



Wolf on the Bayou

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Dedication

To Ms. Sadie. I'll always remember you.

Chapter One

The first time he saw her was the night before a full moon. Usually cranky during this time, he'd avoided people, yet at the same time, the wolf inside him craved to be free. Driven, he walked the dark streets of his sacred city—New Orleans. Gabriel had just turned off Bourbon Street, holding a handkerchief to his nose to ward off at least some of the stench of stale urine, beer, and vomit. His heightened sense of smell could be a burden, along with everything else that came with his curse.

At the corner, he paused and glanced up at the sky. The moon might appear full tonight, but it wasn't quite there. He'd know if that were the case. The madness overtook him, the instinct to kill. He closed his eyes, hating how even now the urge sang in his blood, increasing with each passing hour. Tomorrow night, he'd have to take the usual steps to be sure he would never again hurt another human being. He sighed.

While he contemplated his eternal loneliness, a shop's bell tinkled in the near distance, and a young woman's voice reached him. What made him open his eyes was that same sense he'd damned a second before. Her scent lured him closer to see who gave off such an intriguing fragrance.

She was not a lot of things—not beautiful, not very tall. Where many African American women wore their hair pressed or straightened with chemicals, hers hung down her back in braids. She was not above five foot five, if he had to guess, and rather thin. Her flower print dress was clean but worn, and she'd topped it with a cropped denim jacket. On her feet, she wore flats, another surprise to Gabriel because many petite women liked to wear high heels. Perhaps she didn't because she'd been working in the shop all day.

He waited for her to turn his way so he could look into her eyes. Gabriel could learn a lot about a person by staring into their eyes. At last, the object of his interest turned from her conversation with another person and faced his way. Instinct drove Gabriel to sink farther into the shadows. While she dug inside an oversized knitted bag, he studied her face.

Smooth cocoa skin, large brown eyes, and full lips. He noted the pain and unhappiness in her gaze. An answering ache rose inside him. He took a step forward, but stopped when a man called out behind her. Jealousy arrested Gabriel. Could this be her lover? He prayed it wasn't, and sighed with relief when he saw the family resemblance.

"Babet, I told you I was picking you up," the man grumbled. "Where the hell were you going?"

She frowned. "I got off work an hour ago, and I told you I don't need you picking me up, Martin. I have errands to run."

Babet. Gabriel tested the name on his tongue. He liked it.

"Besides," Babet continued, "you only want me to give you some of my paycheck, and you can forget it. The light bill is due, and the phone is overdue. I can't give you any more money this month. You need to start pulling your weight and paying some of the bills."

Martin grabbed her arm and shook her. When she gasped in pain, Gabriel growled low in his throat. The beast chomped at the bit to have something to rip apart. He didn't dare approach the two, not so close to his confinement.

"Who do you think you're talking to, little sister?"

She pressed her lips together and didn't answer. Her brother shook her again.

"Parain and Nainain left *nbo* in charge of you when they passed? Who made sure you had something to eat every day when you were still too young to get a job, huh?"

"You," she muttered.

"You better remember that, *little* sister." Her brother spat on the ground. He glanced up and down the street. "Come on. I have a game. I don't have all night to wait on you."

She dug inside her purse and removed her wallet. Her brother snatched the satchel from her fingers and routed through it for a wad of bills. He tossed the wallet back and strolled away.

Wanting to know more about Babet, Gabriel followed her around the French Quarter as she visited various shops. Many of the owners knew her and seemed to love her. She chatted with ease and bought a few items. When Babet was finished with her shopping, she hopped on the Canal Street trolley. He trailed Babet all the way to her lower middle class home which looked like it was in sad need of repair. When she stepped up to the curb in front of her door, she stumbled and fell, her bags going in various directions.

Gabriel rushed to help her, taking advantage of this opportunity to meet. Before she could right herself, he bent and scooped her up, placing her on her feet. When he should have let go, he drew her close, enjoying the scent of skin, the softness of her curves. He grew hard feeling her breasts pressed into his chest. In some small way, he tried to make up for her brother's harsh treatment. "Are you all right, *cher*?" he whispered.

Wide brown eyes met his.

One minute Babet was on the ground, disgusted at her clumsiness and grumbling over her brother's total disregard of their financial state. The next minute, she was in the arms of the biggest, sexiest man she'd ever laid eyes on. The top of her head didn't reach his grizzled chin, and she had to lean her head way back to look fully into his eyes. Her heart skittered to a halt when he captured her in the depths of liquid green. How a man could seem dangerous and gentle at the same time, she couldn't be sure, but this man pulled it off in spades.

"I-I'm fine. Thank you." Babet tried not to cling to the broad shoulders or let the obvious hardness of his shaft tantalize her too much. When he didn't take the hint by her wiggling to get away, she said, "You can let me go now."

"Of course." He released her and stepped back. "I'm Gabriel Bordelon. You are?"

"Bordelon?" she wondered.

"Do you know it?"

She didn't know the name, but it fit this big man with his solid build. The hands that had encircled her waist a moment ago could no doubt rip a person apart without effort. No, she told herself, and shook her head. After a long day at work, she was just tired and acting on her usual coping mechanism for dealing with her failure of a life. And imagining Gabriel Bordelon could kill a person with his bare hands was not from her usual knight in shining armor fantasies.

Babet bent to pick up her bags, but Gabriel moved quicker and had them all gathered with his hand out to help her get to her feet. Babet took the offer and stood up. "Thank you, again." One touch of his hand had her breathless. She tried to rein in her desires, but they were alive and ready to play with Gabriel.

Embarrassed at where her thoughts were going, Babet fled to her front door, but Gabriel stopped her. "You haven't told me your name, *cher*."

Did he have to keep calling her *cher*? The rumble of the endearment rolling off his tongue was doing things to her she didn't want to happen. People she encountered everyday tossed around the word, and none of them made her feel like she could come just listening to it. *Thank goodness!*

"It's Babet."

He raised a single eyebrow in question.

"Babet Duval."

"Pleasure to meet you." He smiled, revealing even, white teeth. His suit, though stylish, and she guessed high quality, gave him an air of refinement,

of someone out of their time. Maybe it was his manners, too, that made Babet think of centuries past.

“You too,” she said and hurried into the house.

After she slammed the door and leaned against it, she chided herself for not flirting with him. She could have asked him out, gotten his phone number, or something. The man had been interested. She knew that—if his hard-on was anything to judge by. When she hurried to the front room to look out at the street, he was gone. Babet sighed and dropped into a chair. The opportunity was lost, and she’d probably never see him again.

Oh well, she needed to fix dinner anyway, or Martin would make her life more miserable than it already was.

Chapter Two

“Why are we invited? We don’t even know these people,” Babet complained as she fiddled with her dress for the millionth time. “And it’s for sure we don’t have anything decent to wear.”

“*You* don’t.” Her brother preened in a suit and tie.

She frowned. “Where did you get that?”

“From the attic.” At her disgusted look, he shrugged. “What, like he needed it? He’s not coming back to claim it, and we need to dress to impress. These are uppity fourth ward folks. I told you one day I’m moving up, and this might be the night.”

“You have no respect, Martin. It’s like you don’t even care that our godparents are gone. They were the only family we had, and now it’s just us. I’d think you’d miss them more. They raised us from little kids.”

“Yeah, and they were cheap as hell.” He yanked his tie undone and retied it. “Look at the small inheritance they left us. It barely lasted a year.”

She clenched her hands into fists. “That’s because you gambled it away—yours and mine! Sometimes I feel like—”

He rounded on her, eyes narrowed. “Like what?”

Babet fell silent. She knew how far to push her brother. One day she would have enough money saved to get away from him and start a new life, but that might be a long time in coming. Thank God Pierre, her boss down at the novelty shop, had agreed to take a very small bit of her pay every week and leave it in his bank account, or Babet would have nothing to live on. She would starve. Her brother, with his dark good looks, would charm some woman who just wanted a man in her bed. And that way he would take care of himself, but he wouldn’t think twice to make sure Babet was fine.

Sometimes she wondered how they could be related. She’d like to deny it. That would make her heart comprehend how he could be so cruel. If she were adopted, then that would make his treatment, if nothing else, understandable. No, Martin liked to point out almost on a daily basis that they had the same eyes and the same cheekbones, but he got all the looks while she was plain.

Babet left his room to return to hers. She stared at the worn dress she wore. It hugged her narrow curves, but it was way too long when fashions stopped above the knee these days. At the elbows, the material was shiny and thinner. She hated the dress, but it was the best she had in her closet. After grabbing her makeup case, a luxury she’d managed to buy before Martin snatched away half the money last month, she examined her face in the mirror. Yeah, he was right. She was plain, but at least she had strength of

character. One day, Martin's looks would fade, and he wouldn't be able to get people to give him what he wanted. Someone was going to catch him in all his lies and scams. Where would he be then? Babet knew where she'd be. She'd have pulled herself up by her bootstraps and made a better life for herself, one way or another.

Somehow, she would crawl out from under Martin's verbal abuse. She was still young at twenty-eight, and she vowed to herself and her nainain that before she was thirty, she'd get away from Martin.

"Babet, get down here, and let's go," Martin called from the first floor.

She grumbled as she descended the stairs. "Tell me why I have to go. You said it's dinner and gambling. I don't gamble."

Martin tucked a top hat on his head that made him look stupid. She wasn't going to tell him that. Let everyone laugh.

"Because that Mrs. whatever her name is specially requested I bring you. Said the invitation is only for the two of us together. So, you're going."

"That's weird." Babet had never heard of the woman. She'd seen the invitation that came hand-delivered by a man who claimed to work for their hostess. The name was Devereaux. It didn't strike any bells, but then Martin didn't remember half the women he'd slept with. She'd probably fallen hard for him and thought the best way to get him in her life on a permanent basis was to charm his sister. Babet almost laughed. Little did the woman know, that was the last thing that would win Martin's heart—if he had one.

They arrived at the Devereaux house to find the three story structure lit from bottom floor to top. The same man who'd delivered the invitation stood at the door taking guests' jackets. Babet had worn a simple trench coat since she didn't have anything nicer. She slipped it off quickly when she stepped into the vestibule and folded it over her arm. While she waited for her brother to move farther into the house, she sensed someone watching her. She turned to look out into the rainy night and thought she saw someone on the other side of the street, a hulking figure, hidden in the shadows. Babet shivered and shoved closer to her brother.

He glared at her over his shoulder and shook her hands from his back. "Wait your turn. This place might be nice, but like many around here, it's tight. Devereaux must have invited half of N'awlins."

Soon they were ushered into the front room, and Babet got to meet their host and her husband. Claudia Devereaux was round but well-dressed with a simple strand of pearls at her neck and wrist. She stood even shorter than Babet who hated her own height. Claudia's husband was a good foot taller and just as slender as his wife was heavyset. The older couple, who appeared to be in their sixties, both displayed friendly smiles and warm hospitality to

all their guests. Babet was relieved to find the sentiment extended to her and her brother who must have stuck out like sore thumbs among the uppercrust.

Claudia, upon spotting Babet, approached her and took her arm. "You're with me, sweetie." She all but dragged Babet across the room to meet various people. Babet couldn't focus much on what anyone was saying because the entire house seemed to be permeated with the wonderful scent of gumbo. Her empty stomach growled, and she was grateful that too many people were speaking for it to be heard. Time passed, and still they hadn't gone in to dinner. Babet checked her watch on the pretense of scratching her wrist. It was nearly eight.

Claudia caught her attention when the person she had been speaking to let the conversation lag. "So, what do you do, Babet?"

"Me?" She looked over at the older woman and swallowed. She'd never been ashamed of her line of work. It paid the bills—mostly. But tonight she felt out of her element. "I—"

"Excuse me. He's here, Mrs. Devereaux," her butler, or whatever he was, said.

Babet and Claudia turned toward the door, and Babet gasped. She'd not expected to see him ever again, but there in the open doorway, stood Gabriel. He towered above every other man in the room with broader shoulders than all. Every man wore a dark suit in black or gray, but Gabriel pulled the look off better than every one of them. Such raw power emanated from his being that Babet wanted to race across the room and jump into his arms. Claudia holding onto her arm was the only thing that kept her from making an idiot of herself.

"He's here at last!" she bellowed. "Mr. Devereaux can eat."

Babet thought it was cute the way the woman referred to her husband with mister and by his last name, but she was serious. Without even introducing Gabriel around, she herded them all to the dinner table. Babet didn't know how they fit, but they did with a few extensions on the table. Of course, Martin had been exaggerating about the number of guests too.

Seated next to Mrs. Devereaux and across from Gabriel, Babet tried to keep herself from staring at him. A sexy young woman with long red hair sat beside him capturing most of his attention, but Babet caught him looking at her often. With fingers clutched in her lap, she watched the gumbo being served.

"You know Mama made the best gumbo," Claudia announced, and the guests quieted to hear her story. "Best you ever did want to eat. Even when I moved out of her house after I married Mr. Devereaux, we would be out

somewhere, and he would say ‘since we’re ova by ya mama’s, let’s go get us some gumbo.’” She laughed and slapped her husband’s arm with a heavy hand. “I told him we miles away from Mama’s. He didn’t care. He wanted Mama’s good cookin’, but I didn’t mind none. I had other skills.”

Embarrassed that Claudia could only be talking about skills in the bedroom, Babet shivered in disgust and glanced over at Gabriel. Amusement filled his green gaze, and he raised his glass to Babet. She decided not to understand what he meant by that. He didn’t let her squirm away. “What skills do you have, Babet?”

The redhead wasn’t going to be outdone. She rubbed her big breasts on Gabriel’s arm and all but shouted, “I have skills too.” She whispered them in Gabriel’s ear. The man on the other side of Babet, whose name she’d forgotten after she’d been introduced to him, pumped her arm and gave a gap toothed grin.

“Bet I know what she’s saying, don’t you?” He sighed. “To be young and beautiful.”

Meaning I’m neither? Babet turned back to her food and ate in silence. For the rest of the meal, she pretended to listen to the conversation around her, but instead, mentally took inventory of the shop she worked in. One of the voodoo shop owners Babet had become friends with had offered her a position there, saying she’d give her more money, but Babet hadn’t decided whether she should do it. For one thing, she was loyal to Pierre. He’d given her a job with no experience, and he put up with Martin’s weekly tantrums. Someone else might fire her because of her brother, and that would devastate her plans, not to mention land them on the street. They were close to that anyway.

“Babet, aren’t you coming?” Claudia called out.

She glanced up to find most of the guests had left the room after dinner was over. “Oh, yes. Sorry, I was deep in thought.”

Claudia grasped her hand. “You need to get out of your head and have some fun. Mr. Devereaux is cranking up the music, and we’re going to play cards. Maybe you’ll be lucky for me, and I’ll beat that damn Sadie tonight.”

Babet laughed. “Don’t get your hopes up. I’m not good at any card game, and I doubt I have any luck.” She tugged back on Claudia’s arm looped through hers as they walked through the hallway to the front room. Others stepped around them and continued on ahead. “Claudia, why did you invite me and my brother tonight? Do you know him from...uh...” How could she say the casinos her brother practically lived in?

Claudia’s face reddened, and she froze as if she never expected to be asked that question. Babet was just about to apologize and let the subject

drop when Claudia babbled, “Oh, yes, it must be when Sadie and I went on the Natchez cruise. We do that sometimes just to get away for the evening when Mr. Devereaux is out with his drinking buddies.

“You might not know, but Sadie lived in the lower ninth ward before Katrina. Lost everything, poor dear. Now she’s even suffering from that Katrina cough, you know the one you can’t seem to get rid of no matter what, and the doctors is useless to help? Well, Sadie loves that riverboat, so Mr. Devereaux and I do whatever we can to make her happy.”

Babet blinked at how Claudia could go on and on without seeming to take a breath. She chattered down the hall and into the front room where card tables had been set up. Some people had already taken spots. Babet couldn’t help glancing around for where Gabriel was stationed when Claudia wandered away.

A hand settled on her lower back, and his deep voice came from behind her. “Did you enjoy the meal, *cher*?”

Her heart fluttered. “I—”

“There you are,” Martin shouted and pounded Gabriel on the shoulder. “You look like you have money to lose. Come on over to my table. Babet, get us a drink.” He spun away with Gabriel as if expecting her to do his bidding. Babet ground her teeth and marched to an empty spot at the opposite end of the room. Let him get his own drink for interrupting her and for treating her like she was his personal maid.

As they played late into the night, every so often, Claudia called a switching of partners and tables. Babet shifted around the room, met with relieved sighs from those she left behind and barely suppressed grumbles from those she joined who’d heard that she was not the best partner. At least she’d been able to continue playing because, for some reason Claudia, wanted to keep things light at her party, and everyone played with a few pennies at a time. Even Babet could handle that.

She glanced toward Gabriel, who she hadn’t yet been able to play opposite or alongside, and found his gaze on her. Goose bumps broke out on her skin. She’d had a couple boyfriends in the past, but none who could make her feel like he’d just stripped her naked with a look like Gabriel could. By no means was she a virgin, but her experience was limited. Every fiber in her being wanted Gabriel to take her to levels she’d never been, but the thought of that petrified her.

At two, when Babet bowed out of another game because she couldn’t keep her eyes open, she learned why in switching tables, she’d never met up with Gabriel. Both he and Martin occupied the only table that had been

allowed to play for high stakes. Where Martin got money to even get in on it, she didn't know.

After suppressing her millionth yawn, she approached their table. "I want to go home, Martin. It's late."

"No one's stopping you," he muttered, his eyes never leaving his hand. Sweat beaded his forehead, and his lips were drawn into a tight line. By that, Babet knew he had lost everything, and the last of his money rode on this round. She'd seen it too many times before.

"I don't want to go home alone this late," she reminded him.

"Babet, shut up. I'm trying to concentrate!"

Several people eyed her brother with disapproving stares. She could have told them it didn't mean a thing. Martin wasn't embarrassed or shamed from what people thought of him. He just barreled over everyone to get to where he wanted to go.

More rounds passed, and Babet sat in a chair trying to ignore the ache in her butt. Her eyes burned, and her throat was dry, but she was too tired to get up to find water. A hand slammed on the table made her jump and almost hit the floor.

"One more hand," Martin demanded. "Just one more."

Gabriel shook his head, appearing grim for some reason. If he had lost, Martin wouldn't be whining for another chance. She was glad to know Gabriel wasn't giving in.

"You're out of money and...what's most important," Gabriel told him. Babet frowned. Most important? What did he mean?

Both men stood up, and so did Babet. She stretched and surveyed the room. Everyone else had left for the night, and Claudia and her husband and Sadie were busy folding tables and chairs, along with her butler. How they could have enough energy to do so, Babet didn't know.

When she was about to speak to her brother, he turned around to speak first. The guilt in his eyes didn't bode well. "Uh, look, Babet," he began in a voice so low she had to strain to hear. "Tonight, I kind of did something different than I usually do."

Babet didn't like his tone. Her brother never apologized for anything. "What's wrong with you?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "You did not gamble with our house, did you?" She almost laughed at that thought. Her brother was reckless, but he wouldn't go that far. Besides, it probably wasn't binding in court if he did. At least, she hoped not.

When she used that tone with him, like he was an idiot, it pissed him off. No matter how many times over the years Martin had mistreated her, she'd never learned to curb her tongue. His brows shot low over his eyes, and he

growled. "Serves you right. You're not worth anything anyway. I gambled with you." He hooked a thumb back over his shoulder toward Gabriel. "You're his for a month."

Babet stood there staring at him. She couldn't have heard right. "Excuse me?"

He swore under his breath, but didn't raise his voice. "You heard me, Babet. I gambled with you after my money was gone. Now, get your coat. You're going with this guy. Just do what you're told."

"No!" Babet screamed. All chatter in the room stopped. "Are you out of your mind? I can't believe you'd do that to your own sister. I'm done, Martin." She charged him and shoved him as hard as she could. Maybe it was the fact that he'd been sitting for hours and drinking as well that he was unsteady on his feet. Her brother went sailing back and crashed into the table. The legs gave, and Martin, along with the table, crashed to the floor, sending cards, coins, and cups flying every which way. Babet wasn't done. "I'm tired of you treating me like trash under your feet. I'm tired of you taking my money so I can't pay bills and can barely eat. You take, take, take! I'm sick of being scared of you, sick of being stuck because you won't go away."

"I want you out of my house, Martin." He looked like he was about to argue that the house had been left to both of them, but she stooped down and poked a finger in his chest. "I've paid everything for years while you let it all go to waste. You don't care, so that house is mine, and you better not darken the doorstep. I mean it. I know your secrets, the people you've cheated. I'll go to the police if you ever come near me again. Keys."

She held out her hand for the house keys. He opened his mouth to speak, but Gabriel stooped beside him, arms resting on his thighs. "I'd do as she says."

Babet glared at Gabriel. "And you..." Tears filled her eyes, but she blinked them away. "I thought...you... Never mind. Don't come near me either." She snatched the keys Martin held out and spun toward Claudia. "Thank you for inviting me, Claudia. It was great to meet you all. Good night."

"Wait, sweetheart," Claudia called out as Babet headed for the door. "Mr. Devereaux can run you home."

"No, he looks worn out. I'll be fine." She hurried out of the room before anyone could stop her. At the front door, the butler held her coat. She thanked him too, slipped it on, and ran down the front steps. Humiliated and hurt, Babet headed for home. She had a long way to go, but she didn't care. What did it matter anyway? How many times had she stood up to her

brother only to be knocked on her butt? Over the years, she'd made excuses for him, if only in her own mind. At least he never hit her, she told herself. He was all the family she had left, and her godmother had taught her that family was everything. Babet had even felt guilty sometimes about her plans to leave one day because her godmother, on her deathbed, had made Babet promise to take care of Martin. She'd known he had a weak character.

Tonight, Martin had gone too far. But what hurt most was not how her brother had treated her, like she was property and not a person. It was that she'd believed Gabriel was a decent person. All along he was just as low as her brother, maybe lower. The whole experience just went to show she couldn't trust any man not to use and abuse to get what he wanted.

Chapter Three

Babet picked up the pace when an older model car turned the corner and began following along beside her. Her mouth went dry, and her palms moistened. That's all she needed was some crazy person to drag her into his vehicle. At the next corner, the car turned ahead of her and blocked her path. She stopped, chest tight with pain. The passenger side window rolled down.

"Come, *cher*," Gabriel called out from the dark interior. "I will take you home."

She almost sighed in relief, but then stiffened her back. He was no safer than some madman. "No, thanks. I can get there on my own."

"Don't be stubborn. You have a long way to go, and it's not safe out by yourself."

Babet took a step back. "How do you know where I live?"

He leaned across the seat, and his handsome face came into view, set with a charming smile. She resented him for the way he made her insides quiver and longing heat up her blood. The expression on his face said he knew exactly what he did to her. "You forget that it was at your door that we met the first time."

A memory of their first meeting flashed through her mind, and she had to hide her embarrassment. She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, I'm still not going anywhere with someone like you. You're no better than my brother. Have a nice life."

She started around his car, but he opened the driver side door and stepped out. Scanning the area, Babet tried to decide whether to run.

"*Cher*, you're not afraid of me." He held out his arms as if she would come running to him. Let him wait until hell froze over. He kept advancing toward her, the gentle smile in place. "Your instincts tell you that I'm not going to hurt you, and I won't."

"How would you know?"

"I live by mine." Inches from her, he came to a stop, but didn't touch her. For that, she was grateful. She didn't think she could resist if those big hands brushed her skin. Even pissed off at him, she wanted to see what it was like, just once. "*Mwen regret sa*. I'm sorry," he repeated in English. I never meant to make you feel that you were less than what you are—a desirable woman who deserves the utmost respect."

There it was again, she thought. His manners were those of people from olden days. Maybe that's why he'd figured he could gamble for her. He was a man born out of his time. "Okay, fine. But my body is still not for sale."

His green eyes darkened, and their attention flickered briefly to her breasts and up again to her face. “You mistake me, *cher*. The agreement I struck with your brother should he lose was not to have you in my bed *per se*. You were to spend time with me for one month, mostly at my home, but for companionship, not for sex.”

“Oh.” She felt like an idiot. Of course, he didn’t feel like that. After all, why would he when the redhead had been hanging from his arm offering it up all night. Her scrawny behind with small breasts probably didn’t even get his heart to pumping faster.

While she stared at everything other than him, he caught hold of her chin and turned it toward him. “Not that I don’t want to sample your body. You are everything a man could want and more. He took a step closer, and the heady scent from him, a spicy mixture of bergamot and something else more feral tempted her to move into his arms. Babet bit her lip, resisting him.

“You’re trying to trick me. I’m not falling for it. I know how men are.”

“Babet, look at me.”

She shivered. It was the first time he’d spoken her name since they’d met. Swallowing and mentally reinforcing her walls, she glanced up.

“I want you. I admit that. To make wild, passionate love to you every night for a month would be incredible, as I’m sure”—he ran a finger down her cheek to rest it on her lips—“you would enjoy as well. However, as I said, this is a companionship offer only. I will not make love to you until you’re ready.”

As if she’d ever be. Babet pursed her lips and pulled her mouth away from his touch. “I don’t know you.”

“Claudia Devereaux can vouch for me,” he offered.

Babet frowned. “I don’t know her either.”

Amusement plain on his face, he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back on the car. “And what if I said I am good friends with Marie LaCour?”

She gasped. “You know Marie?” Marie LaCour was the owner of the voodoo shop where Babet had been considering working. Babet believed Marie had her best interest at heart, and she had been encouraging Babet to do all she could to be free of Martin. They’d gone to lunch together a few times, and Babet had hesitated to take the offer in part because she didn’t want to tax the friendship. Was Gabriel lying, though, about knowing her? Or was he just a customer who happened to know her name? The truth was easily found out, so he’d be an idiot to make it up.

"Tell you what, *cher*," Gabriel offered. "If you will spend one month entertaining me—and I don't mean in my bed—I will help you to get free of your brother sooner."

