



A family legend could lead to a treasure more precious than pearls...or get them killed.

Between babysitting her very pregnant sister-in-law and fending off her mother's nagging about her marital status, Blair Moreau is going insane. Her only hold on sanity is her daily walk for a guilty peek at her crush, the sexy neighbor who's fixing up the old Cotesworth place.

Conn Lucas, the bastard son of Culford's leading family, got way out of town a long time ago. When the only relative who didn't despise him leaves him her 250-year-old house, Conn plans to refurbish it, flip it, and get back to Connecticut as soon as possible. Until a local beauty with a rare talent for DIY gives him a hand with some stubborn siding.

When he makes her mad enough to swing a two-by-four at his head, he realizes Blair is better than perfect. Especially when his efforts to keep her from killing him explode into an erotic rush of adrenaline that unleashes desires they've both kept hidden.

Breaking through Conn's tough shell isn't as difficult Blair's next hurdle—telling him she's a werewolf. First, though, they've got to deal with meddling ghosts and a bad ol' boy cousin who isn't above taking what he wants at nail-gun point...

Warning: This book contains a smokin' hot werewolf chick with serious DIY know-how and a man who thinks that's sexy; illegal use of nail guns; things to do in a claw-foot tub; pirate references; piddling Dobermans and meddling ghosts. Which is better than meddling Dobermans and piddling ghosts.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Carolina Pearl
Copyright © 2010 by Sela Carsen
ISBN: 978-1-60928-251-6
Edited by Georgia Woods
Cover by Natalie Winters

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: November 2010
www.samhainpublishing.com

Carolina Pearl

Sela Carsen

Dedication

To the ladies Beyond the Veil, who inspired me and gave me a deadline.

To my husband, whose keen interest in DIY and home improvements gave me the idea.

To my children, who think it's cool that Mom's a writer.

To my mom, who reads all my books and tells her friends about them.

Thank you all.

Prologue

Conn Lucas was too busy fighting with rotten clapboard on the second floor of his house to notice the bloodthirsty buzz of mosquitoes, the deafening screech of cicadas, the hair-raising howl of a wolf...

No, that caught his attention.

He peered into the dense shadow of the wetlands bordering his backyard. He didn't see anything there, but he could have sworn he'd heard...

Nah. There were no wolves in South Carolina. He'd grown up in this backwater town and he knew what was possible and what was not. There were no wolves in South Carolina. As he repeated his new mantra, it howled again.

The hair on the back of his neck rose in primal response to the sound. He squinted, trying to see deeper into the trees. The thick forest of pine, oak and hickory hid a multitude of secrets, but wasn't about to give them up. The scent of the swamp, rich with the essence of life, nearly made him dizzy as he looked for the source of the eerie wail.

"Ah, hell." Conn began to regret not owning a weapon, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He held a hammer in one hand and a crowbar in the other and decided he was as armed as he could be under the circumstances. Not that he needed to be armed. After all, he was eighteen feet in the air and as far as he knew, wolves, who did not live in South Carolina, couldn't climb ladders.

He went back to work, pulling off the old pieces of wood and tossing them down into the dumpster he'd rented. He had a lot to do.

She backed farther into the shadows of the undergrowth to watch him work. She raised her head and drew in a deep breath, sifting his scent out from the myriad other smells around her—duckweed choking the fresh water, trees thick with sap, the rabbit hidden behind a fallen, rotted branch.

Ah. She had him. One more lungful and she'd never forget him. Now she could find him anywhere. The scent buzzed through her blood. This was a man worth tracking. Worth hunting. Worth catching.

He went back to work and she took another step into the woods. He'd be there for her later.

Now. Where did that rabbit go?

Chapter One

Blair Moreau held one hand and Charlene King held the other as they hauled Debra Moreau, Blair's extremely pregnant sister-in-law, out of the chair in the beauty shop.

"Maddox is going to kill me," Blair mentioned as Debra waddled to the front counter to pay the bill.

"Well, what Maddox doesn't know might save your life."

"You're not supposed to be wandering around town in your condition."

"Pregnancy is not a 'condition'. It just is. He's overprotective."

"I can't imagine why," muttered Blair. She knew the risks of Debra's pregnancy. Mating werewolf to human was always tricky and now that they knew there were twins kicking around in there, Maddox was twitchier than she'd ever seen him. He was worried, which was why she was here.

Suddenly, all the color drained out of Debra's face and she swayed. The size she was, if she went down, she was taking the whole shop with her.

"Oh. That's not right," she said as Blair grabbed her and propped her up.

Charlene, the hairdresser and one of Debra's good friends, held the door open, fussing the whole time, as Blair led her out, an arm wrapped around Debra's shoulders. Charlene opened the car door for them too, and Debra slid in like a greased whale.

"Let's get you home, kiddo. Thanks, Charlene." They waved at her as Blair pulled out into the street.

It wasn't far to the little house that Debra and Maddox owned. Of course, this was Culford. It wasn't far to anywhere in Culford. By the time they got home and got Debra into bed, her color had returned and she was feeling much better.

"I'm so sorry, Blair."

"What for?" she asked as she topped off the bottle of water on Debra's nightstand.

"I just feel so helpless. I'm not allowed to go anywhere or do anything and when I show the tiniest hint of rebellion, I end up back in bed anyway." She sniffled. "All I wanted to do was look nice for all your family."

Oh please God, don't let her cry. Maddox swore up and down that Debra was not a weepy person, but Blair had only gotten to know her now that she was pregnant. The woman flipped on the waterworks every time she saw a puppy. Or a kitten. A child. A woman. A man. Blair wondered if a horse would set her off, but didn't want to test her theory.

"Deb, you went to the hairdresser. It's not like you climbed K-2."

"I know, but..."

"Don't worry about it. This has to be frustrating." Blair would have gone completely mad dog, howling insane if she had to be stuck in bed most of every day. Aside from the weeping, Debra hardly ever snapped or got cranky with anything. Blair would have ripped someone's head off by now.

"I can't believe Maddox asked you to actually move down here until the babies come. I'm so sorry we disrupted your life." Tears were imminent, and Blair had to head them off quickly.

"Oh, please. Like I had anything better to do." Which was pathetic, but true. She had been between jobs when Maddox called and asked her to come down and help, so it was no hardship for her to pack up and leave. She had few belongings and no roots at all. And her work as a freelance website designer was the ultimate in portability. Have laptop and WiFi, will travel.

"I can think of about a thousand things more fun than babysitting a pregnant woman."

"I'm fine. I'm having a great time working my way through your bookshelves and relaxing for a change." No. Really. Honest. She resisted the impulse to put a finger over the nerve twitching on her eyelid.

"Not to put too fine a point on it, but bull. Blair Moreau, you need to get out of this house even worse than I do. Look, your folks have been in town for a week. I know you love them, but I also know your mother is driving you nuts. They're probably on their way back from doing their shopping in the city right now. The house is clean. Dinner is in the crock pot. And I'm exhausted."

"I'll let you nap, then." Surely there wasn't a wall in this house she hadn't already climbed.

"No, you're going to go for a run in the swamp, or for a walk down the lane, or something. Get. Out. Of. The. House."

That sounded like bliss. Debra knew her too well. She did need some time alone. Now that her parents were here, her mother was clawing for excuses to push Blair into marrying whichever loser asked her first. Not that any ever had.

She needed a break from her family.

"If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were trying to get rid of me."

"Go, go," said Debra, shooing her away. Twister, Debra's fawn Boxer, crawled up on the bed stealthily. As if no one would notice a sixty-five pound dog hogging the blankets. "See? I have plenty of company."

"What if something happens?"

"You mean, what if I get so huge I explode like that monster on *Slither*? I don't think so. Take your cell phone and I'll call if I need you."

Blair fidgeted. She was supposed to keep an eye on Debra, who had closed her eyes very deliberately. Then she opened them. "Are you still here?"

She grinned. "Fine. I'm leaving. You stay in bed."

“Yes, mistress.”

“Hey, I don’t need to know about your kinky bedroom games with my brother.”

Debra chuckled. “At this size? I wish. My OB would neuter him if he tried anything.”

“All right, all right. I’m going. Don’t wait up.”

She stopped in her room for a baseball cap and stuffed her hair through the hole in the back, then put a band around it until it was contained in a loose ponytail. Some days she loved having long hair, some days it was in the way. She was wearing her standard pearl earrings. They’d been handed down in her family for decades, and they were her college graduation gift. She almost took them out, but decided not to. She’d worn them every day since receiving them. No reason to change now.

Blair already knew where she was going—to feed her latest obsession. She wasn’t used to being this attracted to anyone and she’d never pursued a man in her life. For the most part, she didn’t care whether they pursued her or not. Not that she disliked men. Far from it. They were often a fun diversion, good for a few laughs, and sometimes it was handy to have some arm candy around.

But it was easier to have guy friends than regular boyfriends. Somehow, she had never acquired the knack for relationships. Few men attracted her enough to make an effort to try for more than an occasional tumble, werewolf or human. When she did try, they said she came on too strong. Hmph. Wimps. Since when was knowing what she wanted the same thing as coming on too strong? Now she felt as if she’d been transported back to junior high, crushing on some guy who didn’t even know she existed. Back then, she hadn’t had the courage to do anything about her surging hormones. Now? She stood at the end of the driveway with her hands shoved into her pockets, wondering which way to go.

The sound of hammering made her decision for her. She’d probably watched too much Bob Vila as a child, but the scent of fresh wood, the scream of power tools and the ozone and gasoline reek of compressors always made her mind spin with possibilities. When she was a kid, her dad had let her tag along every time he went to the hardware store and she took to building as easily as she took to howling at the moon. Much more easily than she took to being whatever it was that men wanted.

At least construction was something she was good at, so there was a solid chance that she wouldn’t make a total twit of herself in front of Mr. Sexy. Maybe.

His dream woman jogged toward him on a sandy beach, wearing a red swimsuit, her hair and her holy-shit breasts bouncing with each movement.

Actually, his temporary next-door neighbor walked up his driveway wearing jeans with a rip in the knee and mud at the hem, and a huge red men’s shirt. Underneath, a white T-shirt hugged breasts that were full, but not overflowing. He didn’t think she was wearing much make-up, if any, and her long, dark hair

was in a ponytail under a baseball cap. The soft waves flowed down her back and he wanted to get his hands on it in the worst way.

“Hi,” she said, staring up from the bottom of the scaffold.

“Hey,” he returned. Then stood there, propping up half a board.

“I’m Blair Moreau. My brother and his wife live just up the road. You’re Conn Lucas, right?”

Conn nodded. He knew who she was. He’d been watching her since she arrived to help out her family. A few days ago she’d taken a walk with her sister-in-law up the road and down again. He’d been up on the roof, cussing at a dormer gable that needed patching, when she’d looked up at him as they passed. He’d nearly tumbled two and a half stories.

She was perfect.

She was a distraction and she needed to go away. Conn felt the siding board start to slip and he swore.

As if he didn’t have enough trouble on his hands already. His family was bound and determined to see him fail and he didn’t have the time or energy to chase tail. Even tail as gorgeous as Blair.

“You need some help?” she continued.

Hell, yes. He’d have hired some already if his cousin hadn’t made sure there wasn’t a single crew in the entire county that would do some of the renovating for him.

“No.”

“Oh.” She watched him and he struggled not to let his muscles start to quiver under the load. “Are you sure?”

Hell, no.

“Yep.” The board slipped some more. Her eyebrow went up. He sighed. She climbed the ladder like a pro and scooted past him to the other end of the scaffold. “What are you doing?” She scalded his skin as she passed him, but he welcomed the sting.

“How about if I hold this up for a second?”

“I don’t need your help,” he snapped to cover his shock. What kind of person offered to help hold siding? His eyes narrowed. Something was up.

“I’m not helping. I’m holding up this end while you nail.”

“And that’s not helping?”

“Nope.” She smiled at him and he scowled back. Distraction. She glanced meaningfully from his nail gun to the board, indicating that maybe he should get on with the job.

“Fine,” he growled and shot a straight row of nails into the siding. When he got halfway along the board, she met him, holding her hand out for the gun. He hesitated. It felt weird to have someone around. It made him nervous.

Gifts didn’t fall into his lap like this. Crap came his way in huge waves, but not the good stuff. Conn was used to working and struggling and fighting for everything, and he wasn’t sure he could trust her.

“My dad’s a general contractor and I used to help him out before I moved away,” she explained, still holding out her hand. “I can do a lot of things on my own, but it sure helps to have an extra pair of hands. Not, you understand, that I’m helping.”

She wore pearl earrings, for Pete’s sake. Only girly girls wore pearls, right? He looked at her hands, so pretty and delicate— No. Not delicate. Her fingers were long and slender, but the nails were short and the scars on her knuckles said she’d had more than a few bad scrapes.

He handed over the gun and she shot a perfect row of nails.

Suspicion reared its ugly head as he prepared to wrestle the next board into place. A fist wrapped itself around his heart. God damn Aubrey Cotesworth and the whole Cotesworth clan. They tainted every dream he had, even the ones that were potentially X-rated. How had they gotten to her? How much were they paying her to taunt him with both her beauty and her skill?

He shot the first round of nails, then traded the gun to her. She shot another set of nails in and reached for the next board, but he stopped her. It was time to cut the crap before it got too deep.

“Why are you here?”

“Excuse me?”

“Who sent you? Aubrey? Mayford? Another cousin?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The Cotesworths don’t want me here and they’ve done everything short of actual sabotage to get me to deed them the house. They’d like nothing better than for me to give up and go back to Connecticut. So what’s the plan? Is every piece of siding suddenly going to get cut in half? All the windows I ordered going to get broken in transit? A small fire somewhere? Why don’t you get this over with and tell me who sent you?”

