gave him a questioning look. I hadn't figured him for the type to lie in bed and fidget.

"I need a cigarette," he explained.

I laughed. "I had forgotten you smoked, you don't do it that often."

Most people who saw Ozzy smoking thought his habits were odd. He smokes cigarettes using one of those little clips to keep the tar from staining his fingers.

"You could always go on the porch," I offered.

Ozzy's laughter was soft. "I don't need a smoke that bad."

As I snuggled up next to him I recalled the last time I had seen Ozzy smoking at night. He knew how to blow those delicate little smoke rings I found so fascinating. I liked to sit on the porch with him some nights and just watch them float into the dark. As I breathed in his familiar scent and drifted toward sleep, those memories got mixed in with others. A jumble of things ran through my mind. Memories of coffee and conversations with Ozzy were now combined with some of the best sex I'd had in years.

I sighed one last time and let sleep finally take me.

* * * * *

I awoke to the smell of fresh coffee and the sound of more large machinery outside. It felt like I'd been hit in the head. I rolled over, stretched and took a deep breath. My pillow still smelled like Ozzy's cologne. I stuck one leg out from underneath the cover. The house was cool and the air conditioner wasn't running. The temperature must have dropped considerably because of all the rain. When I sat up I saw that Oz had laid out a worn white sweater and another pair of faded jeans minus the slashes. Some of my favorite comfort clothes.

I got dressed and resisted the urge to look out the window again. Today I would speak to my neighbor and I had the perfect excuse. Besides asking if he was all right after seeing that animal last night, I intended to invite him to a barbeque that evening. Of course this was all going to wait until I took care of the pressing matter of locating the aspirin and eating the entire bottle.

When I entered the kitchen I found Ozzy cooking bacon. There wasn't any bacon in my fridge. As a matter of fact, I was completely out of breakfast food.

"What time did you get up this morning?" I asked, yawning.

"Early."

"It's only eight now," I said.

He laughed. "I got up about six and was starving. So I dried my clothes, went to the Dixie Mart and got some things for breakfast."

It wasn't unusual for Ozzy to bring breakfast food to my house and cook. But this was the first time he'd ever spent the night and then cooked. I kept waiting for the situation to feel weird, but it didn't. So I poured myself a cup of coffee and hugged him like I usually did when he cooked because that meant I didn't have to. I loved cooking. But not first thing in the morning and definitely not when my head was about to explode.

"Could you get me the aspirin? It's in the cabinet over your head."

Oz handed me the bottle with a smile. "Did you enjoy your *gallon* of margaritas last night?"

"Shut up," I said around the three pills in my mouth.

He waited until I had swallowed to say, "I ran into James this morning."

My heart fluttered and my hands shook just a little bit around my coffee cup. I forced myself to sit at the table and ask calmly, "Really? Did he speak to *you*?"

Oz turned around, propped against the counter and crossed his arms.

"He had the nerve to ask about you."

"What did he say?"

"He just asked how you were." The smile on his face told me there was more to this story.

"And what did *you* say?"

"I told him you were fine when I left you sleeping, but I'm sure you'd be much better after I made you breakfast."

I gasped, but I was already starting to laugh too. "You *didn't*? What did he do?"

Oz turned back to flip the bacon. "He just stood there with his mouth open. It looked good on him, he should wear that 'holy shit' expression more often."

I laughed a little harder. I'm not sure why I found the thought of James knowing I'd slept with Ozzy so funny. Maybe I just wanted him to know that I'd been with someone else. Not just anyone, but someone he could put a face to. That was probably spiteful of

me, but at the time it still improved my mood. A broken heart will do crazy things to a person.

"Oh, shit." I put a hand to my forehead like I was trying to keep it from falling off. "That really hurt."

"Give it an hour or so and a few cups of coffee. You'll be fine."

"You know, Oz, I wanted to say thank you for staying last night. I really needed you and..."

He flipped pancakes I had just noticed before turning back to me again.

"We don't ever have to talk about last night if you don't want to," he said.

"You don't mind —"

"Being your sex toy? No, I'm good with it."

I laughed. "That wasn't what I was going to say."

Ozzy sat down beside me and took my hand.

"You're my best friend, Lucy. My only friend some days. I will always be here for you in whatever capacity you have need of. I know that you're not in love with me and I would like to continue to be your friend." He smiled as he went on, "If you'd ever like to do this again, I'm your man. If not, I still intend to tease you mercilessly and I expect nothing less from you. Last night will be our secret and so will any other night that you invite me to stay. *If you ever choose to.*"

I still had those warm, fuzzy, friendly feelings toward him. And what he said made perfect sense.

"Thanks, Oz. Your bacon is burning."

"Shit."

While he took up the bacon he changed the subject to one I wasn't sure I was ready for yet.

"So, when are you planning to talk to him?"

"Who?"

He pointed next door and flipped another pancake. "Mr. I'm-too-sexy-for-my-shirt."

I laughed. "I was thinking of inviting him to the barbeque tonight. You are still going to be here, right?"

"Yeah. I've got to go take care of a few things, but I'll be back later."

While Ozzy got down some plates he took the coffeepot and refreshed my cup.

"You'll thank me later," he teased.

"You want me to give you a ride since you left your car at the Fig last night?"

"Nah, I was going to steal yours." He laughed. "Yes, I'd appreciate a ride."

* * * * *

We had just finished breakfast and were on our way out the door when the phone started ringing.

"Let the machine get it," I said, waving my hand for Ozzy to come on.

Chase's voice stopped us in our tracks. "I just wanted to be sure you were alive over there this morning. I, um, hope you don't mind but I put a little somethin' somethin' in your drink last night. It's not something I'd normally do, but I figured you were in good hands."

"Son of a bitch."

Oz put his arm around me and led me out the door. "Well, at least you don't have to wonder why you were so horny last night."

I slapped him on the ass and he seemed genuinely surprised.

"I'd screw your brains out any day of the week, with or without drugs and alcohol."

"You know you don't have to say that to save my feelings."

He started laughing and so did I. "You're an ass."

"Do you always like to be choked by people you think are assholes?"

"Get in the car, Oz."

We were almost to *The Flaming Fig* before I thought about the wolf again. I'd just walked right out of the house like it hadn't been there only hours before. I shivered and Ozzy noticed.

"What's the matter?"

"I just remembered that wolf. I walked out of the house without even thinking about it."

"Are you afraid of your flower bushes after you see a snake crawl out of them the day before?"

"Sometimes."

"Let it go. Werewolves don't hang around someone unless they have a reason to. Since you don't own a little red hood, I'd say you're in the clear."

"I'm being serious. How the hell do you know so much about werewolves? You've never talked about them before."

"You'd be surprised what I know and you never asked." He pointed at the road. "You're about to miss the turn."

I think I'd been living in denial ever since monsters "came out". Don't get me wrong, I think vampires are sexy and Beauty and the Beast is my favorite fairy tale. I find the whole idea of werewolves sexy. *In theory*. Truth be told, the thought of meeting one for real scares the shit out of me. Since no one in our community came out at first I thought it was just bullshit. After a while I tuned it out. It was old news even though it was on the cover of every magazine. Celebrity gossip had gone from who was sleeping with whom to who was sleeping with the undead or having the wolfman's baby.

I'd gotten so used to it that I didn't think about it anymore. Monsters had become another distant thing that didn't affect me, like the headlines on magazines. None of those things were real to me. They were just a bunch of crap I read standing in line at the grocery store.

Well now that crap had walked up in my front yard. Great, just great. Like I needed something else to worry about.

"I'll be over around three," Ozzy said as I parked beside his black sports car.

Chase was standing in front of The Flaming Fig with his arms crossed, resting back against the door. The bar wasn't open for business yet, but he was always there. He lived in a single-wide trailer out back. The self-satisfied look on his face made me want to slap him.

"Are you listening to me?"

"Sorry, Oz. Tell me again."

He got out and walked around, but instead of rolling down my window I got out. There was something I wanted to say to Chase.

Ozzy looked from me to Chase and smiled. "Go easy on him. I think he just wanted you to have a good time."

"Well, I did," I said, reaching to straighten the front of his shirt. "But that doesn't mean he can put drugs in my margaritas."

Oz laughed and repeated what he'd told me before. "I'll be over around three. I'm bringing corn and lots of liquor. You sure you're up for Sledgehammer Punch?"

"It's Justina's favorite. I promised I'd make some."

"All right then." He kissed my forehead before getting in his car.

I watched him drive away and then turned my attention back to Chase.

"Ooo, looks like somebody got lucky."

He was wearing blush today. I could tell because his cheeks matched the rosy color of his t-shirt. He only wore makeup occasionally and then it was only a subtle touch. Bastard could do his eyes better than I could do mine. Made me sick.

Chapter Seven

What's in a name?

My obvious anger didn't seem to bother Chase in the slightest.

"So, how was it?"

"You're an asshole." I slapped him, but not hard.

"It was good, wasn't it?" He ignored the fact that I'd just slapped him and I considered doing it harder. "Tell me, were you right about his lips?"

Chase and I had talked about anything and everything over the years. We discussed uses and brands of various sex toys on a regular basis. Yet his reference to Ozzy's lips made me blush. I could feel my face burning.

"Hmm?"

I waved my hands as I spoke, trying to distract him from my darkening color.

"Yes, it was great, fantastic in fact. He eats pussy like he deserves a medal. There, are you happy?"

"Are you?"

I could feel my face drop along with my mood. "That's not fair, Chase."

He hugged me and I let him. "Oh girl, don't get upset. You know I wasn't talking about James. Well, maybe I was. I thought some good sex could fix things. But I guess I'm a jackass."

I patted his chest and pulled back enough to look at him. "No, you were at least partially right. I do feel better. But me and Oz, that was a one-time thing. We're friends...that's just how things are and that's what we both want."

"You going to say anything to Justina?"

"Probably not."

He gave me a scolding look. "Already starting to keep things from your girl, huh?"

"It's not like that. I just figured that the less people who knew, the less who could tease me. Besides, the whole town thinks we're sleeping together already. I couldn't stand their smug faces if they knew they were right for once."

He kept giving me that look and I pulled away from him.

"The only reason you know is because you set it up."

He put a hand to his chest like I'd wounded him and I laughed.

"Don't be such a drama queen. There are things I don't tell you."

"Like that barbeque sauce recipe I want so much. You could just tell me that shit so I can put it on the menu."

I waved off the comment, glad for the change of subject. "Forget it. I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually."

Chase rolled his eyes. "I'll be by about noon with the peanuts and the ribs. Can I at least watch you make it?"

I snickered again. "I'll think about it. Oh and Chase, we may have an extra guest tonight."

He put his hands on his hips. "Well, hell, I'm bringing ten pounds of peanuts how much could they possibly eat?"

"That's not why I'm telling you."

"Then why *are* you telling me?" He looked confused. "Oh wait, did you invite that new neighbor of yours? The one that Justina was going on about?"

"Oh, she told you about that, huh?"

"Told me how you been drooling over the man. Did you finally talk to him?"

"Nope. But I'm going to."

My heart hadn't beaten so hard in a long time. My chest felt tight, like I was about to have an anxiety attack. Maybe I was. The whole way home I kept rehearsing what I would say to him. I had all sorts of clever dialogue worked out. But when I pulled back into my front yard and caught a good look at the man next door those ideas flew like birds escaping a nest.

My mind was blank and my hands were shaky. I climbed out of the SUV and started walking slowly toward the porch. "*Coward,*" I scolded myself. What the hell was I so afraid of? "*He's a man, just a man. You've talked to lots of men and never been terrified before.*"

Just as I reached the front steps he stood up and arched his back, stretching. I swallowed so hard I'm surprised he didn't hear it. I could see the tops of bushes against the fence. Perhaps he was planting something after all? I stood there for a moment, looking at my house keys in the palm of my hand. I could either go inside and wish I hadn't or I could walk over there and say something, *anything*. How about a regular old "hello" instead of staring at him like a moron?

I took a few steps toward the fence and froze. I probably shouldn't go closer, didn't want to sneak up on him.

"Excuse me."

To my surprise he turned in my direction. I knew in that instant that my heart would never be the same. That is if I ever pried it loose from my throat. Brown hair long enough to reach his eyes was brushed back by a long-fingered hand. This movement caused his biceps to flex and gave me a tantalizing view of the muscles down his side. Well, as far as I could see down his side considering that the fence was in my way.

Honey-brown eyes looked questioningly back into mine and I hadn't the slightest idea what to say next. He smiled and my heart wasn't the only thing that leapt this

time. He had nice, even white teeth that somehow reminded me of the wolf. Ah, that's what I could talk about!

"I saw a..." I searched for the right word. I still wasn't comfortable with the thought of a werewolf being in my yard. "I saw a big animal out here last night and just wanted to be sure you were okay."

"That's nice of you..."

"Lucy. Lucy Harper."

"Lucy," he repeated. The way he smiled made me wonder if he planned to eat me for pleasure or for dinner. But there was no doubt he wanted to eat me. You just don't mistake a grin like that.

He opened the gate that separated us and opened my mind to a whole new world of fantasies. He was smudged here and there with dirt and a fine sheen of sweat was visible on his sun-bronzed skin. Dark hair spread over his chest and then trailed off in a perfect line that ran all the way to the top of his pants.

Those jeans! They cupped his package better than a pair of hands, showing his shape the way only well-worn jeans ever could. And practically begging the question, "Is there any room for me in there?"

"Eramus Creed," he said, extending his hand in greeting.

I could feel the strength in the hand that gripped mine and led me two steps into his yard. The hole had been filled and he was planting roses.

"Eramus," I repeated. "I've never heard that name before."

"It was my grandfather's name."

"That's nice."

He hooked one thumb in the waist of his pants, causing them to tug down only slightly. Just enough to reveal a bit more of his well-sculpted hipbone. I rubbed a hand against my lips absently to check for drool.

"How about you, Lucy, were you named after anyone?"

"Yes. I was named after the Bram Stoker character. You know, the one Dracula kills almost as soon as he arrives in London."

We both laughed, only his sounded natural and mine sounded nervous. His voice was a nice warm baritone that practically vibrated along my spine. Involuntarily I took a step toward him.

"I'm sorry I haven't introduced myself sooner, but you seemed very busy."

"Yes, I hope I haven't appeared rude. It's a storm shelter," he said, indicating the gigantic patch of ground that was only visible because of the fresh sod.

"Really? Well, that's a relief. I thought you had a lot of bodies to hide." Shit. Now my laughter was *really* nervous. Way to break the ice. Why don't I go ahead and ask if he's crazy?

But Eramus laughed at my bad joke like he thought it was really funny.

"I enjoy a sense of humor," he said. "And since you appear to have one, maybe you'll like my garden."

At this I laughed too. "Why, what's wrong with your garden?"

He indicated the roses behind him and I took a closer look. Some were propped against the fence looking hopeless. Others were larger and more healthy. Judging by their tags, there were all sorts of varieties, climbers, ground cover, bush roses, you name it.

"Looks like you've got quite a variety."

"And I have no clue how to take care of them or where exactly they should go."

I loved to garden, so I was distracted from his gorgeous body long enough to consider the layout of his yard.

"What are you trying to do?"

"I'd like to make a rose garden over the shelter. You see, I don't want it to look like an obvious place for a shelter." He laughed and this time he sounded a bit nervous. "I know that sounds like I'm crazy. My last home was destroyed by storms and I lost some valuables. I'd like a place to store something besides myself in the event of a hurricane and I'd like for it to be safe."

That made sense and helped to put me at ease.

"Then why tell me?"

His smile was going to give me a heart attack. "Because you already knew it was here. Besides, this place could use a woman's touch." The look in his eyes gave away something, I was sure of it. Although I wasn't quite sure what it gave away. "That is if I'm not imposing. I saw you coming out of your shop the other day and figured out you were a decorator. If this place is ever going to look decent, I'm afraid I'll need some help." When I didn't immediately respond he asked, "Are you up for it?"

"Sure."

"And you're positive that your boyfriend won't mind?"

"I don't have a boyfriend."

That sounded desperate. I could have kicked myself.

Eramus raised a brow. "Then who was the man I saw leaving your house this morning?" He immediately corrected himself. "I'm sorry, that's none of my business."

"It's all right. That was my friend Ozzy. We're close, but he's not my boyfriend."

"Good. Then if you have no objections, could you help me decide where the hell to put these roses?"

After about thirty minutes I had it all laid out. Roses would ring the large square above his shelter. Shorter shrub roses were near the middle with climbers along the sides, which I informed him would need trellises. Most of the roses were already two or more years old. This would make the garden look fairly well established once he got

them all in the ground. I got the impression that Erasmus wanted to look like he'd been here for a while.

At his insistence, he did all the work. So, while he moved the roses to my specifications I talked.

"How did you build the shelter so fast?"

"It's a pre-made insert. I had it put down early this morning."

Well, that would explain the machinery I'd heard.

"The door is right over here," he said, walking to stand over the only piece of ground not covered by sod. "I'm thinking of putting a bench over it."

"It would be better hidden if you put a planter with some of the smaller roses on top of it. No one thinks to look under flower pots unless they're looking for a key."

He smiled. "See, I knew you were the person to ask about this."

What was I doing? What was it exactly that I was helping this stranger to hide? He seemed sincere enough. Was he really hiding valuables?

"My friends and I are having a barbeque this afternoon. You're welcome to join us. I mean, if you don't you'll just have to be over here smelling it all."

He laughed and I realized I was really starting to enjoy the sound.

"That sounds nice. Should I bring anything?"

"Just yourself." I could feel my face burning again. My voice had taken on a husky quality and the thought of him showing up in nothing at all was making my heart go crazy again.

"I should probably put on a shirt then," he teased.

"Don't bother on my account."

I was flirting shamelessly. I had never been shy, but I normally wasn't so forward either. But Erasmus didn't seem to mind. He was pretty forward himself and I liked that quality in a man.

His grin was the reward for my boldness.

"We'll start cooking in a few hours, but you can come over whenever you'd like. As a matter of fact, I should probably go attempt to fix my hair."

"It's beautiful," he said. His voice melted me like a candle thrown into a bonfire. "Is it natural?"

It was a question I'd heard often enough. Not many people had naturally "flaming" red hair. But Erasmus' question was different somehow. The look in his eyes said he wasn't asking if my hair color came from a box, but what color decorated mine.

"Yes."

Breathless is the best way to describe how I sounded. But he didn't appear to notice or didn't care. Perhaps he knew the effect he had on me and was enjoying the show. Either way his smile did not waver and neither did the look in his eyes.

I took a deep breath to try to calm myself, but instead I breathed in his scent and my libido kicked into overdrive.

"What cologne are you wearing?"

"I'm not," he said.

"Come on, no one works up a sweat and smells that good without cologne."

Eramus put his hands on his hips and I admired the way his forearms flexed just right. He was perfect. Not in the traditional sense of the word, without flaws. But rather it was his flaws that made him perfect. For example, the fine laugh lines at the corners of his mouth didn't make him look old, they gave him character. The fact that his hair wasn't fixed and still looked sexy also added to his appeal. And man, did he ever smell good!

"Well, apparently I do," he teased.

"I'll see you in a little while then."

He didn't say goodbye, but nodded his acceptance of my words.

I managed to walk calmly back to my house, didn't trip on my way up the steps and didn't look back even though I could feel him watching me. The minute I closed the door I collapsed against it.

"Holy shit."

I immediately called Justina and gave her all the details. She was down at the store with our new employee, Mandy. We had yet to leave her to run the place on her own, but planned to do so today.

"How is everything going?" I asked.

"Fine. I really think Mandy can do this on her own now. Listen, I've got the stuff to make either potato salad or mashed potatoes. Which do you want?"

"Um, either one is fine."

She laughed. "What are you doing?"

"What makes you think I'm doing something?"

"Because you sound excited and I know it's not about potatoes. Are you watching your neighbor again?"

I practically squealed. "No, I invited him to our barbeque."

"What? Is he coming?"

"Yes."

"Well now that you've met him, what's his name? I'm getting tired of coming up with things to call him."

"His name is Eramus."

Chapter Eight

Circle of friends

"He said the place needs a woman's touch?" Justina asked. "That's something an old lady says when she wants her son to get married."

She laughed as I scolded her mildly. "You asshole, he meant he needed help decorating. It wasn't like that at all."

"Still, it's not something I'd expect a man to say." She paused. "Then again, I'm impressed when they get beyond 'duh' sometimes."

I laughed then. "Well, you do tend to be attracted to conversationalists."

"You're an ass."

"Yep. I think it's nice for a man to actually want help decorating."

We went on to talk about what ingredients we still needed for the cookout and other various things before returning to the subject of Erasmus.

"Why do you suppose it's so important to him?" Justina asked.

"Potato salad?"

"No, I mean why do you think Erasmus wants the place to look so...established? It sounds to me like he wants to look like he's been there for a while."

She was right. "You noticed that too, huh? Maybe he's just eager to have a new start. He did say that his last home was destroyed by storms or it could be obsessive-compulsive disorder."

I could hear her jingling her keys and knew she was getting ready to leave the shop. Justina had a routine. Put her keys down immediately when she got to work, never in the same place. Then spend thirty minutes bitching about not being able to find her keys before leaving. Since she'd been talking to me for almost that long I guess she decided to skip the bitching today.

"OCD, huh? You mean like you get when everything is not in its place?"

"Exactly. Maybe he just wants it all done so that he can relax."

"That could be."

We wrapped up our conversation with me telling her again how much better the view was up close rather than over the fence. I went upstairs and took a look in the mirror. Erasmus was right about my hair, it really wasn't that bad. I'd fallen asleep with it wet and it was hanging in a million curls down to the middle of my back. I decided to skip the hair and go straight to makeup, putting on a little powder and some black eyeliner. There, all ready for company.

Since Erasmus had done all of the work with the roses, I didn't need to change clothes either. I was thinking of sitting down with a good book for a few minutes when my doorbell rang.

"Who is it?" I called on my way down the stairs.

"Hurry up, these peanuts are heavy."

"You're early," I said, opening the door for Chase.

He walked through to my kitchen and set down several heavy-looking bags before checking his watch.

"No I'm not."

He strutted over to the french doors and gazed unabashedly toward the house next door.

"Where's Mr. Universe?"

I smiled. "If he's not outside, he must be getting ready to come over here."

"Oh, so you *did* work up the nerve to talk to him. There's my girl." He patted me on the shoulder as he spoke, but never turned his attention away from the house beside mine. "The roses are pretty, but I was hoping for a man in tight-fitting jeans."

"How about you help me make this punch?"

Chase continued to watch the window, but did spare an occasional glance to see what I was doing.

"Could you look in that cabinet and hand me down the molds you find there?"

Watching him try to maneuver through my overstuffed cabinets and still look out the window was hilarious. He snagged his hair on the door knob when he turned too fast, but tried to quickly hide this by running a hand through his brown locks. Chase batted his eyes, a nervous habit I hadn't seen in a while, and handed me the metal pans I'd asked for.

"All I can find is this lobster and a couple of stars."

I filled the molds with water and set them into the freezer compartment.

"You're going to use a lobster mold?"

"Why not? We'll need something to keep the punch cold and it's the biggest one I have."

"You could just fill it up with little stars."

I shrugged. "Takes too long to freeze. Besides, I think putting a lobster in there is pretty damn funny."

We mixed the rest of the ingredients and set them in the fridge to chill. Chase had also brought a rack of ribs that I started to season. While he was still distracted looking for Erasmus, I made my famous barbecue sauce. By the time he noticed me again I was preheating the oven and slathering the ribs with the thick, sweet mixture.

"You bitch," he said, but his heart wasn't in it. After another minute or two he shrugged and turned away from the window. "Fuck it. Is the pot out back?"

"Uh, no. It's under the sink. I meant to get it out earlier, but I was distracted."

I told him about helping decide where to plant the rose garden. Of course, I left out the part about the shelter. Erasmus had only told me because I already knew a hole was there. I planned to tell Ozzy, just because I knew he would ask. Knowing what it was for should put him at ease, or so I thought.

"So, he was just digging a garden? Justina made it sound like a pit."

"That's what I thought, but we couldn't actually see over the fence. It's really pretty over there. He's put down some new sod and everything."

"Humph." With that Chase picked up the bag of peanuts and I followed him with the pot. After helping him set everything up over the fire pit, I returned to get salt and found myself staring out the window just like he had. Only I had better luck.

Erasmus stepped out the back door of his house and my heart felt like it might burst. He was wearing another pair of jeans and a white, tunic-style shirt that hung open enough to reveal a bit of his chest. And here I was expecting a t-shirt. I was very pleasantly surprised.

When I walked out back to hand the salt to Chase he was standing there open-mouthed. Erasmus opened the gate that separated us and came strolling through like something out of a dream. The way I felt when I looked at him was impossible. I say that because we had just met. Until a few hours ago I didn't even know his name. I was still in love with James. And yet...something within me stirred as I watched him move and it was much more than desire. As he came to stand in front of me and ran a hand through his still damp hair I understood something—I hungered for him.

"Glad you could make it," I said, unable to wipe the smile from my face.

He nodded in my direction and extended his hand toward Chase. When he moved, his scent drifted toward me and I nearly started foaming at the mouth. I don't care what he said. He must be wearing something. Cologne laced with pheromones, maybe? Did they make stuff like that?

"Erasmus Creed," he said.

His voice was like warm honey and I noticed Chase shiver before replying, "Chase Ramsey," and shaking his hand.

"Are you sure there's nothing I can do?" Erasmus asked.

It took me a second to realize he was talking to me. "Um, no. Everything is taken care of for the moment. You could come with me to put the ribs in the oven if you want to."

His smile kept doing things to me that I didn't think a simple facial expression should. A smile really was a simple thing. But not his. His lips parted just enough to show his teeth, causing the corners of his mouth to twitch just enough to make the cutest little crease in his cheek. And the way the emotion was clearly visible in his eyes...well, it made me want to smile too. In fact, I couldn't stop.

He paused at the door and I turned back to take his hand.

"Come on."

A feeling passed over me when he stepped across the threshold. It was strange and something I really can't put into words. It wasn't exactly a bad feeling, but a chill of sorts. Almost like a shiver of excitement.

Instantly I thought about the rumor that a vampire has to be invited before they can enter someone's home. Erasmus wasn't a vampire. He had too nice of a tan. Besides, I saw him out in the sun all the time. I scolded myself for having such thoughts in the first place. Anyhow, vampires were supposed to be cold. His hand was warm to the touch and as I continued to lead him toward my kitchen I tried not to think bad thoughts.

Still, I had the impression that I'd just invited the big bad wolf over for dinner and from the smile he continued to wear, I might be on the menu.

I released his hand and checked to be sure the oven was ready.

"Here, let me. That looks heavy." Erasmus moved to set the ribs in the oven as he said, "I wanted to thank you again for your help with the garden. I really appreciate it."

"It's no problem. I like gardening."

"Maybe in a little while it will match the other side."

I was confused. "What's on the other side?"

The blast of hot air from the oven seemed to make his scent even stronger. I remembered on nature shows how they talked about animals being drawn by the scent of the opposite sex. Surely that crap didn't apply to people. Isn't that why we use perfume, because we don't have our own naturally alluring scent?

"You mean you haven't seen it?"

I shook my head.

"This great big rose climbing up the side of the house. It's beautiful."

Now I remembered. "Oh, yeah. I forgot all about it. I never come home that direction, so I haven't noticed it in ages. It's that big now, huh? I can't believe it grew so much without anyone taking care of it."

When he closed the oven and stood back up, Erasmus was so close to me that our bodies almost touched. I was dead even with the middle of his chest, right where his shirt parted, revealing just enough skin to make my mouth water. He touched my shoulder lightly and I wanted more. I wanted to lean into him, to press as much of my body against his as possible.

"Are you all right?"

He was so close now that his breath caused my bangs to move against my forehead. Was I moving closer or was he?

"You smell *really* good."

Before he could reply there was a loud crash and what sounded like someone running across the front porch.

"Motherfucker!"

"That would be Justina," I said.

I'm not sure what would have happened if we hadn't been interrupted or why I wanted so much to touch him. It wasn't like I was sex starved. Ozzy had helped me take care of that problem. I would say it was magic, only I wasn't certain. I believed that magic was real. Witches and wizards did exist, or so I'd heard. Like everything else that went bump in the night, I had never personally met one. Even if that was the case, why would anyone waste a spell on me?

Eramus seemed unfazed by the interruption. He motioned toward the door as he said, "Sounds like your friend could use some help."

We opened the door to find Justina chasing potatoes across the porch and down the steps. Apparently the large bag she was holding had ripped just as she reached the door.

"Well, that would explain the noise," Eramus said.

From the look on her face she had a scathing comment at the ready, but her sarcasm was no match for his smile.

We started helping her retrieve the potatoes while he said, "I'm Eramus by the way, Lucy's new neighbor."

Justina paused and brushed back her long dark hair. She was wearing an orange tank top this time that contrasted well with her black coat and matched her nail polish.

"I'm Justina, the moron who yells 'motherfucker' as loud as possible before I meet new people."

She rolled her eyes jokingly and we all laughed.

"I'm not easily offended," he assured her.

She opened the paper bag she was carrying and as we dumped the potatoes inside said, "Good. You'll fit right in around here."

"I never should have left them in that flimsy plastic bag," Justina grumbled as we made our way inside. "Stupid checkout girl overstuffed it."

Eramus helped carry in the rest of her groceries, listening quietly to her bitching about the world like he was used to it. When I gave him a questioning look he said, "I have two sisters," as if that explained it all.

Justina started pouring the potatoes into the sink.

"I thought you were going to cook at home," I teased.

She started looking around for a pot to fit them. "I'd much rather mess up your kitchen. Besides, I didn't want to be by myself."

That wasn't like her at all. She normally didn't want to be around anybody, sometimes even me.

"Why, is something wrong?"

She shrugged. "I kept hearing weird noises last night. Just creeped me out, that's all."

Before I could tell her what I saw the night before, someone else knocked at the door.

"It's me, I'm early," Ozzy yelled.

By the time I rounded the corner he was making his way through the foyer with a bag full of corn and an ice chest full of booze. I took the corn and hugged him.

"I hope you don't mind me being so early. I wanted to make sure you were all right after last night."

"What happened last night?"

We turned to see Justina in the doorway with Eramus right behind her, arms crossed as if he too were waiting for an answer. Thankfully, Ozzy spoke up because I surely would have given something away.

"I drove Lucy home last night and we saw something in the yard."

"What was it?" Justina asked.

Oz and I exchanged a look. Neither of us were ready to start throwing around the word "werewolf".

"Like a big dog," he said. "He probably got loose from one of the farms around here. Anyway, I didn't get a real good look."

But the wolf sure did. He must have been watching us the whole time. I shivered at the thought before remembering I hadn't introduced Eramus.

"Oh, this is my friend Ozzy," I said.

Eramus stepped forward and the men shook hands as he introduced himself.

Chapter Nine

Sleeping dogs

"Eramus Creed," Ozzy repeated. "That's a pretty famous name."

The two men exchanged a look that clearly said they knew something I didn't. What the hell was going on? I was lost.

"Only in certain circles," Eramus replied.

Ozzy raised an eyebrow. Then as if to further confuse me, Eramus supplied, "It was my grandfather's name." Well, I already knew that, but had no idea what difference it made.

"Ah."

Even though they were both carrying the ice chest through the house now and the subject had changed to the weather, there was a palpable tension in the air. Justina came to stand beside me and we both watched the men walk out of sight. She didn't speak until we heard the back door close.

"What the hell was that all about?"

"I have no idea."

"Is Eramus famous?"

I shook my head. "Your guess is as good as mine. I'm sure if he was a celebrity, I would remember a face like his."

"And that ass," Justina said, rolling her eyes like she was going to swoon.

I turned toward her, laughing. "I know, right? Did you see how good he looks in those jeans? I have never wanted to be woven into cotton so bad in my life."

I thought my comment was pretty clever. In fact, I was waiting for her to respond with a whoop or a catcall of some sort. Instead she looked kind of...embarrassed.

"What? Are you going to say that wasn't funny to you?" I shrugged.

Justina pointed at what I thought was my hair.

"Is there something in my hair? Something wrong?"

I took a section of my red locks in one hand and started searching for whatever it was that was bothering her.

"There's nothing in my —"

My words were lost as I turned toward the back door. Eramus was standing there with his arms crossed, looking down at me. For a second I wondered if he'd overheard us, but the look on his face answered my question.

"Do you often fantasize about being woven into cotton?" His voice was smooth and his words were obviously a challenge. Normally, I would have been embarrassed in such a situation. But something about him made me fearless. I wanted him to know I was attracted to him and had no problem admitting it.

"Only when I see you wearing jeans."

His smile grew wider, revealing more of his perfect white teeth. He was so close to me now that the smell of his cologne was overpowering. Don't misunderstand, it wasn't that strong of a smell, it just had that powerful of an effect. It made me weak. Maybe he *was* using magic of some sort?

"And what if I wasn't wearing them?"

I'm not sure if he meant "what if he wore something else" or "what if he took them off". But I chose to answer in a way that would make him guess as well.

"Not sure." I shrugged in a way that I hoped looked nonchalant. "I'd have to see first."

"Did you get the meat?" Chase asked, sticking his head in the door.

His words and my thoughts were enough to make me blush, although I wasn't exactly embarrassed. Flustered is more accurate. How had I not heard Erasmus behind me? I heard when Chase opened the door.

Never taking his eyes from me, Erasmus answered, "Not yet."

I could feel Chase staring at me and knew I'd most likely get questioned about this later.

"Could you show him where the steak is in the fridge?" Chase asked. "Ozzy said he put some in there this morning."

No one seemed to find it strange that Ozzy was stocking my refrigerator. Besides, he did that quite often.

"Sure, right this way."

Justina was still standing there in what looked like shock. As we walked past her I asked Erasmus, "You don't really need me to show you the fridge, do you?"

"Nope."

But he didn't complain. I opened the door and found the steak in the bottom drawer where I always kept meat.

"Ribs *and* steak? You guys are just a bunch of carnivores."

His smile never wavered as I handed him the steaks.

"Thanks."

Before we could say anything else Chase came in and started rummaging through my cabinet for seasonings.

"Have to do everything myself," he grumbled. "Give me those."

He took the steaks from Erasmus and started sprinkling them with about ten different ingredients. I didn't pay much attention because I couldn't take my eyes off Erasmus, even though I knew it must be beyond the point of rude to stare this long.

"You run a bar outside of town, right?" Erasmus asked Chase, finally breaking whatever spell there was between us as he looked away.

"Yep, the Flaming Fig."

Chase went on to explain the name and Erasmus seemed to understand his reasoning.

"So, does it work? Do the homophobes stay out?"

"You bet your sweet ass they do. Afraid they'll catch some queer disease if they come in."

"But it isn't a gay bar," Erasmus said.

"Tell that to these local retards. Still," Chase said, finishing up, "I don't want people like that in my business in the first place."

"Who did you leave in charge?" I asked.

Chase picked up the platter of steaks with one hand like he was about to wait a table.

"Larry."

I laughed. "Are you sure about that?"

Larry was well meaning, but not the brightest crayon in the pack.

"Mondays at the Fig are slow, he can't do much harm this evening."

We followed Chase out of the kitchen and saw Justina coming from the bathroom down the hall, talking on her cell phone.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said. "And I certainly will. Thank you. Bye."

"That was my neighbor," she said, clicking her phone shut. "I found out what I kept hearing last night. Well, sort of."

"What is it?" Erasmus asked. "Has something happened to your neighbor?"

Chase stopped to listen too even though he had the back door open already.

"Something killed her dog last night. I must have heard whatever did it."

She shivered and Chase asked, "Was it a small dog?"

"It was huge. Biggest Rottweiler I've ever seen."

"Pookie?" I remembered the dog she was talking about now. Justina usually came to my house, I'd only been to hers a few times. But one of those times her neighbor's dog had wandered up in the yard and scared me half to death.

"Yeah, that's the one."

Pookie was not a mean dog, but I had no doubt he could have handled himself. Whatever could take him down must have been one hell of a beast.

"You said *whatever*, not *whoever*. Are you sure it wasn't a person?" Erasmus asked.

"Pretty sure. She said he was...torn up."

"How awful. It's not safe for you to go home tonight," I said. "You can stay here."

"Thanks, but I'd feel safer at home with all my doors locked. You know how I am about sleeping in my own bed."

"Whatever it was, it's probably not still there. I can follow you home tonight," Chase said.

With that settled, we all went out back. I quickly walked over to Ozzy and pulled him aside.

"Did you hear what happened?" I whispered.

"Yes, Chase had the door open."

"Don't you think we should say something? I mean, about the..." I lowered my voice even more. "*Werewolf?*"

"No, I don't. Dogs die in fights all the time. There's no reason to scare everybody more than they already are."

I tugged on Ozzy's arm, pulling his ear closer to my lips once more. "But what if something happens?"

"If I thought there was really cause for alarm, I'd say something."

I pulled back with a huff. "And what makes you such an expert?"

He smiled and started walking back to turn the steaks. "I'll tell you some day."

What was it that Ozzy had said about me? I was the perfect friend because I didn't ask a lot of nosy questions. For the first time I was starting to wonder why I hadn't. I respect the privacy of others when it comes to their personal life. Like Justina—I had never asked about her ex and I didn't plan on it. I didn't want Oz's life history or anything. I just wanted to know how he knew so much about werewolves. And why he'd never said anything to me in six years. Oh well, he said he'd tell me some day. Since I trusted him, I left it at that.

When the potatoes were almost ready and Chase was taking up the steaks, I decided it was time to break out the punch. Since I didn't think I could carry the heavy bowl outside without dropping it, I put it on the kitchen table and poured a few cups. Chase already had a beer and so did Ozzy, so I guessed these would be for myself and Eramus.

Justina was busy mashing potatoes, but I set a cup of punch beside her anyway. Before going back outside I took the lobster ice mold from the freezer and plopped it into the punch along with a couple of little frozen stars. I'd added a few lime slices to the ice for color and thought it looked nice.

"A lobster?" Justina laughed. "That's funny."

I picked up the little red cups of punch and headed out back just as the sun was setting. I paused to watch the last rays of gold and orange plunge below the tree line, leaving only a faint purple glow.