Babet's eyes widened. "What? But how...?"

"I told you. I know many people, and you know how much the residents of our fair city like to, uh, *share* with each other."

Babet rolled her eyes. He raised questioning eyebrows.

"I know that you are trying to make a break from your brother. I will help you do that. At the conclusion of one month spent with me, doing whatever I want, I will give you enough money to make a new start. You are not a prostitute, more like a paid escort, which is a different field altogether."

"Of course," she muttered. His offer was tempting. She might have intimidated Martin for the moment, threatening him in front of everyone else, but there was no telling how he would retaliate. Couldn't hurt to get all the details before she spoke with Marie. "I would stay at your house?"

"If you like, or I can pick you up every morning and take you home every night."

She looked around like she expected some sign to point out his house. "You live around here, in the fourth ward?"

He hesitated. "No, I live on the bayou."

"*On?*"

"Why don't we discuss it in the car? Surely, you'll let me see you home now?"

Babet wasn't about to say no again. Her feet hurt, and she was tired beyond belief. Tomorrow, she'd sleep in since she didn't have to work, and she wouldn't drag herself out of bed until her eyes popped open. "Okay, thank you."

She climbed into the car after he'd opened the door. When she caught him glancing at her dress, visible through her open trench coat, she tugged at the material, wishing it was newer. What a man like him wanted with her, she didn't know, but if everything checked out, she wouldn't back down from Gabriel. This was her way out, and it might be her only chance.

The car seemed unable to reach the speed limit. Babet eyed the dated round dials on the dash. "Is this your car?"

He chuckled. "No, it belongs to John Devereaux. He lets me use it now and then when I come to town. Most often I walk wherever I want to go, or take public transportation."

Babet was beginning to wonder if he even had the money to help her.

He guessed her thoughts. "Don't worry. I don't have a car because I spend most of my time on my estate. I come to the city for specific reasons and nothing else."

She thought that sounded spooky, but didn't pursue it. "And your house?"

"One of the old plantation houses set back off the bayou, or more in the heart of it, far removed from neighbors."

Babet's muscles jerked in her arms, and she found herself clutching the door handle at her right side with both hands. "This is crazy. I want this, but it's too good to be true. *You* are too good to be true. I've just met you, and even if Marie or Claudia say you're a good guy, what does that mean? You've just admitted you want me to go to some creepy old house out in the swamp to do whatever you want with me!"

He settled a hand on her arm, but when she all but slammed herself against the door, he pulled away. "If I were what you think, would I admit it?"

"In some crazy reverse psychology ploy, yes."

"*Souplé, ban mwen* a chance, *cher*. That's all I ask for, one chance." He turned onto her street and pulled to a stop in front of her house. "How about this? You check with Marie and Claudia about me. Then I'll take you to breakfast tomorrow morning. We can spend our time in the city all day and every day if that's what you want. When you're ready, we can go to my home."

She looked into his eyes and felt that he was being straight, although she wasn't going to go on just her feelings alone. "You're a recluse. Is that it?"

Sadness clouded his clear eyes. "I suppose I am. Not by choice."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind that. Do we have a deal?"

Babet peered through the windshield to check the area. She noted that the house was still dark since she hadn't left any lights on. Gabriel laced his fingers with hers, and this time, Babet didn't pull away. Her fear had eased somewhat. His thumb stroking circles on her skin brought about a whole different kind of sensation.

"You will be under my protection while we're together," he stated. "That means I will not let Martin anywhere near you."

She gasped. So he knew she was afraid of her brother. Everybody probably knew, and Gabriel had picked up on the lack of family love the first night. "You said we'll spend all day every day together. I have to work, you know."

"Not if I make arrangements and cover the expenses for that as well."

She couldn't believe he was real. "You can't afford that!"

Gabriel released her hand to reach inside his breast pocket. When he tugged a wallet out and opened it to reveal a wad of cash, her stomach knotted. The man really was willing to buy her. Shame stole over her. Her nainain would never approve. This was like taking the easy way out. Babet should haul her butt out of that car and tell Gabriel to find another woman. The problem was, she wanted to date him, just for a little while, for the fun they might have. Was that so crazy?

"You don't do things in a small way, do you? Like ask a woman out for a date?" She eyed his set jaw. In the bright quarter moon's light, she saw that he'd shaved before attending the dinner party. "Why me?"

"Why not?"

She grumbled. He chuckled.

When she went to get out of the car, he stopped her with a hand on her arm. "That's twice you've made me laugh in the short time I've known you. I am a solitary person. There's been tragedy in my past, beyond what you could imagine. If I use my money to bring me even temporary joy, is that so bad? Babet, you would be doing me a huge service if you help me to forget for even a little while over the next thirty days."

She chewed her lower lip while she considered it. What did she have to lose? *Except my life...or my heart.* "Okay, if you check out, we can have lunch tomorrow. I have to have time to talk to Marie and Claudia."

"Great! And how much do you need now?" His hand poised above the bills.

Babet shook her head. "I'm not sure about that yet. It makes me feel uncomfortable taking money from you now. We can talk about it later. Good night."

For the second time, Babet moved to leave the car, but Gabriel grabbed her hand and tugged her close. She gasped, and with her lips parted, he covered them with his own. Thinking to put space between them, she leaned in closer and ran her hands up over his chest. The beating of his heart teased her fingers. She curled them into his shirt and tilted her head back. Gabriel deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue into her mouth. Babet couldn't prevent the soft moan that escaped her.

They should stop, but she found herself sucking at his bottom lip, pressing closer until her breasts were flattened on his chest. She tried to catch her breath. Gabriel trailed kisses along her throat and tugged at the collar of her dress like he would explore farther. Babet's sanity returned in a rush. She shoved him away.

"You said you weren't going to do that," she panted.

He rubbed a thumb over her lip, his face unreadable. “I said I wouldn’t make love to you until you’re ready. I didn’t say I wouldn’t kiss you. Besides, I wanted to see if your lips were as sweet as they look.”

Feeling sassy all at once, she responded, “And were they?”

He smirked. “Sweeter.”

Babet shook from head to toe. She threw the door open and jumped out before she leaped, instead, onto his lap. Without a backward glance, she jogged up to her door, unlocked it, and hurried inside. This was the second time she’d run from Gabriel when all she wanted was to run to him. Perhaps when they got to know each other a little better, she wouldn’t be so scared. One thing was for sure, if Gabriel checked out, Babet was going to go for it—for *him*. That kiss had ruined her panties from the first touch, and she suspected no matter how exhausted she was, it would take a while to settle down enough to sleep. Something told her having sex with Gabriel would be explosive when she signaled to him she was ready.

Chapter Four

Gabriel arrived early at Marie's shop and banged on the front door. He figured he could beat Babet there since he hadn't gone to bed. Until the sun rose, he had camped outside of her house, taking serious his promise to watch over her. Martin hadn't shown up, and Gabriel intended to find out where he was to reinforce Babet's demand that he stay away from her. When no answer came to his knock, he banged again. Soon, a light came on toward the back of the shop.

Marie, face covered in a green beauty mask, peered through the window. She opened the door grumbling. "Can't you keep decent hours, wolf?" she demanded. He knew she referred to his curse, but let the slight go since he needed her.

"Bonjou!" he said in greeting despite her grumpy attitude.

She sneered.

"I wanted to speak to you. This was a convenient time," he said.

"For you maybe." She backed up to let him in.

Gabriel fished in his pocket for his handkerchief. The many herbs Marie used in her potions crowded every inch of shelf space, all vying for dominance in scent, as well. He never stayed long in her place, preferring to meet for lunch or dinner on occasion. Marie had been unable to help him get free of the werewolf, but they'd remained tentative friends. He couldn't tolerate people for long periods.

He didn't beat around the bush about why he was there. "I wanted to talk about Babet Duval."

Her eyes widened, and she yanked her robe tighter around her plump figure. "What do you want with that innocent girl?"

"Innocent? Girl? She's hardly either. Well, not too innocent." He ran a hand through his hair. He wasn't used to explaining himself, but he needed Marie's cooperation. "I'm not going to eat her, if that's what you're worried about." *Not painfully*. His shaft hardened with thoughts like that, and he redirected them to safer channels. "I want her for a temporary companion."

Marie spun away and went about turning on lights and powering up a computer. She'd gone hi-tech some time ago, developing a website for her company so she could reach more customers than those who lived in or visited their city. "So you want her for sex. I wouldn't have thought she was your type. You've stuck to the loose ones who exchange their bodies for gifts."

Gabriel clenched his hands into fists at his sides. "I do not sleep with prostitutes."

“Just because they don’t call themselves prostitutes...” Marie had never been intimidated by him even though she knew what he was, that pushing him too far was dangerous. She seemed oblivious, but he knew she wasn’t. Pinning him with a hard stare, she said, “Babet has been hurt a lot in her life, losing both her parents when she was four years old, and then later losing her loving godparents. Now, she has to deal with that bastard of a brother who doesn’t care about anyone but himself. I am trying to get her to work for me, to make more money, so she can get free of him. She doesn’t need you bringing more complications to her life.”

How could he explain that Babet drew him to her without sounding like a fool? Marie would never go for it anyway. She wouldn’t believe he wanted anything other than sex. Hell, he wasn’t sure he wanted more than that either. “Our arrangement would be for companionship,” he reaffirmed. His assertion sounded lame to his own ears.

“Uh-huh.”

“You know I’m a good person, other than my problem.” That didn’t sound any better. He grunted, searching his mind for some better way to convince her of his worth. If after a year of knowing him, Marie didn’t believe he was not evil aside from the wolf, then he had little hope.

“Oh, is that what you’re calling it? Your ‘problem?’” She studied him for long moments in silence. He tried not to shift under that insightful gaze. Marie was no fake just looking to make a dollar off gullible customers. She was the real thing, a witch with impressive powers. That was the whole reason he’d come to her in the first place, to see if she could help free him. However, just like many before her with skills in the black arts, she had failed to lift the curse that weighed heavy on him.

She shook her head. “You want me to convince her that you’re not dangerous, that she should go out with you. Is that it?”

“When you put it like that...”

Marie lowered her lashes to the jar of black liquid she’d picked up. “If I asked you for a favor, then, in return for putting in a good word to Babet, what would you say?” She went on before he could answer. “Deal with someone who has been, up until now, impervious to my spells.”

Gabriel blinked at her. She couldn’t be asking him to kill someone. “Deal with?”

“You know what I mean.” Still, she didn’t look at him.

Gabriel flared his nostrils, feeling Babet slip away. He’d have to convince her some other way. The memories of his dark past washed over him, and he resented Marie for bringing them to the forefront of his mind. He would not

return to that way of life, not for anyone. "I cannot do that. I *will not* do that."

Marie sighed. "*Bon*, I guess. I will tell her she's safe with you as long as she doesn't lose her heart." Leaving him confused, Marie patted his arm and passed into the back of the shop out of sight.

Gabriel began to realize what Marie's words meant. His spirits rose. "Thank you for that. I should get going." He turned to leave, but she stopped him.

"Gabriel."

"Yes?" He glanced back at her, seeing the hesitation in her eyes, hoping she wasn't changing her mind so soon. "What is it?"

She set the jar on a shelf nearby, but didn't look at him. "I discovered something in my studies the other night. I didn't say anything because, well, I didn't know what to say." He waited for her to continue, apprehension tightening his jaw. "I found a spell that can bring your maker to you."

He gasped. "What the hell? And you didn't think that was important to tell me? I have many questions. You know my story. I never knew who it was that attacked me that night in 1802. He or she could have the answers I need. Why would you keep that information from me?"

Marie seemed pale, and he thought he saw her sway, but she steeled her back when he would have helped her. "Yes, I know your story. I've heard how the beast drives a person to madness with a desperate need to kill. I also know you hate the thought of losing control like that ever again. You hide yourself away on the bayou so nothing and no one will provoke you."

"So?"

She swallowed as if her throat were dry all at once. "So, if I were to use that spell, there would be no turning back from it. In order to break the curse, you would need to kill the one who made you."

"That..." Gabriel ground his teeth. "That can't be true. All these years, I've consulted many witches and others in a position to know. Not one of them told me of those conditions. No one mentioned that there was even a way to bring my maker to me. I don't believe you." Gabriel turned away and closed his eyes, breathing deep through his nose. The anger was rising. He had to get a grip. If he didn't, it would drive him home without him being able to see Babet today. Even without shifting, his strength was greater than that of a human's. He'd end his life before he risked hurting her, or anyone else.

"I'm sorry," Marie told him. "I suspect some of the witches you met were fakes. Others knew you weren't willing to kill again, so they concentrated their efforts on finding another way. But there's more."

He growled. "Isn't there always? Tell me!"

"If I were to cast this spell, your maker would come. He would feel the pull, and he'd know why he felt it."

"Meaning?"

She tapped a fingernail on the bottle, grating on his raw nerves. "Meaning he would know you're calling to him to kill him, and he would feel obligated to kill you first. You would not know who he is until you were face-to-face. He would already know about you and, therefore, could gain the advantage."

Where hope had risen a moment before with thoughts of spending more time with Babet, it died a quick death. "So there's nothing to discuss at all. I will not kill. Therefore, I am stuck with this beast inside me, forever fighting him, forever separated."

"Oh don't be so melodramatic." She slapped him on the back with little sympathy. "You're the hottest man I've ever laid eyes on. Every woman wants to jump into your bed, and you're rich. What more could you ask for? Enjoy what you can, and leave the rest. That's what I always say."

Gabriel smirked. Well, he hadn't expected anything more for the time being. And it had taken Marie a year to find this tidbit of information. What was another year to locate another way? There had to be different solution. He would hold onto that and, just as she said, let the rest be. "*Mesi*. I will leave it at that for now and enjoy other things."

"You mean other people." She hesitated. "Gabriel?"

He stopped, having moved to the door. "Yes?"

She seemed to force a smile, and he could only wonder at what she kept from him. "I will keep looking. Remember, I will put a hex on your tool if you hurt her, so you better treat her well!"

Gabriel opened the door and squinted in the morning sun after the darkness of the shop. "I'll remember that. Talk to you later."

He left her shop in better spirits, hopeful, at least, that he could see Babet. Claudia would put in a good word for him no matter who was asking, so he didn't need to visit her. This afternoon, he would pick up Babet for their lunch, and very soon, she would be a guest in his home away from the noise and smells of the city.

* * * *

The seedy motel where Gabriel found Martin was easily the worst in the city. Gabriel wasn't surprised this was where the gambling addict had ended up. Neither was he surprised that the redhead he'd rejected last night was

with Martin. After picking the lock on the door, Gabriel stood over the sleeping couple considering how he should play out this scene. He wanted Martin to fear for his life, although it would never be in danger. He also needed to be careful the fool didn't set him off. Each time before when Gabriel watched how he had treated Babet, it had taken everything inside of Gabriel not to react. But he would not stand for any more of it. She belonged to him now.

Gabriel kicked the bed, jostling the sleeping figures. Martin groaned and waved a hand over his head like he shooed a fly. Gabriel grabbed an ankle and jerked until Martin tumbled over the side of the bed and hit the filthy floor.

"Ow, what the heck?" he grumbled.

"Wake up," Gabriel commanded.

The redhead yawned and stretched, allowing the sheet covering her to fall, revealing her naked breasts. Gabriel didn't spare her a second glance.

"It's you," she squealed with delight. "I knew you couldn't resist me."

"I assure you, I'm not here for you," he told her and focused on Martin. "I had to rush out last night before I got to outline our deal further. Now that I've won your sister, she belongs to me. You will not come anywhere near her. You will not harass her for money, lay a hand on her, or even greet her should you come across her on the street."

Martin scowled, still planted on the floor. "Who the hell do you think you are? She's my sister, and I've been looking out for her all her life."

"Like you took care of her when you gambled with her last night?"

"Oh please. Don't get all high and mighty with me." Martin, at last conscious of the fact that he was naked, grabbed the sheet from the bed and stood up to wind it around his waist. "You can look down on me all you want, but it was you who suggested I use Babet in the first place. Wonder what she'd think if I told her that."

Gabriel lessened the space between them and put a hand at Martin's throat. "Are you threatening me?"

The man sputtered and gasped for breath.

Gabriel narrowed his eyes, hardening his expression to make his meaning clear. "What I said was that I'm interested in seeing more of her. Your depraved mind added the details. I repeat, if you come near her, you *will* be sorry."

The redhead screeched, incapable, it seemed, of doing much else. "Wait, that girl from the party? You chose her over me? But she's plain and doesn't have any boobs. I can't believe it."

"Shut up, Rose. This has nothing to do with you."

Gabriel let Martin struggle a little longer, and then he let him fall to the floor. The bastard jumped up a second time and rushed to put space between them. "I don't want anything more to do with Babet anyway. She humiliated me in front of everybody last night, and I can't forgive that."

"Never mind the numerous times you did the same to her."

"Whatever. You made your point, man. Now, get out."

Gabriel had no problem leaving. He turned his back on the couple just as Martin began harassing Rose for money. The man would never change, and Gabriel would do all in his power to be sure he never bothered Babet again.

The day grew late since he'd spoken with Babet for their lunch date, and she'd been still too tired to go anywhere. Gabriel had suggested they move their first outing to dinner. She'd agreed. At the small apartment that he kept for use when he was in the city, Gabriel showered and changed his clothes. Tonight, he would go a tad more casual, wearing black slacks and a black collared shirt, no tie. Frowning at his wet hair, which needed a trim, he hoped that Babet would assume he was going for the untamed look.

Feeling like a cub who'd never been with a woman before, Gabriel left the apartment and strolled toward the nearest trolley stop. He had plenty of time to reach Babet's place, but he wanted to be early. A rare chuckle rumbled up from his chest. He wanted a lot of things, one being to kiss those lovely chocolate lips again. A powerful urge for her took hold of him. Babet wanted it too—just a matter of time before they moved to the next level.

In his more than two hundred year life on this earth, Gabriel had come across many in New Orleans that were not quite human. He'd even stumbled across a few vampires when he was in the wrong place at the wrong time, so he could identify various paranormal creatures. What he hadn't come across was another werewolf, which was strange in itself. Stranger still as he put one foot on the bright red Canal Streetcar was that he could identify the scent of another werewolf without having experienced it before.

He paused and looked around him. Humans waited impatiently for their turn to step on the trolley, and others strolled along the busy streets to other destinations. No one nearby appeared out of place. He sniffed the evening air, but the scent was gone. Perhaps it had been his imagination with all the talk about his maker earlier. That must be it. He dismissed the notion and hopped onto the vehicle that would carry him to Babet.

When Babet answered the door, she was dressed in a black lace dress Gabriel recognized to have been fashionable in the 1950s. Above her breasts, over her shoulders and sleeves, and around her mid-section, the lace was lighter in color to give the impression of being see-through, although it wasn't. The design was perfect in that it accentuated her small breasts and

cinched in her tiny waist even more. Gabriel grew rock hard and was glad he hadn't yet stepped into the house where more light shone.

"Where did you get that dress?" he asked.

She frowned down at it, covering her mid-section. "It's horrible, isn't it? I feel guilty about raiding my godmother's old clothes in the attic. I know it's old-fashioned, but it was the best I could do on short notice. I didn't want to embarrass you tonight."

Meaning she couldn't afford anything new, he guessed. She had no idea how much he wanted to see what she hid beneath the lace. "You look beautiful." She'd pinned her braids up off her neck, exposing it to be long and graceful. Gabriel stroked the smooth cocoa skin, allowing his thumb to linger where the lace left off at her cleavage.

"Gabriel," she began.

He let his hand drop. "Fine, I'll behave. Are you ready?"

"Yes, just let me get my purse." She hurried in to get it and came back right away. Gabriel took her hand while they descended the few steps. Babet glanced up and down the street. "You didn't borrow the car again?"

"No, we don't need it. It's a warm night. The trolley is fine."

She rolled her eyes. "You're strange. You know that?"

He shrugged. "I know. Is it so bad?"

"No, it's not bad at all." She blushed. "I like you so far, and both Claudia and Marie said you are okay. So, where are we going?"

"Brennan's. I made reservations. Is that fine?"

She stepped closer to him and linked her arm through his. Gabriel made sure he gave no reaction to the fact that her breast rubbed his arm and sent blood rushing to his groin area. This woman might be the death of him after all.

"Yes, that's perfect." She laughed for no obvious reason. "I think you have the same reaction on me."

He looked down into her soft brown eyes. "What reaction is that?"

"The one where you make me laugh, something I haven't done genuinely for a long time. Thank you for that."

Gabriel unhooked from her arm and then wrapped his around her waist to drive her closer. After nipping her earlobe and making her shiver, he whispered, "*Cher*, I will give you that and so much more before we're done. That's a promise."

Chapter Five

Babet glanced up from her lap where Gabriel had curled his fingers around hers. An arrow of desire had zipped between her legs from his first touch, and she found it hard to concentrate on their conversation. She realized after the trolley ambled on down the road that they'd gotten off early. "I thought you said we were going to Brennan's. That's on Royal."

He nodded. "Yes, I like to walk. I hope you don't mind. Walking allows me to think and settles my emotions."

Babet fell into step beside him. "You must do it a lot. You always seem calm to me, as if you don't get angry. I like that."

Her compliment didn't appear to please him. He looked away from her, his expression guarded. "I'm far from calm much of the time, and anger, well, everyone has their challenges."

"Is that why you stay out at your house on the bayou?"

"Yes. And because it's where I grew up. I've lived in that house from the beginning." He seemed to catch himself in something by the contrite expression, but she couldn't make heads or tails of it. "I mean since I was born."

Babet let her gaze wander past him, and she spotted a hearse with excited people peering out from the interior. She knew that a popular attraction for their city was the ghost and vampire tours conducted in hearses. What people wouldn't do for a thrill. "Have you ever been on one of the ghost tours?" she asked Gabriel as they continued walking.

He grimaced. "Ah, the culture of New Orleans demands experiencing it at least once, doesn't it? I went a few times when I was younger. We visited the cemeteries and heard all about the voodoo legends, especially the one about Marie Laveau."

When he mentioned Marie Laveau, Babet shivered. She might have grown up here herself, but all the spooky stuff scared her a little. Vampires and other dark creatures seemed a little too real, and, of course, it should with more than one haunting in Vieux Carre, or as most knew it, the French Quarter. The culture was what made New Orleans what it was.

They arrived at Brennan's and were quickly seated at one of the tables. Babet marveled at the tall, white candles gracing each table, the elaborate place settings that included several pieces of silverware on both sides of her plate, and the ornate chandelier overhead. Large paintings decorated the neutral colored walls, and not far from their position, she could look out onto a patio area where more tables were set up.

"Did you prefer to sit outside?" Gabriel asked.

“Oh no, this is great. Besides, it looks like a full house. I don’t even know how you could get a spot on such short notice.”

He shrugged and, after helping her get seated, took the chair across from her. “I know a few people.”

Babet eyed him over her menu. “For a man who stays to himself, you sure do know a lot of people.”

“I’ve been around a while.”

She waited for him to elaborate, but he let the matter drop, and so did she. Babet perused the menu. Gabriel ordered the house wine after getting her consent. Then, they both chose the Creole onion soup as appetizer. For her main course, Babet ordered the shrimp Samantha with andouille. Her mouth watered just reading the ingredients in the dish—shrimp with spicy Cajun sausage, mushrooms, garlic, green onions, white wine and spices. Served with parsley rice, the food was bound to be delicious.

After lusting over her own choice, she inquired about what Gabriel decided on.

“I tend to stick with the same meal each time I’ve come. Tournedos Taylor, prime tournedos with Bearnaise and Marchad de Vin sauce and vegetables. More important than variety, it must be flavorful.”

She grinned. “Yes, I’ve noticed your big appetite.”

His eyebrow went up. She thought he might say something dirty, but instead, he put out a hand for her menu and laid the two aside for the waiter to take. Babet slid her place setting back a little and crossed her arms on the table to rest against them. Gabriel’s intent stare dropped to her chest. She searched her mind for a subject to get his focus off her breasts. “Do you have any siblings?”

He smirked, obviously knowing her tactic and giving into it. “I did. I had a sister.”

“Had? I’m sorry. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

“It’s okay. That was a long time ago.” His eyes clouded with the memories. “Gaye was just that, full of joy. She was the exact opposite of me. While I was introverted, a shy boy, she was outgoing, but she was also sickly. So my parents had a hard time keeping her from getting into trouble or overexerting herself. In some respects, the changes later in life were a good thing for her. At first, she wasn’t a very healthy adult, but she begged my parents to allow her to throw lawn parties and get the servants to cook mounds of food.” A slow smile spread over his face. “She’d have them cooking gumbo, crawfish, and barbeque. They’d play bluegrass music, and Gaye invited the townspeople to come.”

Babet wrinkled her nose. "Townpeople? Sometimes you speak so oddly. It's like you're from, I don't know, the last century or something. It's cute."

Gabriel took on that look again, the one where he seemed to think he'd said more than he should. "I read a lot. You'll see when you visit my home that my library is extensive. I guess since I'm not here very often, I tend to take on the vernacular from my old books."

"Uh-huh." Babet lowered her lashes. "May I ask what happened to Gaye? Did the sickness come back after she'd grown stronger?"

"No, it never did." He let out a heavy sigh, and Babet thought she heard the sorrow for his loss in it. "She'd never learned to stop her recklessness. It got her killed. That's all I can share about that."

She patted his hand, and he grasped it. "I understand."

They continued talking, sharing more of their background. At least, Babet shared more of hers. After Gabriel had been so open with her regarding the painful loss of his sister, he'd clammed up and told her very little of his family. He did tell her stories from the books he'd read, and Babet found herself lost in both the fictional worlds he built with his words and the hypnotizing cadence of his voice. She tried to resist, but felt herself falling for him. The fear of visiting him at his home receded, but she wasn't going to tell him that yet. A few days spent getting to know each other would be the smart thing to do instead of being led around by her hormones.