The words were flying out of his mouth and he was watching her face get whiter and her eyes get bigger, and then her eyes started to narrow and her cheeks started splotching out in fiery patches, and the more he talked, the more he realized he was wrong, so wrong, but the words kept coming until they just...stopped.

Oh shit.

“You...you...” She was still holding the end of a piece of siding and he barely ducked out of the way as she swung it straight at his head. It went sailing out into the yard and landed with a slight squelch when it hit the saturated ground.

She rounded on him with a fist balled up like she meant business, but he caught her arm before she connected. They were off-balance and the whole scaffold was starting to sway. He needed to get her under control—and apologize if he could—before they both ended up with broken bones.

Still holding one wrist, he caught the other one and by virtue of weight more than skill, he maneuvered her to the center of the scaffold, backing her up until she was sandwiched between him and the house.

“Blair, I’m sorry. I was wrong and I’m sorry.” He had to yell his apology over her shouting, which was...wow. He wasn’t sure her suggestion was anatomically possible. And given that his mother was dead, he knew *that* wasn’t happening. Also, he didn’t own any goats.

He pushed closer and closer to contain her struggles until there was no space between them, still repeating his words in her ear like a mantra, hoping she would draw a breath soon.

Conn felt it the moment she heard him. The moment his words registered. The moment her body stilled under his. In the aftermath of their shouting, it seemed the world held its breath, waiting to see the outcome.

Whether she leaned forward, or whether he reached for her, they were so close it didn’t matter. Her lips were so soft, so warm under his. So responsive as he pressed further. He still held her arms against the side of the house, pinning her there, but now it was pleasure keeping him dominant.

He caressed the pulse in the slender tendons under her hands, loving the stutter and leap of her blood under his thumbs, knowing his own did the same. She was caught, completely under his control, and he was shocked to discover the sheer eroticism of knowing he was unquestionably on top.

Not that she simply let him take over. She kissed back, undulating her body under his, pressing her breasts into his chest, opening her legs to bring him closer.

He decided to push his advantage, curious to see how far she would let him go. He licked at her mouth and she opened immediately, welcoming his tongue, returning his challenge with the scrape of her teeth against his lip.

Conn let go of her wrist to get a better grip. He wrapped her ponytail around his fist and pulled her head back—not enough to hurt her—but enough to break their kiss. Enough to have her looking up at him with fire in her eyes and red, swollen lips.

“Christ, woman. I could eat you alive.”

She grinned, a fierce baring of blindingly white teeth as she tipped her hips into his again and he surged forward, fitting his cock into the tight vee of her thighs. “I’m told I go well with Chianti.”

Chapter Two

His crack of laughter changed the moment into something they could shelve for now and pick up later. His hand loosened in her hair and she thought he might have smoothed her ponytail when he let go. She let her hands rest on his waist, not pulling him close, but content to share his warmth.

Blair was used to having the upper hand with the human men she'd dated. She rarely even thought about the balance of power, simply assuming she'd always dominate. Conn seemed so quiet, she thought she'd do that here too.

So when he pinned her against the house and pulled her hair back, she ended up being the one gasping under a powerful partner. It was strange to admit she kind of liked it. Not that she'd let him push her around, but it was exciting to have someone else be dominant for a change.

Their moment, however, was interrupted by clapping from down on the ground. They both peered over the edge of the scaffold and she felt his body tense.

The man leering up at them was handsome in a shallow way. His face was clean-shaven except for a luxurious blond moustache matching his thick, wavy hair. His eyes were dull blue and too close together, but the worst of him was his scent. He was drenched in department store cologne, but it couldn't hide the corruption seeping from his pores.

"Nice show. And I didn't even have to buy the Pay-Per-View." That pretty much confirmed his status as an asshole.

"What do you want, Aubrey?" said Conn, and she'd never thought to hear such a chill in his voice. He stepped in front of her and placed himself so Aubrey had to crane his neck to see her.

"I came by to check on your progress. The old place sure is shaping up."

"Yeah." He left the word hanging and Aubrey shifted uncomfortably.

"I see you found some help."

"Yeah."

"I didn't think you could find a crew here in Culford," the man sneered.

"I'm sure you wouldn't know anything about it." Oooh. She got it now. This was the guy that Conn figured was sabotaging his remodel. "Not my fault if all my crews are busy."

"Or if you own all the construction crews in town."

"Nope," he said with a nasty smirk. "That's not my fault, either. Are you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Conn said, “No,” as Blair stepped out beside him.

“I’m Blair Moreau.”

“Aubrey Cotesworth. We own this place.”

“Is that the royal ‘we’, Mr. Cotesworth, or are you pregnant?” She bared her teeth at him so it looked like a smile.

“And you owned it,” interjected Conn. He emphasized the ‘D’. “It’s mine now.”

“Of course,” said Aubrey, waving the objection away. “It’s a family thing. You know how it is.”

“No. I don’t.” Conn left his reply hanging out there in the cold, but Aubrey recovered.

“Is there something I can do for you...cousin?”

Blair hid her surprise. They were related? She was abruptly grateful for her family.

Aubrey’s nose wrinkled for a moment before he smoothed out his expression. Obviously, he didn’t like to be reminded of the connection.

“Just figured to drive by and make sure you didn’t want to take us up on our offer. After all, you don’t want to be away from your job for too long, and this project is too big for one man on his own. We could help each other out here, Conn.”

“You mean you want to help by buying me out with an offer that wouldn’t even cover my capital gains expense? And you don’t need to worry about me doing this project all on my own, Aubrey. You can let the Cotesworths know I’m going to get this house into shape come hell or high water.” Conn was furious. Standing next to him, she felt his body temperature rise and his pulse pound, audible to her with her heightened senses. Nonetheless, each word was measured and delivered with the cool diction of a trial attorney. Strong emotion buried under stronger discipline. She wondered where he’d learned all his control.

Aubrey’s brows drew together until he looked like he had a long, hairy yellow slug creeping across his forehead. Then he took a deep breath and cleared his expression. He put his hands up in mock surrender. “I give. You know we had to try.”

“No, you didn’t.” Boiling anger plus his frozen voice should have built up a hissing cloud of steam, but the air remained surprisingly clear.

There was nothing left to say, so Aubrey simply turned on his heel and stalked back to his brand new black pickup truck with “Cotesworth Construction” emblazoned on the door.

He kicked up a cloud of dust on the dirt road as he wheeled out, leaving silence in his wake.

Conn stood at the edge of the scaffold, clenching his fists and his jaw. Blair didn’t know what to do for him, but she knew she shouldn’t touch him right now. She hated being touched when she was angry, so she afforded him the same courtesy.

“Conn?”

“I need to get back to work.” His words were clipped and harsh, but she didn’t take it personally. There was something much deeper at work here when family turned on each other. Instead, she picked up the other end of the siding board and held it in place while the nail gun blasted.

Conn considered trading out the nail gun for a hammer, if only for the excuse to hit something. The Cotesworths wanted him gone and forgotten. In fact, as soon as they realized he’d inherited the house, they set their law dogs on him to have the will contested. It wasn’t that they wanted the house, they just didn’t want *him* to have it.

Him. The bastard son of a pampered princess gone wrong. If she was being a maudlin drunk as opposed to a vicious drunk that day, his mama would tell him they used to call her “Pamela Precious” when she was growing up. But she’d thrown it all away on a bad boy who blew through Culford one summer. She broke off her engagement and rode out of town on the back of his shiny motorcycle, only to return a year later, alone but for a massively pregnant belly, days away from giving birth.

She refused to give him up, and he ended up bearing the brunt of all their hatred. Fun times. His uncle, Aubrey’s father, had never said more than five words to Conn—“Get out of my way.”

But he succeeded and got the hell out of town, which only made them hate him more. Then his Great Aunt Pinkney died and left him the house and property—and all hell broke loose. She’d been a recluse, never saying much to anyone, so “surprised” was the kindest word for their reaction.

The Cotesworth place was actually the old family seat and had stood since the Revolutionary War. When the family moved into town after World War II it went from slightly shabby to major disrepair. Still, it had the family name on it and they resented it going to a bastard.

But the will stood, and because he was feeling contrary, he’d come down to see his new property.

After one look, he realized he should have let them have the place. The longer he worked on it, however, the more he found the house was far more solid than it looked. Other than a patch or two on the roof, it was in pretty good shape for not having been replaced for sixty years. Some of the siding was rotten, but there was no mold inside the walls. The foundation was sturdy and none of the ceilings sagged or swayed, but from the outside, it looked as though the place would fall in on itself at any moment.

It was as if the house was disguising itself as a wreck to keep people away. Conn wished he could disguise himself so easily.

He and Blair worked steadily and silently for half an hour, finishing the siding replacement on the west side of the house in less than half the time it would have taken him on his own. He owed her for that.

Actually, he owed her for more. He owed her for finally letting him rid himself of some of the poison building up inside him. He owed her for taking his anger and giving it back in passion. And for all the work she’d done today, the very least he owed her was dinner.

“Blair?” he said after the last board was in place.

She turned to him, open and accepting.

"I'm sorry. Again. I seem to say that a lot around you and we haven't even known each other for long."

"You had at least some provocation. I'm glad Aubrey's not my cousin."

He nodded. "I guess he had to be someone's cousin. It's just my luck I won the lottery there." Conn climbed down the ladder, then held it still as she followed. She had the most perfect ass he'd ever seen or imagined in his life, heart shaped and taut with muscle. He had to bite his lip to keep from grunting in Neolithic approval.

She glanced over her shoulder and flashed him a coy smile. "Enjoy the view?"

"Prettiest thing I've seen all day." He decided he may as well go for broke. "Would you have dinner with me tonight?"

Her eyes widened in surprise, but she didn't look upset. No, her full lips quirked up at the corners and he suppressed a desire to lean forward and lick them.

"I'd love to have dinner with you tonight. When and where?"

"Robin's. I'll pick you up at seven."

She nodded and walked away, putting an extra sway in her hips for him, he was sure. He cleaned up the leftovers of the day's work and headed inside to shower and change.

But first, he stopped in the front parlor where a rocking chair swayed and creaked under its own power.

"Aunt Pinkney." He nodded at the empty chair that wasn't quite empty. A shadow, a shimmer of air wearing a housedress and an apron, sat in the chair, her lap covered in fine crochet work.

"Who is your young lady?"

He'd never known Aunt Pinkney in life, but in death he learned that under her sweet old lady exterior, there was a superior mind and a sharply honed sense of humor. It was her idea of hilarity to leave the family property to a bastard. They got along perfectly, even if she was a ghost.

"That's Blair Moreau. Her brother and sister-in-law live in the house down the road."

"Oh, the Moreaus. We know about them."

"What do you know?"

"They're fine folks. A little unusual though, if you take my meaning."

"Is there something I should know about her?"

"Nothing that would hurt you to find out on your own. You have a nice time at dinner now, you hear?"

"Yes, ma'am," he muttered as he walked away. He showered and shaved, pondering his situation as he dragged the old-fashioned safety razor over his bristles.

His life had been normal before he came back to Culford. Boring, stressful, colorless, yes, but normal. Now he had vicious cousins crawling everywhere, a house that magically looked like hell but was actually in pretty good shape, and a few ghosts as roommates.

Oh yeah. He was a real prize. Because that's what every dream girl wanted—a guy who could see dead people. Even if they were family.

Chapter Three

At five minutes until seven, Blair was standing out on the front porch wearing skinny jeans that showed off the length of her legs and a silky blouse with a scoop neck. She didn't have cleavage like her sister-in-law, but there was no point in hiding her light under a bushel, either.

But the real reason she was standing out here shivering in the damp evening air and fiddling with her earrings was because if she had to listen to her mother plan her wedding before she and Conn even had their first date for another minute, she was going to snap. She stared up at the nearly full moon and tingled with the electric call of nature.

Debra needed to pop those pups out soon before Grandma drove everyone nuts. As soon as the babies were born, she and Dad would head back to Freeze-Your-Ass-Off, Canada, and leave everyone alone.

She heard her mother's footsteps approach the front door and she bounded off the porch, heedless of her high heels. The door opened and she waved back. "Bye, Mom! I'm going to meet him at the mailbox."

Guilt assailed her. What kind of rotten daughter left her mother standing in a doorway? A gutless one with a backwards "fight or flight" mechanism. She sighed and trudged up the driveway.

He drove up in an older model BMW, and she let him come around and open the door for her. Her mom was still out on the porch, so they waved at her before he got in and buckled up.

"Uh-oh. What happened?"

"That obvious, huh?"

"You look unhappy. Great. Sexy. But not happy."

It had to be bad, then. She sighed. "I'm sorry. It's just... I love my mother, but she can be a little overbearing."

He nodded, but didn't say anything. To combat the silence, she asked, "Is your mom like that?"

"Not exactly." Her eyebrow went up as the temperature in the car dropped. Okay. Obviously another sensitive topic, but she didn't like being left out in the cold and she was only willing to give so much for the benefit of the doubt. She crossed her arms and waited. He sucked in a quick breath and held it for a moment before letting it out.

"My mother was a Cotesworth. She made a series of stupid decisions resulting in being shunned by her family and having me, then spent the rest of her life getting as drunk or high as possible in order to forget those stupid decisions. Your mom might be a little overbearing—and I can see where it could get annoying—but mine was underbearing to the point of ignoring my existence. If I had to pick one, I'd pick

yours.” His hands were clenched on the steering wheel and he stared straight ahead as he spoke. When he was done, he remained focused on the road in front of him. The car was still parked.