"Is that for me?" Erasmus asked.

I handed him the punch and smiled as I looked back at the last traces of daylight.

"Sunsets are so beautiful this time of year. Everything seems so much more crisp and clean, even colors."

"I take it you like fall?" he asked.

"I love it. How's the punch?"

He took a sip. "Strong, but that's not a bad thing."

Erasmus turned to look at the setting sun then too, and I took the opportunity to observe him. His expression was thoughtful and at the same time, almost sad. It was as if he hated to see the night come. A cool breeze blew past us, wafting his scent toward me once more. If I didn't stop breathing deeply when he was close to me, I might faint. What the hell was that all about? I'd been around men who smelled good before. I'd even encountered a few colognes that turned me on pretty good. But not like this.

The breeze picked up and when it blew his shirt open wider I shivered. I'm not sure if my reaction was to the drop in temperature or his exposed flesh. He took a step closer to me and the heat rising from his body relieved my chill. He moved like he knew I needed his warmth, but he never took his eyes away from the sunset.

My stomach growled and Erasmus smiled down at me.

"Yeah, me too," he said.

The pot of boiling peanuts was starting to smell really good. I was absolutely starving.

"How about a sample?" I asked Chase, who was adding more salt to the pot.

Before he could answer Ozzy changed the subject. "What kind of plant is that?"

We all looked to see Ozzy pointing to some purple flowers sitting in a planter near Erasmus' back door.

"Monkshood."

Where had I heard that name before? As if he read my mind Ozzy said, "You mean wolfsbane?"

"That is another name for it, yes." Erasmus took another sip of punch, but I could feel tension in the air again.

"Kind of an unusual plant to keep around, don't you think?" Ozzy asked. His tone was casual, but I could tell there was more going on than what I saw. I just had no idea what.

Erasmus smiled, seeming unfazed. "I think they're pretty."

Ozzy seemed to accept that answer, at least for the moment, and turned back to the grill. His sleeves were rolled up and scratches were visible on his forearms.

"What got ahold of you, a wildcat?" Chase asked the question before realizing what he was saying. He quickly looked at me as if to apologize, but there was no need.

"Something like that," Oz answered.

I felt closer to Ozzy after spending the night with him, but the fact that we'd had sex still seemed sort of surreal. It was as if nothing had changed. I just knew what he looked like naked, that was all. Was that normal? Either way, I was relieved at how easily he played off Chase's remark and turned everyone away from the subject of his scratches.

"Is everybody hungry?" Chase asked. "If Justina has those potatoes ready then I think it's time to eat."

We were all on our way back inside when Oz took me by the arm and whispered, "No one keeps wolfsbane around because it's pretty."

Chapter Ten

It's raining werewolves

All throughout dinner I kept thinking about what Oz had said. As I watched Eramus select the rarest steak on the platter all sorts of thoughts ran through my head. Not the least of which was, had he been the wolf we'd seen last night? Had he watched us having sex in the front yard? Surely not. If he was a werewolf, I didn't think he could be growing wolfsbane. Besides, he didn't have any of the signs. You know – unbrows, excessive body hair, or a pentagram anywhere on his body. Then again, I hadn't seen all of his body.

After dinner everyone started to clear out fairly quickly. We all had to work tomorrow. Well, I just had to go by and check on Mandy. The whole point of hiring someone else was so that Justina and I could cut back on our hours. We both loved the business, but had fallen behind in other areas, like having a life.

She and I were standing on the porch with Eramus, waiting for Chase to find his keys so that he could follow her home.

"Before you go, I have something for you," Eramus said.

Justina seemed just as surprised by this as I was. We exchanged a look as he added, "I'll be right back."

We both watched as he went through the gate that led to his house and in the back door. He emerged in a matter of minutes with a pot of wolfsbane. It was much smaller than the one outside his door, but it was clearly the same plant. It was also covered with a plastic bag.

"I don't mean to scare you, but after what happened to your neighbor's dog, I'd feel better if you took these with you."

Justina took the pot of flowers, still looking a bit surprised.

"Thank you, but what are they?"

I forgot she missed the whole discussion about the flowers before. She was busy mashing potatoes at the time.

"Wolfsbane," he answered. "Be careful not to let it touch your skin, it's deadly poisonous."

The look on her face said she didn't need an explanation of what wolfsbane was for.

"That's nice of you, but I don't think that a –"

"You don't think that a werewolf ate your neighbor's dog?" When she didn't respond he said, "I wouldn't rule it out."

Justina and I both looked at him for a moment before she said, "You're serious."

"Yes."

She looked down at the plant and her expression was grave. She looked as if her fears had been confirmed.

"Thank you," she said softly.

I looked from one of them to the other in disbelief.

"You didn't even see anything and you're just going to accept that a werewolf most likely killed your neighbor's dog?"

"I did see something," she said, lowering her voice. "I didn't want to scare Chase. You know how jumpy he gets sometimes. Anyway, there were these really big tracks in the mud beside my house. Bigger than Pookie, because I've seen his footprints before."

She handed me the pot of wolfsbane and put her hands together, indicating the size.

"Whatever the fuck did that, I don't want to run into it."

"Fine, but doesn't this all seem just a little farfetched to anyone else?" I asked.

"It's all over the news every day. It's common knowledge that they *are* out there," Justina said.

"And didn't you say that you and Ozzy saw something here last night?" Erasmus asked. "Who's to say that what you described as a big dog wasn't a werewolf?"

"Did you see anything last night?" I asked him.

What I really wanted to ask was, "Did you see *us* last night, watching you through the kitchen window?"

"No, but I heard it."

I turned toward him and it was like no one else existed. Vaguely I was aware of Chase coming out of the house and of Justina taking the plant back from me. But all I could see was Erasmus and all I could feel was his presence.

"I said goodnight," Justina called back from her truck. "Geez, he's not *that* good-looking."

Erasmus and I both laughed as he called back, "Yes, I am."

I could tell already that he and Justina were going to be good friends.

About that time Ozzy came out too and gave me a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

"I hate to eat and run, but I've got to be up early tomorrow."

For the first time I wondered what he had to be up early for. To my knowledge, Ozzy didn't work. But, now was not the time, I supposed.

"Night, Oz. Thanks for coming."

"I did most of the dishes," he said.

"Thanks."

Eramus and I were left on the porch, watching everyone's taillights fade into the distance.

"Is he always that nice?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's why we've been friends for so long."

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

Wow. What a question. As I looked him up and down I could think of several things he could help me with. None of which were appropriate to say out loud.

"No, that's fine. I'll finish up."

"Well, I'll leave you to it then. Thank you for inviting me."

Once he was out of sight I went back into the house and let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Why hadn't I asked him to stay? Not for the night or anything, but for a little bit of company? I really didn't want him to go, but couldn't think of a reason that wouldn't sound desperate to ask him to stay a while.

Oh well, time to do the rest of the dishes.

* * * * *

By the time I was finished with the kitchen thunder was already rumbling outside. I went upstairs and was changing into some comfortable pants and t-shirt when I remembered to call Justina.

I had meant to do it earlier and make sure she got in all right. I picked up the phone beside my bed, but couldn't remember her number. She didn't have a home phone, only a cell, and had recently changed the number. The only place I had it was programmed into my cell phone, which should have been on the bedside table too, but it wasn't.

I thought I'd put it in the kitchen, but all that was there was Ozzy's ice chest and the beer I hadn't finished earlier. I looked everywhere, but with no luck. I decided to double check the locks while I thought over where I might have put my phone. I was just passing the back door when I heard my ringtone.

About that time the rain cut loose.

"Shit."

I really didn't want to go outside. It was cold, wet, and apparently there was a werewolf roaming around. It rang again.

"Shit. Shit. *Shit.*"

It was a new phone. I'd paid three hundred dollars for the damn thing. I couldn't let it sit out there and get ruined by the rain.

I opened the door and leapt outside, making a mad dash for the grill. My phone was sitting on the little tray beside the grill and still ringing so I guess it wasn't too wet. Justina was calling. I picked up the phone and cradled it in my hands to try to minimize the damage. No sooner had I turned around than I heard snarling. My heart leapt into my throat and I found it very hard to breathe. I should have stayed inside. What was

three hundred dollars compared to my life? Stupid, stupid, stupid. I wasn't used to having any money. It was a gut reaction to not waste it. However, in this case I did not think my instincts had served me well.

A gust of wind rushed across the backyard and slammed the gate on the fence that separated my yard from Erasmus'. He must have forgotten to lock it. The growling noise was getting closer and it was much closer to the door to my house than I was. If I ran I would most certainly draw attention to myself if it didn't already know I was there.

What if it's just a dog? I thought. Still, it didn't sound friendly and I was in no mood to get mauled.

I was considering running around the other side of the house to the front when I heard something start to run through the mud. I could hear it splashing closer and closer as I took off down the side of the house. It was gaining on me and the front porch was too far, not to mention the time it would take to get the key out from underneath the flower pot. I ran through the gate and slammed it shut behind me, throwing the latch in place. Not that the lock would keep out a werewolf, but it sure as hell made me feel better.

By the time I turned around Erasmus was coming toward me, his long dark robe flapping in the wind like a cape.

"Get inside," he said.

He wrapped me in his arms, rushing me toward his door with a rustle of wet silk. On the other side of the fence I could hear the sound of gnashing teeth and growling. But the monster didn't try to get through. It didn't try jumping over either.

Erasmus closed the door behind us and when he looked down at me I remembered that I wasn't wearing a bra. Not only that, my t-shirt was white. The look he gave didn't embarrass me. It wasn't like some pervert checking me out. His honey-brown eyes looked haunted...and hungry. He ran a hand through his wet hair, which now looked black. His robe was open and I took a step toward him without thinking. Something about him drew me near. The black pants he wore also appeared to be silk, but they weren't wet enough to cling to him the way my shirt did.

He reached for my arm. "May I?"

His hands were a warm shock against my cold, wet skin. It took me a minute to realize he was checking me for injuries.

"You weren't hurt, were you?" His voice was soft and the sound warmed me just as much as his hands.

"Um, no. I didn't even see it."

As he continued to look up and down my body for signs of injury I realized that I wasn't trembling from the cold or from fear. In fact, I was quickly starting to warm.

"Erasmus?"

"Hmm?"

"That thing out there...it's a werewolf, isn't it?"

"Yes."

He stood back up and I could have sworn his eye color had changed. The difference was very subtle, just a little more gold than brown around the irises, but it was there.

With what sounded like a reluctant sigh, Eramus took a step back from me.

"Let me get you something dry to put on."

I crossed my arms over my breasts, suddenly aware that my nipples were visible. When I didn't make a move to follow him, Eramus looked back over his shoulder and said, "This way."

His house was roughly the same size as mine, but that's where the similarities ended. The walls and floors were made of a dark, beautiful wood. It wasn't paneling, it was real. His furniture looked to be mostly leather and the lighter tan color broke up the darkness of the walls and floor. As we passed his living room my attention was drawn to the violently red rug underneath the coffee table. It was spread out there like a bloodstain in the middle of the room. He had shelves upon shelves of books. At a glance they looked to be fairly old. There were still several boxes sitting around, all neatly stacked and waiting to be unpacked. And there were dozens and dozens more pots full of wolfsbane. Considering that I'd just been chased by a werewolf, a creature that until recently I'd tried to pretend wasn't real, the plants were comforting. If werewolves were real, then surely the plants must really keep them at bay, right? I mean, what would prevent something with supernatural strength from breaking in the house if it wanted to? By this reasoning I assumed the plants must work. However, that also made me wonder what Eramus was doing with so many of the purple flowers. I didn't believe for one second that he kept them around because they were pretty.

His robe flapped behind him and curled about his ankles as he moved. I'd never figured Eramus for the type to wear silk robes, but seeing him in it now I couldn't imagine him in anything else. His feet were bare – and I liked that.

"So, aren't we going to talk about what just happened?" I asked. "I knew they were real, but I never knew they were around *here*. Now suddenly I've seen *two*, or maybe that was the same one, in just a couple of days? What is it, raining werewolves?"

He stopped in front of the bathroom door and motioned for me to go inside. I stepped in, but Eramus remained in the hallway.

"You can use my other robe on the hook there." He pointed to a long black robe that I knew would swallow me whole, but the thought of wearing his clothes excited me. I also found it strangely comforting. "There are towels, if you need them, in the cabinet. If you hand me your clothes, I can dry them for you."

"Thank you."

I closed the door and as I started peeling out of my wet clothes, I could feel that he was still on the other side.

"Aren't you going to answer me?" I asked.

"I'm thinking about it. Werewolves don't just hang around without a reason."

"You're the second person to say that to me. So, what's his damn reason then?" I knew instinctively that the wolf outside was male. That surprised me, but no more than everything else. Erasmus either felt the same way or already knew the answer, because he didn't correct me on the wolf's gender.

"I'm not sure."

I opened the door and Erasmus smiled at the way I looked in his robe. The hem dragged the floor and I'd had to roll up the sleeves to even be able to see my hands. He reached toward me and I gave him my wet clothes.

"Thanks. Not just for this, but for saving me."

I'd decided to keep on my panties. They weren't very wet. Besides, I thought it might be awkward to hand him my wet underwear. Goodness knows why after everything else, but I did.

"You're welcome."

The heat rising from his body made me wonder if he was running a fever. The temperature was in the fifties outside and he was burning like an oven. As best I could tell, the heat wasn't on and I hadn't noticed a fire when walking past the living room.

"How did you know I was out there?"

"I heard your phone ringing."

Goose bumps rose on my arms. "Through the rain, across the yard and through walls, you heard my phone?"

"It's a loud ring."

I paused. "Yeah, I guess it is." Shit, that wasn't normal. I couldn't even hear it sometimes if I left the phone downstairs!

"Anyway, I looked out the window and saw you running. I went to help." He motioned down the hall toward the living room. "Make yourself comfortable, I'll go start drying these."

There were lots of things I wanted to ask Erasmus, but I didn't know where to start. Was the werewolf after me or had it followed him here? I had just pulled the robe over my crossed legs so that I wasn't flashing when he came back in the room. I decided that a direct approach might be best.

"Erasmus, is the werewolf after you?"

His expression gave nothing away. If I had to guess, I'd say he was schooling his features on purpose. "Maybe."

I gasped. "What do you mean *maybe*?"

He walked into the kitchen and I followed him. Walking in his robe was no easy task. I finally pulled it up to ankle level so that I could move freely. I felt like one of those southern belles in an old movie, trying not to trip over a ridiculously frilly dress. Erasmus paused so that I could catch up, but he still hadn't answered my question.

"Well?" I said more softly.

"I mean that it's a possibility he's looking for me."

"I'm sorry if this is none of my business, but considering I just got chased by that monster, I think I have the right to ask. What did you do before you came here? Why would a werewolf be hunting you?"

He was quiet for several minutes and I watched as he moved over to the stove and turned on the burner beneath a copper teapot.

"Because of what I am," he said softly. "And what I used to be."

Chapter Eleven

Confessions

Even though my mind was churning with questions, I could tell that what Erasmus had just said was significant. It was also damn hard for him, judging by his pained expression. He acted like he was speaking of a loved one who'd died. After waiting as long as I thought I could I finally asked, "What did you used to be?"

"A bounty hunter." His reply was soft, almost a whisper.

I took in his appearance once more and began to see his muscles as much more than decoration. For the first time his size seemed imposing. I could easily imagine him standing toe-to-toe with a werewolf, even in his silk robe. He ran a hand through his still damp hair and appeared to be completely unaware of the effect this gesture had on me. The movement opened his robe, revealing a few beads of rain still clinging to his skin. His pants rode lower than the jeans I was used to seeing him in and I could see the beginning of a tattoo just below the curve of his left hipbone. Everything about him appeared threatening. He could hear phones across the yard, could fight werewolves and win, and was obviously hiding a dark secret of some sort. Why then did I focus on the pain in his eyes? He was just as dangerous as the wolf outside, but instead of running, I wanted to comfort him.

I took a seat at the kitchen table and waited for him to say more. He took down a cup from the cabinet and placed it on the counter beside the teapot before going further.

"I specialized in werewolves. My grandfather, the one whose name I inherited, passed down the trade to me, along with a lot of his clientele."

I wasn't sure how to react. I suppose I never expected to meet a bounty hunter, much less one who hunted werewolves.

"What kind of jobs did you do exactly?"

He shrugged and turned back toward the counter. I watched as he placed some herbs into a tea strainer and lowered the small metal cage into his teacup.

"Say someone skipped bail, or missed a court appearance, that's something a bounty hunter might typically handle. But if the person in question is infected with lycanthropy, not many hunters are going to be chomping at the bit to take the job. That's where I come in." He sighed and turned back to face me. The look in his eyes made me lean back.

"That's not all I did. If someone wanted a werewolf, or any were-creature for that matter, tracked down I did it. I didn't ask questions. A lot of people died because of me...some of them by my own hand. When your friend said I had a famous name, he

was right. My grandfather was one of the best." He hesitated before adding, "And so was I."

"Was? You mean your grandfather passed away?"

"Retired," he corrected. "And so have I."

As I thought over what he'd just said, one statement stood out as stranger than the rest.

"You said *were-creatures*. You mean there's more than one kind?"

He laughed, but not like he was really amused. "Of course. Werewolves are just the most common. So, what possessed you to go out in a storm after you'd already seen a werewolf the night before?"

I wasn't entirely prepared for a change in subject. It took me a minute to respond and when I did I felt like my reasons were stupid.

"My cell phone wasn't cheap, and I left it outside."

"Let me see it," he said, holding out his hand.

Until then I hadn't realized my phone was sitting on the table between us. I must have put it down when he first ushered me inside. I handed Erasmus the phone and watched as he removed the battery and carefully wiped down every surface.

"I think it'll live, but you should let it dry here overnight."

"Overnight? You mean leave my phone here?"

He laughed again, but this time there was genuine mirth in his voice.

"I mean leave you here too. There's no way I'm letting you go back outside with another storm coming and at least one werewolf waiting for you."

I swallowed hard. "You think he's waiting for me?"

The teapot whistled and I jumped all over. Erasmus was kind enough not to tease me. Instead he motioned for me to follow him down the hall after setting the steaming kettle aside. He led me up the stairs and for a moment I thought we were going to the master bedroom. I could see a massive bed through the partially open door. The comforter was red and looked to be draped in animal skins. I had only one guess as to what type of skins they were. My heart hammered against my ribs like crazy. What was he doing? If he *was* taking me to his bedroom, what should I do?

But that's not where we were going. He turned in the opposite direction. When he finally stopped, we were standing in front of a window at the end of the hall. Erasmus put his arm around me and pulled me close. This did nothing to calm my runaway heart. I don't think I could have been more nervous if we *were* in his bedroom. My body was pressed against his bare chest and his skin burned mine even through the borrowed robe I wore. He leaned closer, close enough to kiss before whispering against my lips, "See for yourself."

Then he pulled back the curtain and turned his gaze toward the yard below. In my yard I saw what was unmistakably a werewolf—and he was pacing. He wasn't exactly what I'd expected and yet he was frightening beyond my imagination. His head was

wolflike and huge, but his upper body was that of a man down to the thighs. His feet were enormous and part of me wanted to examine his footprints in the mud once they'd dried. The rest of me never wanted to go outside again.

"Why is he on all fours like that? I thought werewolves walked upright."

It was probably a strange thing to say, but all I could think of at the moment. It wasn't like this stuff happened to me every day.

"Only the most powerful walk upright. This one will be fully changed within the hour. He's strong, but not alpha."

I wanted to ask how he could tell such things, but didn't. I probably didn't want to know.

"What do you mean, fully changed? He looks like a werewolf to me."

"When the change is complete, he will become a wolf entirely, at least in appearance."

"So, he'll look just like a real wolf except bigger?"

"Yes."

"But why is he turning now, wasn't the full moon last night?"

"Yes. He's not strong enough to resist yet when the moon is still this close to full."

"Oh." I pretended that made sense to me and forced myself to pull away from the window. Watching that creature in my yard was sort of like driving by a car wreck. I didn't *want* to look, but couldn't seem to stop myself. Morbid curiosity, I suppose.

No matter how much I tried to remain calm I must have been visibly shaken, because Erasmus pulled me closer. I was shivering and now it *was* from cold. My hair was wet and my bare feet felt like ice against the wooden floors. My bedroom shoes were sopping wet, so I'd left them in the bathroom downstairs without remembering to dry my feet.

Erasmus opened his robe and wrapped me in his warmth. He smelled of fresh rain, soap and leather. But underneath that there was something more. Something I couldn't identify, but loved. His scent moved me the way watching a really good movie or reading a romantic poem usually did. There is no way to put into words what being near him did to my heart. The moment was undeniably real and yet it was magic all at the same time. I barely knew him, but being in his arms came as naturally to me as breathing. And it felt just as necessary. I ran my hands around his sides and hugged him back. Erasmus lowered his face to rest against my head, effectively tucking me away from the rest of the world. It felt like going home after a long vacation and finding everything still there, right where you left it. It was a comfort unlike anything I had ever known. I was safe.

"You can sleep with me tonight if you want to," he said. His voice had taken on a husky quality and it made me shiver again.

His words made me pull back just a little bit, but not enough to let go completely.

"Erasmus, I barely know you. I can't believe I'm standing here like this —"

"For comfort," he added, "and for warmth. I haven't unpacked all my blankets yet. I don't have any firewood and my heat is broken."

"That's kind of you, but I don't know. I don't usually act like this." I laughed at my words. "That's such a cliché. What I'm trying to say is that I don't go around spending the night with men I just met, for comfort or otherwise."

His smile was warmer than any blanket and suddenly, I couldn't understand the need for a heater at all.

"Then let's go downstairs and have some tea. Maybe if you get to know me a little better, you'll let me keep you warm tonight."

I was so taken aback by his words that I stood there with my mouth open for a full ten seconds before following him back downstairs. When I reached the kitchen he was already straining his tea. The situation felt intimate, but not awkward in any way. Even though I'd been watching him for three weeks, I'd only just "met" him today. And here I was more than half naked, sitting in his kitchen while he made tea. It was positively cozy. I sat there for a moment, wondering why the circumstances didn't bother me, but they didn't. It felt natural that I should be there and that he should be in his pajamas. I felt like I had known him for years instead of hours.

"Would you care for some English tea? I've got an assortment in the cabinet here."

His robe was almost completely dry and made a slippery, swishing noise when he opened the door for me to have a look. Once again this revealed his chest and I couldn't hide my smile of pleasure at the sight. I moved to stand beside him and glanced at all the neatly arranged boxes. There was lots of chamomile.

"Do you have trouble sleeping?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

As he brought the tea to his lips he made a face. Not a bad one, just enough that I noticed.

"What kind are you drinking?"

He took another big gulp. It looked more like he was taking medicine than enjoying a cup of tea.

"It's an acquired taste," he said, obviously forcing a smile. "May I suggest the Breakfast Blend?"

"All right."

I handed him the box.

"Depending on how shaken up you are, it also goes well with a shot of whiskey."

"I look that nervous, huh?" I propped against the counter beside him and crossed my arms to keep the large robe from falling open. It smelled like him and I tried to pretend that the scent wasn't driving me wild.

He shrugged. "Most people aren't used to getting chased by werewolves." As he poured steaming water into a dainty red cup he added, "And that's a good thing."

Eramus handed me the cup after adding the whiskey and I stirred it thoughtfully with the little spoon he'd left in.

"So, now that you know what I used to do, and I know what you do, let me ask you something else." He made it sound like more of a request than a statement, which was nice.

"Okay."

"Are you sure you aren't dating Ozzy?"

I nearly choked on my first sip of tea.

"No," I said, clearing my throat, "we're not dating."

He refilled his cup, straining the tea from the same batch of herbs. While his back was to me he asked, "Have you ever slept together?"

His line of questioning was not something I'd normally put up with. But I liked Eramus and I sensed there was no malice behind his words. He just wanted to know. When I would have slapped anyone else, to him I answered, "Yes. As a matter of fact he spent the night at my house last night for that very purpose." Well, that was certainly more than I meant to tell. I had only intended to say "yes".

The more tea he drank, the more his eyes seemed to darken back to a warm brown. And those dark eyes met me straight on without flinching. The next thing I knew I was launching into a long story about my failed relationship with James, about Chase and all his advice, and how it was his idea for me to sleep with Ozzy. But I also didn't deny that I'd wanted him. I *did*, however, make sure to point out that such was not my normal behavior. I just needed to blow off some steam with someone I trusted.

"But Ozzy is all right with it because he's a sociopath and I couldn't possibly hurt his feelings." I could have crawled under the table. How crazy did I sound? "I mean, I had no expectation of ever getting to know you and..." I paused again and slapped my palm against my forehead as if that would stop this horrible episode. "What I meant was if I had known that I would start talking to you the next day and we would hit it off so well, maybe I would have...hell. I wanted to sleep with Ozzy. Who am I kidding? And now I find myself very attracted to you and I don't know if my reacting this way after having sex with him just the night before makes me a slut or—"

"A woman," he interrupted. The smile on his face was to die for. "You're only flesh and blood, Lucy, and Ozzy's not a bad-looking man." His smile grew wider at the shocked look I gave. "Of course, he's not *my* type."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Eramus, I'm so sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me, going on like this. I haven't been myself lately. It's like my hormones are in overdrive and—" HOLY SHIT! Had I just said that out loud?! "Jesus, what the hell is wrong with me?"

I walked over to the table and sat down, staring into my tea. If I refused to open my mouth again, I couldn't possibly make a bigger ass of myself. I felt Eramus sit down beside me and when his hand touched mine my resistance was gone.

"They say that confession is good for the soul. You can say whatever you like to me."

I took a deep breath. "I have no idea why I told you all that. I'm a very private person. I keep to myself, honest."

He sat back and his robe fell open. I found myself transfixed by the way his abdomen flexed with every breath.

"There is a legend among the lycans that says when one finds their mate, they have the need to bare their soul."

Chapter Twelve

Safety in numbers

That was not what I expected to hear. Actually, I expected him to call me a crazy bitch and send me on my way, no matter *what* was outside. Instead he was talking about legends...and did he just say *mate*?

"You mean a werewolf legend?"

"Yes. I don't know if it applies to us, but I thought it might make you feel better."

"You mean to think that what I did was out of some sort of need rather than idiotic rambling."

"You're not an idiot."

He leaned forward and brushed the hair back from my face, tucking it gently behind my ear. Our lips were so close that when he pulled away I almost followed him this time. I wanted so much to know what he tasted like.

"Are you saying that you're my mate?"

He laughed. "I'm saying that I like you too and maybe the attraction you described is why you —"

"Can't shut up," I supplied. "That's kind of you. It's all right to just agree that I've made an ass of myself."

He laughed again and I couldn't help but return his smile.

"What happened to the woman who gave as good as she got earlier this evening?"

That comment sounded so dirty that it took me a while to realize he was referring to our clever banter about whether or not he should wear pants.

"Well, that was before I was chased by a werewolf," I countered. "Things like that can shake someone up pretty good."

I think the wink was involuntary as he said, "Why can't you just admit that I get to you?"

I tried to stare him down, but it wasn't working.

"Go out with me sometime," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"Don't say 'what,' say 'yes'."

Of course I wanted to date him, but after the way I'd just acted I wouldn't blame him if he thought I was mental.

"Why would you want to go out with me?"

The look he gave scorched me to the core. How the hell did he do that with just a look?

"Why wouldn't I?" he replied smoothly. His deep baritone voice was unlike any aphrodisiac I had ever known. I was about to say that I'd let him keep me warm any time when he changed the subject.

"So, tell me about this ex of yours."

That startled me. James was the last person I wanted to think about right now.

"What's there to tell? We dated, lived together for a while, it didn't work out."

There was no lying to those eyes. "He hurt you." It wasn't a question.

"Yes." After a slight hesitation I confessed, "I've never loved anyone the way I loved James. But...he didn't want to be with me. So I let him go. Now he's dating someone else and there are rumors he might start a family."

He rubbed my shoulder and I felt like I was melting. "That has to hurt."

"It hurts like hell, but why do you want to know all this stuff?"

I'd never met a man who wanted to hear about the other men in my life. Most guys wanted to block out the fact that you'd ever slept with anyone else. What was up with him?

"Knowing who you care about helps me to know you." He smiled. "And I would like to know you."

We spent the next hour or so talking about anything and everything. But, Erasmus did most of the questioning. Until finally I asked, "Have you ever been married, Erasmus?"

"Nope."

"Ever been engaged?"

"No, but I came close once."

"What happened?"

"She was killed many years ago. She lived with me and as a result she was attacked by a werewolf."

I gasped. "How awful. Did she turn?"

"Yes."

I could tell it hurt him to talk about her, but I wanted to hear more. After all, I'd just spilled my guts about James and that wasn't exactly easy.

"What happened?" I couldn't bring myself to ask what I really wanted to know — had he been the one to kill her?

"I tried to hide what had happened to her, but there was no hope for it. She got out of control one night and attacked my grandfather. He killed her in self-defense. After that night, he retired."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

He shook off the pain like a cloak and turned a warm smile toward me. "Don't be. You answered all my nosy questions, it was only fair."

"Was your grandfather all right? After the attack, I mean."

He took another sip of tea and made another slight grimace. "Fine. He was scratched, but my grandpa is immune to the lycanthropy virus."

"Really?" I was surprised to hear that.

He shrugged. "Some people have a natural immunity. They've been working for years on a vaccine so that everyone else could be immunized. But I don't think it will ever work."

"You said that you were retired too. How long since you quit?"

He finished the tea and with a look of triumph set down the empty cup. "Two years."

"What prompted you to quit? I don't mean to be too nosy, but you still look young. I guess I just associate retirement with someone older."

"I'm thirty-eight and I decided to stop hunting werewolves when I became one."

I put down the little red teacup and moved for the door faster than I had thought possible. And even faster Erasmus followed.

"Please, don't be afraid of me."

He reached for me and I pulled back. The look in his eyes made me wish I had died instead of refuse his touch. Did I really hurt his feelings that badly?

His hand dropped to his side defeatedly and he lowered his head as he moved back to the table. "I was looking for a way to tell you. Obviously, that was not the right way. I'm not going to wolf out and decide to eat you or anything." He lifted the empty cup as he spoke. "This god-awful mixture I just forced down is made from wolfsbane. It suppresses the beast. Besides that, after two years I have learned a good deal of control on my own." He met my eyes again as he added, "And before you ask, no, I don't know the wolf outside and I have no idea what he's doing here."

He stood up again and extended a hand toward me. "Tell me you didn't feel safe with me before you knew and I'll escort you back home myself. But you should know I'd rather not get into a fight tonight. So if you trust me then take my hand and let's finish our tea."

We sat in silence for several minutes while he drank another cup of tea and I continued to sip mine.

"You're dangerous." When I finally found my voice again, that was all I could think to say.

"Yes."

I turned to him, searching those expressive eyes for some kind of answer. "Then why do I feel safe with you?"

"Because I'll do you no harm."

He hadn't said anything out of the way, but his voice was so warm and tender that it made me blush. I could feel my face burning at the same time the look in his eyes made me want to cry.

I reached over and took his hand. "I believe you."

"Thank you." He reached for my cup. "Would you like some more?"

"Sure."

As Erasmus got up he added, "And I didn't kill Pookie either."

"Are you reading my mind?"

"No, but it's natural to wonder about those things. I was just trying to help you out. You're taking it well." He added the last as he set a fresh cup of tea in front of me.

"Thanks, I guess. No one's ever told me they were a werewolf before. I'm probably still in shock."

"Do you *really* think you're in shock?"

"Probably, yeah."

Erasmus was standing in front of me, beside his chair. When he placed his hand on his hip the robe opened even wider and I couldn't stop the sigh that escaped my lips. My God, he was beautiful. Even though I had seen him without a shirt there was something so tantalizing about that robe, about the bare flesh I kept getting glimpses of. I wanted to lean forward and press my face against his stomach. I had started to tilt slightly in his direction when Erasmus spoke again.

"I know the perfect way to tell if you're in shock or not."

"How's that?"

"Kiss me."

"What?"

"That's right," he said, reaching for me again. "Kiss me and I can tell whether or not you are in shock."

I took his outstretched hands and let him pull me to my feet. There was very little distance between us and when I took another step forward, there was none at all. His chest was burning hot beneath my palms and I could feel the warmth of his body seeping into mine, warming me like no fire ever could. When I looked up into his eyes I felt lost. But I also felt like someone had finally found me. Someone I didn't even know was looking for me.

He put his hand beneath my chin and tilted my face up just a little bit more. I could still feel the smile on his mouth as he finally lowered his lips to mine. His lips were soft and tender and so was his kiss. It was firm without being insistent and when I opened my mouth he accepted the invitation. I wrapped my arms around him, pulling him closer as his tongue delved gently into my mouth, moving in and out, around and over. His kiss stirred me in a way I had yet to experience. Yes, it turned me on, but it was more than that. The way he made me feel went beyond arousal. When Erasmus kissed me, something moved within my soul.

"Wow." My voice was breathy.

I lingered in his embrace. It seemed we were both reluctant to pull away.

"You're definitely in shock," he said, his expression grave. "People who are just aroused taste a lot different than people who are in shock."

He winked at me and I pushed him away playfully.

"You tricked me."

He held me tighter against him. "Did you want to kiss me?"

"Yes."

"Then I didn't trick you, I gave you an excuse."

This time he laughed and actually moved back when I pushed him. Then he went to the fridge and started rummaging around.

"Not to change the subject too drastically," he said, his head still in the fridge, "but I'm starving."

"We just ate."

He set a package of steak strips on the table. "Yeah, two hours ago." When I continued to look confused he explained, "My metabolism is probably three times faster than yours. Think about it. How else could werewolves regenerate if their bodily processes weren't sped up like crazy?"

Well, that made sense I suppose. "I never really thought about it." I moved to prop on the open door of the refrigerator while he continued to look through the shelves for something that appealed to him.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Steak sauce."

"It's in the door."

His smile looked genuinely grateful as he turned to where I pointed and retrieved the bottle.

"Thanks."

"So, you really can regenerate? That's amazing. You know, it probably would have taken me a while to figure out what you are if you hadn't told me."

"Nah," he said, brushing aside my comment. "You're a smart woman." He winked at me again and my heart fluttered.

"I feel kind of stupid admitting it, but I always thought werewolves would have certain telltale signs."

Eramus laughed and licked some of the sauce from his fingers as he opened the bottle.

"You mean unibrows and hairy palms?"

I shrugged. "Well, yeah."

He held up his palms. "No hair. And I shave between my eyebrows." He burst out laughing at my startled look. "I'm just kidding. I don't have a unibrow."

He put the raw meat onto a plate and doused it with steak sauce.

"I do, however, have the mark of the pentagram."

My knees wobbled a little bit. Maybe I wasn't taking this so well after all.

"You've got what?"

"The pentagram. Originally it was just an old wives' tale. I mean, marks like that don't just show up on people because their DNA changes. But among monster hunters, like me and my grandfather, there is a tradition. We get the tattoo of a pentagram somewhere on our bodies using a special ink. The mark only becomes visible if we are ever infected with lycanthropy."

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. "And where is yours?"

Eramus opened his robe wide and pulled down his pajamas just enough to show me the pentagram beneath the curve of his left hipbone. I suppose this should have frightened me, but it was actually kind of sexy. I fought the urge to touch the marking, to trace its every curve with my fingertips. Instead, I took a step back.

"Do you have any tattoos?" he asked. His smile once again gave me the impression of a wolf, only now I knew why.

"Yes."

"Can I see?"

"Maybe, but not right now. I'm cold and if I open my robe...well, there would be nothing to keep me from exposing myself."

At last I had regained enough of my composure to flirt. Eramus' eyes looked gold around the edges again and I wondered if I had done something wrong. Maybe I should not have made reference to the fact that I was naked beneath the robe. Well, except for my panties.

"Your eyes, they keep changing."

He looked back down at the plate as if he didn't want to meet my gaze when he answered. "Sex brings out the beast."

"But we're not having sex," I pointed out.

This time his smile was all wolf and even though I was afraid, I liked it. "Maybe not, but when you mention exposing yourself, I really can't help but imagine just that."

I pulled the robe closer underneath my chin.

"Maybe we should change the subject then, if I'm going to stay here tonight. You *do* still want me to stay?"

"As long as that wolf is outside, yes. Maybe longer if you like." Eramus cleared his throat and walked back to the cabinet to get a glass. "Besides, there's safety in numbers."

"You mean *us* outnumbering *him*?"

"I mean the plants." He gestured toward the living room as he spoke. "Even a small amount of wolfsbane is enough to kill most werewolves if ingested or weaken them severely if it comes in contact with their skin."

"But you were just *drinking* it."

He took down a wineglass and pulled a bottle out of the fridge. "Would you like some?"

"No thanks."

He seemed to just realize I was waiting for a response and waved a hand as if in apology.

"I've been growing wolfsbane all my life. It looks as if I have an almost complete immunity to its power. Same thing for silver. It's a tool of the trade and I'm used to being around it. So far, silver has no effect on me and the wolfsbane is very limited."

While he talked my gaze roamed over his body the way my hands could only imagine. I knew he was answering my question and what he said did register in some other part of my brain. But when he moved his robe swished and opened and when he walked his pants moved just enough to outline —

"Any ideas on changing the subject?" I asked suddenly.

Chapter Thirteen

Sweet Dreams

"You mean from sex?" he asked. "I thought I already had changed the subject." His smile was warm and knowing and completely male. "Nice to know you need more of a distraction though."

That was an understatement. If anyone else had been saying such things to me I have no doubt I would have been embarrassed. But it was almost like I had no shame when in his presence. Besides, he was right. I *did* need a distraction. Was there anything that could keep me from imagining what was beneath his clothes? *My territory, that's what.* The words came to my mind completely unbidden and I tried to keep my expression neutral. I didn't relish the idea of explaining my weird thoughts to Eramus. I'd already said enough strange things tonight, didn't want to push my luck.

My territory? Who thinks like that? I certainly never had before. I'd thought of a man as mine, but not in the sense that he was my *possession*. That didn't seem healthy to me at all.

He picked up the plate of steak and his wineglass. "Why don't we take this to the bedroom?"