After they'd eaten and talked until the restaurant staff tossed them out, they walked along the city streets. When Babet began to yawn, Gabriel escorted her home. At her door, she hesitated. "Do you want to come in for a little while? It's not an invitation to..."

He smiled. "I know. I have promised to behave myself."

"Why don't I believe you?"

He winked. "Because you have a dirty mind?"

Babet grabbed his arm and dragged him in, then shut the door. She led him into the front room, and Gabriel stood looking around. To distract him from the aged furniture, she asked him to take a seat and hurried into the kitchen to get him a drink. When she came back, she held out a beer. "Sorry, it's the cheap kind, but that's all I could get at the time I went shopping. It's Martin's, but he's not here anymore."

Gabriel took the beer. "He hasn't tried to contact you, has he?"

"No." She dropped into the seat beside him and kicked off her shoes before folding her legs under her. "He must have known I was serious when I threatened to turn him in. I don't know why I didn't do it before."

Amusement registered in Gabriel's eyes. "Yes, that must be why."

"You don't think so?"

"Yes, I do," he said. She didn't believe him. He played with one of her braids. "I'm glad he understands for the time being that you're mine."

Babet jerked her head away. "I don't belong to anyone—you or my brother. I thought you were different from him. I'm my own person, and there's nothing wrong with just letting me be that. Can't you just have fun with me without trying to control me?"

Gabriel tugged her close to him and kissed her forehead. "*Mwen regret sa*. I never want to offend you or make you unhappy, *cher*. I'm not trying to control you. Come, let's make up. You tell me every boring detail of the customers that come into your shop and what they buy. I'll sit quietly and listen."

Babet pulled out of his arms and punched his arm, laughing. "Boring! You're terrible. Just for that, I am going to tell you, and you can't fall asleep even if it takes all night long."

Funny enough, her suggesting they would talk all night long seemed to please him. "I'm something of an insomniac, so I won't fall asleep. I'm listening."

She did just that, talked his ears off for hours. Gabriel told her more stories he'd read and more of the dark legends of New Orleans, making Babet shiver and inch closer to him. She figured he did it on purpose for that response, but she didn't mind. Gabriel made her feel safe, something—along with the laughter—she hadn't had for a long time.

* * * *

Babet opened her eyes to focus on the clock she'd hung just inside the front room wall. If the time was right, it was twenty minutes to six in the morning. The last time she'd glanced at it while she and Gabriel continued talking was at ten after five. She must have dozed off. She yawned and put a hand beneath her to push herself up straight. A groan sounded behind her, and she stiffened. She realized she'd used Gabriel's thigh to help herself sit straighter on his lap. Biting her lip, she twisted around to look at him.

He grinned. "*Bonjour, cher*. Sleep well? Although it wasn't for very long."

"What am I doing on your lap?" She inched her way off, relieved that she hadn't grabbed anything more embarrassing than his thigh. That was bad enough along with the fact that she'd felt his hard-on under her rear.

"You looked so cute asleep, I couldn't help myself."

She examined her body for any telltale signs that he'd done more than that. Gabriel held up his hands. "Trust me, I kept my promise, but there was

no agreement about cuddling.” He went on teasing her until his stomach growled. Babet laughed.

“Are you kidding? You’re hungry again so early?”

He patted a toned belly from what she could see. The man had not an ounce of extra flesh on his hard body. She craved a taste, but kept her thoughts no lower than his empty stomach.

“Okay, well let me clean up a little, and I’ll treat you to breakfast.” She stood up.

“No, I can’t allow that. When we go out, I will pay. There will be no discussion on it.”

Babet was too tired to argue about what they would and wouldn’t discuss, but he’d mistaken what she meant by her treat. “No, I didn’t mean go out. I will make you our world famous thick, delicious hotcakes. I even have the ingredients to grate apple or pumpkin on the top, your pick.”

“Both!” Gabriel said almost salivating. “Homemade syrup?”

She shook her head, not believing his love affair with food. “Yes, of course.”

As Babet strolled toward the door, Gabriel zipped up behind her and whipped her around to face him. He backed her up to the wall next to the exit, crowding her with his wide, hard body. Babet lost the ability to think straight or breathe without panting.

“Gabriel, what are you doing?” she whispered.

“What am I doing?” He tsked, moving closer, inching a solid thigh between hers. “*Non*. Not what am *I* doing. *You* are casting a spell on me, capturing me through my stomach. *Wii?*”

She shook her head. “No, I just wanted you to enjoy yourself.” She tried to force more space between them, but it was impossible without rubbing her hot center along his body. Babet curled her fingers to keep from grabbing hold of Gabriel’s arms. What she really wanted to do was feel his hands all over her from head to toe.

Gabriel read her need as if she’d spoken aloud. He ran a hand along her leg, bringing up the delicate material of her dress. Inch by inch, he exposed her thigh. Babet went up to her toes to try to prevent herself from straddling him. Gabriel shifted. His movements gave her more room away from his leg, but that opening allowed him to slide his hand around Babet and rest it on her stomach. He needed only to go lower, and he’d find her treasure.

“You said you wouldn’t do this,” she offered as an excuse to make him back off. Something told her if she asserted herself and told him no, Gabriel would never force her, but Babet couldn’t make herself tell him.

Gabriel groaned in her ear and nibbled the curve of her jaw line. "So you're saying you don't want it?"

"I..." *Say no, say no, say no!* Her lips disobeyed her rational mind.

Gabriel continued his exploration along her jaw to her neck, and around to her throat. He slipped the tip of his tongue out and teased her skin. Babet's head went back. At least he was concentrating on kisses. She could handle kisses. The moment she thought it, he remembered his hand and began creeping lower. When his palm covered her core, Babet shivered. She took hold of his arms, half way between pushing him back and yanking him closer.

When she didn't say anything, Gabriel reached down to find her dress's hem. Babet gasped. "You're not going to..."

"You can tell me to stop." His fingers grazed her panties.

She should. They were moving too fast, but he'd said they'd be together one month. Not that she had to give herself to him within those thirty days. Her mind reeled with thoughts of giving in and whether she'd regret it if she didn't. All the while she wrestled, Gabriel waited. One touch couldn't hurt anything.

A hand on his wrist, she still hesitated. She planted a light kiss on his jaw and moved up to his lips to lay one there. Gabriel matched the gentleness of her kiss with feathery pressure from his. He pushed her panties aside and grazed her nubbin. Babet quaked, but she didn't shove his hand away. Encouraged, Gabriel delved deeper, gliding his fingers over her slick folds and pushing them aside. A shuddering breath rocked Babet. When he pierced her center, she was back on her toes, arching into his touch.

His fingers eased inside her, and a moan parted her lips before she knew it was coming. She dropped her head on his chest. Gabriel stopped his movements.

"You're not a virgin, are you?" he asked.

"No." But her experience was limited. Reminding her of that fact cooled her down somewhat. She pushed his hand away and straightened her panties and dress. "It's been a long night. Maybe we should meet again later."

The disappointment almost crushed her. Gabriel lifted her chin. "It's fine. Get some sleep. I'll pick you up at two." She was about to protest when he dug out his wallet, but he wasn't about to listen this time. He peeled off several bills, grabbed her wrist, and put them in her hand. "I'll borrow Devereaux's car, and we can buy groceries and pay whatever you need to take care of."

"Gabriel," she began.

"No arguments, Babet. You agreed to a month, didn't you?"

She frowned. "Fine, but this isn't easy. I'm used to taking care of myself."

"And you'll do so again when this is over," he assured her. Only his words were not encouraging in the least. When this was over, what would she be—a woman with a broken heart? He kissed her a few more times and then walked out the door. Babet sank onto a chair with all the strength suddenly leaving her body. She hadn't gotten to make him hotcakes, but she would tomorrow morning. He deserved a treat in return for all he'd already done for her. Glancing down at the money in her hand—two hundred dollars—she sighed. Hopefully, when this was over, she'd still respect herself.

Chapter Six

"A beautiful woman like you should never be left alone," a male voice said behind her.

Babet jumped and turned around. She'd been checking out some shoes, the last stop on her and Gabriel's day of shopping. He'd finally convinced her to do it after they had done everything else over the last few days. Soon she would have to admit that she trusted him and spend time at his house. Gabriel might always be pleasant with her, but the strain of spending a lot of time in the city was getting to him. The tension around his eyes and mouth, not to mention between his shoulders, was obvious. Besides, she couldn't deny that spending time with him was the most fun she'd had in her life. To top it off, she hadn't seen Martin since that night she told him off.

"Excuse me?" she said to the man in front of her. He wasn't handsome in the least. In fact, a scar over one eye looked like it was the cause of just half of that eyebrow growing in. And one of his nostrils had healed with a bit of it missing. She wondered if he'd had a run in with an animal. Either way, he was not attractive, and the beady eyes put her off. Men like him were always bold in trying to pick up women, she had always thought.

He reached around her, minimizing the space between them, and picked up a shoe. "May I suggest this one? It would look amazing on you."

The shoe he held up was a Fergalicious. The black straps over the entire foot were built like a studded cage with the toe open, and the heel looked to be about four and a half inches. Babet would break her ankle to even try.

"Oh, you work here?" she said in relief. "Thanks, they're cute, but I'd break my ankle in those. I'm looking for something lower."

She waited for the man to say something more, but he took on an arrested look and turned away. Babet stared at him. Did he even work in the store? Without excusing himself, he walked off and disappeared through the door leading toward the back of the store. Another employee called out to the man and followed. Babet stood there, blinking. She couldn't believe the whole incident had happened. Men didn't accost her in public. They seemed barely to notice her existence. Sure, some had begun to take notice since she made an effort to look like something now that she was basically dating Gabriel, but the attention was still weird and would take getting used to.

Gabriel strolled up moments later. "Sorry, that call took longer than I expected. It's getting crowded in here. Have you found something you like yet?"

She noted the irritation in his eyes and put the high heeled shoe down to lean up and kiss his lips. "I would like to come to your house this weekend."

His eyes widened, and then relief and joy vied for dominance in his expression. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Can you take a couple more days?"

He grinned, pulling her into his strong embrace. "I can with that reward coming."

* * * *

Babet's decision to come to Gabriel's house couldn't have come soon enough for him. Not only was the number of people getting to him, he was still sensing another werewolf every now and then. At the store where she'd been shopping, his scent had been strong. Gabriel had questioned Babet the best he could without raising her suspicions, but she'd just admitted that a man had tried to pick her up. Gabriel vowed to stay close to her from now on. He'd left her side during his business call only because he knew she was intimidated by the amount of money he'd spent on her. The bills were nothing to him, but Babet was not used to luxury. He would not do anything to run her off.

Gabriel checked his calendar. Two weeks until the next full moon. That was the time he was at his strongest and at his weakest. During the full moon, he could change and hunt down the other werewolf. Unfortunately, his mind would be filled with one thought alone—kill. He would lock himself away before that happened in the spot he'd been using for many years, the old slave quarters behind his house. Years ago, he'd redone of the rooms to be strong enough to hold him in werewolf form.

The single consolation he had was that the other werewolf, too, would need to lock himself away or risk exposure. Since he hadn't been on the rampage all this time, Gabriel guessed he was either not from New Orleans or he, too, found sanctuary during the full moon and had spent all of his time in another area.

What about Babet? Gabriel watched her as she held up clothing for him to help her choose what to buy. He needed to be sure she was protected when he couldn't be with her. Searching his mind, he tried to come up with someone who could watch her while he was incapacitated, someone who was powerful enough to combat a werewolf if need be, but not make Babet his next victim. When had this become more complicated than he planned? From the first time he'd seen her, he wanted her. He'd thought for companionship, in time, for sex, but now he wasn't so sure. In one week, he didn't like the thought of this ending after thirty days.

At last, Babet had everything she wanted, and they headed to the checkout. On the way, with Babet ahead of him, Gabriel spotted wracks of sexy lingerie and panties he'd love to see her in. He eyed her hips and rear, guessing her size. Knowing what he liked, he grabbed a few pieces without hesitation and continued to the counter. When he set the pieces on top of her pile, her brown eyes widened. Although he couldn't see a blush in her smooth chocolate skin, he knew he'd embarrassed her.

He took her fingers to his lips and kissed them. The tremor he felt made him want to take her in his arms, but he resisted. There'd be time enough for that later. Babet was unlike any other woman he'd ever met. She was strong, yet vulnerable, innocent like many of the respectable ladies he'd come across in the nineteenth century, and yet she was a modern woman. What was he going to do with her?

"I don't wear that stuff," she whispered. "It rides up my butt, which is annoying."

He laughed. "Come on," he coaxed. "Just when you're with me."

"I'm always with you," she complained. "You want me yanking on my panties all day?"

"I'll yank on them for you."

She smirked and rolled her eyes. At least he'd teased her out of being embarrassed.

"How about every now and then, maybe once or twice a week over the next two?" she offered.

The saleswoman interjected with a chuckle. "I can't believe you are negotiating how much you wear sexy panties." She winked at Babet. "Whatever he wants, I would give it to him 'cause it's for sure, he moe betta than the one I left at home who couldn't afford to bring me shopping."

Gabriel thanked her for her support of his cause. He held up four fingers. "Four times a week, and this as often as I'd like." The sheer teddy made him ready to jump her right there. The fact that they were discussing this indicated that they were both ready to take the relationship to the next level. Babet didn't seem to question whether they would make love. It was a foregone conclusion, and he couldn't wait to get his hands on her. How he'd ever thought her plain, he didn't know. Babet's sweet beauty was subtle. He craved her like no other woman.

"Fine," she said. "You deserve it."

He waited until he'd paid and they were out in the car before he addressed her words. "Babet."

"Yes?" She was distracted, searching through one of the bags she hadn't let him place in the back seat.

“Look at me.”

Soft brown eyes focused on him, and he felt himself melting, ready to give in to whatever she wanted, to shower her with gifts. He shook himself. He’d always been generous with the women who shared his bed, even if it was for a night or two. Babet was more than that, and he didn’t want her to feel like he’d bought her body.

“What you said,” he began, and chose his words with care. “I don’t want you to feel like you owe me anything because of all I’ve spent on you.”

“I don’t feel that way—”

“Listen to me, *cher*.” He lifted her chin and stared into her eyes. “You can walk away anytime. Everything is yours. All the gifts, the clothes, the money, and the bills I’ve paid are done. You do not owe me your body. Do you understand?”

“I know that! Trust me, you wouldn’t lay one finger on me if I didn’t want it.”

He refocused on the road ahead and started the car. “So, you do want it?”

She took a long time to answer, until his patience coiled tight about to snap. “Yes.”

They headed back to her house and while Gabriel unpacked the bags from the car, Babet, with only the one in her hand, bounded up the steps to the door. He chuckled. Where had the little mouse gone in the last week? She sashayed about with confidence at times, fully aware of what she did to him. Every now and then when he pushed her beyond her comfort level as he’d done with the lingerie, she retreated to her former self. However, Gabriel had every intention of keeping her the way she was right now, vibrating with energy and luring him to her like the strongest drug. With more time, he had no doubt that Babet would wrap him around her little finger. But was that what he wanted? The beast in him was unpredictable. Anything could set it off, and hurting her was more than a possibility. It might be inevitable.

Babet’s shriek of fear brought him to her side in seconds. Without knowing what she looked at inside the house, he whipped her around behind him, and a growl rumbled up from his chest.

The house was in shambles, sofa cushions upended and shredded, papers tossed about, and the contents of drawers strewn on the floor. Gabriel sniffed the air and caught no lingering scent of the werewolf or anyone else present at the moment. Still, to be cautious, he directed Babet outside. “Lock yourself inside the car while I search the house.”

She was about to protest, but he didn’t give her the chance. He returned inside and searched the house from top to bottom. The familiar scent was in

each room, one that he was sure he'd never picked up inside Babet's house. The redhead. He tried to recall her name. Oh yes, Rose. Gabriel guessed that Martin's money had gotten low, and he'd sent Rose to search Babet's house for any funds she might have hidden. Babet had admitted a couple days ago that, whenever she had hidden any, Martin always found it, no matter how clever she thought the hiding place was. Martin must have told Rose to be thorough and make it look like a random break-in. Gabriel located the smashed window at the back of the house.

Of course, he couldn't tell Babet he knew who'd broken in. He could report the crime at the police station and arrange an anonymous tip or two to solve the case. The fact that Martin hadn't come himself showed he was still intimidated by Gabriel's threat. After Gabriel got Babet settled, he'd deal with her brother.

Gabriel returned to the front of the house where he'd left Babet. Instead of remaining inside the car like he'd instructed her, she stood on the sidewalk. Annoyed at her disobedience but softened by the way she tried to hide her fear, Gabriel pulled her into his arms and held her tight. "Don't worry, *cher*. I will find out who has done this. In the meantime, our plans must be moved up. Tonight we will go to my house."

She stood her ground. "I'm not going to be run out of my house," she insisted. "I can just—"

"No," he said simply.

"Gabriel, be reasonable."

He took her hand and led her to the rear of the house where glass littered the floor. She crossed her arms over her chest and shivered, staring at it. He kissed her temple. "Can you honestly tell me you feel safe right now?"

"I..."

"We'll report it to the police. I'll get someone to come in and get the house back in order. Meanwhile, you and I will get out of the city for a while. We intended to in the first place. You need a break as well as I do. And frankly, I need to get some work done, which I cannot do because vital paperwork I need is back at my house." He lifted her chin and played a finger across her soft mouth. Paperwork was the last thing on his mind. "Will you have mercy on me?"

"Fine," she grumbled, "but not because I'm afraid."

"*Non*, of course not."

Since Babet had purchased plenty of clothes, she needed to pack very little in addition for the trip. Gabriel found himself anticipating being alone with her. While she packed, he made several phone calls, one to the caretaker

that had been with him for years. "Lawrence, I need a pickup in an hour and a half. Is the house stocked with sufficient food for two?"

"Yes, sir. I believe what we have is sufficient. Should you get here and need more, I will make another run." His man hesitated and then said what was on his mind. "Sir, you never bring anyone out here. Should I ready a particular room for your guest, and are there other requirements?"

Gabriel glanced across the room to where Babet worked. He followed the line of her rear, a gentle curve. Desire flamed to life inside him as he envisioned himself pushing into her from behind. His shaft tented in his pants, and Babet turned to him in time to see it. Her eyes widened, and she looked away quickly. Gabriel chuckled.

"No, we won't need another room. Babet will share my bed."

Babet made a noise of alarm. "Who are you saying that to?"

Gabriel laughed again, but didn't explain until his conversation was over. "That was the caretaker I employ at the house. He is the only person I have living there with me. I take care of most of my own needs, but Lawrence is a big help. He'll make sure the house is clean and we have food enough until we return. That's in two weeks. Can you handle the isolation and quiet?"

She shrugged. "I guess I won't know until I get there. If I go stir crazy, I expect you to find a way to entertain me."

He crossed the room to stand behind her when she'd gone back to packing. Allowing his erection to brush her rear, he took hold of her hips and pushed forward. She gasped and fell over the bed. Gabriel lifted a knee to brace himself. He watched how she quivered when he ran a hand up her thigh, pulling her dress up to reveal her panties. He couldn't wait to get her in the thong, or rather, out of it. "I can think of one or two ways to entertain you right now," he said.

"You mean one way. Sex."

"Mm, I like the sass you've developed, *cher*. Tease me some more," he demanded.

She wriggled around and pushed him back before straightening her clothes. "If you don't stop, we won't get out of here. I-I think you're right. I need some time away."

Ashamed that he'd forgotten what had just happened and how afraid she was, Gabriel nodded and took her bag from the bed. "I apologize. Let's go. We'll take Devereaux's car back to him, and then he will drive us to the pier where Lawrence will pick us up."

"Do we have enough time to stop by my shop? I want to check in with Pierre and make sure everything is okay without me. He can get a little

flustered when business picks up, and who knows if the temp he got is working out.”

Gabriel admired how she could still think of others at a time when she needed to regroup and rest. “Yes, that’s fine. We’ll go now.”

They arrived at Heart of N’awlins Novelties shop within twenty minutes, and walked in. The first detail Gabriel noticed was that the place looked to be no larger than fifteen by fifteen feet, making him feel a bit closed in, and the second was the lingering scent of the other werewolf. Gabriel promised himself he’d call a friend to come to New Orleans the minute they arrived at his house.

A squat, red-faced man came running toward Babet with open arms the second she crossed the threshold. “*Soc au’ lait!* Babet, what are you doing here? You’re on leave, remember? I am so glad you’re here. I’m going crazy without you.”

Babet suffered his hug, but Gabriel stomped over and plucked her from the idiot’s arms. “Keep your hands to yourself,” he demanded.

Several patrons turned to stare, and the proprietor reddened even more. He clasped his hands together, blinking up at Gabriel. “*Soc au’ lait!* So manly. Where did you find him, Babet? I want one.”

Babet smacked the man’s hand in a playful gesture. “Pierre, behave yourself. This is my...boyfriend, Gabriel. Gabriel, this is my boss, Pierre.”

A smile Gabriel suspected was Pierre’s most charming one spread over Pierre’s face, and he put out a hand to Gabriel. Ignoring the gesture, Gabriel told Babet, “We don’t have much time.”

She nodded. “Okay. Pierre, I’m going out of town for a while. Can you handle things without me a little longer? Is the assistant working out?”

Pierre hooked a thumb over his shoulder and shoved his lower lip out. “See for yourself. The stupid girl is so clumsy. Her application said she’s eighteen, but I don’t believe it, and she’s breaking up all my delicate things.”

Gabriel was about to ask him if he meant the cheapest junk, but Babet cut him off with a look. “I’ll call Marie and ask if she can lend you one of her assistants during the day hours when you’re busier. Her shop gets more customers at night. Tell her whatever it costs her, I’ll make up for it when I get back.”

“*Soc au’ lait!*” Pierre declared for the millionth time, grating on Gabriel’s raw nerves. “You are the best friend and employee in the world, Babet. Don’t leave me for this beast.” Pierre glared at Gabriel. Gabriel raised an eyebrow, and the man cowered. He reached to hug Babet again, but seemed to recall Gabriel’s warning just in time to draw back.

Remembering the werewolf, Gabriel asked, “Has there been anyone in particular looking for Babet?”

The man’s eyes widened. “Why would you ask that?”

“Has there?” Gabriel didn’t feel the need to explain himself.

“N-No,” Pierre said. Gabriel knew he was lying. Why, he couldn’t guess.

Gabriel scanned the small shop a second time. Wherever the wolf was, he wasn’t nearby. He took Babet’s arm and tugged her toward him. “We’re going.”

They left the shop in a hurry with Gabriel shuffling Babet protesting at his side. He got her tucked inside the car, and he searched the area around them. Night was falling on New Orleans, when all kinds of creatures—human and otherwise—lurked for prey. He and Babet were already late meeting Lawrence. First, he would get her settled on his property, and then he would get some questions answered.

He went around the car and jumped behind the wheel. The tense atmosphere in the car almost hit him in the face before he could turn the engine over and pull away from the curb. Babet said nothing.

After a few moments driving toward the fourth ward, he sighed. “What is it?”

“You were grouchy and mean back there,” Babet complained. “I’ve never seen you anything but patient and kind, but you showed me a whole other side just now. I don’t like it, and I don’t appreciate you treating my boss and friend the way you did.”

Gabriel pressed his lips together, attempting to gain control of his temper. Babet appeared to be oblivious to it.

“Well? Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“You didn’t ask a question.”

She balled her hands into fists like she wanted to swing at him. He was glad she restrained herself. “Why did you act like that?”

“What did I tell you about me when we first met?”

She shrieked in frustration. “You are so not going to answer me with another question!”

He repeated it with more insistence, and Babet grumbled. As he expected, she gave into him long before he did with her. His anger never left him reasonable.

“You said you’re a recluse.” She tapped her lip, trying to recall. “You said you get grumpy when you’re around a lot of people. So what? Adjust. From what I’ve seen, you do fine. I saw no problem at the dinner party at Claudia’s. You even handled Martin without having your last nerve plucked. So what, is

it Pierre? He's off the wall a little, but I don't see why you're so bent out of shape."

"Of course you don't, and you wouldn't." He bit his tongue, seeing the hurt in her eyes. How could he explain about the werewolf, about the break-in? Those two incidents, and with the coming night, his teeth were set on edge. The beast inside rattled with impatience for the full moon, the time when it had the power to be unleashed. The results of high tension situations always put him in a bad mood, even if it wasn't close to the full moon, and Pierre shouting stupid phrases that had no real necessity, along with touching Babet, had pushed him beyond his endurance. None of this was something he could share with Babet.

"Just let the matter drop for now, Babet. Suffice it to say, I am eager to get home."

She stared at him for a long time, a myriad of questions in her eyes. Gabriel focused on the road ahead and on decisions he would have to make. This incident, if nothing else, made it crystal clear that no matter how much he enjoyed Babet, two more weeks was all they had. After that, he would send her far away from him where she would be safe. Then, he would return to his home and live who knew how many more centuries all alone.

Chapter Seven

As they motored down the center of the river, Babet slapped at mosquitoes and watched birds flap all together up into the air. Occasionally, she studied the water's edge to see if she could spot a gator, but so far, she hadn't seen one. Lawrence, the thin older man who'd picked them up at the pier, told her that they'd see plenty farther upriver before they arrived at Gabriel's house.

She glanced over her shoulder at her soon-to-be lover. He had been silent since beginning their trip along the bayou. Guessing that he was still in a bad mood, Babet hadn't bothered him. Her mood wasn't that great either after their argument. So what, he didn't like crowds or people. She couldn't excuse the attitude and wondered if going to his house was a mistake. Not that she didn't trust him at this point. She didn't believe he would hurt her or that he was a crazed psycho. It was just that she wondered if she could make him happy.