Her mom was still standing on the porch. Blair rolled down the window and leaned out. “I love you, Mom!”

Her mom smiled and waved back. “I love you, too, baby!” Then she went inside.

“You are a very tough guy, you know that, Conn?”

He smiled at her as he turned over the engine and got them moving. “I’m a lawyer. We’re vicious by nature.”

Dinner was lovely. Robin’s might have been a small-town hangout, but the chef knew her business. Blair ordered her steak a little more done than she usually liked it, but only because she wasn’t sure how Conn would handle seeing a chunk of bloody meat on her plate. Everything else was delicious.

She spent two hours pretending she was normal. Human. They spoke of small, inconsequential things, and she asked about the house.

“How old is it?”

“About two hundred twenty-five years old. It was built in 1784. Now, the first Cotesworth actually landed in Georgia long before, back when it was a penal colony.”

Conn was a natural storyteller. As he spoke, his expression became that of a proud father and his voice grew warm and expansive. He even used his hands to illustrate his points. “He’d been transported for theft, or so the story goes. He served out his sentence, but being an enterprising young man with sticky fingers, he left Georgia and headed up into the Carolinas. He married a widow woman who lived here in Culford—you know the town’s been around since the first colonists showed up—and settled down with her.”

The waitress arrived with coffee for both of them and he leaned forward. It was getting late and the restaurant was emptying out as he continued the tale. “The widow woman had a story of her own. They say she was the widow of a pirate, and she had hidden his treasure in her home. But they also called her a witch, so they left her alone in her little house at the edge of the swamp.”

Blair smiled. She didn’t mind swamp witches. Heck, her sister-in-law was a swamp witch, when it came down to it, but she didn’t interrupt.

“Some say she cast a spell to steer him straight. Some say he gave up his life of crime for love. But everyone agrees that the happy couple enlarged her little cottage—I expect they used up the money from the treasure to do it—and ended up in the timber business, cutting down the tallest, straightest trees in the swamp and shipping them to Charleston for use as ship masts. Turns out it was a pretty lucrative business, so after a couple of generations, the Cotesworths were able to build themselves a fine and fancy house, the envy of the Midlands.”

“And that’s the house you live in now?”

“That’s the one I inherited, yes.” He paid the bill, which had been discreetly delivered by the waiter, and they pushed back from the table.

“The meal was delicious. Thank you for dinner, Conn.”

“Thank you for the company. This is the first time I’ve been out for a nice meal since I got here.”

“Then I’m honored.” A rain shower burst overhead on the ride back, cocooning them in the wet night. And if her hand rested on his as it lay on the gearshift, then it was a companionable and warm gesture.

“Is there anything left of the original cottage?” she asked.

“I think the fireplace in the kitchen was built in the same place as the first hearth. Some markings on the brick seem older than the house based on my research, but I’m not sure. You can check them out tomorrow, if you like.”

They’d arrived back at her house and all the lights were out. It was late and she was sure everyone was fast asleep by now.

“So it’s all right if I come back and not-help?” She smiled at him and he returned it, turning his hand under hers so he caught her in his grip.

“I’d love your not-help.”

He turned off the engine and the dashboard lights faded away, leaving them in nothing but cloud shadow. Conn looked at her. “Did I say you looked gorgeous tonight?”

“You did. Thank you. And you’re very handsome tonight.” She smiled at the sweet formality of the exchange.

He threaded their fingers together before bringing their joined hands to his mouth. His hot, moist breath on her skin made her realize how very alone they were. In the dark. In the rain. No one to see them.

Her breasts swelled almost painfully in anticipation.

“Come here,” he said, and she didn’t hesitate to crawl over the console until she straddled his lap. He reached down and pushed the seat back until there was room for her between him and the steering wheel, but she didn’t care. This felt like high school, only better because now she knew what she was doing. Or at least she knew enough to know how good it felt to be bad in the front seat of a car.

Blair leaned down and buried her nose in his neck. She knew his scent from a distance, but up close, he was overwhelming. His base notes were a blend of cool and rich aromas—Spanish moss and black water, steely graphite and coffee with cream. Now she drowned in a symphony of scent that opened up each of her senses until she could hardly take in anything else.

She licked his throat, sliding up until she took his earlobe between her teeth to nibble, alternating nips with hot little panting breaths in his ear.

“God, yes,” he moaned and she shuddered. Every instinct screamed at her to grab his head and work very hard on swallowing his tongue. That wasn’t how this was supposed to go, though. You couldn’t be so

aggressive with humans—it was too much, too soon. If he was another wolf, he'd already know what was humming in her blood. If he was another wolf, they'd already be naked.

Her very human partner in lust, however, seemed to be holding his own with her animal instincts. He worked his hand under her blouse, skimming a hot palm over her belly, sliding up her back, circling her waist. She rose above him and saw him with her wolf's eyes. He was beautiful, primal and hot beneath her, and she wanted him more than she'd ever wanted any other man.

His eyes opened when she paused and they stared for a moment before the dark wave overtook them.

Their mouths bruised each other, their teeth scraped and nipped, leaving pleasure/pain in their wake. She knotted her hands in his hair and dragged his head back so she could lick a wide path up the other side his throat, drinking the scent that poured from his skin.

In retaliation, he jerked her hips closer to his, branding the size and shape of his erection onto her mound, regardless of their clothing.

An exultant scream burst from her lips when he tilted her head and bit down not-too-gently on the tendon between her neck and shoulder. She'd never been marked before and reveled in the feel of his teeth on her skin. He rocked insistently against her core as he crossed his arms behind her, pressing her to him until thin fabric was the only thing separating them from shoulder to hip.

"Oh God," he said, shuddering against her. "I need to..."

"Yes." She reached down and ripped his shirt open, buttons pinging against the windows. Blair had no idea if that was what he wanted from her, but it was exactly what she needed right then. His chest was a thing of pure beauty. Not heavily muscled, not gym-sculpted, but thick and strong. She buried her head against his neck again and let her lips trail from shoulder to shoulder as he trembled in her arms.

It was the work of moments for him to return the favor. Her blouse was tossed into the backseat while one of his hands captured her wrists, holding her arms behind her. Her breasts were thrust forward and she was anchored to him only by her legs straddling his thighs, so she scooted closer.

To her everlasting disappointment, he held her away when she would have pressed herself to him.

"No, I want to see." His voice had changed to something rough and dangerous. Something that sent a tingling thrill up her spine. She surrendered, arching her back and raising her chin. If he wanted to look, the least she could do was give him something to look at.

"Keep your hands behind you," he said, and she obeyed.

He sucked in a breath before starting at her wrists and sliding those big palms up her back, spreading fire over her skin. He flicked open the catch on her bra, but pushed her arms together behind her when she started to move them. He skimmed down to her waist, then changed the angle so he cupped the swell at the bottom of her ribs like a chalice. Only then did he let her move her arms.

Blair was barely breathing, so caught up in his need that her own blended seamlessly into the greater spell. He drew her black satin undergarment over her arms and let it dangle carelessly from his fingers before it joined her top in the backseat.

He placed her hands on his shoulders, then began a slow, consuming, greedy quest down to her breasts. Without a word, without a sound other than his harsh breathing, he overwhelmed her, brought her senses to a fever pitch she'd never known. He cupped her, pushing the pale mounds high, forcing her to bend to his will. His fingers surrounded the areolas, but didn't touch her nipples, didn't come close to the throbbing points that begged for his caress; rough or gentle, she didn't care anymore.

Blair wanted to close her eyes to absorb more of his touch, but didn't dare. Didn't dare look away from his face as he studied her body.

Chapter Four

Conn couldn't tear his eyes away from her. Couldn't believe she was letting him do things he hadn't even known he dreamt about. He'd never been a dominating kind of guy—except with her. He didn't pin women against houses, or hold their arms down and bite them on the neck until he left a mark.

He flicked a glance away from her breasts to the red scrape on her throat. It touched an almost bestial part of his soul. This wasn't like him and it shook him enough to bring him out of the red haze of lust.

He realized it was still raining outside. The windows were completely fogged up, but he could hear the insistent thrum of water on the roof. They were lying in the front seat of his car, and he was two zippers away from pushing her back against the steering wheel and screwing her like a horny teenager.

Conn closed his eyes and gathered her close, absorbing the chill of perspiration on her skin, wrapping his arms around her for himself and for her.

"I'm so sorry." He was getting tired of apologizing, but the only way to stop saying he was sorry was to stop being such a dickhead.

She whimpered and he hugged her closer, savoring the illicit thrill of her breasts against his chest, her legs around his, the warm niche of her thighs where his cock rested, still striving for completion.

Her shudders matched his and he realized he couldn't let her go quite yet. She seemed to like his dominance—he liked it, too—but he didn't know how far to push. Anyway, the car seemed like the wrong spot for experimenting with her. She was too precious to be treated like a random Friday night lay.

He soothed her, running his hand down the thick mane of hair tangled in his fingers. Her own fingers stroked his shoulders and he took what comfort he could. They may have dozed, he couldn't tell, but eventually she reached over him for her bra and blouse.

Conn tried to do the right thing, the gentlemanly thing, and look away as she pulled her shirt on over her head. No luck. He was mesmerized by the gentle shimmy of her body. She didn't bother with the bra and somehow, it sent him right back up, knowing those perfect breasts were unbound, brushing against the silky fabric of her top.

She shook out her hair, still perched above him, then looked down.

She was a goddess, lush and beautiful, sensual and far too elegant for a poor bastard like him. The moonlight gleam of her earrings was a beacon in the darkness.

"Was this not a good idea?" Her head was cocked to the side and he couldn't decipher her tone, delivered in that husky voice. Finally, he decided he needed a little soul-cleansing, so he confessed.

"I've never taken anyone the way I want to take you, and I'm afraid I'll hurt you." God, he was an idiot. He'd blown his chance with the hottest woman he'd ever met and it was his own damn fault for being such a coward.

The smile that crept over her lips, however, was neither condescending nor amused. It was subversive and conspiratorial and very wicked—and it turned his crank again.

"Is that all? I'm not afraid of a little pain." Holy shit. If his dick got any harder, it would snap clean off.

"A little pain, yes. But doing what I want to do to you in here would put us both in traction."

She was leaning down to him and she stopped—he could feel his balls turning blue—"You might have a point. I heal pretty quickly, but I wouldn't want you to get hurt." What an odd thing to say, he thought, but then he was derailed by the sensation of his testicles going a strong shade of cobalt.

She sat up to open the door and he could see the faintest outline of her breasts swaying with her movement. God, he wasn't helping himself at all. She climbed off of him, out of the driver's seat and into the rain, but she didn't seem to care if she was getting wet.

He followed her out and found that he didn't care, either.

The cool rain felt good after the sweltering heat of arousal, and the fresh breeze swirled through the car, clearing out the heady scent of sex and replacing it with sweet anticipation. All he had to do was make it home and spank the monkey before his cock expired from lack of circulation. He shook himself and she put up her hands, protesting the double shower with her sexy laugh.

The storm faded as quickly as it had come, leaving only a soft mist.

"It's gorgeous out here, isn't it?" she said, and he could only nod. She was gorgeous. The weather was incidental. "This is one of my favorite moments. Right after the rain when everything is so clean and quiet."

Blair bent down, and slipping off her shoes, rolled up the bottoms of her jeans. She even had pretty feet. Long and bony, but elegant. She was way too good for him, but at the moment he could be happy in the knowledge she wanted him, no matter where he came from.

"If you don't mind leaving your car here, I could walk you home." She held out her hand and they started down the road.

"I thought that was my line. You don't have to walk through the rain with me." This was such a strange relationship. He wanted to have caveman sex with her, but when they weren't trying to rip each other's clothes off, they were a pretty equal pair.

"But I want to. I'm not ready to go home quite yet. And this way, I can, umm, roll in the mud on my way back to the house and no one will laugh at me."

"I wouldn't laugh at you."

Blair smiled at him. She didn't really have rolling in the mud on her mind. Here, between their two homes, they stood on the edge of civilization. Beyond this lay hundreds of acres of wetland forest and a complex river system. Unblemished nature.

The wilderness called to her. There was so much territory to explore, so many experiences awaiting her. The clouds parted suddenly and a brilliant moon shone through the gap. The urge to shed her human skin and howl swept like fire through her blood and she raised her face to the light.

The desire to mate with him, which was not quite the same as the desire to have sex with him, pinched at her, keeping her on two feet. She needed his trust and acceptance, but for the first time, she felt fear that, when it finally, really mattered, he wouldn't understand. She put the thought away.

They walked on, swinging their hands, and she enjoyed the innocence of it—a sharp contrast to the carnality of other times together. Which reminded her as she glanced at his chest, watching raindrops trickle down to his waistband—she was either going to have to buy him a new shirt or find some spare buttons and learn to sew. He started to say something to her, but she held up her hand.

A sound caught her attention. It was probably undetectable to the human ear, but she heard it clear as a bell. Or at least as clear as someone sneaking around Conn's house. The faintest tinkle of glass indicated a freshly broken window.

"There's someone messing with your house, Conn."

He took her at her word and gave her a stern command. "Stay here. Or go back to your house and call the cops." It was almost sweet, the way he went all alpha male on her, but she didn't need his protection. If things went wrong, he was more likely to need hers.

He was already running over the wet grass, angling across the field toward his home, and she followed, catching up with him easily. He glared at her, but didn't stop, so she kept pace with him.