"Eramus, that is *not* a distraction."

"I was going to suggest we watch the weather report. It's the only room I've got a television in at the moment." About that time I heard something howling and after a second realized it was the wind. "Sounds like it's getting worse out there. I was just going to check it out."

I crossed my arms and he offered another solution.

"I've got lots of books. Pick one and we can read it together."

"Fine."

I walked through to the living room and stopped by the first row of books, running my finger down the spine of a large leather volume. When I paused for a moment Eramus said, "Anyone who thinks words can't be sex has never read Shakespeare."

I laughed, but pulled the book from the shelf anyway. "True, but if you understand him then you'll realize there is more to what he was saying than that."

"You test me."

He didn't sound angry at all, but genuinely perplexed by me. I walked back to him, clutching the heavy book against my chest. When I looked up at him I wanted so much to pull him down for another kiss.

"We all test somebody, Eramus. That's just life. Now, lead the way."

To my surprise, he turned toward the stairs without another word. As I followed my heart began to beat faster until it got to the point of being wildly out of control. I think I was on the verge of hyperventilation when he stopped and looked down at me from three steps up.

"I'm not going to ravish you," he said softly. "I also don't make a habit of eating people I like. You're perfectly safe with me."

For once there were no sexual implications in his words. I believed him. But that didn't make me any less nervous about the prospect of being alone with him in his bedroom. Besides the fact that he was a very sexy man whom I barely knew, he was also a werewolf. There was no doubt in my mind that the situation was far more dangerous than I realized. But I also had no doubt that Erasmus was telling the truth. I was safe with him.

"How did you know I was afraid?" I finally managed to ask.

For a split second his eyes glowed in the semidarkness of the staircase. Even though I stared into the eyes of a wolf when he spoke, there was still warmth in his expression.

"I can hear your heartbeat."

His words were soft and no sooner had they been spoken then he turned around. Erasmus stopped at the door to his room and swung it wide in invitation. His bedroom was sparsely furnished, but what was there made quite a statement. His four-poster bed was huge. If I had to guess a size I'd say it was a California King, like the ones you find in lush hotel rooms. The red comforter was just as violent a shade as the rug downstairs. It wasn't just red, it was the color of fresh blood. The lower half of the bed was draped with what looked like the hides of several different animals. Two were brown, one black, and another auburn. These lay in stark contrast to a large white pelt that was spread in front of the fireplace in the corner of the room. Strange, but there was a beauty to it, just like Erasmus.

The chest of drawers at the foot of his bed looked old and the wood matched the dark floor. Above this was a large, flat screen monitor attached to the wall. I hadn't known Erasmus was behind me until he reached around and switched on the television.

"Do you like it? It needs work I know, but —"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "It really doesn't. It suits you perfectly."

"Does that mean you won't help me redecorate?" His tone was half teasing.

"Did you really *want* to redecorate?"

He shrugged. "I'd considered it. But mostly it was just an excuse to talk to you."

Well, it was nice to know I wasn't the only one coming up with excuses for us to meet. He set the wineglass on the nightstand and I smiled as I realized the bed curtains matched his robe. When Erasmus turned back to me his eyes were normal again. He must have been fighting to remain in control.

"Something funny?" he asked, returning my smile.

He crawled onto the bed with his plate of raw steak and reclined against the pillows.

"Not really." I stroked my hand absently across one of the pelts. "I was just thinking that I'd expect to see decorations like this in a vampire's house."

I looked up to see if I'd offended him and found Erasmus laughing so hard it appeared he couldn't breathe.

"Tell me you don't mean I'm extravagant?"

"I was thinking more melodramatic."

He put a hand over his heart. "God, comparing me to a vampire in my own house." Still laughing, he patted the bed beside him. "Have a seat."

It was surprisingly easy to crawl up beside him and as I opened the large book of Shakespeare, he pulled the remote from the bedside table.

"Does this bother you?" He pointed to the steak. "Not everyone is fond of watching someone eat raw meat."

"I had a friend in high school who ate his steak almost as rare. You won't bother me."

The steak was cut in thin little strips and I watched as he took a piece between his fingers and sucked it down like spaghetti. It's not as gross as it sounds, really. Actually, I was surprised that eating something completely raw wasn't a lot worse. If I had to describe the way Erasmus ate I would say that he did so...delicately. Maybe he was afraid of offending me.

"I thought you were supposed to be reading," he said, smiling at me over his wineglass.

"You don't look a day past thirty-two."

His smile was thanks enough for the compliment. I never would have guessed his age if he hadn't told me.

"How old were you when your grandfather retired?"

I deliberately didn't mention this also being the same time that his girlfriend was killed. No need to bring up painful memories again.

"Twenty-three." He finished the steak and sat the plate aside. "I worked alone for thirteen years before..."

"How did it happen?"

Erasmus finished his wine as if he needed it before he spoke. "I would say that I was careless, but that's not true. I was always careful. I just got in way over my head. I took on an alpha werewolf one night. The body armor I wore was made of silver. It covered me almost completely. Almost. During our fight he overpowered me, pinned me to the ground. I had his face straight down the barrel of my gun. But I couldn't pull the trigger faster than he found the weak spot in my armor. Right across the throat."

Fascinated by his story, I leaned forward to examine his skin. "You don't have a scar."

"That's because after he slit my throat with his claw and left me, I regenerated quickly. By the time I had the strength to crawl out of the woods and check for other injuries, my tattoo was becoming visible." He pointed to the large black pelt at the foot of the bed. "He was the last werewolf I ever hunted. The reason I have trouble sleeping sometimes...is because of what I did to him."

"You shouldn't feel guilty," I said. My words surprised me just as much as they appeared to surprise him. "He could have easily killed you. That werewolf did what he did on purpose. That's just plain evil as far as I'm concerned. He got what he had coming to him."

"I thought so too. But sometimes I wonder if killing him made me just as much of a monster."

His expression was so sad. I tried to think of a way to change the subject, at least a little bit.

"So, yesterday was the full moon. If you take wolfsbane to keep from transforming, what happens to you on the full moon?"

Eramus turned to the weather report before answering me, but kept the TV on mute.

"Normally I do transform on the full moon. But last night I was afraid that being in a new neighborhood and all, it might not be a good idea. It's the only night I allow the beast to take over."

I couldn't seem to stop myself from moving closer to him. "How does it feel?"

"Like power and freedom." He shook his head. "I suppose I expected to feel evil or sick or something. But I don't. It feels good to be me."

I reached for him and he didn't withdraw as I ran my hand over his chest. The fine hairs beneath my palm were just as soft as the fur lying at the foot of the bed.

"I want to be close to you," I said softly. "And I don't know why. I'm not trying to have sex with you. I just want to be near you."

Eramus touched the tip of my nose affectionately as he said, "There is something of the wolf in you, Lucy."

My mind was filled with images of him rolling around naked in all those furs. I was overcome with the need to have him inside me. I shook my head and pulled back.

"What do you mean?" I managed to ask. "I'm not a werewolf."

He smiled as he took a lock of my hair and wound it around his finger. "I'm not saying that you are. I'm saying that somehow there is wolf in you."

"But how is that possible?"

"Werewolves don't pass on their curse to their children. But it's not unheard of for some trace to remain in your genetic makeup."

"No one in my family is a werewolf either."

He shrugged. "You can't possibly know everything about every ancestor."

Maybe I didn't want to accept what he was saying, because I kept shaking my head slowly.

"No matter how attractive you might find me, to have a compulsion to touch me is something that only another wolf could feel."

"Who said I have a—" The look on his face brought me up short. "All right, fine. So I feel compelled to touch you. So what?"

"I felt it when I kissed you," he whispered. "I thought you'd like to know."

Before I could respond Erasmus rolled from the bed, leaving me cold in his absence.

"Where are you going?"

"To brush my teeth. Have you ever eaten raw meat?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "No, I haven't."

"Well, it leaves a terrible taste in your mouth. Not to mention it probably gives bad breath."

One minute I was listening to the sound of Erasmus brushing his teeth, the next I was overcome with the urge to lie down. By the time he came back from the bathroom I was snuggled underneath the covers with my face pressed against his pillow. I felt like I'd been drugged.

"Are you okay?"

I could hear his voice close to my ear and feel him brushing the hair back from my face. His touch was soothing.

"Did you put something in my tea?"

"Of course not."

My mind raced. What was wrong? Why was I so tired? And then it hit me.

"We had the same color cup," I whispered, my voice getting lower.

"What?"

The bed sank down as Erasmus leaned over me.

"The second time—you didn't have wolfsbane tea, did you?"

"No, I had a sleeping draught, but I don't feel..." his words trailed off. "Oh, shit. I don't feel sleepy yet. Our cups must have gotten switched when you sat back down." He pulled me against his chest so that I was almost completely on top of him. "I'm sorry, Lucy. Don't worry, I'm just moving you so that I can keep you warm. Your body temperature is going to start dropping soon and it's already going to be a cold night."

Erasmus opened his robe and I sighed as my face made contact with his bare skin. He scooted me up just a bit more and my forehead was against the curve of his throat. Even though I was afraid of what was going to happen, it was exactly where I wanted to be.

"Should I be this tired?" My speech was becoming slurred.

"No, but you had a dose strong enough for a werewolf." He rubbed my back absently as he spoke and I liked it.

"Am I gonna die?"

He kissed the top of my head and my throat constricted with emotion. There was such tenderness in that simple touch.

"You're going to be just fine. Now close your eyes."

"Night, Erasmus," I mumbled against his neck.

"Sweet dreams, Lucy."

Chapter Fourteen

What dreams may come

I was in the parking lot of my old high school. The old building has long since been torn down and a new one built on the same site. Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew this. However as I watched, construction was still going on. I was walking around, not sure why. The air was crisp and cool. Everything around me felt more alive and so did I. I took in my surroundings for only a minute before turning my attention back to the school.

I needed to get inside before they closed.

Without hesitation I took off on all fours, running through the grass and clay. The cold grass crunched beneath my palms and I loved the feeling. It was refreshing. The way the damp clay squished between my fingers felt better than any massage.

When at last I came to the door of the school I realized they might be put off by my appearance. After all, I was barefoot and had mud on my hands. The girl inside looked at me funny. I laughed, I couldn't help myself. I mean, I'd just been running full out like an animal across the grass. What must she be thinking? I waved and said, "I need to wash my hands. Can you let me inside?"

She did. I washed my hands and she quickly locked me out. I laughed again, unable to recall why I was at the school in the first place. The next thing I know I'm in a mall. Don't remember ever being in this mall before, but it had nice carpet. I couldn't seem to get where I wanted to go fast enough. So, in front of everyone, I started running on all fours again. I didn't get nearly as many strange looks as I'd expected. The carpet felt good and I enjoyed it, but not nearly as much as running outside.

The cool grass crunching underneath my palms, the wind in my face, and a sense of absolute freedom. It felt powerful, good and free. No sooner had I thought of the outside then I was there. My arms couldn't reach fast enough to meet the ground. My body felt more alive with every stretch of my limbs.

And then suddenly I was listening to a drum. Who the hell plays a drum in the middle of nowhere? It was getting louder.

Eramus' heartbeat. That's what I was hearing. I wasn't running across a field, I was snuggled up against his chest. Feelings of warmth and safety were wrapped around me just as tightly as his arms. The sound was slow, rhythmic, entrancing in its simplicity. Without thinking I pressed my lips to his throat because it felt natural that I should do so. He stirred and snuggled me closer. I could feel his smile against my cheek as I drifted back to sleep.

* * * * *

The only reason I woke was because I was freezing. Cold was the first thing I was aware of in hours besides the sound of his heart and his slow, even breathing. I sat up and pushed back the covers. The light streaming in was a dull gray, proof that last night's storm hadn't passed.

"Eramus?" When he didn't answer I scooted toward the edge of the bed. "Are you here?"

He'd left my dry clothes at the foot of the bed and I got dressed before pulling his robe back on.

When I went downstairs he was nowhere to be found. I did find where he'd started to make coffee. Fresh beans had been ground and were still sitting in an open canister on the counter. I found the coffee filters easily enough and in no time at all had a fresh pot brewing.

Even though I couldn't see Eramus anywhere, I could feel him. With that thought my strange dreams returned. Running on all fours? Was that because of what he'd said to me? Surely I must have been influenced by our conversation just before I fell asleep.

Eramus came inside as I turned around, soaked to the bone and looking hot as hell. He was wearing jeans again and a white t-shirt that clung to him like a second skin. Every ridge and curve beneath the wet fabric was perfectly outlined. He was a work of art. I would say that nothing was left to the imagination, but that's not true. The more I looked, the more I imagined how it would feel to touch him. I imagined the wet skin beneath those clothes and how exciting it would be to peel him out of them. I could feel my mouth watering and licked my lips involuntarily. He hadn't shaved this morning and a light stubble was visible along his jawline. It suited him. Not only that, but his hair that had been shaggy yesterday looked almost chin length this morning.

Eramus pushed his wet hair back from his face and smiled as he looked at the coffeepot.

"Did you decide to make the coffee yourself so I couldn't drug you?"

I shook my head. "I was just trying to be nice."

He opened the cabinet, took out a dish towel and draped it over his shoulders. All the while I watched the way his back flexed, every movement visible beneath the tight wet shirt. When he turned around I'm surprised my expression didn't give away my thoughts. Or maybe it did and he was too nice to say anything.

"I'm really sorry about that. The chamomile tea I drink is laced with other things to help me rest. It tastes so close to that Breakfast Blend stuff that I didn't notice the difference. My carelessness is inexcusable. I hope you're not upset."

He should have been freezing. He'd just come in from a cold drizzly day and yet when he moved near me I could feel the heat rising from his skin.

"I'm not upset." I couldn't stop myself from touching him. As I placed my palm flat against his chest I remembered what Erasmus had said. A compulsion to touch him, that's what he'd called it. At first I didn't want to accept that, but it was true.

My hand traced the front of his wet shirt idly, admiring the curves that I could just barely see. "What time is it? I didn't see a clock."

"It's morning."

"I know that," I said, laughing softly. "What *time* of the morning?"

"*Thursday* morning."

"What?! Are you kidding? You're kidding." I said the last quickly, not waiting for an answer.

Erasmus took a coffee mug down from the cabinet. "Sorry, but it's no joke. It's Thursday morning. I told you the draught you had was strong enough for a werewolf. What would have helped me to get a good eight hours rest made you sleep since Monday night."

I stammered for a minute or two before something coherent finally came out. "But I've got a job, a business to run."

"Your phone is working, by the way. I called Justina and let her know what happened."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Maybe I was still dreaming? "You told her what happened? What did you say?"

He pulled out a chair and when he sat down I watched the way the wet jeans clung to his thighs. Damn. I had the vulgar urge to walk over and cup his package in my hand.

"I told her that you'd been chased over here by a werewolf. I told her everything. Well, almost everything."

"So, you told her the truth?"

"Of course. We didn't do anything wrong. You needed a place to stay and I let you stay here. Other than that, our tea got mixed up and you passed out for a while."

"Wow. It doesn't sound like such a big deal when you say it."

He laughed. "It isn't a big deal unless you want to make it one. The shop has been running just fine."

My jaw dropped. "You've been going by the shop?"

"Just to see how things were going in your absence. I figured you'd want to know stuff like that."

"Yes. Thank you."

"And to answer your other question, no I did *not* tell her I'm a werewolf. It's not wise to let too many people in on a secret like that."

"Hmm." Everything he just said was running around in my head in an incoherent jumble while I turned back to the coffeepot. I guess my brain was trying to wrap itself

around what was going on. Finding out my hot neighbor was actually a hot werewolf was quite a shock. Realizing I'd just used the words "hot" and "werewolf" in the same thought was another.

I selected another coffee mug, making sure it was a different color than the one Erasmus had put on the counter.

"Just in case," I said, holding up the cups. Taking the coffeepot in hand I asked, "How do you take it?"

"Any way I can get it."

The sexual innuendo was even stronger than the coffee I'd just made. When I gave Erasmus a questioning look he explained, "I like coffee."

I crossed my arms underneath my breasts and continued to stare at him, unable to stop my playful smile. "You weren't talking about the coffee."

He rose slowly and I tried to focus on his eyes instead of the way those jeans clung to his crotch. Erasmus was close enough to touch. His scent drifted to me as I my eyes moved to his smile. Seeing my gaze deliberately shift made his grin even wider, revealing his even, white teeth once more.

He lifted his arm and took the sugar from one of the lower shelves beside the sink.

"You mean you aren't going to drink it black?"

He laughed. "Do you know why men drink black coffee? 'Cause if you don't I'm going to let you in on a secret."

I leaned toward him, propping on the counter. "Enlighten me."

"To impress women."

I threw my head back and laughed. "You've got to be kidding. That's ridiculous."

"It's true." He added two heaping spoonfuls of sugar to his cup and then went to the fridge. "No one really likes black coffee. At least, that's my theory."

"And you think that men only drink it that way to impress women?"

He closed the refrigerator and turned around with a carton of fresh cream in his hand.

"Exactly."

I watched the cream swirl around in his cup before asking, "So, you're *not* trying to impress me?"

Erasmus took a sip of coffee and then added more cream. "Honey, if you're not impressed with the fact that I didn't molest you for the past two days, I don't know what else to do."

"Is that right?"

I took a step toward him and he didn't back down, meeting my look and smiling at the challenge. Erasmus set down his cup and leaned closer, close enough that I could almost taste the coffee he'd been drinking.

"That's right." His lips almost brushed mine as he spoke. The already deep baritone of his voice seemed even lower, as if he were deliberately trying to create a certain vibration. "I had you in my bed for two days, naked except for my robe." Erasmus brushed his face against my hair. "Your shampoo smells like hyacinth." He pressed his lips to my throat and I could feel his sharp inhale as he ran his face up to my ear. "And your skin smells like vanilla." He moved back just enough that I could look into his eyes and doing so nearly brought me to my knees. "I held you against me in the night, felt your soft breath against my skin – and I never once looked underneath the robe."

"Erasmus..."

He smiled again and the spell his words had cast was temporarily broken.

"I didn't take advantage. I'm not saying I didn't enjoy myself."

It was all I could do to hold the pot steady as I poured myself a cup of coffee. When I sat down at the table, Erasmus remained propped against the counter, giving me the best view I'd had in days, including the sunset.

"So, what have you been doing for the past two days?"

He took another sip of coffee and made a face. "I put too much sugar." Then he seemed to remember what I'd asked. "I've been planting wolfsbane in your yard."

"O-kay. Do you think that will keep the other wolf away?"

"It should at least keep him out of your yard. But if he really has business with you, I doubt it will keep him from following you around."

That scared the shit out of me. Was he trying to give me a heart attack?

"What do you mean, follow me around? I can tell you right now he doesn't have any business with me."

Erasmus nodded his acknowledgement of my words. "There's a good chance he *was* after me, but couldn't enter my yard. Yours was the closest he could get."

I sighed with relief. "Well, that makes a whole lot more sense. I mean, what the hell would a werewolf want with me?"

The raised eyebrow was answer enough, but if there were any blanks, his smile filled them in nicely.

"Forget I asked that."

"Any time you want the answer, just let me know."

Erasmus finished his coffee as he explained about the new plants in my yard. "This is the best time of year to plant wolfsbane. It naturally grows in much colder climates. I didn't want to mess up your yard, so I planted them behind your other flowers. No one will even see them behind the rows of azaleas. But they're not for decoration anyway. They need partial shade and whatever you do, don't touch them with your bare hands."

"Anything else I should know besides don't touch the new poisonous flowers in my yard?"

My question was sarcastic, but Erasmus paused to think it over anyway. "I think that about covers it. Here's your key."

He put my house key on the table and I gave him a confused look.

"When you ran over here you said you left the back door unlocked. So when I talked to Justina I asked where you hid your extra key. She told me. I checked to make sure no one was inside, and locked things up for you. I hope you don't mind."

"No, I appreciate what you did. It's not that." I laughed softly. "Justina knows I've been sleeping here and that you've been in my house. I'll never hear the end of it."

He winked and my heart fluttered on cue. "Give her something to talk about," he teased.

"Well, I suppose I should go back now. I've got work to do, things to catch up on."

Truthfully, I felt at home with Erasmus, but I didn't want to impose. I removed his robe and shivered just a bit as I handed it to him. His big warm hand wrapped around mine and gently pushed the robe back in my direction.

"It's cold out there," he said softly. "I'll get the robe when I come to pick you up."

"Pick me up for what?"

He grinned. "For our date."

"Is that so? When were you going to ask *me*?"

"I asked you Monday night."

Teasing him was way too much fun. From the look on his face Erasmus enjoyed the game as much as I did. We both knew I wanted to go out with him. Guess my pride wouldn't allow me to give up so easily.

"And as I recall, I didn't answer."

I slipped back into the robe and found my bedroom shoes beside the door. By the time I looked back up Erasmus was right in front of me. Once again, his look said it all.

"And what do you say now?" he asked softly.

His hand was warm against my shoulder, burning even through the robe. He could have reached for so many other places with no objection from me. But he chose my shoulder. I liked that.

"I say tomorrow night."

"Sunset."

"I'll see you then."

The kiss I gave him was chaste. However that didn't make its effect on my body any less potent.

Chapter Fifteen

The picture in my mind

The drizzle had stopped and even though the sky remained overcast, I thought it was a beautiful day. Cold, cloudy days are so relaxing to me. I breathed in the fresh air as I made my way through Erasmus' rose garden, noticing that he'd already put up the trellises. The garden looked complete. When I stopped to smell one of the white roses I almost tripped over a pipe. It was running out of the ground and stood about two feet high. Remembering what was right beneath me, I guessed it to be an air vent.

His garden was lovely, but the most beautiful flower was his climbing Don Juan and it was growing up the other side of the house. I decided that while I was out I might as well take a look since Erasmus said it was doing so well. I hadn't looked at the rose in years and even though my old neighbor used to mention it from time to time, I hadn't thought about it since he'd left.

As I rounded the corner my breath caught. Trellises had been attached to the entire side of the house years ago to allow for growth. And since I had last paid attention, the rose had covered at least half that space. It was magnificent. Hundreds of blood-red petals covered the ground, freshly fallen due to the storm. There were too many blooms to count and their sweet fragrance filled the air. The vines had wrapped around a window upstairs so that they formed a delicate frame, just like a picture. When Erasmus appeared there I guessed it to be his bedroom.

I selected a rose and while smiling up at him, plucked it.

He raised the window and propped against the sill.

"Be careful. You *do* remember what happened when Beauty picked one of the Beast's roses?"

"It was her father who picked the rose," I corrected, lifting the blossom to my nose.

"Same difference."

I paused, hesitant to go too far. But at the same time, I didn't want to say goodbye. Not yet.

"Have you had breakfast?"

He looked surprised. "No."

"Want to come over?"

Sandpaper could not have erased his wicked grin. "I thought you had work to do, things to catch up on."

"Well, I'm not doing anything until after breakfast."

* * * * *

By the time I got out of the shower I was sure I was running late. But one look at the clock said otherwise. It had only taken me thirty-five minutes to indulge my fantasy and take a bath. While I braided my wet hair I looked down at the drawing I'd left on the bed.

Once we were inside Eramus had offered to start breakfast and give me time to shower. It had only taken me five minutes to commit to paper what I saw every time I closed my eyes. Eramus. He was lying on his stomach, naked. Every curve and valley of his perfect body was outlined as if by candlelight. And he was watching me, peeking up above his forearm. The only part of his face that was visible was his eyes. And if I ever decided to color the sketch, they would be amber instead of brown. I was very proud of my drawing. It was the best I'd done in a long time.

Despite the fact that the picture was a nude, it wasn't overly graphic. I had decided against full frontal nudity for a couple of reasons. One, I didn't know what Eramus looked like naked. And two, I was afraid my imagination wouldn't do him justice. So, the drawing left something to the imagination. Why I felt I had to draw it before getting in the shower, I'm not sure. Maybe I just needed to get it out of my head.

I continued to glance at the picture while getting dressed. After locating my green sweater and a comfy pair of jeans I looked at it again. Finally, I had to close my sketch book in order to finish. Since I planned to go into town shortly, I put on some boots and did my makeup.

Surprisingly, after doing nothing but sleeping for two days I hadn't looked that bad. When I first got upstairs I'd approached the mirror with dread. But my hair was fairly smooth. I must not have moved much in my sleep. But thoughts of sleep brought thoughts of Eramus pressed up against me and my heart started doing flip-flops again.

Enough thinking for the moment. I was starved.

As soon as I stepped into the hallway the most amazing smells greeted me. It smelled like waffles, bacon and coffee. My guess wasn't too far off. When I entered the kitchen I found Eramus flipping a blueberry pancake.

"I'm impressed."

He turned around and I saw that he was wearing my pink apron that said "The other white meat". I couldn't help laughing.

Eramus had changed out of his wet clothes before coming over. In addition to my apron he was wearing another pair of formfitting jeans and a green t-shirt. I also noticed he was barefoot. When he saw me glance at his feet he explained, "I stepped in a mud puddle on the way over. My shoes are on the front porch."

I just stood there staring at him for a minute, wearing what I'm sure was a goofy smile.

"You look great in pink."

He took a dramatic bow before turning back to the bacon. "Thank you."

I walked over to the sink and hopped up onto the counter, putting my butt right beside his mixing bowl. Eramus didn't seem to mind me studying him while he cooked, so I took advantage. His biceps flexed when he lifted even the smallest plate. It was only a slight movement, a ripple across his sun-bronzed skin, but it was intriguing. He'd taken one of my hair clips and pinned up the front of his shaggy hair. I snickered when I noticed the clip was pink.

"Oh, you looking at this?" He pointed to the clip. "I found it in the downstairs bathroom. Didn't want my hair to get into the pancakes." His smile could have lit the room. It was like someone had bottled sunshine and decided to release it in my kitchen. I'd never had anyone's smile make me feel this way. It literally made my day. I realized then that I hadn't felt sad or even remembered James until he'd asked me about my ex. Mrs. Morrison's nosy words didn't matter at all in the cozy little kitchen with his smile. I liked the way his bare feet sounded when they walked across my floor. And I liked the fact that I had to sit on the bar to be eye level with him.

Suddenly I remembered Justina's words, "Over six feet of therapy," she'd called him.

"What are you doing here, Eramus?"

"Cooking breakfast. You invited me, remember?"

I shook my head. "No, I mean in Peace."

He poured another pancake on the griddle before turning back to me. "I was living in Florida. My home was destroyed by a hurricane last year. I rented a place up in Georgia for a while before finally buying the house next door."

Well, he'd answered my question, but not what I wanted to know.

"What I mean to say is, I've never met anybody like you before."

"Meaning?" He flipped the pancake before turning to me with a smile.

"You're great. You're good looking, you cook, you've got a great sense of humor. And you're single. I suppose it's just hard for me to believe that you're not with someone."

He laughed and I wondered if my honesty was a bit too much.

"Did you miss the part about me being a werewolf? 'Cause I could have *sworn* I told you I'm a werewolf."

I reached for him and he let me pull him closer. When I took the clip out of his hair he pretended to pout and I laughed again. Running my fingers through his hair felt even better than I'd imagined it would. Strands smooth as silk and the color of milk chocolate fell through my hands. Eramus took another step toward me and I moved so that he was right between my legs.

"That doesn't matter to me," I said softly, unable to keep the emotion from my voice.

"It will. Knowing something and seeing it firsthand are two different things."

Something wild passed behind his eyes. It probably should have frightened me, but it didn't.

"What is this?" I whispered, continuing to stroke his hair.

"Hair."

We both smiled.

"No, I mean this." I moved my hand to his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath my palm. If you'd taken my pulse right then it was probably sky-high. But his heartbeat remained calm, steady, as if it had purpose. That was reassuring somehow. "What's happening between us? You feel it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"It's happening so fast. I don't know what to do."

He put his hand over mine, covering it completely. "Just let it happen. Fast isn't always bad."

He leaned closer and now his chest was pressed against me as I moved my hands to his shoulders.

"I don't want to get hurt again."

"I'll never hurt you." His words were a whispered promise against my lips. And then he kissed me. My stomach felt weightless, like it had floated up into my chest and dislodged my heart. Erasmus wrapped his arms around me and I couldn't believe how good it felt. I was drawn to him as I'd never been drawn to anyone else. Touching him was a necessity. We'd only met a few days ago and yet his smile was as dear to me as an old friend.

Erasmus ran his hands slowly up and down my spine and I moaned into his mouth. That weightless feeling in my stomach reminded me of something. It felt an awful lot like falling. Like that moment you realize your feet are off the ground. I was wondering if it would hurt when I hit or if someone would catch me, when I heard a noise.

"Something's burning. It smells like something's on...fire."

We both turned to see Justina standing in the doorway.

"Well," she said, smiling as she exhaled the word. "Guess we know where the fire is coming from."

Erasmus took the smoldering bacon from the stove eye. "Shit."

I scooted down to flip the pancake he'd left on. "It's a little crispy, but I think we can save it."

When I turned around Justina was still standing in the doorway giving me "the look". It wasn't something you could master overnight. "The Look" took years to perfect and she had it down pat. That look said in no uncertain terms that she wanted details and she wanted them now.

"Your door was unlocked," she said. "This looks really cozy, so I could come back later if—"

"No," Eramus and I said together.

I smiled at him, glad that he didn't want to run my friend off either.

"Even with the burnt bacon, I've cooked way too much food. Please, stay," he said.

"He's got looks *and* charm." Justina spoke to me as if he weren't in the room and Eramus gave a snort of laughter before turning back to the stove.

She came to stand beside me, eyeing me critically. "Well, you *do* look rested."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Did you really drink some tea that made you sleep for two days?"

Eramus acted wounded. "You doubt my honesty? Really, Justina, I thought you could tell I was sincere."

She laughed and I was startled. It had been a really long time since I'd seen her laugh at someone else's sarcasm. Well, someone other than me that is. Justina doesn't warm up to new people too quickly.

"It's true," I said. "Eramus has this really strong tea that he drinks to help him sleep. Our cups were the same color." I shrugged. "Honest to God."

"And it was that strong?" she asked.

"Look at me," Eramus said, turning around as he spoke. He made a gesture up and down his torso and my eyes followed hungrily. "Surely you can see where something strong enough for me would be too much for Lucy."

"What are you, six-four?" Justina asked.

"Six-five," he corrected, smiling. "And that's without my shoes."

I had of course noticed how he towered over me, but hearing him say exactly how tall he was, was still a bit shocking. Eramus was more than a foot taller than me.

Justina put one hand on her hip and I noticed that her nails matched her pink sweater today. She turned her attention back to me, apparently accepting what Eramus had just said.

"And you were chased by a werewolf? Seriously?"

"I swear. That's how I ended up in his house having tea."

Justina walked over to the coffeepot, calling over her shoulder, "That's the weirdest shit I ever heard. It would have been easier to just lie and say you decided to sleep over for two nights." She paused while pouring her coffee and then said, "And more believable."

"Well, the next time she stays over at my house I'll make sure not to switch the tea." Eramus winked at her and Justina actually blushed. "More fun that way."

"You're horrible," I said, laughing.

While she drank her coffee, Justina helped me get some plates down and set the table. She also continued to grill Eramus, which was quite entertaining.

"So, if you're not gay, are you unemployed?" Her questions sounded harsh, but were posed with a comical flare. Erasmus didn't seem to mind. When I went to say something, he put up a hand to stop me.

"It's all right. Wanting to know something about the man who intends to date your friend is admirable."

"Is *that* what you intend to do with me?"

"It means she cares about you," he answered, ignoring my question.

He turned to Justina. "I'm retired."

She put her hands on her hips and raised both eyebrows as she looked him up and down.

"No, you're not. You're not old enough to retire. You quit something. What was it?"

His smile was devilish. "You cut me to the quick. I was a bounty hunter specializing in monsters. Werewolves to be exact, although I did track down the occasional vampire. And yes, I *am* retired."

He was trying to shock her, that much I could tell. It didn't work very well. Justina looked surprised, but that didn't last long. She quickly recovered with another question. "Did it pay well?"

Erasmus laughed softly as he set the rest of the pancakes on the table.

"How do you think I could afford to retire at such a young age?"

After that the questions slacked off while we ate. Apparently everyone was hungry enough to put curiosity aside for a few minutes. I was starving. After all, I hadn't eaten in two days.

We were almost finished with breakfast when Justina said, "We don't get many guys like you around here. You know, hot, single. And straight."

I laughed so hard I nearly snorted my orange juice.

"That's enough out of you," I teased.

After breakfast, Erasmus helped to clean up before going back home. He paused at the end of the porch and called back to Justina, "I invested everything, that's why I don't have to work now."

Obviously she had been wondering this ever since he mentioned making so much money. She seemed relieved. "So, what are you, a day trader?"

He smiled. "Sometimes."

Justina and I stood on the porch, watching him until he was out of sight.

"Shit, I need a smoke."

Her mood had changed right before my eyes. She fished a cigarette out of her pocket and as she lit it, started to pace.

"What's the matter with you? You said that everything at the shop was fine."

She waved off the comment. "Everything at the shop *is* fine. Mandy's doing great. I think we'll actually be able to take a vacation this year if we hire someone else to help."

"Okay then, what's wrong?"

"My birthday's coming up."

"And?" Obviously, there was something I was missing. "I know you don't really like to celebrate or anything, but it's not like you're old. Hell, I'm older than you."

Justina shook her head and blew out a long trail of smoke. "It's nothing to do with my age." She hesitated for so long that I thought she wasn't going to say more. "I always get a card."

Chapter Sixteen

Thinking of you

Justina continued to pace and blow smoke like a train while I thought over what she'd just said.

"A card? You mean like a birthday card?"

She paused to flick her cigarette out onto the wet lawn and light another.

"Not exactly."

The look in her eyes said how upset she was. Maybe other people would need to see the chain smoking and nervous gestures to figure it out. But all I needed to do was look her in the eye. Justina was falling apart and I wasn't sure how to help.

"Stina, I know we never really talked about your ex." She looked up sharply and I added, "And I'm not asking about what happened. But does this have something to do with him?"

"His name was Nick, and I'm not sure." Her eyes filled with tears. I wanted to reach out to her, but I wasn't sure if she needed a hug just yet. She looked like there was more she needed to say and I wanted to give her the space to say it.

"Was?" I questioned the way she'd referred to him. Past tense. Did that mean he really was dead? It's what I'd always suspected. But then who the hell was sending her a card?

Justina continued to pace, running a hand through her long dark hair. "You know I moved from Pennsylvania. What you don't know is why or that I lived in Tennessee before coming here." She paused to take a deep breath. "Nick was abusive, you know that too. He was an asshole and I planned to leave him. Only I didn't have anywhere to go. Most of my relatives live too far away or they're dead. I didn't really have anyone. So I planned for us to take a vacation. That way when he saw me packing bags he wouldn't be suspicious."

She looked toward me as if asking my opinion.

"That sounds smart," I said.

"Yeah, I thought so too. So I was putting everything into the car when he came home early. Such a cliché, right?" She laughed nervously. "I told him that our flight had been changed and that I was loading things up before I called him. So there I was, stuck in a car with him and not knowing what the hell I'd do once we got to the airport, 'cause I hadn't actually booked a flight. I hadn't thought past getting away."

She flicked her second cigarette into the yard.

"He figured it out. I guess I was so nervous or something. But we started to argue. I was driving and when he took a swing at me I ran off the road." She talked faster and faster, almost running her words together. "I hit a tree. I didn't mean to."

Justina turned to me then and tears slid down her face. "I thought I'd killed him. Nick wasn't wearing his seat belt. His head was a mess." She gestured toward her forehead and I assumed from that he was torn up pretty badly. "I panicked. I pulled two of my bags from the trunk and ran. We were just down the road from the house, less than a mile. It felt like forever before I got back. I threw those bags in the truck and went in to get some more of my stuff. Not much. Just a few things, necessities."

"What kind of necessities?"

I'm not sure what made me ask the question, but I knew she wasn't talking about toothpaste and maxi pads. I just knew. Justina seemed to understand this too and didn't hesitate to tell me the rest.

"I'd bought a gun a few weeks before and stashed it. I was so upset. I must have lost track of time. I couldn't find my mom's picture. You know, the one beside my bed?"

Justina's mom passed away when she was just eighteen. I knew how much the photo meant to her and could certainly understand her taking the time to find it before leaving.

"I wasn't coming back, you know? I had to find Mom. By the time I went for the door, he was there."

"Nick? So he survived the crash?"

She started crying hard enough now that I looked around, making sure there was no traffic coming. I also looked across the yard to make sure Erasmus wasn't watching.

"He was all messed up. He started saying terrible things. Calling me a whore, saying he was going to kill me. He came at me, started choking me. I didn't have a choice."

Justina leaned forward when I reached for her and put her head on my shoulder. I led her inside, got her a glass of whiskey and let her cry. After about ten minutes I finally asked, "What happened?"

"I shot him. I left him on the kitchen floor and I ran. I made it to Tennessee and stayed there until my birthday. That's when I got my first card." She shuddered. "It said 'Thinking of you'. It scared the shit out of me. I mean, who would even know where I was to be thinking about me? I didn't tell anybody."

She took a great big gulp of whiskey and made a face. "Damn, this shit is strong. Anyway, the card scared me so bad that I picked up and moved here. I didn't get a card last year. I'm hoping that he lost track of me. But my birthday is next week and—I'm scared."

I hugged her again and continued to rub her back until her breathing sounded closer to normal. I'd never seen her like this before.

"Maybe it's not even him. He was in a car crash and then you *shot* him. That really should have been fatal."

She shook her head. "I didn't stop to check his pulse."

"Does he have anyone else, friends or someone who might have suspected you and tracked you down?"

Justina eyed me sarcastically and I was relieved to see my friend starting to look like herself again. "Does Nick sound like the kind of guy who had friends?" She finished the whiskey and set the glass on the coffee table. Her look of triumph at finishing the strong drink reminded me of Erasmus drinking wolfsbane tea. Under different circumstances I might have laughed.

"I think he's still out there," she said softly. "And he's mad as hell at me."

