

*Miniature  
Rose*

# Love at First SHOT

*Fairy Rose*

Kaye Chambers

Love at First Shot  
*by Kaye Chambers*

**The Wild Rose Press**

[www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

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First published in 2010

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Emma blushed, but didn't drop her gaze. Standing there, saucy and bold, she made him wish she'd picked another place to aim. It wasn't that bad, but it certainly meant that sitting was going to be uncomfortable, to say the least. Truth, now that he'd stopped walking and straining the muscles around it, it didn't hurt at all. It really wasn't more than a graze.

"I'd be careful, Doc. I'm the only one who knows the way out of here until Vick and Phil get back tonight. You wouldn't want me to run off and leave you for them to take you back to civilization. You're right about their type."

"But am I yours?"

"My what?"

She blinked at him owlishly. He didn't believe she'd leave him at the mercy of her compatriots. Suddenly, he realized he had her number. Emma was the type of woman who'd jump up and down to make her point, but she wouldn't let anyone else pound on him. There was just too much iron in her for that.

"Vick made no bones that I'm his type. Thank you, but no. I prefer my companions a little softer around the edges. So, am I yours?"

He was ten kinds of a fool. Here he was, bleeding on her steps, trying to maneuver her into seeing him as a sexual object all because he liked the way the sunlight streaked her hair. Well, he liked other things, too, but still. Instead of flirting, he should be treating the gunshot wound she had given him and planning a fresh escape. Reminding himself of

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the fact didn't help. Even wounded, the possibility of sex was too good to pass up. He really was a dog.

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Love at First Shot

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PO Box 708

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at [www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

Publishing History

First Faery Rose Edition, 2010

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Published in the United States of America

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## **Dedication**

As always, to my husband, Jason,  
for whom there does not need to be a reason.

The Cookie Monsters,  
who love me, support everything,  
and push me to be better.

To Kim,  
who helped me when I was ready to give up  
on Emma and T.J.

To Sarah,  
who took a chance and helped me fill in the holes.

Thank you all.

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## Chapter One

"Autopsy report on John Doe. Description is roughly six feet tall, table says he weighs one hundred and eighty pounds, hair and eyes are brown, and he likes leggy blondes and long walks on the beach."

"He told you all that just now?"

"Well, look at him. That's the kind of guy he looks like. Have you found his clothes yet?"

Theodore Jackson, better known as T.J. to everyone, including his friends, turned away from his task to grin at the man leaning against the wall by the door. Detective Jim Beam—no relation to the alcohol—was a regular visitor to the Mercy General Hospital's morgue. Since T.J. didn't get many who came and went under their own power, he appreciated the visit.

"Nope. We're still looking. Do you have a cause of death, yet?"

"Jim, buddy. I'm fast, but not quite that fast. I haven't even cut him open. If I had to hazard a guess, I'd put my money that it was being caught between the headlights of a speeding car."

"SUV."

"See? There ya go. He's not Superman, after all. Bet his heart is breaking over the fact."

Jim grunted painfully at the jest and shook his head. T.J. knew better than to invite him closer to the body. Jim, for all

his bluster, and despite his profession, just didn't do corpses all that well.

"Don't you think this whole situation is a little bit strange? I mean, come on. The woman swears she hit a dog. She stopped to check on it, found him, called 9-1-1, and waited for the cops. She even asked for a breathalyzer test, which showed alcohol, but she wasn't drunk. Top that with the fact he's naked and I'm stumped. Don't you think it's strange that he lost his clothes sometime between going out for the night and the expressway?"

T.J. gave him the look the poor man deserved. Jim obviously didn't keep up with the calendar at the college.

"Um, no. Two words: Greek week."

Jim just blinked at him, not catching the implications.

"And that, my friend, is why you can't get a date. You need to lighten up—a lot. I have more fun than you, and I talk to dead people all day."

"And night, apparently. There's nothing wrong with my social life. Where is Charlie, anyway?"

"Taking that leap off a cliff. He planned a romantic dinner with Melissa and asked me to take his shift. It's the only night she's had off in two weeks. Poor guy looked like the noose was already tightening, but it could have just been nerves."

"The inevitable question, huh?"

"Yep."

They shared the companionable grin of men who secretly swore they'd never marry before Jim glanced back at the body. With a wave of hand, he indicated the corpse.

"What I really don't understand is why a guy like this would bother with a fraternity? You, we can understand, but him? He had a wealthy family and a pretty easy life ahead of him."

"I take it our John Doe isn't a John Doe, anymore?"

"Nope. Frederick Wymette, III. Youngest son of the Wymette Pharmaceuticals empire. The family is on their way down to identify the body. They've asked to delay the autopsy for religious reasons."

"Well, damn, and we were getting along so well."

T.J. turned back to the table and reached down to pull the sheet back over the body. All in all, it wasn't a bad night when he didn't have to dig around in the guts of his visitors.

"So, C.O.D. is vehicular homicide?"

"Pretty much. There's nothing about the body that indicates foul play."

"Good enough. Thanks, buddy. That's all I need for my report. Gotta cross all the t's on this one. Don't work too hard tonight."

"You either, Jim."

"Don't worry, it's after two. By the time I get this report filed, it's home and bed for me."

T.J. watched him go with a grin. On one hand, he hated to make a case more complicated, but there was also a thrill of excitement associated with finding a clue when one turned up. In his mind, since the people who ended up on his table couldn't talk for themselves, it was his duty to do it for them. Having this one turn out to be routine was almost a letdown. Hitting the start button on the digital recorder, he recorded

the details as he adjusted the body on the table for the last round of photographs before cold storage. He didn't turn around as the door opened behind him.

"Change your mind and want me to cut him open?"

"I don't think so, Dr. Jackson."

Glancing over his shoulder at the woman's voice, his senses kicked into high gear. She was a pretty little thing. A little more petite than his norm, but it wasn't every day he got the chance to flip on the charm at work.

"Well, hey there, darlin'. What can I do for you? Please tell me you're not one of the new lab tech interns. I may never forgive you."

She smiled somewhat shyly at him and stepped a little closer than most women felt comfortable with, all without taking her hand out of the pocket of her lab coat. He'd been told more than once that his height was intimidating. Trying to compensate, he let himself slouch a bit as he smiled back at her. T.J. had a flash of warning before she whipped her hand out of her pocket with a whispered word and blew dirt in his face.

"What? Lady, are you crazy? Keep your pixie dust to yourself. I'm allergic!"

Jumping back from her, he rubbed his face to get the offensive dust from his nose. It burned just enough to make him wonder if she were carting around pepper in her pocket for a reason other than antagonizing the night doctors.

"You will forget..."

"Lady, I don't forget anything. Get out of my morgue and take your damned dirt with you."

She stared at him with an expression that could only be called mounting horror.

"I must not have used enough."

T.J. ducked just in time to avoid another direct hit in the face, but not quick enough to miss the thrown concoction altogether.

"That's it. I'm calling security. You're freakin' nuts."

"You're immune!"

He ignored her as he made for the phone on the wall just as a man who could have doubled for the local linebacker came through the door, effectively cutting off his path to the phone.

"The detective's squared away. I see you're having a bit of trouble."

"I am not," she snapped. "He's immune."

The man cocked his head and surveyed T.J. like a cat who'd found a mouse that didn't run away. With a smirk, he shook his head before looking over T.J.'s shoulder to his partner.

"Emma, honey. His mind might be immune, but his body isn't."

"You would notice."

"And what's not to notice? You'd have noticed too if you weren't so busy panicking because your spell didn't work."

It took a moment for T.J. to realize what they were talking about. When he did, he balked, put his hands up, and backed away from the man.

"Whoa, there. I'm all for free love, buddy, but I bat for the other team."

The man laughed and raked him with a suggestive look. T.J.'s feet tangled together and he nearly fell trying to put more distance between them. Regaining his balance, he felt the woman's hand on his back as she whispered another unintelligible word. Pain shot through him as his feet rooted in the ground.

"What the hell?"

At least his mouth still worked. There was some comfort in that, he supposed.

"Emma."

The chiding tone the man used matched the exasperated expression. The woman behind him muttered another word and T.J. found himself mute too.

Damn the luck.

"Well, what do we do with him, Vick? We can't just leave him here."

"It does sort of defeat the purpose of cleaning up the mess, doesn't it? Never leave a master mage and an alpha werewolf wondering if their clean-up crew is getting sloppy. Nope, can't leave a witness. Nothing to be done but to take him with us since we can't erase him. The other one is much easier to work around."

T.J. realized his eyes were all he could move no matter how hard he strained. *That's it. The booze has finally made off with my sanity. Anyone else hear the Twilight Zone theme in here?*

Since his back was to the examination table, he could only hear the body being slid onto a gurney. Some sounds just never go away once you learn to identify them.

"Emma, you can get his feet."

The woman, Emma, stood in front of him and pushed him solidly in the chest. Panic welled up, but Vick was already there to catch him as he fell backward. The way the man smirked over him told T.J. he'd planned the free-fall effect. Emma picked up his feet and he found himself tucked onto a gurney all his own. The last thing he saw was the man's wink as the sheet fluttered over his face.

*This must be how my corpses feel. God, I'm never going to be able to wheel one down the hall with his head covered again. What am I saying? They're going to kill me and bury me in a shallow grave in the woods for the dogs to dig up. What a waste. And I've just finished paying off my student loans. Should have partied with the money, instead. Guess that'll show me to be responsible.*

He was momentarily distracted by the way the wheels of the gurney squeaked against the polished floor. How had he never noticed that? Voices murmured as they walked by and he tried to scream or thrash, but nothing happened. Whatever they'd done to him, he was effectively mute and paralyzed. Hearing the outer doors open and close behind them, hope faded.