That was it. Deep in Gabriel's eyes, Babet saw sadness, like he felt he had no hope in life. Of course, that was absurd given the man had more money than anyone she knew. She bet he'd never experienced a night when he had to go to bed hungry because there was no food in the house and no money to go out and buy any. Those experiences for her had been too many to number. The last week of eating with Gabriel was the most she'd eaten in months, and she was pretty sure she'd packed on a good ten pounds in the process.

By the time they reached a different pier from the one where they'd started, Babet estimated that they'd ridden seven miles or so along the bayou. The moon was visible in the sky, but the light of day hadn't been extinguished. A late model car waited beside a dirt road not far from the water's edge. Gabriel led her to it while Lawrence collected her bags.

Another couple of miles deep into the trees led to Babet's first glimpse of Gabriel's estate. Lawrence turned off the dirt road onto a paved one that was lined from beginning to end with massive oak trees, their boughs extending over the road as if to protect it from the sky. The trees with their thick clouds of leaves blocked out the light, giving a creepy feel. Babet inched a little closer to Gabriel and rested her hand on his thigh. His muscles tensed under her touch. She expected him to pull away, but he covered her hand with his. He said nothing.

The narrow lane opened to a wider area with much more light. The trees still reached for each other like fingers above, but they were set back to allow two strips of lawn on both sides of the street. The waning day came through,

and the ominous feeling Babet had experienced a minute before lifted. That's when she saw the house.

Three stories, the first two punctuated by thick, white columns, the house spread wide before her. On the veranda of the first floor sat two antique styled rocking chairs like an elderly couple had just risen from them to go inside the house. Babet caught her breath at the beauty. One person lived here in this mansion? No wonder Gabriel seemed lonely, and yet, he appeared to prefer it that way. Babet knew she'd miss the noise and surroundings of her much loved city.

Lawrence stopped the car in front of the house, and Gabriel stepped out of the car, then turned to help her out. They ascended the stairs to the porch and entered the house. Babet drew in a sharp breath for a second time. The lobby ceiling was frescoed with an oval inset that depicted a heavenly scene of angels watching over men. She shivered to find at the edges of the beautiful picture was a darkness, as if something evil lurked just out of sight.

"Are all the ceilings like this?" she asked.

"You don't like it?"

"It's elaborate," she admitted and then thought she might be insulting him. "Your house is amazing. I can't imagine living out here all alone. Don't you get lonely for company?"

He shrugged. "I have Lawrence most of the time, and when I do require more companionship, I go into the city, which is what I was doing when I met you."

She wondered what kind of companionship he was referring to, but pushed the thought out of her head. Gabriel had lots of acquaintances by his own admission, so there was no reason for her to suspect he shopped for women when he left his home. He'd led her to believe their agreement was unique.

"Let me show you our room," he offered.

Babet hung back. "Can't I have my own room? I mean, I know that we'll have sex. I'm not denying I want that, too." Embarrassed, she turned toward the stairs so he couldn't look in her face.

Gabriel came up behind her and turned her to face him before wrapping his arms around her. "First, we will be making love, not simply having sex. Second, I want you close where I can reach for you whenever want. As long as you're willing to share my bed, that's how I prefer it to be." He lifted her chin and dropped a kiss on her lips. "You did agree to my terms, did you not, *cher*?"

She sighed. "Okay, fine. What about if we don't mesh? You know, if...ah...it's not good."

Gabriel looked at her like she'd grown a second head, like he hadn't once considered that making love between them wouldn't satisfy them both. To have that level of confidence boggled her mind.

"Trust me, I will please you. I will not stop until I make you addicted to my touch and you wake up in the middle of the night looking for me to satisfy your need."

"Full of ourselves, aren't we?" Babet's words might have been flip, but her voice shook a little at the picture Gabriel drew. All too soon, they'd bare everything in his bed, and nothing would stand between them. She was scared about how much Gabriel would enjoy her. He'd explained he could please her as if that was what she was worried about. Maybe he felt strong that his needs could be met without issue.

Rather than stand there all night speculating, she pulled herself from Gabriel's embrace and started up the steps. "This way, right?"

He nodded and followed. Babet clutched the smooth banister in a bear grip, knowing where Gabriel's eyes were directed. At the doorway to his room, she paused. Gabriel's hands came down on her shoulders and he nibbled at her neck. She moaned and tilted her head to the side.

"Are you exhausted from the trip here?" he asked.

"It wasn't that far."

"It's been a long day." He sounded like he was giving her excuses to let her go to bed alone. Babet considered taking one and calling it a night, even though she saw through the bedroom's windows that the night had at last taken over. Fear permeated her thinking, but she didn't want Gabriel to back off. They both knew why they were here, and Babet wasn't in the habit of lying to herself. She desired Gabriel like crazy.

"Gabriel," she whispered.

He trailed kisses down over her shoulder and braced his hands beneath her breasts. Her nipples pebbled with his fingertips so close. She already ached for his touch.

"Yes?" he answered.

"Make love to me. Right now."

His caresses stopped, and he lifted his head. "Are you sure?"

She swallowed. "Yes, I'm sure. Right now. I want you."

Gabriel didn't have to be asked twice. He turned her in his arms and carried her into the bedroom before kicking the door closed. When he laid her on a huge, king-size bed and followed her down, Babet reached for his shirt buttons with trembling hands. He stilled her movements. "Let me."

After ripping from his clothing, he helped her out of hers. Babet stared at his bare chest, too nervous to look anywhere else. He took her hands and

placed them on his hot skin. As she allowed her fingers to explore, to caress his flat nipples, she was encouraged by his quickened breath. Babet pinched one of his nipples between her thumb and forefinger while leaning in to lick the other. Gabriel's growl was animalistic. Babet teased him more with kisses, each one lower and lower.

"Babet," he moaned. "That will lead you to trouble."

"I'm going just where I want." She glanced up at him. "I've been denied what I want a long time. Are you going to deny me, Gabriel?"

He shuddered. "Never, *cher*. Take all you need."

She couldn't believe how bold she was behaving, but hell, she had spoken the truth. Martin pushed and pushed until she had to give up most of what was hers, everything that had been good. He'd bullied her until she hadn't been able to hold on to the few men that had come into her life. No longer. Gabriel would be with her for two more weeks. She was bound and determined to take all he was offering.

Pushing him onto his back, she straddled him and wrapped a hand around his shaft. Her desire pulsed higher. Gabriel had already grown more excited. Precome beaded at his shaft's head, and she swiped up some to taste. Gabriel swore, but apologized like the gentleman he was. Babet grinned. She slid down his body and lowered her mouth to his erection. The thick head could scarcely fit past her lips, but she took in as much as she could.

Gabriel tucked an arm behind his head and stroked her braids with the other. He ran the back of his hand down her cheek and then cupped her chin while she swallowed him. "Easy, *cher*. Don't hurt yourself. You please me so well. I feel like I'm going to burst already. Your mouth is incredible."

Babet pulled back and ran her tongue around his thick head. She teased the tip between her lips and sucked hard. Gabriel's hips rose, and he shouted. He gripped her shoulders to drive her back until she had to release him.

"Too much. I'll never last." He pulled her up his body and rolled until he landed on top and she lay flat on her back. "Let's turn the tables, shall we?" An eyebrow flicked toward his hair line. Babet bit her lip.

Gabriel splayed a hand over her chest while Babet's heart slammed against her ribcage in response. His pinky finger plucked at her nipple. She closed her eyes.

"Uh-uh," Gabriel admonished. "Watch what I do to you. I want you to see the beautiful contrast our skin makes. He caressed the beginning swell of her breast and then licked it. "Mm, you do not taste like chocolate, but oh so sweet. Tell me, *cher*, shall I eat all of you?"

Tremors rippled over her skin, but she didn't answer at first. He hovered above her nipple, gave it a swipe of his tongue, and then moved lower to her

heat. Every muscle contracted so that Babet held her legs tightly closed. Gabriel tsked, spreading them to give himself a better view.

“You haven’t answered me, Babet. *Wi?*”

She nodded. “*Wi.*”

“*Kote?*”

She closed her eyes and pointed to her breasts and then lower. Gabriel chuckled, making her feel even more nervous. His breath warmed her nipple before his tongue made impact. She couldn’t help the cry that escaped her lips. Gabriel squeezed her small mounds and sucked at her nipples, allowing each to pop from his lips only to go after them again. Babet squirmed under his ministrations, her core becoming more and more drenched. She tried to close her legs, but he held them apart with a firm hand against her heat. The tips of his fingers penetrated her, but he didn’t allow them to sink far. Babet was going to explode any second. She did all she could not to beg him to take her now.

When he’d finished driving her insane teasing her nipples, he moved down her body to her belly. Small kisses led the way until he circled around her center and ran his tongue along her inner thigh. Gabriel nudged her leg higher and nipped at her skin.

She gasped. “Gabriel.”

“Hmm?”

He didn’t raise his head, but instead began dipping fingers into her cream. Babet cried out when he replaced his fingers with his mouth and licked with earnest. She writhed, curling her nails into his shoulder. He ate her like he felt no pain, running his mouth from the bottom of her entrance up to the swollen nub. When his lips closed over that aching bud, she screamed his name and came hard. Her hips gyrated on their own, pumping his face while she pleaded for more.

Gabriel lathed her, greedily eating up every drop her body released. He pushed her legs up over his shoulders to delve deeper. Her bud growing sensitive, Babet tried to get away, but he held her in place. He leaned back and blew on the wet surface. Babet’s core muscles clenched. She let go of Gabriel’s shoulders to tug at the back of his head. Driving him forward, she arched closer to his mouth. He threaded fingers up her channel and sucked her nubbin. She came a second time, wave after wave of bliss streaking throughout her being. Moments passed with her whimpering, and then he rose up on his haunches.

He took his shaft in hand and glided a fist over the full length. “Can you take this, Babet?”

"Yes, without question," she told him, and ran a hand across her belly to the patch of hair between her legs, and lower. She tested the sensitivity of her bud with her fingers while watching Gabriel. His eyes widened. She knew the experience of bringing her to two orgasms had sent him to the edge of his control. "I want you to come."

Eyes almost glowing with his desire, he leaned over her, his intent gaze holding her captive if not his hands. "Tell me if it's too much."

"It won't be."

Babet choked off a cry of pain when Gabriel entered her. Her last encounter with a man had been brief and years ago. Gabriel drew back, but she wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him in place. He settled his hips slowly, allowing inch by inch to ease into her. When he'd buried himself to the hilt, he began to pump. Babet's eyelids drifted closed. She wanted to raise her knees, but the ache froze her in place. Gabriel took hold of her ankles and lifted them with gentle hands.

"I'm going to take my time, *cher*. I don't want to hurt you."

The pain all at once turned to intense pleasure, the tight fit letting up since her muscles relaxed. Babet raised her hips to meet Gabriel's thrusts. He picked up the pace. Their bodies flowed together in harmony and separated before coming together again. Gabriel drove faster. Babet put her hands under her knees to yank her legs higher. His balls slapped her rear. She didn't want it to ever end.

"It's so good. Harder, please," she begged.

He gave her what she wanted until he pounded his shaft deep inside of her. A third climax started to build. Babet moaned. And then she felt Gabriel jerk before he slammed forward one last time. Her explosion broke forth right as he shouted his release. Together, they clung to one another, kissing in desperation through each incredible wave.

Babet fell back on the bed, panting. When she was calmer, she rolled to the edge of the bed and stood to look around. "The bathroom?" she asked Gabriel who still lay sprawled where he'd dropped.

He opened his eyes a slit, but he didn't speak. Babet spun to face the bed and leaned over him. "Are you okay? Was I too much for you?" she kidded, but something about him had changed. Maybe it was that his eyes were darker and wilder. An air of danger hovered around him, putting in her mind the impression he'd given when they first met. Babet's heartbeat, which had calmed, kicked up again. She straightened and took a step back. "Gabriel?"

Not saying a word, he rose and stalked toward her as she backpedaled away from him. She met with a dresser behind her and inched along its length until she could get around it. All the while, she kept her frightened

gaze on him. Babet hit a wall and couldn't go farther. Gabriel walked up on her and put a hand flat on the wall at each side of her head.

He leaned down and breathed deep along her neck. She shivered. "You have no idea," he growled, sounding angry again as he had earlier. He licked the tender skin at the base of her neck and then nipped it. Hands shaking, Babet reached out to his chest to push him back. Gabriel was a steel barrier, unmoving. And when he crowded closer, his shaft pushed at her belly. The man was already solid for the second time.

"I-I don't know what you mean," she said as a way to distract him from whatever was bugging him. "I don't know what I've done to tick you off."

He flipped her around and shoved her to the wall. Not hard so as to hurt her, but rougher than normal. Babet guessed at that moment, Gabriel was fighting for control. Had she made a mistake in coming here? Would he abuse her?

"Your scent is driving me insane," he whispered in her ear. "Your curves. These breasts..." He kneaded them, pinching the nipples until she gasped. He dropped to his knees and licked at her rounded cheek. Babet went to her tiptoes and arched her back. Her lips parted and eyes closed. When his hands came around from her rear to her sex, she thought she would collapse.

Gabriel was no longer interested in taking it slow or even knowing if what he did pleased her. Like a hungry animal, he took her, positioning himself between her legs to lap up the juices flowing from her. When he'd had his fill, he stood and moved behind her again and lifted her in his strong arms. Two fingers parted her folds, and then his massive staff drove deep inside her moist center.

Babet braced herself on the wall while Gabriel grunted with each thrust into her. He held her against his body with one hand and squeezed her breast with the other. Babet cried out, wanting him to stop, but wanting him to continue. His strokes were cruel, yet so good. They sapped her of strength, and all she could do was hang on until another orgasm crashed through her body. Over and over, Gabriel repeated the process until Babet collapsed in his arms. Only then did his drive cease and he went back to the man she knew.

He picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. While she lay in his arms, he ran water in an oversized tub and poured in bath salts. After testing the temperature, he lowered them both into the warm water. Babet sat silent in his hold while he washed her body and then his. After they had soaked away some of the soreness, Gabriel stood Babet on the side of the tub and towed her dry. She didn't meet his gaze at first, but then realized he wasn't attempting to meet hers either.

Gabriel led her back to his bed and tucked her in. After that, he dressed and left the room. Not until some time in the early morning did Babet fall asleep, but Gabriel hadn't returned. She slept alone all night and woke only when late morning sunshine warmed her face.

Chapter Eight

Gabriel couldn't maintain a change before the full moon, but that didn't mean the beast in his soul had no influence over him. Making love to Babet last night was a prime example. Ashamed at how he'd treated her, he'd closeted himself in his study all night and hadn't put in an appearance yet to see if she was okay. He should be shot for how cruel he'd been with her, taking her beautiful body without a care for anything except the satisfaction of his own lust. She must hate him, would probably beg to go home the moment she saw him.

Deciding he couldn't squirrel away forever, he stood up and corked the half empty bottle of scotch he'd cracked open. The fact that he didn't suffer from hangovers was the single positive he could think of at the moment of being a werewolf. He opened his office door and listened for movement. His heightened sense of hearing let him pick up the sounds of Lawrence at the side of the house washing the car. Deeper in the recesses of his home, Babet tinkered in the kitchen. He didn't have the ability of a vampire to pick up on what she was thinking or how she was feeling. Fear was all he could sense because it gave off a certain smell.

He chose to take a quick shower before facing Babet, and he headed to his room. The moment he opened the door, memories washed over him, of the sensations he'd felt the night before—Babet's cries of ecstasy, the way her hot sex felt wrapped around him, and the pleasure of taking her countless times.

Damn it! He'd not given her a chance to protest. Sure, she'd come each time with him, but what if she hadn't? What if he hurt her or left bruises on her sweet, brown skin? He wouldn't forgive himself.

Now in a hurry to see her, he shed his clothing and jumped in the shower. Afterward, he dressed with haste and took the back stairs to the first floor where the kitchen was situated. Before he turned into room, the scent of hotcakes and pumpkin reached him. His empty stomach stirred. She couldn't possibly be cooking for him after what he had done.

Gabriel rounded the corner and came to a stop. Babet wore a simple lilac sundress, and she'd found an apron somewhere. Her feet were bare, and she extended up on her tiptoes to reach a high shelf for plates. He considered going over to give her a hand, but didn't want to remind her of how he'd treated her last night.

"Bonjou," he said and walked in to take a chair at the table.

She glanced at him with wide, innocent eyes. Shame washed over him for the millionth time. "Good morning."

Her voice was low and shy. He tried to decipher whether she was down, but couldn't tell.

"About last night," he blurted out. "You should know—"

"I've made you the hotcakes I promised. I have some to top with apple and some with pumpkin. I packed a jar of my favorite homemade syrup. You'll love it." She chattered on, not giving him a chance to get a word in.

Gabriel tried a second time, but she'd retrieved the plates at last and slapped one down in front of him filled with hotcakes. His stomach cramped in anticipation. After breakfast, he told himself and dug in. Three plates later, Gabriel rested his silverware on the table and wiped his mouth with a napkin. He stood up and walked around the table to Babet. Without giving her a chance to interrupt him, he plucked her up from her seat and pulled her into his arms. After burying her face into his shoulder, he stroked her braids.

"I'm sorry. I had no right to treat you the way I did." He paused, collecting his thoughts. "It might be best if I take you back to the city. I can put you up in the apartment I own there until the mess at your house is straightened out."

She struggled in his arms and lifted her head. Tears glistened on her lashes, but she brushed them away. "I knew it was iffy whether I could please you. I haven't had a lot of experience, and what I did have wasn't all that great." To his surprise, she grinned and pressed in closer, wriggling her hips until he grew hard. "We can try again, and you'll tell me what feels good."

Gabriel blinked. "You do know I was cruel to you last night, Babet? I was not gentle in the least, and I took from you without much concern if you enjoyed yourself."

"I did enjoy myself. Were you even there? I came like a million times." She glanced away. "Yes, you were rough. It hurt a little, but it's been a while. I admit, I was scared at first, but then it was hot." If she were lighter-skinned, he knew she would have been red right then.

He drew her close and kissed her head. "I don't deserve you. I know you must be sore." He considered how to explain his sexual challenges without revealing his secret. "I have a huge sexual appetite, not unlike the one for food. Most of the time, I resist it because...Well, my previous partners withstood my enthusiasm."

She smirked. "Enthusiasm."

He shrugged, trying for an apologetic look. It seemed she wasn't as emotionally destroyed as he had thought she'd be. Of course Gabriel could look at Babet and see her experience was not varied. She was the farthest thing from the loose women he'd chosen to assuage his needs. Yet, he'd thought he could maintain control with her so he wouldn't hurt her. The

problem was, he found he wanted Babet much more than he'd ever wanted another woman. Could he risk losing control to be with her? The thought terrified him, but she didn't beg to go, and Gabriel didn't want to give her up just yet.

He released her and gathered his dishes to take to the sink. "So you're not asking to leave?"

"Not unless it wasn't good for you."

"*Cher*, nothing's ever been better."

"Oh," she squeaked. "And did you like the food?"

He spun to face her and held his arms out. She drifted into his embrace. Gabriel kissed her soft lips, wanting to delve deeper, but holding back. He was serious about allowing her to heal. "It was delicious. *Mesi*. I just may have to keep you here indefinitely for food and sex."

She gasped.

He cleared his throat. "But that's not our agreement, and I'm happy being a loner. Now, come, I will give you a tour of the house, and you can tell me what you would like to do today."

Gabriel's words seemed to startle Babet, and then he told himself he didn't see the hurt in her eyes as they finished cleaning up the kitchen and started their tour. Beginning at the top floor, he shared a little history of life in his house and on his grounds a century ago. "The place has been in my family for generations. My grandfather built it from the ground. Well, great-something grandfather." He only lied a little. It was not his great-grandfather anything, but his grandfather who had built the house. He skipped the details of New Orleans and its most obvious history. Babet would have learned all of that in school anyway.

"Life was simpler then," he said, feeling nostalgic.

"You love that period, not just because you read a lot of books," she guessed. "Can I see your famous library?"

He grinned. "You may." Just as Gabriel opened the door to his favorite spot in the house, Lawrence cleared his throat behind him. Gabriel turned. "What is it, Lawrence?"

"Excuse me, sir, but there's a call for you. Mr. Vashel."

Gabriel nodded. He hugged Babet briefly and kissed her. "*Mwen regret sa*, Babet. I have to take this call. Please, explore, and I'll be back as soon as I handle some business. Then the day is all yours. *Oke?*"

She nodded. He hurried down the hall to speak with his long time friend.

* * * *

Babet turned to survey the library. The room was bigger than the entire first floor of her house. Bookshelves rose above her head on each wall except the one with high windows. Just as she had seen in movies with scenes of similar rooms, a ladder on wheels waited for someone to climb it and roll up and down the longest wall. For the fun of it, she ran over and started to climb. When her head was less than a foot from the ceiling, she pushed off using one of the shelves. Like a kid, she whooped at the smooth ride.

In front of her was a new discovery—a small glass case built onto the top level next to the window. Curious, she tugged at the door to find it unlocked. Just inside was a single book lying atop red velvet as if it was revered. The tome didn't look as old as some of the books in Gabriel's collection, so she wondered why this one was special. She started to lift it out and then stopped. Maybe Gabriel didn't want anyone touching it and that was why he had it so high up. Then again, the case hadn't been locked.

Her interest piqued, she lifted the book from the case and made her way down the ladder. A small round table with a comfortable chair was positioned nearby. She made herself comfortable, tucking her feet up, and opened the book. Instead of a novel, the book held old black and white photos. Babet caught her breath at the old scenes, most in various rooms of this house or outside at the front.

She came to one picture of a man and a woman. The woman's hair was swept up on her head, and her dress extended to the ground. Babet loved looking at these old outfits. They made her long to have a reason to wear those kinds of clothes if just for a costume party. Not the high necked thing the woman in the picture donned, but the lower cut ones. Thinking of that, she glanced down at her breasts. They weren't much more than a handful, but she bet even she could look sexy in the dresses women wore in the eighteen hundreds.

After she'd studied the woman, she moved on to the man in the picture. She gasped at the resemblance to Gabriel. "Wow, this must be his great-great grandfather," she mused. They could have been twins. The man in the picture had Gabriel's same build, same features, except he looked slightly younger, maybe ten years or so. She ran her finger over the picture, wondering what life was like for these people so long ago, and she stopped at the neat little note at the bottom someone had taped in the book.

Gabriel and Gaye when life was still normal.

Babet's hands began to shake. Fearful that somehow she'd drop the book, she placed it on the table and leaned away from it. Gabriel and Gaye? Sure, he could have been named after his grandfather, but had his family also

named his sister after this other ancestor? Yes, that must be it, but what did “when life was still normal” mean?

She glanced toward the library door. Since Gabriel hadn’t come back yet, she considered going to find him and ask about the picture. He’d probably think she was an idiot for freaking out because of his family members looking alike. There were plenty that did. Heck, her godmother always said Babet was the spitting image of her father’s sister who died before Babet was born. The same fire that had taken her parents years ago destroyed all pictures of her family, so she had taken the older woman’s word for it.

Her reasoning made sense, but Babet still decided to find Gabriel. She was beginning to miss him. Grinning, she closed the book and put it back before leaving the room to search for her lover. A warning went off in her head, reminding her not to fall for him, but their time was winding down, and right now, she didn’t want to hear that. She wanted to throw herself into Gabriel’s arms and hear him call her “*cher*”. His every touch set her body to flames. Since she knew he’d also enjoyed last night, she felt confident going for more.

After a few wrong turns, she came upon a room with an open doorway. Gabriel’s voice echoed out into the hall. Babet increased her pace, but stopped just short of the opening when she realized what Gabriel was saying.

“I knew I could depend on you to help me with Babet, Vashel. Lawrence is faithful, but that night, I want him out of here just like I want Babet gone.”

Babet slapped her hand over her mouth. She ran Gabriel’s words through her mind over and over, but she couldn’t figure out what he could possibly mean. Gabriel wanted her gone? But he’d just invited her here, and what did he mean by “that night”? She took a few steps back and crashed into someone behind her. A shriek sounded in the hall before she could get control of her fear. Strong hands circled her arms.

“Ms. Babet.” Lawrence stood behind her.

“I-I,” she stuttered, not knowing what to say.

“What’s going on out here?” Gabriel appeared in the doorway of his study. Babet froze in place. She wasn’t sure if she’d misunderstood what he’d had been saying on the phone or if she should run for her life.

Lawrence had no problem outing her. “Ms. Babet overheard some of your conversation, sir. Perhaps you’d like to speak with her about it.” With that betrayal, he turned and left them standing in the hall.

Babet peeked up at Gabriel’s face, found it unreadable, and spun to make her exit. His arm came around her waist, and he directed her into his study. The low click of the door when it closed made her jump.

Gabriel rested on the edge of his desk and crossed his arms. "What exactly did you hear, Babet?" From the lowered brows, the narrowed eyes, and the compressed lips, she figured he was pissed off that she'd eavesdropped on his conversation. But he didn't have a right to keep secrets about what he was going to do with her.

"What were you talking about?" she countered.

"Babet." His voice held a warning. She wanted to ignore it and give him a piece of her mind, but she was still feeling shaken by his words and what she thought they meant.

"Well, it wasn't like I was trying to overhear," she explained. "I was looking for you to ask about the picture of your grandfather, and then I heard—"

"What picture of my grandfather?"

She could have bitten her lip off. "Maybe I should just go back home. This isn't working out." She stood up to leave. He beat her to the door and took her hand.

Babet thought he would force her back, but instead, he drew her into his arms. She couldn't help herself. Gabriel's charm, even when he didn't say a word, weaved a spell over her, and all she wanted was to let it wrap her in a cocoon that bound them together—one that lasted much longer than a few more days.

"I've been mean to you again," he whispered.

She gasped and looked up at him. He stroked her cheek and planted gentle kisses at her temple.

"I told you I'm an old grump with no social skills," he admitted.