Anger surged through me so suddenly it was shocking. The thought of anyone hurting her made me see red. I was an only child and Justina was the closest I'd ever come to having a sister. I'd be damned if some asshole was going to threaten her while I was around.

"Fuck him."

The violence in my words caused her to look at me sharply.

"Like you said about James. Fuck him and the horse he rode in on."

She smiled weakly. "James isn't trying to kill you, just tear your heart out. Figuratively. Nick would do it for real if he could."

I took her hand and squeezed it for emphasis as I spoke. "You just let him try. I'll fuck him up myself if I have too. No one is going to hurt you, Stina. No one."

Her eyes teared up again. "Thanks, Lucy."

I hugged her again and when I pulled back the emotion in her eyes was so raw that I had to look away.

"It's been a long time since someone really cared about me. Someone I could trust." Justina tipped my chin up to look at her again. "You really would shank a motherfucker for me, wouldn't you?"

We both laughed. The return of her usual coarse language was comforting. It meant she was going to be all right.

"Of course I would."

While I started catching up on my laundry, Justina told me about everything that had been going on down at the shop. Things really did sound fine like she'd said before. I was relieved that I hadn't been needed while I was unconscious for two days.

"So, what all happened with Erasmus?"

She was on her second glass of whiskey and seemed to be feeling better the more she talked. Her cheeks were flushed from the alcohol and her hair had started to frizz thanks to the weather. I had no doubt that my red mop looked similar by now.

"I didn't leave anything out, Stina." My smile revealed the truth and she kept staring at me until I said, "Except this amazing kiss."

The way she squealed made me feel like I was thirteen again and at a slumber party.

"It was incredible. No one's ever kissed me like that before."

She raised a brow. "Did he have a new technique or something?"

"No." I stared off into space, trying to find the words. "It had nothing to do with what he did. It was more about what he made me feel." I hesitated to reveal how strongly his kiss had affected me. But after what she'd just shared it felt right that I could admit the truth to her. "It felt like someone had finally found me. Like going home. That probably sounds—"

"Beautiful," she said, cutting me off.

I wasn't sure what else to say, so I picked up a stack of clothes and carried them upstairs to fold. Justina followed and it wasn't until we were in my bedroom that I realized I'd left my sketch pad on the bed.

She sat down and immediately started looking for anything new. I often showed her my sketches, so she flipped past the ones she'd already seen.

"Anything new?" she asked.

I tried to act casual. "Just some stuff from a few of my dreams."

I knew the moment she found Erasmus. It was apparent by the look on her face. I stood beside her and looked down at my sketch. He was so lifelike. It really was some of my best work.

"That's a pretty sweet dream."

"Or a beautiful nightmare," I said softly. "Either way, I'm not sure I want to wake up."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

For a second I forgot that Justina didn't know his secret. I hurried back to the pile of clothes I'd been folding.

"I just mean his job. He told me a little about it, sounded really rough."

"Oh. Does Ozzy know him or something? Didn't he say he had a famous name or was it a familiar name? I can't remember."

She continued to flip through my sketch book and I tried to act like the question didn't bother me. But I was dying to know exactly how it was that Ozzy recognized his name. Especially considering what Erasmus used to do—and what he had become. How the hell would Ozzy know anything about a monster hunter and his grandfather?

"Lucy? Are you listening to me?"

"Um, yeah."

"So, besides the obvious, what did he tell you that was so bad?"

I had to say something to account for my reaction. To her knowledge there was nothing about Erasmus that even hinted at being a nightmare. So I told her something that was true and that I knew she wouldn't bring up in front of him.

"His grandfather had to kill his girlfriend years ago."

She almost choked on her whiskey. "What the fuck?"

"She was living with Erasmus at the time. Somehow she got exposed to a werewolf."

Justina's eyes grew wide. "She was turned, you mean? Holy shit. And his grandfather *killed* her? That's pretty harsh."

"It wasn't like that. They tried to cover up that she'd been turned. But she got out of control one night and attacked his grandfather. Erasmus said he didn't have a choice."

She sighed and took another swig of whiskey. "I can relate to that."

"It happened fifteen years ago. His grandfather retired after that night."

"That's some pretty harsh shit. No wonder he has trouble sleeping."

Her understanding was a relief. Of course, I knew the other reason that Erasmus had cited for his insomnia and that I kept to myself.

We were both quiet for several minutes while I put the clothes up and Justina finished her drink.

"Whatever it is he's running from...maybe you should just let him hide."

"What makes you think I wouldn't?"

She shook her head and then stopped as if the motion made her dizzy.

"I didn't mean it that way. It's just obvious to me that Erasmus is hiding. I ran too. I left a lot of bad things behind. Things that I hope don't find me here. I think he's trying to do the same thing. And now we've both found you. You've been a friend when I really needed one." She laughed softly. "I'm not trying to say that I know what he needs. There's obviously something between you two. Chemistry, let's call it. Maybe you should just see where that leads and not worry about the past. All that matters is that he's here now. And unless I'm mistaken, you need him too."

Tears stung my eyes. Her words were more than drunken rambling. She'd been thinking about this for a while. I could tell by how deliberate her words were. Maybe she'd even rehearsed it a time or two. Either way, the fact that she brought up the subject at all was deeply touching. It meant that she could read me like a book. And it meant that she cared about me just as much as I cared about her.

I'd always wanted a sister. But, my parents didn't get along well enough to stay in the same room much less have another child. Guess I'm lucky to be here at all.

* * * * *

Justina ended up staying the rest of the day. By the time I started dinner that evening, I knew she didn't want to go home.

"I know you like to sleep in your own bed, but you can stay here tonight if you want to."

I took some pasta from the cabinet as I spoke. Justina had continued to drink off and on all day and was by now beyond helping me to cook. I pulled out a chair for her and she plopped down with a grateful smile.

"Thanks. I don't want to impose though."

I smiled. "You're not. But are you really more afraid of Nick than a werewolf?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the other night you went home after what happened to your neighbor's dog. I don't mind you staying, I just wondered why this bothered you so much worse. I'd think a werewolf was worse than an ex-boyfriend."

She shook her head and pushed her glass away. "You haven't met Nick. He's fucking terrible. And he always gets my birthday wrong. My birthday is the twenty-second."

"I know, that's next Tuesday."

While I listened to her talk I took some shrimp and other fresh ingredients out of the fridge. I was dicing tomatoes when I realized what she was trying to tell me.

"Wait a minute. When do you usually get a card?"

Justina looked terrified. "On the eighteenth. That's tomorrow."

I poured some olive oil into a pan and turned up the heat. My mind was made up before I finished turning the knob.

"We'll check it together."

She nodded as if my decision helped to give her strength. "Thanks. That makes me feel better."

"You know what'd make *me* feel better? Some food. I'm starving."

Justina laughed, probably as grateful as I was for the change in subject.

I was dicing some bell peppers when we heard a knock at the door. I was halfway expecting Ozzy to drop by. He usually did at least twice a week. Besides, I wanted to ask him how he knew Eramus.

But when I opened the door, a stranger awaited me. He was tall, but not as tall as Eramus, maybe six foot one. He had black hair, blue eyes and a scar that ran down the right side of his face. It didn't disfigure him, despite how large the scar was. It was more the look on his face that made him frightening.

By the time I recognized Nick, it was too late to slam the door in his face.

Chapter Seventeen

Unfinished business

He was everything Justina had said and then some. I had no trouble believing his cruelty. As strange as it may sound, all I had to do was look into his eyes. You know how they say that the eyes are the windows to the soul? Well, Nick's eyes were the coldest, most unemotional I'd ever seen. The only thing visible in his expression or his stance was pure malice.

My voice was surprisingly steady as I looked up at him and asked, "Can I help you?"

"You don't know me," he said, oozing false charm, "but my name is Nick."

He held out his hand and I just looked at it. Taking my insult in stride he continued.

"Is Justina here?"

My heart skipped. How the hell would he know that? Maybe she wouldn't come to the door. Just maybe I could talk him into leaving.

"I'm sorry, who?"

"Cut the shit," he said, flashing fangs. "I know she's here."

Fangs?! How the fuck did Nick get fangs?!

"I don't know who you're talking about."

He leaned forward, stopping just short of pushing the door further open. His eyes started to glow and I recognized them. A chill ran through me that had nothing to do with the cold outside. What the hell was I going to do?

"You were here the other night, watching me."

"That's right." His grin made me feel dirty. "Nice tattoo."

He'd seen me with Ozzy! Holy shit, Nick was a *werewolf*! My first instinct was to scream for Erasmus. But if Nick's reflexes were as fast as his, he could break my neck before I got out a squeak. I thought about trying to argue the point further and say that Justina wasn't there. But I looked past his shoulder and saw her truck right in the middle of the yard. There was no way around it. He knew she was here.

"If you let me pass, I promise not to mess up your house," he said, still smiling that evil smile. "This doesn't concern you. All I want is her."

He leaned even closer, propping against the door frame and nudging the door in toward me. I refused to back up. My heart was beating so fast I felt dizzy, but I'd be damned if I gave her up to this lunatic. Maybe she'd already heard his voice and run out the back. And maybe Erasmus would see her running and get here in time to stop Nick from tearing my throat out.

"I know she's here. Took her neighbor a while to squeal, but she told me. Even gave me directions to your house."

It took everything in me to stand my ground, but I did. I opened the door wide, took a step toward Nick and said, "Go fuck yourself."

He grabbed the front of my sweater so fast I didn't even see him move. The next thing I knew I was two feet in the air and he was shaking me like a rag doll.

"Tell me where she is, you little bitch!"

"Put her down!"

Nick turned around, but he didn't let me go. Eramus was standing in my front yard. Even the fact that I knew him couldn't take away from his fearsome appearance. He was the scariest thing I'd ever seen.

His eyes burned like amber lamps in the darkness and his fangs were clearly visible as he snarled at Nick. I heard a crackling sound, like logs on a fire. When I realized the sound was coming from him I took a closer look. The bones of his hands broke and reformed before my eyes, shaping themselves into enormous claws. Every horror movie I'd ever watched ran through my mind in a perverse set of flashbacks.

A low growl rumbled from Eramus' throat and made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"I said put-her-down."

Nick dropped me onto the porch and I rolled to the side, scooting back toward the open door.

"This is none of your business," Nick snarled. "This is *personal*."

Eramus took another step forward as the rain grew harder once more. It poured down and over his body, outlining his every curve in the faint moonlight. I had never feared someone and wanted them so badly at the same time. He reached one nightmarish hand forward and motioned for Nick to step off the porch.

Justina crouched down behind me and helped me to stand.

"I flagged him down out the kitchen window," she whispered. "I'm so sorry, Lucy. I didn't know what else to do."

"No," Eramus said, his deep voice rumbling over the porch. "When you put your hands on Lucy, you made it my business."

Nick laughed, a cold humorless sound that was closer to a bark.

"So, she's yours now? Well, that's not what I hear. Rumor has it she's been marked."

Marked? What the hell was he talking about? No one had marked me. What did that even mean?

From her sharp intake of breath I guessed that Justina had finally noticed how Eramus looked. His partial transformation must have been unnerving to say the least, especially when she didn't know he was a werewolf. I was terrified and I had known.

"Jesus Christ," she gasped. "Did you know about this?"

"Yes." My voice was hoarse, probably from where Nick had been choking me with my sweater.

"You wait right there," Nick said.

He pointed to Justina, but he never took his eyes off Eramus.

"I'll be right back."

"We'll see about that," Eramus growled.

The change in his voice was almost as shocking as his hands. It was still recognizable as Eramus, but obviously changed. It was deeper, more guttural—and the scariest thing I'd heard outside of special effects.

Nick stepped into the yard and tore off his shirt, revealing a powerfully muscled body. Eramus followed suit and my heart started beating even harder, which I didn't think was possible. How could he look so good and so bad at the same time?

Rain cascaded over his shoulders and down his body. The hair that washed forward, almost obscuring his face, had grown at least five inches. Other than his hands and glowing eyes, Eramus could have been the incarnation of one of my sexiest dreams.

He grabbed Nick by the throat. The rain that had been dislodged from his body hung in the air like a fine mist. I could hear Nick strangling. My eyes grew wide as he lifted him off the ground just as Nick had done to me. Only Eramus had him by the throat and I had no doubt he could have killed him on the spot.

"How do *you* like it?" His voice was little more than a growl as he lifted Nick even higher before slamming him to the ground with a loud splash. Mud and rain splattered up onto the porch, just inches from where we stood.

Justina was pressed against my back. I could feel her shaking. Was she more afraid of Eramus or Nick? Either way, I think she was much more shaken than I was.

Somehow Nick managed to get to his feet, slipping in the puddles as he rose.

"Who the fuck are you?" he snarled. "You're not from the local pack."

With a quick jerk of his head Eramus tossed his wet hair back, revealing his face. His eyes flared brighter as he replied, "My name doesn't matter. Leave now, or I'll kill you where you stand."

You hear things like that in movies and it sounds pretty cool. But this was real. This was actually happening right in front of me, and all I could do was stare. Watching something like that for real was not the adrenaline rush you might expect. It was awful. Someone was most likely about to die right in front of me. Depending on who that was, I might die too.

"This is *not* your territory!"

Nick's words trailed off into an inhuman scream as he began to tear away his own skin. Justina shrieked and fell over one of the chairs on my porch. I should have helped her, but all I could do was stare. Someone else was yelling. It was a high-pitched blood chilling sound. Nick's hands were claws now also and he used them to rip his face off

like a mask. He tore through his own flesh like paper. Shredding himself down to the beast he was beneath. His transformation was violent beyond description. As he stood there fully transformed, his breath fogging on the cold air, I realized that *I* was the other one screaming. And I couldn't stop.

He lunged at Erasmus and the taller man caught him underneath the chin, jamming his maw shut with a painful-sounding snap.

"Bah," Nick said, shaking his head. "You can't stop me. You won't even shift!"

Everything seemed to grow still. All I could hear was the sound of the rain, beating on the roof and pouring in torrents to the ground. Nick snorted and his breath looked more like smoke rising from the nostrils of a monster. He was hideous.

When Erasmus replied, his voice seemed to echo. "I don't need to."

The only indication I had of how fast he was moving was how much water splashed up behind him. He parted the rain like a curtain as he slammed forward into Nick. He hit the other wolf with a double punch to the chest, knocking him clear into the road.

"Stay back!" he ordered.

I had no intention of leaving the porch. One glance around and I saw Chase in the driveway. I hadn't even noticed his headlights, I was so caught up in watching the fight.

Erasmus stood just inside my yard, waiting for Nick to make a move. The other werewolf was hurt badly. I don't know how many bones he'd broken, but it took him three tries to stand. As he limped closer Erasmus told him, "I don't want to kill you."

Before Nick could respond a shot rang out and he fell facedown. Erasmus looked around as Justina and I ran forward. I'm not sure why we did that. It was a stupid move considering what was going on. Erasmus held a hand back toward us, motioning for us to stay behind him. He was still looking for the direction of the shot.

"Get out and get down," he called to Chase.

Chase scrambled out of the passenger side of his car and crouched down.

A dark shape stepped out of the tree line across the road. I couldn't make it out at first. But once he stepped into the moonlight, I recognized Ozzy. He was dressed all in black and carrying a high-power rifle.

He approached Nick like he expected he might get up. I hadn't noticed him changing, but Nick was now completely human again. He was also completely naked. Ozzy kicked him over and pointed the gun in his face.

Nick laughed and blood spilled from his lips. He looked to Oz, then back to Erasmus.

"Do what you want, but your girl is still marked."

He coughed up more blood. In a surprising move, Justina pushed past Erasmus and grabbed Nick by the shoulders. Her dark hair fell over his face as she shook him. For a

second I thought she was upset that he'd been shot. But I was wrong. She was upset about what he was saying.

"What mark, Nick? What are you talking about?!"

His eyes flashed amber as he looked at her and I feared the worst. But Nick didn't have the strength to transform again. He strangled on his own blood while Justina continued to shake him.

"Silver bullets," Ozzy said. "Works every time." He turned to Erasmus, who looked normal once more, right down to his hands. "I'll split the fee with you if you want."

Erasmus waved off his comment like this was a normal conversation.

"Keep it."

"What the *fuck* is going on?" My voice was still hoarse, but I had no doubt that everyone had understood me.

"We could discuss this inside," Ozzy said calmly.

I looked around, afraid someone might see what was going on. Then I realized something—no one was close enough to hear me scream. Erasmus was my only neighbor for miles. If he hadn't been here, God only knows what might have happened. I felt dizzy and my knees nearly gave out. Oz caught me, but I pushed away his hand.

"No, tell me now. What's going on, what fee?"

He handed the rifle to Chase. "Would you put this in your car for me? I'll get it before I leave." Then he turned back to me. "You've never asked what I did, so I never felt the need to explain. I'm an assassin, Lucy."

"What the hell?" Justina mumbled as she fell back on her butt in the mud.

Erasmus knelt to help her and she only flinched once before taking his hand.

"I won't hurt you," he said softly. "Let me get you inside."

While Erasmus helped Justina to her feet I turned back to Ozzy.

"Assassin? Not a bounty hunter?"

"You mean like Erasmus? No."

I thought I understood what he was trying to say. "So, someone put out a hit on Nick?"

Justina froze and rounded on Oz. "Who? Who wanted him dead?"

Ozzy shrugged. "A lot of people. But his brother ponied up the cash."

As I looked at Ozzy, I could still remember the last time I'd seen him in the rain. He still looked good wet. He also still looked like my friend, but I wondered if I'd ever really known him at all.

He must have read my mind. "It's still me, Lucy," he said softly.

When Ozzy reached for me, I let him pull me close. I needed the comfort and Erasmus was busy keeping Justina upright.

"That's why you're always out of town. Why you keep such strange hours."

"Yes."

"We should all get inside," Erasmus said. "I'll help you with the body. I assume you have someplace to hide him?"

Ozzy smiled. "Even better. I've got an incinerator."

Well, that was news to me.

Justina turned away from Erasmus just in time to throw up.

"I've got her," Chase said, running forward.

I took her other arm and we started toward the porch.

"Why are you here?" she asked him.

Chase seemed reluctant to answer. We helped her up the steps before he replied.

"I thought I'd stop by and surprise you. So I rented a couple of movies, picked up some Chinese."

She smiled weakly. "That's nice."

"When I got there...there was blood on your front door. A bloody handprint."

Shit. I could see where this was going. Suddenly, I felt sick too.

"When I couldn't get you to the door and I didn't see anything through the windows, I went next door. He— I think Nick killed your neighbor."

Justina gave an anguished moan. "What do you mean you *think*?"

"I was trying to be nice about it. There were...pieces..."

"That's enough," she said, putting up her hand. "I don't need to hear any more."

As we helped Justina into the house she asked me, "So, what was he talking about? What mark?"

"I have no idea."

Chapter Eighteen

Marked for what?

I went upstairs and stripped out of my wet clothes. After putting on a robe I carried some towels downstairs for everyone else. Justina was shivering in a chair beside the kitchen table. I wrapped the large towel around her shoulders and hugged her tight.

"Stupid question here, but are you all right?"

"No," she said through chattering teeth. "But, I think I will be. Eventually."

Chase took the towel I offered and wrapped it around him. "I can make us some coffee," he said.

"So," Justina said, sniffing, "you knew Erasmus was a werewolf? Were you going to share that with the rest of us?"

"It wasn't my secret to tell. Besides, I only found out a couple of days ago. Even if he'd told me to spread the word, which he didn't, I still wouldn't just *spring* something like that on you."

"I suspected it," Chase said.

We both stared at him open-mouthed.

"How could you possibly?" I asked.

"Easy. It was the way he smelled."

Justina snorted. "You recognize the scent of a werewolf?"

Chase smiled. "Not like that. Have either of you been around a werewolf before?"

We shook our heads.

"They smell too good to be true. It's like the best cologne ever, but I can't put it into words."

"Pheromones," I said. "I don't think you *can* put it into words."

"He does smell great," Justina agreed.

"Doesn't he?" Chase asked. "I was around a wolf once before in a club out in New Orleans. But he didn't smell as good as Erasmus."

I took a seat beside Justina and put my head in my hands. "Did you know about Nick?"

"Are you kidding me? It must have happened after I left. I'd like to think that I would have at least noticed something strange if I was living with a werewolf."

She looped her arm through mine and we just sat there, huddled together for a few minutes. I think we stayed close as much for warmth as we did for comfort.

"I could find you a robe," I offered.

"I'm fine. I think it's my nerves making me shake this hard. What the fuck kind of day was this, huh? Mr. Hottie is a werewolf, Oz is an assassin, and my ex really was a monster after all."

She laughed bitterly. Chase walked over and put his arms around both of us.

"You're going to be okay. Ozzy is still Ozzy, Nick will never bother you again, and I think that if Erasmus wanted to hurt any of us, he'd have done it by now."

Ozzy walked in and we all jumped. He was soaked through, but somehow didn't seem as cold as the rest of us. He ran a hand through his hair, slicking it back against his head. Even after all that had just happened, Oz was still good looking to me. The silence was a little awkward. So I worked up the nerve to ask what I felt like everybody wanted to know.

"What did you do with the body?"

"It's in my truck, across the road."

Maybe you're too isolated when people can carry a body across the road in front of your house? Not to mention the werewolves fighting in my yard, and no one even heard. I fought off another bout of chills.

"What will you do with him?" Justina asked.

She looked distraught. Even though she hated Nick, watching him die was a terrible thing. I wanted to erase the pain in her eyes, but had no clue where to start.

"I'll take photographs first and fingerprints to verify who he was. I'll mail them to his brother."

She nodded grimly. "And his body?"

Ozzy hesitated. Even if he didn't have a "full range" of emotions, he was sensitive to the fact that other people did. Obviously she didn't hear what he'd said outside.

"I'll put him in the incinerator. It will destroy the evidence of what he was. His ashes will be sent to his brother as well."

I was more than a little horrified at all of this. Yet all I could think to say was, "You have an *incinerator*? Who *are* you Ozzy?"

He moved toward me slowly. "I'm the same man you've known for the past six years. Oswald Chesterfield." He put out his hand as if to shake in greeting. When I grasped it firmly he smiled. "I'm a sociopath and I kill people for money."

"Why?"

"It's a job that requires emotional detachment. I'm well suited for that."

"Do you only go after werewolves? Aren't you afraid of getting bitten or scratched?"

"I'm immune to lycanthropy. And yes, I go after mostly werewolves. In this case Nick's brother felt he was dangerous enough as a human."

Justina snorted into her coffee.

"He was afraid what might happen if someone didn't take him down."

I started to ask to speak to him alone, but figured that Justina deserved to hear everything. Plus, I'd probably end up telling Chase anyway. Might as well let him hear now.

"How did you know about Eramus? Did you meet...professionally?"

Without so much as blinking he replied, "You could say that. His grandfather killed my mom's best friend."

I gasped and I heard Justina start to choke on her coffee. Chase started patting her on the back while Oz continued.

"She was a vampire, my mom's friend. Her own mother ordered the hit. She was a religious fanatic who thought she was saving her daughter's soul."

"That's horrible," Chase said.

"So, his grandpa didn't just collect bounties?" I asked.

Ozzy shrugged. "Everybody has to make a living somehow, Lucy. Eramus isn't just a bounty hunter either, but don't be too hard on him. He's not like his grandpa."

I was confused. "What do you mean?"

"He only takes jobs when the wolf or vamp in question had or was likely to hurt people." He shrugged again, making the gesture look elegant somehow. "Besides, he's retired."

A sort of numbness settled over me. I didn't know what to think. Having the mystery of how Oz and Eramus knew each other revealed had not been as satisfying as I'd hoped. One of my best friends was an assassin and he'd just killed the ex-boyfriend of my other friend. To top it off her ex happened to be a werewolf! Calling this a bad night would be the understatement of the century. I think I was too upset to really *be* upset, if that makes any sense? It was like my mind was trying to protect me by shutting down my emotions just a little bit.

Maybe that's what happened to Oz? Maybe he was so upset by something as a child that his emotions sort of...shut down?

"Did you *see* your mom's best friend killed?" I asked softly.

"Yes. I was never the same."

Poor Oz. At least now I could better understand the way he was. But my numbness would wear off in a few hours and his had lasted for most of his life.

"Would you like some coffee, Oz?"

"Sure." He took the towel I offered and wrapped it around his shoulders. "Eramus is still outside if you want to talk to him."

Did I want to talk to him? I wasn't angry. Shaken and confused, but not angry. Tonight was not his fault. While I stood there thinking it over Justina said, "He saved your life, Lucy. That's got to be worth something."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that he told you his secret, risked rejection —"

"And possible lynching around here," Chase cut in.

"When he didn't have to."

I nodded. "You're right. I was just thinking the same thing."

The beach towel still lying on the table was intended for Erasmus. He was so big, none of my other towels would do much good. I tucked the towel underneath my arm and slipped on some shoes on my way outside.

Erasmus was standing on the porch, staring out at the rain. His chest was bare and still glistening with moisture. My breath caught at the sight. I'd never seen anything so gorgeous—or so deadly. His feet were also bare and I wondered why he wasn't shivering. Then I remembered how hot his skin had felt.

I was starting to get used to seeing him in wet jeans, or so I thought. He moved just a little, just enough to make his thigh flex and my heart leapt in a way that proved me wrong.

"There's a tropical depression moving through."

His deep voice warmed me like a fire through the cold. I watched as his breath fogged, unsure what to say. The porch creaked as I moved toward him. Though the sound was barely audible above the rain, I was sure he heard.

"You'll freeze out here," I said softly, handing him the towel.

His smile was faint. Only a slight curl of his sensuous mouth. "Let me show you something, Lucy."

Erasmus moved to the edge of the porch and stretched his arm out into the cold rain. At first nothing happened, but in a moment steam began to rise from his skin.

"Feel me," he said, pulling his arm back out of the rain.

No sexier words had ever been spoken. Erasmus turned around and for the first time I was fully aware of how small I was next to him. He towered over me. Though he could easily have done me harm, I saw him not as a threat but as a guardian. I put my hands against his stomach and he gasped.

"You're cold," he said softly.

"And you're burning up."

"My temperature runs higher even after a partial transformation. I stayed out here to cool off. After what you've seen tonight...I understand if you don't want to be with me—just don't be afraid."

Erasmus wrapped the towel around his shoulders and blotted his chest dry before reaching for me. Falling into his arms was one of the easiest things I've ever done. It surprised me when I felt him stiffen just a little. My first thought was that he was injured and I'd made it worse by hugging him.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." He smiled down at me and my knees felt weak. "I just didn't expect..." His words trailed off. He didn't have to say it. I knew what he meant. He didn't expect me to want to be close to him after what had just happened.

His heat burned against my skin, thawing me from the dampness and the chill. I hated to ruin the moment, but there was something I needed to know.

"Do you know what he was talking about? About a mark?"

"Yes." His voice was soft, but there was a graveness to his tone. "Sometimes a werewolf's mate is marked with their blood. It's like marking their territory. Do you understand?"

"I think so. You're saying that Nick believes I've come in contact somehow with werewolf blood."

"Alpha werewolf," he corrected. "Those are the only ones allowed to use the mark."

"So this mark is used on their *mates*? What is it then, some kind of sex symbol? They just mark the one they want to fuck?!"

Eramus nodded.

Oh, that wasn't scary at all! What the hell was I supposed to do? This got stranger and stranger by the *minute*.

"Well, I'd like to think I'd notice something like that," I snapped. Immediately I regretted my tone. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound so harsh. But what you're saying is terrifying. How would they mark me?"

Eramus shook his head. "It's hard to say. I've never come across a case where the mark was actually used. I've only read about it."

Well, that was just great. "Where? Can I read this too?"

He sighed. "That's one of the books I lost in the storm."

"*Shit*. How was it done before, in the book? Do you remember?"

His brows knit in concentration. Under different circumstances the expression would have been endearing. But at the moment I was afraid that he wouldn't be able to remember and I'd be shit out of luck on finding out the truth.

"You'd have to consume the blood, or so the book said. It would have to be taken from the alpha when he was in human form."

"Why human form?"

"Because then he couldn't infect you."

I was certain that I hadn't drunk anyone's blood. At least, not to my knowledge. If something like that *had* happened, someone must have slipped it to me. I looked up at him, already regretting what I was about to say.

"Have you marked me, Eramus?"

"No. I wouldn't do that." He answered without hesitation and that made me feel a lot better.

"Then what he said can't be true. I haven't been around any other werewolves."

He ran a hand through his hair, biting his lower lip in thought. Damn he was so sexy without even trying.

"Have you received a blood transfusion recently?" he asked.

"No."

"Ever?"

"Never in my life."

"Have you noticed any change in your...appetites?"

"You mean sexually?" Where was he going with this?

"I mean anything."

Vivid images flashed through my mind. I remembered the way I'd been with Ozzy, biting his neck, asking him to choke me. That wasn't like me.

"Um, I was *different* with Ozzy."

Damn, this was hard to say. Even though Erasmus seemed fine with the conversation, I was *not*.

"Different how?"

"It was like I was wild."

I didn't know what else to say. That was the best way I could sum up my behavior. I was wild that night. It was like something took over me and took from Ozzy exactly what I needed.

"How long had it been?"

His question was gentle and spoken as softly as possible.

"Seven months."

The look he gave me was kind, but his sexy smile gave away his thoughts.

"I'd say that's enough to make anyone wild."

That was nice of him to say. I reached up to touch his hair and Erasmus bent down to accommodate. It was almost to his shoulders. Looking at him was enough to make anyone wild if you ask me.

Chapter Nineteen

The rest of the night

We stood there for what felt like the longest time. The rain seemed to wash away all thoughts except Erasmus. There was nothing to keep my mind and my body from him. Maybe if I closed my eyes it could wash away the rest of this night, taking away all but the man who stood before me. I knew this night would always be a fond memory. Not what had happened with Nick, but what was happening now. This moment would live forever in my mind. Even if Erasmus disappeared and I never saw him again, nothing could erase what I felt right then. A part of me would always remain in the rain with him. It still does to this day.

His chest against my face was the only thing real. All of the numbness from before slipped away and as Erasmus held me tighter I started to cry.

"I've never seen anyone killed before," I whispered against his chest.

"Nick was very disturbed. What he said about the mark could have been an empty threat."

He stroked my back and I let his touch soothe me enough to stop crying.

"You mean he read the same book? I'm sorry, but Nick doesn't strike me as a scholar."

I pulled back to look at him and the truth was in his eyes. Erasmus didn't think he'd read the same book either.

"It's possible that he heard someone else mention the mark."

Erasmus pulled me close again and kissed the top of my head. My throat felt tight and for a second my vision was misty again. His feelings were obvious by the way he touched me. How could he care so much in such a short time?

As soon as the question crossed my mind I knew that I felt the same. Something pulled me to him like a magnet. Maybe there *was* something of the wolf in me? Was that so bad? I liked being next to him, of that I was certain. The fact that my life would be endangered because of this...I suspected as much. In that moment I also knew that it was absolutely worth the risk.

"Thank you for saving my life again."

"Guess it's a good thing I didn't drink my tea tonight."

I laughed softly.

"I can stay with you tonight, if you want me to."

I knew he meant to comfort me, but my heart raced at very thought of him spending the night.

"I think it might be a good idea if everyone stayed here tonight," he added. "Especially after what Chase said about Justina's neighbor. It'd be best if none of us were around when the police find her."

"How did you know about that?"

"I can hear through walls, remember?" His grin was wicked as he added, "And I can hear how fast your heart is beating now. Don't worry, I don't plan to ravish you with all your friends in the house."

"Oh, really? And why not?"

"I wouldn't want your screams to keep them up."

My startled gasp was lost against his lips. I moaned as he lifted me to him, crushing me against one of the porch posts with the force. I didn't hear the door opening behind us.

"Oh, Jesus, this looks like a bad time. I can come back."

Chase was already on his way back in when Eramus lowered me down saying, "No, come back. What is it?"

"Look, I'm sorry to, um..." He made an awkward gesture to the two of us. "Anyway, Justina was wondering if we could stay here tonight."

"Sure. That's what we were just talking about."

Chase put his hands on his hips. "Really? 'Cause it didn't look like you were talking about anything."

"Body language," Eramus teased.

"I speak that too," Chase said boldly. "Would you like an interpretation of what I just saw?"

"No." My tone was a little too firm and they both laughed.

Once we were back inside everyone took turns drying their clothes in the laundry room down the hall. Chase mixed us some drinks, because we could all use one, and we ended up camping out in my living room.

The only one who didn't stay was Ozzy. He said that it was very important to take care of Nick's remains *now*. That sounded reasonable to me.

* * * * *

A few weeks passed. The death of Justina's poor neighbor was chalked up as a robbery gone wrong. I think the authorities were trying to cover up how bad it really was. No details were ever released other than she'd been murdered. But we all knew what Chase had seen that night and were thankful we hadn't witnessed it too. When Charlie came by the shop I asked him if there were any suspects, just to test the waters. I've never seen a man turn so pale so fast. He said they had no idea who could do such a thing and hoped to never find out.

Eramus and I had started dating. Nothing extreme, just dinner and a movie type stuff. As hot as things were between us he seemed intent on taking it slow. That was sweet, but I wanted him so badly I could taste it. What he was didn't matter to me, just so long as he was mine.

As for that crap about a mark, nothing else had been said. Nick had mentioned a pack, which also scared the hell out of me. That meant there were a lot more werewolves around than I'd first thought. I hadn't had the nerve to ask Eramus about it yet.

Ozzy seemed fine. Not that he ever appeared to have a problem. He still came over about once a week and had breakfast with me. So did Justina. Usually on the same day, though it was never planned. Nick's death had been awful, but she looked better each day. I think that every day she woke up and realized she didn't have to be afraid anymore helped her to heal.

We'd also hired another girl to help run the shop. Her name was Jenny and so far it was working out. Technically, that meant I could take the day off, but Thursdays were when we got our flower deliveries and I wanted to be there to receive them.

One of the best things about owning your own business is that you can wear whatever you like. I like jeans, therefore I wear them almost every day. I paired them with a black t-shirt that I tucked in and a black belt. I planned to put on a matching blazer before going into town. The weather had remained unseasonably cool. Sure it was October which meant snow already in lots of places. But this was Mississippi. You could break a sweat around here just walking outside. Though the weather had had a few ups and downs in the past few weeks, it stayed fairly cool. That was fine by me. I'm a jeans and sweaters kind of girl.

I'd just finished my makeup when someone knocked on the door. My hair would have to wait. I took a minute to fluff my long red curls before slipping on bedroom shoes and going downstairs. Ever since Nick showed up I actually took the time to look through the peephole before answering the door. Ozzy was standing there with his middle finger held high enough that I could see it.

"Good morning to you too," I said, opening the door.

He smiled. "I think you're being paranoid and I like to tease you, that's all."

"You here for breakfast?"

"Always."

Oz and I had fallen back into our comfortable routine easier than I thought. Once I got used to the idea, it really didn't bother me that he was a killer for hire. That probably said bad things about me, but I didn't really care. I was dating a werewolf, it wasn't like I had the right to say someone else was strange.

"Wait 'til a werewolf shows up at *your* door, asking to you to just step aside while he kills someone, *then* we'll talk about paranoid."

"Fair enough."

Ozzy was wearing his usual, black slacks and a white dress shirt. He could have just come from a business meeting or he might be on his way out of town to kill someone. Who knew?

He went to the fridge and started taking out ingredients for breakfast.

"Why did you come to Peace?"

"You mean why did I move here or why was I here in the first place?"

He got down a bowl and started cracking eggs.

"Both."

"I came here looking for a target. His name was Ronald. I wasn't given a last name, just a description."

Ozzy told me his description. When I realized who he was talking about I dropped the fork I had been about to hand him.

"You know him?"

"Yes. But the man you described, he's in a wheelchair. At least, he was when I knew him. We went to school together. I haven't seen him in years. Not since graduation."

"What happened to him, was he always in a wheelchair?"

"Car accident. He'd been in the chair since he was twelve."

Ozzy got another fork and went back to making scrambled eggs. "Anyway, I never found him. After sticking around here for about six months and meeting you, I decided to stay."

He'd brought some ham slices with him and as he started to cook these he said, "On a different note, I hear James is back in town."

"You hear from where?"

He laughed. "All right, I'm lying. I didn't hear it. I saw him."

"And?"

He shrugged and turned back to the stove. "And nothing. I just saw him."

For the first time the thought of running into James made me angry instead of sad. I was doing really well. I didn't need him to come around and fuck it all up.

"I wish he'd just take his new bitch and his new life and stay the fuck out of mine."

Oz took a step back. "Wow. Where did that come from?"

"Sorry. I guess I'm just sick of hearing about James. How come people think that when a couple breaks up you still want to hear about each other? I mean, is that written somewhere and I just don't know about it? I wouldn't walk up to someone and start talking about *their* ex. Oh, yeah he looks really happy, probably wants a house full of kids and —"

"Lucy." Ozzy put his hands on my shoulders and gave me a gentle shake. "I didn't mean to upset you."

I hugged him, enjoying the familiar smell of his cologne. "I'm sorry, Oz. I'm not mad at you. I'm not sure what I feel. I just think it's time I stop thinking about James. I feel something for Erasmus, something real. That deserves a chance, not a halfhearted effort because I can't get over my ex."

He smiled and nodded his agreement. "Good for you."

* * * * *

I meant every word I said about James. But it's damn hard to forget someone when they won't go away. I'd just received our shipment of flowers when he came strolling through the front door of *Passionate Petals*.

I wanted to hate him. I bit my lip, waiting for anger to ignite. Hoping, praying that I could do something besides want him. I spent three years of my life loving him and one trying to forget how much I cared. How dare he show up now? He left. He wanted to be with someone else. Fine. I had accepted that. I had *not* accepted the way it hurt me to look at him now or how much the thought of him being with someone else cut through to my soul.

Damn his sexy smile and his gorgeous green eyes. And damn the way he looked at me, he had no right.

"Good morning."

"It was."

He winced and I threw in another curse for the cleft in his chin and his goddamned dimples.

"I suppose I deserve that."

He set a cup of coffee onto the counter. The cup said "Morrison's." I knew then why he was here. He'd been gossiping with that old biddy. Damn her too, while I was at it. Couldn't he just go easy on my heart and walk out now? Was that so much to ask?