His breath left in an *oomph* as the gurney supports dropped. A new voice joined his kidnappers. From the sound of it, he was not happy T.J. had been added to the heist.

"I thought there was only one body."

"There is." Vick's tone was smug.

*Yes, don't mind me. I'm just the hostage. Leave me on the loading dock. Someone will find me long after you're gone.*

"Be careful with him."

Emma's warning was the only way he knew they were preparing to lift the gurney. Up and forward he went. Doors slammed at his feet hard enough to shake the vehicle.

"Damn, Doc. You might want to lose a little weight there. Almost dropped you. Wouldn't that be hard to explain?"

T.J. decided he didn't like Vick one iota.

"Oh, leave him alone, Vick. You're just mad that he didn't appreciate your charm."

"Emma, honey..."

"You two stop squabbling until we get out of here, okay?"

A door slammed telling T.J. that the new man was probably their getaway driver. But what were they driving...a hearse? No, two bodies wouldn't fit in a hearse, so it had to either be a cargo van or an ambulance. Neither thought was comforting to T.J.

"So, who do you have under that sheet?"

"The medical examiner."

Vick's answer held far too much glee. *Just wait, big guy. Revenge was made for people like me.*

"Why didn't you just brainwash him? It's not like it'd be the first time. The guy's brain is going to go to cheese."

*So that's Charlie's excuse. Glad to know he didn't lose his mind all by himself.*

"This is the other one. The regular guy apparently called in sick."

*That's one way to put it.*



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The engine purred as the vehicle was put into drive and any chance he had of getting away melted into the noises of early morning traffic.

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## Chapter Two

Emma Feltman glared at Vick, but kept her mouth shut. Phil was right. Sniping at one another wasn't going to help anything. Considering she was trying to prove to her master mage aunt that choosing her as the heir apparent wasn't going to take the coven to ruin, she needed all the help she could get. The whispers and pitying look of the other mages jockeying for the position weren't lost on Emma.

It was just so unfair.

It wasn't her fault that her frustration was screwing with her magic and she didn't want to snuggle up for a quick lay. Vick was more than willing, but Emma had not considered him a reliable candidate once she found out he was bisexual. Alternative lifestyles are great if you and your lover share them, but she wasn't that into sharing, much less with another guy.

*Picky, picky, picky.*

Emma told the voice in her head to shut up and go away. The cargo van swung onto the highway heading north toward the mountains. Only she could find herself in such a chaotic situation.

"So, Emma, when are you going to bite the bullet? Keep putting it off and one of your spells isn't just going to backfire, it's going to explode. Hate to have something like that happen to pretty little ol' you."

Vick's tone was so sweet it made her teeth hurt. She opened her mouth to snap at him but Phil beat her to it.

"Can it, Vick. Stop being an ass because she won't roll over for you. It's getting tiring."

"It doesn't have to be me," Vick defended. "I know a certain werewolf who would be happy to get the job done for us all."

Emma cringed at the reminder of Noble Copland. Kit, the local alpha, had maintained the pack tradition and brought in an outsider as his heir apparent. Noble had made no secret of his interest in her. Since her aunt kept close relations with the pack, the situation was making for more discomfort than actual possibilities.

"Now you're thinking about it! My job here is done."

"Lay off, Vick."

Emma's voice was full of warning and Vick opened his mouth to say something, but nodded his head to her instead.

"Truce. It's going to be a long enough day without needling."

Emma let out the breath she hadn't realized she had drawn. Leaning back against the bench, she stared down at the body at her feet. Unbidden, Dr. Jackson's smile flashed through her memory. He had such a cute smile. Too bad he was male, available, and exactly her type.

*Give it up, Emma. Just because Evan was a jerk doesn't mean every guy you find sexy will be...just ninety percent.*

Evan had been her lover until she'd caught him with a stripper last year and booted him out on his ass. He had left willingly, but not before saying some things about her desirability that she just couldn't shake.

"Someone want to tell me why, exactly, we're dragging a normal into this disaster? Kit's already fit to be tied at getting the call from Dr. Wymette. The Wymettes are taking offense that we let their baby boy get run over by a car."

"That'll teach them to play with traffic and leave us to clean up the mess." Emma's hand shot up to cover her mouth in shock. Had she actually said that out loud? Oh lord, the frustration had finally done away with her common sense. Hysterical laughter bubbled up and she shook it off with some effort. Raising her gaze from the sheet-covered coroner, she found Vick's own laughter shining on his face. It was Phil who answered her, though.

"Kit's going to go ballistic when he finds out about our little friend here."

"Don't blame us," Vick defended. "No one knew Dr. Jackson had such a strong mind or that Dr. Samuels would be out tonight."

"Maybe we need better intelligence."

"Maybe we need someone with intelligence calling the shots. Kit might be top dog, but he needs to get his alpha persona straightened out and the job done," Emma said as she leaned forward and pulled the sheet back from the doctor's face. Telling herself she was doing it for his comfort, she knew it was a lie. She just wanted to look at him. "So what are we going to do?"

Silence held for a moment before Phil spoke up.

"The cabin is waiting for us. I say we take Dr. Jackson up there and leave one of us to watch him while we take the body to the pack. All the masters will be there trying to

assure Dr. Wymette that this was just an accident to avoid a war. He's going to automatically think Noble's behind it to get Ricky out of the way of succession since the final choice was between them. While they're sorting all that out, one of us can get Anne off to the side and let her know what's up with the doctor. Let the people at the top of the food chain do their jobs. Anne is the one who volunteered to be the mediator of the world. She's the only person I know who would jump between two werewolf packs bent on war. Damned werewolves and their tempers."

A moment of silence fell and both Emma and Vick let their gazes rest on the body of Ricky Wymette. He had come to town full of optimism, ready for college and the opportunity to branch out to a new pack...and was leaving in a body bag over a freak accident with an SUV. It just didn't seem right.

Shaking it off, Emma let her gaze automatically return to Dr. Jackson.

"Someone is going to miss him," Emma said.

"Who, the werewolf? Not likely."

"The medical examiner, you idiot." Emma rolled her eyes at Vick's familiar tirade. One day she would get to the bottom of his problem with werewolves in general, but not today.

"There's a way to fix that. You want to search him or shall I?"

"Search him? For what?"

"Cell phone, PDA, incendiary devices..."

Emma watched panic fill up T.J.'s gaze as Vick leaned over him and pulled the sheet even farther down. For a moment, she thought about it. Just for a moment, she wanted to see

what the doctor would do if Vick patted him down. But just for a moment.

"I'll look."

"Knew you couldn't resist our boy here."

With a frown, she felt around T.J.'s belt until she found the cell phone. His abs were firm under her hands and her mind wondered just how he'd look with his shirt off. She'd always been a sucker for broad shoulders and tight abs. It took a lot more effort than she wanted to admit to keep her hands from roaming away from the task as she plucked the phone from his belt. Handing it over to Vick, she smiled as innocently as she could muster considering the trail of her thoughts.

"I can resist, Vick. It takes more than a hot body to get to me."

"So you admit you think he's hot."

"I admit nothing. Why did you need his phone?"

Emma knew her blush was giving her away, but there was nothing to be done about it. So what if she thought the doctor was hot? She'd sworn off men who were too sexy for their own good.

"Watch and learn, little sister."

Vick flipped the phone open and scrolled through the log.

"Aha!" Pressing the button, he coughed to make his voice rougher. "Hey, look. It's Dr. Jackson down at the morgue. Yeah, quiet as a tomb. Look, man, I just hurled all over the john. I'm going to head home and see if I can't shake this bug. No, I'm fine. Just bad sushi, I think. I'll be right as rain tomorrow. Duh. You're right. I forgot. Working that extra for

Charlie threw me off. I'll be in on Monday. If anything comes up, call Charlie in. Gotcha. Good night."

Vick flipped the phone shut and smiled at her triumphantly. Rolling her eyes, Emma couldn't help but acknowledge that it wasn't a bad idea, as far as ideas on the fly went.

"You didn't even sound like him."

"Probably not, but it worked, didn't it? Mercy General tends to run a lax shift at night. How else do you think we slip in and out with so many bodies? Someone would notice over at Hope, but not at Mercy. As long as the paperwork disappears in the daylight thanks to our paper-pusher friends, all's well that ends well."

"Settle in, everyone," Phil said as he maneuvered the van through traffic. "No potty breaks for two hours, Emma. The sun's going to come up and we don't want to be caught with bodies in the car, ya know?"

"I resent that."

Emma didn't even try to hide the smile as she tucked the sheet back in around T.J.

"Stop groping the body. You might not be his type either."

"Trust me, Vick. I'm so his type and you can be as jealous as you want. He hit on me before I cast the spell. Too bad he's what he is."

"A normal?"

"A man."

"Emma, you can't swear off men forever. You'll get us all killed. You like him? Use him, discard him, put that ass, Evan, out of your system once and for all. I don't think the good

doctor would mind playing around for awhile since we have to take our dead friend to meet his makers."

"I'm not going to take a tied-up man off into the mountains and turn him into a boy toy."

"Why not? Sounds like a hell of a good time to me. From his reputation, he'd probably appreciate the irony of it."

Emma shook her head, but had to admit the idea certainly had merit. Before she could come up with a suitable reply, Phil turned on the radio. Without actually talking about it, she and Vick didn't bother to try to converse over the music and the road noise. Her gaze kept flipping back to their impromptu guest with more than a little curiosity. What would he think if she did proposition him? The cabin was a long way from anywhere, so it seemed like the perfect romantic setup.