Despite her reservations, she chuckled. "Yeah, I'm seeing that first hand."

He tapped her rear playfully. "Come with me." He opened the door and led her down the hall. A few turns, and they stood outside a room with double doors. The golden knobs put her in mind of times long past. "This is the ballroom," he announced, and threw open the doors.

Sheets covered chairs and couches at the side of the room, and huge landscapes graced the walls. Potted plants were set at various points. While the room had a dusty, unused feel, the floor gleamed like someone had just finished going over it with a buffer. Gabriel strolled to the center of the room and then turned to hold his hand out to her.

"May I have this dance?"

Babet's eyes widened. She was suddenly swept back to the past and could almost see the men and women twirling around the floor to the haunting tunes of a grand piano. Remembering the conversation earlier, she didn't

move. "Gabriel, what are you planning to do to me? I heard you say you have to get me out of here. You're the one who wanted me to come to your house. If you want to break things off, you should just come out and say so."

Gabriel shrunk the space between them in three long strides. He tugged the strings at her dress's neckline until they unraveled and revealed the beginning swell of her breasts. His eyes grew darker. "Trust me. The last thing I want is for you to go away."

She couldn't miss the lust in his gaze and shivered.

"In a few days, I have an important...business matter to take care of. If you think I was grouchy last night and few minutes ago, you haven't seen me then. I don't allow anyone to be around me during matters of high stress, as I expect that to be. I informed a friend of mine to look after you for that one night since I am worried about you after the break-in." He smirked. "There's no clandestine plot to chop off your head. So you can stop looking so terrified while you speak brave words to hide it."

She rolled her eyes and spun away, but he turned her right back. With fluid movements, he glided over the floor. She gasped. "Did you take ballroom dancing lessons?"

One side of his mouth rose in a half smile. "Sort of."

Babet closed her eyes and tilted her head back, trusting Gabriel to lead her. Every now and then, she stumbled, but his hand was strong at her waist. As they twirled, a breeze cooled her face. She loved every minute of it, but sobered a little when she thought of the past.

"You would have been the dark lord of the manner type, but I would have been slaving away over a hot stove in the kitchen, or cleaning up after your family."

He slowed and stopped, and then led her to a set of French doors leading outside. "Do you resent being here? I don't want you to be unhappy, *cher*. I want to always enjoy your smile."

"No, I don't. Your house is amazing, and all I know is where I come from in a recent sense, the fourth ward, my godparents, and Martin." She glanced outside at the garden and breathed in the roses planted nearby. "This is so different than what I'm used to, so detached from the city. I feel like I've dropped into the past. You're from the past."

"What?" He paled.

She laughed and nudged him. "I mean you're always out here alone. In this atmosphere, it's like you get sucked into the past. I guess that's why I can't get it out of my head. Is that weird?"

He blew out a breath that sounded like relief. "No, it's not weird. Shall I tell you a story?"

“What kind?”

“Of two young people who had their whole lives ahead of them.” His eyes glazed as if he tried to recall how the story went. She nodded for him to continue. “In those days, the late seventeen hundreds to the early eighteen hundreds, a young woman often had her father choose a husband for her.”

“I thought that was in England or other countries.”

“We were influenced by that culture, among others. She was young, carefree, but she had her challenges, which I won’t go into. Her father decided if he found a man willing to take her who was a good social match, then he would accept the man’s offer for her. At the time, she didn’t want to get married. Her brother supported her. He fought on her behalf every day, begging his father to let her choose for herself. Their father threw a ball for the woman. She loved parties, so she went along with the idea.

“What she didn’t know was that he intended to announce to all of his friends and neighbors that an offer of marriage had been given and accepted for his daughter. He named the man, who was present that night.”

Babet watched the emotions play over Gabriel’s face as if the story had some direct connection to him. She guessed that maybe it was a relative’s experience passed down from one generation to the next. The sadness in his eyes seemed a bit much for something that happened way before he was born. Babet touched his arm to snap him out of the past. He blinked and turned to her with a smile, but it froze in place.

“She ran,” he said simply.

“Ran away from home?”

“No, not really.” He walked out on the porch, breathing deep. Pointing to the left toward a forest, he said, “She ran that way and disappeared into the night. Before her brother realized what she’d done, he’d already lost her among the trees.”

Babet shivered. She’d never want to be out there after dark. God knew what was out there, gators, bugs... “Tell me he found her,” she begged, hoping for a happy ending like the father coming to his senses or the woman telling him where to go. Then she remembered the time period. A woman telling her father where he could stuff his marriage arrangement wasn’t common.

“He found her, but not before both their lives were changed forever.”

For some reason, Babet thought of the picture she’d found in the library, the one that read *Gabriel and Gaye, when life was still normal*. “In a good way?” she asked.

“No, not good.”

Babet sighed. "I thought you were going to tell me a romantic love story. That story is depressing."

Gabriel took her into his arms. "Aw, *cher*. You can be happy knowing she never married the man her father chose for her. How's that?"

"Well that's something, I guess."

"Come, we'll make our own story." He teased the valley between Babet's breasts with a fingertip, and she knew what kind of story he was interested in creating. Babet followed Gabriel out into the garden and farther into the trees.

Chapter Nine

Gabriel led Babet down a narrow path, lined on both sides with thick foliage. Ahead, she spotted an opening of thick grass and a massive oak reaching toward the sky. Babet ran ahead on bare feet with her arms out to the side. She'd never felt so free, so happy. When she stopped in the center of the clearing, she glanced back at Gabriel. For a moment, she saw him as the man in the photo, frantic to save his sister. Over his shoulder was darkness similar to that in the painting on the foyer's ceiling.

Babet gasped and stepped back away from him. Gabriel rushed to her. "What's wrong? *Cher*, you know I would never hurt you."

She blinked and shook her head to clear it. Instead of darkness, there was only light and her lover, the man she was beginning to lose her heart to. Babet reached up to tug at her dress, revealing more of her breasts. "Make love to me, Gabriel. Right here."

"There's nothing I want more."

He bent to grab the hem of her dress and raised it up over her head. Babet wasn't wearing a bra, so when he freed her of the dress, he reached for her small breasts and fondled the rigid peaks with his thumbs. Babet moaned, wetness pooling between her legs. She moved closer to him, tugging his shirt open so she could enjoy his skin under her hands. Punctuating each unveiling with a kiss, they explored each other's bodies from top to bottom.

When Babet unfastened Gabriel's pants and let them fall around his ankles, she licked and kissed his firm thighs, savoring the flavor. Seeing his shaft twitch behind his boxers, she went after those, too, and marveled at his thickness. She ran the tip of her tongue over his length, groaning. "I love how you taste. I want to swallow all of you."

"Your mouth is too small for that," he said, but his eyes had darkened when she looked up.

"I want you to come in my mouth." She thought he might release at her words.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." What man didn't like a woman to do that for him? And Babet loved the feeling of power it gave her, knowing she held Gabriel's pleasure in the palm of her hand, or at least on the tip of her tongue. A man like him had chosen her, even for a short period of time. A sexy, rich man. Not that she cared about his money. She didn't. But no one who had so much going for him, the embodiment of every woman's fantasy, had once looked her way. Babet wanted to please him, to make him shout her name when he released.

On her knees, she took him into her mouth and sucked hard on his member before allowing it to slide out. When she took him in the second time, she slid her hands around to his buttocks and squeezed. Taking his broad length deep into her throat, she massaged him, making his balls tighter as she worked him. Gabriel tangled his fingers in her braids, tugging her closer, but not so roughly that it hurt. His breath came out in a low hiss, and he pumped against her face in slow movements.

"I can't hold it, *cher*. Your mouth is amazing." He gritted his teeth and grunted. "Damn it all, Babet. I'm going to come!"

He reached out one hand to the oak behind them and leaned against it for support. The other hand he kept on her head, driving her into him while he pumped his hips a little faster. Babet eased back, but didn't let him go. She took his heavy sac in the palm of her hand and massaged that as well. Gabriel shouted her name in a kind of roar, and then let his hot load go into her waiting mouth. Babet took every drop, swallowing and sucking for more. When she'd drained him, she pulled his shaft from between her lips and licked him from base to tip. After she was done, she reared back on her heels and glanced up at him.

"Well? Did I satisfy you, baby?" she asked.

"You know you did." He bent down to hook her beneath the arms before he hoisted her up to his chest. Babet saw the lust in his eyes, the same wild emotion that had been there the night before. She'd never heard of any man being so fired up after coming. Gabriel spun with her in his arms to rest his bare back on the tree. He lifted her higher, felt between her legs to find her soaking wet and then pushed his still hard shaft into her body.

Babet cried out at the mingled pleasure and pain—pain because she was still sore from last night's wild ride, and pure, unadulterated bliss because Gabriel knew how to work his rod. As he drove himself deep inside her, Babet clutched his shoulders. Gabriel yanked at her braids, bringing her head back. He nipped her neck and worked his way to one swollen nipple. When he sucked her hard peak between his lips while pounding into her heat, she screamed his name. A raging orgasm tore through her body. All the strength left her limbs, and she hung in his arms.

Gabriel's lips came up to her ear, and he spoke in a harsh whisper that made her tremble. "You shouldn't have come out here with me."

Babet didn't get the chance to question what he meant. He pulled out of her and slipped down to the ground with her facing away from him. Positioned on his lap, her legs spread wide around his hips, Babet gasped when Gabriel brought her down on his shaft.

“Ride it,” he demanded, leaning back on his elbows. She bit her lip and held herself steady with his knees. Slowly, she began to gyrate her hips. His thick shaft moved far up her channel, feeling like any second it would bump her cervix. Gabriel growled. “Harder.”

She leaned closer to his thighs, her nipple grazing the rough skin. In her core, the muscles contracted in response. Babet whimpered. Already, she was going to come again. “Gabriel...”

“Ride it harder, *cher*. Now, or you will displease me.”

Tears wet her lashes. Gabriel heard her sniff, and his attitude changed in a second. He put her off him and stood to put space between them. Babet saw the tension in his shoulders, the way he held his hands in fists at his sides. From the angle where she sat, she knew he was still rock hard and unsatisfied. She couldn’t understand why he changed when they had sex. From the gentle, thoughtful lover to this angry person, this person who couldn’t get enough. And yet, sex had never been so good with anybody else.

She stood up and touched his back. Goose bumps broke out on the flesh, and a shiver seemed to roll through his body.

“Why?” He pounded the tree trunk enough, she thought, to hurt. “Why with you? I can’t control it. I’ve been with countless women.”

She didn’t really want to know that, but wracked her mind for a response, words that would comfort her tormented lover. And that was it, she realized. Gabriel was tormented by some inner demon. She couldn’t imagine mistakes he might have made in his past to react this way.

She stepped closer and hugged him from behind. A kiss to his shoulder blade made him shiver. “You make me feel good. You shouldn’t beat yourself up.”

“You deserve better. I don’t want to be like your brother bullying you to give me what I want.”

“I want it too.” She put her hands down to his shaft to stroke him, but he stilled her movements. Obviously fighting for control, he pushed her hands away.

“I have some business in the city,” he announced. “I will be back before night.”

Babet stood there, naked in the middle of a clearing, as she watched Gabriel walk away from her. The tears that had started from his cruelty rolled down her cheeks. She slumped to the grass and cried until she couldn’t any longer. Once she’d dreamed of being different from any other woman, different for one man who would make her the center of his life. Now she had it in part, but it meant nothing. Gabriel had admitted that sex with her was not like the previous women in his life. From the way he lost it when he

touched her, it was obvious they had chemistry that went beyond her imagination.

What did that matter if Gabriel was wracked with guilt afterward? Feeling defeated and lonely without him, she put her dress and panties back on to return to the house. She would shower and find something to do with herself until he returned. When he did, they would talk whether Gabriel liked it or not.

* * * *

Word around the French Quarter was that this particular hotel on Bourbon Street was reserved for those guests who had special needs. Management allowed the locals and tourists to think that included people who were ill or who couldn't abide crowds, the socially challenged. Gabriel knew that it was more than that.

The lavish lobby with walls decorated in butter yellow, columns of gold, and comfortable seating was the safe stopover for vampires and other paranormal creatures. His friend Vashel stayed at the Royal Paresta whenever he visited New Orleans because all windows were shielded during the day with coverings that were decorative to the person out on the street, but blocked sunlight on the inside.

Gabriel waited for Vashel in his suite until his friend finished with his phone call. After a few minutes, Vashel disconnected and stood to hold out his hand to Gabriel. "Good to see you, old friend. What's it been, forty years? You don't look a day over one hundred."

Gabriel sneered. "Haha, funny. Some of us are not immortal like you. I know I'm not as young as I used to be." He sighed and focused on the wall behind Vashel. "There are a lot of advantages you have that I don't."

"And vice versa," Vashel assured him. "I can never again enjoy the sunlight, and your problem happens once a month. Other than that, you live a normal life."

"If you call fighting a burning rage twenty-four-seven normal, then yes my 'problem' isn't a big deal."

Vashel directed him to take a seat and then took one, himself. Gabriel studied his friend. He knew he looked older, although he aged much slower than humans, but Vashel hadn't changed at all in the two hundred years Gabriel had known him. It had been Vashel's maker, his wife, that had saved Gabriel and Gaye's life the night they had been attacked by the werewolf. Later, through her, Gabriel had met Vashel, the man who threatened to kill him if he didn't maintain control of the beast. The threat still stood.

"Do you sense him?" Gabriel asked, sitting forward in his seat. "I've never smelled another werewolf here in New Orleans. We've had other types of shifters, but not like me." A wave of anger and loneliness crashed over him, but he closed his eyes a moment to resist the familiar emotions.

Vashel nodded. "Yes, I do, but I don't know who he is or where he comes from." Vashel put a pale hand to his chin as if to concentrate harder on the new presence in his city. Gabriel couldn't imagine how he did it, how he distinguished among so many bodies, emotions, among human and non-human. "He's near. I suspect he's here for you, but he's biding his time. Still, he stays close. If he guesses she's special to you and not another lay, she will be in danger."

Dark eyes focused on Gabriel's, making a chill crawl up his back. He thought he was strong enough to resist any charm Vashel put on him, but he wasn't going to take a chance, and so he never looked directly in Vashel's eyes. Right now, he felt himself falling into their depths, so he surged to his feet and turned away.

"She is special, isn't she?" Vashel murmured.

"I won her in a poker match. No big deal," Gabriel covered. "I just don't want anyone else hurt because of me. You know that, and last time we talked, you wanted the same, said you'd suck me dry if I lost control again."

Vashel flashed even, white teeth. Gabriel had always marveled at that since he stained them with blood on a regular basis. No fangs were evident in his grin at the moment.

"Yes, I did say something to that effect. It still stands. I will help you until we get to the bottom of what this guy wants. Tonight, when the sun goes down, I'll make some inquiries and track him."

A thought occurred to Gabriel. "Do you think he might be my maker?"

Vashel's eyes narrowed. "Why would you think that after so many years never knowing who he was? I was out of town the night you and your sister were bitten. Charlotte could have tracked him later when I returned." The sadness that clouded his friend's eyes got to Gabriel. The two of them had been deeply in love until Charlotte had been staked by a human. He'd found it impossible to live in New Orleans after she was gone, and visited infrequently.

"I'm sorry, my friend. I know it still hurts after so long," Gabriel offered.

"Yes, well, that's in the past. You need to focus on your woman. What about this other mess with her brother? Does he know what you are?"

"*Non*," Gabriel grumbled, "and I want to keep it that way, but he's pushed me far with his frightening Babet. I will have to meet with him today to reiterate my warning. He thinks I don't know he sent his whore to break

into Babet's house. It's why I hurried her out to mine where she'd be safer for now."

"Why do I sense doubt in you?"

Gabriel pretended not to get his meaning, but Vashel could read him like a book. The man was at least five hundred years old, and he didn't age. All that time had increased his power, his ability to bypass all the empty words people spoke and sense the truth. Because Gabriel spent his life hating what he was, he'd never built a resistance to Vashel's mental meddling in his business.

"Get out of my head, damn it! I told you, she's just a good lay." Even saying the words out loud, he felt ashamed. Babet was much more than a good lay, but he didn't want to admit it at this time, and definitely not to Vashel. His friend was all for werewolves hiding away where they couldn't hurt anyone else, even if he was Gabriel's friend.

"Very well." Vashel stood up, all quiet and deadly grace. "I will handle the brother for you. Return to your house, and I'll call you when I have more information."

"I don't remember joining your clan, vampire, where you get to order me around."

Vashel continued to smile, showing no emotion. "Calm yourself, Gabriel. It was a suggestion. If you'd like to handle it all, take additional time away from her when she is more vulnerable. I'm referring of course to the earlier incident between you."

Gabriel swore. "One day you will not read my mind so easily."

The vampire didn't respond, but Gabriel did rein in his anger. Why Vashel could rile him more than anyone else, he didn't know. Of course, it could be the fact that the man never lost control, never broke a sweat. Even in the face of an enemy, his hiss and show of fangs was more to scare his opponent rather than because his anger had gotten the best of him. At night, Vashel never had to worry about doing anything he would regret later. Well, as long as he'd already fed. Gabriel envied that ability.

He flexed his shoulders and rotated his head to work out the tension in his neck. "Fine, you can deal with Martin and the girlfriend. I do want to get back to Babet. And thanks for the help. I appreciate it."

Vashel bowed his head. "My pleasure."

Gabriel left the hotel headed in the direction of Babet's house. He wanted to check the place over before he went home to be able to let her know everything was fine. When he'd completed that task, he intended to return to the boat he'd left moored at the pier, but a man blocked the path. Gabriel stopped, knowing exactly who it was—the other werewolf.

“So, you finally decide to reveal yourself to me,” he said, studying the man for ill intent. In broad daylight, he didn’t expect an attack, but one couldn’t be too careful.

“Hello, Gabriel.” He spread his arms out to the sides. “Daddy’s home.”

Gabriel made a sound of disgust. “You’re not my father. What do you want? Why are you here in New Orleans after all this time?”

The man flashed a smile obviously meant to be charming, but it came off sinister instead. “Come now, Gabriel. I’ve given you near eternal youth, strength and ability mere humans dream about. What more can you ask for?”

“You cannot be serious,” Gabriel spat. He narrowed his eyes. “I can see you enjoy everything about being a werewolf. I don’t. It’s a curse, one that I would avoid if I could go back in time. Again, why are you here?”

“Gabriel, why all the hostility? We can be friends, right? Call me John. After all, you’re the one who pulled me here.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

At Gabriel’s continued attitude, the man gave up the friendly attitude and showed his true colors. He sneered, eyes narrowed and flashing just as angry as Gabriel felt. “I could feel the pull. I’ve been around long enough to know when someone has cast a spell on their maker to draw him, and I know the intent should such a charm be done. You want to kill me. Since that is a joke as you’ll never be nearly as powerful as I am, I’ll give you a chance to change your mind. I am forming a pack, werewolves that will obey my every command. I will, of course, make it worth your while.”

Gabriel couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “A pack? The beast binds me to emotions I don’t want to feel, and you think I want to take your orders. Old age must have addled your brains.”

A snarl distorted John’s face. “Tell me, Gabriel, how is that bitch of yours? What’s her name? Oh, Babet. You like black women, huh? I’ve had a few myself. Exotic.”

Gabriel moved like lightning to jerk John in his collar. “You stay the hell away from Babet. You don’t even mention her name. Got that?”

John wasn’t moved in the least. He continued to hold Gabriel’s angry stare and shook himself free of Gabriel’s hold. “I’ll give you some time to think about my offer.”

With that statement, he straightened his clothes and turned to walk away. Gabriel wanted to go back to Vashel’s to talk to him about the conversation he’d just had with his maker, but he wanted much more to see how Babet was doing, to assure himself that she was okay. He dismissed John from his mind for the moment and hurried toward the pier.

* * * *

Gabriel let himself into the house and met Lawrence in the hall. "Where is she?"

"Ms. Babet is in your bedroom, sir. Would you like me to ask her to come down?"

"*Non.*" Gabriel started toward the stairs and stopped to look back at his servant. "Lawrence?"

"Yes, sir?"

He hesitated, but then Lawrence wouldn't need much of an explanation. He knew what Gabriel was, and he knew if Gabriel gave him a warning, he needed to take it seriously. His life depended on it. Gabriel had never allowed Lawrence to remain on the property during the night of the full moon even if he did lock himself away. "If you see anyone on the property, protect yourself and Babet if she's still here, and then report it to me. Understood?"

Lawrence's expression showed he wanted to ask questions, but he refrained. "Understood, sir. Will there be anything else?"

"No, that's all. Thank you." Gabriel took the stairs two at a time, all the while going over in his mind what had happened between Babet and him and his conversation with John. Should he send her home? He couldn't get enough of touching her beautiful body, but that was the problem. How he hated the curse. He was damned no matter how hard he tried to live a normal life. Vashel could never understand walking among humans, looking human, but never able to make the connection. None of that mattered to his friend.

When he opened the bedroom door, Gabriel found Babet lying across the bed with her feet up. He didn't meet her eyes or allow his gaze to linger on her. She'd changed her clothes into another of the dresses he'd bought her. This one didn't quite cover her smooth, brown thighs, and he hardened with the small glimpse he had. Rather than remain in the room, he continued on to the bathroom while unbuttoning his shirt.

"Turns out Martin sent someone to ransack your house to make it look like a break-in," he said over his shoulder. "It's being dealt with, so you don't have to worry."

"Dealt with how?" She jumped up off the bed to follow him, but Gabriel spun around, still not making eye contact. He held up a hand to stop her from crossing the threshold.

"Excuse me while I take a shower." He shut the door in her face, lamenting the fact that there was no lock on it. More ashamed of his actions, but seeing no other way, he finished undressing, turned on the hot water, and

stepped beneath the spray. With his back to the door, Gabriel rested a palm and his forehead on the shower wall and closed his eyes. His entire being burned with a need to be with Babet, but she deserved better than an evil beast that would tear her apart rather than treat her with gentleness.

He never should have brought her here. He was a fool. The women he'd bedded were whores. They knew the score, didn't have a heart to fall in love, and their bodies were so overused, hurting them during sex was next to impossible. Yet, Gabriel had broken all of his self-assigned rules when he started seeing Babet.

"Why her?" he grumbled. "She doesn't deserve to be hurt, and that's all I'd do. Hurt her."

"No, that's not all," she said behind him.

He didn't turn around. He'd heard her enter, picked up her heady scent. Maybe he'd wanted her to hear his words, to know what lay in store for her if she didn't get out now. No, he was being weak, wanting Babet to decide to leave him when he couldn't make himself let her go. Gabriel closed his eyes, allowing the water to cascade over his heated skin. His body throbbed with desire. All he wanted at that moment was to sink his shaft deep inside of her, to hold her close and pretend the evil in his soul didn't exist.

When her small hand touched his back, he shuddered. "You shouldn't be in here, Babet. All I do is hurt you. You must return to the city. Your brother is being taken care of as we speak so that he won't bother you again." He paused when she didn't say anything, then tried again. "If I stay away from you until tomorrow, you will be fine, but then you must leave."

"What if I don't want to stay away from you?" Her breast caressed the back of his arm. Gabriel's shaft twitched. All of his control drained away. Babet stepped around to stand in front of him. She took one of his hands and placed it on her breast. Gabriel could come without another touch just feeling her tightened nipple in his palm.

"Babet," he warned.

"You can make love to me without hurting me, Gabriel."

"It's not as easy as that."

"It can be." She stepped closer allowing their bodies to touch. The heat between them was enough to ignite the entire world. Gabriel brought his hands up to push her away, but he didn't dare touch her for an instant. He closed his eyes instead. Thinking of being alone again, living this long existence without her... No, it wasn't Babet herself, he decided, but just someone—*anyone*—to take away the loneliness. To believe it was Babet and no other person who could help him through the darkness was worse. He couldn't have her. He *must not* have her.

"I know what it feels like," she told him, and Gabriel opened his eyes to stare into hers. She couldn't know.

"My parents died in a fire when I was little. After that, my godparents raised Martin and me, but then they died too. Martin was always just as he is now. He never showed affection, never loved anyone but himself. Sometimes I thought it was his way of dealing with our parents dying. Maybe so, but after a while, that becomes no excuse. I know I shouldn't think that nobody can love me or stay with me, but I believe it. I can't help but believe that."

Pain tore through his heart, just like it had done all those years ago. He shut it away.

"See? I know what it feels like to be alone. If nobody else knows, I know. Gabriel, let me stay. I...I love you."

His eyes widened. Love? No. She didn't know what she was saying. No one could love the demon he was, especially after what he'd done. But she didn't know the truth. The only one alive today who knew the truth was Vashel. He couldn't be forgiven or loved.

Babet kissed his chest and then tasted his hot skin. He shivered. Before he knew what he was doing, he had his hands at her waist, his eyes locked on her small breasts. Desire threatened to take his breath. She stretched up on her tiptoes to kiss him. He took her offering. The beast stirred within, wanting to lift her on his erection and pierce her sweetness. Memories of their coupling made him grow tighter, his hard-on more painful. Gabriel pushed his tongue into Babet's mouth, and he backed her to the shower wall.

When he rained kisses down her throat and thumbed her taut nipples, she panted. "Easy, Gabriel. I know you can make me feel good without being too rough."

He lifted her off her feet. His rod lay poised at her opening. He wanted to drive her down, but he fought the need. Their gazes locked, hers full of trust. Gabriel brought her down slowly. Her folds widened and then enveloped him. She was still tight like a glove, stroking him, encouraging his seed to burst forth.

With slow, gentle thrusts, he worked himself to the hilt inside her channel. She arched against him. Gabriel encircled a nipple, laved it, and sucked it deep between his lips. The beast demanded he take her harder, rougher. It wanted to come now, at any cost, but Gabriel fought with all his being.