"Why are you here, James?"

He smiled. "Can't I bring you some coffee?"

I never turn down good coffee, even under the circumstances. "You remembered to put vanilla cream," I said, taking a sip.

"I remember a lot of things." His voice was soft and sad.

I wanted to slap him.

"You came all the way from Biloxi to bring me coffee?"

He propped against the counter. It was only a small move closer to me, but it was enough that I could smell his cologne. Memories flooded through my mind. The way he looked in the morning, the smell of his skin—so many things. A familiar ache settled into my chest. I could *not* let him do this to me.

I had to look away, but I tried not to be obvious about it. Looking James in the eye was still too painful. A tall flower arrangement was standing beside him and it was my

saving grace. I couldn't stop myself from smiling when I remembered Erasmus helping me put it there. Remembering Erasmus also brought to mind the way he smelled. My smile grew wider. Perhaps my reasoning was juvenile, but I took pleasure in noticing how far the arrangement reached above James' head. Erasmus was taller *and* he smelled better. I suppressed the urge to laugh. Could something so simple really make me feel this much better?

James returned my smile, apparently thinking it was meant for him.

"I'm moving back."

Well, that was a shock. I tried to conjure up the image of Erasmus and his sexy smile to calm my nerves. I didn't want James to see that his comment had unsettled me.

"And what does Rachel think about that?"

He hesitated, glancing at the floor before he answered, "Rachel isn't coming with me."

I tried to pretend I wasn't surprised. So, he came back to tell me that? Bastard. Did he think he could just come back like nothing had happened?

"I came in earlier to ask how you were." He paused and his smile looked awkward. "Mandy, wasn't it?" he asked her as she walked behind me.

The petite blond smiled. "That's right."

James focused his attention back on me. "Mandy tells me you have a boyfriend. Now, I know I don't have the right to ask about—"

"You're right, you don't."

Before I could say more, Erasmus walked in. The bell above the door wasn't necessary to alert me to his presence. I could feel him. He moved toward us with purpose, as if he knew I was in trouble and needed his help. Maybe he did. He was wearing long sleeves, which was unusual for him. But it was a cold day even for a hot-blooded werewolf. His black jeans matched the shirt, creating a striking image made all the more imposing by his height. I don't think he'd ever looked better. Black really was his color. It made his eyes look darker and picked up the red undertones in his hair.

James turned in his direction, but didn't seem to understand what was going on until he noticed the way I was looking at him. Erasmus came behind the counter and when he smiled down at me the ache in my chest went away. I reached for him, not for James' benefit, but because I simply couldn't help myself. I put my palm against his stomach, enjoying the way his heat seeped through the material of his shirt and warmed my hand.

"I brought you lunch," he said, putting a bag down on the counter.

He seemed to notice James for the first time, but I knew different. Nothing like that would have gotten past him. Erasmus turned to him and to anyone else his smile might have looked friendly.

"You must be James."

Chapter Twenty

Tonight's the night

At first James looked taken aback by the fact that Erasmus knew his name. Then he smiled and I hated the smugness in his expression.

"And you are?"

"Erasmus." He introduced himself, but he didn't offer to shake hands. That was probably just as well for James.

Erasmus hadn't bothered to cut his hair, which I now knew grew at an accelerated rate when he transformed. He left it at shoulder length and I absolutely loved it. I also had such a desire to touch it that I had to put my hands behind my back. Erasmus had the ability to make my mind lose control over my body just by showing up.

"So, Lucy told you about me?" James asked.

"No, Justina."

"Oh."

James' tone said he understood just how unflattering Justina's description of him probably was. And the look on his face said how upset he was at being recognized by such a description.

"You must be the boyfriend?"

The way he said that really pissed me off. But to his credit Erasmus remained cool.

"You could say that."

James' grin was evil. "I was expecting someone else."

At that moment I would've had no trouble strangling him if I could have gotten my hands around his neck. Obviously what Ozzy said to him before about making me breakfast had really pissed him off. The fact that he would bring it up here just made it easier to be mad at him. In a way, I was grateful.

"If you mean Ozzy, they're not dating."

It was hard to tell who was more shocked by Erasmus' reply, me or James.

"And even if they were," he continued, "I don't think it's any of your business." Without hesitation he smiled down at me. His complete dismissal of James was both comical and smooth. "Are we still on for tonight?"

"Absolutely."

"I'll see you then." He nodded as he walked past James who was still standing there with his mouth open. "James."

He didn't reply to Erasmus, but he did close his mouth. "Ooo," Mandy said. "Not to get in your business or anything, but that man's hotter than shit on a sidewalk."

I think James turned three shades of purple.

Justina walked out of the back. With everything that had just happened, I'd forgotten she was there. The look on her face was enough to make me lose it. We both started laughing.

James turned even redder.

"I'm sorry, James, but surely you can see the humor in this?"

"Sure." But his lips had formed a tight frustrated line. He was not happy and I didn't really care. He'd come here to start trouble and deserved what he got.

"Well," I said, regaining my composure, "since you're back in town I guess I'll be seeing you around. If you'll excuse me, I've got a lot to finish before we close up."

His smile was as forced as any I'd ever seen. "See you later then."

Once he was gone Justina burst out laughing again. "I know," she panted, "it's awful, but I can't stop. He, he, had that coming. Motherfucker. Ha. Ha."

Mandy was not only used to the language around the shop, but she fit in perfectly.

"So, besides being her ex, what makes him such a motherfucker?"

"Come here, sweetheart, and I will fill you in," Stina said, still laughing softly.

* * * * *

It was hard to believe that James had moved back. However, by the end of the day some of the shock had worn off. The shock of having him meet Erasmus right off the bat was another thing entirely. In a way it was a relief. Now I didn't have to worry about them eventually coming into contact or having to introduce them at some other time. I never thought I would feel this way, but I wished that James had stayed in Biloxi.

It should not have been so hard to focus on Erasmus and our date, but it was. Having your ex show up and meet your new boyfriend is upsetting, no matter how it goes. And all things considered, I think it went as well as it could.

I had no idea where we were going tonight. All Erasmus had told me was that we were going to "a club".

"That means you should wear something sexy, but not slutty," Justina informed me.

On the drive home I mentally went through my closet with her advice in mind. It had been a while since I'd been to a club of any kind. I'd been to a few bars, but that's not the same thing. I wasn't much for crowds. They always made me feel nervous. But the thought of being in a crowd with Erasmus was kind of exciting. I wanted to be seen with him. I wanted people to know that he was the one I was with.

I still couldn't believe James had come to the shop. A few weeks ago I might have been glad to hear he was back and that his relationship with Rachel was over. But now it didn't really concern me. I just wanted him to leave me alone. I wanted Erasmus. No matter how much it might still hurt me to look at James, I did not want to be with him.

By the time I got ready, it was almost time for Erasmus to pick me up. I'd finally decided on a pair of tight black slacks and a dark purple top. It made my eyes look more brown than green and I thought it went well with my hair. The top was clingy and reached to mid-thigh. Since Erasmus liked my hair down, I left it that way, hanging in curls that I didn't bother trying to tame. I went heavier on the eyeliner than usual, making my eyes look smoky and somehow wild. Normally I didn't stand around admiring myself, but I was having a hard time looking away from my reflection. Not because I thought I was "all that", but because there was something different in my eyes. My skin glowed in a way it never had and my eyes seemed to sparkle. I looked more alive than I think I ever had.

As I applied lip gloss I smiled, remembering that my underwear matched the purple top. A thrill ran through me when I remembered that Erasmus hadn't seen my tattoo yet. Since he liked roses so much and it was, in a way, roses that had brought us together, I was saving it. I had no doubt that we would eventually end up in bed together. I wanted to wait until we made love to show it to him.

I lifted my shirt, about to inspect the tattoo just for fun, and the lights went out.

"Shit."

I looked out the window. There were no storm clouds in sight. Night had settled over the landscape like a pale gray cloak. Stars were beginning to sparkle. It was beautiful. And the moon was nearly full. Some idiot must have hit a transformer. That happens out in the country more often than you might think.

Oh well, at least I was already finished getting ready. The power would probably be back on by the time I got home and putting on my shoes in the dark was no problem. I stood in the beams of moonlight coming through the window and lifted my shirt. As soon as I did so, I laughed.

"I must have used the stupid glitter soap," I said to myself.

Justina got me glittery soap for my birthday and I must have picked it up by accident when I was in the shower, because my rose tattoo practically glowed in the moonlight. It was beautiful. It looked almost surreal, but before I had time to examine it further, someone knocked on the door.

I pulled my shirt down, stepped into my heels and hurried downstairs. When I opened the door I was expecting Erasmus. What I wasn't expecting was for him to look even better than he had a few hours ago. His hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail and he'd changed into leather pants. *Damn*. One smile and I was his. His smile wasn't just a greeting, it was a promise of things to come. That subtle curving of lips spoke of things done in the dark and I considered asking him to just stay at home with me and skip the club.

Without taking my eyes from him I reached for the table beside the door and grabbed my purse.

"Ready?"

That was a loaded question. Boy was I ever ready.

"Yep."

I closed and locked the door behind me.

Eramus laughed. "Don't you need a coat?"

I looked him up and down once more and considered the cold wind nipping at my bare arms.

"You'll do," I said, taking him by the hand. I wanted to wrap him around me and by the way he growled in response, I think he understood my desire.

"That's fine with me, but I think you might freeze on this."

Eramus indicated the motorcycle in my driveway and I laughed. Normally, he drove a sleek black car similar to the one Ozzy had, only a larger model. Eramus wouldn't have been able to fit behind the wheel of Ozzy's car, not enough head room.

I stepped back inside and took a leather coat from the closet beside the door.

"Does this look okay?"

"Fine." Eramus put his arm around me and led me back outside, taking care to lock the door again. "Don't worry, I'll still keep you warm."

His voice rumbled through me, making me feel hotter already. It had been ages since I'd been on a motorcycle. I was almost as excited about that as I was thinking about Eramus between my thighs. After all, that's the way we'd have to ride. Lucky me.

When we got to the bike I noticed his coat. I'd never seen Eramus wear a coat before. Even though it had been cold, he usually didn't bother. Seeing him slip on the long leather duster made me wish we lived in Alaska. It hung nearly to his ankles and matched his black pants. The coat was made with a split up the back which parted as he straddled the bike and reached for me.

"Need help?"

"No, I've got it. I have ridden a motorcycle before," I teased.

"Oh, really? You've had your legs wrapped around some other man for extended periods of time going down the road?" He made it sound dirty on purpose and I laughed.

"That's right, baby."

"You know, we can take the car if you prefer to not get your hair messed up."

I fluffed my curls. "I don't think it can do much damage. My hair naturally looks wild."

He smiled. "I doubt you'll feel much of a breeze behind me anyway. I'll probably block it all."

I put my hand on his shoulder and swung my leg up and over the seat. The small seat behind him was elevated so that I didn't look like a dwarf riding behind him. But he was right, I couldn't see over his shoulder. I wrapped my arms around him and Eramus put his hand over mine, covering them both.

"Hold on tight."

The feel of his body next to mine was both comforting and arousing. He was so much bigger than me that I had no choice but to open my legs wide. I felt exposed because my posture reflected my thoughts so well. My only regret was that we had clothes on. Even through the leather and our clothes his heat burned into me. Suddenly I was so wet that once again I almost asked him to forget the club and stay at home. I don't think I'd ever wanted anyone the way I wanted Eramus. I didn't just want to have sex with him, I wanted to be a part of him.

We were halfway down the road when I got the nerve to say, "Thanks for today."

He paused at a stop sign. "What do you mean?"

"For the way you handled James."

Eramus shook his head and turned back onto to the road. "Don't worry about it. Let's not think about him tonight."

"I'm not. I just wanted to say thank you. He kind of had me cornered before you came."

He patted my hands. "You're welcome."

Eramus went back to watching the road and I rested my head against his back. I enjoyed the soft rumble of the engine, the way it vibrated through my body and his. I wasn't even cold. The scenery passed by in a blur as I opened his coat and put my hands inside. I wanted to run them down the front of his pants, but managed to control myself. Instead I focused on the drive.

After a few more turns I was convinced of one thing – we were lost.

"Where are we going exactly?"

"The place is called Mixer's. Actually, a lot of shifters hang out there. I hope you don't mind. It's not a shifter bar or anything. There'll be other people there. It's usually a mixed crowd, no pun intended."

"Then why do shifters hang out there?"

"Maybe they just like the place. I really don't know. I guess I should have asked you first."

"No, it's all right. But why did you decide on Mixer's?"

For a moment the only thing I could hear was the roar of the engine and the wind passing by. I thought he wasn't going to answer, but he did.

"Because I don't want you to be afraid of me. I thought that if you were around a few other shifters, maybe you'd be more comfortable."

I rested my head against his back again and thought about what he'd said. Did Eramus still think I was afraid of him? We rode the rest of the way in silence while I continued to ponder this question. He excited me, sure. But *was* I afraid on some level?

When we pulled into a parking lot, I lifted my head. A huge brick building stood in front of us. It was two stories high and had a neon purple sign that said "Mixer's".

I stepped off the bike and Erasmus turned to face me, but remained seated. I decided to take advantage of being on almost eye level. I wanted to see his reaction to what I had to say.

"I'm not afraid of you, Erasmus."

There was sadness in his eyes like I hadn't seen since that first night when I was chased into his yard.

"You say that now, but I could hear the way your heart raced when I told you where we were going tonight. It flutters the same way when I mention the full moon, or anything along those lines. You're trying hard and I appreciate that. But you are still afraid of me." Erasmus pulled me to him, spreading his long legs so that I could rest against the front of his body.

"I hope to change that. I want your heart to beat faster, Lucy, but not with fear."

I ran my hands inside his coat just as the front of my body came more firmly in contact with his. Erasmus took my face in his hands. His eyes turned amber as he lowered his lips to mine and a thrill ran through me. At first he nipped gently at my lower lip, then he brought it into his mouth with a low growl and my knees buckled. Erasmus held me tight against him as he slowly devoured me with his kiss. He sucked and nipped at my lips until I moaned. When he finally slipped his tongue inside my mouth I cried out, wrapping my arms around him and grinding my body against his.

I pulled back only long enough to breathe against his lips, "Take me back home, Erasmus."

"Are you sure about that?"

"I need you."

I think we were both shocked by my words. Not "I want you", but "*I need you*".

It was true. I wanted him to devour all of me, not just my lips. It was sweet that he had waited and not pushed the issue of sex. But I needed to be with him. My body was so aroused that my skin ached for his touch. I wanted him to take that big body of his and wrap it around me 'til I couldn't breathe.

The sound of gravel crunching beneath someone's shoes brought our conversation—if you could call it that—to an end.

"I didn't expect to see you here."

James stood there, smiling at us from the other side of a sports car. Well, fuck me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Chance encounter

Retreating from the warmth and safety of Erasmus' arms was not an option. I simply turned enough to address James. The way Erasmus continued to hold me let me know he was thinking along the same lines.

"So, you're dating bikers now and...other things?"

Whatever James was implying, I did *not* like his tone. I felt Erasmus stiffen and sit straighter behind me.

"Whatever you're trying to say, James, you're pissing me off."

He raised his eyebrows at my comment, but the chickenshit didn't step from behind the car.

"I just didn't figure you for a gravedigger, that's all. Or didn't you know that a lot of *them* come here?"

"Them?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I mean." In all the time we had been together, James had never used that tone of voice with me. It caught me off guard. What the hell was his problem?

"Okay, call me stupid if you want to, but what *do* you mean?"

"Maybe your boyfriend can explain. Or didn't he tell you this was a *werewolf* hangout?"

"Fuck you." The vehemence of my words was surprising. "How dare you follow me here and then act like this."

When James didn't even bother to deny that he'd followed us it felt like fire ran through me. I tried to take a step forward, but Erasmus kept his arm around my waist. He stood up and stepped in front of me.

He ran his hands through his hair, smoothing it back as he moved toward James.

"If you've got something to say, I suggest you say it."

James looked toward me as I leaned around Erasmus enough to see what was going on.

"He's dangerous, Lucy. I did some checking around after I left the shop today and—"

"Stop right there," I said, moving in front of Erasmus again. "You have no right to check around on anyone here. I trust Erasmus and whatever you're about to say, if it is another insult you better think it over very carefully." James just looked at me for a

minute, pleading with his eyes for something I couldn't understand. "The words that come out of your mouth next determine if I will ever speak to you again. Understand?"

After what felt like several minutes he said, "Good night."

Eramus put his arm around me and pulled me close against his side. He didn't say anything until we saw James leave the parking lot.

"We can go if you want." His voice was soft and kind. I knew he didn't mean we could leave for the purpose I had suggested earlier, but because I was upset.

The tear running down my face startled me. I wiped it away with determination.

"Fuck him. I need a drink."

Eramus turned me around, tipping my face up to his. "Are you sure? We can do this some other time."

I'm not sure why I hugged him, it just felt right. When I answered him, my voice was muffled against his shirt. "For a while now I've let James ruin my life. I'm not going to let him ruin tonight or anything else anymore. He can't upset me if I don't let him."

"Lucy," Eramus said softly, "if he doesn't know I'm a werewolf, he knows enough. That was obvious from what he said. Aren't you afraid he'll spread rumors?"

It took me a minute to understand what he was saying.

"I don't care if people know who I'm dating."

His smile was gentle. "Don't you mean *what* you're dating?"

When I reached up to touch his face it was like electricity passed between us. Lust ran through my veins like fire, spreading down my arm and throughout my body.

"I see you almost every day but I still go to sleep each night with the hopes that I'll get a glimpse of you in my dreams. Screw what people think. I've never wanted to dream about someone so much in my life."

It may have been a strange answer, but it was the truth. Every time I closed my eyes I wanted to see him just as much as I did when I opened them. Touching him was a temporary high and like any drug I craved him more with each touch. He was the sweetest dream I could imagine and I had no desire to wake up.

"That's the sexiest thing anyone's ever said about me. But what if I turn out to be a nightmare?"

Laughter carried across the parking lot and we both turned to see Justina standing beside the door. I wasn't sure how to answer his question anyway. I suppose it was just as well that we were interrupted once again.

"Does everyone come here except me?" I asked.

"Let's go see."

Once she saw us, her laughter stopped, but not like we had ruined her fun or anything. Chase was propped against the nearest car, puking like he was getting paid for it.

"They've got this really nasty drink and I made him try it," she laughed.

"Bitch," he said between retching.

"You must have tried the fire poker," Eramus said.

"That's the one."

Chase hurled again and I had to turn away before I did the same.

"Do you come here often?" Eramus asked.

Justina laughed again as she handed Chase some tissue. "No, this is our first time. Someone came in the bar and was telling Chase about the drink." She shrugged. "You know us and our weird drink fetish." She directed that comment toward me and this time I laughed too.

"They think they've got to try every weird drink they hear about," I explained to Eramus. "Chase was already this way, but when she moved here he found a partner in crime."

It was pretty clear that neither of them were at Mixer's for the "wildlife". Even though they both knew what Eramus was, I think he was relieved to find out why they were there. Guess he didn't want to feel like a tourist attraction.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," he said, laughing as he patted her shoulder.

I'm not sure what I expected, but Mixer's wasn't it. The interior looked like a high-end gentleman's club, but nobody there looked like a gentleman. Or a lady for that matter. It looked like a bunch of punks and bikers had taken over a nice club and made it their own. Other than the décor, the most obvious thing about Mixer's was the dim lighting. There were a couple of lighted strips outlining the dance floor and the tables were lit with large candles. That was it.

The atmosphere was surprisingly relaxed and after spending a few minutes at the bar, I understood the name. When it came to music, they played *everything*. The death metal they had going when we first entered suited the place, but now they'd moved on to Eighties rock. Some people danced, some people didn't. Nobody seemed to care. There were people who looked overdressed and several who looked underdressed, both for the club and the weather.

Eramus slid out of his coat and put it on the barstool beside him before turning toward me. The stools were close together and I found myself once again between his legs.

"Is that smile because the margarita is good or do you like the place?"

I leaned closer, putting my hand on his thigh. The way his leather pants creaked when he slid closer just did something for me. I'd always loved leather, but the sound of it on his body when he moved was so erotic. I was grateful for the pause in the music; otherwise I would have missed it.

"I like the place, but this *is* a very good margarita." I kissed him lightly, just a little peck. "Are there many here?"

I knew he understood what I was asking. "Only a few. It feels different when you're around someone like me. The change is usually subtle unless you're a shifter too, or psychic. Of course there are those who can't mask their aura at all. Those are the ones you should be careful of."

"How come? Are they more powerful?"

He took a sip of his drink and licked his lips. I wanted to lean closer and do the same.

"No, it means they don't have control. They're more dangerous."

Eramus finished his drink in one gulp and asked, "Do you dance?"

I was surprised. "Do *you*?"

"Never trust a monster hunter who can't dance," he said with a wink.

He reached for me and I hesitated. "It's been a long time since I had a partner."

James never liked to dance and dancing with Ozzy a few weeks ago didn't count. I was stone drunk then.

Eramus took my hand anyway and pulled me off the stool with a smile. Could anyone refuse that grin?

"But you're so much taller than me."

He laughed. "You're wearing heels. Besides, as long as you reach my chest, which you do, we can dance just fine." He took both my hands then and pulled me forward. "Trust me."

One of my favorite songs started to play and I couldn't hide my smile. Eramus pulled me to him and I wrapped one leg around his thigh. His smile widened into a wolfish grin. I could feel everyone's eyes on us just as sure as I could feel his hands on my body. For the moment I had no trouble imagining him as the big bad wolf. If I played my cards right, maybe he'd eat me.

In one fluid movement he twirled me around so that he was pressed against my back. As we moved together he growled softly in my ear. His hands roamed over my body as his lips pressed against my throat. If anyone else noticed his growls, they didn't let on. Maybe there were more werewolves here than he thought and they didn't care. Each time his bare flesh touched mine a thrill ran through me. He was so hot—and I wanted to be burned. Who would have thought that dancing with a werewolf could be so sexy?

"You're surprised." He made it sound like more of a statement than a question.

"A little bit."

We were facing each other again. Body to body. I put my palms flat against his chest as he lowered his hands to my waist.

The way his lips curled made every muscle between my legs jump. Eramus tried to smile, but desire and his beast were taking over. His eyes had turned to amber and his mouth only gave a halfhearted effort at a smile. Still, it was the sexiest expression I'd ever seen.

He moved so that his thigh was between my legs and when he moved again the friction nearly made me come. But he didn't stop at that. The music changed mid song, like they'd done some sort of remix. It turned into something slower, smoother, a grinding rhythm that you didn't even have to hear, you just had to feel it. And I did. I let the music move over me along with his hands, losing myself to the heart-like beat.

I wrapped my leg around his waist again and Erasmus dipped me back, bending deeply to place a kiss at the hollow of my throat. The music had stopped, but I didn't notice for several heartbeats. He pulled me up slowly until I was standing straight again before kissing me softly and walking me back to the bar.

"Well, I'll be damned," Justina said. "I didn't expect you to be able to dance."

Erasmus laughed while he signaled the bartender for another drink.

"I don't think Chase could dance right now," he teased. "You okay down there?"

Chase was slumped over the bar with his head resting on his forearms. "I'll make it," he mumbled.

"It's all my fault," Justina said. "I told him to go first, then when I saw what it did to him I chickened out. It'll be a while before I outlive this one."

We all talked for a few minutes about one thing and another before Chase lifted up his head and announced, "I have to go to the bathroom."

He looked pale and nearly fell over when he tried to stand.

"I've got this," Erasmus said, pushing Justina back down into her seat.

They were barely out of our sight when I felt someone brush up against me. I turned to find a darkly handsome man with the most unnatural green eyes I'd ever seen.

"Sorry," he said, "I didn't mean to bump you." His voice was soft and seductively sweet. I couldn't help but return his smile. "I hope I didn't spill your drink."

"No, I'm fine."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Fine. I'm Maxwell."

I laughed, taking the hand he offered. His handshake was firm. That surprised me a little. Most men didn't give women a firm handshake. It was like they were afraid of breaking you or something. Maxwell obviously didn't have that fear.

"My name is Lucy."

He leaned in closer and smelled my hair. Since I'm not used to having strange men smell me, I pulled back.

"You have a very interesting scent," he said.

Was he a werewolf or just weird? I had no way of knowing. About that time Justina leaned against me from the other side and sniffed my hair too.

"Yeah, you do smell good," she agreed. "Is that a new shampoo?"

Maxwell laughed. Okay, so maybe smelling my hair wasn't that weird. I suppose I was overreacting, wondering if everyone around me was a werewolf. Maybe Erasmus

was right. Maybe I *was* still afraid of him and needed to learn to relax. On a subconscious level I must have been afraid of getting hurt. But if there was one thing I was certain of, Erasmus would not hurt me. And this Maxwell character didn't appear to have violence on the brain either.

He ordered a drink before asking me, "Can I get you one too?"

"No thanks." I toasted him with my margarita. "I'm still working on this."

Maxwell turned to prop against the bar and as his coat opened I caught a bit of his scent too. I don't care what anyone says, you can smell the difference in expensive cologne and cheap cologne. He definitely wasn't wearing the cheap stuff. I breathed deeply and let myself enjoy the fragrance.

"Are you here with someone?" he asked.

"Yes."

He nodded as if to say, "Then I won't trouble you further." That was nice of him, and unexpected in a club. I almost said that he wasn't bothering me, but changed my mind. I didn't want him to think I was flirting either. But, he seemed like a nice guy. What could be the harm in talking to him?

"Please don't take this as a line, but are you ladies from around here? It's just that I haven't seen you before."

"Nah, we're from Peace."

Justina answered before I could stop her. No matter how nice he seemed, I wasn't going to tell a stranger where I lived. Oh well, too late for that. Maybe she wouldn't give him the address before I could shut her up.

"How much have you had to drink?" I teased, pinching her thigh in a way I hoped she understood meant "shut up".

Maxwell ran a hand through his short dark hair and smiled as he took his drink from the bartender.

"You girls have a good night."

Chapter Twenty-Two

If not now, then when?

As it turns out, whatever was in that drink made Chase so sick we had to follow them home. Justina was driving her truck with Chase hanging his head out the window while Eramus and I followed on his motorcycle.

"I hope this didn't ruin any plans?" I asked.

We were going slow enough to carry on a conversation above the rumble of the engine.

"This?" he nodded toward her truck and laughed. "No. I think he was allergic to the pepper sauce in that drink. You can't help something like that."

We only stayed long enough to be sure they made it in Chase's trailer all right. Justina was going to spend the night to make sure he was okay. My house wasn't far from there and I spent the entire ride trying to find the words to ask Eramus to stay with me tonight.

When he came to a stop in my driveway, I realized I still had no idea what I was going to say...I just knew I didn't want to be alone tonight. Eramus waited for me to get off first and put his arm around me as we walked toward the door. I had the key in my hand, but dropped it just before opening the lock.

Eramus bent to pick it up, but didn't get further than my lips. He paused at eye level and the hunger in his gaze reflected my own. I kissed him and Eramus wrapped his arms around me, lifting me up and pinning me against the front door. My legs wrapped tightly around his waist, pushing me closer against him. Despite the intensity I felt in his touch, he refused to deepen the kiss.

Above the pounding of my heart, a soft shushing sound drifted to my ears. Rain and wind beating gently against the trees, bouncing off the leaves on its way to the ground. His kisses were as soft. He didn't just kiss my lips, but my face, my eyelids, my throat. His kisses reminded me of the soft patter of the rain because they were just as tender and easy.

"Stay with me tonight, Eramus."

My words were not a request so much as a moan.

"I can't." He kissed me again, deeply, but ever so gently. "The full moon is too close."

I arched against him, willing him to feel what I felt. "I want you so bad," I whispered. "I want to be with you."

Eramus lowered me to the ground and I released him, however reluctantly. He touched his forehead to mine making the moment more intimate by remaining so close. "You don't know what I am. You haven't seen what's underneath."

He kissed me again and I sighed. It was the sound of inhibitions falling away.

"Please."

"I want you so much," he said softly, "but I've been known to mess up a good thing before. I don't want that to happen here. Give it just a little more time. If you haven't changed your mind by then, I'm all yours."

This time my sigh was one of frustration as I pulled back from him. "I've never seen a man so hard to get into bed."

He laughed, but the sound was bittersweet. "It tends to upset people worse if they see you transform at some point *after* you've slept together. No matter how much you might think you know what's coming, you really don't." He reached to tuck a stray hair behind my ear and I leaned into his touch, closing my eyes. "I don't want to become even more attached to you and then scare you off."

I wasn't sure what to say. So I let him kiss me good night and went upstairs alone. Eramus had obviously had a bad experience before and I could understand that. I respected him not wanting to frighten me, but part of me kind of wished he would. Let me see the beast and get it over with so that I could love the man.

* * * * *

Later that night when someone knocked on my door, my heart leapt. I was hoping it was Eramus and snatched the door open without looking. Guess I hadn't learned my lesson after all. James was standing there with his umbrella in hand and a smile on his face.

"Are you here alone?" he asked.

I propped against the door and crossed my arms. "Not that it's any of your business, but yes."

"Can I come in?"

"James, I really don't think that's a good idea."

He sighed. "Look, I know you're mad at me and you've got reason to be but I really wanted to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About everything. Please, can I just see you for a few minutes? We can talk in my car, you know, like we used to do?"

I had changed into some ratty old jeans and a t-shirt after Eramus left and didn't feel like going anywhere. Actually, I had been making up my mind between a hot bath or a movie when James showed up.

"You've known me most of your life," he said softly, "I'm just asking for a few more minutes."

He looked so pitiful that even after the way he'd acted tonight I couldn't refuse him.

"You want to ride around the block then?"

"Sure."

I grabbed my keys and my coat and put on some shoes, but I made James wait on the porch. Since he'd gone, this was my house again and I didn't want him in it. I'm not sure why I felt so strongly about that, but I did.

He held the umbrella for me and I barely got wet getting into the car. While he walked around to the driver's side I couldn't help but notice how normal the situation felt. I also couldn't help but notice the car smelled like him. You don't really notice how someone smells until they're not around. Then little things like their cologne or shampoo, or even their skin starts to trigger memories you didn't realize you had. The only exception I'd ever found to that was Erasmus. I always noticed the way he smelled.

We were a good ways down the road when James pulled over to the side and put the car in park.

"What are you doing?"

I wasn't expecting him to make a move, so when James kissed me, at first I didn't react at all. His kiss was urgent and sad. I could feel his desperation but that didn't mean I wanted him kissing me. Up until a few weeks ago, this was what I thought I wanted. I put my hands against his chest and pushed gently but firmly in the other direction.

James looked hurt, but he moved away easily enough. "Are you sure about this? About him? Lucy, it's over with Rachel and I—"

"Stop it." I spoke softly, but that didn't mean I gave room for argument. "For the longest time I thought I wanted you back. Now that I have you here, I keep wishing you were someone else."

It was the truth and that more than anything let me know how I truly felt about Erasmus.

"I'm sorry, James. You need to take me back home."

He nodded. "All right."

We had just pulled back onto the road when something fell onto the pavement a few feet in front of the car.

"What the fuck?"

James slammed on brakes and leaned forward in his seat.

"It looks like someone in a wheelchair!"

"What the hell are they doing out here?"

"Like I know?" he said.

James started to get out and I reached for him. "Wait."

The look he gave me said it all, even before he spoke. "You want me to leave someone in a wheelchair lying across the road? Really?"

"It's not that."

There was no way to express what I felt, but something wasn't right here. Looking closer I could see that the person in the road was a man. His chair was turned on its side and he was facedown. A mass of wet brown hair obscured his face. The only thing I could see clearly was his red shirt. James was soaked through by the time he stepped in front of the headlights. I grabbed the umbrella and got out too.

James approached the man slowly, crouching down as he moved. "Hey, buddy? You all right? Can you hear me?"

The man didn't appear to be breathing. My heart was hammering like a drum. Why was I so afraid?

"Should I call 9-1-1?"

James was right beside the man now and as he turned to answer me the man lifted his head. What I'm about to tell you next happened in an instant. There was no time whatsoever to react. The man's eyes flared to life like two amber torches in the darkness and fangs at least two inches long extended from between his lips. He snarled as he backhanded James. The body of my ex-boyfriend went flying past me and through the windshield of his car.

I had no idea if he was dead or alive and no time to check. It happened so fast that I forgot to scream. Or maybe I was just too terrified. I tore off through the woods to my right, praying that was the right direction. The storm and the horror of what I'd just seen had me so confused. But I was pretty sure that my house was back to the right and through the woods.

I didn't realize I was still carrying the umbrella until it snagged on a branch above my head and snatched me down flat on my back. Coughing on mud and wet leaves I scrambled to my feet. Everything looked the same as I scanned the woods. I had to get my bearings or I didn't stand a chance. That is if that thing was following me. Did it really need that wheelchair or could it run?

The tree that had snagged me had several low branches. If I could climb up maybe I could get a look around and figure out which way I was going. Climbing a wet oak tree is not easy. The tree was covered in moss that slipped beneath my hands and my tennis shoes as I tried to climb.

I'm wasting time, I thought frantically. I have to get out of here!

The rain felt like needles pounding down on my head as I reached the top of the oak tree. Well, it wasn't exactly the top, it was as high as I could safely climb and have the limbs hold my weight. At first I was afraid I had just wasted precious escape time. But then I saw a big dark shape in the distance. Just over the top of the next hill was what had to be my neighbor's barn. I was so excited that for a second I felt weak. This meant I was going in the right direction. I just had to cross the farm and the road and

I'd be back home. What the hell I'd do once I got there was another matter entirely. Then I remembered Erasmus. I would run to Erasmus. He'd know what to do.

I was about to climb down when I heard something coming through the woods toward me. The rain was so heavy that it looked like a white sheet in front of my face. Whatever was out there, it most likely had the advantage because I couldn't see shit if you threw it at my face.

There was no doubt in my mind that what was coming intended to do me harm. My chest hurt as I thought about James. He was probably dead or lying there dying and I couldn't do a damn thing about it. I'd dropped my cell phone when I took off for the woods and I didn't have a weapon. So it was either outsmart this thing and get away, or die. I felt stupid just sitting there, waiting for death to find me. But what was I supposed to do, jump down and flag it saying, "Here I am, eat me?"

The reason I thought of it as a "thing" and not a werewolf is because it wasn't exactly a monster I recognized. Its face however was very familiar. As the creature grew closer I figured one thing out, it needed that wheelchair, at least most of the time.

He was limping through the woods with a halting, uneven gait that looked painful.

"Goddamned silver necklace," he mumbled as he drew closer.

Silver necklace? He must have meant James' necklace. I gave it to him the first year we were together and he'd worn it ever since. Apparently when he hit James the silver touched him. And it affected him this badly?

"Well, well."

He bent to pick up my umbrella and took another look around the woods. In order to keep steady he propped against the trunk of the tree where I was perched only a few feet above his head. His hands were hairy and his fingernails had become claws. His eyes glowed so in the dark that they seemed to light the flesh around them, giving him a jack-o'-lantern sort of look. His fangs reminded me of a vampire. Not that I'd seen one in person, but that's what they looked like. But I'd never heard of a vamp with hairy hands. I'd also never heard of a vampire or a werewolf with a physical disability.

He ran his nose up the handle of the umbrella and a chill ran through me that had nothing to do with the freezing rain. He was trying to pick up my scent. I might get hypothermia, but at least the rain was good for something. It was helping to mask my smell. That much was obvious, otherwise I was certain he would have found me by now.

"Fuck." He tossed the umbrella down with a snarl. "Don't worry, Lucy. I'll find you."

He knew my name? Who the fuck was he? His voice didn't sound familiar. Then again, it was deepened so from his transformation that it sounded like something you'd hear in a horror movie. The only thing familiar about him at all was his face. Not the features, which were also slightly transformed, but the shape. I felt like we'd definitely met, I just had no idea where.

I sat there for what felt like an eternity, waiting for those awful jack-o'-lantern eyes to look up at me and praying they wouldn't. He stumbled around the area where I'd fallen, looking for tracks I suppose, but the rain had washed everything away. I'd never been so grateful for rain in my life. I thought about jumping down on him and hitting him in the head. But then I remembered what he'd done to James. James was over six feet tall and weighed two hundred pounds. He'd flung him into the car like a rag doll. So, seeing as how I'm not a ninja, I quickly pushed all thoughts of assault from my mind.

Finally he limped off in another direction and as soon as he was out of sight I began climbing down. I lowered myself down from the last branch as far as I could. My upper body strength wasn't enough to hold me there for long. I stretched my feet toward the ground as much as possible, hoping to keep from making any sort of splash. But I had no such luck.

My feet hit the ground with a wet smack and I took off toward the farm like a madwoman. Not even looking to see if the monster had heard me I tore through the woods at a break-neck pace. I had just made it out of the woods when a bone chilling howl cut through the night.

I bit back a scream and saved my breath for a running start as I scaled the wooden fence that surrounded the property. The horses were in the stable across the field and I could hear them going crazy. The monster was getting closer, because they could sense him. I would have tried to make it all the way across the ranch and to my neighbor's house, but it was the weekend and I knew they were away. They worked the ranch during the week and spent almost every weekend out of town. Of course there was a caretaker, but he didn't spend the night.

Lightning split the sky and the barn stood out like a big red beacon. I slipped as I crested the hill and for the first time I could hear the creature behind me. He had just reached the edge of the woods. I knew this because when I looked back his profile was illuminated by another flash of lightning. If I had seen him I had no doubt that he'd seen me.

I had no idea I could run so fast. I think I traveled half the distance to the barn on my hands and knees, trying to plow my way through the wet grass and mud. As stupid as it may sound, my mind was suddenly filled with movie clichés. *I'm a large breasted woman being chased by a monster in the middle of a storm*, I thought. *By movie standards, I'm fucked.*

Chapter Twenty-Three

Remember when?

Under different circumstances my thoughts might have been amusing. But in my current situation they were frightening. I guess it's not that unusual that I thought about scenarios in movies. I mean, it's not like this is what normally went on in my real life. I didn't even know any monsters until recently and now I kept getting chased by them. I'll admit I had wanted a bit more excitement in my life, but this was *not* what I had in mind.