Suddenly, an idea crept through her mind.

"Why didn't we just take him home and knock him out? You could have gone back with Anne and dealt with him after we got the rest of this mess sorted out."

"Because, my dear, we're not qualified to make that decision. That's a master mage call. All we have to do is stash him and sit on him until Anne can work down her priority list for the weekend. Besides, you think he's so hot you're tongue-tied, and you seriously need to get laid. I'd do him in a heartbeat."

A strangled sound made her glance down. Not bothering to hide her amusement at T.J.'s distress, she patted his shoulder. *Guess a mute spell isn't one hundred percent in extreme situations.*

"Don't worry, I'll protect your virtue from him."



"But who's going to protect him from you?"

Vick winked at her before standing to step over the gurney and slide into the passenger seat up front.

*Maybe he doesn't want to be protected from me...*

She told that little voice to shut up again as she tried to get comfortable on the bench. Finally giving up, she slid down to the floor and put her back into the corner. Pulling out her pocket pc, she tabbed open the reading software and tried to immerse herself in the book she'd been reading earlier today when the call had come in to rescue Ricky from the morgue. The steamy romance didn't help. All of a sudden, the hero in her imagination looked frightfully like the doctor on the gurney and the heroine looked like her.

Not what her libido needed, that's for sure. One scene, she was reasonably sure was physically impossible, and that traitorous little voice whispered about asking the doctor if he wanted to try it out, just to see.

So caught up in the fantasy, she didn't realize the van had stopped until the door she was leaning against opened. Tumbling out, Phil's quick hands were the only thing that saved her from landing on the rocky ground.

"You know, Emma, I've always wanted to know what it would take to make you fall at a man's feet. I hope the answer is more complicated than a trashy novel."

"I'm not..."

"Save it. I've been on your computer. I know what you load that thing with."

Blushing, Emma straightened and hid the incriminating evidence in the pocket of her pants.

"Okay, boys and girls." Vick rubbed his hands together and he came around the other side of the van. "Let's get Emma's present into the house so we can be on our way. I'd like to grab some lunch before I have to face the big bad wolf."

"There's nothing even close to here but the diner and that's all the way down the mountain. I really don't feel like wilted salad today, Vick."

"Good, because you're not going. Phil's going to be my wingman for the trip. You get to stay up here and ogle our prisoner."

Emma's mouth dropped open. *Not going? Oh, hell no.*

"Vick, I'm stronger than Phil is. You know you need me on this one. Kit's going to go through the roof and you need the best backup you can get. No offense, Phil, but they'll eat you for dinner."

"None taken, Emma. You're right. Magically, you are stronger. However, when was the last time you threw a spell that actually worked like it was supposed to?"

Vick and Phil pulled the gurney out of the van before she could rally.

"It's not my fault."

It came out a little desperately, but she held on to hope as she followed them.

"Sorry, Emma. I'd love to have you at my back, but I don't have time for you to cozy up to Dr. Sexy, here, and get your itch scratched before we go. Without that, you're likely to blow my head off instead of the monsters. Done deal. You stay with Dr. Jackson and keep him out of trouble while we

deliver Ricky to his parents and make sure Kit doesn't start a war with his damnable temper."

Emma paused and watched the two men push the gurney over the hard, rocky ground toward the rustic cabin. Indoor plumbing courtesy of a gravity system worked down the mountain, it only had electricity because of the solar panels on the roof. Not her idea of a good time despite the company she'd be keeping. Running after them, she tried again.

"Vick, you need me on this one. You know you do. Phil will get you killed."

"Hey, I'm not that bad, Emma. I've saved your ass a time or two over the last few months. Just because I'm not destined to be some master mage like the two of you doesn't mean I'm the court jester, you know."

"I know. I'm sorry...I just..."

"Am going to be quiet, now, before I decide to tell Ms. Anne exactly why you're not there tonight." Vick finally spoke up in a manner that brooked no argument. Emma tried, anyway.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Watch me."

Oh lord, the last thing she needed was her aunt getting that up-close and personal with her sex life. She'd be married before the week was out to some guy Aunt Anne pulled off the street. Compulsion wasn't illegal if you didn't get caught at it.

Sullenly, she watched the two men maneuver the gurney up the stairs and into the cabin. Plopping down on the top step, she waited. It wasn't a long wait. Jumping up, she

opened her mouth to try again, but the look on Vick's face drew her up short.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do while we're gone. Next time, I'll do better with the gift wrap."

With that, they pushed the empty gurney between them, loaded it up in the van, and drove away.

"Of all the obnoxious..."

Storming up the stairs, she found T.J. tucked onto the couch in the small square cabin. It only had four rooms, if the bathroom counted, so there wasn't a lot of room to avoid him. At least they hadn't tucked him in the bedroom like a gigolo.

"Can you believe that? He'd rather have a mediocre mage with absolutely no experience in heavy situations than me, all because my magic's been a little bit unpredictable. Okay, fine. Even I can admit that's putting it mildly, but I've not come near to actually hurting anyone over it. A few singed fingers do not count. UUUGH!!!"

Emma threw up her hands and started to pace before she realized she was ranting practically to herself. There was something to be said for a captive audience, but it felt wrong to rave at him when he couldn't rave back.

"And why am I talking to myself! You're at least good for something."

Reaching out with her magic, she tried to pluck the mute spell, but found herself tangled in the binding spell. Concentrating, she sorted the spells and finally pulled the mute spell off.

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"I'm going to fix something for a late breakfast. Don't go away. As if you could, anyway. God, I'm lame. Forget I said that."

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## Chapter Three

T.J. felt the spell pop with a soft sonic feeling. Instinctively, he jerked and called himself a fool as he forced himself to remain as still as he had been under the spell.

Emma didn't seem to notice as she stomped back into the kitchen muttering under her breath. Tentatively, he shrugged his shoulders and then wiggled his toes. Yep, it was done. He was free.

"I really can't believe they just drove off and left me here to babysit. So what if my spells have been going flat lately. I'm not a novice. I can stand up to the werewolves as well as the best of them. Don't you think?"

He blinked before commenting, careful to keep his head from moving in case she looked in from the kitchen. People just don't appreciate how much they move when they talk.

"Well, other than being slightly psychotic, you seem fine to me."

She came into the room just long enough to glare and stomped back into the kitchen. At the resounding bang of pots, he sprang off the couch and headed for the door. He had to get out of this crazy place. The door banged against the wall and slammed shut behind him as he made a break across the country porch.

Barreling out into the bright sunshine, T.J. didn't give himself time to survey his surroundings. Instead, he made a beeline toward the tree line. Safety lay under the cover of

those trees just beginning to turn orange and red with the season.

He'd never been much of a sprinter and his lungs were burning with the reminder. When this was over, he promised himself he'd start jogging instead of sleeping in on Saturday mornings. Hell, he'd start jogging on his lunch hour, if he ever had another one.

"Come back!"

T.J. ignored her and only ran faster. All he had to do was outrun her. He felt the pain before he heard the loud crack of the gunshot. His leg refused to swing forward and he landed in a tumbling heap. He felt every sharp rock hidden in the long grass and rolled head over heels to land, eating dirt quite literally. Shaking his head and spitting out the mouthful of soil, he rose up and looked at his backside, now spouting a river of blood.

"You shot me!"

T.J. didn't bother to try to keep the outraged shock out of his voice. He'd known she was nuts, but this was taking it a step too far.

"I couldn't help it," she screeched back from the porch of the cabin. "You can run faster than me."

Oh, that made perfect sense. Struggling to his feet, he glared at her. He'd managed to put a surprising distance between them. If she'd not played dirty, he would have been home free. Well, maybe not, but at least he wouldn't have been locked up with a madwoman. With his hand on the wound to apply pressure, he started walking, or rather, limping. When he was away from her, he could worry about

stopping the bleeding. Right now, he was getting the hell out of Dodge.

"Oh, Dr. Jackson?"

He ignored her and the pain shooting through him with each limping step.

"We're in the middle of werewolf country and thirty miles from the nearest road with enough traffic for someone to pick you up. Blood and werewolves don't really mix well."

Her tone was bland, but he hesitated a moment. Unbidden, his mind flashed back to the body of Frat Boy Freddie and then to the snippets of conversation he'd heard from the drive here. Could she possibly be serious? Had his life turned into a B-rated horror movie?

*Nah. There's no such thing as werewolves.* He pushed his mind to the conclusion despite all the evidence that had passed through his morgue.

"You know, lady, I think I'll take my chances. Better the monsters than an armed woman bent over with frustration."

*And delusional.* He kept that part to himself. She was still armed, after all.

"Oh, I don't know. I can think of better ways to commit suicide, but it's your body. If you want to be dinner for the werewolf pack gathering tonight to give Ricky back to his family clan, that's up to you. Personally, I'd come back here and let me tend that bleeding backside of yours before you lose too much blood to hike out of here."

She was right. He was bleeding like a stuck pig and couldn't bend himself around to get a good look at the wound. He needed help. Hating it, he turned back and glared at her.



"I can't believe you shot me."

"At least I'm willing to make it better."

She turned to lean the rifle she had grabbed from somewhere and the sunlight glinted off her hair. Red and gold highlights shimmered. He'd thought her hair was brown, but it wasn't. It was auburn. When she turned back to him with a smile on her face, he realized she was beautiful when she wasn't scowling and screaming at him.