"Gabriel," she moaned, her head back and limbs trembling. He felt the quivers pass through her thighs. "Don't stop. Please, don't stop." She rested her hands on his shoulders and began working her hips to drive him in and

out. Gabriel gritted his teeth, never allowing his gaze to waver from watching her move on his length.

She cried out again and again, bouncing on him, digging her nails into his shoulders. Her ankles crossed behind him, and he gripped her rear to hold her in place. Gabriel spread his feet a little wider for a firmer stance. He glanced down to watch his long shaft pass into her sex and come out slick and coated with their combined cream. Her thighs shook once again, and when she cried out, he knew she was close. He drove faster, but she squeezed his shoulder.

“No, slow. Keep it slow,” she pleaded.

It took everything inside of Gabriel to give her what she wanted and not to take what the beast demanded. He tasted blood in his mouth as he fought to maintain an unhurried pace. Their bodies met and drew apart. He kissed her lips, devoured her warm mouth with his tongue. Lower, he took first one nipple into his mouth, and then he moved to the other.

Twice, Gabriel opened his mouth to tell her that he loved her, but he bit off the words. He wouldn’t believe it. He couldn’t believe it was true, and it meant nothing. Gabriel might not be immortal, but he did have a long lifespan. To get involved with a human meant heartache. He would not hurt Babet like that.

She screamed suddenly. “I’m going to come. Gabriel, I need you.” She kissed along his jaw, robbing him of strength and sanity. He moved his hand up her back and tangled his fingers in her braids. Before he knew he would lose that amount of control, he pulled her head back and crushed her mouth under his. She didn’t fight him, but accepted his desperate hunger.

After a moment, she quaked from head to toe, crying out. Her sex clenched around him, and her hips jerked. He knew she’d reached her peak. Gabriel let himself fall. He came in her with scarcely contained aggression. When he had made sure she’d come a second time, he put her down on her feet and turned his back. The water had grown cold, but he didn’t care. He washed himself and then stepped out of the shower. Babet soon followed.

In the bedroom with a towel knotted at his waist, he faced her. “Now, you see, Babet? I didn’t hurt you just now, but I could have. It took every shred of self-control not to lose it. I can’t keep this up. You’ll leave tomorrow, whether you want to or not. I’ll still give you what I promised. In the meantime, I’ll get Lawrence to make up another bedroom for you.”

He waited for her to say something, but she stood there for a long time, a glare his single clue that she was pissed. After a while, she walked over to him stark naked having tossed her towel on the floor. His shaft grew out

again seeing her that way. Babet raised a hand and snapped it across his cheek. The sting shocked him more than the action.

“You can go straight to hell!” she growled.

He sighed, rubbing his cheek. “Too late, *cher*. I’m already there.”

Chapter Ten

Babet cried herself to sleep that night in her new bedroom. She hated the fact that she'd told him she loved him, and he'd rejected her. Gabriel hadn't even acknowledged her words or reacted. In the morning, she showered and dressed, then packed her things. When she was ready, she walked down the hall to Gabriel's room to tell him to take her home now. Better to just get it over with. She would not cry over him anymore. A man like Gabriel wasn't worth the tears. She should have known that from him gambling for her in the first place.

Gabriel didn't answer her knock, and after a few minutes, she decided to search the house for Lawrence. She found him in the kitchen slicing an apple. "Good morning, Ms. Babet. I hope you slept well."

She frowned. "Not really. Is Gabriel around? I wanted to tell him I'm ready to leave."

The servant seemed embarrassed and hesitant to say his next words. "He isn't here."

"*Here* as in the house, or in the kitchen?" Dumbfounded, she looked around.

"Mr. Gabriel is not here as in he left early this morning to return to the city."

"Without me?" she shouted. "I don't get it. He's all tragic and dark with the 'I can't be with you' stuff, and 'it's better that you go home,' but now he leaves without me? What is his problem?" Lawrence was about to answer, but she held up her hand. "Don't even bother. I'm not in the mood to hear it. I'm going for a walk."

When she turned to stomp out of the kitchen, Lawrence chased after her as far as his aging legs would carry him. "Ms. Babet, you shouldn't go far from the house. Mr. Gabriel said—"

"I don't care what *Mr.* Gabriel said. He's your boss, not mine." She knew she sounded like a child, but she didn't care. All this time, she'd put up with Martin, dealt with the hand that life had given her. Then she went and made it worse by falling for Gabriel to add more hurt to her life. All the time, she thought of others' comfort rather than her own and about what everybody else wanted. Now, she planned to take the money Gabriel gave her, sell her house, and leave New Orleans—maybe for good.

Eventually, she would get over Gabriel, but she wouldn't look for a new man. They were more trouble than they were worth. She would return to school and train for a career that would be satisfying. Excited by her plans despite the ache in her heart, she bounded down the porch steps and strolled

across the lawn. Planning to venture as far as she could under the warm sun, she hoped Gabriel would come home and wonder where she was. Let him worry if he had enough of a heart to.

When she could no longer see the house through all the foliage, Babet came to a stop and swiped the sweat from her brow. She leaned back against a tree and shifted enough so the sun peaking through the branches wouldn't shine into her eyes. After a while, a breeze stirred, and her body temperature began to cool. Although she knew she was miles away from the city, Babet strained to hear the traffic passing along the streets. She listened for jazz music, which spilled out of the clubs at night. Some claimed one could hear that for miles. No sounds other than nature reached her, and she let it relax her, ebb away her anger.

"He's lying to you, you know."

She jumped at the voice and opened her eyes. The same man that had attempted to help her in the shoe store stood in front of her. Babet straightened and glanced around. "What are you doing here? This is private property. Do you know—"

"Gabriel Bordelon?" A bushy brow rose, and he smirked more than grinned. A shiver passed through Babet. She wanted to take a step back, but didn't want the man to see she was nervous. He appeared to know, flaring his nostrils and breathing in deep. "He's a liar. What he's told you isn't true. Or rather, what he *hasn't* told you."

"Look, I don't need the cryptic words right now. If you have something to tell me, just say it. Although, I can't imagine why you'd think I would believe you over Gabriel."

The man's eyes widened, and he moved closer to her. "You love him. I can almost smell it." He shook his head. "Ask your lover what happened to his family. Better yet, why don't I show you what happened to them?"

He took a step in Babet's direction. Her mouth went dry. She swallowed hard, but felt her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth.

"Ms. Babet, run to me now, please."

At the distinct click behind her, Babet glanced over her shoulder to see Lawrence standing there with a shotgun in hand, trained on the stranger.

"Hurry, Ms. Babet."

She hesitated, then backpedaled a few traces. Lawrence waved the gun at the man. The stranger's grin never left his face as he held up his hands. "I won't break his little toy. He'll do that on his own."

Babet took the lesser of two evils, the unknown regarding Gabriel versus this man who, all of a sudden, took on a greater appearance of evil with the dark eyes, the thick brows, and raised hands looking like they'd punished

many in his lifetime. She scrambled to a position just behind Lawrence who'd never taken his eyes off the stranger.

"Now get off this land, or I will pull the trigger," Lawrence promised him. "Mr. Gabriel doesn't like uninvited guests."

The man chuckled. "I bet he doesn't." His cold gaze shifted from Lawrence to Babet. "Remember what I said. Find out the truth now, or suffer the consequences later." With that, he spun on his heel and walked away. As she stood there trying to pull herself together, Babet heard a fan boat start up somewhere in the distance. She hadn't heard it speeding along the bayou while she stood by the tree. The thought of him having already been out there watching her made her shiver.

Babet spun around and hurried in the direction she had come. Lawrence followed at a more sedate pace. She waited for him to say something about the man, but he didn't utter a word. Babet guessed he was trying to catch his breath. Gabriel was a loner who liked his space away from everyone else, but she'd never imagined he'd order his servant to pull a gun on visitors. There was more to Gabriel than she suspected.

As she ascended the stairs to her room, she wondered if she should ask him about it or just leave, expecting never to see him again. Fresh hurt rose from her heart. Babet climbed on the bed and laid down. All she could do now was wait for Gabriel to come home to know the direction her life would take.

Babet must have fallen asleep because the next thing she was aware of was Gabriel leaning over her, brushing her braids from her forehead and staring down at her with a worried expression on his face. "Are you okay?" he asked.

She pushed to a sitting position, and he settled down on the bed next to her. Babet remembered the scene earlier with the stranger, and anger rose inside. "I assume Lawrence told you about the man we saw today?"

Gabriel looked away. "He did."

She frowned. "And?"

"And what? He took care of it." Gabriel stood up. "If you're ready, I can take you into the city. For a few days, at least until after the sixteenth, you can stay at my apartment. It might be better if you leave New Orleans for a while. I will, of course, fund everything and make arrangements."

"Hold on!" she demanded and scooted to the end of the bed when he walked to the door. She stood up. "You don't get to walk away without telling me anything, Gabriel. That man was spouting all kinds of hints about you, that you weren't being truthful with me. Why would Lawrence be

commanded to pull a shotgun on the man? And what's so important about the sixteenth?"

She would have gone on if he didn't stride up to her and take her in his arms. Babet opened her mouth to demand to know what his problem was, but he covered her lips with his. Weakness stole over her body. She melted into his embrace and pressed closer. His shaft stiffened, then twitched. Gabriel ran his hands over her back down to her rear and squeezed. A moan escaped her, causing her head tilt even more. Gabriel left her mouth to trace kisses along her throat. When he nipped at her heated skin, she was ready to forget everything else beyond making love with him.

Realizing his actions were a ploy since he'd basically dumped her, she wrenched out of his arms and put distance between them. Babet hugged herself to try to hide her hardened nipples. "You broke it off, remember? Our arrangement is off."

"Is that what it was? An arrangement?" He had a nerve acting like his feelings were hurt.

"Wasn't it?" she spat. "You won me in a card game. You got what you were after. We had sex. Now it's over. Two weeks sooner than it was supposed to be. Guess I didn't please you as much as you would have liked."

"It's not like that, Babet."

She shrugged. "Looked like that to me." She turned to grab her suitcase. "Whatever. It's obvious you kissed me to get me to drop the conversation about your secrets. I'm not an idiot. Anyway, I'm ready to go. What you're hiding doesn't matter at this point since I'm never going to see you again. You can make whatever arrangements you want."

"Babet..." he began, and fell silent. When she reached the door and pulled it open, he tried again. "*Cher*, I never meant to hurt you. *Mwen*—"

"Stop!" She held up a hand. "That's what you've been saying from the beginning. Just don't say it. You're getting what you want. What's the big deal? I said I'm ready!"

Their trek back to civilization was done in silence, Lawrence guiding the boat while Babet sat alone watching the water. This time, she did spot several gators, but she was too down to even shiver in fear of them. They slid silently into the water, and with little interest, she traced the ripples as they swam along. Gabriel kept his distance, not trying to touch her or draw her out, but the couple times she'd peeked at him it was to find him looking miserable. She told herself she didn't care. This was his choice.

At Gabriel's apartment, she settled in, and Gabriel turned to her at the door on his way out. "I'll call you in a couple days with all the information for your move. I have someone looking out for you. Most likely you won't

see him, but he will see you. Please don't go far from here." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a card to hand to her. "You can call here, and they will deliver your groceries to the door."

She blinked. "You're saying I'm a prisoner until you call me?"

"No." He ran a hand through his hair. "I want you safe until I can arrange your trip. I'll put money into an account for you, and you can draw from that to live on until you're settled. Is that acceptable?"

Babet sighed. "Just a couple days, right? No longer?"

"No longer."

"Okay, I can deal with that. I don't really have a choice." Babet didn't resist when Gabriel drew her into his arms and planted a light kiss on her lips. Then, he stepped back to stuff his hands in his pockets. He sighed, studied her face a long time, and closed his eyes.

"If you ever need me, Babet, call me. I promise I will be there. Take care of yourself, and be happy."

She watched him until he passed out of sight, and then she closed the apartment door. Right away, the walls closed in, and Babet sank to the carpeted floor. She gripped the threads under fingers and clenched her teeth. With all the strength she could muster, she didn't cry. After a long while, she stood up and went to unpack. "Welcome to the beginning of my happy life."

Chapter Eleven

Days passed, and Babet hadn't heard from Gabriel. She refused to call. Fed up with being locked away in his apartment, she showered and slipped into one of the dresses he had bought her. With low heels on her feet and her braids swept up at the back of her head, she left the apartment and headed downstairs to street level.

As soon as she passed through the front door, the sound of jazz music reached her. She turned left. On lower Decatur, she came across the Hookah Café and went inside. Pausing at the door until her eyes adjusted to the lowered lighting, she scanned the nightclub. Tonight, there were no covers for those over twenty-one. When her eyes adjusted, she worked her way through the crowd to the bar, grateful for the spot that opened up.

"What can I get for you?" the bartender asked.

Babet didn't hesitate. "A hurricane, please." She didn't drink much at all, but tonight she wanted something stronger. The mix of white rum, Jamaican dark rum, Bacardi 151 rum, orange juice, pineapple juice, and grenadine syrup was what she was looking for. Poured over crushed ice, the concoction was sweet and packed a punch. Babet took a sip from the hurricane glass and glanced toward the band. Between the music's smooth rhythm and the drink in her hand, Babet soon felt the tension ease from her shoulders. She smiled a little, lowered her lashes, and swayed to the beat.

When a man's pale hand tapped the bar beside her, Babet jumped until she heard his voice. "Son of Satan," he ordered.

Babet shivered and looked up at him. Tall and sexy with long dark hair, he watched her out of eyes almost as translucent as his skin appeared to be. She considered moving away from the dangerous-looking man, but something inside compelled her to stay. A sort of energy or power rolled off the stranger, making her uncomfortable. Babet had had enough of strangers for the time being, and if this man was interested, he could forget it. She would not be shopping for someone new any time soon.

"Vashel," he said, and held out a large hand.

Babet didn't take it. "Hello."

After a few minutes, the bartender brought his drink, and he moved to take it. Relief flooded her when the knowing eyes left her face. She took the opportunity to escape and moved farther along the bar. Just ahead, a table opened up, and Babet hurried toward it. Another man got there at the same time she did.

Casting her an encouraging grin, he put a hand to her waist. "Join me, beautiful. I'm sure we can have lots of fun together."

"Get lost," Vashel said behind her. Babet whirled around, not realizing he had been following her. She was about to tell him where to go with the new man, but Vashel's attention was not on her. The same power seemed to emanate from him. One second the guy had bulked up for a fight, and the next he shuffled away like a whipped puppy. Babet gaped at Vashel.

Still calm and collected, he gestured toward the table. "Have a seat."

Babet searched her mind for an excuse to leave.

"You shouldn't have left the apartment, Babet," Vashel said.

She gasped and stared at him. "Gabriel said he had someone looking out for me while he makes arrangements. You're him?"

He nodded. "I am. Would you like to sit?"

She didn't have much of a choice. Setting her glass on the table, she made herself comfortable at the table and then reexamined Vashel. Oddly, just like Gabriel, his friend had an old world quality to him, like he was also born out of time. His manners were formal even though his clothes were modern. The calm, almost unemotional characteristic he portrayed seemed excessive, but Babet put it down to his personality. She wondered where Gabriel had met the man or if they'd gone to school together. Another thing she noticed they had in common was that air of danger, as if either of them would, and could, kill if necessary. The knowledge scared the crap out of her.

"Do you know why he hasn't contacted me yet?" After she asked the question, she realized how pathetic it sounded, like she was some lovesick woman clinging to her ex-lover. "I mean, because he was supposed to be handling some business for me, and I had planned to leave New Orleans soon."

Babet thought she saw a flash of pity in his eyes, but it was gone in an instant. Perhaps it hadn't been there in the first place.

"Unexpected complications arose with his business," Vashel assured her. "Now that it is close to the sixteenth when..." He paused and cleared his throat.

Babet remembered that Gabriel, too, had mentioned the sixteenth. She searched her mind for anything significant about the day, but couldn't come up with anything.

"Business over the next few days will delay him, but I assure you he will contact you after the sixteenth."

She frowned. "After the *business*?"

"Yes."

The man had no intention of sharing any details with her. Babet sighed and turned away. They sat in silence, listening to the music. When she'd

drained the last of her drink, she told him, “Thanks for your company, but I think I’ll go back to the apartment. It was nice meeting you.”

She stood up and swayed. Vashel was at her side in a flash with a hand at her elbow. She blinked, looked back at where he had been sitting, and then at him. With a shrug, she put it down to the alcohol and let him lead her out of the club. Out on the street, a cool breeze cleared her head a little, and Babet sucked in a breath. Vashel guided her along the street with the music following along behind as if it wanted to draw them back.

When they reached an alley, Vashel paused and glanced into the inky depths. His eyes narrowed as if he could see what was down there. Babet shivered, then put a hand to her nose at the smell. From the longing on Vashel’s face, she hoped he wasn’t perverted enough to get off on the city’s stench. Gabriel couldn’t be that insensitive to stick her with a lunatic.

Vashel put a hand up to his mouth and not his nose. When he spoke, his voice was deeper, and he didn’t meet her gaze. Instead, he averted his head like he didn’t want her to see him. “We must hurry to get you home, and you must promise not to come out again.”

Before Babet could ask him if he was sick, a man stepped out of the alley and slung his arm toward Vashel. Instead of hitting Vashel with his fist, the man splashed a dark liquid across his face. Whatever the substance was, it sent Vashel into a rage. He launched at the man whose face Babet hadn’t been able to see yet since he stayed hidden in the shadows. Vashel let out a hiss and extended his hands, on the ends of which were suddenly long, sharp fingernails.

Babet shrank back in shock. Not taking her eyes off the two of them, she searched her purse for anything she could use as a weapon. From the sounds of bones cracking against the brick wall and slams on the hard ground, she didn’t think anything she had could do as much damage as they were doing to each other. At first it seemed like Vashel was winning the fight. Babet gawked at how he held the other man up with one hand wrapped around his throat. But then for seemingly no reason, Vashel sank to his knees. All the strength appeared to drain from him body.

The other man shoved Vashel flat on the ground and bent over him. Babet fisted her hand and went after the man since his back was to her. The punch she drove into his ear might as well have been a flick for all the effect it had. “Leave him alone,” she shouted. “Someone help us!”

“Babet,” Vashel whispered. “Run!”

Why was Vashel so weak sounding? Her mouth dry, Babet took a few steps in retreat. The man didn’t look at her. This was the time for her to get away, but it seemed low to just turn and leave Vashel. On the other hand, it

wasn't like she could do anything standing here. If she ran, she could get help. Decision made, she turned to run, but the man had finished what he was doing to Vashel and grabbed her arm in a steel hold. He slammed her backward to his chest and took her by the chin to force her to look down at Vashel.

Her protector had been tied up with a silver chain all along his torso. From the thinness of it, she imagined he should have been able to snap the links, but Vashel lay on the ground weak as a baby. His gaze locked on hers with a message to get out of there, but it was too late.

"If you don't behave yourself, little girl," the man growled in her ear. "I will let you watch me kill your friend, and then I will kill *you*." Babet began to shake, but she didn't respond. He whipped her around to face him. She gasped, realizing it was the man following her. He'd not been satisfied until he got his hands on her. Now, real terror set in. She closed her eyes.

Gabriel, please help me.

Her lover was nowhere to be seen. The man gathered Babet tighter in his arms and leaned down to drag Vashel across the sidewalk to a car parked at the curb. He opened the trunk and tossed Vashel inside. Then, he put Babet in the front seat. All the while she sat there, she ran through her mind on ways to get away, but fear gripped every muscle in her body.

When he folded his large form behind the steering wheel, she decided to get the information she could from him. "W-What do you want me with me? Who are you?"

He winked at her, started the car, and pulled away from the curb. "I'm John."

"John...?"

"Just John." He ran a hand over his unshaven jaw. "I'm Gabriel's maker. Do you know what that means?"

Babet frowned. "You're not old enough to be his father, so what do you mean by maker?"

He shook his head. "I see he's still lying to you, even after that incident out at his house. I'd have thought a sexy thing like you would convince him to tell you his deep, dark secrets. But I guess secrets like his can't be shared." He laughed. "Secrets like *ours*."

Babet expected John to drive her out of the city to some secluded place where he would kill her and Vashel, but instead, he stopped at a small, run down bar. He parked, shut off the car, and tugged Babet after him as he entered the dim interior of the building. After he'd pushed her down in a booth seat, he sat opposite her.

John signaled a waitress who brought him a beer. He didn't offer to get Babet anything, and she couldn't bring herself to look up long enough to say a word. Instead, she clutched her fingers together so tight in her lap that they ached. When the waitress walked away, she managed to eek out, "Why are we here?"

"Waiting for your boyfriend, of course. He'll sniff us out soon." His empty beer bottle slammed on the table, and he crooked a finger for another. "At least he better come, or he'll be sorry. He'll give me what I want or else."

Babet was about to ask him what he wanted from Gabriel when someone scooted into the booth next to her, forcing her to slide over. She looked around to find Martin grinning at John like a smitten idiot. "Hey, what you up to, little sis? Who's this, your new boyfriend? You sure do get around."

She pressed her lips together, but put a hand on Martin's leg in warning. Her brother remained oblivious, and John cast her a warning glance. His cold-blooded stare sent a shiver down her spine, and she pulled her hand back from Martin. Leave it to her brother to show up in a dirty place like this, looking for a way to scam someone.

"I saw you two drive up," Martin continued. "Sweet ride you got there. Must have cost a lot of money." Practically drooling, he kept trying to get John to talk to him, and then Babet saw her chance to escape when Martin stood up and moved around to sit next to John.

"Hey, man, let me tell you about this idea I had," he said. "You'll love it."

Babet sat unmoving in her seat, her gaze flicking from John's alert expression to the keys he'd stupidly tossed on the table. Martin reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick wad of crumpled paper. He began to unravel it and spread it on the table. Nudging John, he pointed out various notes on the paper.

John jumped and snatched at Martin's other hand, which had been below the table, half hidden by the paper. "You're trying to pick my pocket? You must be out of your mind!"

Babet didn't wait to see how the argument would go. While John was distracted, she grabbed the keys and ran toward the exit. As she pushed the rotting wood door open, she glanced back to see if John was following. He still fought with Martin. And then, when she was just passing out of the bar, she saw a sight that would be with her the rest of her life—John snapping Martin's neck.

Bordering on hysteria with tears running down her cheeks, Babet half stumbled half ran to John's car and jumped in. She peeled out of the dirt parking lot at top speed, not knowing where she was going or even how to get there if she did. Her brother's murder played in her mind repeatedly,

confusing her. She drove for miles, making turns she thought would lead her back to the part of the city she knew, but each time, it was a false turn. By the time the sun was rising over the horizon, Babet ran out of gas and sat on the side of the highway shaking, her tears all dried.

She must have dozed because a car door slamming woke her, and she jumped in fear. Through the windshield, she spotted a man, but there was no mistaking who it was. Babet wrenched her door open, ran to Gabriel, and threw herself in his arms. He crushed her to him, kissing her hair, her eyes, and finally, her lips. “Babet, are you okay?”

She nodded into his shoulder, but didn’t lift her head. In a muffled voice, she whispered, “I don’t know how you found me. Gabriel, he killed my brother. He killed Martin right there in the bar.” The tears returned, flooding her eyes. She hiccupped and clutched him tighter.

Gabriel pushed her chin up to kiss her again. “My friend? Vashel?”

Babet squeaked. “Oh my goodness, I can’t believe I forgot him in the trunk!” She jerked out of Gabriel’s arms, ran to the car for the keys, and then jetted to the back to open the trunk. Before she could raise it, Gabriel slammed the lid down.

Babet looked at him like he was crazy. “He could be hurt, Gabriel. We have to get him out of there.”

“Not now, *cher*. We need to get him to a safer place.”

She frowned. “Anywhere is safer and more comfortable than the trunk. I was so confused and scared, I left him there, and I’m so sorry. If he’s hurt, it will be all my fault. Gabriel, we have to get him out.”

He ran a hand through his hair like he barely contained anger. Babet didn’t get the attitude he was giving her. “Babet, get in the car. You’re going to drive behind me until we reach Vashel’s hotel.”

“But I—”

He pulled her close and then roughly led her to the car to sit her behind the wheel. “I can’t explain right now. I promise I will later.” He leaned over her, stroking her cheek. She hated the regret he saw there. No matter what she’d suffered the night before, Gabriel hadn’t changed his mind about dumping her. She turned away from him and clenched the steering wheel, waiting for him to get into his car. He started to speak again, but then fell silent.

Babet followed Gabriel back to the French Quarter. This time, anger burned in her heart, helping her to bear the fear that Vashel wasn’t okay in the trunk. Whatever she’d done wrong in this whole ordeal, she didn’t deserve to be treated this way by Gabriel. There was no love lost between her and Martin, but he was still her brother. Breaking up with Gabriel was for the

best, and whatever involvement he had with John was between them. Money or no money, Babet was leaving New Orleans today.

Chapter Twelve

Gabriel pulled to a stop in front of the Royal Paresta. He hurried back to Babet's vehicle and got her out. She'd been up all night and witnessed the murder of her own brother. Gabriel knew if he didn't get her somewhere she could relax and give her something to help her sleep, she might have a breakdown. On top of that, she was worried about Vashel, as was he. But bringing Vashel out into the sunlight meant certain death. He'd already called ahead for hotel personnel who could come out in daylight to take care of his friend.

While Gabriel led Babet into the hotel, porters scrambled past with heavy UV resistant cloaks to lay over Vashel. Gabriel knew there would also be someone in his room to give him blood should he need it. After he had settled Babet in another room, he'd come to check on his friend.

When they stepped into the elevator, pass key in hand, Babet moved to the opposite side of the enclosure, her arms crossed. She was pissed off at him, and he didn't blame her. With one day until the full moon, Gabriel was almost out of control. The beast wanted its freedom, and because of that, Gabriel's disposition was shot to hell. He'd been impatient with Babet, and after what she'd been through, she didn't deserve him treating her that way.