Instead of going straight in the barn, I ran around the side. I wanted him to think there was a possibility that I might have gone on. That way, there was a chance he might not even go in the barn. At least, that's what I was hoping for.

There was a big tractor parked up against the backside of the barn. I climbed up on top of it and through the loft window. It was all I could do to breathe. I felt like I was making way too much noise, like my breathing and my heartbeat were magnified. What was it Erasmus had said, that he could hear my heartbeat? Couldn't this creature do the same? Or was the rain drowning out the sound?

He came crashing through the front doors and I slapped a hand across my mouth to keep from screaming.

"Here kitty kitty," he growled.

He was taller than before by at least a foot and his back was curved like he was hunched forward. His hair was longer and his hands were now transformed into giant claws. But the way he limped let me know that something was still wrong with his legs.

"I promise not to eat you," he drawled. "Come on, Lucy. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

He fell down with a roar. "Your fucking boyfriend's necklace! Who the fuck wears silver anymore?"

I edged closer to get a better look at what was going on, but was careful to only lean and not actually move my whole body. I didn't want to take a chance on a board creaking or some other such stupidity.

"Don't you recognize me?" he panted. "Remember? We used to be friends?"

He turned his face up toward me then and I screamed. He'd known where I was all along. As frightened as I was, I did not like being toyed with. Matter of fact, it really pissed me off.

"Come on down, darling. Let's get reacquainted."

I was more than a little surprised when my knees didn't wobble and my hands didn't shake. I took hold of the ladder leading from the loft and climbed down. As I approached him the monster took a hammer in his right hand. I froze.

"Don't worry," he said. "This isn't for you." He held the hammer high, then paused. "You might want to look away."

"I probably should, but forgive me if I don't trust you enough to turn my back."

His smile was evil as he lifted the hammer up and proceeded to break his own shin bones. I screamed, but I didn't look away.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Fear was obvious in my voice, but I didn't care. I wanted to know who he was and how he knew my name. Fighting back bile over what I'd just witnessed, I forced myself to watch him.

The creature let out another awful howl before turning his distorted gaze back to me. "You mean besides the obvious?" He gestured at his broken body. "I've been in a goddamned wheelchair since I was twelve."

Despite my best judgment, I knelt in front of him and gasped when I finally recognized the monster before me.

"Ron?"

He smiled, flashing his fangs. "You do remember me."

"What happened to you?"

He winced and when I glanced at his legs I saw that they were already reforming. I scooted back on the dirt floor, but I still didn't stand up.

"You remember my accident, right?"

"Of course."

"Well, growing up like this wasn't easy. That's an understatement and a cliché all at once, but I'm in a lot of pain here." He roared as his foot broke backwards and began to reform into a massive paw.

"As I'm sure you can imagine this is not pleasant, but severe injury speeds up the process."

"Ron...what are you?"

He waved off the comment. "I'm getting to that. Like I said, I hated being in that chair. So I—" He stopped and looked back at me again. "Do you know anything about lycanthropy? About the effects of the disease itself?"

I shook my head. "Only the obvious stuff. It turns you into a werewolf."

He growled again only this time I kept watching his face. I didn't think I could handle what was happening to his legs.

"It does more than that. If you have a physical disability, scars, anything of that nature it can heal it. Like say you lost your hand and all you had was a stump. If you were turned into a werewolf, you could grow that hand back. Of course, you'd have to cut off part of it again in order for your hand to regenerate, but what have you got to

lose? Same thing for scars, just find a way to re-injure the skin and it will heal completely."

This gruesome picture was finally starting to come together.

"You contracted lycanthropy on purpose to try to heal?"

His laugh was a cold, bitter sound. "I've never exactly been lucky. That was the plan, but it didn't work out. As it so happens, I'm immune to lycanthropy. I got bitten by a werewolf for nothing."

"But..." I gestured at his hands and fangs.

"I'm getting there. I actually became friends with the werewolf who agreed to bite me. See, it took some persuading, but once he decided to help me he was in 'til we came up with something else."

He paused and I noticed that his legs looked almost whole. Only they weren't perfectly formed human legs, they were nearly perfectly formed werewolf legs.

"What did you do?"

"He suggested that if we mixed werewolf blood with that of a vampire that it might still work. It would sort of be as if the vampire blood was a carrier for the virus. I don't know how to explain it to you any better than that, but a vampire can't mix with a werewolf. It can, however, carry the virus in its blood without infecting anyone else."

His explanation was dizzying.

"So you somehow got a vampire's blood and mixed it with werewolf blood. Then what?"

"Then we injected it into my bloodstream and tada! As you can see, it didn't work out like we'd planned, but it did work. I have to stay in that damn chair when I'm human, but when I transform...I get to walk again."

As horrific as his story was it was also heartbreaking.

"I'm not exactly a vampire and I'm not exactly a werewolf. Since the two don't mix naturally, I guess you could say I'm just fucked up. Normally if someone is bitten by a vampire and then a werewolf, they'll take on the traits of whoever got there first. In my case, since I couldn't contract lycanthropy on its own, I took on a little of both."

I rose to my feet and backed up slowly. Ron rolled over and was lying facedown in the dirt, growling as his body continued to reform itself.

"That stupid necklace delayed my transformation or I'd have caught you in the woods."

His voice was even deeper now and nothing could have hidden the malice in his words.

"Why are you here?"

He lifted his face up and I gasped. He was covered in hair, but he didn't grow a wolf snout like Nick had done. He looked like a human wearing a monster costume. A really good monster costume.

"I'm here because you have been marked."

Okay, I'd had enough of this shit. "What is everyone talking about with this damn mark?"

He laughed. "You really don't know? It's an honor, Luce. You've been chosen."

"For what?"

"To mate with the alpha who helped me."

I retreated so fast that I stumbled over a wheelbarrow full of garden tools. It's a miracle I didn't stab myself with something.

"What the fuck?! You can't just decide you want to mate with someone! Is that why you're here, to bring me to him?"

"Yes," he snapped. "And you're lucky it's me. His second choice would not have been as kind."

"You call this *kind*?! You show up, scare me to death! You probably killed James! I don't understand. We really *did* used to be friends. At least, I thought we were. Why would you do this to me, Ron?"

"It's not all about you," he spat. "I recommended you for the position because he needed a good woman. You were the only one who was ever kind to me. I thought that if anyone could love him it would be you. So, when he gave a sample of his blood to the shaman for the mark, I gave him your name. There were other recommendations given by other members of the pack, you know. We had no way of knowing who had actually gotten the mark. That is until recently."

"You're delusional. I don't know any fucking shaman or any such bullshit. You're doing this because you're sick. Let me help you, Ron. It might not be too late. I know someone who —"

"Eramus," he growled, cutting me off. "You should forget about him right now."

Ron rose to a crouching position and as he did so his clothes ripped off, he'd completely outgrown them.

"Once you get a taste of a real alpha werewolf, you'll forget all about that monster hunter."

I backed up until my back hit one of the poles that held up the barn. My hand wrapped around a wooden handle and I clutched it for dear life. If he came any closer I was going to hit him with it, whatever it was.

"I still don't understand why you'd do this to someone you thought was kind. Isn't being raped by a monster something you save for your enemies?"

He laughed. "My master has never had to rape a woman. Your blood calls out to him. He's become a part of who you are. Even now you are drawn to the wolf in me, whether you like it or not."

His words were shocking. But even more shocking was the fact that he was right. I *was* drawn to Ron. It wasn't necessarily sexual, but I definitely had the urge to touch him.

Well fuck that. I'm not some weak minded fool who can't control her libido when her life is at stake.

"Just let me go, Ron. Pretend you couldn't find me...for old time's sake."

"No such luck, Luce."

He lunged at me, but I was expecting it. I snatched the handle behind me and brought it around as fast as I could. Ron must have still been affected by the silver, otherwise I never would have been able to hit him. I'm nowhere near as fast as a werewolf. For lack of a better term, that's what he appeared to be.

I didn't even realize until the tool swung past my face that it was a pitchfork. I jabbed it through his chest just below his armpit and he howled.

"I'm not going to kill you, but you shouldn't press your luck."

I pulled the pitchfork back and stabbed it through his throat. Ron's eyes showed just how surprised he was as he fell to the ground. If he got back up, this might be my only chance to escape. He was still clawing at the pitchfork, trying to get it out when I ran through the front doors and out into the storm.

The rain was still coming down too hard for me to see the road, but I knew it couldn't be far. On a clear day you could see the barn from the side of the road across from my house. I had to make it to Eramus. "This is *not* the night I die," I kept telling myself.

Have you ever had one of those dreams where you're running from something and you can never seem to get anywhere? That's what it felt like trying to get to the road. Part of me expected to wake up at any minute and curse whatever it was I'd drunk before going to bed. Vaguely I was aware that I'd stopped feeling cold. That could either be because I was running flat out down a hill or because hypothermia was starting to settle in.

Keeping in shape was something I enjoyed, but I was a casual exerciser. I enjoyed long walks and gardening. Occasionally I'd use the exercise bike in my spare room. But I was not in the kind of shape to be running like this without passing out. Not normally. Ron's words haunted me as I continued my mad dash through the rain, completely exhilarated and not even remotely tired. Had my blood really been mixed with an alpha werewolf? I sure as shit knew I couldn't run through the woods and then clear across a large ranch without even a stitch in my side just a month ago.

Maybe this was just the effect adrenaline had on my body, but I doubted it.

When I finally reached the shallow ditch beside the road I tripped. The rain was too heavy to see through and I fell face first. I turned my face up to the rain as I gasped, sucking down air like I'd been underwater. I ran my hands over my face and down my arms, wiping away the mud. I'm not sure why I felt the need to take a mini-shower in the rain, but I *am* obsessive-compulsive to a slight degree.

My shoes touching the pavement at long last was a bit surreal. It seemed like a lifetime since James and I had driven out of the yard. Now he was somewhere on the

other side of the woods, possibly dead, and I was on the run from a monster who used to be my friend.

There was no sign of Ron following me yet, at least none that I could detect. I ran across the road and up to Erasmus' front door. As I knocked it occurred to me that if he didn't let me in I had nowhere else to go. My keys were in my coat. And my coat was in James' car. Even though Erasmus had returned my spare key, I'd forgotten to put it back outside underneath the flowerpot.

If he didn't come to the door then I was *fucked*. I started to beat frantically. Where was he? I peeked through the living room window. The lights were off. Before I could look around more a howl was lifted up on the night wind and it made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I looked around, desperate for a place to hide when I spotted Erasmus' garden. More specifically, I found his flowerpot, the one where I'd told him to hide a key. I ran over and nearly slipped down when I reached for the large planter. At first I thought he hadn't taken my advice, because there was nothing underneath the heavy pot.

I sat down beside the flower and saw something sticking out of the dirt near its roots. It was a key box! I pulled the little black box out of the soil and found a shiny silver key inside. I was so excited that I could barely hold onto it as I looked for the door.

I splashed around in the grass for what felt like forever. There *was* no freaking door! What had he done with it?! I could hear Ron howling again and it sounded like he was halfway there!

Then I hit my toe on something hard and looked down to find a large stepping stone. It was pretty and decorative and under different circumstances I would have liked it. But right now I wanted to smash it for being where the door should have been. Wait a minute. I bent down and found that the rock lifted more easily than I'd expected. The stone *was* the damn door!

Chapter Twenty-Four

Beauty and the Beast

Eramus had said something last week about having the door replaced, but I hadn't given it much thought. I'd assumed he meant to put another door. You know, that actually *looked* like a door. This made sense though. If this place was meant to hide things, a door would be pretty obvious if you couldn't cover it back up. And who could do something like that from underground?

I lifted the flat stone up as far as I could and slid down into the room beneath, not bothering with the last few rungs on the ladder. The sooner I got out of the storm and away from Ron, the better. I had no doubt that Eramus would find me—eventually.

The door slapped shut above me and I shivered. Soaked to the bone and suddenly exhausted I turned to get a look at my surroundings. It was then that I felt a presence in the room and realized I wasn't alone. My first thought was that Ron had found me. I almost ran back out into the storm. But what if I was wrong? What if I ran out and he caught me? I heard something, though I wasn't sure what.

The room was lit by candles. There was one small table and a few shelves in one corner of the room. A shelf of some sort blocked my view, but when I stepped around it I saw where the sound had come from. Eramus was chained to the wall. One arm was locked above his head and his feet were shackled where he stood. I ran to him.

"Eramus, who did this to you?"

I started to look around for a key, but he stopped me, putting his free hand on my shoulder.

"I did."

I stood there for a moment and just stared at him.

"I don't understand. Why would you do this to yourself? How do you expect to ever get free?"

"The shackles are controlled by a machine. In twelve hours, it will release me."

"Why? What happens for the next twelve hours?"

The look on his face was pained and though I made a move toward him he turned his face away, stopping me once again.

"The full moon," he answered.

It took me a minute to find my voice. "Eramus, a wolf chased me, he—"

"I don't know who's doing this," he said. "But if I am to have the strength to fight him, I have to stop suppressing what I have become. I thought that I could pretend to be a man in order to...in order to love you."

Tears stung my eyes, but I ignored them. "If you're not a man, then what are you?"
"A beast."

The pain in his voice was like nothing I had ever heard. And all the sadness in the world was in the eyes that looked back at me as they slowly turned to amber. I understood what he was trying to say and it made no difference to me. I touched his face and as his fangs grew he started to cry.

"Get out of here," he said.

"I'm staying."

He was still human to all appearances except for the short fangs and amber eyes. He looked like something wild and a passion stirred in me such as I have never felt before. He wasn't wearing a shirt and when I placed my hand against his chest it seemed to me that his flesh burned.

"I don't want to hurt you," he pleaded.

"Then don't."

When he looked at me I felt a flame ignite in my soul like hellfire. Anything I felt before was in comparison to a match. The tortured look in his eyes broke my heart in two. I didn't think it could ever be repaired, but he was surely welcome to both pieces.

I kissed him and my heart leapt. It danced against my ribs to a beat all its own and Erasmus trembled at my touch. Sweat shown on his forehead like a fine mist and as I trailed my hand down his face I could feel his stubble already starting to grow.

A low growl escaped his throat as he said, "You should be running."

"Didn't you know? Beauty is incomplete without the Beast."

I didn't call myself beautiful because of my own opinion, but because he always said that I was. It may seem ridiculous, but I was not afraid. Not just because he was chained, but because whatever he became, he was still my Erasmus underneath. And I was completely and irreversibly in love with him.

Our lips met once more and I pulled him as close as his chains would allow.

"We don't have much time," he whispered. "Soon, I won't be able to control it."

"What will happen when you turn?"

"I don't know, this will be the first time I haven't suppressed the transformation for a while now. I'm afraid that holding the Beast back has only made him stronger."

I ran my hand down his chest and he winced as if in pain. When I reached the top of his pants I understood what sort of pain he felt. I unbuttoned his jeans and slid the zipper down.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "This is dangerous, I might —"

But I cut off his next words with a kiss as I ran my hands down his pants. I held him in my hand and felt him grow hard in an instant. No coaxing or foreplay, just a growl as he forced me to loosen my grip by his sheer size.

I took a step back to undress and was devoured in sections by his hungry eyes. My wet shirt peeled from my body with a slippery sliding noise that excited me. It flopped to the ground in a wet heap and I moved to my pants. First I unbuttoned them and Erasmus licked his lips. I had known from the first time he looked at me that he wanted to eat me. And now I knew by the way his amber eyes flashed, exactly what was on his mind.

I slid my pants down just enough that my tattoo became visible and he paused, staring intently at the markings on my skin.

"You like roses, don't you?"

He growled again and the hairs on my arms stood on end.

"It is symbolic." But he didn't offer further explanation at the moment.

Just a short while ago I would have been upset at the very idea of being close to a werewolf, but not so anymore. I peeled off my remaining clothing and tossed it aside in a sodden heap. I could feel my hair, plastered to my shoulders and back and as I tossed my head back I liked the way the wet locks smacked against my skin.

He looked like a feral Adonis. Sweat glistened on his skin in the candlelight, reflecting every curve and hollow of his body the way only an artist could ever recreate. My words pale. Images came to mind, his hands on my body, his lips roaming up and over my skin. And the hunger burned. My need for him was like a living thing, consuming me from inside out. The only way to calm this demon was a sacrifice of flesh.

I stepped forward and lowered his pants to his knees, exposing his cock and the magnificent curves of his thighs. All this time I had been admiring him in jeans, never understanding what a crime it was to cover him. A body like this was meant to be appreciated. No, worshiped.

I took his cock in my mouth and Erasmus moved his free hand to the back of my head, guiding me slowly as he continued to tremble beneath my touch. My mouth strained to contain him though I continued to move up and down, wetting his shaft for what was to come.

"Yes." His voice was something between a whisper and a cry for release. Caught between man and beast, pain and pleasure.

I lifted my head and found his amber eyes watching me.

"The taking of Beauty is a fantasy among lycans, something I have heard of for years."

His voice had become strained with desire and I'm sure my own expression reflected that same burning need for release.

"And what about when Beauty takes Beast?"

I put my hands on his shoulders and with agility I hadn't know I possessed, leapt so that my legs were wrapped around his waist, securing my feet against his thighs. He put his arm around me, the other visibly straining around his braces.

"Sex brings out the beast," he moaned. "I don't know how long I can —"

"Long enough." And with my interruption I positioned myself directly over his throbbing erection. His cock felt like a brand against the lips of my pussy, burning me even before he was inside. I knew that I was wet enough to take him fully, but I wanted to savor the feeling. To relish the sensation of him slipping inside of me. I watched the expression in his amber eyes as I stroked him. I had waited so long for this moment and now all I wanted to do was make it last. I wanted to savor the feel of his hot flesh in my hand and the hard body pressed against mine. I squeezed lightly, excited by the way his breath quickened.

"Your cock feels so good in my hand."

Eramus smiled, showing a little bit of fang. "Wait 'til you have it in your pussy."

I rubbed the tip of his cock up and down my wet lips, teasing myself as much as him. I used his throbbing flesh to rub my clit, stroking in slow circles until I shook from the effort it took to keep from sliding him inside.

I lifted myself up, as close as I could get to being face to face, and with a shuddering sigh against his lips I lowered down onto him, watching the way his eyes changed when he was inside me. He went from the look of one who seeks to touch to one who seeks to possess.

The sounds that came from him were more animal than man as I began to move. I hooked my feet around his thighs, pressing my breasts against him. This allowed me just enough leverage to wiggle my ass. I ran my tongue across his nipple as I bobbed my ass up and down, pulling him in and out of me at a deliberately slow pace.

"You're so tight." His voice sounded strained. It excited me to know he held the beast at bay so we could enjoy this moment. Knowing he could harm me just as easily as he could bring me pleasure was thrilling.

I took his nipple in my mouth, sucking on the tender flesh until he growled. I slammed against him as hard as I could, taking his cock as deeply as possible. When I growled too, I thought he might break his chains.

Up and down I stroked him, grinding my body against his, using his torso for leverage. I climbed his body as if he were a ladder and my pleasure awaited at the top. Touching him was like a fever, it spread throughout my body, taking all in its path and leaving only my soul in its wake. But that too belonged to him. All he had to do was ask.

I continued to move slowly, delighting in this slow, grinding torture. I could feel his breath against my skin and his struggle against his bonds to thrust deeper inside. I ran my tongue up the side of his throat before nipping gently just below his ear.

His smell was intoxicating. He didn't smell like sweat, even though his body was slick with it. His natural sexy scent was getting stronger, so much so that I couldn't resist running my tongue over his chest. I wanted to see if he tasted as good as he smelled.

I reached down to touch the base of his cock, and stroked my pussy.

"You're going to make me come," I moaned.

He growled softly as he nipped at my ear the way I'd done his. The soft pinch sent a shiver of pleasure through my body, making my pussy clench.

"It hurts," I said. "I want you so bad my pussy hurts."

"Stroke me," he commanded. "I like to feel your hand between us."

I used the barrier of my hand to keep from taking him fully as I moved. The slow gyration of my hips was driving me crazy. And yet I didn't want to move faster. I wanted to grind my wet pussy against him until I couldn't take any more. I growled again as I grasped the base of his shaft and squeezed.

I lifted up enough to pull him out, teasing him by letting him only halfway back inside.

"Does that feel good?"

"Yes," he moaned. His voice barely sounded human anymore and still I wasn't afraid. The more it seemed he might lose control, the more it drove me wild.

"Do you want more?"

"Yes."

"Say please."

Eramus bent to kiss me again and moaned the word into my mouth. I moved my hand at the last second, taking him fully again. This time I ground my body against him with complete abandon, holding nothing back. Our bodies were slick with sweat and trembled with the effort it took to keep from coming. I had to hold on tight so I wouldn't slip. Eramus put his hand on my ass, helping to move me up and down at a faster pace.

Wet hair slapped against my body as I threw back my head. The look in his eyes was something I'll never forget. No one's ever looked at me the way he did, not like he wanted to be inside me, but like he wanted to be a part of me.

"Finish it," he growled.

Eramus moved his hand to brace against the wall rather than touch my ass.

"Touch me." My words were both a command and a pleading request.

"I can feel the change. I may scratch you."

"Do it. I want your hands on me. I want to feel you..." But my next words were lost to pleasure. He put his hand against my lower back, pushing me down as he drove his hips upward, thrusting so deeply inside me that I screamed.

My climax was unbelievably strong and I clung to him for fear of falling on the floor as I came. My muscles contracted so long and hard that I thought the next pulse of release might never come. I screamed again, grinding against him, getting every last drop of pleasure I could.

"I'm close," he whispered.

Knowing that he was about to come seemed to make my orgasm last even longer.

I felt him go stiff in my arms and knew he was coming just by the sound of his breath against my ear.

He threw back his head and howled.

"Please, Lucy. I love you too much to—"

His voice became another growl and I slipped from his body, withdrawing a few steps as the change finally overtook him.

He turned more easily than anyone I had seen so far. His hair became longer, spilling over his shoulders in a wild, dark tangle. He growled again and his fangs lengthened. In that split second, caught between man and beast, he was the sexiest thing I had ever seen. Nick's transformation had been horrific and so was Ron's. But Eramus didn't look as if he was in pain, at least not in the way they had been. It was the pain behind his eyes that broke my heart.

Eramus looked down at me before throwing back his head with a howl. As he did this his chest expanded and a carpet of dark fur spread over and down his abdomen. The bones of his lower legs lengthened and his feet became gigantic paws. His face began to lengthen as well and in a few short moments his transformation was complete.

I stood there in total disbelief. At first I thought that nothing remained of the man I had known. But then he looked at me and I recognized Eramus behind those amber eyes.

"Eramus?"

I moved closer, but not close enough that he could touch me, just in case he was not in control. The moment he looked at me, I knew everything was all right. I didn't see a monster before me, just a werewolf. Just because he was one didn't mean he had to be the other. I was still naked, but it was impossible to be cold next to him. Heat radiated from his body and by the time I was close enough to touch him, I was completely warm. I was already short compared to him. Normally I reached the middle of his chest. Now I was on eye level with his abs.

I put my hand against his stomach and gently stroked his fur. The hand he put over mine was enormous and covered with hair just like the rest of him.

"You're not afraid." He sounded amazed. His voice was deeper. But instead of sounding evil like Ron or Nick, his voice sounded powerful.

"And you're not a ravening monster."

He laughed and it seemed so strange coming from a wolf's face.

"Just wait 'til I get started."

I was so relieved to see that he was still Eramus and so overcome by all that had happened that I hugged him without stopping to think about it.

"Well, you're taking things a lot better than I expected. No one's ever hugged me like *this* before."

I started crying into his fur and Eramus wrapped his free arm around me. It wasn't like me to break down crying. Then again, it wasn't like me to hug werewolves either.

"Why don't you tell me what happened," he said softly. "You said someone was chasing you." He looked up at the ceiling. "Obviously they haven't found the door."

I leaned back and wiped my eyes. "I almost didn't find the door. I thought I was going to get eaten alive."

"Sorry about that. I thought I told you I changed it."

"You did. I just didn't remember you changing it to a *rock*." I hugged him again, desperately needing the comfort of his nearness. "Eramus, I'm so scared."

I repeated for him everything that had happened since he left my house that evening. He stiffened when I got to the part about James showing up. Other than that he showed no reaction. Halfway through my recap I realized I was having a conversation with a werewolf and suppressed the urge to laugh. Maybe shock was settling in along with some mild hysteria? I tried to remember exactly what Ron had said in the barn and repeated it word for word. I didn't know how important each detail was and didn't want to leave anything out.

When I finished he asked, "Do you think James might still be alive?"

I shook my head. Fresh tears fell down my face. "I don't think so, but I'm really not sure."

He sighed. "As much as I don't like your ex-boyfriend, I can't leave him out there to die. If you come over to the machine, I can tell you the combination to get this off." He rattled his chain as he spoke.

"You're serious. You really mean to go out there? What about Ron?"

He growled and suddenly I realized just how ridiculous it was that I'd hugged him. Werewolves were among the most dangerous creatures on earth and I'd just used one as my personal teddy bear.

"I can handle Ron. I'm more concerned about James. Besides, I want to find out what this Ron knows about you being marked."

"About that—"

"It's your tattoo," he interrupted.

"What?! But I didn't go to any shaman to—"

"Where *did* you go?"

"Crazy Wolf's. It's over on—"

"I know where it is. Did Crazy Wolf do your tattoo himself?"

"Yes, but I've known him since I was a kid."

"He's a werewolf and obviously he's the pack shaman."

I had to sit down. I pulled the one chair over and placed it between Eramus and the machine that kept him chained.

"Are you telling me that he mixed the ink for my tattoo with an alpha werewolf's blood?"

My voice was calm, but the menace it held surprised me. I had known Crazy Wolf since I was about thirteen. He was a tall, dark, good-looking Native American. And yes, Crazy Wolf was his real name. I'd even entertained a few fantasies about him over the years. Now I was fantasizing about breaking his neck with my bare hands.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Broken ties

I was so angry I couldn't see straight. Twice tonight I had learned of betrayal by people I thought were old friends of mine. Obviously those ties were broken. Or maybe they were never my friends at all.

"Are you sure it's the tattoo?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"I knew the instant I saw it. Like I said, the rose is symbolic. I'll explain it all later. If your friend is still alive, we're wasting time."

"Shit." I stood up and pushed the chair out of the way, kneeling in front of the machine. "I'm sorry. It's not every day I find out shit like this. I guess I'm not so good at getting this kind of news."

"You're not doing too badly. I'm surprised you don't want to kill Crazy Wolf."

I looked back at Erasmus and could feel my lips curling into a snarl. "Whoever said that?"

His eyes widened. Maybe I shouldn't have let him know what I was thinking.

"I understand, but murder is a serious crime. Even more so in the lycanthrope community."

"It's not as if I go around killing people over just anything. The way I see it this motherfucker took my life into his hands without consulting *me*. He deserves to be *punished*."

"No argument there, but do you really want him to die?"

Erasmus' advice was softly spoken, but it had a sobering effect. Even if I had the opportunity, I wasn't sure that I could kill Crazy Wolf, or anyone else for that matter. I wanted to hurt him, but I'm not a murderer.

"No, I'm just upset. Tell me the combination to this thing."

Once Erasmus was free I started putting my clothes back on. Getting back into wet clothes is a bitch.

"I could leave you here," he said. "But I'd just worry about you the whole time." I rolled my eyes and he added, "I'll make it up to you later."

"Let's just find James. If we both survive the night I want a full explanation on all this bullshit."

"You got it."

"What were those chains made of anyway?"

"Reinforced steel plated with silver."

That sounded impressive. "Would it have stopped you?"

He shrugged. "Maybe."

"No offense, but you don't seem like you needed to be chained."

"I've been suppressing the change for months now. I wasn't sure what to expect. Guess I overreacted."

Once I was dressed Eramus headed for the door. The ceiling was nine feet high. He didn't need the ladder to open the door. I estimated him to be just over seven feet tall once he was transformed. Now *that* was intimidating.

"Shouldn't I take a weapon or something?" I asked.

He smiled and it was frightening coming from a wolf's face. "You *are* taking a weapon."

It was at this inopportune moment that I noticed he was completely naked. And *all of him* had grown when he changed.

Eramus laughed. "That is *not* the weapon I was referring to."

I smiled, embarrassed that he'd caught me staring. "Well, you could probably knock someone out with it in a pinch."

"I'll keep that in mind." He put his hand on the door. "Are you ready?" I nodded. "Let me take a look first. Get on the ladder and be ready when I reach for you."

Eramus opened the door and rain splashed to the floor as he leapt outside. Wow. He could jump nine feet high? He closed the door and I climbed up as far as I could without hitting my head. It seemed like no time at all before he opened the door and pulled me outside.

"He's not around the house, but he has been. Traces of his scent still linger. I'm betting he went back to the car. We should hurry."

Eramus knelt down in front of me.

"What are you doing?"

"No offense, babe. I'm sure you're a fast runner, but I doubt you can beat my time. Just climb on and point me in the right direction."

I never expected to ride a werewolf, but what choice did I have? I climbed on his back and wrapped my legs around him as best I could. I was too short to lock my ankles in the middle, fully transformed he was just too damn big. I put my arms around his neck and Eramus put his hands underneath my thighs.

"That way."

He took off in the direction I'd pointed and I had to hold on for dear life. I knew werewolves were supposed to be fast, but *damn*. It was like riding a motorcycle in the rain without a helmet. Not entirely a fun experience, but exhilarating just the same. He leapt over the ditch I'd fallen in earlier and I resisted the urge to squeal.

Eramus went to all fours as we raced across the field and I held on tight, riding him more like a horse. It didn't matter if my legs couldn't wrap all the way around him, just as long as he stayed down.

"Is this the barn?"

The rain beating into my face was nearly blinding, but I could still make out the barn.

"Yes."

He came to a stop only long enough to tell that Ron was not inside.

"Which way?"

I pointed to the right. "Through there, then take a left until you reach the road."

"Keep your head down, that way you won't catch branches."

I hugged Eramus tight, burying my face against the fur on his back. Riding him through the woods was definitely a rush. But knowing that we might find James dead made it a whole lot less exciting. Maybe we hadn't wasted too much time. Honestly, I thought he was dead on impact. Otherwise I never would have taken so much time with Eramus in the shelter. But when he asked me, I couldn't say for sure. If James *was* still alive and ended up dying because I never came back, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself.

The moment his claws hit pavement Eramus stood up and lowered me to the ground. Ron was standing in the middle of the road. The car was still running and he was right in front of the headlights, casting his gruesome shadow into the ditch on the other side. He looked more like a scarecrow wearing a wolf suit than the enormous wall of muscle standing beside me.

It took me a minute to realize that Ozzy was standing on my other side. Of course, I'd figured out by now that Ron was the wolf he'd been sent here to find six years ago. But I didn't expect to find *him* here. If I had known for certain just a day ago that he was definitely looking for Ron, the Ron I used to know, I would never have told Oz his whereabouts, even if I'd known. But after tonight, fuck Ron.

Screw all these fake friends. My *real* friend was here—and he'd brought a big gun.

"What's going on here?" Eramus growled.

Ron gnashed his teeth at us and Ozzy cocked the rifle he had aimed.

"Go check on James," Eramus said, nudging me in the direction of the car. "If he comes near you, I'll tear his head off."

Ron howled with frustration, but he didn't make a move toward me. Apparently I wasn't the only one who believed Eramus' threat.

I hadn't actually looked at the car since getting out of it and seeing it now was difficult. James' legs were hanging out over the hood and it looked like his upper body was inside the car. He'd definitely gone through the windshield headfirst. I got in the passenger side and scooted toward him.

Being mad at your ex is one thing, but seeing him hurt is quite another. It felt as if someone had kicked me right in the chest. I'd have given anything to take back what had happened tonight. I couldn't bring myself to check for a pulse. Instead I brushed my hand across his forehead, dusting off a few small pieces of glass. Rain poured in the car and over his body, leaking onto the floorboard. He must have been freezing, but he wasn't responding to the rain or the cold. Ever since we'd split, my chest hurt when I looked at James. Now it ached for an entirely different reason. I moved closer and cradled his head in my arms as best I could. The steering wheel blocked me for the most part, but still I held him. My tears mixed with the rain, pouring over his face. There aren't words for moments like this. I knew that Erasmus was waiting for me to say something—but what do you say?

Finally I took a deep breath and released him. I had to do this, might as well find my voice and get it over with. I was just about to call back to Erasmus that James was dead when he opened his eyes. No matter what had happened between us, I had never been more excited to see those green eyes looking up at me. I stroked his face and kissed his forehead. James tried to smile, but it turned into a grimace. There was no telling how badly he was injured, but at least he was alive. My immediate fear was that his back was broken, but I didn't want to upset him by blurting it out.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Shh. Don't try to move. We're going to get you help."

James grabbed the front of my shirt and pulled me closer to his face. "That man in the road—*he isn't a man.*"

"I know, James. He threw you through the windshield."

About that time I could hear raised voices outside, but with all the rain and James talking, I couldn't make out what they were saying.

"He's alive," I called. Just in case anyone wanted to know besides me.

"I want to get up," James said, bringing my attention back to him.

"That's probably a bad idea."

"This fucking hurts. I want to sit up."

He wiggled a little, then fell back down.

"At least wait until Erasmus can help."

He looked defeated. "You brought your boyfriend? How long was I out?"

"I'm not sure, maybe an hour. Honestly, I thought he'd killed you or I would have been back sooner." James continued to fidget and I put a hand on his chest to hold him still. "You might injure yourself further. Can you even feel your legs?"

"Yes, and they fucking *hurt.*"

Well, that was a good sign.

"Lucy!"

Ozzy yelled for me and I got back out as I told James, "Stay put. I'll be back."

I approached Ozzy cautiously. It was evident that he and Eramus had been having some sort of an argument with Ron. He kept his eyes trained down the barrel of the gun as he spoke to me.

"Reach in my pocket. I found your phone underneath the car. Call for help."

I did as he asked, amazed to find my phone still in working order. I had just dialed the ambulance when Ron roared, "Enough of this shit. She's coming with me!"

Ozzy took him down before he got halfway to where we stood. He fell to the ground with another roar, clutching his chest.

"Who is the alpha?" Eramus asked, stepping forward. "Who has Lucy been marked for?"

Ron laughed and blood spilled from his lips. "You'll find out."

"Tell me!" I screamed.

"Who ordered this?" Ron asked, looking directly past me at Ozzy.

Did everyone know he was an assassin except *me*?

"Elsa. She sends her regards."

"That fucking bitch."

Those were Ron's last words. Not so great as far as last words go. Somewhere during all this I'd hung up on the ambulance.

"Shit. Let me try again," I said.

Eramus walked over to James and about the time someone picked up on the other end of the line, he screamed. Great, just great.

It took me a while to explain the "nature of our emergency". I told them I and some friends were driving along when we found Ron in the road. Hey, no need to lie about a perfectly good explanation. Since it was legal to shoot werewolves who attacked you, I told them that he had attacked James and Ozzy had shot him. It was the truth. Sort of. I left Eramus out of the story entirely. By the time I hung up he had helped James to a sitting position on the hood of the car.

"They're on their way."

James still looked terrified while Eramus checked him for injuries.

"He must have curled into a ball on impact. His back took most of it. He's probably got a few broken ribs and a bad concussion."

"I feel like shit and I can't see straight," James added. "So, you prefer a werewolf to dating me again?"

I laughed. After all that had happened tonight, talking about our relationship was so ridiculous. "You've got to be kidding me. Yes I do, James. Especially when you act like this. Although I am glad you didn't completely cave your head in tonight."

He looked back toward Eramus and apparently noticed he was naked for the first time. "Holy shit. No wonder so many women have turned into gravediggers. Not to be crude, but do they all look like that?"

I laughed, but his question still rubbed me the wrong way. "I wouldn't know James, I've only been with *this* one."

Even though he still had a wolf's face, I could see the grin Eramus was trying to hide. Hey, who wouldn't want to know that their girlfriend's ex was intimidated just by looking at their dick? At least *he* was enjoying the conversation.

I heard a click and turned around to find Ozzy photographing Ron's body. I walked over to him, grateful to get away from the "mine's bigger than yours" discussion.

"This is the only way I can prove it was finished," he explained.

"I hope I didn't ruin anything by saying that you shot him. I didn't want them to start a manhunt or anything. Or would that be werewolf hunt?"

"No, you did the right thing." He stepped closer and angled the camera for a different shot. "There's a chance they heard the gunshot over the phone anyway. Now we don't have to alter our story. Plus, I've got a permit for the gun. We can just say it was in the trunk because I'd been hunting."

Practically everybody hunts in Mississippi. Oz didn't seem to have the slightest worry that his excuse wouldn't work. He was probably right.

Eramus put his hand on my shoulder and I jumped.

"Why don't you ride with James to the hospital? I'll catch up later after I...change."

I could hear Oz laughing behind me at Eramus' choice of words.

"I'll bring you some fresh clothes if you want."

"I'll be okay. My coat is in the car. I'll just wrap up in that until I can shower. It'd feel weird to put on clean clothes and still have mud in my hair."

Eramus patted the top of my head. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

He took off through the woods and was gone before I could take a deep breath. Oz borrowed my phone and called a wrecker while I got my coat. The only way to keep halfway dry was to get in the backseat. So, that's where I waited.

Oz eventually came and sat in the back with me. James was afraid to move too much, despite his insistence at needing to sit up. He stayed on the hood and talked to us through the broken windshield.

"I think I'm in shock. I really don't hurt that much anymore."

"Yep, that's shock," Oz said.

"I can't believe I saw *two* werewolves tonight. I can't believe you're *dating* one!"

While James rambled on I turned to Ozzy and asked, "Who's Elsa?"

"The vampire whose blood he stole to become..." He gestured toward where Ron lay in the road. "Whatever it is that he is. She said he was an abomination and had to be put down."

"Wow. How the hell did a man in a wheelchair steal a vampire's blood?"

He shrugged. "According to her, he drew it from her during the day when she was powerless to stop him. What makes matters worse is they'd become friends, or so she thought."