Telling himself he was only going back because it was too long of a walk with a bleeding wound slap dab in the middle of the muscles he'd need to hike it, he began to limp back to the cabin. The question of what, exactly, she was willing to do to make it better whispered in the back of his mind and he didn't even bother to bite back the grin. Now that the initial shock was over, the pain wasn't so bad. It was just a gouge where the bullet had grazed him. He was very lucky she was as crummy with her shooting as she apparently was with her magic.

Emma saw it. Her face went from open and smiling to that frown he had already become accustomed to. Her gaze searched his face as if trying to determine what he was thinking. It startled him to realize her eyes were clear as crystal and pale as a cat's. Blue or green, they shifted as the light flashed upon them.

"You can't read minds, can you?"

The question popped out before he could filter it with common sense. It sounded crazy, but why not? The girl could do magic, so it was a valid concern if he was going to continue to think naughty thoughts. Before today, he hadn't

believed in magic, either. Nothing like being trussed up with it to make a man a true believer.

"No, why?"

"No reason. Where's your first aid kit?"

"In the bathroom."

She didn't take the hint to preserve his dignity and go after it. Instead, she leaned against the porch railing and watched him limp across the yard. It gave him a chance to get a really good look at her. There were curves hidden away under her carefully conservative slacks and blouse. He was willing to bet that she took great pains to hide behind that frigid image that had initially fooled him. The latch in the back of his mind whispered racy thoughts and the saner part of him reminded him that he was her prisoner. Maybe she wasn't the only one who was crazy around here.

Grasping the railing, he hobbled up the steps, but stopped on the top one. The extra height put them at eye level. Man, but she was a tiny thing.

"I need a towel and the kit if I'm going to resist bleeding all over your living room. I can't believe you shot me."

"You keep saying that, Doc."

Put that way, it did sound ridiculous to keep harping on it. Another smile teased her mouth and he felt an answering one threatening.

"Well, honey, it's the first gunshot wound I've had. Tends to make an impression on a man."

"Maybe I should have thought of it sooner."

"Do you have that much trouble getting a man out of his pants? Somehow, I don't believe it."

Emma blushed, but didn't drop her gaze. Standing there, saucy and bold, she made him wish she'd picked another place to aim. It wasn't that bad, but it certainly meant that sitting was going to be uncomfortable, to say the least. Truth, now that he'd stopped walking and straining the muscles around it, it didn't hurt at all. It really wasn't more than a graze.

"I'd be careful, Doc. I'm the only one who knows the way out of here until Vick and Phil get back tonight. You wouldn't want me to run off and leave you for them to take you back to civilization. You're right about their type."

"But am I yours?"

"My what?"

She blinked at him owlshly. He didn't believe she'd leave him at the mercy of her compatriots. Suddenly, he realized he had her number. Emma was the type of woman who'd jump up and down to make her point, but she wouldn't let anyone else pound on him. There was just too much iron in her for that.

"Vick made no bones that I'm his type. Thank you, but no. I prefer my companions a little softer around the edges. So, am I yours?"

He was ten kinds of a fool. Here he was, bleeding on her steps, trying to maneuver her into seeing him as a sexual object all because he liked the way the sunlight streaked her hair. Well, he liked other things, too, but still. Instead of flirting, he should be treating the gunshot wound she had given him and planning a fresh escape. Reminding himself of

the fact didn't help. Even wounded, the possibility of sex was too good to pass up. He really was a dog.

"Let me run get that kit and a towel...and a sheet."

Her gaze flicked down him and back to his face as she backed away, blush deepening.

"Why do you need a sheet?"

"You'll have to wear something after you...um...stop the bleeding. Those pants are ruined."

"I could just..."

She didn't let him finish the thought. The front door slammed behind her and the echo of running feet on the hardwood reverberated back to him. Guess that answered that.

Emma ran to the bathroom and closed the door, leaning against it as if her life depended on it. What was she thinking?

She had shot the man. Picked up the rifle and shot him. How could she do such a thing? It wasn't even aimed at him.

Banging her head against the door, Emma groaned. Vick was right. She was a total screw-up from the word go. Not only was her magic wonky, but so was her aim and her judgment, too.

What had possessed her to pick up that rifle from where it stayed by the door in the event of predators?

"Hey, bleeding out here, sunshine. Get a move on before you have another body on your hands."

God, body on her hands? What she'd like to do with that body should be outlawed. The scene from the book flashed

into her mind and she wondered if it were possible with a bullet wound in the behind.

Wait. What was she thinking? She wasn't even sure it was possible *without* a bullet wound in the behind. Not that she was going to find out any time soon, she reminded herself with force.

Covering her eyes, she jerked her thoughts out of the gutter and remembered how he'd looked limping across the meadow with his hand on his wound. He'd smiled at her, actually thought it was funny.

Five years from now, she would be laughing about it, too. Right now, she didn't know how she was going to face him. But she had to. He was bleeding on her porch and it was all her fault.

Shoving away from the door, she hurried to the medicine cabinet and surveyed the slender pickings. Nope, not much to chose from. Snatching the pre-packaged kit from under the sink, she added antibiotic ointment and an extra pack of bandages from the cabinet. All the towels were bright neon green, so he was just going to have to deal with being neon.

Zooming into the bedroom, she snatched a sheet from the closet and frowned at it before putting it back and grabbing an older one that was slightly yellowed. It was going to get trashed anyway.

"Still bleeding out here."

"I'm coming, I'm coming, already. Hold in that last quart. You won't die that way."

If he could talk, he wasn't exactly going to bleed to death, right? Emma struggled to remember her first aid before

deciding she'd just have to wing it. At least he wasn't going to run away again.

By the time she made it back to the porch by way of the kitchen, she had a plan. Of course, it lasted until she came around the corner and found the object of her plan standing in nothing more than his dress shirt. Luckily, or unluckily, depending on the perspective, it hung down to cover him in the front as he bent around to survey the gash.

"It needs stitches. You do know how to sew, right?"

Emma blinked. And blinked again. She'd always been the type to appreciate a set of shoulders, but she suddenly found she had a whole new appreciation for an ass on a man.

"Um. Your pants?"

"Sorry, they were ruined. Didn't think you'd mind if I went ahead and got them off. Flesh wounds bleed like a bitch."

Mind? Everything flew straight out of her mind until he pulled his hand away stained red with blood. It startled her out of her dead zone and she hurried forward.

"Put your hands on the railing and turn around so I can see."

"You just want to ogle my ass. I didn't take you for a take-charge kind of girl."

Her gaze flew to his and the knowledge she found there made her pause. He knew exactly what he was doing to her IQ. Rallying to cover her embarrassment, she forced herself to scowl.

"That's brave considering I'm about to bend you over and put a needle in your behind."

Dragging a small outdoor table over to use to hold her supplies, she opened the kit and surveyed what she had to work with. Tape, gauze, bandages, bee sting ointment, an old Epipen with her name on it, but no needle and thread were available. The Epipen made her smile as she remembered the first summer she had spent up here with Aunt Anne and how paranoid her aunt had been over everything. Pushing it aside, she spied a small package of butterfly steri-strips. Grabbing them, her face fell.

Looking at the wound as critically as she could, she shook her head. Nope, just wouldn't do. Time for drastic measures.

"Well, Doc. I have good news and bad news. The bad news is there isn't a needle and thread in the kit and neither me nor my aunt sew. The good news is that I have a backup plan. Bend over."

Suspicion colored his face as he stared down and Emma was forcibly reminded of the vulnerability of her position. Here she was, on her knees, staring at the wrong end of a fine-looking man.

"No can do, lady. I'm not bending over until you tell me what you're up to."

Rolling her eyes, she reached onto the table and pulled out a bottle of cayenne powder. She might not remember much about her first aid, but she did remember that cayenne pepper would cauterize a wound, if it wasn't too deep. Luckily, she'd only grazed him with the stray bullet.

"We're going to cauterize your wound."

"What? You're not marinating my ass."

"Well, I'm so sorry I left my curling iron at home. It's either the fire poker or the pepper. I can guarantee the pepper will hurt less."

"I don't think so."

Exasperated, Emma sprang to her feet and gathered her magic. Muttering the invocation word, she popped T.J. on the head to stun him. The moment the spell activated, she knew she'd put too much punch into it in an attempt to counteract the wild quality.

T.J.'s eyes rolled back in his head and he collapsed on the deck in a dead faint. A quick check on his vitals, and the welling panic subsided. At least she hadn't killed him. If he survived her hands, Aunt Anne was going to be a piece of cake. Of course, now she had a different problem to deal with.

"Yeah, just like a man. Fall down...and land on the blasted bleeding wound and add splinters to the problem."

Blinking, she realized his shirt had flared up, leaving him bare from the waist down. Her gaze rested on his privates before she could tell herself not to look. Even passed out and wounded, he was still impressive.

Maybe Vick had the right idea, after all. Shaking her head, she carefully rolled him onto his side the way she'd been taught in CPR class.

"He's just a man. Doesn't have anything I haven't seen before. Nope. Just a man. Think of him as a patient. He's hurt, no thanks to me, so I have to fix it. No lusting after the patient. But man, it's enough to lust after. T.J., we're going to



have to find you some clothes. Don't ask me where, though. There hasn't been a man here in forever."

As she talked, Emma poured the pepper directly into the wound, pressing it into place with a bandage. It mixed with the seeping blood to make a paste. What little bit touched her skin burned. Maybe it was a good thing she had knocked him out, after all. Getting up and leaving the concoction to do its work, she hurried to the kitchen for water.

"Don't wake up until I'm done, don't wake up, don't wake up."