When they reached the room, he let them both inside and shut the door. A moment later, someone knocked. Gabriel opened the door to find a porter with the sedative he'd ordered in hand. Of course, Royal Paresta was unlike any other hotel in existence. What went on there was not for everyone to know.

"I want you to take this, Babet. It will help you to rest," he told her.

"No, I don't want anything. I want to go home. I have things to do."

He tried to hold her, but she pushed him away. Gabriel didn't want to force her, but he had to. It was for her own good. She'd been shaking just a little after he'd held her out on the highway, but now the tremors had intensified. Babet had no idea how mentally drained she was.

"I don't trust you, Gabriel," she declared. "I don't know who you are."

"Because of that bastard who grabbed you?" He fought for calm. "*Cher*, you know me. I—"

"No, actually, I don't! I said I want to go home! Now!" She sobbed. "I never want to see you again. I don't need your money or you. I've been taking care of myself all these years, and I can do it again. I couldn't even depend on you last night to save me. Right now, I can't stand you."

He stared at her, his eyes wide, feeling grim. Not for an instant did he allow to show what her words had done to him. "Whatever you want," he

said softly. He was a fool. Sure, work had kept him, but it didn't have to take as long as it did. He'd delayed getting back to her over the last few days for the simple reason that he didn't want her out of his life. Even if they couldn't be together, knowing Babet was close, living in his apartment, offered him a small bit of comfort. While he'd lain alone in his bed, he'd fantasized about her, brought himself to orgasms. But it had meant nothing without Babet in his arms.

When had he fallen in love with her? When had she become the air he breathed? Yet, it was hopeless. She deserved so much more. Delaying what he had promised her had led to this situation. That bastard John could have killed Babet, and it would have been all Gabriel's fault. Babet was right. They should never be together, especially with him cursed to become a beast every month for the rest of his wretched existence.

Gabriel strolled to the door and paused without looking back. "Get some rest. I *will* give you the money I promised. Don't worry. John is not allowed in here."

She didn't answer, so he passed out of the room and shut the door behind him. The man he set to guard the place would ensure no one entered and Babet did not leave. Gabriel needed to make sure Vashel was fine. He walked along the hall and knocked on his friend's door. Another vampire, a woman who came up to Gabriel's elbow, if that much, opened the door. She glared at him, but he moved past her, not intimidated in the least.

"How is he?" he asked.

"None the worse for wear," Vashel answered for himself. "Thank goodness your human didn't decide to rescue me from the trunk before you got there." Vashel busily wiped blood from his mouth. Gabriel assumed the small woman had offered him sustenance. Vashel appeared well if weaker from his experience.

"I'm sorry this happened when you were doing me a favor," Gabriel said. "I was a fool to underestimate how far John would go before the full moon. You're sure you're okay?"

Vashel stood up. Lacerations on his face and bruises on his knuckles faded with each passing moment. "It's I who should apologize, my friend. You left her in my care, and I failed you." He closed his eyes, no doubt remembering what had happened the night before. "The lowlife must have killed something in the alley, spread its blood so it would evoke my blood lust. I could think of almost nothing beyond tasting it when he attacked us."

Gabriel watched Vashel's face. The only time his emotions stirred even a little was when he spoke of blood. Gabriel couldn't understand that kind of addiction, but he'd seen it countless times over the years from Vashel and

others. He knew that at that moment, Vashel could have attacked Babet for her blood, and if he had, Gabriel would not have needed the beast to kill again. He would kill for Babet if need be. But would it come to that?

"You must realize that it will come to that," Vashel told him.

Gabriel frowned. "Get the hell out of my head."

Vashel raised a neat eyebrow. "Don't be jealous." He gestured with his hands. "Since Marie went against your wishes and called John with her spell, he and you are drawn to each other. If you will not join his pack, you will have to kill him. He will never leave you alone, and no matter where you send Babet, he will hunt for her and use her against you."

"She's just—"

"Don't assume no one knows how you feel for her, my friend. This life you live may seem hopeless to you, but as you've discovered, the moment John dies, you are redeemed. I, on the other hand, will never have that luxury."

Gabriel ran his hands through his hair and started to walk toward the window before he remembered it was covered. He sighed. "In other words, I should stop feeling sorry for myself and get it over with. Is that it? Some of us still have emotions that didn't die when we did."

"Touché." Vashel moved to a bar in the corner of the room and made a drink. He brought it to Gabriel. "I'm sure you're not planning to let her stay here until after dark? Some will awaken ravenous, too hungry to hide their fangs while inside our sanctuary. If Babet should see that..."

"I know." Gabriel hadn't wanted to move her while she slept, but if she didn't wake before sundown, he would. He considered taking her to his apartment, but changed his mind. Too close to the full moon, he could not stay in the city, and he would no longer trust anyone to watch her other than himself until he dealt with John. His house on the bayou was the safest place for both of them. "I should get back to her to be sure she's fine."

Gabriel downed his drink and thanked Vashel before heading back to Babet's room. When he walked in, she lay on her side, eyes closed. His heartbeat kicked up a few notches watching her. Gabriel couldn't help himself. He needed to be closer. After crossing the room in three long strides, he climbed on the bed and lay down. Propping himself up on an elbow, he stared down into her beautiful face. Her skin was smooth and brown, soft to his touch. He ran the back of his fingers over her cheeks and teased her mouth with his thumb.

Gabriel shifted closer as he watched over Babet. Time passed by, but he was not paying much attention. The next time he looked up, the clock on the nightstand read four in the afternoon. They'd need to get moving. With

reluctance, he sat up and turned away from Babet. After fishing out his cell phone, he dialed Lawrence.

“Mr. Gabriel, what can I do for you, sir?” Lawrence asked without pause.

“Lawrence, I’m bringing Ms. Babet back to the house for a couple of days. She may want her own room, so have it ready just in case. Also, have you heard any news about a murder in the city, a young, black man?” Gabriel was not worried in the least that Lawrence would assume it was him who committed the crime or turn him in if he did think so. His servant had been loyal to Gabriel from the time he had been a young man.

“Yes, sir. They are looking for the young, black woman with braids that was with a Caucasian male at the Old Speck Bar.”

Gabriel swore. Another detail he would have to take care of. For now, he needed to get Babet out of the city. She would not like him delaying her leaving, but it couldn’t be helped. Now, if he didn’t deal with both John and the police, anywhere she went was pointless.

“We’ll be there within an hour. Bring the boat, please.”

“Yes, sir. I’m on my way.”

Gabriel reached down to retrieve Babet’s shoes from the floor where she’d kicked them off. He gently put them on her feet and then wrapped her in a comforter. She stirred for a moment, but he kissed her sweet lips and murmured soothing words. He phoned down to the front desk for a protective car, which amounted to deep tinted windows for creatures for whom the sun was painful, but not deadly. That would serve to keep prying eyes from spotting Babet and reporting her location to the police.

After lifting her into his arms, Gabriel left the room and headed down the hall toward the elevator. On the first floor, a bellboy topped Gabriel’s head with a dark cloak and spread it around Babet as well. They passed with haste to the car and were soon speeding toward the pier.

Within a short period of time, Gabriel had Babet settled in bed as the sun lowered on the horizon, and the entire sky lit up with an almost florescent orange. He breathed in the evening air at her window, feeling the beast stir inside. A low growl of longing left his throat, but he reined in the desire. Perhaps he did know a little something about the addiction Vashel battled. When Babet stirred behind him, he shut the window and quickly turned toward her.

Her sooty lashes fluttered, and she opened her eyes, looking around in confusion. Alarm registered on her face. She shoved up from the bed into a seated position. “What am I doing here? Did you... Did you kidnap me? I told you I wanted to leave and I never wanted to see you again!”

Tears filled her eyes, although she fought them. Gabriel's chest constricted. He took a step forward, reaching out to her. "No, I'd never do that, *cher*. You have to understand—"

"Stay away from me!"

His reflexes should have been more on point, but he didn't expect her to toss the lamp at his head. The piece shattered when it hit, nicking his ear. Gabriel swore and wiped blood from the side of his face. When he looked up again, Babet was gone. Gabriel took off after her, hearing her bare feet shuffle down the stairs. By the time he made it to the top, she'd slung the front door open and had jetted through to the darkening night. *No!*

On the front porch, he scanned the area and found no sight of Babet, but he smelled the direction she'd gone in. The beast seemed to leap in his chest and in his mind, wanting freedom. His blood pumped harder with his increased heartbeats. Gabriel left the porch on a run. He charged through the trees, not caring about how the low hanging branches tore at his face and clothes. Another growl rose in his throat. The almost full moon egged him on.

Gabriel knew when his teeth sharpened, and his claws grew on the edges of his fingers. The night before the full moon, he could force a change, but he couldn't hold it long, and he hadn't attempted it for many years. Tonight, chasing after Babet, he craved to let go, to give his demon freedom. While he ran, Gabriel bit down on the inside of his cheek, hoping the pain would help him to keep control. But the moment he heard her ahead of him, thrashing through the brush, panting, he was lost. He howled and ran faster, but not enough to catch her. The chase—how the wolf lived for the chase.

All of a sudden, the trees fell away, and Babet came up on the bayou. The moon was so bright, Gabriel didn't doubt when she turned his way, she'd see how much he had changed. He couldn't reverse it now, hide what he was.

"Babet, don't be afraid," he begged in a thickened voice, one he didn't use when in wolf form. "I-I didn't want you to find out this way. I wanted to tell you...or...send you away without knowing, with thoughts of the way you knew me." He sounded like a lovesick fool.

She didn't say anything. He thought at least she would accuse him, yell that he was a disgusting animal. Her brown eyes were wide with fear, and she pressed the back of her hand to her mouth, backing away. One foot slipped into the marshy water before she regained her balance. He thought he'd have a heart attack.

"Come away from there, Babet. It's not safe." With his keen eyesight, he searched the bayou for any sign of gators. At the prospect of a kill, his bones cracked and popped, forcing him into more of the change. He doubled over

onto all fours and shut his eyes for an instant before forcing them open again. Not for a moment could he afford to take his gaze from her.

Now in full wolf form, his clothes torn away, Gabriel inched toward her. Babet shook her head, crying. Before he could take another step, he picked up the second scent on the breeze and turned his head to the left. A few moments later, Lawrence came puffing through the trees with a comforter. "Ms. Babet, let me take you to the house. I will make sure you're safe."

She hesitated, swinging her frightened stare from Gabriel to Lawrence. Gabriel backed off a few paces, hoping she would listen to his servant. She hugged herself. "You're...you're..."

Lawrence nodded. "Yes, miss. I'm human. If I were more, I would not shuffle around in this creaking old body of mine."

Babet must have decided to trust him for the moment. She ran over to Lawrence and let him wrap the comforter about her shaking shoulders. As they walked ahead of him, Gabriel prepared to follow until something else shifted in the darkness. With the night now dark, a figure launched through the shadows and landed on Gabriel, sending him rolling head over heels toward the water. Claws ripped through his flesh and teeth chomped down on his neck. He howled in pain before kicking his opponent away. Somewhere nearby, Babet screamed. Gabriel willed Lawrence to get her inside the house while he dealt with this new danger.

Righting himself, he examined his enemy and knew by the scent it was John. The other wolf sneered. *"If you won't join me, you will die. And so will your bitch."*

Gabriel flattened his ears. He'd never met a werewolf in New Orleans, but he had traveled extensively in his earlier days of looking for a cure. He knew in full wolf form, the only means of communication between his kind was telepathically. That gift had never worked with Vashel and not in his human form.

"You will die before I let you touch her," he threatened.

"Like you killed your family, your precious sister."

"You know nothing about my sister!" Gabriel roared in his mind. *"Nor about my family."*

"Do you think I didn't keep a watch on you over the years? I watch all of my own. Maybe not personally, but I have eyes everywhere, those who are loyal to me. If you don't want her to die—"

Gabriel didn't give him the chance to continue. He leaped at John, but already, he felt the beast's control lessening. Soon he would change back, but so would John. Gabriel ripped into his maker with everything he had, wanting this mess to come to an end. For a moment, when he went for the

kill, a bite to John's throat, the memory of Gaye dying at his hands flashed through his mind. Guilt made him falter, giving John the advantage.

John swiped sharp claws across Gabriel's chest, and Gabriel fell onto his back with searing pain ripping through his body. The second blow didn't come when his bones elongated and straightened. The extra hair receded, and he lay unable to move as his life essence seeped from the wound. Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched John slip naked and wounded into the darkness. How he wished the other wolf's injuries were severe enough to end his life, but like Gabriel, John would heal. The fight would continue another time.

Chapter Thirteen

Babet woke in a dark room. It took her several moments to realize where she was, stuck in the middle of nowhere while the man she loved was an animal. All of a sudden, she felt more vulnerable than she'd ever felt in her life. Trembling beneath the sheet tossed over her, she considered what she'd seen that night. Gabriel as a wolf—a real, live, four-footed beast.

This had to be fantasy. Maybe she'd been in some kind of accident and was in a coma. That this was all a dream made a whole lot more sense. She sat up and threw her feet over the side of the bed. Fully clothed except for her bare feet, she suspected Lawrence had put her to bed and not Gabriel.

The thought of Gabriel reminded her that something had come out of the trees, something vicious. Was he okay? Did she care? Unfortunately, her stupid heart couldn't turn off what it felt just because he wasn't human. Fear that that thing had killed him forced her to go find out. Without turning on the light, she left her room and tiptoed along the hall. Gabriel had put her in the bedroom she'd had before, next to his. She stopped at his door and pressed her ear to the panels. No sound reached her, but light flickered beneath the door. The way it wavered and shifted, she suspected it was a fire. The night had been turning chilly when they headed back to the house.

Swallowing to wet her parched throat, she touched the knob, but then drew back when she heard a noise. Babet backpedaled deeper in the hall's shadows when the door opened and Lawrence paused in the opening. Beyond him Gabriel stood in front of the fire, staring down at it. His back muscles, all tight with tension, were visible since he didn't have on a shirt. Despite everything that she'd experienced, desire crept into Babet's belly. She resented him for making her feel anything at all.

"How is she?" Gabriel asked Lawrence.

"When I checked on her a half hour ago, she was still resting. Sir, if you don't mind me saying so, you should talk to her about this. Finding out you're a werewolf is shocking for anyone—more so for the woman who loves you."

Babet bit down on her tongue to keep from crying out at Lawrence's words. She was that obvious, huh? She was an idiot. Not expecting Gabriel to acknowledge the same feelings for her, she hoped he would say it anyway, but was shot down.

"What she feels doesn't matter." To his credit, he sounded and looked hurt by his admission when he turned around. "Because of what I am, we can't be together. I knew that from the beginning. I...I wanted her. I shouldn't have."

Tears slid down Babet's cheeks. She swiped at them and pinched her nose to keep from giving herself away. Gabriel had sounded hopeless, but was she reading more emotion into what he felt than was real? Her mind still couldn't wrap around the facts or accept them. All she knew for sure was the man she loved didn't love her back. That's what it was always about in any woman's heartbreak.

"Sir, you should get some rest. I know you heal quickly, but that gash was bad." Lawrence shook his head, focusing on the red, jagged scars extending from Gabriel's neck, over his collarbone, and onto his chest. Babet's eyes grew wide staring at it. The other thing had done that to him, and yet he stood there like they'd been out there having tea, not trying to rip each other's throats apart.

Babet put a hand up to her throat and took another step back. This time, she stumbled and fell hard on her butt. When she looked up, both men's attention was trained on her.

"Good night, Lawrence," Gabriel said.

Lawrence nodded and murmured good night to them both before he shuffled off into the darkness. Gabriel stood where he was watching her. Babet considered what she should do, stay or run. She'd run earlier, and that had gotten herself and Gabriel in trouble. Besides, she prided herself on standing up to her fears and her challenges even if she could never win. She'd lost many times over the years.

Babet stood up and walked into his room. She'd like to think she'd moved with dignity, holding her head up high, but from the feeling of lead in her limbs and the fear still coursing through every vein, she probably jerked like she was having a fit. When she passed the doorjamb, Gabriel severed the eye contact they'd shared as she approached him. With his back to her, a chill moved over her flesh, and she shivered.

"I told you I wanted to leave," she said, her voice too low and scratchy. She cleared it. "I have money saved—"

"No."

"Gabriel!"

He sighed. "I'm not holding you against your will, Babet, but the fact of the matter is that I have to deal with John before I can let you go. He's made you his target to get back at me. I was naïve to think this could be resolved without violence."

She blinked, seeing him grip the ledge over the fireplace until his fingers were white and strained. His head dipped down, and the tension in his muscles appeared to grow. Babet shouldn't feel sorry for him. He was part animal, or all animal pretending to be human. She didn't get that. However,

Gabriel was struggling with something. If she didn't know any better, she'd think he didn't want to fight, didn't want to kill John. That man didn't deserve mercy, and she suspected the police wouldn't know the first thing about bringing him down.

Babet inched closer. Everything inside her screamed, *run for your life*, but she held her ground. "What's wrong? Why don't you want to fight him?"

"It's not that I don't want to fight him." He ran a hand through his hair and flexed his shoulders. Babet dug her nails into her palms to keep from touching him this time. "The beast in me lives for that sort of thing, but..."

She hugged herself. "But what?"

"You think you know what am, but you don't know the half of it. You don't know how far into hell I've been and how hard it was to find my way out. Bringing you into this nightmare was an error in judgment I will make right—somehow."

"Is it your family?" she ventured. "Did you hurt them like John insinuated?"

"Hurt them?" His laugh was bitter and humorless. "A hurt can be healed. What I did can never be taken back. Do you remember the story I told you?"

She searched her memory, and dread snaked through her being. "The one with the brother and sister?"

"Yes, that was me and Gaye, my sister."

"But you said that was the early eighteen hundreds, more than two hundred years ago. You can't be that old." She studied his face. The man didn't look a day beyond thirty-five.

Sad acceptance came over his countenance. "I age about five years per century. I am not immortal like a vampire, but I do have a long lifespan."

Babet blinked at him. Like a vampire? So they were real too? It was too much to fathom, so she let it go. Still, no wonder so many paranormal books and movies were set in her city. They'd probably all been written by those who knew firsthand. How she could ever again walk the streets alone at night, she didn't know.

Gabriel continued. "The night my father announced he'd accepted an offer for Gaye, she ran out of the house into the woods. I chased after her. It was a full moon, and unknown to either of us, John was out on the prowl. I didn't know who it was at the time. All I knew was that I heard Gaye scream, and then I came on a scene that should have stopped my heart. I fought off the beast, or tried to, and for my pains, I nearly had my arm torn from my body. We both would have been killed if someone who later became a friend hadn't saved us."

"Vashel?" she guessed.

He started and looked at her.

“He’s a vampire, right?”

Gabriel’s eyebrows rose. “How do you know that? Did he tell you?”

“No, I remembered how you panicked when I tried to open the trunk, and I remembered other little details about when I was with him. Plus, just now you mentioned vampires as if they exist.”

“I’m glad you’re taking all of this so calmly.”

“Trust me. I’m not calm,” she quipped. “Go on.”

“Vashel’s mate saved us. She introduced me to Vashel later. She was killed several years ago in an unrelated incident.” His eyes began to glaze over with the telling of the story. “That night Gaye and I became werewolves, chained to the phases of the moon. Because we were young, we had no control over the rage that comes with the curse, a rage that makes you harm those you love the most.

“Vashel and his mate hunted for John, but he seemed to disappear from the face of the earth. Gaye and I woke up the next morning almost healed, and over the next few days, we grew stronger. Like I told you, she was sickly most of her life. With the curse, that disappeared, and Gaye embraced everything that being a werewolf meant. She no longer had to follow my father’s rules, or society’s for that matter. While I battled the wolf each month, Gaye went on killing sprees. I pleaded with her to come away with me, somewhere we could just be alone where we couldn’t hurt anyone. She didn’t want to.”

Babet knew where this was going. Despite her fear, she walked over to Gabriel and rested her hands on his chest. He closed his eyes, sucking in a deep breath. She felt a quiver pass over his skin and wondered if it was from his memories flooding back, or from her touch. He covered her hands with his. She thought he was going to push her away, but he raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them one by one. Desire curled in Babet’s belly. She moved closer. Their bodies brushed.

And then, she remembered what he was and didn’t know how to handle it. He saw the doubt in her eyes and let her go. “One night I decided she had to be stopped by any means necessary. I followed her down toward the bayou, but somehow, she must have doubled back. The scent of blood was overwhelming. All I wanted to do was rip something apart. My nose led me back to the house, and that’s where I found her over my parents and a loyal servant. They were dead.

“Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t see them as my parents at that point. I saw them as prey just as Gaye did. And I saw her as my opponent, someone to fight for the right to take her kill. We went head-to-head.”

Up until that point, Gabriel had been telling her his story in an almost monotone, no emotion whatsoever, but when he reached the point of admitting that he had killed his sister, he dropped to his knees before the fireplace and cradled his head in his hands. She expected to see his shoulders shaking from sobs or to hear him cry out, but he held it all in. The single demonstration of what he endured was the pounding of his fist on the hard floor.

Babet rushed to him and fell down behind him to wrap her arms around his waist. She caught his hand to keep him from hurting himself, and she stroked the bruised skin. "It's going to be okay, Gabriel."

"No," he panted. "It's not. I killed her, Babet—the one person that meant more to me than anyone else. My best friend. I killed Gaye, and nothing I do can ever change it. I am cursed until I die, and when I do, I will go to hell for what I have done."

She climbed around him and sat in his lap while forcing him to look at her. Cupping his unshaven jaw, she stared into his eyes. "It's not your fault, Gabriel. None of it is. You didn't kill your family, and you had no choice with Gaye."

"Don't you see? If I hadn't let her get away with it, none of them would have been killed. I have lived alone here in this house as punishment for two hundred years."

Pushing her fingers into his hair, loving the silky feel along with the pleasure of being close to him, she said, "And how's that working out for you?"

Instead of laughing at her attempt to lighten the mood, he brushed a thumb over her bottom lip. "Babet, you should go back to your room."

She swallowed. "And if I don't?"

"Then I will strip you naked and make love to you in front of this fire. Being with you is the only pleasure in my life."

It wasn't a declaration of love, but it did reveal that he had some feelings for her. Babet leaned back and unbuttoned her blouse. She slipped the two sides over her shoulders and then tossed the shirt away. Her bra soon followed. She waited for Gabriel's reaction. Too many times, she'd seen the lust in his eyes, so she knew she turned him on. Cocking her head to the side, she prompted, "Well?"

He lifted a hand and played with one of her nipples between two fingers. Babet arched into his touch. He groaned. "You don't know the dangerous game you're playing, *cher*. I could hurt you."

"You won't hurt me."

She lay back on the carpet and waited for him to join her, but Gabriel scooted over toward his bed to drag down a comforter. He lifted her as if she weighed nothing to spread the cover beneath and then paused with his hand at her jeans zipper. "Are you sure, Babet? After this, we..."

He left the rest unfinished, but she knew what he was going to say. He would send her away tomorrow while he dealt with John, and there was a real possibility that she would never see him again. Tears filled her eyes. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Gabriel already knew what she felt about him, and she wasn't going to say it again. Besides, he was right. Gabriel was a werewolf, cursed for life. They couldn't be together. This one night was all she asked.

"I'm sure."

He leaned over her and nudged her lips apart with his. Gentler than any time before, he pushed his tongue into her mouth. Babet welcomed him in, loving the warmth of his touch, the pleasure he evoked. She drove her fingers into his hair to pull him closer, but Gabriel withdrew. He trailed kisses down her jaw to her neck and on to her chest. Briefly, he paused at one nipple to suck it between his full lips and leave her panting for more. Then, he moved to tease the other tight peak. Babet's back came up off the floor as the tip of his tongue circled her puckered areola. She cupped her breasts as if to feed him, but once again, Gabriel withdrew. She cried out.

"Patience," he whispered, and continued his exploration.

He pinched open the button at her waist and lowered her zipper. Next, he worked her pants over her hips and snatched them free of her legs. Her panties followed, but he hesitated before throwing them aside. "I've dreamed of you in skimpy panties, your dark skin contrasting stark white, or maybe red or black."

He lifted her panties to his nose a minute with his eyes shut, and then dropped them to lay a palm over her hot core. Babet shuddered. She grabbed his wrist to push him tight to her. She squeezed his hand and gyrated her hips a couple times. When he pulled his hand away, a light coating of her cream lay in the center. While he watched her, eyes almost black, he licked it clean. Babet clutched the cover beneath her. The man loved her flavor. It was too hot. She couldn't wait to get him buried deep inside of her. If he withdrew at that point, Babet wasn't beyond taking what she wanted. Gabriel had pushed her beyond the point of no return.

He licked his way down across her belly and paused above her center. A mysterious look tossed up at her let her know she was going to lose what control she had when he was ready to take her. Gabriel pushed her legs apart and nipped at her inner thigh. He raised one of her legs and ran a finger over

her slit. When he teased her swollen lips apart and pressed his digit into her, Babet squirmed. She begged him to put in more fingers, but he wasn't listening. Gabriel had his own agenda, and all she could do was go along for the ride.

Gabriel coated his finger and then licked it clean, making her watch his actions. Babet tried to close her legs, but he shook his head. "No, you don't. You will take all I have for you, *cher*, even if you don't think you can handle it."

He dipped his thumb in her juices, only to run it back to her rear entry. Once again, he locked their gazes, and then he thrust in. Babet gasped in shock. She fought to get away, not because it didn't feel good, but like Gabriel said, it was too much. He pinned her in place, a knee over her legs. His thumb worked the hell out of her rear. Babet cried out her pleasure, but Gabriel wasn't done driving her insane.

He lowered his head closer to her center and began to lap at her juices while working her with his thumb. Babet raised her hips, pushing into him, wanting to take him deeper. Her muscles clenched around his thumb, and when he moved his hungry mouth to her nub, she grasped his head to tug him closer.