When they got to the edge of the mown lawn, they stopped, crouching in the tall grass. "I'm telling you, Blair. Stay away. This could be dangerous."

Okay. It was cute the first time, but now his protectiveness was starting to grate on her nerves. "Don't worry about me, Conn. I can take care of myself."

A faint light filtered through the windows, bobbing as the intruder moved.

"Looks like he broke in through the back door already, so he'll probably try to use the same way to get out."

That was fine with her. She nodded and watched him run toward the back stoop, crouching low to keep out of sight.

It took less than a minute to strip out of her clothes. She lifted her face to the moon and opened herself to the magic in her blood. A blast of excitement and adrenaline surged through her as she called the Change and accepted its wild embrace.

She shook and settled her fur along her spine. This was as much a part of her nature as her humanity. She could never deny the wolf in herself for anyone. And with that thought firmly in mind, she loped off to the front porch.

As she arrived, she mourned briefly the lack of opposable thumbs, but the door opened for her, quietly and mysteriously.

She reached out with her senses to learn that Conn was creeping slowly up the stairs. He hadn't opened the door.

"Come on in, wolf girl. Don't let the rain in and wipe your paws before you get the floor all muddy."

Blair backed up, swallowing a whimper. She strained every organ she had to locate the source of the voice, but found no one. Nothing but the faintest dry whisper of old jasmine.

"I know you can hear me. I'm a ghost. You're a werewolf. Believe me, sugar, there are stranger things than us roaming this old world."

Her hackles rose and she lowered her ears. Why was she hearing an old lady in her head? Anyway, even if there were werewolves, it didn't necessarily follow that there had to be ghosts.

"You're a cool one. Good. He'll need you. Now go help him. That other fool nephew of mine is upstairs doing Lord knows what to the nursery."

It was Aubrey in the house? Good grief. The stupid in that man went all the way to the bone.

She quickly checked to see if he'd brought any help, but found no one else so she quietly trod up the stairs, letting each riser take her weight slowly in case it creaked.

At the top of the landing, she ducked to the side to hide herself. Conn was barely visible in the darkened hall, but she could see him clearly, carrying a crowbar over his shoulder like a baseball bat. He was going the wrong way.

Aubrey was disguised by a knit ski mask, but she could tell who he was by the oily stink of his cologne. He stood in a doorway on the other side of the stairs, waiting. His ugly anticipation poisoned the air.

The immediate danger, however, was Aubrey's weapon of choice. The nail gun he'd picked up outside had a battery pack for portability. The short roofing nails probably wouldn't kill Conn, but they could still do serious damage. Assault and battery by Black and Decker.

Conn was coming around the corner, oblivious to Aubrey's ambush. In a heartbeat it would be too late, so she leapt out across the wide hall, knocking Conn to the floor and intercepting the nail that punched through fur and skin and muscle and buried itself in her side. She yelped and twisted, but more nails followed as Aubrey made like a Hollywood stuntman, firing as he ran for the stairs.

Just her luck she'd found a good ol' boy with good aim.

She leapt for his back and caught him, clawing down his shoulder, hearing fabric tear, smelling blood well under her claws. She scrabbled at him, inflicting as much damage as possible before he twisted away from her, cursing, and ran down the stairs.

Conn scrambled to his feet behind her, and tossed the crowbar like a boomerang. It clipped him behind the knees and he stumbled over the last two steps. Aubrey landed on his hands and knees at the bottom, but recovered quickly and took off like the hounds of Hell were on his heels.

Actually, she knew a couple of Hellhounds. Nice guys. A little intense. She sure could have used their help right now because she did *not* feel good.

She wobbled to a standstill as Conn backed away.

Wrong direction, big boy. She took two steps toward him before she realized at least one nail had gone a little deeper than muscle. It felt like someone was using a cheese grater on her spleen.

She sat down abruptly, her haunches crumpling under her, and then pain consumed her world.

A familiar scent neared, soothing, but not enough to take the edge off. He came closer and closer until his heat comforted her. Until his hands spread over her fur, stroking and caressing. But when his fingers began to probe at the jagged spears of agony in her side, the wolf appeared. She meant to snap the air near his arm, but misjudged. Skin parted lightly under the tip of her fang, tainting the air with no more than the promise of blood. He jerked his hand back and she whimpered, ashamed of her outburst. He stripped his shirt off and slowly returned to her, soothing and stroking at her ruff.

The old lady spoke in her head again, murmuring warm mother sounds, calming her as the human poked and prodded and found the nail heads. She burned. Shifted. Changed. And faded out of consciousness.

Chapter Five

“Jesus Christ. Holy shit. Jesus Christ.”

“*Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, boy.*” Aunt Pinkney’s voice would have startled him, but he was currently all out of startle and well into his stock of what-the-fuck.

“She’s...she’s...”

“*You might want to consider getting those nails out.*”

“I have to take her to the hospital.”

“*You can’t. They won’t know what to do with someone like her.*”

“Well, where am I supposed to take her, Aunt Pinkney? The vet?” Conn knew he was shouting, but he felt entitled.

“*Settle down, child. Take her down to the kitchen and see what you can do.*”

“What if she’s hurt inside? I could kill her if I move her.”

“*I doubt it, unless you’ve been using silver nails on your roof.*”

He shook his head and realized he was shaking all over. *Oh please God, not Blair. Please don’t let her be hurt. Please don’t let her die.* Reassured by his aunt’s words, he gathered her close for a moment before he pulled himself together and carried her downstairs into the kitchen.

Other than some glass near the door, everything was still clean and tidy. He set her down on the floor, thanked God she was still unconscious, and got to work. He quickly scrubbed his hands in water so hot he nearly blistered, then brought a steaming bowl and a stack of dishcloths with him.

He had to pull the nails out with his fingers.

The first one was under her armpit and fairly shallow. It slid out easily, its passage eased by a trickle of fresh blood. The second, lodged in the flesh of her breast, was also simple. The third one, though. The third one was lower down on her side and it had hit bone. He wasn’t sure if the rib was broken, or if it was merely grazed. Either way, he ended up using a pair of kitchen shears as leverage to pull it out as smoothly as possible.

As bad as the third nail was, the fourth was worse. The fourth hadn’t hit bone; it had gone between her ribs and hit blood. When he pulled it free of her body, instead of the seeping he’d seen before, he got a flood. It gushed out in pulsing spouts and he frantically pressed down with the towels, trying desperately to stem the tide that soaked through towel after towel with no end in sight.

As he worked to keep the blood inside of her instead of pooling on the floor, he began to realize he wasn't alone. More than just his aunt, the kitchen was filling with vaporous forms in costumes that varied from Pinkney's 1950s housedress all the way back to knee breeches. Each form stretched a hand toward the fallen woman, then made way for one figure in particular.

A woman in a Colonial-style gown with her hair tied back in a tidy bun came forward.

"You've done well, Conn Lucas."

"I've killed her. She won't stop bleeding." His heart bled with her, dripping out onto the floor where the generations of his ancestors could step all over it.

"You have the right of it, Pinkney. He worries overmuch," she said over his head before answering him. *"She will not die. Not by such a trifling wound, though it bleeds heavily."*

Footsteps sounded. Real ones, not ghostly ones. A hugely pregnant woman came through his door, then stopped at the counter and put a hand under her massive belly. "Whew. That's a hike to get over here."

Gabriel's trumpet could blow this minute and it wouldn't distract his attention from Blair. Was she getting paler? Was her breathing getting more shallow?

"Hey, you," growled a masculine voice as it came up the stoop. "You want to tell me why my pregnant wife decided to haul ass over to a stranger's house in the middle of the ni—sweet Jesus. Blair?" He turned on Conn and snarled. "What happened to her?"

"There was someone in the house. He broke in and went upstairs. He was standing in the nursery room door with my nail gun." His voice broke and he tried to pull it together. "She...she jumped in front of me."

"Where is he? I'm going to kill him."

"Now Maddox, she'll be fine," said his wife. "You know she will. There's no silver in those wounds, is there?"

"No," answered Conn.

"Then it'll be all right, Conn. These guys are unbelievably tough."

He shook his head. "She's bleeding so much." Still pressing down with one hand, he moved the other to caress the pearl at her ear, leaving a smear of blood on the dull glow.

Debra—he knew her from her walks with Blair—lowered herself to the ground on all fours like a camel with the hump on the wrong side. "I am never going to get back up on my own."

Conn lifted the towel and used a fresh cloth and the hot water to wipe away the worst of the gore. She was still leaking a steady flow of crimson.

"Is this the nail you removed?" she asked, picking up the two-inch spike.

He nodded, beyond words now, and watched as she poked and prodded around the wound. She laid her hands over the black hole and concentrated for a moment. Conn swore he saw a soft golden light pulse around her fingers, but then it was gone.

Debra leaned back with a gusty sigh. “She’ll be fine. Based on the placement, it’s possible she nicked something, but she’ll be healed by morning, I promise. You’ve cleaned it and you’re applying pressure. There’s not much more to do until she stops bleeding.”

She reached up for her husband, and Maddox lifted her with relative ease, then pulled out a chair for her to sit on.

Conn checked Blair’s side again and decided that the bleeding had slowed, seeping now in a sluggish flow. He didn’t understand any of this. “Hey, can you...” He looked around for a corporeal helper who wasn’t about to pop and spotted Maddox. “Can you grab one of the quilts off the couch for her?”

“Not one of my prize-winning quilts! Why don’t you use one of those other blankets?” screeched Aunt Pinkney.

Conn rolled his eyes. “Or maybe a blanket from my bed?”

“I heard her,” said Maddox before he went in search of a warm covering for his sister.

“He heard her?” he asked Debra.

“Oh sure. It’s a werewolf thing,” she said, waving a hand breezily. “They can see and hear ghosts. Not too many humans can, though.” She didn’t quite pose it as a question, but her curiosity was unmistakable. He had no answers for her, though. He’d never seen one before he got to this house and now they were popping out of the woodwork.

“He is my kin, after all,” said the Colonial lady. *“I am Temperance Cotesworth.”*

So that’s who she was. Not enough his aunt was hanging around. He also got to meet Great Great Great whatever Grandma.

“Wow,” breathed his neighbor. “You’re the Swamp Witch.”

Temperance smiled. *“I believe the title now belongs to you, daughter of Morgaine.”*

Blair moved slightly and moaned. His attention snapped back to her as Maddox came in with a warm microfleece blanket. Conn wrapped her up and lifted her in his arms.

“Y’all can stay and chat and have your coven meeting or whatever. I’m going to go make sure she’s comfortable.”

Maddox stood in his way. “I think she ought to come home with us.”

“Leave her here, Maddox. She’ll be fine. And your mother will be thrilled.”

Conn had no clue what they were talking about and he didn’t care. He nodded to everyone, thanked Debra, and pushed past Maddox to climb the stairs to his bedroom.

Once there, he gently laid her on the bed. He got a box of bandages and antibiotic cream, plus another warm, damp towel and cleaned the blood from her skin carefully and thoroughly. Before his eyes, however, the shallowest of the wounds seemed to be healing themselves. The third and fourth nail holes were still there, but no longer bleeding.

He took his softest T-shirt from the dresser drawer and pulled it over her even though her nudity was unimportant now. He wanted her warm and comfortable more than he wanted to see her naked. The perfection of her body was secondary to the wounds she had received. For him.

She had jumped in front of a nail gun for him.

“What were you thinking, Blair? Why would you do that?”

He received no response from his insensate savior, although he suspected she was more asleep than unconscious now. Her breathing was deep and even, and her color was back to normal.

He heard the back door close and checked to see the lights were out in the kitchen. Maddox and Debra were gone. There were no ghosts around.

They were alone.

He stripped down to his boxers and crawled into bed beside her, making sure he lay against her unwounded side. Dim starlight filtered through the old lace curtains at the window and he watched her face as she sighed and moved, her brow furrowing slightly before she rested again.

Tonight, it was enough to know she was safe in his arms. He'd deal with the werewolf thing in the morning. And then he was going hunting. With a nail gun.

Chapter Six

Morning sun angled across the room, leaving lacy patterns on the hardwood floor and over the foot of the bed.

Not her bed.

She turned her head on the fluffy down pillow—she liked firmer pillows—and saw something she'd gladly wake up to. Conn's eyes were closed, and asleep, he looked so young. The lines that care and stress had given him were smooth, leaving only the soft brackets around his mouth.

Stretching as much as she could without waking him, Blair felt the pull and ache in her side from...her eyes went wide.

She was going to gut that son of a bitch with a hacksaw. How dare he shoot nails at her?

Blair slid quietly out of bed and made for the bathroom. When she was done, she stripped off the T-shirt and stood in front of the mirror, examining the tiny pink holes in her side.

There was a knock on the bathroom door and she said, "Come on in. I'm..." She was standing naked in a bathroom. Decent was probably not the right word, but she didn't stop him.

No, uppermost in her mind was the realization that he'd already seen her naked because he'd seen her Change.

He stood in the open doorway, and in the mirror, she watched a remnant of terror leave his eyes.

Without a word, he approached her, his eyes on hers. Not on her body, not on the scars that now marred her, on her eyes. He stood directly behind her, the cushion of air between them so fine she could feel the faintest tickle on her shoulder blades from the hairs on his chest.

His fingers encircled her wrist, for once, not bending her to his will, but exploring. He lifted it above her head and looped it back so it rested behind his neck, pulling him closer. Only now did he look at her body, trailing gentle fingers over each mark.

When he got to the lowest one, the one with the widest scar, though it was barely half an inch, he finally pulled her close and held her like a man clinging to his last breath.