It became a mantra as she picked up the sheet and tried not to cringe as she pulled off a corner of it. The medical scissors in the first aid kit weren't a lot of help cutting through the cotton, but she finally managed to get a square cut to clean off the blood and paste from the wound.

"Am I good or what?"

She grinned as the paste came away, leaving the wound red and raw, but no longer bleeding. It wasn't as bad as she thought it was, only about seven inches of furrowed skin. He was going to have a hell of a scar, but at least it was somewhere no one but a lover would see.

Since it wasn't that bad, maybe she could fix it after all. Rolling her shoulders in a gesture supposed to be relaxing but failing miserably, she gathered her courage. Holding her hand above the wound, she recited the spell from memory pushing as much magic into her palm as she could hold. With a final word of invocation, she slapped her hand over the wound and yowled at the backlash. Shaking her hand, she frowned at the goose bumps across the writhing muscles. Yep, definitely a

good thing she'd knocked him out. Dejectedly, she surveyed the wounded area as the magic evaporated.

"Gods and devils, you look like a porcupine got hold of you."

Smearing the area full of antibiotic ointment, she carefully covered it with thick gauze squares and taped them in place over the gash. That done, she began to work on the splinters. A box of Band-Aids later and he was as healthy as she was going to make him.

Curling up against the porch railing, she scooted under his head and waited for the spell to wear off. Unable to resist the urge, she tunneled her fingers through his thick dark hair and enjoyed the way it felt. Soft and luxurious, he had hair that would do a woman proud. Why were such things wasted on men?

The thought made her look down at his body stretched out in front of her. No, it wasn't wasted on the man. It simply gave a woman something else to hang onto when...

*Stop it, Em! You've kidnapped him, shot him, and now you're lusting after him. Can't the man have any dignity?*

But the doctor didn't look undignified. He looked like he should be posing for a condom ad emphasizing a woman's right to take what she wanted. Shaking it off, she tried to think of something that did not involve getting the good doctor out of the rest of his clothes as she waited her spell out.

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## Chapter Four

T.J. came awake slowly, trying to remember where his down pillow had gone and why his ass burned. The fingers stroking his hair felt good until all the pieces fell together in his mind. Starting to jump up, he yelped at the sharp pain from the burning wound on his backside and lay back down again.

It all came back to him in a rush. The crazy lady had shot him.

"Hey, careful. If you pull it open, the next time will be with the fireplace poker and I can't promise my hands are steady enough for that."

Bending around, he tugged off the bandage to get a look at the wound. Even T.J. had to admit that it looked better than he expected it to.

"Lady, you're not getting anywhere close enough to me for that. What did you put on me? Wait, never mind. I don't want to know. At least I'm not going to bleed to death."

She smiled at him and he was struck, again, at how beautiful she was when she wasn't scowling. Emma reached for his hair and he pulled back.

"Oh, stop. You look five with your hair in your face."

Well, damn. If she saw him as a child, they had a distinctive problem.

"Look, lady, if you think this is going to work out like that crazy syndrome where the captive falls for the captor, you've got another think coming."

"Stockholm syndrome."

"Yeah, that. Not happening here..."

"You know, for a doctor, you're not really good at those defining terms. Don't you know they make you more intimidating?"

*Intimidating, she says.* T.J. stared down at the sheet pooled over his privates in disgruntlement. It was hard to be intimidating sitting naked on a porch in the middle of nowhere with a gunshot wound to his ass, of all places. Couldn't she have aimed higher to give him a manly scar? No, she had to shoot him in the butt where God and country would know he was running like hell when she did it.

Instead of dwelling on that depressing thought, he snapped back to the conversation.

"I don't need long, defining terms. I majored in dead people."

"They don't have majors in medical school."

"Well, still. Why would I pay attention to psychology when all I was interested in was pathology?"

"And here I thought anatomy would be your favorite subject."

T.J. stopped and thought a moment. Damn, the girl really did have his number. Deciding discretion was the better part of valor, he quickly changed the subject.

"Where did you learn that trick with the spices?"

What surprised him was that he really wanted to know. Who would have thought standard kitchen spices would be so helpful?

"My aunt is an herbalist. This is her cabin. I've spent summers with her since I was a child, though I'm not here as often as I would like. If you can stand, I'll get you inside and feed you. You missed breakfast."

"Yeah, I believe I was a little tied up at the time."

She blinked at his joke, but smiled shyly at him as she scrabbled to her feet. Taking her hand, he let her help him to his feet though he didn't need it. If he was going to be stuck out in the middle of nowhere, there were worse things than having a beautiful woman at his disposal. Besides, his curiosity was piqued.

Who was this woman who went from sweet and shy to a raving lunatic and back again in the blink of an eye?

His sheet slipped and her eyes widened as she jerked her gaze away. And he knew she'd snuck a peek while he was unconscious. From the perpetual blush, he supposed she liked what she saw. Instead of feeling insulted, T.J. found it flattering. The kind of woman who usually fell at his feet weren't nearly as appealing, maniacal tendencies and all.

"I feel like I should be getting ready for a toga party at a frat house."

He let the sheet slip until it barely covered him to see if she'd catch it. She did. Reaching over, she snapped it up and reached around him. With one hand on each side of him, she covered him and began to maneuver the excess bulk.

"You know, a simple knot will hold it, I think. I'm sorry I don't have any men's clothes lying around. My aunt doesn't usually bring men up here and neither do I."

"There's a first time for everything. Tell me, does the tie-me-down-and-haul-me-off thing appeal to you on a personal level or was it just me? It certainly has potential."

She was so close he could smell her shampoo. It had the sharp smell of herbs and lemons, but somehow suited her more than flowers ever would. Her hands stilled for a heartbeat as she took a deep breath before answering. Her body stiffened with tension, but her voice remained calm.

"If I apologize for that, will you forgive me?"

"Forgive you, yes. Let you live it down and forget it, hell no."

Her gaze jumped to his face as her eyes widened in surprise. Lips parted and he had to resist the urge to close those last few inches between them to see if her cherry-colored lipstick had a taste.

"That would require that we're still speaking when this is said and done."

"Yes, it would. Of course, I could just be lurking to see if I can't tie you up and kidnap you for nefarious purposes all on my own. You had help."

Her mouth opened, closed, and then opened with a full laugh that changed her face into something extraordinary. T.J. felt something shift inside him at the sound. He was the one who took that step backward to put the distance between them. Her knot was haphazard over his hip, but it should hold unless he put too much strain on it.

Stretching the muscles across his gluteus maximus, he had to admit she hadn't done a bad job patching him up. It would

hurt to sit, but he thought he'd manage to hold in that last quart of blood, after all.

"Food. I've tied you up, kidnapped you, hauled you off to the middle of nowhere, shot you, and now I'm starving you. How do you like your eggs?"

"Lady, if you think eggs are the way to a man's heart, it's no wonder you used a bullet to get me out of my pants. I want steak, potatoes, steamed vegetables...you know, manly food so I can sustain my strength. Trust me when I say you'll be glad that you went through all that trouble."

T.J. wagged his eyebrows to make the insinuation all the more obvious. Instead of renewing her blush, she only laughed harder and shook her head.

"Emma. My name is Emma. If you call me 'lady' one more time, I am going to shoot you again. Eggs are on the menu because that's all there is in the fridge. Since I didn't expect company when I was making my weekend plans to venture up here, all I had Aunt Anne stock for me when she said she was coming up here was eggs and yogurt. I was planning on making a trip for groceries Saturday morning. You're just lucky that she went back to the city yesterday."

The brief thought that Aunt Anne could very well decide to stay over after the werewolf mediation session instead of driving back made her cringe. Before she could think too much about it, T.J.'s voice interrupted. The tone was full of suspicion.

"You said we were thirty miles from anywhere."

"We are. The market is actually the farm that supplies the produce stands on the highway. They're kind to those of us

who like our isolation. So, for you, it's eggs and canned corned beef hash because that's what there is. Come on."

She turned and sauntered toward the door. T.J.'s gaze dropped to her swaying hips. Oh yeah, he'd follow that down the road to hell. With careful strides, he began to limp after her. A man just doesn't realize how much he needs his ass until someone takes a chunk out of it, literally or figuratively.

*Bad idea, Emma. Bad, bad, bad idea. Don't get too close to the man until Aunt Anne gets a look at him.*

Humming, she cracked the eggs into a bowl and began to whip them with a fork. Behind her, T.J. battled the manual can-opener. At that moment, she wasn't exactly sure he was going to win.

"Dr. Jackson, please don't tell me you're all thumbs? I might not get over the disappointment."

Though her back was to him, Emma sensed all motion cease. Slowly turning with the bowl balanced against her middle, she was somewhat taken aback at the expression on his face. He should have looked ridiculous, but she found herself wishing he'd tossed the undershirt and dress shirt along with the tie and pants. The man certainly knew how to make a sheet work for him.

Jerking her gaze back to his face, the look of pure mischief and lascivious intent made something low in her body catch and hold. Vick was right. She'd been entirely too long without a man if a stranger could do that to her in a glance.

*His eyes are green.*

The random thought jerked her back to reality. Emma blinked first. T.J. simply stood with the can of corned beef on



the island and the can-opener in his hand wearing the same smile he'd worn when he had first turned to her in the morgue. Was it just this morning?

"The things I can do with my thumbs will ruin you for any other man, sunshine."

Emma blinked at the husky tone and stared blankly. What? Oh, oh, thumbs! Remembering she had started the teasing didn't help as images flooded her mind as to what he could possibly mean. Worse, what she wanted him to mean. He let the silence rest for a moment before chuckling and finishing his comment.

"I give a mean massage."