"Gabriel, I'm going to come," she screamed. He never let up for an instant. Between closing her eyes and forcing them open, dropping her head back to enjoy the pleasure he gave her, she tried hard to watch him eat her out. The man didn't have to tell her his untamed side loved how she tasted. He couldn't seem to get enough. She tried to track his darting tongue as it laved her swollen bud, but her orgasm came on strong.

Accompanied by the crackling fire and Gabriel's eager moans, she screamed her way through a powerful climax. But when the waves of bliss began to settle, Gabriel sat up and ripped out of his clothing. She stared, half afraid, half turned on at the naked lust radiating off of him. His shaft, when he revealed it, stood out from his body rigid and ready. Babet reached out to run her fingers over Gabriel's chest, luxuriating in his defined muscle. His skin was warmer to the touch than she remembered before, and when she glanced up into his face, it was to find a wildness there, like the beast was in control.

She hesitated. He'd warned her that having sex with him tonight was dangerous. The little she knew of werewolves was that they turned into beasts on the night of the full moon, and now she remembered the significance of the sixteenth. That was the problem. So close to when Gabriel had no say over what happened to him. He would walk the night in his cursed form.

Babet shivered while watching him. Now she saw it, in his eyes, the way they darkened. She'd attributed it to lust, but there was more, his aggression during sex, the alpha in him. Gabriel held out his hand to her. "Come here."

The command was unmistakable. He'd given her a choice earlier. She'd chosen him. Shifting to her hands and knees, she crawled toward him and stopped when she drew close. Gabriel gripped her shoulders. He leaned down as if to breathe her scent deep into his lungs. A shudder of need passed over Babet. She said nothing. He pressed his lips to her throat and nipped her. The sting startled her, but he didn't break her skin. He tightened his grip.

"If I take you now," he muttered against her skin, "I might hurt you. It's taking every kernel of my strength not to throw you on your back and force my way into you. The smell of your release mixed with your natural essence is driving me insane."

She caught a low growl come from him. Her life was in danger, yet here she was, getting wetter by the second. The fact that it was Gabriel, that he cared enough to fight with himself to keep from hurting her, melted the thin barrier she'd begun erecting around her heart when he hadn't told her he loved her in return.

"Let me," she whispered. She traced a path with her fingers to his nipple and plucked at it. Gabriel gasped. He didn't stop her when she leaned in to tease it with her tongue. She sucked at the tiny peak before moving to the other one. While she kissed his hot skin, she reached down between his legs to grab hold of his erection. Gabriel covered her hand as if he was afraid of what he might do. She raised her chin to kiss him. "Trust me, Gabriel. I trust you. I know you won't hurt me."

"You don't know that."

"I do."

She pushed him back, and when he was flat, she climbed up on his massive form to position herself over his hard-on. Anticipation clenched her belly as she grabbed hold his shaft and began to lower herself onto it. Babet caught her breath as the first inch parted her folds and glided inside. Gabriel blew out through flared nostrils. His intent stare never left her face. His jaw was clenched tight as he bit down.

"You like it, baby," she told him as she took him deeper.

"You're so damn tight, *cher*." He squeezed her waist almost painfully. "How many times must I take you before your body accepts me without a fight?"

Babet's lashes grew wet. She was about to look away, but he tipped her chin to force her to look at him. "You make me come too soon," he grumbled, and then he took back control from her, making their hips grind

together, his shaft push deep and then glide out. Over and over, they pumped together, the silent room punctuated with their grunts and moans.

Babet rested her hands on Gabriel's solid abs and squeezed his sides with her thighs. He was right about how they fit. The pleasure was explosive. She bent back to brace herself with a hand on the floor. She rode his thick shaft like a woman who hadn't had a man in years. Each time he withdrew his shaft and drove it back in, she traced the movements with her palm, loving the slick, wet skin as it skimmed over her fingertips.

Without warning, Gabriel sat up, jerked out of her, and then turned her so her back was to him. He pushed Babet down on her hands and knees and spread her legs wider. She chewed her lip, knowing what was coming. Rough and demanding, he thrust into her heat. She bit off a scream. He ground hard and fast, one arm wrapped around her waist to slam her back to him. Babet could do nothing other than hang on. Gabriel pounded their bodies together until Babet couldn't hold off her climax any longer. When it came, it sent her keening in a loud voice, oblivious to anything other than her lover and the way he made her feel. Soon after, Gabriel also reached his release. He came shouting her name, and when he was done, he pulled her back on his chest. They clung to each other on their knees, breathing hard, lips brushing.

When he'd caught his breath, Gabriel stood up and lifted Babet into his arms. He carried her to the bathroom, and together they showered off the residue of their lovemaking. Babet shook from head to toe as Gabriel towed her off, and then he returned her to his bed. He stood over her rather than join her. The look in his eyes tore at her heart. It was the expression of a man who had everything taken away from him, a man without hope.

Babet didn't ask Gabriel where he was going when he dressed and left the room. Instead, she cried herself to sleep, wishing there was something she could do to save him.

Chapter Fourteen

Gabriel stalked about the house feeling like a caged animal. Every now and then he stepped out onto his front porch and stared into the trees. While he couldn't pick up on John's scent anywhere in the vicinity, he knew the man was out there somewhere, biding his time until night fell. The urge to rip his enemy apart bubbled inside Gabriel. He knew the same feeling grew within John.

He hated who and what he was. The sooner this whole mess was over, the better. Rage coursed through his veins, dragging a growl from him at every perceived slight. He slammed doors and broke any delicate items that had the misfortune of being between his hands. Because of that, he'd forbidden Babet to leave her room. Just thinking about her had him rock hard, but a repeat of last night was impossible today. He had scarcely restrained himself from doing damage to her sweet body then, but today, he'd never have the control.

"Sir, would you like anything?"

Gabriel whirled around from his vacant stare out the front door. "Why the hell are you still here, Lawrence?" he roared. "You know the rules. You leave the house until tomorrow morning."

His servant's eyebrows went up, and he wrung his hands. Gabriel wasn't fooled at the calm exterior. He knew Lawrence was nervous being here. He had not come face to face with the destruction Gabriel wrought on the night of the full moon, but he'd seen the interior of the room in the old slave quarters. The deep gashes on the walls, the bite marks in the bed's posts. Gabriel had destroyed many of those over the years. He'd considered not furnishing the room, but decided something to work out the rage was better than nothing.

"You've allowed Ms. Babet to stay," Lawrence reminded him. "I thought—"

"Don't think, Lawrence," Gabriel snapped. "Here is the best place for her. If I send her to the city, John will trace her there. No one can protect her from him as well as I can."

Lawrence never bit his tongue. "Who will protect her from you?"

Gabriel paced, running his fingers through his hair. He sighed. "Fine. Stay. Get the gun and the two of you lock yourselves in the library. At least you'll have something to read. You make sure she doesn't leave that room until sunrise."

"Yes, sir." His servant turned on creaking joints while Gabriel stared out the front door. In the west, the sun was beginning to set. His nostrils flared,

and already, he felt the changes coming. His gums ached. The blood in his veins seemed to boil as it rushed throughout his body. Clear thoughts began to fade to be replaced by an intense desire to hunt.

* * * *

Babet jumped at the howl outside in the dark night. Lawrence had boarded up the window, but that didn't stop the sounds from reaching them. An hour ago, they'd heard someone walking in the hall and then scuffling in the bushes, but no creature tried to enter. Her heart threatened to hammer out of her chest, and she didn't place much faith in Lawrence's shooting the way he shook at every noise.

While she was terrified one of the werewolves would break in at any moment, she was more scared that John would kill Gabriel. If that happened, she didn't know what she'd do. After that look Gabriel had given her last night, she knew he loved her. He could deny it all he wanted, but she'd seen it in his eyes and the way he fought with everything he had to be gentle with her. Curled in a chair, she closed her eyes to the pain wracking her body, the ache at being unable to be with him. If Gabriel was able to win the fight tonight, what then? She blew out a breath and rested her forehead on her drawn up knees. Who was she kidding? She knew what then. Gabriel would send her away because there was no way he would repeat this night over and over, risking her life.

An explosion jerked Babet from her thoughts. She jumped to her feet. "What was that?"

"The front door," Lawrence whispered, his gun trained on the library door. "Sounds like someone just tore it from the hinges."

She swallowed. Were they that strong?

Something scratched along the hall, and it took a few seconds for Babet to realize what it was—clawed feet. Her knees threatened to give out, but she held them straight with a will to survive. She glanced around for a weapon and spotted a poker beside the fireplace. She gripped it in both hands and waited. The noise stopped. A howl pierced the still night, and then growls reached them as heavy thumps landed against the door. Babet thought she'd wet herself when she heard wood splitting.

Lawrence confirmed her fears. "They're fighting right outside the room. If they keep it up, they'll break the door down."

One of the animals yelped in pain. Babet shot forward. "Gabriel!"

"No, Miss Babet," Lawrence called out.

She was several feet from the door when it burst open and the wolves tumbled inside. One of the beasts didn't pause for a second. It leaped at Babet and sent her down hard. The poker went clattering across the floor out of reach. Shock slammed through Babet's system at the first bite into her arm. She screamed in pain. The animal brought its powerful jaws down again, and Babet's vision blurred. A shot rang out. Another growl and she felt, rather than saw, the wolf snatched away from her.

Fire burned through Babet's body. She kept blacking out and waking up. All sounds came from a distance. She tried opening her eyes, but she couldn't force her lids higher than a slit. Even then, she saw nothing but shadows. The sticky liquid between her fingers indicated she was probably bleeding to death.

"Gabriel," she called out, but wasn't sure she'd spoken very loud given her dry throat. Trying again was too much effort. She lay there, unable to move.

Sometime later, something touched Babet's forehead, cooling her down a little. She felt like she was on fire and hadn't drunk anything for days. Forcing her eyes open, she tried to pick up any sounds of the fight, but the room was quieter. Had Gabriel and John gone back outside, or were they both...? She turned her thoughts away from thinking the worst.

"Ms. Babet, can you hear me?" Lawrence asked.

She looked at his blurred face. When it came into focus, she was sure the elderly man had aged twenty years in a few hours. Stooped, he hung over her as if any second he would collapse.

"Yes," she responded, although not sure he could hear her. "Gabriel?"

Lawrence shook his head. Babet started up on a scream, but the servant held her down. "No, no. He's not dead. Neither is that other one. I nicked him, but he got away, and Gabriel went off after him. All this time I had that gun and turns out I can't shoot very well." The sorrow in Lawrence's eyes touched her, but she was more worried about Gabriel.

Before Lawrence could stop her, Babet surged to her feet and swayed. He stood up, reaching for her, but she stepped toward the door. "I've got to help him. I won't be a victim anymore, waiting for someone to rescue me."

"Ms. Babet, this isn't the time for that. You can't beat a werewolf, and Mr. Gabriel might hurt you. He would never be able to live with himself if he did. Think of him if not your own safety."

Whether he made sense or not, she didn't care. Babet shuffled along. Her head spun, and her vision went in and out. The fact that she was even trying to help Gabriel was probably testament to her being half out of her mind, but she was going to try anyway. What she didn't tell Lawrence was that she

already felt a change coming over her body. John had bitten her. She didn't know all the rules of becoming a werewolf, but the one fact almost everyone knew was that anyone scratched or bitten by one would be condemned to live as he did.

Somehow, she made it outside into the cool, dark night. Her fevered brow received a tiny bit of relief, but from the second she stumbled off the porch steps, she encountered the moon's pull. Babet paused by a tree and held on as her insides ignited and burned her alive. She screamed and writhed in pain. In the distance, two wolves called out in answer. When the howls sounded a second time, they were closer. John and Gabriel must have heard something in her cry, some message of being like them. Babet turned to place her back against the rough tree bark and scanned the area around her. Blood rushed in her ears, and her limbs quivered. Were Gabriel and John coming as friends or enemies?

Gabriel broke through the trees first. He paused long enough to snarl and bark at her and then ran full tilt in her direction. Babet yelled mentally for her body to move, but it refused to obey. In the moment before he impacted with her, Gabriel shifted from a wolf to something half way between human and animal.

His clawed hands slammed into the tree on both sides of her, and he pressed his powerful, muscled form against hers. Terrified, Babet turned her head. Gabriel lowered his head toward her neck, still snarling threats. A second and he'd kill her with little effort. Babet swallowed.

"Gabriel, please don't. It's me, Babet," she whispered.

With boldness she didn't feel, she raised her hand to his face. He jerked back, baring his sharp, pointed teeth.

"You know me," she told him with firmness in her voice. "You love me, Gabriel. I know you do. Try to remember."

Telling him that whether he understood or not seemed to send him over the edge. He grabbed her by the arms and lifted her up off her feet like he was about to slam her into the tree or throw her. Before he could do either, John came through the trees, ready to continue the fight. Gabriel dropped Babet and whirled around. The instant he faced his maker, he shifted to his wolf form and leaped at John.

They tumbled back and forth, biting and clawing. Babet tried to push away from the tree to somehow help, but when she did, her foot snapped a twig. Gabriel barked at her, and she could have sworn she understood him to say back off. Still in pain, she put it down to being tired and having lost too much blood. At the thought of her injury, she examined her arm. The blood

had dried, and the wound had pretty much closed. Babet cried dry, hacking sobs with no tears.

The fight between the wolves went on for what felt like hours. Sometimes they were in front of Babet, and other times, one chased the other out of sight amid the trees. She picked up the sounds they made even when they were at a distance. Her nose burned with scents too strong. Sinking to the ground, she closed her eyes. A new smell and sound reached her, and Babet stiffened.

"Go back into the house, Lawrence. Now!" Her voice was gruff. In horror, Babet opened her eyes to look at her hands. Her nails had grown out sharp and ugly. Panic tightened her chest. At her odd tone, Lawrence scurried away.

Just as quickly as the change began, it receded. She glanced up, but it was still a few hours before sunrise. The moon still lit the sky.

Babet listened hard, but picked up no sounds at all beyond crickets. After working her way to her feet, her strength sapped, she inched from tree to tree in the direction she'd last seen Gabriel. Before she got to the spot, he walked through naked and covered in blood.

Babet cried out and ran to him. She threw her arms around his shoulders. "Are you okay? Gabriel, say something," she demanded when he didn't answer.

He sighed and rested his forehead on hers. She felt the trembling in his limbs, although he tried to hide how bad it was. "*Cher*, you cannot imagine going from superhuman healing and being able to shake off most pain and injury to being...ordinary."

"You're saying it's over?" She leaned back from him to study his face. "You're not a werewolf anymore?"

He gave a half smile, and for the first time, she saw real joy and hope in his eyes. "I'm not. However, being human means I'm going to need stitches in a few places."

Saying the words seemed to cause his body to show just how much the fight had taken out of him. Gabriel sagged against Babet, and she almost crumpled beneath his heavy form. Together, they struggled toward the house, and when they were closer, she called out for Lawrence's help. The old man came stumbling down the stairs.

"Mr. Gabriel, you're okay. I'm glad. When I shot..."

Babet gasped. "You said your shot nicked John!"

Lawrence looked sheepish, but now wasn't the time to deal with him. They had to get Gabriel inside and get him a doctor. Once they had him

settled on a couch, Babet hurried for the phone and snatched it up. Would a doctor travel this far down the bayou to help Gabriel? She prayed he would.

Gabriel's eyes fluttered open where he lay, his breaths shallow. "Put that down, *cher*. I'll be fine."

"How can you be fine when you've been shot and whatever else that beast did to you?" She tucked the phone between her shoulder and cheek and began searching his body for wounds. Between the dirt, blood, and bruises, it was no easy task. If she wasn't so scared for his life, she'd be embarrassed to look at his naked body with Lawrence in the room. Neither of the men seemed bothered at all.

Gabriel clucked like he was dealing with a small child. Even that sound was full of joy, and despite the pain clear in his expression, his eyes shone. Babet tried not to worry. She sat down beside him, and he took her hand to bring her fingers to his lips.

"When I'm stronger, we'll talk. For now, you go get cleaned up and go to bed. Lawrence is used to stitching me up."

"But—" she began.

"I promise. I'm fine, Babet."

She didn't care what he said. She wasn't going to leave his side until she knew he was out of danger. Sure, she felt like someone had tied lead weights to her arms and legs, even her eyelids, but that didn't matter. She opened her mouth to argue further, but Gabriel's gaze shifted from her to something behind her. "Cutting it close, my friend."

Babet turned to see who he was talking to when a hand came down on her shoulder. "Sleep," came the command, and her eyelids grew even more weighted. Babet could no longer fight sleep. She tumbled into Vashel's arms, lost in dream land.

* * * *

"I'm sorry I wasn't here sooner," Vashel told Gabriel.

Gabriel's attention lay on how carefully his friend held Babet in his arms. He was grateful to Vashel for forcing her to rest, but still jealousy rose in his chest, among other things. All of a sudden, he was no longer a supernatural being. He was ordinary. He was human.

"Lawrence, show Vashel where Babet's room is."

Vashel started toward the stairs. "I'm sure I can find my way. I assume the room I used last time I visited you is still available? We can all talk after we've taken a rest."

Gabriel fell back with a sigh. Weariness overcame him. “Yes, it is. I don’t normally entertain vampires.”

“I’m flattered,” Vashel called over his shoulder, and Gabriel clenched his jaw at the first stab of Lawrence’s needle.

Chapter Fifteen

Babet jerked in the chair she'd been sleeping in all night. Her muscles complained as she stretched out the kinks, but when she searched the bed for Gabriel and found him gone, she jumped to her feet. Heart pounding, she was about to run from the room when she realized someone was in the shower.

She sank into her chair with a hand on her chest. For the last few days, Gabriel had been delirious and feverish. He'd been flat on his back, and Lawrence hadn't been sure if Gabriel would make it. Babet never left his side the entire time. Now the man had the nerve to get up like nothing happened when she'd been worried out of her mind.

Babet crept toward the bathroom and cracked the door open a little. She peered inside to find that Gabriel hadn't closed the shower curtain all the way, and his back was to her. She let her gaze drift down over his body while she enjoyed watching every flex and ripple of muscle. A long, jagged line extended from the left of his spine on around his side, a product of his fight with John. As a werewolf, that would have healed by now without a trace. As a human, he was fortunate to be alive.

Tears filled her eyes, but Babet blinked them away, and then he turned around, surprise in his eyes. "Babet."

"I wanted to be sure you were okay," she muttered. All the confidence from that night must have gone with the curse because she was no longer sure of his love. "You had been out of it for three days."

"Mwen regret sa."

She shrugged and turned away. "I'll get Lawrence to bring you some food."

While Gabriel changed into fresh clothes, and Lawrence changed the sheets on his bed, Babet showered as well. She returned to his room ready to settle things once and for all. Pausing at the door, she noted that he'd already cleaned his plate of the bacon, eggs, and toast Lawrence had brought up.

"Well, you still eat like a wolf," she murmured.

She didn't expect the sadness in his eyes. He crossed to the window and clasped his hands behind him while staring out at the bright day. "It's strange not having the beast fighting for dominance inside me. I feel a little empty, like something's missing."

"Well, he was there for over two hundred years. Even though you hated that part of yourself, it was you." Her words sounded supportive, but she was feeling anything but. In reality, what he said hurt. If he was missing the wolf, or whatever it gave him, how could she fill the gap? She couldn't.

“Babet.”

She jumped at his saying her name suddenly. “Yes?”

“I know you want to leave.”

“I can stay.” How desperate could she sound?

“I’m not the same man you fell in love with.”

She frowned. “What do you mean by that? You’re not a werewolf. You don’t fight irritation and violence. You won’t be swayed by the moon, but you’re still you.”

He turned around and walked over to her. His large hands came down on her shoulders, and he pulled her close. “I might have had to battle my own demon to keep from going too far with you, but you responded—more than any woman I’ve ever been with.” He traced a line down her bare arm. “It was as if your skin tingled under my touch, and all I had to do was enter you, and you’d come.”

With his soft-spoken words, she was creaming her panties already. The man didn’t have to be a shifter for that. She was still attracted to him, and now she got it that he was afraid it was the wolf she had been attracted to and not him. Babet wanted to reassure him that she still loved *him*, Gabriel Bordelon, but she stood by her decision not to say the words again.

“You’re a man. I’m a woman.” She shrugged with as much nonchalance as she could muster. “Our bodies are made for each other, to bring pleasure.”

“You know what I mean, Babet.”

She stepped out of his embrace and turned her back on him. Arms crossed over her chest, she took a chance to say, “Maybe I don’t.”

Gabriel wrapped himself around her from behind. She sank against his chest, luxuriating in how it felt to be in his arms. This might be the end if he didn’t get it through his thick skull that they should give a long term relationship a try. She wanted to push him, but she couldn’t give into it. He had to want it.

“*Cher*,” he began, hesitance in his tone. “I love you.”

She gasped. Her heart thundered in her chest, and her knees gave. Gabriel sank with her to the carpeted floor. Despite telling herself not to do it, she cried. Gabriel turned her around to face him and sat her on his lap. He might not be a werewolf, but his strength was impressive the way he crushed her to him.

When he lifted her chin, he covered her mouth, kissing away her salty tears. Babet shook in his arms. Lately, she’d been crying a lot, and she hated it. But that didn’t matter. The man she longed to spend the rest of her life with had just told her he loved her. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

They held onto one another for a long time, no words needed for the time being.

After some time, Gabriel lifted his head to stare into her eyes. "I need to know."

She was about to ask him what he needed to know, but he lifted them both and walked over to the bed. When he laid her down on her back and began removing her clothing, she knew. Babet helped him wiggle her dress up over her hips and then kicked away her panties when he lowered them down her legs. The hunger in his eyes at seeing her naked sent shivers over her body and caused goose bumps to rise on her skin.

Gabriel took his time surveying her from head to toe. He nudged her legs open to study her heat too, and Babet moaned. How he could turn her on just looking at her? There wasn't a doubt in her mind he could make her scream with a touch.

Feeling bold, Babet ran her fingers down over her belly, past her thatch, and she pushed two fingers into her wetness. She used the other hand to tease a nipple and squirmed at getting herself off. "Well?" she demanded. "Don't you want me?"

"You know I do!"

Gabriel threw his own clothes to the floor and climbed on the bed. He didn't waist any time tugging her into position so he could brace a knee between her legs. When he paused to squeeze her hips and lick his lips at the moisture at her center, Babet focused on his rock hard shaft. It stood out from his body ready to pierce her, and she knew he had more than enough human testosterone to drive her to climax.

He lowered himself down until their bodies just touched. Babet sucked in her breath. She raised her knees higher and felt the tip of Gabriel's shaft at her entrance. Desperate need coiled in her belly, but she forced herself to wait. Gabriel held back, staring into her eyes. Without warning, he plunged deep into her heat, driving his thick tool hard. Babet arched up so her nipples grazed his chest. He caught her ankles and pushed her legs higher. When he leaned back, he began a fast pump that threatened to make Babet faint.

She cried out his name and thrashed under him. Gabriel let her ankles go and took her by the hips to bring her down on his erection again and again. An orgasm ripped through Babet. She pressed the back of a hand over her mouth to muffle her cry, but it didn't work.

"Gabriel," she shouted.

He leaned down, his eyes narrowed. They hadn't shifted darker like before, yet she had the feeling he was not any less dangerous. Her heart hammered in her chest. Love mingled with the pleasure he gave her. He

slanted his mouth over hers and thrust his tongue between her lips. Hungry for him, Babet sucked it into her mouth and twirled her tongue with his. She groaned her needs, pushing with everything she had to grind her hips into him, to get his shaft deeper. Her inner walls clutched at him, and the friction of his body rubbing her nub each time he came down on her set her up for another climax.

“Do you want me to stop?” Gabriel asked her.

“No, never,” she pleaded. It was too good. If he stopped now, she might be on her hands and knees crawling behind him.

He kissed her once again before asking, “Do you want me go slower? Like this?” His rough pump gentled. She encircled his waist with her legs until she could lock her heels behind him.

“Faster, harder.”

His eyes seemed to glow, and he began to push into her at the rate she wanted. Their bodies slammed together, the friction, the impact, the sound, taking Babet to the edge. She cried out his name, and he echoed with hers. Babet felt his hot release seconds after she reached another orgasm. Afterward, Babet lay on Gabriel’s chest, trying to catch her breath.

Later, several rounds with small rests between left her just as sore but satisfied as she had been when Gabriel had been a werewolf. If that didn’t convince the man that he had everything a woman could want, nothing would. She began to drift off when he spoke.

“Babet?”

She yawned. “Hmm?”

“Stay with me. We can travel around the world or to any place you’d like to visit. We can rent out both our houses and for now leave New Orleans behind.” She opened her eyes to find him surveying the room. “I stayed here in this house as a sort of punishment, partly because I thought it was the best place for me on the night of the full moon, but also because it reminded me of what I let happen to my family.”

She leaned up, resting a hand on his chest. “You have to forgive yourself and believe you deserve better than that. I know personally how those negative feelings can hold you down and keep you where you don’t want to be in life.”

He nodded. “Yes, that’s why I’m saying we should get away, start anew. I said before I love you, and I meant it. I’m sorry for not telling you so when you first said it to me. Deep inside, I knew I loved you the night I met you, if that doesn’t sound too corny. It’s true.” He stroked her cheek and stared into her eyes. “*Cher*, I don’t want us to be apart from now on. I can’t even express

how happy it makes me knowing we don't have to be because of some curse. Say yes, Babet. Tell me you'll stay with me."

"Yes. There's nothing else I want to do than to be with you. I love you, Gabriel, with all my heart."

The End

About the Author

Tressie Lockwood has always loved books, and she enjoys writing about heroines who are overcoming the trials of life. She writes straight from her heart, reaching out to those who find it hard to be completely themselves no matter what anyone else thinks. She hopes her readers enjoy her short stories. Visit Tressie on the web at www.tresslock.webs.com.