"You scared the hell out of me, Blair Moreau," he murmured into her neck and she could do nothing but hang her head and let the tears fall. Then something subtle shifted. He pulled her arm down and spun her around so she was trapped between his hard body and the counter.

The crippling heartbreak was gone from his eyes, replaced by anger. “What were you thinking, woman? Don’t you ever step in front of a nail gun—or anything else—for me again! I could wring your neck.”

But the rising hardness between her thighs didn’t feel angry to her. The strength of his grip set her blood flowing faster, so she merely shook her hair back and whispered, “Yes, Conn,” before she reached up and bit him on the chin.

Thought ended. Instinct took over. He reached up and fisted his hands in her hair, pulling her head back farther, then he ran his teeth over her jaw, down to her ear where he bit her on the earlobe hard enough to sting. She squealed and pushed herself up so she sat on the counter.

Blair wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him into the place where she needed him most. She reached to pull his boxers down, but he stopped her.

“No. You do what I tell you.”

She moaned at the erotic order, delivered in his gravelly morning lawyer voice. She wouldn’t think of disobeying, not if he was going to do wonderful, lovely, sinful things to her if she followed his instructions. Instead, she let herself go, allowed him to take her where he wanted, sure it would be exactly what she wanted, too.

He palmed her ass and yanked her closer, so she was barely resting on the edge of the vanity. Her arms he placed behind her so she could hold herself up, but not touch him. She laid herself open to him. Trusting. Welcoming. Waiting.

There was no hesitation this time as he slid his hands over her waist and up her sides. He bent down to lick at each pink little scar, tracing a pattern on her ribs with his tongue that was so sensual, she shivered in delight.

His hands continued up, the work-roughened palms scraping sensation over her skin until he reached her breasts. He pushed them up.

“Look,” he told her. “Look at how beautiful you are in my hands.” She had no choice but to tip her head down and look. She didn’t see herself, though, except as she was held in his large, tanned hands. He was the beautiful one.

He let his thumbs slide over her nipples, watching them bounce back, hard as glass, aching, burning for him.

“Please,” she whimpered.

Conn chuckled. “Soon.”

Instead, he abandoned her, leaving her bereft, but not for long. No, instead he licked a path up the middle of her body, from between her breasts all the way to the tip of her chin. He blew on the wet trail he’d made and the cool, quick contrast made her shiver again.

He tipped her chin to the side, exposing her throat to him. He leaned forward and gathered her close before he whispered, “Move.” He twisted his torso over hers and the friction of the springy hair on his chest on her swollen nipples made her catch her lip in her teeth.

She moved against him, straining for more and more sensation, pressing for more and more of his heat, of his flesh on hers. Now they were nearly one flesh, melded together from shoulder to hip, only the thin cotton of his shorts in their way. She could feel him rocking against her exposed, wet heat, seeking the relief she could provide. In this one way, they were equals right now. Each wanting the same thing.

He held her hips, rubbing his thumbs over the crease of her thighs where they were pulled against him. His lips teased over her throat, following the vein that tightened and rushed under his caress.

Conn opened his mouth and let his teeth take over where his lips left off, scraping down her throat to the exposed tendon. Her screams of bliss from the night before still rang in his ears, but this time, he wasn’t going to stop. This time, he would unleash his desires on her without mercy. He needed it—needed her—too badly to let mannerly constraint stop him this time.

And she was so ready. He felt her sex leaving damp heat against the front of his shorts where he teased her with short, hard grinds. He opened a drawer and pulled out the box of condoms stashed there, tore one packet off the strip with his teeth.

“Oh God, yes,” she panted, her hands still behind her exactly where he’d put them. He could see the whiteness of her knuckles as she strained to keep herself there and he decided to reward her obedience.

He bent and licked one nipple before sucking it deep into his mouth. Pressing it hard between his tongue and the roof of his mouth, he suckled and hung on while she cried and bucked beneath him.

Blair was loud, the echoes of her cries bouncing back against the cold tiles of the bathroom. He loved it, encouraged it by flicking his thumb over her other nipple, with another strong pull on the one in his mouth. Her flavor on his tongue was an aphrodisiac in itself. The heady scent of sex underlaid with fresh, green spring and...he sniffed. Wet dog?

Conn sucked again, molding her other breast in his hand, squeezing the nipple between his fingers just to hear her breath catch. He pulled away with one final lick and dropped his boxers around his ankles, kicking them away. He ripped open the packet, but didn’t put it on. Instead, he handed it to her.

“You do it.”

Her eyes glowed like the wolf of the night before, all gold and amber, rather than her normal human blue and it was the sexiest thing he’d ever seen in his life. Conn knew that he should be afraid of a woman who changed into a wolf, but she’d protected him, trading her safety for his own. Spilling her own blood for him. Blair Moreau could turn into an eight-foot tall, face-eating monster and unless she did it right now, he wasn’t stopping.

Her fingers were cold and her hands shook, but it was perfect. The light strokes of those chilled little fingers added a shocking wake-up sting to his cock, and he couldn’t wait couldn’t wait to open her up.

“Lean back again,” he ordered and she did, her eyes still wolf-like, her breasts heaving in anticipation, still glistening with moisture where he’d licked the one, the other with faint red marks around the engorged tip.

He wrapped her legs around him loosely and finally put his hands on the prize.

Melting, hot, wet sex. Sticky, slippery cream. All for him. He aimed for the glistening, swollen gates of heaven and slid all the way in on one smooth glide. Tight muscles contracted against him, squeezing hard, then undulating away.

She whimpered again and he looked up, away from the thatch of dark curls where they met and mingled in a stormy eye of lust. She was watching the way they came together, too, and she was on the verge of losing control, on the edge of bucking his commands.

“No,” he said, fighting for his courtroom voice. She sucked in a breath and looked up, then tightened her legs against him, pulling him in tight.

“I want...” she began.

“You want what I want. Only that.” Conn leaned in and sucked in her earring, running his tongue over her ear, then slid out of her hot sex, even though it nearly killed him. “Stand up.”

She slid off the counter and stood before him, a goddess in her own right. A goddess who would bend to his will.

“Turn around.”

Another scent wave of sex surrounded them as she moved slowly. Now she was facing the mirror where he could watch every ripple of desire that crossed her lovely face.

And he could see her lovely, lovely ass. He paused for a moment to admire its perfection and caught her smile in the mirror at the edge of his vision.

“Enjoy the view?” she asked, an echo of their first kiss.

“Prettiest thing I’ve seen all day.” He used his knee to nudge her thighs apart so she was in a wide-legged stance, one that begged to be taken. “But it’s early yet.”

She chuckled, low and slightly hoarse. He put one hand on her shoulder and let it trail lightly down her spine, curving over the splendid slope of her cheeks before delving back into the center of her body. She arched, thrusting herself back at him, eager to be taken.

Not yet. He wanted her trembling. Shaking. His.

He bent over her, putting his lips at the top of her spine and kissing his way down each little bump, each little dip. Where her hips swelled, he squeezed, reveling in the feminine softness of her ass. A nibble was all he needed. A little nip and bite of her sweet flesh.

Blair squeaked and he chuckled. Maybe another little mouthful. Each bite took him closer to his goal.

She was open to him, his penetration having spread the walls of her body, and all he needed was to pull up a seat and feast. With his thumbs, he parted her outer lips and pressed his own to the hooded bud at

the top. Then with small licks and stabs of his tongue, he took his mouth where his cock had already ventured, deep inside her, a softer mimicry of his invasion. He left no part of her sex untouched, returning to stroke her clit with his tongue until she was flooded with her juices, running down her thigh like the ripest peach. Only when he was sure she hung on the very edge of orgasm did he stand. With short, shallow strokes, going deeper each time, he kept them both at the edge of control. They caught a rhythm easily, as if they were already familiar with each other's bodies, established lovers, not exploring new territory.

He reached under her body and stroked across her firm belly, questing up until he caught her breasts in his palms. He already knew they were sensitive and he pushed his advantage, kneading the soft flesh, interspersing his gentle touch with flicks over the nipples that made her gasp.

He pulled her up against him, lifting her onto the tips of her toes, her arms holding tightly to his as he changed the angle and pushed upward. His shallow thrusts hit a spot inside her that made her eyes glaze over while she shuddered convulsively in his arms.

He lowered her back until she could lean again on the vanity with shaky arms. This time when he skimmed her belly, he went lower until he cupped her mound, stroking again at the center of her passion. Longer and harder he drove inside her, in time with his feather light touches on her clit. He was driven not only to satisfy her, but to imprint himself on her. To brand himself into her memory as the only man she would ever crave—at least as much as he craved her.

He met her eyes in the mirror, watched them waver between blue and gold and when he felt the contractions inside her milking his cock, he quit fighting the urge to come that had been swamping him since he kissed her yesterday.

He surrendered to the waves, to the building storm, and burst free, clutching her to him, absorbing her shudders so they moved together until the tremors eased, leaving only tiny little aftershocks that made him feel like he was cracking into small pieces.

Her head fell back against his shoulder as they sank to their knees. He kept her on his lap until his spent cock finally slid from her body. First blue balls, now he was pounded raw. His dick was never going to be the same with her around.

It was worth it.

Chapter Seven

If she was human, she'd be walking funny for days, Blair thought, staring blindly up at the ceiling. It would still be worth it.

Never had she been taken with such animal ferocity. Never had she had anyone take charge of her and her pleasure. She could get used to him being the boss in the bedroom. Sometimes. She meant to smile at her stray thought, but her lips only twitched. She was spent.

Her head fell to the side and she spotted the one thing that might bring a little life back to her limbs.

"Shower," she croaked and crawled off Conn's prone body. The bathtub was an old, heavy, cast iron relic with claw feet and external pipes, surrounded by a flimsy shower curtain on a circular rail.

She reached up and cranked the water on, listening to the gurgle and rattle of pipes and the hissing sound of the water heater as it came to life. "You know, if you take this tub and move it to the guest bath—because you don't want to discard a gorgeous vintage item like this—then you could tile yourself an amazing, huge shower in here. You've got plenty of room."

Conn, who was still kneeling on the floor, cracked one eye open and peered at her. "How are you thinking? All my higher brain function is...pfft. Gone. Possibly forever."

Blair stuck a hand under the water. Ahhh, warmth.

"Come sit in the tub with me. It'll come back." She got in and leaned against the back of the tub, letting the water fall on her, reviving her with its heavy spray.

He crawled over and climbed into the bathtub, propping himself against the opposite rim. "I don't think helping you shower is going to get blood flowing back to my brain, if you know what I mean."

She looked at the length of his hairy legs tangled with hers. He had to be as worn out as she was, but his sex was trying valiantly to rise to the occasion. "Wow. I'm impressed. How old are you, anyway?"

"Thirty-two. You make me feel like a teenager."

"Aww, you're sweet."

"How old are you?" he asked.

It was funny, she thought. They'd been through so much in such a short time that they hadn't had the chance to get to know the little things about each other. "I'm twenty-six. My birthday's next month."

Conn reached up one long arm for the soap and lathered it up between his hands before leaning forward.

"Are you going to be here next month so I can wish you a happy birthday?"

"I think I can be convinced." He wouldn't have to work too hard. She already knew he was the one for her. She would be wherever he was until he realized the same thing.

He took her hand and spread creamy bubbles up her arm to her shoulder, then over her collarbone and down the other arm. She scooted closer. "You missed a spot."

"I'm just getting started."

They met for a kiss under the showerhead, drinking each other in. The soap and water made each touch a sensual glide of skin over skin. She washed him, going over his back while she rubbed her breasts against his chest, raising a lather. Her hands slipped over his hips and strong abs down to his rising staff.

Blair reached under to cup and massage his balls while he leaned back with a groan. As much as she loved being taken, there were times when a woman had to stand up for herself. Sure, steady strokes of her hand brought him standing to attention.

"Blair," he moaned. "Have mercy."

She laughed. "Mercy? Is that what you showed me?" She crouched between his knees. "Sorry, hon. There's no one named Mercy here."

The spray pounded against her back as she bent to lick the very tip of his cock, enjoying the twitch and jerk of his body. But she wasn't in the mood to tease, so when she sucked down half his length, he arched, throwing his head back. And she was relentless. She sucked as if she meant to draw the life right out of him. In fact, she nearly did, stopping short of having him come in her mouth.

She fished around outside the tub and didn't have to lean too far out to snag the end of the roll of condoms.

"This time you want what I want," she said, but her actions belied her tough words. She sheathed him, then let him pull her onto his lap. Blair slowly impaled herself, loving the tenderness of his intrusion. She was so tight, and he was so close that little movement was needed to amplify the sensation of being filled to the brim.

Gently this time, he held her close and kissed her breasts, giving them sweet and loving attention while she rocked back and forth. This experience was soft around the edges. Steam rose around them, insulating them from the harsh world that awaited them outside the walls of the house. Slowly, she tensed as the first wave of her orgasm washed over her. Not the tsunami of the first one, but a gentle crest, followed by more, higher and higher, but never completely out of control.

Conn rose with her, muscles tightening as he thrust into her, then stopped. She felt thick around him, sensitive to each pulse of his body as he burst inside her. As if someone let their strings relax, they both collapsed into the bottom of the tub.

Sated and spotless.

Half an hour later, they were sitting at the kitchen table blowing on their coffee. Blair wore Conn's sweatpants and a baggy T-shirt, and she was tall and athletic enough to make it sexy-boyfriend wear, rather than I-have-four-children-under-the-age-of-six-and-this-is-as-good-as-it-gets wear. It was possible he was biased in her favor, though.