Closing her eyes and spinning on her heels to face the counter, she took deep breaths and tried to erase her brain. Fighting for equanimity, she struggled with how to best handle the man behind her. Confidence and poise, she decided. Emma was proud of her airy tone as she countered.

"Isn't it just like a man to overstate his proficiency when the skills are directly related to his hands on a woman's body? If you really want me to believe you're all that, you might try mastering the can-opener. That takes hand skills."

"You could get an electric one like the rest of the world."

"We're a green house, Dr. Jackson. We only use electricity when we absolutely need to."

"I don't see any plants anywhere."

Glad her back was to him, she gave in to the smile she had been holding back at the disgruntled tone. Patiently, she explained as she adjusted the heat on single gas burner on the stove. It was barely more than a propane camp stove, but

it did the trick and used a small bottle of propane stored under the cabinet.

"Not that kind of greenhouse. An eco-friendly house. The electricity is supplied by solar panels on the roof. I don't believe in wasting it on simple things when effort can get the job done just as well."

Pouring the eggs into the pan, she carefully began to scramble them, wishing for the necessary ingredients for a decent omelet. Ah, well. The man was probably used to heat-and-eat meals, so he could just settle for plain eggs.

"Which way to that diner Vick and Phil were so hot to get to?"

"That way," Emma waved with her spatula in the general direction of the front door. "Just walk straight east until you hit the gravel road and then turn left until you hit the pavement. It's only about twenty miles north from there. They make really good eggs."

Stirring the eggs, Emma held her breath and waited. Several heartbeats later, the sound of the can-opener slapping against the can gave her the answer she needed.

"When we get out of this, sunshine, you and I are going to talk about eggs and what, exactly, you can do with them."

She should have left it alone. Even as she was opening her mouth, that little voice was screaming for her not to say it, but she didn't listen.

"There you go with assumptions again, Dr. Jackson. What makes you think I'm ever going to want to see you after our little interlude?"

Lifting the skillet off the stove, she turned to him with her best suggestive smile. Dropping her gaze to his feet, she moved it up in a way that a woman would have found insulting. T.J. wasn't immune to it, but Emma wasn't sure she had gotten the response she was aiming for by the time she reached his face.

T.J.'s mouth firmed in a line and the smiling flirt was gone. In its place stood a man who was used to getting what he wanted. The way he stood broadcasted it. Of course, with the gash across his behind, she doubted he'd be relaxing against anything for a few days, but still. In some part of her mind, she'd known he was physically imposing. Standing so close to him at the morgue, the detail had been filed away; however, she hadn't fully appreciated it until that moment.

Her mouth went dry and she leaned back to rest against the stove and allowed herself to stare. Without the teasing smile to soften it, his face was hard planes that looked perfectly at home on the broad shoulders encased in cotton.

"Um, Emma?"

"Hmmm?"

"You're on fire."

"Hmmm?"

"Your shirt. It's burning."

Heat drifted up her back and she jerked away from the stove. Throwing the skillet down on the island, she ripped her shirttail out of her pants. Before even considering if she wanted to be without her clothes with the new persona of Dr. Jackson, Emma had it over her head and onto the floor.

Stomping on it like it was her most hated possession, she put the fire out.

"I guess we're even."

Looking at him blankly, Emma tried to make sense of it. Only when his gaze heated and rested significantly below her chin did she realize she'd worn one of her nice bras. It took every ounce of self-possession not to cover her chest with her arms.

*I will not be embarrassed. I'm over twenty-one, hardly a virgin, and stranded in the woods with a man I find attractive. Nothing has to happen that I don't want to happen. Dr. Theodore Jackson is a tool to be used, at best. At worst, he's an inconvenience that will shortly be safely in the hands of powers greater than I.*

Somehow, she found her voice, but the airy confidence had gone down in the same ashes as her shirt.

"What do you mean?"

"Now, we're both out of clothes. But, alas, I was raised to be a gentleman. I'll give you my shirt if you'll open this damned can."

Emma had clothes here, but made absolutely no move to correct his impression that she'd just lost her shirt. She had, it just wasn't her only one. If he gave up his dress shirt, he'd be down to nothing but his undershirt and sheet. In her mind, that was an improvement.

"You're just cranky because you lack manual dexterity."

"I'll show you manual dexterity, woman. It was only luck that kept you from scattering the eggs across the floor."

She caught the can-opener as he slid it across the island. Absently, she set the lip to the can and broke the seal with a quick clamp of her hand. A flick of her wrist and the blade slid easily through the aluminum.

"Show-off."

Glancing up at him, her comment died a sudden death as he reached around and pulled his shirt off by the shoulders. And the man wanted to call her a show-off? It took two tries to say something to off-set the display.

"Something wrong with the buttons?"

"Yeah, they require manual dexterity. Why didn't you just pull out the magic to put out the fire?"

"Because I don't think my aunt wants me to burn her house down?"

Now, why had she just admitted that? She couldn't even blame it on the shirt as he straightened with it in his hands. The cotton undershirt stretched across his broad shoulders, emphasizing the muscle tone. Emma had always had a soft spot for shoulders on her men. Snapping her eyes closed, she reminded herself that he wasn't "her" man.

"Modest, Emma? Please tell me you are not some fainting virgin that is going to run like a rabbit on me."

Emma's eyes snapped open and she glared at him. The tension in the air heightened as she flipped the top off the can without looking at her hands. T.J.'s face was openly appreciative as he surveyed her. It took more effort than she wanted to admit not to glance down and see if he was feeling half the potential brewing between them. Deep inside, guilt festered over the possibility of using him as an outlet for her

frustration. Casual sex wasn't her thing, but if he kept implying there would be more to them than tonight, she wouldn't be resisting long.

"T.J., let's be honest here. If anyone screams 'rabbit' around here, it's you. I may have been out of the saddle for awhile because my last boyfriend was a jerk, but when was the last time you hung around a woman when it wasn't about sex?"

"Does today count? And your burner's still on."

*What? Oh. Breakfast. Amazing how food ceases to matter when... Nevermind.*

Putting the can-opener down and holding out her hand, she waited until T.J. dropped his shirt into them and leaned back against the cabinets behind him. Emma was tempted to ask if leaning hurt, but she decided it didn't matter. Turning her back to him to put the shirt on seemed naive and juvenile, but she did it, anyway. Pulling it over her head, she savored the smell of his cologne, soap, and just him.

"Try not to burn it up since it managed to escape the blood splatter. It'll make a good souvenir for the weekend from hell."

Folding up the sleeves, she couldn't help but appreciate the soft feel of the quality shirt. He was right, it would make a great souvenir, but for whom?

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## Chapter Five

T.J. watched her roll up the sleeves of his shirt with some disappointment. It was probably for the best that she'd covered up that embroidered bra, though. Ogling her breasts all decked out to be appreciated was too much of a temptation and distraction. So much for being a gentleman. Unfortunately, it hung about her like a dress and covered everything else he'd been ogling, too. It wasn't fair. He'd seen swimsuits that covered less and still didn't have that much of an effect on his libido.

"Is your magic really that bad? I mean, what's the good of being a witch if you can't toss spells around and stuff? Is it one of those don't-quit-your-day-job kind of things?"

She turned back to him with a frown that screamed with affront. Guess that wasn't what he needed to ask to smooth things over.

"I'll have you know, I'm apprenticed to a master mage. It *is* my day job."

Snatching up another pan from the row hanging on the island, she slapped the can of corned beef into it and made short work of the bottom of the can so she could push it out. He was reminded, again, of why he liked his meat from the butcher and his vegetables from the frozen food aisle. Unless he missed his guess, that corned beef could survive a nuclear holocaust.

"Guess that sucks for you, doesn't it?"

He tried to lace his tone with sympathy, but was beginning to worry if there were any sharp knives lying about from the look she gave him. Spinning back to the stove, she ignored him as she heated the meat.

"You could be helpful and get plates from behind you. If you want to eat, that is."

Every hair on the back of his neck stood on end at the sweet tone and energy suddenly radiating from her. *Oh, this could be bad.*

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Her eyes were stormy as she glanced at him over her shoulder, but that was the only indication of ire. Her face was utterly serene.

"If I say I'm not quite sure, you're going to throw that pan at me. So I'm going to take a wild stab and just say for being a man. I'll admit that I was out of line if you promise not to start throwing things. Fair enough?"

"I do *not* throw things."

"Liar. Somewhere in there is a tempestuous shrew who's dying to throw things. If you haven't indulged at least once, I'll eat my hat."

"You don't wear hats."

"And how would you know that?"

"Easy, your hair would have hat creases if you wore hats a lot. It doesn't. I know women who would kill you for having better hair than they do."

Aha! She had noticed. So this little bout of libido boogie wasn't totally one-sided. Wasn't that good to know?



"Glad to know you're not one of them. If you were, you'd have hit more than my ass."

"I wasn't even aiming at you. It was a wild shot. I was actually hoping the sound of it would scare you enough to stop running."

"La...Emma, I don't scare that easily. The only way I was going to stop running was when I hit the road. Maybe it's a good thing you can't keep your concentration on anything."

Her shoulders began to shake. At first, T.J. thought she was crying until the first giggle escaped. Hurriedly, she turned off the burner and set the pan on the ceramic square obviously designed for it. Stepping back, she started laughing in earnest with an edge that made him worry about hysteria.

"Is this my chance to hit you back? I don't hit women. It's against the guy code. You're going to have to stop on your own."