I pulled the coat closer underneath my chin. "There's a lot of that going around." Ozzy put his arm around me and I leaned into his embrace. "I'm glad you're here."

"Is anyone even listening to me?"

"No," Oz and I said together.

The ambulance arrived within ten minutes. That was bad if someone had been dying, but not too bad considering we were in the middle of nowhere.

Ozzy stayed behind with James' car to wait for the wrecker and the police. I rode with James to the hospital.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Love thine enemies

By the time the ambulance arrived, Ron's body still hadn't turned back to human. Nick transformed before he died. I guess that a transformation required energy and Ron didn't have enough left before dying to turn. He was one hell of a mess for a coroner to have to figure out, that's for sure. There was only the wound in his chest as far as cause of death went. But his anatomy? Holy crap I wouldn't want to have to categorize a mixed up monster like him.

These were the thoughts running through my head while I waited for further word on James. The ambulance driver had given me a blanket and I was wrapped tightly with a cup of coffee in my hand, sitting in the corner of the small waiting room. Ozzy was the next one to arrive. He sat down and put his arm around me. No doubt he'd seen that I was still shivering and wanted to offer some warmth.

"So, how is he?"

"Not sure. He's been back there for a while."

"How are *you*?"

I shrugged. "Fine. They gave me a quick go over. I've got a few scratches from running through the woods, but they didn't ask and I didn't tell."

We sat there in silence for a few minutes before I got up the nerve to say what was really on my mind.

"Now that the contract is complete – the one that originally brought you here – will you stay?"

Oz looked at me as if the thought of leaving had never crossed his mind. "Of course. Why would I leave?"

I sighed. It was a relief to hear he'd still be around. "I don't know. I guess I'm wondering which friend will leave me next. Sorry, I'm not sending out invitations to a pity party or anything." We both laughed. "I grew up with Ron. We hadn't spoken in years, but that's because he moved. We were close in school. Or so I thought." I shook my head and took another sip of coffee. "I never would have guessed he'd turn out like this."

Ozzy nodded and seemed to consider what I'd just said. "You sounded as if you were referring to more than one friend. What else don't I know?"

I told him what Erasmus had said about the mark being my tattoo. I also filled him in about Crazy Wolf.

"Known him since I was thirteen," I said, taking another sip. "I can't believe he'd do something like this to me. We've never even had an argument. He used to come to my family's Christmas dinner before Mom and Dad moved to Florida."

"I gave up trying to understand how people work, Lucy. Maybe you should too."

I laughed softly. "Sorry, Oz. I guess I'm just not sociopath material."

He took my poke at his personality quite well. Besides, he shouldn't have expected anything less.

"We can't all be so fortunate," he teased.

I had another smartass comment in mind when someone else walked into the room and caught my attention. His tall lean frame filled the doorway and just as soon as he turned his ponytail in the other direction I jumped Crazy Wolf from behind.

He hadn't noticed me which meant I had the advantage. I didn't give a *fuck* if he was a werewolf.

"Motherfucker," I screamed, choking him from behind with all my might.

To my surprise he dropped to one knee. Maybe being mixed with a werewolf's blood had some advantages after all.

"You fucked up my *life*. How *dare* you do this to me?!"

He fought me off, but I came up swinging. As soon as he lifted his chin I caught him with a punch that sprawled him flat out.

"Wow," I said, looking down at my hand in amazement. "I didn't know I could do that."

"Neither did I," Ozzy said from behind me.

Crazy Wolf stayed down and started rubbing his throat. His nose was bleeding and I felt such satisfaction at seeing his blood that I smiled despite what was happening.

"You can do all sorts of things if you learn to channel it," he said.

"I wasn't talking to you. Oh, by the way, Ron is dead."

He seemed genuinely upset to hear this and I felt bad for the way I'd blurted it out. But only until I remembered what he'd done to me.

About that time an orderly came in the room, taking in the man on the floor and me standing over him with a glance.

"Is everything okay in here?"

"Fine," everyone answered together.

He left with a look somewhere between fear and curiosity. But, he wasn't curious enough to stick around.

"You mixed the ink for my tattoo with alpha werewolf blood. Why?"

He sat up and I stepped back. I'd be damned if I offered to help him. Crazy Wolf sat in a chair beside the vending machine and I moved to stand in front of him. I wanted a damn answer. Finally he said, "Because I had no choice."

He sounded so defeated that I took a seat on his other side. It's hard to glower at a man when he looks like a dog that someone has beaten.

"My mother has cancer," he said softly. "She comes here for chemo. That's why I'm here."

"For how long?"

He sighed. "Three years now. She was in remission until six weeks ago."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because it's not my way."

"Like it wasn't your way to tell me you were a werewolf either?" Anger was returning to my voice. Good. I really didn't want to pity him right now.

His laugh sounded bitter. "Why do you think I never asked you out in school? I was afraid I'd break you if we tried to have sex."

His blunt remark gave me a minute's pause. Then I realized what he'd said.

"You mean you've been a werewolf that long?"

"Since junior high. Remember that field trip you didn't go on, when I got bitten by a dog?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it wasn't a dog."

"Shit." We both sat there for a minute, staring at the floor. I was vaguely aware of Ozzy standing in front of us. "I'm sorry to hear about your mom. But what has that got to do with what you did to me? Why would you hurt me like this, Wolf?"

"The alpha who gave me the blood, he studies a lot of the old ways. He practices beliefs that most people consider antiquated." He laughed bitterly again. "Even us Indians." His self-deprecating comment made me feel even worse. "In his studying he came across a book that told a lot about our people. Werewolf legends, if you will. He read up on the mark and decided it was the perfect way to find his mate."

"And you helped him?" I couldn't keep the horror from my voice.

"Not at first." Crazy Wolf was silent for almost a full minute. "He offered to pay my mother's medical bills if I would help."

"And if you didn't?"

"He'd kill me. It was save her or kill myself. Not really great choices considering I couldn't pay the bills and I didn't want to die. I didn't want it to be you."

"Then *why*?"

He shook his head and long dark hair spilled over one shoulder. "Because I could sense something within you. I don't know how to explain it, Lucy, but you were meant to be a wolf."

"That is *not* a choice for you to make."

He turned toward me and I stood up. Crazy Wolf took me by the hand when I tried to walk away and I looked back at him. I was surprised to find him close to tears.

"I gave the blood to three women. All of you wanted rose tattoos. You *do* know of the significance of the rose?"

"Sort of yes, but go on."

"It didn't take with them. See he gave the blood in his human form, which meant he wasn't contagious. It had absolutely no effect on them. But you...well, look at what it's done to you."

What *had* it done to me? That was the question. After what he'd said about his mom, all of the anger drained out of me. I wanted to hate him, but I just couldn't. I withdrew a few steps and he let my hand slip from his fingertips.

"You had no right," I said softly.

"I'm sorry."

"And you think that makes it better?" I snapped. "What's going to happen to me now? Did you even stop to think about that? I got the tattoo over a month ago. Why am I experiencing changes *now*?"

"Did you have any changes before? Increased sex drive maybe?"

Normally having Crazy Wolf ask me about my sex drive would have bothered me. But after the night I'd had I just answered him.

"Yes. But tonight I can choke a werewolf and knock him on his ass. Oh, and I can run clear across a ranch without getting a stitch in my side. What the fuck is going on?"

"You exposed yourself to moonlight. I felt it."

At first I had no idea what he was talking about. Then I remembered when my lights had gone out. I'd lifted my shirt and looked at my tattoo by moonlight. Holy shit.

"How could you possibly?"

"Because I am alpha as well."

A chill ran through me at his words. "I'm not just marked as *his* mate, am I?"

"No. You're a target for all alphas. You've become the mark. If more than one alpha wants to be with you, then there will be a challenge for leadership of the pack."

"What? This asshole is the leader of the *pack*?!"

He shrugged. "Who else?"

"Who is he, Wolf?"

"He'll make himself known. If I tell you, he'll kill me. God knows what he might do to my family."

I was confused. "If he might not even be the one to get me, why would he do this to find his mate?"

"Because if he isn't wolf enough to claim you, then he doesn't feel he deserves the pack either."

"Must be a macho thing," Ozzy added.

"Why hasn't he come already? Why send people after me?"

"He didn't know which three women I gave the blood to. Wolves were sent out to track the mark. So far the only one who found you won't be able to return."

"You mean the *two* who found me."

"What?"

"Two werewolves have found me so far. Both have been killed."

I didn't bother to elaborate on the fact that Ozzy had been the one to kill them both. Crazy Wolf's eyes widened apprehensively. Good. He should be afraid. I might not be able to hurt him, but I couldn't speak for Ozzy and Erasmus.

"Will I turn into a werewolf?"

"The books I've read are unclear on the subject, but I don't think so."

"Unclear?! Are you kidding me?"

About that time Erasmus walked in and everyone turned in his direction. His eyes flashed amber when he looked at Crazy Wolf. The change was subtle, but enough to show he did *not* want to be messed with. After that, he completely ignored the other wolf.

"How's James?"

"The doctor should be back soon," Ozzy said.

I sat back down between Erasmus and Ozzy and huddled underneath the blanket the EMT had given me.

"As soon as we get word on James, you should let me take you home," Erasmus said. "You'll feel better once you have a shower and get warm."

After a few minutes of silence I guess Crazy Wolf felt he should say something. He cleared his throat before he began, "You must be Erasmus. I've heard of you. I'm—"

"I know who you are." Erasmus didn't raise his voice, but his tone left no room for further comment. "I also know what you've done to Lucy. You-should-not-speak-to-me."

His last statement was punctuated with a low growl. After the way he'd reacted to me wanting to hurt Crazy Wolf earlier, I was a bit surprised. Still, I liked him taking up for me. I hadn't really taken the time to relive the memories of what had happened between us. The way he looked in those jeans, the way he smelled and the way it felt to have him close to me was enough to bring it all back.

Before my imagination got carried away, the doctor walked in. He was smiling, which was an instant relief.

"Your friend is going to be fine. He's got four broken ribs, a concussion and a hairline fracture in two of his vertebrae."

"And that's *good* news?" I asked.

The doctor smiled again. "After what he's been through tonight? Yes. It's very good news. He also tested negative for lycanthropy, which is even better news."

I was wondering if I should have myself tested when he added, "I suggest you all get some rest. You can see him if you like, but make it fast."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The leader of the pack

We kept our visit with James brief as the doctor had suggested. He rambled on about hoping his insurance wouldn't give him any grief about the car. All the while I was thinking, *I'm fine, thank you very much for asking*. I still had mud in my hair and was wrapped in a blanket and all he could think about was his damn car. Oh well, at least he was going to be all right.

On the way home I told Erasmus what had happened with Crazy Wolf before he got to the hospital. He listened without a word. In fact, he didn't speak until we pulled up in my driveway and it was to comment on the weather.

"Another tropical depression is moving through. They think this one might be a little worse."

"The words 'tropical' and 'October' just don't go together."

He nodded his agreement as he opened the front door. I was so glad to be home that it took me a second to realize he was still standing on the porch. I turned around, halfway to the stairs.

"Come in, Erasmus." He looked as if he was about to protest. "That is not a request. You and I have things to discuss. But not before I take a shower."

* * * * *

Hot water poured over me like a blessing. I enjoy cold weather, but I hate to get *that* cold. You know, it's the cold that only extreme heat can take away. No amount of layered clothes can restore warmth when you get a chill like that.

I sighed, running my fingers through my hair. I was watching suds swirl down the drain when I heard Erasmus open the door.

"Can I come in?"

"Sure. You can join me if you like."

I should have been too tired to be aroused. But the sound of him unzipping his pants did things to me I could not deny. We needed to talk, but that didn't have to be our only activity.

I listened as his clothes hit the floor and when he opened the shower curtain, I greeted him with a kiss. Without the aid of shoes, I had to stand completely on tiptoe to have a chance at reaching his lips. Erasmus bent low to accommodate as he backed me against the shower wall.

"Why are you being so quiet?" I asked, pulling back.

"After all that's happened tonight, I thought you might need some time."

"You mean what happened with us?"

He ran a hand through his wet hair, slicking it back against his head.

"I mean everything. You saw one of your friends killed, another seriously injured. Not to mention you saw your boyfriend turn into a werewolf. Are you really okay with that?"

I considered his question carefully before coming to the conclusion that, "Yeah, I really am."

The way he looked at my lips let me know what he was about to do only a second before he moved. As he kissed me Erasmus lifted me, pinning my body against the tile with his. Even though I could feel the power in his arms as I ran my hands over his biceps, his touch was gentle. His lips were a tender promise against mine. My legs wrapped around him and he growled into my mouth, deepening the kiss.

"I want you," I whispered.

"Not yet."

Erasmus knelt in front of me, holding my body up with his hands on my hips. When he brought his mouth to my pussy I thought I might scream. I moved to prop my legs against his shoulders, arching myself against his face as he devoured me. His tongue parted my lips and when he started to suck my clit that scream I'd been holding back finally escaped.

"Yes," I panted. "Don't stop."

"Come for me," he said.

He slid one long finger inside me and I almost did.

"I want you to come on my face."

I ran my fingers through his hair, holding him tight as his tongue moved faster against my clit. Tension began to build at the base of my spine, spreading down my thighs and straight to my aching pussy. I could feel my muscles growing tighter around his finger as he moved in and out, bringing me closer and closer.

I wanted to come for him...I wanted to..."Oh! God, I'm coming."

Erasmus continued to suck my clit as I threw my head back and screamed with release. He rose slowly, never letting me go. He held me in place with both his body and the look in his eyes as he positioned his cock against me. My muscles were still contracting, though much less powerfully than before. His eyes turned amber as he looked down at me and slipped inside my pussy while I was still coming.

He pressed me against the wall, spreading my legs wider as he thrust into me again. I wanted this so much. I needed him to take me. Hard.

"More."

Erasmus thrust into me again, bringing another cry of pleasure from my lips. He was huge. I knew he was going slow so he wouldn't hurt me. But I still wanted more. Maybe

on some level I wanted to be hurt. I wanted him to work that ache out of my pussy. And if he was going to do that, he needed to go faster.

I pulled his face down to mine, kissing him hard and deep. I mimicked with my tongue what I'd like for him to do to my body and he caught on quickly.

Eramus put his arms around me, holding me against him with only his arms as my support. He cradled my body as he moved me up and down on his shaft. I clung to him, digging my nails into his shoulders as we moved. No one had ever done something like this to me before. Then again, I'd never been with someone so big or strong.

He must have sensed when I couldn't take it anymore and lowered me to the floor of the walk-in shower. He spread my legs wide, running his tongue over my pussy again before thrusting into me with complete abandon. Yes. This was what I wanted.

I wrapped my legs around him, lifting up to meet his thrusts as he moved harder and faster. I came again and he still didn't stop. Just when I thought Eramus might pound me right through the tile, he cried out with release.

We lay there on the shower floor for several minutes. Water splashed over his shoulders and down into my face as he lifted up.

"Are you all right? Did I hurt you?"

I smiled. "No. I'm fine."

We finished our shower and when I stepped out Eramus wrapped me in a towel, pulling me against him. I snuggled my face against the soft hair on his chest. I wanted so much to enjoy the moment, but there was something I really needed to talk with him about.

"I know this is shitty timing, but I really need to talk to you," I said softly.

"I know. Let's build a fire first. We didn't have time earlier for—a lot of things. I promised I'd make it up to you, remember?"

"Yeah, but..."

"I'll tell you everything I know," he added softly. "I just want to enjoy being with you for a while, and see if we can figure a way out of this mess."

Eramus built a fire in the small hearth in my bedroom. He left me sitting there on a blanket, wrapped tightly in my bathrobe, while he went downstairs to get some wine.

I waited 'til he'd poured us both a glass before I asked him the same burning question I'd asked Crazy Wolf. "Am I going to turn into a werewolf?"

"If you did, it would defeat the purpose of giving the mark."

"What does that mean?"

"You have been altered by his blood, but not enough to turn you. For someone not compatible with werewolf DNA, it would have had no effect at all. However, even those slight changes are enough to make you immune to a regular attack."

"Okay, now explain to me exactly what *that* means."

"It means that if Ron had attacked you, your wounds would have healed at an accelerated rate, just like a werewolf. But you wouldn't grow paws at the next full moon."

"So why would someone give their 'mate' their blood if it wouldn't turn them? Don't they want to be with someone like themselves?"

Eramus' expression was very serious. He appeared to be choosing his words carefully, which made me worry even more.

"Female werewolves are barren. The whole reason to give someone the mark is to alter them just enough that having sex, no-holds-barred sex, with a werewolf won't hurt them. And of course, to prevent their transformation. You see, the transformation would make a pregnant woman miscarry. For that reason, female werewolves cannot have children."

My voice shook as I asked, "Are you saying that he did this to me so that I could have his babies?"

"Yes."

"Oh my God."

I couldn't breathe. I leaned forward, pressing my forehead to the floor. I was hyperventilating and didn't know how to stop. A full-blown panic attack had never hit me this hard before. The room was spinning around me and my heart felt as if it was going to pound through my chest.

Eramus reached for me as I leapt to my feet.

"I'm going to be sick."

That was all I had time to say before running into the bathroom and following through with the threat. To think of all the trouble someone had gone to just to make me do something like that. It was so terrible. And I didn't even have a choice in the matter. I think that's the part that pushed me over the edge. No one even asked me if I *wanted* kids. And now I was expected to have babies with an alpha werewolf?!

I didn't even realize that Eramus was in the room until I felt him pull back my hair. He rubbed my back, whispering softly to me. I couldn't understand what he was saying, but that didn't matter.

Once I stopped throwing up, he handed me a cloth to wash my face before going back into the bedroom. After brushing my teeth, I walked out to find him resting back against the pillows on my bed. I knew that he was naked beneath the covers, but it wasn't his sex I craved. It was simply his nearness.

I let my robe fall to the floor before slipping underneath the covers and curling against his side. I didn't realize I was crying until I felt the moisture against my face.

"I don't want to have some strange werewolf's children," I cried.

"It's okay," Eramus said. He sat up, pulled me onto his lap and started rubbing my back again. "It's all right. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. No one will touch you except me. I swear it."

I lifted up enough to look at him. "Really? You swear?"

He kissed my forehead and repeated, "I swear."

"But don't I belong to him now? Is there a way to make him reconsider? Whoever the hell he is."

"The only way to do that and still save face among his pack is to kill him."

"What?"

"I know you don't want to hear this, but we're going to have to wait 'til he shows up first."

He was right. I didn't want to hear that. "And then what?"

"Then I'll challenge him for your hand. It's the only way to ever be free of his hold. No one will challenge my claim to you once he is defeated."

My heart was still fluttering wildly and I fought to keep my breathing steady. "But wouldn't that make you the new leader of the pack?"

Eramus hugged me close again. "It's a burden I would gladly bear if it will save you."

I wrapped my arms around his neck, burying my face against his throat. "Before, when we were in the shelter, you said you loved me. Do you really?"

"If there is one good thing about being a wolf it's the clarity it gives you. You don't have to doubt or second-guess yourself." He kissed the top of my head. "And there's never a need to take back words spoken in the heat of passion, because you know they're true. Yes, I love you. With all my heart."

I went to sleep in his arms that night feeling safer than I had in a long time. That feeling of safety lasted for about two weeks.

* * * * *

Memories of Eramus tangled in my bed sheets and thoughts of his hard body beneath my hands were a constant distraction. Every time I was alone with him it was as if the rest of the world didn't exist. The more I thought about everything else that had been happening, the more I longed for those quiet moments.

I was in the shop making a bouquet with fresh red roses and dreaming of Eramus' naked body when a familiar face came through the door. The instant he smiled at me I knew who he was and it had nothing to do with his name.

"Well, well, small world, huh?"

Maxwell, the man Justina and I had met at Mixer's a few weeks ago walked up and propped against my counter. He leaned forward enough to smell the roses and sighed. If I didn't know why he was there, I might have been attracted to him. Besides Eramus, he was one of the sexiest men I'd ever seen. But that didn't distract me in the slightest. He was dangerous and I needed to find a way to get as far from him as possible.

"Beautiful," he said softly. His unnatural green eyes focused on me again and I understood he wasn't talking about the roses.

"What can I do for you, Maxwell?"

His grin widened. "So nice to know you remembered me, and I'm glad you asked." He reached out and took a strand of my red hair between his fingers, twirling it lightly. I let him. No need to get into a fight over something so simple. Besides, no matter how much my strength might have increased something told me that Maxwell could still kick my ass. If I was going to get out of this I'd have to play nice.

When he spoke again his voice was just as soft and seductive as it had been that night at the club. But there was no mistaking the underlying threat. "I'm sure you've figured out what's going on by now. I know that you've been seeing another wolf, Eramus if I'm not mistaken?"

He paused and I assumed he was waiting for my answer. "Yes."

"Well, I can't hold that against you, seeing as how you had no idea what I'd done. However..." He leaned in close enough to kiss, but stopped short of actually touching me. "If you refuse to consider my offer, I *can* hold the deaths of two werewolves against you. One of which was a close friend of mine."

"Before you fucked up his life, Ron was a friend of *mine* too."

Maxwell laughed and ran his hand up through the back of my hair. He didn't pull, but tightened his grip just enough to threaten violence.

"Think about it, Max. What do you expect me to say? That I appreciate not having my feelings considered? Or maybe that I've always wanted to be raped by a werewolf? I can lie to you if you want, 'cause none of that shit is true."

Okay, so much for being nice. I just couldn't seem to help myself. Who the hell did he think he was?

"I'm not a rapist," he said softly. "And you will be mine. You have until the thirty-first to consider my offer. Someone will let you know where to find me then. Bring yourself as an answer, or bring your champion if he has the balls to challenge me."

To my surprise I *growled* at him. Not like a wolf exactly, but it sounded vicious and scared the hell out of me.

"Let go of my hair, Max."

He released me and stepped back, holding his hands out in a harmless gesture.

"I'll see you on the thirty-first."

Eramus missed him by only a few minutes. I couldn't help but wonder what might have happened if he'd gotten there sooner. I was still standing at the counter when Eramus drove up, staring at the roses, wondering what I should do next.

"Where's Justina?" he asked, pushing the door open with his elbow. "I brought you both some coffee."

Eramus took a good look at me and hurried to set the coffee down. "What's wrong? You look pale."

"You just missed Maxwell."

"Who?"

"The leader of the pack."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dreams and nightmares

It surprised me how calmly I was able to repeat what had just happened to Erasmus and to Justina, who followed us to the office. I was sitting at the desk, Justina was sitting on top of it sipping coffee and Erasmus was pacing the floor.

"Motherfucker," Justina said.

"My thoughts exactly," Erasmus agreed. "He gives us no choice."

"What he gives us is two damn days," I said. "You can't be serious about this showing up and killing him business."

"What else would you suggest?" he asked.

Justina and I had been talking about everything for the past few weeks so none of this was news to her. However, she decided to offer her support to Erasmus.

"I say kill the fucker. He tried to use my best friend as a sex slave without ever even meeting her."

I rolled my eyes. "He had the nerve to act as if I would like it. You know what really pisses me off? Maxwell is good-looking."

"What the fuck?" This from Erasmus who looked thoroughly confused.

"Hear me out. He's an attractive guy. Why would he do something like this to someone *unwilling* when I'm sure the willing are lining up? It doesn't make any sense."

"The challenge."

We all turned to see Crazy Wolf standing in the doorway.

"He did it for the challenge. You know, to be so smart you really don't know a damn thing about werewolves."

"Wolf, get the fuck out of my office."

"*Our* office," Justina corrected.

"Fine, get the fuck out of *our* office."

He raised a brow. "Does that mean you don't want my support?"

Okay, now I was confused. "Support for what? This is your fault."

Erasmus took a step toward him, but to my surprise he didn't offer violence. "I think I know what he's trying to say."

"I've decided which side I'm taking," Crazy Wolf said. "In a battle for leadership, there are always sides. This is mine."

I walked over to Crazy Wolf and slapped him as hard as I could. He took it. And even though Justina gasped, neither she nor Erasmus tried to stop me.

"Don't ever do anything to me without my permission, understand?"

This was probably as close as we were going to come to making up. Sad. I really liked Crazy Wolf. His dark eyes held a lot of emotions as he looked down at me, but anger was not one of them.

"I understand that as the mate of our leader, you can do to me whatever you like."

Why did he have to go and say something like that? Every time I got mad enough to hurt him, he made me change my mind.

"I don't want to do anything else to you," I said softly. "And I'm not the mate of your leader. I'll kill myself before Maxwell touches me."

"Jesus," Justina said from behind me. "Don't be so dramatic. Besides, Erasmus is going to kick his ass. Right?"

"Absolutely," Erasmus growled.

* * * * *

Once Erasmus and I were alone that night I wasn't so confident. It wasn't that I didn't have faith in him. After all, I'd seen the way he handled Nick. I was afraid. Afraid he would get hurt, afraid *I'd* get hurt too. My mind wouldn't stop running through the possibilities. And besides that, I felt sick.

"It's your nerves," Erasmus said, handing me a glass of soda. "This should help settle your stomach."

I set the soda on the nightstand and crawled into bed. "Aren't you even a little bit worried?" I asked him. "I feel like an idiot. You're the one who's fighting him and I'm getting sick over it. All I've got to do is show up."

Erasmus slipped between the covers and I crawled toward him. His body did more for settling my stomach and my nerves than soda ever could. If I could just be close to him, everything seemed better. He lifted his arm and I snuggled up against his side.

"If I wasn't a little worried I'd be stupid. I knew there was a pack here when I moved. But I've never heard of Maxwell before. I'm guessing that means he hasn't been the leader for more than a few years."

I looked up at him. "Do you keep up with that sort of thing?"

"To an extent. It was part of my job for a long time. Now, it just pays to know whose territory I'm in."

I hugged him tightly and closed my eyes. I didn't want to think about what might happen in two days. Maxwell didn't strike me as the type to play fair. That's what worried me most. Even if Erasmus won, would we make it back alive?

A few minutes later when I decided to get a sip of the drink he'd brought me, I noticed an empty teacup on the nightstand too.

"Are you still having trouble sleeping?" I asked.

He slept better or so it seemed for a few nights after we'd made love for the first time. But now he was back to occasional insomnia.

"Have I ever told you why I can't sleep?"

I snuggled back up to him. "Yeah. You said you have nightmares."

"Did I tell you what they're about?"

I shook my head.

"You remember when I told you about my attack?" I nodded again. "Well, as you know, I killed the one who turned me. I tracked him down and did terrible things to him."

I wasn't sure how to take this news. I had known he'd killed the werewolf who purposely turned him. What I didn't know was what he did to him.

"Nothing you can say will upset me, Erasmus. Whatever you did, I'm sure you had your reasons." When he remained silent I asked, "Did you torture him?"

"Yes. My grandfather had a book that supposedly told how to break the curse of lycanthropy."

"And this involved torturing the one who attacked you?"

"Yes. Supposedly if you could track down the one who bit or scratched you, before your first full moon...and kill him, then you would be free of the curse."

"Kill him how?" Something told me I didn't want to know, but I couldn't seem to stop myself from asking.

"Rip out his heart and eat it."

"Holy shit. You *did* that?"

I pulled back to see his reaction and Erasmus made a face as if he was going to be sick. "Why do you think I have nightmares? Obviously, it didn't work. What a load of bullshit. Lycanthropy isn't a curse, it's a disease. I knew this, but at the time I was desperate."

Once again I didn't know how to react. So, I just sat there, staring at him.

"I *did* upset you, didn't I?"

The deep rumble of his voice soothed me, despite what he'd just said. I thought it over for a minute before answering. "Surprisingly...no."

He laughed. "Are you serious? You're okay with knowing I *ate* his *heart*?"

"Considering everything else that's happened lately?" I shrugged. "Yeah, I'm good with it."

* * * * *

The next morning Erasmus went into town alone and I stayed to cook breakfast. Cooking was something I enjoyed and it helped to take my mind off everything else. In fact, I was so busy trying to distract myself that at first I didn't hear the doorbell.

I looked through the peephole and saw Crazy Wolf.

When I opened the door he just stood there, looking defeated.

"What do you want?" My question was harsh, but my tone wasn't.

"I've come to tell you where to meet Maxwell tomorrow night."

He might as well have punched me for all the effect his words had. "So, you're his messenger?"

"He's my alpha, I have no choice." He handed me a piece of paper and I glanced to see some directions written across it. "It's easier this way. If I had to tell you, I'd get you lost."

I looked at the paper again. "I might get lost anyway. This is in the middle of nowhere."

He laughed and I realized how long it had been since I'd heard that sound. Damn it, I missed my friend. Since Justina had moved here two years ago I hadn't realized how much I *didn't* see Wolf anymore. But now that he was back, no matter the circumstances, I kind of liked having him around.

"Where else did you expect a pack of werewolves to meet?"

"So, the whole pack will be there?"

"You *are* bringing a challenger, right? They'll be there as both witnesses and to take sides."

I decided that asking him what I was worrying about was better than not knowing.

"If Erasmus wins, will we be allowed to leave or is it a trap?"

"Maxwell is a bastard, but the beta wolf, second in command, is a man of his word."

"Who is the beta wolf?"

"Me."

Somehow, that didn't surprise me as much as it would have a few weeks ago.

"Wolf, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Since lycanthropy heals any physical problems, why didn't you just offer to turn your mom? I know that's a terrible thing to say, but wouldn't she rather be a werewolf than die of cancer?"

"No," he answered softly, hanging his head.

That one word said so much. His whole body seemed to sag with the weight of my question. How horrible it must be to know someone would rather die than become what you are. Cancer is an awful way to go. It's hard to watch someone you love suffer like that. I know from personal experience, two of my uncles went that way.

Even though he had mixed my tattoo ink with werewolf blood, it broke my heart to see Crazy Wolf in such pain. His heartbreak was almost tangible. I took a step forward onto the porch and wrapped my arms around his waist. If there was one thing I had

learned since having my blood mixed, it was that werewolves craved physical contact. I had always been a hugging sort of person. But now...I needed to be touched. If Wolf was the same way, then having me keep distance between us must have been the hardest thing about answering my question.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

He hugged me so tightly that I couldn't fight back the tears. There was desperation in his embrace. When I heard him crying it was as if my heart was broken too. I could almost literally feel his pain. Guess that's what comes from knowing someone for so long.

"I'm so sorry for hurting you," he said. "Please forgive me. When my mother turned me down...this was the only choice I had to help her. She'd rather die than be like me."

I couldn't imagine the pain he must have been going through for the past three years. I was so caught up in my relationship with James and then our breakup, I had failed to notice. I felt like an ass. Wolf had become like family to me years ago. And just like family, I had taken him for granted and avoided him except for holidays. As angry as I had been before, it was a choice between potentially hurting me or his dying mother. How could I hold that against him? I was still alive. Changed yes, but alive.

"You did what you had to do," I said softly.

"No." He pulled back and wiped his eyes. "I betrayed a trust. There's always another option."

I smiled. "That's noble of you, Wolf, but I'd have done it to you in the same situation."

He looked surprised. "Really?"

"Given a choice between helping one of my parents to fight a fatal disease or take a chance on linking you to an alpha werewolf? Yeah, I'd do it. I'd hate myself but it's the only option. Even if you'd let him kill you, that would still leave your mom with no one to help her."

"What are you saying?"

I took his hand and pulled him close again. "I'm saying I forgive you."

When he pulled back from me this time, something had changed in his dark eyes. Wolf looked down at me again and his long hair spilled forward, framing his face. The effect was striking.

"Don't be afraid of Maxwell. If for some reason Erasmus doesn't win..." His words trailed off. We both knew he meant if Erasmus was killed. "I will challenge Maxwell myself. I won't let him touch you."

"Wolf, you don't have to—"

"Yes, I do. You said it yourself, this is my fault. If things go badly tomorrow, you can depend on me."

"Thank you." He started to leave and I grabbed his hand again. "I do have one more question. I've been learning about all this stuff from Erasmus. Anyway, I thought that you had to be the beta wolf to challenge the alpha. Or that an alpha from another pack could issue a challenge. How does that work, because Erasmus doesn't have his own pack?"

"In this case Maxwell is putting everything on the line. He's a cocky son of a bitch. That's one reason the mark hasn't been used in ages. It opens the pack up to outsiders who haven't worked their way through the ranks, so to speak. Everyone advised him against it, but he doesn't exactly take our opinions to heart."

I didn't want to let him go because I didn't want to be alone, but I did. Besides, Erasmus would be back soon.

* * * * *

Erasmus spent the rest of the day in preparation. I knew that whatever he was doing was necessary, but this left me alone with my thoughts and at the moment that wasn't a good thing. If someone had told me a few months ago that I'd be dating a werewolf, I'd have said they were nuts. If they'd told me that I would be involved in a battle for leadership of the local werewolf pack, I'd have looked up the number to the crazy house. If they'd said that the fight would also determine who gets to be my mate, I'd have just driven them there instead of calling the men in white coats.

To say that I was under stress was like saying that the ocean is wet. I tried everything to distract myself. Reading didn't work because I kept staring out the window. Same for watching television, it just couldn't keep my attention. To make matters worse, there was a monster movie marathon on. Great. As if I wanted to watch werewolf movies right now.

I had no idea what Erasmus was doing to prepare for the fight, but I was certain he didn't need any distractions. I did everything I could to keep from walking over to his house. However, by nightfall, my good intentions had evaporated completely. I needed to be with him, even if I just sat there and watched whatever it was he was doing.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Into the night

When I opened the door, I didn't expect to find anything there. Least of all a large box. I looked around, but no one was there. At least, not that I could see. The box was light, too light to have a bomb inside. Wow. My thoughts had really changed in the last month. Just a short while ago I would have assumed that a box like this contained roses or something. Now I was guessing it wasn't heavy enough to be a bomb.

I sat the box on the kitchen table and took a good look. It was white, but not plain. There were all sorts of designs on the surface and it was tied with a large red ribbon. Pretty. I considered leaving it there and going over to Erasmus' as I had planned. But, wasn't I just looking for a distraction?

I pulled the red ribbon carefully and opened the box. No card, no flowers, just a beautiful red dress. I assumed it was for me to wear tomorrow night. I'm not sure how I knew that. Guess I just had a feeling. I also had a feeling that Maxwell had sent it. For that reason, I was determined to go in jeans and a t-shirt.

I put on my jacket once more and headed toward Erasmus. My mind was in absolute turmoil and if I didn't see him soon, I felt as if I might become physically ill. The odds were certainly against us. Erasmus may have been a badass werewolf hunter, but this was different. This was a fight to the death with an alpha werewolf for leadership of a *pack*! Erasmus may have been powerful, however that did not mean he could stand up to a pack of werewolves all on his own. I trusted Crazy Wolf when he said he was a man of his word. It was the rest of the pack that concerned me.

I was honest enough with myself to admit this might be the last night I got to spend with Erasmus and I didn't intend to waste it sitting at home. We stood a better chance together, and that's what I planned to say when he opened the door. Only when I knocked, it was open.

"Erasmus?"

I pushed the door further open. No sign of Erasmus. After closing and locking the door behind me, I made my way into the living room. There he was, standing in front of the large fireplace, wearing his long dark robe and black silk pajama pants.

"Sit down," he said softly.

I did. However, I continued to watch him.

"I haven't meant to ignore you today. I've been going over a lot of things, doing some research."

"I need to talk to you."

Eramus propped against the mantle, staring into the flames as he replied, "I'm listening."

With the two of us alone like this, Maxwell and all his bullshit seemed a world away. The fire shined in the dim light, casting a soft glow over Eramus' features. He was gorgeous, as always, but I was distracted. I shared my concerns with him, to which he listened quietly before saying, "I may have found something that can help us."

"A way for us to win, you mean?"

He sighed heavily. "I would like to say that I can take Maxwell, no problem. But the truth is I have no idea what to expect. I haven't been able to find anything on him. If it were only my life on the line that would be one thing, I've done that before under different circumstances. But it's not just my life. Crazy Wolf stopped by here after he left your house. Maxwell is insisting on your presence—and it's you I'm worried about."

"You found something that might help us?"

"I'm not sure you'll want to hear what I've found."

I could hear the warning in his voice. But I was tired of worrying. I wanted this to be over with. And I wanted to survive. "What did you find?"

He stared into the fire, and I watched as the flames reflected in his honey colored eyes. I had finally decided he wasn't going to answer me when Eramus said very softly, "You could take me as your mate."

"What would that mean exactly?" I felt as if he was already a part of me. I wasn't sure what "taking him as my mate" would mean exactly, but I was willing to hear him out.

"There are all different kinds of ways you can become someone's mate. You could go the traditional route and get married."

For a second there I couldn't breathe. Did he just mention *marriage*? It's not that I was opposed to the idea, I was just *completely* unprepared.

"Don't get me wrong," he said quickly. The look on my face must have alerted him to my surprise. "I'm just saying what I've read. To be truly mated, according to some, will actually lend you the strength of your mate."

"What are you saying?"

"You would be able to draw from my strength. If everything goes to hell tomorrow it might give you a greater chance of survival." He paused before adding, "In the event that I'm not able to help you."

What he meant was that if he was killed he wanted to be sure I made it out alive. I wasn't sure what to say. Was he doing this just to save me or did he really *want* to be my mate?

"And would this benefit *you* in any way?"

He smiled sadly. "You still don't understand that I want to be with you. Of course I'd get something out of it—you. We'd also have a greater connection."

"Like telepathy?"

"Not exactly. We won't be able to hear each other's thoughts or anything like that. But I *can* sense when you're in danger."

I smiled. "That's sort of romantic."

"Yeah, like a knight in fur-covered armor," he joked.

Eramus had moved to sit on the rug in front of the stone hearth. I was quiet for several minutes while I joined him to stare into the fire. I searched the flames for answers I knew they didn't have. The fabric of my jeans became hot against my skin and I stepped back, taking a seat beside Eramus on the rug. I watched him for several minutes, wondering how to say what I was feeling. I simply couldn't face tonight alone.

Finally he said, "My grandfather always said that there is one true mate for every werewolf. Someone who will add to what they are."

"Sort of as if there's someone for everyone?"

"Yes."

"And what do you think about that?"

"I believe you were meant for me." He took my hand and pulled me closer. "And I was meant for you."