But there was the matter of the wolf to get past first. There were no good openings to this conversation. He stared into his coffee cup and blinked when steam wafted into his eyes.

"So. I don't know if you knew this or not, but, uh, I think you broke skin last night."

She frowned, not understanding. "Sorry?"

"You snapped at me when I was looking at your injury." Conn held out his hand so she could see the faint red line where her fang had barely grazed the first layer of the epidermis.

"Oh." She frowned. Then, "Oh! I'm so sorry! Are you all right?" She reached for his hand and he let her take it.

"That's the question, isn't it? Am I going to start howling at the moon now?"

She smiled, but he wasn't comforted. "Oh, I see. No, you're not going to turn fuzzy in the moonlight, I promise."

"How do you know?"

"Because you can't be Changed by a bite. Being a werewolf is a family trait. You're either born into the family, or you're not."

"What? There's a lupine Cosa Nostra or something?"

She laughed and he felt his spirits lift slightly.

"It's more like '*on tra*' which means 'our thing' in Breton."

"You speak Breton?"

"Not really, but we're all descended from a Breton knight named Melion. He was the first werewolf. Debra's got a couple of old stories about him, if you want to read them."

Conn let out a sigh of relief. "Good. That's good. But what about you?"

"What about me?" She tensed slightly, but he pressed on.

"Can you change when you want to? Does it happen every full moon? Are you ever going to eat my face off?" He wanted it to sound light, but knew he didn't quite pull it off. She winced and heaved a deep sigh.

"Yes, I can Change whenever I want. No, see previous answer. And no, I will never eat your face off. Even if I've had a horribly bad day at work, I'm PMSing and the moon is full, I will never eat off your face, tear out your heart or claw out your guts."

His brows rose. "Okay. That's actually more information than I was going for, but I'll take it." He switched their hands around so he was holding hers. "I'm sorry, Blair. It's just...I've never dated a werewolf before."

A reluctant laugh welled out of her. “It’s okay. I’ve never told a human what I am before, so it’s new territory for both of us.”

He leaned forward and kissed her quickly. Then kissed her slowly. They parted on a smile.

“So, what’s on the To Do list for today?” she asked.

“Let’s see. I need to replace the window in my back door. Check the roof on the front porch because I think it’s starting to sag. Consider moving a three ton cast iron tub so I can tile my bathroom for a two-person shower.” He winked at her. “Oh, and find out who broke into my house and shot my girl with a goddamn nail gun.”

“I can help with the last one. It was Aubrey.”

“Aubrey Cotesworth?”

“Why? You know anyone else with such a ridiculous name?”

He snorted. “You realize my full name is Conn Harriot Lucas, right?”

“Dear Lord. What’s the etiquette here? Should I apologize or sympathize?”

“Doesn’t matter. How do you know it was Aubrey?”

“Have you ever smelled the man? He reeks of nasty cologne. Trust me. I’m good with scents.” She tapped the side of her nose and he realized that, yeah, werewolves probably had pretty extraordinary senses of smell.

“What am I supposed to do? He broke into my house, shot you—”

“He was aiming at you.”

“I wish he’d hit me, then.” He would have given anything to take away her pain. The memory of her bleeding on his floor in gushing floods made him shudder. “I don’t even know what he was doing in here. Was he trying to steal something or just destroy things?”

“Let’s go ask him,” she said, and the smile on her face made him wonder if maybe she wouldn’t eat Aubrey’s face off. Then he tried to convince himself that was *not* sexy.

His car was still in front of her house, which made for an awkward few moments when they went to retrieve both his wheels and clean clothes for Blair.

Mrs. Moreau, or as she’d introduced herself, Tammy, looked over her daughter with a raised brow, then offered him coffee while he waited for her to change.

“So what do you do, Conn?” she asked. Mr. Moreau stood behind him, arms crossed. Saying nothing.

“I’m a lawyer in the insurance industry.”

“So you don’t live here.”

“I’m considering a move. Nothing definite yet.” He was gifted with words. Concise. Definitive. So why was he waffling around these people?

"Moving into that house? It hardly looks comfortable."

"You'd be surprised, ma'am."

"And if you moved to Culford, what would you do? Is there much call for insurance lawyers here?"

"No, ma'am, but I can practice a more general type of law here. Or Columbia's not too far away if I want to work with a firm."

"So you're good at your work?"

"I believe so, ma'am." He nearly smiled. This wasn't too bad.

"Do you know what we are?" Any semblance of friendliness slipped away from her manner.

"Yes, ma'am." The smile he held in reserve was gone now.

"Do you think you can live with that? Keep our secret?"

"Yes, ma'am." He felt like a bug pinned on a board. Or a sheep surrounded by wolves, which was a better metaphor. The bug was already dead. The sheep had time to contemplate getting ripped to shreds.

"Can you keep her safe?"

"I'll do my best."

"Your best wasn't good enough last night, from what I hear." Her eyes glistened with unshed tears and Mr. Moreau growled, low and menacing. Conn swallowed. "She's not indestructible. She can be hurt."

"Yes, ma'am. I know and I'd do everything in my power to stop it." His words were a vow. Never again would Blair shed blood on his behalf. Not if he could do anything about it.

"You're setting out to fix it now?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And once this is taken care of, what do you plan to do with my daughter?"

"I...I..." Well, this was embarrassing. He hadn't thought so far ahead yet. Keep her safe. Keep her close. What did that lead to?

"You don't sound too clear. Do you have plans for my daughter?" He felt the larger weight of Mr. Moreau behind him. The man was no giant, but he cast a big shadow.

"I..."

Blair chose that moment to come out of the bedroom, dressed in jeans again, but dark and slim. Her form-fitting black T-shirt showed off the deceptively subtle muscles in her arms. Black boots laced halfway up her shins, and with her hair loose and flowing in waves over her shoulders, she looked sexy and slightly sinister. Powerful.

Conn had known all along her occasional submissiveness was a game for both of them, but it wasn't until this moment that he truly realized she could have knocked him on his ass any time she chose. It was stirring and slightly humbling. In any case, he was proud to be the one to whom she chose to submit—when she felt like it.

He stood when she came into the room.

“Mom, have you been bothering him?”

“Of course not, honey. Maddox tells me you were hurt last night.”

“It was no big deal. I wish Debra hadn’t hiked all the way out there, though. Is she all right?”

“She’s fine. A little achy today, but no contractions.”

“Thank goodness.”

Mrs. Moreau rose to her feet—she was compactly built, but he decided right then that he wouldn’t be the one to cross her—and Blair bent to hug her.

“You take care of whoever hurt you, then hurry back. Your young man hasn’t answered all my questions yet.”

“Mom!”

“I’m just doing my job,” said Mrs. Moreau. “And your father is doing some truly inspired looming.”

He felt like a kid picking up a date while Dad cleaned his rifle in the living room. Blair took his hand and led him out, and he let her.

“Your parents are kind of scary,” he said once they were in the car.

“You think?”

“I started out practicing criminal law. I know from scary.”

She smiled. He was not comforted.

Chapter Eight

They pulled up in front of the Cotesworth Construction offices and sat for a moment. When Conn turned the engine off, the silence was deafening.

“We have absolutely no proof he was at the house last night,” he said.

“We have some, but very little that would stand up in court. Anyway, proof would only matter if, say, we wanted to bring him up on charges. Is that where you’re going with this?”

His jaw turned to stone. “Jail isn’t going to accomplish what I want.”

“What do you want, Conn?” That was the key question here, and she was surprised at how much she wanted to hear his answer.

“Aside from you?”

She smiled. So far, so good.

“Yes, aside from me.”

“I want...I want to not be the whipping boy anymore. I want to not be hated because my mother made a bad decision. But I know I don’t have any control over what other people think.” His hands were wrapped tightly around the steering wheel and she ached for him. She couldn’t imagine being an outcast in her own family.

“So since I can’t get those things, I’ll settle for them leaving me the hell alone. When I was a kid, I tried to please them. When I came back, I tried to ignore them. Now, I want them to stay away. They don’t want the house. They just don’t want me to have it. I can’t believe they went so far as to try to have me killed. I guess it’s time to show them who’s the big dog here.”

“Woof.”

He grinned and the lines around his eyes crinkled appealingly, but then he got very serious. “You. You don’t go in there. You stay here where it’s safe.”

“You must not be as bright as I think you are. Unless he carries a nail gun in a shoulder holster, I’m perfectly safe.”

His brows were drawn together and she leaned forward to kiss the little line bisecting his forehead.

“How about this? I’ll follow your lead. If you want to play it close to the vest, I can do that.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then he’ll wish he carried a spare pair of tighty whities with him.”

Finally, the smile he’d been holding in came out.

He held the door open for her as they entered the office. A blonde woman looked up at them and stared blankly. Her desk was decorated with photos and memorabilia of her past as second runner-up in the Miss Lower Richland County pageant. Blair wondered if she'd put it on her resume.

"We're here to see Aubrey," said Conn with a professional smile. Bimbo smiled back and preened for a moment before she caught Blair's murderous glare. Her smile faded and she pouted before hitting a button on her phone.

"You have some visitors, Mr. Cotesworth."

"Send 'em on in, Becky," replied Aubrey's tinny voice.

Becky waved a pink-clawed hand toward the hall and went back to her—Blair looked as they walked past her desk—very important game of Spider Solitaire. Which she was losing. Blair smirked. She wasn't above being petty.

Aubrey pretended to be on the phone and held up two fingers when they arrived, but she knew there was no one on the other end of the line. There was no point in letting him think he was playing them, so she walked over and put a finger on the hook.

"Hey," he protested, but she shook her head and perched on the edge of his desk.

"Nice try." She tamped down her glee. Being the bad guy was fun.

He regrouped for a moment before sitting back in his big, important-looking leather chair. "I remember you. You're Conn's little slut."

Conn stepped forward, but she smiled. "I remember you, too. You're a little prick."

Aubrey obviously wasn't used to people who didn't roll over for him, so he was silenced while he tried to think of a comeback. Blair got off the desk and sauntered back to stand next to Conn.

"Nice to see you two getting along so well," drawled her man.

The door behind them wasn't shut all the way. It creaked slightly when a dog nosed it open. A big dog. The unneutered Doberman was all muscle, with cropped ears and a thick, studded collar. It stopped as soon as it saw the strangers and began a low growl.

"Y'all should meet Mojo, here." Aubrey smiled, his eyes narrowing.

Conn stayed perfectly still, but Blair met the huge animal head on. She lifted her lip and stared straight into Mojo's eyes. After a moment, he stopped growling, then lowered his ears and finally dropped to the floor, rolling over and showing his soft belly, whimpering lightly.

She rubbed his belly and he rolled back up, licking her hand while he piddled on the floor. "Oops. Looks like Mojo had a little accident. It's okay, baby," she said, letting the dog lean against her. She opened the door behind her. "Becky, could you take Mojo for a walk while we talk to your boss for a few minutes?"

The blonde clattered over on heels that looked half a size too small. She spotted the puddle on the floor and started to scold the dog, but Blair interrupted. "Don't worry about it. Your boss will clean it up himself."

Becky called the dog over and after a final lick at Blair's fingers, he followed the secretary out the door. Blair closed it behind her.

"You done having fun now?" Conn asked with an amused look.

"For now."

Aubrey hadn't moved during the entire encounter, but his expression had gone as sour as the milk in Conn's fridge.

"What are you doing in my office, bastard?"

Blair flinched, but Conn took it in stride. It made her wonder how often he'd heard the slur growing up.

"I'm here to tell you to stay off my property."

"What makes you think I was on your property last night? Do you have any evidence to that effect?"

She and Conn smiled at each other. "One, I didn't say anything about last night, and two, in fact, we do."

"I don't believe you. In any case, I don't think you'll have the property for much longer. It should never have passed to you in the first place and I am determined to do whatever it takes to make sure it comes back to the family. Where it belongs."

Conn felt the words slide off him. Years ago, even a month ago, the taunt would have stung. Being pushed to the outside, looking in on the Cotesworth clan like a poor kid staring at a window display of riches.

This time, it didn't even faze him. The house was his. He was a Cotesworth by blood, if not by name or filial bond.

"What were you looking for anyway?"

Aubrey leaned back in his chair again, elbows wide as he propped his hands behind his head. "You don't know? You want to hang on to that old wreck and you don't even know what it holds." He laughed like it was funny.

Conn pulled out a chair and sat down. He was willing to learn, willing to play along if that's what it took to get the information he needed. "Why don't you tell me?"

"I don't know how much you know about the Cotesworths, but I'm going to assume you're dumber than dirt."

"Assume what you like."

Aubrey didn't like that. Didn't like someone else humoring him. He sat up straight again.

“There’s a treasure in the house. One that’s only for the Cotesworths. Something the old swamp witch Temperance left behind.”

“You mean you really believe the old story about the pirate’s widow hiding his treasure?”

“It’s true, I swear.” Aubrey looked like a five year old defending the existence of monsters in his closet.

“You know as well as I do that if there was any treasure there, it’s all gone. If it really existed, the Cotesworths would never have abandoned it. I bet it was found when they built the new house on top of her old cottage.”

“You don’t know the whole story, Conn. How could you? I think we always thought we’d get back to it eventually. We figured someday, some inheritor would find the location of the treasure and dig it out.”

“You mean y’all were just too lazy to do anything about it.”

“I wasn’t.”

“You were until you found out you didn’t own it anymore.”

“Well, I suppose it’s still in the family. After a fashion.”

Conn burst out laughing. “You’re serious? You’ve called me a bastard and a mongrel since I was born. Nearly everyone in the family disowned me except Aunt Pinkney, and I think most of the reason she left the house to me was to piss everyone else off. But *now* you want to call me cousin?”