That only made her laugh harder until she slid down with her back to the cabinet with tears streaming down her face. By rights, it should have been splotchy and red, unattractive. Anything to put his attraction to her in its place. But no, she glowed with it. She was probably the first woman he'd met that tears looked good on. Maybe it was his shirt, instead. Yeah, that's it. The woman was standing there in his shirt and he was responding to the implied intimacy of that.

Talk about not quitting their day job, he mused. As a psychologist, he would be a bust. Stepping around the island, he checked the knob on the stove and started to crouch down beside her before realizing the sheet was something of a problem. The haphazard knot over his hip left one leg bare,

but if he crouched like he usually did, his privates wouldn't be so private anymore.

How did women manage skirts?

Awkwardly, he tried to imitate his sister and knew he lacked the grace of it as he somehow managed to sit with his knees together and all pertinent body parts covered.

"Hey, Emma, you okay? Really?"

She opened her eyes and he was struck with how luminescent they were as she stared up at him.

"Do you care? Really?"

Her tone was rich with sadness and the undertow of tears. His body developed a will of its own and leaned forward. Deep down, T.J. knew he was invading the hell out of her personal space, but he couldn't bring himself to care about that.

"Baby, why wouldn't I care? You tie me up, drag me out to the middle of nowhere, shoot me, set yourself on fire trying to feed me... Hell, there's a bond in there, somewhere. Of course I care."

Reaching out, he wiped a tear away with his thumb and marveled at how soft her skin was. If he were honest with himself, he'd wanted to touch her face since coming nose-to-nose with her on the porch. Emma turned her face into his palm and they both froze, gazes locked together, as the air between them sizzled with awareness.

"This is a bad idea."

The sadness was gone from her voice replaced by husky desire. Involuntarily, his body responded to that promise. Sitting as he was, he couldn't hide his reaction. Lucky for him, she was too busy looking at his face to notice other things.

"Says who? If you recall, your buddy Vick told you to use me, abuse me, and throw me back. Sort of like an empowerment cocktail. He strikes me as the type to understand how that's done."

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you."

"Which part?"

It was utterly ridiculous to be sitting there like a lady on the floor with her head cradled in his hand having this conversation.

"The male one."

And that made so much more sense. T.J. resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"You know, Emma, if we're actually going to get anywhere, you really have to stop the man-bashing.

Unless...well...unless..."

*Please, God, don't let her be a lesbian. It just might break me.*

Fresh laughter spilled over and suddenly she was crying through her tears all over again. Well, damn. Where was that smooth charm that had earned him his reputation? Obviously, he'd lost it wherever he'd lost his wits.

"Is it a good idea to question a woman's sexual orientation when you're dressed in a bed sheet and working toward a compromising situation?"

"Hey, it's a fair question."

"Oh, it is not. And if I said I was, what would you say?"

"Do you share?"

Emma blinked, frowned, and blinked again. When his meaning dawned, she blushed scarlet and swatted his

shoulder. At least the tears had stopped. Tears on a woman were a hard thing for him to take. Teardrops still glistened on her lashes. T.J. felt something give even further inside him.

*Hello? Slightly psychotic. Do not get involved with her. You're doing her a service, nothing more. Don't think about how beautiful she is.*

"I do not do threesomes, thank you very much, nor am I interested in women. I like men just fine."

He told the voice of reason to go away and it took a moment for the implication of her words to sink in. T.J. felt the smile beginning to spread across his face before he could stop it and found an echoing one on hers.

"Good to know."

Still he hesitated. Those few inches between their faces seemed like the Grand Canyon. With what could only be described as a growl, she reached up and tangled her fingers in his hair and yanked him forward. Women may have perfected the art of sitting on their knees with their legs closed gracefully, but T.J. lacked the practice. Balance deserted him. Because she was turning into him, there wasn't any way to avoid a tangled fall, but he managed to get his hands out to catch his weight.

The momentum put her beneath him and, at least in his mind, it was an improvement. Soft curves pressed against him and there was no doubt she could feel just how happy he was to be there. For the first time since he was sixteen, T.J. found himself embarrassed about it.

"You know, you're bad on my reputation. I do have quite a way with the ladies, normally, anyway."

The smile on her face deepened to reveal dimples high on her cheeks. Even with red-rimmed eyes from crying, she was stunning lying there with that gorgeous hair spread out around her face. The remaining tears made the color of her eyes luminescent as she reached up to run her fingers back in his hair. She must have pulled them out to break her fall.

"Couldn't prove it by me," she said lightly as she tugged his face forward. "Now, shut up and kiss me."

Shut up and kiss me? Where had that come from? Oh yeah, the certain knowledge that the answer to all her pent-up frustrations was lying right where she wanted him and very happy to be there. Emma wiggled against him and he hardened still further with a groan as his lips sealed against hers.

*Wow.*

He kissed as good as his packaging. Opening her mouth, she eagerly met his tongue with her own. Answering her wiggle with one of his own, he wedged himself firmer between her thighs. Giving in to temptation, Emma wrapped her calves around his legs. The feeling of his erection against her made her body tight and wet. It really *had* been too long.

Her hand slid down the soft cotton T-shirt to stop at the knot at his hip. T.J. froze above her and pulled back to stare down at her. There was the light of laughter shining from his face, but something else, too.

"You pull that loose and this is going to get hot and heavy pretty fast. I'm not a man who does naked without a reason. Unless you've got a box of condoms hidden around here, I need some assurances. What's the plan?"

Assurances? What, exactly, was he asking? *Does he think...?*

"What do you mean? If you're worried about disease, I can promise you that you've had a lot more partners than I have and my last check-up was clean."

T.J. let out a bark of laughter and cut her off with another searing kiss. Her mounting temper evaporated under the onslaught. When he finally pulled back, they were both breathing hard and her body was facing a serious craving.

"Actually, that wasn't the consequence I was worried about. Protection?"

He bobbed his head to emphasize the point. In a rush, she realized what he was trying to be delicate about. Birth control. She was trying to get him naked and he was worried about embarrassing her over birth control? He was a doctor, after all. Without answering his question, she put her hand over the knot and concentrated.

*Please, please, please don't go wrong. Don't ruin this for me.*

Magic sparked and flowed, made all the more powerful by the passion. The knot untied itself while she continued to stare into her soon-to-be lover's face. The worried uncertainty on his face was replaced by that age-old look of a man who knows he's about to get lucky.

As the knot fluttered free, she closed her hand around the magic, bonded it to the sheet like a giant fist and tossed her hand back over her head. The sheet jerked through the air and disappeared on the other side of the island.

*Who needs a day job!*

Euphoric with the first spell that had gone right in weeks, she grinned up at him as she ran her hand under his shirt and over his back. Part of her wanted to pull back and fully appreciate the body that was about to put her over the moon. Of course, in her present state, dear Dr. Jackson wouldn't need half his ego or self-reported skill to get the job done.

*Just how sad is that?*

Boosted by her success, she grabbed the collar of his T-shirt with her other hand and closed her eyes. Building the spell, she was momentarily distracted as he began to nibble down her neck.

*Naked. The goal is naked. Make it happen, Emma.*

The shirt simply dissolved into balls of fluff.

"That's awfully handy. Think you can do it to yourself?"

"Not a chance, Doctor. It packs a sting if it backfires. Better your skin than mine."

He pulled back to grin down at her.

"That's okay. I usually use scissors, but I think I can make it work with my hands."

His voice had dropped deeper and she shivered at the promise in it.

"Doc?"

"Hmmm?"

His mouth was too busy to answer as he nuzzled the collar of her shirt aside.

"Are you half as good as you say you are?"

He stopped nibbling and pulled back to grin down at her. God, she'd do a lot for that grin. Something gave inside her and, for the first time, she wondered. What if this wasn't just

a one time deal? By his own admission, he wasn't the kind of guy who made commitments, but what if?

"Oh, sunshine. Better. If you get rid of this shirt, I'll prove it to you."

Pushing his shoulder, she blushed when he obligingly gathered himself up to kneel between her thighs. Abs every bit as toned as she imagined rippled as he started to rock back to sit on his heels, but he grimaced in pain. Making a note to heal the gash for him when this was over and she knew she wouldn't maim him for life, she began to work the buttons free from the bottom up. Emboldened by the way his gaze heated, she arched to unhook her bra instead of finishing the buttons while letting her gaze take him in.

Oh, he took the time to take care of himself. Under different circumstances, she'd have drooled then run away as fast as her feet could carry her. Now, she was fully appreciating the moment as she lay back against his shirt.

It was gratifying to realize he was returning the favor. Reaching down, he slipped his hands down her belly to stop at the button at her waist. His gaze rose to hers full of heat and promise as he flicked it open and slowly lowered the zipper. Emma lifted her hips in invitation. T.J. took it for what it was and slid the pants free of her hips. She had never been aware of how her silk panties felt against her skin, but the gentle slide of the fabric against her sensitized skin made her body catch.

Darkness was her friend, but the look on his face as he tossed her pants away was worth the change in venue.

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## Chapter Six

T.J. leaned forward, running his hands up her body. With long, sure, and lingering caresses, it was as if he were memorizing every curve of her body as he pushed the shirt up. By the time he reached her bra, her breath was coming in soft pants.

She had expected his hands to be soft, but they were rich with calluses. Obviously, he liked to work with his hands when he wasn't in the morgue. Emma made a mental note about it, seriously doubting she would remember. It only served to remind her how little she knew about him.

"Emma, calm down. I'm just getting started."

Opening eyes she hadn't even realized she had closed to savor the sensations, embarrassment flooded and then faded under the expression on his face. Mischief, amusement, and passion blended into a look she knew she would remember when she was eighty.

"Well, hurry up then. You have to stand up to your reputation, after all."