I couldn't count the times I'd dreamed of his handsome face since he moved in beside me. Not one of those dreams equaled up to this moment. After James and I didn't work out, I never thought I'd be happy again. For the past year it felt as if I couldn't breathe most of the time. Especially when I thought of James or trying to move on. As I sat there holding Eramus' hand, I realized that for the first time in a while I could breathe deeply again. I had never wanted anything more than to be with him.

"How is it done? Other than marriage."

He hesitated. "After all that's happened I hate to even tell you this, but you'd have to take some of my blood."

That probably should have upset me, but it really didn't. I can't say the thought was appealing, but after everything else it was nice to at least be given the choice.

"Will I, you know, turn?"

"No. There's more. I'd need to take some of your blood too. Sort of like an exchange. It would bind us to each other. It's normally done just between two werewolves. But I think there is enough of the wolf in you for it to work."

"What would that mean for tomorrow night, besides me being stronger?"

"You would be mine," he said softly.

"Would Maxwell be able to sense this?"

"If it works correctly, everyone would."

I moved closer and brushed the hair back from his face. I remembered the way I felt when he touched me for the very first time, and knew that a part of me was already his. No matter how much I had loved James my feelings for him could never compare to

what I felt just sitting beside Erasmus. It wasn't just lust or affection, it was real. And it was definitely love. I would have given my soul if he'd asked, but all he wanted was my blood.

"What do I need to do?"

He brushed the hair back from my face, imitating my gesture from before. The softness in his eyes made me weak.

"Make love to me," he whispered. "I'll explain the rest as we go. It's not entirely unlike turning a vampire."

I trembled slightly as he took my face in his hands. "You won't grow fangs, I swear."

"How is it like turning a vampire then? I don't understand."

"There must be an exchange of blood and of flesh." He kissed me softly, and as he pulled back he asked, "Are you afraid of me?"

I smiled as I watched his eyes turn amber. "No."

He closed his eyes and sighed. He seemed to be holding back so much. "You've seen what I am, and you'd still be willing to do this?"

"Yes."

I knew the moment he held me that I should never have been afraid of him, even for a second. I had no doubt that he would die to protect me. No place in the world would ever be as safe as his arms.

He kissed me again and I felt a change within him. When he pulled back, nothing had visibly changed. I can't explain it other than there was a certain...power in his kiss. I knew he would not hold back with me this time. The beast was going to come out, even if he didn't change.

I remembered what Crazy Wolf had said about being afraid that if we'd had sex years ago he might have broken me. I was pretty sure that after the changes I'd undergone, Erasmus wouldn't break me. But it might still be more than I could take. He held me close, deepening the kiss.

The world around me ceased to exist. It was as if time stood still. Tomorrow night faded from my thoughts along with everything else. There was nothing but the feel of his lips against mine. His tongue probed my mouth gently and I moaned.

His hands caressed my body, relieving me of my coat and my shirt before I realized what was going on. His touch was soft and gentle, filled with desire. The look in his eyes said more than any flowery words ever could. He wanted me. That was easy to see. But he also loved me and the emotion clearly etched in his expression made my chest feel tight.

Just like the beast he made reference to so often, Erasmus was obviously powerful. He could just take me if he chose, but he didn't. He surrendered to me when he could have conquered. Is there anything really sexier than that?

"Do it," I whispered. "Take me."

He smiled and for the first time I realized his fangs had grown. But this time I wasn't afraid. He took my index finger and brought it slowly to his lips. I tensed, knowing that he intended to prick my finger, but there was no pain. My body began to arch and I shook with the pleasure his small bite produced.

"Isn't it only supposed to feel good when a vampire bites you?" I gasped.

His eyes blazed just like the fire and I shivered again.

"Werewolves enjoy a little pain with their pleasure."

He didn't need to say more. Obviously, I had changed enough that this applied to me. Because I sure as hell liked the sensation when he bit me. Erasmus put my fingertip into his mouth and sucked gently, bringing another moan from my lips. I could feel my eyes rolling back and my toes curling so hard I thought it might cause a cramp.

After a few minutes he withdrew my finger and his lips were stained red with my blood. I watched as Erasmus pulled open his robe, revealing the body that occupied so many of my thoughts. I wrapped myself around him, rubbing my face against the soft hair on his stomach.

I watched as he brought his fingertip to his fangs before lowering his hand toward me.

"Your turn," he said. His voice had grown deeper with desire and the change he was no doubt fighting back. He'd told me that sex and violence brought out the beast. Wasn't this a little of both? He must have been in turmoil.

He placed his hand on the back of my head and brought my lips to the wound. "Yes," he whispered as I wrapped my lips around his finger. I drank deeply, surprised at how much I was enjoying this. I ran my tongue up and down his finger, pulling it in and out of my mouth and he moaned.

Erasmus pulled me back suddenly and kissed me again. Our blood mingled as we kissed and I felt a rush at the contact. I reached up and over his chest, sliding the robe off his shoulders and as my hand touched his skin I felt a shiver run through him as well. There was something so forbidden, so all consuming and yet gentle about his seduction. I had never felt this way before. I thought that only vampires could seduce someone this way, but I was wrong. It wouldn't have surprised me if Erasmus could hypnotize with his eyes just like Dracula.

I felt his hands at my waist, unbuttoning my jeans and sliding them down my hips. I rose quickly and finished undressing, tossing my clothes into a corner.

Erasmus pulled me back against him and down to the floor. The soft hair on his chest tickled across my breasts, making my already hard nipples ache to be touched. He pulled one taut peak into his mouth and sucked it hard. My back arched, thrusting my breast harder against his mouth. His tongue swirled round and round, teasing my flesh until I cried out.

Erasmus pulled back with a wicked smile, before lowering his head to my abs. His lips were so hot they burned against my skin as he kissed a trail down my body.

"You know, Lucy, there's something I've wanted to do since the first time I saw you."

"What's that?"

He flashed me a wolfish grin as he replied, "I want to eat your pussy."

He started near my ass and ran his tongue all the way up to my clit. A shiver ran through me as he took the throbbing bud into his mouth. He moaned against my skin and the vibration almost made me come. He lapped and sucked at my flesh, pulling my pussy lips in and out of his mouth 'til I wanted to cry with frustration.

I needed to feel him inside me. "What are you waiting for?"

Eramus slid one long finger into my pussy and I started to grind against him. His tongue flicked back and forth across my clit while he fingered me, bringing me closer to the release I sought. It was good, but I wanted more.

His hand moved faster and faster, making a wet slapping noise as he moved. Knowing my pussy was that wet and hearing the sound as he fingered me was such a turn-on. I put my hand on his head, using the leverage to ride his face.

"Eramus, please. I need you to fuck me."

"Not yet."

He slid two fingers inside, spreading me wide as his tongue made a long, slow stroke over my clit. My muscles clenched and Eramus gave my pussy a little slap, effectively stopping my orgasm.

"Hold that thought," he whispered.

The fire beside me was nothing compared to the heat of his naked skin against mine. He entered me slowly and I moaned, arching myself against him, trying to get him to move faster, but he wouldn't. He continued his slow penetration of my body as he whispered, "You are mine." And with those words it was done.

Power, ancient and primal, broke over me and I clung to him. He was moving faster now, and I was completely lost to the sensation. Nothing existed beyond his body, his hair spilling across my face, and the smell of his skin. Whatever resistance was left within me, I gave it all up in that moment and release flooded through me.

When Eramus cried out with his own release, I felt a wave of power rush over me again. We truly were bound to each other now—I could feel it. The emotion was too real, too raw to make me do anything but cry softly. I can only describe it as feeling complete. I had loved before, but I had never felt anything to compare to this.

"Let me take you to bed," he whispered, as he kissed my forehead.

Apparently what had happened between us had taken a lot out of me, because I found myself unable to stand. Eramus swept me into his arms as if I weighed nothing at all and started carrying me upstairs.

It felt as if I blinked and the next thing I knew Eramus was tucking me into bed. He snuggled up beside me on top of the covers, tucking a pillow behind my head.

"What happened?"

"You passed out," he said, smiling. "But only for a minute."

I looked over at his bedside clock and realized that it had been two hours since I'd left my house. Wow.

"Don't worry," he said softly, "everything's going to be all right."

Whether I believed that or not, I desperately needed to hear it. I hugged him as tightly as I could and willed myself to believe what he said. Everything was going to be all right.

I'm not sure how much later it was when I drifted off to sleep, but the last thing I remember is the beating of his heart beneath my ear. That, and thinking if we died tomorrow, at least we had tonight.

Chapter Thirty

The time has come

The next day was a blur. All that mattered was that night. I took the red dress upstairs and put it in my closet. I'd be damned if I wore what Maxwell requested. I put on jeans, a comfortable pair of boots, my coat and a t-shirt that said, "Eat me."

"Oh, that's nice," Eramus said. I knew he was joking, but he didn't laugh. Who could blame him? "You might want to reconsider what you wear in front of a bunch of werewolves."

"It's my way of coping."

Eramus was sitting on the edge of my bed pretty much watching me waste time. My hair was braided, my makeup was as good as it was going to get. But I didn't want to leave. Stupid really, considering how much I wanted this to be over with.

"Eramus?"

"Yes?"

"I know I haven't said it before and I should have. I just want you to know that I—"

"I know," he said, stopping me before I could say the words. "If saying it out loud scares you, it's all right to wait a while."

I loved him, was in fact *certain* of it. I just had yet to tell him. Now seemed like the right moment, but maybe not. Even though I was over James, I was *not* over having someone I trusted break my heart. That might sound like the same thing but it really isn't.

"We should go," he said.

My heart felt as if it dropped to my stomach and the room started to spin. My mouth was suddenly dry. Come to think of it, I couldn't remember drinking anything all day.

"Okay, just let me get a drink of water."

When I reached for one of the disposable cups on the bathroom counter I accidentally knocked over my planner. It was mostly used for business, but I kept some personal appointments written down. If I thought my heart was in my stomach before, I was positive it was when I noticed there were no little dots on this month's page. The "little dots" are what I use to mark my period. And according to this, I was about two weeks late. I'd been too caught up in everything else to notice.

I picked up the calendar and closed it with shaky hands. I wanted a family, but not under these circumstances. Eramus and I hadn't even had time to discuss anything like that yet. Forcing myself to drink some water, I decided to keep it to myself. Eramus didn't need anything else on his mind. It would be selfish of me to say anything now.

He was the one about to fight to the death, not me. Until I was certain, I would keep my mouth shut.

Relief flooded through me when I remembered that I was on the Pill. This had to be a mistake then. Maybe it was my nerves. I pulled out my little pill box and counted very carefully. Twice. I was on my third count when Erasmus opened the door. I jumped and dropped the pill box.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I called and you didn't answer. I thought something might be wrong."

He watched as I picked the box back up and turned around. I was facing the mirror now and could see the concern in his reflection.

"Is everything all right?"

"Fine," I lied. "I'm just scared about tonight. I've never been around a pack of werewolves before or had to watch a fight to the death..." My words trailed off. Whatever I was going to say was forgotten when Erasmus put his hand on my shoulder.

"Isn't that your pill box?"

"Yes. I knocked it over when I reached for the water."

His voice was soft as he leaned down close to my ear. "I could have sworn you were counting them when I walked in."

Shit. "I'm sorry, Erasmus. I wasn't going to say anything. You've got enough on your mind with everything tonight and—"

"It's okay," he said, cutting me off. I could hear him taking a deep breath before he asked, "Do you think you might be pregnant?"

"Possibly. The first night we were together, I missed my Pill."

"Understandable with everything that happened that night." He paused. "How do you feel about that?"

His question surprised me. When I turned and looked up into his eyes, I found them full of compassion and instantly felt better.

"How do *you* feel about it?"

"I don't want to rush you into anything. I know you said you didn't want to have a werewolf's children—"

"Whoa. Stop right there. I said I didn't want to have *Maxwell's* children. Maybe I worded that wrong, but I didn't mean that... Did you think I put you in the same category?"

"Yes."

His honesty was painful to hear. I didn't realize when I made the statement about not wanting to have some "strange werewolf's children" that he thought that included him too. I felt like an asshole.

"Well, I didn't," I said softly.

Erasmus put his arm around me.

"Come on. We have to go. We'll deal with this later."

Right, later. He was going on the assumption that we would both survive. That made me feel better. I gave him Crazy Wolf's directions before deciding to take my car. We rode in silence. I think Eramus had his mind on the fight. I simply couldn't think of anything to say.

There was no comfort for this, no easy way out. What if Eramus died and I was pregnant with his baby? No. Eramus was *not* going to die. I reminded myself of the way he'd handled Nick. He'd flung a full-grown werewolf as if he was a rag doll. Eramus was a badass if I'd ever seen one. We'd be fine.

As for the possibility of being pregnant, that hadn't sunk in yet. I was torn between fear and something else I never expected – excitement.

When we finally arrived at a field meeting Crazy Wolf's description, Eramus pulled the car over. Hundreds of cars were parked there, but no sign of people...or werewolves. I jumped when Eramus opened my door. I had been staring in disbelief at all the cars. *Hundreds of werewolves* this close to home and I never had a clue. Did they hide that well or did I live with my head up my ass?

"There are so many," I said, taking his hand.

I glanced around as we walked and saw a few cars I recognized. One of them belonged to Ozzy. I paused beside it and Eramus answered my question before I could voice it.

"He's here at my request. Crazy Wolf seems genuinely repentant, but I still don't trust him with your well-being if something happens to me." He winked. "Not that I plan on anything happening."

I was pretty sure his bravado was for my benefit and forced myself to smile.

"But, he isn't a werewolf."

"A challenger has the right to bring with him whomever he wants."

And he wanted Ozzy to be there. For some reason that made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. It was almost enough to bring out a real smile. Justina had volunteered to come with me tonight, but I wouldn't have endangered her life for the world. She was at home with Chase, waiting for me to call and say that everything was all right. I didn't plan to disappoint them.

Eramus headed straight for the woods across the field. Not knowing what else to do, I followed. We walked for what felt like a mile before finally coming to a clearing. We hadn't encountered a soul along the way. Apparently, they were all waiting on us.

The first thing I noticed was Oz, standing beside Crazy Wolf on one side of the clearing. There were about fifty others with him. On the other side of the clearing was Maxwell along with the rest of the pack. Some of them were already transformed, others were in the process of turning. I would say that those who remained in human form looked normal. But they didn't, not quite. There was something different in their

eyes. Even if I had seen them on the street somewhere well away from here I would have known what they were in an instant. The sight was staggering.

I looked back at Maxwell's side once more and saw a familiar face. Mrs. Morrison was standing to his right. She was a werewolf?!

For some reason that really pissed me off. She'd probably been in on this all along. Hatred fueled my courage as I crossed the clearing, ignoring whatever sort of protocol we were supposed to adhere to.

"Mrs. Morrison." It wasn't exactly a greeting, but it would do.

It was so odd to see her like this, and I don't just mean the circumstances. She was in her early fifties, petite and thin with her dark hair usually worn in a bun. She also dressed up for work, black slacks and things like that. It looked strange to see her with her hair down and wearing jeans. I wondered for a moment if her nephew Charlie was anywhere around. Was the deputy a werewolf too?

I stopped so close in front of her that I left no room for retreat. Why was I making this into a confrontation?

"I see you chose not to wear the red dress," Maxwell said from beside me.

"Piss on your dress," I spat.

Mrs. Morrison's face registered the shock of my words, but Maxwell laughed.

"I really hope you didn't, it's a great dress."

I ignored him and directed my anger toward the woman in front of me. "You knew about this all along, didn't you? You knew what he was planning and you let me be used!" I pushed her and she took a step back, her sweet smile never wavering.

"There's no need for that, dear. And yes, I knew. I was one of the ones who recommended you for the position. After the way things turned out with James you needed a strong man in your life. I thought that if I could make you think James wanted children with someone else then maybe the thought of—"

"You *lied* about him wanting to have kids with Rachel? Are you kidding me? Do you have any idea how much that *hurt*?"

"Well, I was only trying to—"

Whatever else she was going to say would have to be spoken with a mouthful of dirt. I hit her so fast and hard that I didn't immediately realize my hand had moved. The throbbing in my knuckles and Mrs. Morrison coughing up blood onto the grass revealed the truth.

"Be careful," she said, wiping blood across the back of her hand.

"You fucking bitch, is that a *threat*?"

Though I'd tried to hide it, I had hated Mrs. Morrison for years. Her nose had been poked into my business one too many times. As I flung myself at her I had every intention of ripping it off. I don't know if it was the changes in my blood that made me so violent or just my long pent-up hatred for the gossip queen. Either way I was

straddling her waist and beating her into the ground when Maxwell's arms around my waist pulled me back.

"Most impressive for a half-blood," he said.

"Get your hands off me."

He released me. I dropped back to the ground and straightened my coat before looking up at him. I glanced over my shoulder and saw that Erasmus, Crazy Wolf and Ozzy were still standing on the other side of the clearing.

"Why didn't one of them pull me off her?"

"I'm sure they would have been content to watch you beat her to a pulp even if you were right next to them. However, the rules state that a challenger and those who take his side may not cross the clearing."

I looked back at him sharply.

"That does not include you," he said. His grin was nothing like the charming smile I'd seen that first night in the club. It was evil and it chilled me to the bone. "You can do whatever you like. Except, of course, interfering with our fight."

I looked at my hands and when I realized I was visibly shaking, stuffed them in my pockets. "What happens now?"

He smiled. "You'll see. Stay put for a minute."

Maxwell walked to the middle of the clearing and stretched his arms out as he addressed the crowd. "As you all know, some time ago the mark was bestowed upon three women. The only one whose body accepted the blood is here tonight." He gestured toward me. "Allow me to introduce you to Lucy Harper." Maxwell curled his finger, indicating that I should step forward. I didn't know what else to do.

When I moved forward he took my hand. Erasmus' growl could be heard above the murmurs of the crowd and Maxwell turned sharply toward him.

"After tonight, Ms. Harper will be mated to the leader of this pack."

Howls, laughter and catcalls echoed through the gathered werewolves. After a minute Maxwell held up his hands for silence.

"Fate will decide who that leader will be," he continued. "Apparently, Ms. Harper finds the thought of being my mate quite offensive."

At this point I was sick of his bullshit and snatched my hand away eliciting more howls from the crowd.

"She's brought a challenger. Erasmus Creed, step forward."

Erasmus did so without hesitation and his eyes turned to amber as he moved. I had never seen anyone or anything look so powerful, and all he was doing was standing still.

"She has also managed to turn my beta wolf against me."

The howls coming from the crowd had definitely taken on a nasty sound now.

"In the very likely event that this challenger is cut down, Crazy Wolf will be relieved of his position as second in command. Those wishing to challenge him for the right, can do so after the fight for pack leader is finished."

Confidence has always been sexy to me. Overconfidence was just the opposite.

"Everyone! This is your last chance to choose sides. Those wishing to change should do so now."

I ran to Erasmus without looking back. Crazy Wolf pulled me toward him as Erasmus moved to the center of what was quickly becoming a large circle.

When Erasmus spoke you could hear the change in his voice. It was a powerful, frightening rumble. "I, Erasmus Creed, challenge you for leadership of the pack and for the right to be Lucy Harper's mate."

Maxwell snarled and his hair started to grow longer, spilling over his shoulders in a matter of seconds as he growled, "I accept."

"To the death then."

"To the death."

I didn't want to watch Erasmus turn again, but couldn't really look away. If I was going to be his mate, it would look stupid for me to be squeamish now. Besides, his beast didn't frighten me—he was my only hope. Who would have thought that my knight in shining armor would be covered instead with black fur?

His hands began to lengthen first. I could hear the bones breaking and reforming as his skin became covered with fur. Erasmus turned so easily that it was almost like watching a magic trick. He threw back his head and howled. As he did this, his shirt began to tear underneath the strain of his chest. The bones of his lower legs lengthened, and his feet became gigantic paws. In a matter of moments he once again had the face of a wolf and Erasmus' transformation was complete. It wasn't like something out of a movie or a nightmare, it just was. His power seemed to radiate through the air, making the hairs on my arms stand on end.

I found Mrs. Morrison through the crowd again and saw the challenge in her amber eyes. If this went badly, or maybe even if it went well, I might have to kick her ass again tonight.

My attention was quickly brought back to Maxwell as with a howl he ripped out of both his clothes and his skin. In an instant his transformation was complete as well. His fur was only one shade darker than Erasmus', however he was almost a foot shorter than Erasmus' now over-seven-foot frame. They circled each other, growling and snarling and I felt as if I might throw up or faint. Or both. Crazy Wolf reached over and took my hand. I was surprised to find his covered with fur. He had transformed right beside me, and I hadn't even noticed.

They continued to circle each other, growling threats. My heart was beating so hard it hurt.

"What are they waiting for?"

"The right moment, I guess."

I looked up at him, and Crazy Wolf smiled. A smiling werewolf is one of the most frightening and yet strangely entertaining things I've ever seen.

"It's really scary when you do that," I said.

Before he could respond, I heard an awful sound that let me know someone had finally made a move. Maxwell dove toward Erasmus and I gasped as he leapt out of the way. He hadn't missed him entirely though. A long scratch was visible on Erasmus' ribs. Maxwell had drawn first blood. Erasmus backhanded him, sending Maxwell flying as he yelped like an injured dog.

The gathered werewolves stepped back to allow them more room. Was it just me or did they look afraid to even touch their leader? Maxwell stood up slowly and I realized his shoulder was dislocated.

Holy shit. Had one hit from Erasmus really done that much damage? My confidence in surviving the night began to soar and the frantic beating of my heart slowed just a bit.

Maxwell jammed his shoulder into place with a crunch and I suddenly felt sick again.

"Is that it?" he growled.

Maxwell leapt at him again, and Erasmus opened up a gash across his chest. Maxwell was now bleeding badly, but he continued to fight. Having to watch didn't bother me as much as I'd expected. Maybe it was because Erasmus was winning. Or maybe the werewolf blood mixed in my veins had weakened the effects of the violence.

All things considered I felt I was handling things pretty well. That is until Erasmus jammed his claws into Maxwell's chest and tore out his heart.

I screamed like someone had just been killed in front of me because...well, they had. It was awful. Erasmus held the heart high and the crowd roared their approval. That is, all except me.

Maxwell had to die. I knew that going in. But that didn't make it any easier to watch. No way was I prepared to witness what happened next either. Erasmus flung the heart toward the pack. Someone jumped up and caught it in their mouth!

I fought the urge to be sick as Erasmus turned to me and I did my best to ask a question with my eyes. Would we be all right now? Tears blurred my vision. Not because I mourned for Maxwell, but because I could feel the violent energy of the pack growing. I feared we would not be allowed to leave as Crazy Wolf had promised.

There was silence all around, only broken by the sounds of growls and gnashing of teeth from the crowd. Maxwell hadn't had time to turn back to human as he'd fallen to the ground. His body lay at Erasmus' clawed feet.

The crowd drew closer to us and Crazy Wolf pushed me behind him.

"Get her out of here," Erasmus yelled.

He must have been talking to Oz, because that's who pulled me by the arm and back several feet through the crowd.

Though my vision was blurred with tears, I watched as the crowd closed in on Eramus, knowing that I couldn't save him. I had never felt so helpless in my life.

I tried to pull free from Oz, but he put his arm around my waist and lifted me up, carrying me further into the woods.

"No," he said. "There is another way. He's not alone."

Crazy Wolf moved to stand at his side and that was the last I saw as a wall of werewolves leapt toward them.

"Come on then!" Eramus yelled. "Those who take his side will share his fate. I'll have your trophies as well!"

Ozzy had pulled me all the way back to the semi-safety of the trees.

"What? What does that mean? What's he talking about?"

"Their skin."

"What?!"

Ozzy swung up onto one of the lower limbs of a tree before reaching back down for me. "Do you think you can make it?"

I swung myself up with less effort than I'd expected. Maybe if I survived all this I'd get used to my extra strength.

As Oz and I crouched on the branch he asked, "Does Eramus have other skins in his house?"

I remembered the ones in his room, one of which had belonged to the werewolf who turned him. "Yes."

"Then he'll add these to his collection. That's what he's saying." Oz started climbing higher as he spoke and I tried to ignore the sounds of chaos coming from the clearing. "It's a great insult for a werewolf to be killed so quickly that they can't transform back to human. That's what it represents when you take their skin. It says that you took them down so fast that they weren't even a challenge."

"Oh."

Well, I guess that made sense. As we reached the upper branches I saw that Ozzy had several weapons here. High-powered rifles strapped down to the branches as well as a few other guns. He handed me a shotgun.

"Aim this at anything that comes close to the tree and blow it to hell."

"What are you going to do?"

"Put a silver bullet in anything that isn't Eramus."

"Don't shoot Crazy Wolf," I said quickly.

"Fine. Anything that isn't Eramus or Crazy Wolf. There's extra ammunition in that pouch above your head. If I yell, you hand it to me. Got it?"

I nodded my agreement, but truthfully I felt numb. Ozzy on the other hand seemed about as excited as I'd ever seen him while I was scarcely aware of the fighting that had broken out around me. Shrieks echoed through the night, as sounds of tearing flesh reached my ears. I couldn't tell who was winning, but I could see Erasmus cutting a bloody trail through the others.

Shots rang out and several werewolves fell dead in their tracks thanks to Oz. I was so afraid that he'd accidentally hit Erasmus that I found it hard to watch. However, I couldn't turn away. What if these were his last moments and I didn't have the courage to look? This was all too much for me. It was as if my emotions were shutting down. The only part that didn't feel completely numb was my heart, because it ached at the thought of losing Erasmus.

Just when my hands had stopped shaking, I heard an awful howl. Instinctively I knew it was Erasmus. Through the connection we now shared, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was hurt.

"Are there silver bullets in this gun?" I asked, holding up the shotgun.

"Yes."

Ozzy didn't look at me, but fired another shot into the crowd as he spoke. Another werewolf bit the dust.

"Where are the extra rounds?"

"In the second bag."

Before he could react to my question further, I leapt down from the tree. I hit the ground with a rolling dive, flinging the ammo bag over my shoulder. I hadn't even been aware that I could do something like that, but there would be time to be impressed with myself later. My only concern was getting to Erasmus. If I couldn't transform and tear them apart with claws and teeth, then I would use the shotgun and my bare hands.

I ran back to the clearing in time to see Erasmus throw a smaller wolf to the ground and tear out his throat. The injury to his side looked deeper and I assumed this attacker had made it so. I held the gun tightly; however, I was frozen to the spot. This was only the second time I had seen Erasmus transformed and the first time I had seen him fight as a werewolf. He was terrifying.

I could see Crazy Wolf close by, leaving a trail of broken bodies in his wake. The way he crushed those who stood in his way was brutal to say the least. But it was nothing to compare with Erasmus' tactics. Those who attacked him directly, he tore apart.

I had never seen anything like it and stood rooted to the spot until someone jumped in front of me. Mrs. Morrison knocked me flat on my ass before I could react.

"See, this is why a half-blood will never be a threat to a true werewolf," she drawled. Her face was now lengthening and her hands were grotesquely deformed. She didn't look big and bad like the men had when they turned. She just looked ugly.

I rose to my feet and shoved the barrel of the gun underneath her nose with reflexes that stunned me. Her eyes widened just before I pulled the trigger, splattering those nearby with bone fragments and brain matter.

I looked up as Erasmus slashed his way through two more wolves before I came to my senses.

"What are you *doing* out here?" he yelled.

"I can't leave you here, Erasmus. If we die, we die together."

Not waiting for his answer I charged into the crowd, screaming a battle cry that reflected all the horror I felt. I shot the first werewolf who charged me. I reloaded with my newfound speed and cut down four more, blasting their legs from beneath them, leaving Erasmus to finish them off. I shot anyone who attacked me or Erasmus, hoping like hell that my aim was true and I didn't hit anyone on our side by accident. It wasn't as if the good guys were clearly labeled. If they made a move to hurt either of us, it was their ass.

Crazy Wolf moved to my other side as a shot rang out so close it made my ears ring. Ozzy was still watching out for me from the trees. It was complete and utter chaos. All I could do was scream as I continued to fire into the oncoming werewolves. Several more came at me, and I shot them like they were nothing. All I could think about was saving Erasmus and getting out of there alive.

For the next several minutes I lost all control. Maybe it was the werewolf blood taking over. I don't know. All I did know for sure was that these people were trying to kill the man I loved and I'd be damned if I let them. I had lost too much in my life, been hurt too often to turn my back on the one man I trusted. The one man I knew wouldn't have left me to fend for myself. I had no choice but to stay by his side. He would have done no less for me.

Several minutes later as the smoke cleared and the growling subsided, I realized we'd won. I looked around to find Erasmus and was once again struck with fear. After all that had just happened you'd think the sight of my boyfriend would have been a comfort. But in his werewolf form and covered with blood, he was terrifying.

He fell to one knee and I cried out, running toward him, dismissing all thoughts of fear. This was my Erasmus and he was hurt.

He looked down at me, because even from his knees he was taller. Despite my best effort, I trembled. He was losing a lot of blood. A cold knot of dread began to form in the pit of my stomach. What if he died anyway? What if after all of this it wasn't enough?

Erasmus reached out, putting his large clawed hand on my shoulder.

I found it difficult to meet his eyes, but forced myself to do so. If he was dying, I didn't want all of my fears to show. His muzzle was covered with blood from all he'd had to tear his way through. There were lots of claw marks over his body, but he stopped me when I tried to examine them.

"It's all right, Lucy," he said as softly as his deep voice would allow. "They'll heal."

"All of them?"

"Yes."

I fell into his arms, not caring anymore about the blood. I needed to be close to him. To know that we had survived this.

"It's all right," he repeated. "We're still here. We made it."

Later I would probably have nightmares about what I'd seen tonight. But at that moment I was grateful for even the possibility of sleeping again. We were alive!

Ozzy was back in the clearing now with us, surveying the damage. Apparently we hadn't killed *everyone* as I'd thought. But between us we came awfully close.

"There were over two hundred werewolves here tonight and not enough bodies to account for them," Oz said.

"Some of them ran," Crazy Wolf said.

He looked pretty banged up too, but not terribly so. The werewolves who had survived appeared to have been on our side. I'd guess there were maybe thirty or so.

"Guess you're not left with much of a pack to run," Crazy Wolf said. "Maxwell was sick. In the few years he had been our leader, he'd managed to corrupt the pack so much, I doubt anyone normal could have saved it, no matter how good their intentions."

"You can help me rebuild it then," Erasmus said.

By that I took it that he wanted Crazy Wolf to remain second in command. Still in wolf form, Crazy Wolf smiled as he nodded his acceptance.

"Does anyone know where Maxwell is?" Crazy Wolf asked.

I pointed to the place where the former leader had fallen. Erasmus rose and the three of them started walking toward his body.

"What are you going to do?" I called.

"Follow through on his threat," Ozzy said, gesturing toward Erasmus.

Realizing they meant to skin Maxwell, I fainted.

Chapter Thirty-One

Rest for the wicked

I awoke to the sound of running water. I was facedown on my bed, but had no idea how I'd gotten there. My last memory was of Ozzy, Erasmus and Crazy Wolf about to relieve Maxwell of his fur. Just the thought made me feel sick.

"I'm sorry about the sheet," Erasmus said.

I rolled over to find him standing in the bathroom doorway, completely naked. Tonight wasn't turning out so badly after all. He smiled, seeming to understand what had caught my attention.

"You were covered in blood so I took one of the spare sheets from the linen closet and put it over the bed. I hope you don't mind."

I sat up slowly and ran my hand over the sheet in question. "No. It's an old one. Besides, I'd rather get blood on a sheet than my new comforter."

He laughed. "Spoken like a true decorator."

"No," I corrected, "like a woman."

"I thought you might like a bath." His voice was soft and there was a kindness there I could not resist.

I rose slowly, making sure I was steady on my feet before trying to go further.

"Need help?"

He was already standing beside me when I answered, "No, I got it. What happened?"

"Um...when we went to skin Maxwell, you fainted."

"Sorry about that."

"No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything you had to see tonight. For everything you had to do." He indicated my bloody clothes as he spoke. "I never meant for this to happen."

I reached up and took his face in my hands. "None of us did. This was all Maxwell's fault."

"And that Morrison woman. She seemed to have a hand in quite a bit of it."

I sat on the closed toilet seat and started removing my shoes. "Is it wicked of me to be glad I shot her?"

Erasmus laughed as he adjusted the water. "No. She tried her best to ruin your life. Then when that didn't appear to be working, she tried to kill you. I'd say you're completely justified if you wanted to piss on her corpse."

I tossed my boots onto the floor. "I'll pass on the corpse pissing, but I'm glad I shot the bitch."

As I noticed his size again I was glad I'd put in a garden tub. It was one of those things I'd second-guessed during the remodeling. But if Erasmus intended to join me, which I figured he did, we'd need the space. He turned around and caught me smiling.

"Shooting nosy women makes you that happy?"

"No," I said, laughing. "I was thinking about something else."

I finished stripping while he selected some bubble bath. "Vanilla and lavender appear to be our only choices," he said.

"I don't like anything too strong. It messes up my allergies."

He smiled. "Vanilla it is then."

I had just eased down into the water when I remembered something. "Shit. I was supposed to call Chase."

"Already done," Erasmus said, pulling me back down. "I explained that you fainted but were not harmed, and the rest of us would survive."

At his words I reached out and ran my hand across what should have been a vicious cut on his side. The blood wiped away to reveal a thin pink line beneath.

"In a few more hours, you won't even be able to see that," he said.

"That's amazing. Does it still hurt?"

"Not anymore."

A few minutes later after we'd scrubbed off the blood, I rested my face against his chest and sighed.

"I think part of me didn't expect to make it back here, to a moment like this." His only response was to gently stroke my hair. As tender as the moment was, my mind kept drifting back to the clearing and what had happened there. "What about all those bodies, about the abandoned cars?"

"If there's one thing werewolves are good at, it's cleaning up messes like that. I left Ozzy and Crazy Wolf in charge. I have no doubt it will be handled."

My mind couldn't begin to wrap around how you'd cover up a mass slaughter like that. So I stopped trying, or so I thought.

"There are people all over the country who'd be willing to help. Crazy Wolf probably has some of them on speed dial."

"What? How did you know I was still thinking about that?"

Erasmus took his finger and rubbed it across my forehead. "Because you get this little wrinkle between your eyebrows when you're concentrating."

Suddenly I felt overcome with emotion. I rolled toward him so that my small frame was stretched out down the length of his body. There was something I needed to say.

"You stopped me before we left," I began. When Erasmus tried to speak I pressed my finger against his lips. "I have thought when I first started ogling you in those tight

jeans that we'd end up like this." He laughed softly and I pressed a kiss against his chest. "I love you, Erasmus."

As he leaned forward to kiss me he whispered against my lips, "I know."

I took his face in my hands and kissed him again. Long gone were thoughts of James or any twinges of a broken heart. Without even trying, Erasmus had fixed me. Until I knew him I hadn't realized how truly broken I was.

I moved to straddle his waist, wrapping myself around him. Erasmus held me tightly and for the longest time I just kissed him. I wanted to commit to memory the way he tasted, the way soap smelled against his skin.

I reached between our bodies and felt him grow hard in my hand before guiding him inside me.

"It's been a long day," he said suggestively, thrusting deeper as he spoke.

"A *hard* day," I agreed.

I moved faster and water splashed over the side of the tub. When I paused to look at the wet floor, Erasmus laughed.

"I'll clean it up later," he said. "Don't stop."

I didn't. I rode him long and hard, expending energy I didn't think my tired muscles were capable of. God, I loved him. It was as if I couldn't be satisfied for long. Even when he touched me I remained hungry for him.

Erasmus rose, lifting us both out of the water and sat me on the side of the tub. He spread my legs wide, slamming into me with abandon while I cried out for more.

"Harder."

I reached around to grab his ass. The feel of his muscles flexing as he pumped in and out of my pussy was enough to finally send me over the edge.

Just as I started to come, Erasmus whispered, "I'm coming too."

We lay in the tub for several more minutes, languishing in what was left of the warm water. The day finally caught up with me and I was almost asleep by the time Erasmus tucked me into bed.

Epilogue

When I finally got the nerve to take a pregnancy test a few days later it came up negative. Someday Eramus and I might start a family together, but for the moment I'm glad to have more time to get used to the idea. Apparently my first suspicion was right—my nerves had caused my period to be late. After all, I *did* have people trying to kill me. I'd say that's enough to throw anyone off.

Eramus seemed to be adjusting to his role as leader of the pack quite well. Besides, there wasn't much of a pack to lead anymore. With the help of Crazy Wolf it would gradually be rebuilt. For the moment, I was kind of glad to know there were fewer werewolves in Mississippi. Not that I had anything against them. Guess I was just afraid of another Maxwell turning up.

On a different note, Justina finally got up the nerve to ask Edward (the hottie we bought supplies from) on a date. Well, sort of. She shocked the hell out of me by bringing him to our next barbeque. I was waiting with crossed fingers to see how long it lasted, but hoped with all of my heart that it was for keeps. For the time being, they were happy and that was enough to make my day.

It was alarming how no one seemed to notice those that went missing Halloween night. Was the whole town in on some kind of cover-up? That was my guess. Even our sheriff, Sam, didn't try to look into the disappearances. I think that surprised me the most, considering his deputy had lost an aunt. As it was now, Charlie was running the coffee shop. I still went in for coffee and the occasional doughnut. I mean, what else could I do? It wasn't as if I could let him know what had happened to her.

James was out of the hospital and had moved back to town. Without Mrs. Morrison around to provoke bad feelings between us, we were actually starting to become friends. No matter how much I loved Eramus, James had been a big part of my life. It was nice to be able to talk to him every now and then. But I wouldn't trade my werewolf for the world.

Other girls can dream about a knight in shining armor all they want. I'll take black fur any day.

About the Author

This multi-published author has been writing stories for her own entertainment since she was a child. Tracey has always been drawn to the macabre, with a fondness for anything with fangs. She writes what she enjoys reading in the hopes that others will enjoy her stories as well. Her main goal as a writer is to put emotions into words. She wants people to feel something when they read her work.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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