Aubrey pounded his fist on the desk, but Conn didn’t flinch.

“You can be a Cotesworth. All you have to do is sell us back the damn house!”

“You want me to buy my way into a family?” This time it was Conn who leaned back in his chair. “I may not know much about how it works—given that I have you all for relatives—but I do know I shouldn’t have to pay for my spot.”

“Now.” Conn slapped his hands on his knees and rose to his feet. “You can drive yourself to bankruptcy trying to get the house back through the courts, but I am here to tell you this. If you so much as put a toe on my front porch ever again, they’ll have to drag the swamp for your body.”

Aubrey took him at his word and paled, then tried to puff himself up. “Like I said, you can’t even prove I was there last night.”

“Take off your shirt,” interrupted Blair.

“What’s the matter? Your boy here not man enough for you?”

Blair fingered the letter opener she’d lifted from the desk. “Take off your shirt,” she repeated in a bored voice.

“Hell no,” he said, belligerent now, but Conn could see a beading of sweat gather at his temples.

She sighed and stripped to the skin before either man could say a word. In another breath, she Changed, and Conn was nearly brought to his knees by the beauty of her transformation. Her wolf was large, with intelligent eyes and a half-smile that allowed her fangs to peek out.

She padded around the desk and placed both front paws on the arms of Aubrey's chair. Conn thought she looked amused, but he figured Aubrey wouldn't see it that way.

"I think you should take off your shirt, cousin."

Shaking, his eyes peeled wide, Aubrey shrank back in the chair and reached for his waist. Blair got off the chair and waited, pacing in front of him. He pulled his shirt out, then tugged it over his shoulders with a noticeable wince.

As well he should have. His back and shoulder were shredded, her claws having left rows of ragged slashes in his flesh.

"Care to explain how you got all those wounds, Aubrey?" asked Conn, propping his hip on the edge of the desk. "Have you had a doctor look at those? You could get a nasty infection."

"What the hell is that?" He nodded at Blair and he was an unhealthy shade of pasty redneck.

"You don't need to know, Aubrey. You do need to know she tore you up even after you shot her. Last night."

"You're the..."

Conn cut him off. "So here's the deal. You leave the house alone. You leave me alone. You leave Blair alone. Her whole family shares this gift, and if her mother finds out you're the one who shot her baby? And her dad? And her brother? You. Are. Fucked."

Blair growled low in her throat, lifting her lips in a genuine snarl. It was impressive until she sniffed and stepped back, sneezing.

Conn leaned over the desk to the dark spot spreading on Aubrey's lap. "Oh. Oops. You should get that chair cleaned before the smell sets in." He stood, looking bored. "If you tell anyone what she is, you know what's going to happen, don't you? Gary Corvell ended up in Columbia at the state mental hospital. I'm sure your father would be devastated were his only son and heir to be declared insane. Think of the stain on the family honor."

Aubrey looked like he was going to throw up, but he nodded.

"And I don't want to hear from the rest of the family, either. If any of them come after us, we're going to assume you sent them. Did you know wolves don't always kill their prey before they start eating? I love the Discovery Channel." He smiled faintly, enjoying the novel sensation of deliberate cruelty, but understanding its dangerous appeal. "Do you understand me, Aubrey?"

He nodded again, convulsively.

"Then I think we're done here."

Blair Changed again, swiftly clothing herself as he stood in front of her, blocking her from Aubrey's still stunned view. "I am never going to see you again, Aubrey Cotesworth. Never. As your life depends on it." Conn opened the door for Blair and waited while she played with Mojo in the reception area for a moment before stepping out onto the sidewalk.

The dog followed them outside and up to the car, wagging its stubby tail. Blair turned to him, and Conn got hit with two sets of puppy dog eyes.

“You want to take his dog?”

“He’s so unhappy, Conn. He doesn’t like Aubrey and he hates this silly collar. Please?”

Mojo sat and offered his paw. Oh hell.

Aubrey was approaching like an overheated steam engine with a leaky lap. “Mojo, you gitchee ass back in here right now or I swear I’ll beat you to death.”

The dog crouched and whimpered. That decided it, right there.

Conn turned to Becky, who was watching the scene like a tennis match. “Becky, I’m not stealing his dog, I’m rescuing it from an animal abuser. Got it?”

She nodded, her hairsprayed coiffure bobbing along with the motion. Aubrey realized that Becky wasn’t the only one watching. Charlene King and a couple of her customers had poked their heads out of the salon next door and stood there with shocked expressions.

“Why that poor, precious baby dog,” said Charlene. “You go right ahead, Conn Lucas. Aubrey, if you so much as wave at the sheriff, I’ll tell him what you said about beating that poor dog to death. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” She marched back into the beauty shop with her ladies behind her. Aubrey stalked back into his office and slammed the door.

Conn opened the back door of the car and the dog leaped in, leaned over the front seat and swiped Blair’s face with a tongue that looked a yard long. Conn paused before he joined them. The small town seemed different now. As a child, it had been a prison of sorts. Now it felt safe. Comfortable. Culford felt like home.

He had been offered the chance to have what he always wanted—a family—and he’d let it go. Thrown it away. And suddenly he felt more whole than he’d ever been in his life. He took Blair’s hand in his and raised it to his lips. He wanted to take his new dog and his girl in her ass-kicking boots and...

“Let’s go home.”

Chapter Nine

They drove back to the house with Mojo hanging his head out the window. When they arrived, Blair realized Conn was humming as he held the front door for her.

“Are you usually a hummer?”

“Hmm?” he asked.

“You’re humming. I wondered if it was something you usually did.”

“He used to hum. When he was little.” Pinkney sat in her favorite chair in the parlor, her lap covered once again in a pile of crocheted thread.

“Aunt Pinkney.” He greeted his aunt with a smile before he kissed Blair on the cheek and went to the kitchen, leaving the ladies alone in the front room. Mojo immediately set to sniffing out each room and disappeared upstairs.

“He was born in this house, you know. Right upstairs. And he slept in the nursery, smiling at the ghosts who visited him. He’s the last Cotesworth born in this home.”

“Is that why you left him the house?”

“Yes. He’s the only one left with a real connection to it. He’s the only one who can truly bring it back.”

“Aubrey mentioned something about a treasure. Conn doesn’t seem like he could care any less about it, but I’m curious.”

“Curious about what?” asked Conn as he walked into the room with a half-eaten apple in one hand and a fresh one for her. She declined with a shake of her head, so he dropped it on the table.

“The story of this treasure.”

“I thought I told you about it at dinner.”

Blair rolled her eyes. “You told me a little. Something about a pirate’s widow and burying it in the house, but that was it. There have to be more details.”

He sat down on the couch and thought for a moment. “This is just what I’ve heard, so I have no idea how much is true. Temperance Cotesworth was born in Charleston to a well-to-do merchant’s family. The story goes that Miss Temperance was beautiful—now we’ve seen her, we know it’s true.”

“Thank you.” Temperance shimmered into view and sat delicately on the loveseat, making Blair, who was semi-sprawled in a chair, feel very gauche. She sat up.

“Maybe we should let you tell it. After all, you were there.”

"I should like to hear the modern version of my tale. I can correct later."

Conn shrugged and continued. "When she was a girl, Bayard Stede, the famous 'Gentleman Pirate', blockaded Charleston and demanded ransom for the prisoners, one of whom was Temperance. He eventually got the ransom and returned everyone but the very pretty girl who fell in love with him. The feeling was mutual because he officially married her, set her up with a beautiful home and visited her frequently."

Temperance was smiling. *"When women tell the story, they also mention how handsome he was. How gallant and romantic, how well-educated and well-mannered he was."*

"Unfortunately, Stede was eventually captured and executed. All his property was confiscated, too. But Temperance knew what was coming, so she packed up everything she could carry and took off before the government men got there."

"Hmph. And they called my husband a thief when they were no better themselves."

"She couldn't go home to her family because she knew they wouldn't take her back, so she traveled up here to the Congaree. She sold off little bits of her treasure to buy the house and the land, and lived quietly until Jack Cotesworth stumbled across her cottage with the Georgia lawmen on his heels."

"He was not so well brought up as Bayard, but he was bright and quick, my Jack. Quick with a laugh and quick with his hands. And handsome, as well."

"It seems like you had a thing for bad boys, Mrs. Cotesworth." Blair smiled and winked at Conn.

"Reformed rakes make the best husbands, you know."

The ladies shared a smile. Conn was rakish enough for her.

"I don't know much else. The story says she buried the biggest piece of her treasure under the house to keep it safe, but no one ever found it. I figure she spent it all. Her grandchildren or great-grandchildren built this house on top of her old cottage, but never dug up anything, so I thought it was all gone." When Conn was done, he leaned back and took another bite out of his apple.

"So what was the treasure?" asked Blair.

"Something Bayard gave me for safe keeping. He wouldn't have it on his ship, but he couldn't give it up. It might have saved him, but likely not as it was a woman's gift. Come with me. I'll show you where it is."

She rose and led them to the kitchen. *"I will show you, but I beg you to let it rest."* She reached through the masonry with a ghostly hand and brought it out of the hole.

A great black pearl, larger than any Blair had ever seen, glowed silvery grey in her hand like a full moon on a starless night.

Blair had been fascinated with pearls since receiving her earrings. She knew the legends and the stories, the superstitions and myths. And she knew about La Perla Plata.

"This is..."

"Stunning, is she not?"

"She is. She is so completely stunning."

A thump sounded beside her and Conn's apple core bumped into her foot.

"Is that thing real?"

"It most certainly is. La Perla Plata was stolen from the governor of Barbados about the time Bayard left the island."

"By coincidence?" he asked.

"I think not," replied Temperance. "This pearl has many stories connected to it, but they end with that theft. No one else in the world knows where it is. Most of the tales deal with the protection of a home, but it must be placed by a woman and she is the only one who can remove it. Every time it has been taken by a man, disaster follows."

"Which explains why you don't want anyone to remove the pearl," said Blair, still in awe of the deep gleam radiating from the gem.

"If it is removed, the house will fall. Its protection will cease to exist. Those of us who linger on this plane have done so to protect the jewel. We have been here for far too long, I think. We need someone we can trust. Someone who can protect the pearl and leave it here to do its work."

"Then put it back. This house should stand until the wheels come off the world." Conn looked over at Blair, who nodded. Magic at work shouldn't be messed with.

"I should perhaps mention that the pearl is not the only buried treasure here. The house still requires some upkeep. These might help."

She returned the pearl to its resting place, but came back with a handful of small to medium sized gems; rubies, emeralds and sapphires made a glittering, colorful pile on the hearth.

"Wow." If Conn had been holding another apple, it would have dropped too.

"I'll second that."

"These are for you to use as you require. I wish you nothing but happiness here together."

"Together?" asked Conn. "You know, Grandmother, you have a great idea. What do you say?" He turned to Blair with a smile.

"What? Did you just ask me to marry you or something?"

"Or something." He was still smiling and she wanted to bop him over the head with a skillet.

"Or something? That's your idea of a proposal? That's the best you can do? 'Hey babe. I gotta house and a handful of rocks, wanna get hitched?' You know, I have put up with a lot from you—"

Blair didn't get to finish her rant because he grabbed her by the waist and cut off her words. Hard lips on her mouth, hard body against her, hard arm around her waist, hard hand in her hair...until he gentled. Bliss as she returned his kiss, unconscious of everything but pleasure. Yes, she would marry him. Live in

this house, have children here, raise a few dogs, run in the swamp, live and die here. With him. She didn't need a black pearl to keep the house intact. All she needed was him.

Temperance wrapped an arm around Pinkney's waist. *"Our work here is done. Will you not come with us to rest?"*

"Oh heavens no. They've got a lot to learn. Anyway, I think I'll stay and see if I can try to bring the rest of the family up to snuff."

Temperance smiled and looked out toward the swamp. Two figures awaited her there.

"So you get to spend eternity with two men. I'm not sure whether to envy you or feel bad for you."

"Happiness, I think, is the best route, Pinkney. And I think I will not be gone forever. No doubt someone will eventually forget the truth of the pearl and I shall be needed again."

"I'll stay until then. I wish you joy, Temperance."

"And I wish you patience." With one last smile, she peeked in on the couple doing some rather extraordinary things on the kitchen floor. She passed them her blessing in silence, then went to meet her husbands who were grappling with each other in the dirt. Temperance grinned. It didn't do to have one's rakes too reformed.

Author's Notes

Congaree Swamp National Forest? Totally real. Culford, South Carolina? Totally not.

Some of the names I used? Kinda sorta real. Eliza Lucas Pinkney is a prominent figure in South Carolina's colonial history. She developed a strain of the indigo plant that thrived in the state, as well as the process for refining it. She was a scientist, a businesswoman, a wife and a mother. A yesteryear superwoman!

I wanted to honor this real life historical heroine, so I borrowed a few names. Conn's last name is Lucas, Eliza's maiden name. Aunt Pinkney is taken from Eliza's married name. Her eldest son was Charles *Cotesworth* and *Harriot*, which I appropriated for Conn's middle name, was her only daughter. If you're interested in learning more about this extraordinary woman, you can find a quick biography at Indigo Blues, a blog about notable places and events in South Carolina. You can also find some of the letters she wrote at the National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox.

About the Author

Sela Carsen is just your ordinary, average, everyday stay at home mom. Really. Ignore the two Monkey Children. And the disaster area she calls home. And the Darn-Near Perfect husband who patiently puts up with the chaos. And did she mention the Boxer?

If you see her talking to herself while she's going down the produce aisle at the grocery store with her travel mug of coffee welded to her hand, well, doesn't everyone do that?

No?

Oops.

Despite the caffeine-induced jitters, she has managed to write comic romances featuring smart, funny, mostly alive, occasionally dead (and undead) characters. Her writing runs the gamut from paranormal to historical, with several rabbit trails in between.

She lives in the Midwest now after a gypsy life that allowed her to live in places from Idaho to South Carolina and from Egypt to England.

To learn more about her, please visit www.selacarsen.com and check out her blog. You can also find her blogging regularly at Beyond the Veil—a group blog of paranormal romance authors at <http://paranormalauthors.blogspot.com/>. Send an email to Sela at selacarsen@gmail.com. She'll be thrilled to hear from you!

Look for these titles by Sela Carsen

Now Available:

Not Quite Dead
Heart of the Sea
Carolina Wolf

Anthologies:
Love & Lore
Tickle My Fantasy

What happens in Atlantic City...changes everything.

The Naked Detective

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Karmic Consultants, Book 4

The “gift” that makes Ciara Liung the FBI’s prized secret weapon makes her existence more like a curse. Unable to bear human contact, she lives as a hermit, immersing herself in the water that gives her peace and amplifies her power.

Her new FBI handler, though, only believes what he can see. The problem? Her gift—the ability to psychically locate stolen jewels—only works in the nude.

Special Agent Nathan Smith can’t believe he’s expected to babysit some psychic finder. Psychic...right. An undercover op gone wrong may have left him a desk jockey—and Ciara’s charms are more distracting than he cares to admit—but he’s a field agent at heart. She’s working some kind of angle. It’s just a matter of time before he unravels it.

Sent to Atlantic City to recover a ruby necklace for Monaco’s royal family, both finder and Fed are pushed outside their comfort zones, and discover more than they ever believed possible. And when a trap is sprung, they realize they stand to lose much more than a sparkly stone...

Warning: This book contains gambling, go-go dancers, public indecency, and every brand of trouble a troubled psychic can get into in America’s Playground.

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Naked Detective:

Ciara was standing in the stall, pulling her dress over her head, when she realized Nate had actually let her out of his sight. He hadn’t swept the bathroom to make sure there weren’t other exits or frisked her for a hidden cell phone. He’d just let her walk in here without so much as a second glance.

In the four days she’d known him, that was unprecedented.

Could Nate Smith actually believe her?

Ciara came out of the bathroom to find Nate leaning against a slot machine as he waited. He looked utterly relaxed, as if there hadn’t been even a flicker of doubt in his mind that she would return to him. Trust. It seemed to have burst open between them impossibly fast.

She didn’t know when she had started trusting him, a moment ago, a day ago, maybe a part of her had started trusting him the moment he rang her doorbell. But his trust of her seemed to hinge on that moment in the tank. Sure, she’d done it so he would believe her, but now she was suspicious of that instant faith.

Nate levered himself away from the slots. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.” He started to reach for her hand again, then snatched his hand back. His eyes scanned her from her flip-flop bedecked toes all the way up to her still-damp hair, as if checking for war wounds.

Ciara rolled her eyes. “I’m *fine*. Better than fine. I’m—” Again words failed. This feeling, it was too much. “Come on. We’ve got a necklace to find.”

She grabbed his hand and dragged him behind her toward the street exit. Ciara felt like laughing, though she didn’t know why.

She wore his jacket over her dress—the shawl a casualty of her dunking—but as soon as they stepped out of the air-conditioning of the casino, she shrugged it off. The sun hit the skin of her arms and felt delicious. For once she was outside, surrounded by people and not worried about being brushed against.

Though maybe she should be worried. What if it was only Nate she could touch?

He hailed a taxi and ushered her into the backseat, careful as he had been all week not to touch her skin.

“The Borgata, please,” she told the driver.

Nate climbed in after her. “No,” he said, “let’s go back to the hotel. You can rest—”

“The Borgata,” she repeated, more firmly. No more invalid treatment. No more hiding.

There were a million things she’d never done. Too many things. A wild excitement pulsed through her veins. A thousand possibilities.

She could eat in a restaurant, dance in a club, go to a movie in a crowded theater where the schmuck next to her would steal her armrest. She could fly on a plane. Go to Egypt or Bermuda or Taiwan. She didn’t know why she should want to go to Taiwan unless she was picking up a few sweatshop workers, but the fact that she *could* changed everything. It changed *her*.

Nate wedged himself against the car door, as far away from her as he could get without leaping into oncoming traffic.

“What are you doing way over there?”

“Recovering from the heart attack you gave me on the pier,” he snapped. “And trying to figure out how to talk you into going back to the hotel and leaving the jewel thieves to the professionals.”

“I thought I was a suspect,” she purred, scooting across the bench seat toward him. “Don’t you want my confession?”

He leaned away, pressing into the door. “You aren’t a crook. I believe you. Now back off, before you give yourself another seizure.”

Ciara kept her eyes locked on his, slowly shaking her head. “Nate, for the first time in the last decade, I can touch someone without feeling like someone dropped a cherry bomb into my brain. Do you honestly think I’m not going to take advantage of this for every second it lasts?” She reached out and laid her fingers along his jaw. She *listened* and the touch sang through her, a perfect pitch ringing sweetly, deep inside her rib cage.

She slid her fingers down, drawing them along the column of his throat, listening as the note shifted with his every breath. Her eyes fixed on his mouth, the delicious masculine curve of it.

Ten years. She hadn't been kissed in ten years.

"Nate," she whispered. Her upper body leaned forward of its own volition, closing the distance between them. She wet her lips.

"This is a bad idea. I don't think—"

"Don't think. It's overrated." Ciara's eyelids lowered, but she watched him through her lashes, not wanting to miss a single detail of the kiss. She brushed her lips ever so softly over his, a fleeting whisper of a touch. His breath was warm on her lips. His stubble grazed her fingertips, the tantalizing spice of his aftershave teasing her nose. Ciara pressed a closed-mouth kiss full on his mouth and a chord struck in her soul. She placed one hand over his heart, feeling his strength through the thin cloth of his shirt. She wanted bare flesh under her fingers. She wanted to bathe in touch, skin to skin.

Nate kept his mouth closed, his head back. He was frozen against the door, as if afraid to touch her.

Or as if he didn't want her touch.

Ciara drew back. Her eyes flew wide to find him watching her, his gaze steady and concerned.

"You don't—" She hesitated. Crap. With her luck, he was probably gay. Just because he seemed like a big strong macho man and gaped at her naked girly bits whenever the opportunity presented itself didn't mean he wasn't batting for the other team. "You aren't—" She couldn't very well ask him what his sexual orientation was five seconds after she planted one on him.

God, her people skills sucked. That's what happened when you lived in a freaking bubble for a decade and learned all of your social skills from the television and internet. Had she missed some signal?

He watched her. God, the way he watched her. It made her feel like she was edible, sweet and sinful, and he was hungry for some decadent indulgence. Would a gay man look at her like that?

But if he wasn't gay, what the hell was he doing cowering beside the door like she was molesting him against his will. His body was eerily still, but his eyes raced over her.

"Are you okay?" he asked, an odd urgency running under the words.

Was she *okay*? She kissed him. He didn't kiss her back. And now he was concerned that...what?

"That didn't hurt you?" His voice was rough.

Ciara blinked, the pieces suddenly jolting into place. Of course. Mr. All-American was concerned for her well-being. His moral fortitude prevented him from enjoying a kiss if it might be hurting her. Damn moral fortitude. Why couldn't he just take advantage of her like a normal man?

"I'm fine," she assured him in a rush. "Great, actually. It feels amazing."

"Good."

Before she had time to react to that guttural growl, his hands were on her arms. He hauled her forward across his lap. His mouth crashed down on hers, urging her to open for him, and a symphony exploded inside her. Ciara threw her arms around his neck and held on tight. She parted her lips and his tongue slipped between them, a whip of heat unfurling in her stomach with each flick.

She didn't remember kisses like this. She remembered the fumbling, groping, wide-open-mouthed attempts of her adolescence, before her curse hit. This was unlike any of those. This was skill and persuasion, seduction and heat. As a fiery concerto radiated out from her soul, a clenching warmth rose up from her toes, tingling along every nerve. Nate's hands chased those tingles and multiplied them, tracing her curves through the thin barrier of her clothes.

He raised his head. His eyes searched hers as they clung together, both breathing rapidly. "Ciara?"

"More, Nate," she whispered. "Please, touch me more."

He groaned and crushed her to him, instantly obeying. His mouth slanted down on hers and she fell into sensation.

Score one for the underdog...er...wolf.

Wolf Tracks

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Granite Lake Wolves, Book 4

TJ Lynus is a legend in Granite Lake, both for his easygoing demeanor—and his clumsiness. His carefree acceptance of his lot vanishes, though, when his position as best man brings him face to face with someone he didn't expect. His mate. His very *human* mate. Suddenly, one thing is crystal clear: if he intends to claim her, his usual laid-back attitude isn't going to cut it.

After fulfilling her maid-of-honor duties, Pam Quinn has just enough time for a Yukon wilderness trip before returning south. The instant attraction between her and TJ tempts her to indulge in some Northern Delight, but when he drops the F-bomb—"forever"—she has second thoughts. In her world, true love is a fairytale that seldom, if ever, comes true.

Okay, so maybe staging a kidnapping wasn't TJ's *best* idea, but at least Pam has the good humor to agree to his deal. He'll give her all the northern exposure she can stand—and she won't break his kneecaps.

Now to convince her that fairytales can remake her world—and that forever is worth fighting for.

By popular demand: Clumsy sidekick wolf grows up, sarcasm reigns, and the wilderness gets wilder. Includes hot nookie in places you expect—like a remote cabin—and places you don't.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf Tracks:

Someone stepped in behind her, the heat of his solid body hitting her back as he wrapped his hands around her waist and gently nestled them together.

TJ.

Cocky bastard, really. Pam debated slamming a heel on his instep, or flipping him over her shoulder, just to teach him a lesson, but watching Maggie and Erik float around the floor had mellowed her too much.

"You should be careful putting the moves on a girl like that. You might lose something important," she warned.

He ignored the threat and rested his chin on her shoulder. The heat radiating between them tempted her. "They fit awesome together, don't they?"

His breath brushed her cheek, warm and sweet smelling. Her mouth watered, but she didn't want to talk romance with him.

"They look...unbalanced. What was Maggie thinking getting involved with someone so much taller than her?"

He *hmm*ed. "They were probably thinking that when it's right, there's no denying you've found the one you want."

Oh lordy, his thumbs stroked her waist, and he nuzzled under her ear. Did she want this? Heat flushed her. She had to decide, and quick. She could lead him out onto the dance floor and enjoy his touch in public, or they could find a dark corner and see what else came up.

So to speak.

He tugged her backward and her body overruled her mind. They slipped into the shadows at the side of the hall, ducking behind a room divider. He pressed her against it, his solid body very, very warm. Her heart rate increased, as did the tingling sensation between her thighs, and she squeezed her legs together to stop the ache.

Man-oh-man, his eyes were so incredible she swore he was using some kind of hypnosis. Turning away was impossible as he stared at her, tracing her hair, her face, one finger outlining her lips before he slowly lowered his head and brought their mouths together.

He brushed his lips over hers like a gentle breeze, his fingers tugging her hair to redirect the angle of her head until their mouths meshed together. Tentative strokes of his tongue brushed fleetingly past her teeth. Teasing, barely giving her a taste of him before he broke away and dropped his forehead against hers.

“Holy shit, you taste good,” he panted. “Incredibly fabulous. I’d never dreamed a woman could taste like you. Or make me feel the way you make me feel.”

Screw the sweet talk. She hadn’t had nearly enough of his kisses. She tried to regain possession of his lips. Arched her back in an attempt to press their bodies together and let her feel his muscles, his desire for her.

He groaned softly. “You’re killing me. We shouldn’t…”

She stepped on either side of his leg and pasted her aching crotch to his thigh. A short gasp escaped her as the impact made her clit throb.

“Fuck it.” TJ grabbed her butt and dragged her hard against him, wrestling control from her as this time he kissed her senseless. Sucked the air from her lungs, twined their tongues together. An almost desperate, mindless, seeking touch. He demanded her response and she gave it eagerly. The pleasure in her sex rose like a rocket blasting into outer space.

His hands were everywhere. Skimming her torso, touching her breasts. Clutching her hips and grinding her hard onto his thigh. Excitement washed over her, the rapid beat of her pulse making her lightheaded, out of breath. He licked a path down her neck, nibbled on her collarbone and something electric shot to her core.

“I want you, Pam,” he growled against her skin. “You’re going to be mine.”

Sheesh, that comment pushed a few wrong buttons, but right here, right now? She wasn’t about to argue with his macho-sexist statement as long as he kept doing what he was doing. Lost beyond all reason, she teetered on the edge of an orgasm and if he stopped she would kill him. Pam clasped his head in her

hands and hauled his mouth to hers as she leaned back and tried to find the final touch she needed to go over the edge.

The barrier at her back wobbled for a second, then tilted to the north. All their weight went with the wall as it tipped, crashing to the floor with them on top. She smothered her curses as the flames of desire building between them evaporated into thin air.

TJ's heavy breathing echoed in her ear as they unwound tangled limbs. The damn disco lights flickered over them, showcasing their undignified situation. Partygoers congregated to stare with concern and offer helping hands. Pam scrambled to her feet, but all she could think about was the aching need in her core and the sweet taste of him lingering in her mouth.



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