T.J. blinked. Cocking his head, the smile on his face took on a decidedly evil twist.

"I can promise you; I'm standing up to it. One does not rush the master."

"Prove it."

Where had this sudden bold streak come from? He took her at her word. With one quick yank, the tiny plastic buttons on the shirt flew in every direction. She could hear the tiny

pings as they bounced across the floor. T.J. gave a sharp intake of breath as he stared down at her body framed by nothing more than the last bit of clothing he had with him.

*Please don't stop. Not now!*

The moment was nothing more than a couple of heartbeats, but it seemed to take forever. Finally, T.J. settled his body onto hers with a searing kiss that made all the others tame by comparison. Emma felt her toes curl as she wrapped her legs around his thighs, lifting her hips to grind into him until he pulled back with a muttered curse.

"Emma, honey, foreplay is an art."

"Foreplay is over-rated. Any more foreplay and I'm going to disgrace myself."

"That's my line, isn't it?"

*Great, just great.* Here she was, naked, on the floor, with a man who wanted to take his time. Every woman's dream. That is, unless they've been abstinent for so long that toys didn't even work anymore. Shoving his shoulder, she shook her head.

"Over. I want to be on top."

"I so don't think so. The man always gets to be on top for the first time. It's a rule in the *Guy's Book of Everything*. Besides, you shot me in the ass. You don't want to hurt me, do you? You're going to just have to lie there and take it."

She opened her mouth to argue, but he did something with his hips and rubbed against her in such a way that all thought ran straight out of her head. Groaning, she grabbed his face and began to nibble at his lips, chin, neck, and

shoulder while he worked magic with his body without actually joining them.

"Uncle," she said, offering the word for childhood capitulation while gasping and coming up for air. "Please don't make me beg if you ever want to see me again."

Closing her eyes at the way that sounded, desperate and hopeless, she could have cried when he froze over her. Jumping slightly when his lips touched her forehead, she jerked her eyes open to stare at the wonderment on his face.

"Does that mean I get a second date?"

*Date? He's calling this a date?*

Deep down in her heart, the part of her Evan had broken when he'd left her the year before healed in a blinding rush of emotion. Staring into T.J.'s eyes, all thoughts about how unlovable she was vanished in a puff.

"Not if you don't do your job. And here I thought doctors knew so much more about anatomy than... AAAHH."

T.J. married their bodies with a quick flick of his hips in one swift movement. For a moment, time stood still. Emma watched his face as the late morning sunlight shone in the window, memorizing the details to savor later.

When he thrust in, he stole her breath away. He was warm, large, and she widened her legs to accommodate him so she could take him fully. He slid deeper, vibrating against her already oversensitive walls. Emma wanted to explode right then. She thanked God she was not a man.

This was so not going to be a one-time-and-it-was-over bout of sex. She was not going to have a one-shot deal. He was going to make it worth her while. Two. Three. Even six

was not out of the realm of possibilities. Moaning at the thought as much as the way he began to play her body, she arched to enjoy every possible sensation.

Lord, he felt good. No, great. Giving her body time to adjust to his thickness and length, she began to move under him. Emma wanted to pick up the pace but at the same time, she didn't. Together, the gentleness only made her body more aware of how glorious he felt inside her. She had never felt the need, the want, as strongly as she did in that moment. It had nothing to do with deprivation and everything to do with the man gently staring down at her.

Unable to meet his gaze, Emma closed her eyes and wrapped her legs around him, locking her ankles together. T.J. fulfilled her silent invitation and quickened his rocking. Once, twice, he hit a spot she had never experienced before. Her body quivered, her back arched, her leg muscles tightened around his waist. Oh, so close!

Emma wasn't sure when she took over the lead, and frankly, she didn't care. Everything that she was concentrated on that one tiny spot. Quicker, harder, longer. She breathed his name as her hands slid through his hair, taking handfuls to pull him toward her. She wanted, no, needed his kisses. To feel his want grow, his need rise as high as hers was. And continue building.

T.J. handed the reins to their loving over without a struggle for dominance. A moan, a whimper, a gasp was all she needed to tell him how close each thrust took her to heaven. She moved faster underneath him, meeting his thrusts. *So close. So wet. So strong. So. So.*

Jerking her mouth away, she clamped her teeth down on his shoulder to keep from crying out. Her body was on fire. Extreme heat rushed through her veins connecting, exploding nerve ending after nerve ending. With each move building momentum, her hands tightened around his back and she moved as fast as she could.

*Please don't stop. More. More. Oh, God! Please. Hard. Harder. Faster.*

Suddenly, her entire body exploded from the passion. A hot flow avalanched from within. Her heart raced almost as quickly as she moved with her release. Colorful spots speckled against her closed lids. Her heartbeat echoed in her ears.

T.J. wasn't done, though. He continued to move, compounding the sensations. As the orgasm built a mind of its own, magic and power flared to life from deep inside her.

With a start, she realized he had broken through her natural reserves and her magic was answering the call. Before she even had time to panic, she crested that peak and all thought abandoned her as the power burst out in a blaze of white light.

The pots fell from the hooks on the island. The lightbulbs shattered. The breadbox flew off the counter. Above them, tiny lights in a rainbow of colors danced and played on the rays of sunlight. It took Emma a full moment of contemplation to realize they were dancing in time to both the rhythm of her heart and the aftershocks of her pleasure.

*Talk about seriously underestimating the man's skill. No more having to use dusty potions to make my spells work!*

By the time her thought process returned, she realized he was holding her. T.J. kissed her neck. The weight of him, his warm skin against her body, Emma decided she didn't want him to leave, right then and there. Not now, anyway. But long-term sticking around? He wasn't such a pain in the rear as he tried to be sometimes.

Emma lay beneath him flushed and sated. The glow surrounding her made him feel ten feet tall. It was corny. She was hardly the first girl he'd brought screaming, but something about it felt like it. Maybe it was the fireworks.

"You know, sunshine, I've never had a girl actually give me fireworks. I'm a little afraid to see what's coming in the encore."

"Me."

Her body shook as laughter escaped and faded into giggles. She acted drunk. Fighting the urge to tease her about it, he went for banter instead.

"That much is a given or all those girls have been stroking my ego all these years."

"Oh, trust me. You deserve the praise. Or maybe not? It could just be that I'm so far out of practice that it doesn't take skill..."

"Hey! I worked hard, here. And have the sweat to prove it."

Her giggles exploded and she began to run her hand down his back. Just the feel of her smooth palm against his skin made his body jump despite the heavy romp. Leaning down, he gave into the urge to taste her. Burrowing his face in her

hair, he nuzzled her ear and began to nibble as her hands explored him.

Suddenly, a sharp, stinging burn radiated up from the wound on his backside.

"Ouch!"

T.J. tried to jump up, but Emma wrapped her legs around him to keep him close.

"Be still and don't break my concentration."

The look on her face was intense. When he stopped struggling, the sharp burn changed to flooding heat. Gradually, the heat faded. It felt like an eternity, but was only moments in reality. Belatedly, he wondered why he hadn't been afraid. T.J. jumped when she gave his ass a sharp pop with her palm right over where the wound had been. Instinctively, he cringed from expected pain, but it never came.

"There ya go. Payment for services rendered. Next time, I get to be on top. No excuses."

"What did you do?"

"Healed that gouge in your behind. It really wasn't that bad, but I know it smarted."

Smarted, she said. Shaking his head, he started to tease her about the origins of said wound, but the look on her face stopped him. Gone was the prim and repressed woman from the morgue and in her place lay a siren confident in her ability.

He had done that.

Okay, fine. Maybe not totally, but he had unlocked something in the heat of passion for her.

Wait. What had she said? Payment for services rendered? What did she think he was? A gigolo?

"Wait a minute. I'm not some toy... Uumph."

T.J. found himself on the ground with her astride him with enough force to make his ears ring.

"Oops. Guess I overcompensated. I'm going to have to remember that I don't need that extra push to make spells work anymore."

*Here I thought I was doing a good thing for mankind.*

"I am not a toy."

"So I guess I can't wind you up and ask for more?"

The sheer joy on her face melted his ire. Now that passion was spent, the thought of food reared its ugly head. On cue, his stomach rumbled and she glanced down with another giggle. Now that he was on his back, he could see the dancing lights all around them.

If she were this high off loving, he was seriously going to enjoy the first time he gave her alcohol.

"I'm not a wind-up toy. I'm a high-powered, complexly built fuel-dependent engine. No fuel, no go. Off, woman, and feed me so we can find a bed. If I have to be on the bottom, I want to be comfortable."

"Spoilsport. The floor was just fine for me."

But she hopped up and smiled down at him for a moment before offering him her hand. Taking it even though he didn't need it, he realized he had absolutely no clothes. She was still wearing his shirt. It looked better on her than it did on him that was for sure.



"I am effectively out of clothes. Does that T-shirt trick work in reverse?"

"Nope. Sorry."

Oh, she was not. He could hear the glee in her voice.

"Then we have a bit of a problem."

"It's only a problem if you make it one. We have plenty of options."

Emma held out her hand and the sheet danced through the air with no more noticeable effort than a muttered word he couldn't understand. T.J. felt a little foolish when it wrapped around him.

"I am not wearing a sheet all day. Your friends will be back anytime and they'll think the worst. You know they will."

"Well, Dr. Jackson, are you worried about my reputation?"

She took a step forward and kissed his chest as her hands deftly tied the knot at his hips. Stepping back, she bent to pick up her pants and he suddenly wished she wasn't such a tiny thing. It meant the shirt effectively hid any cheap thrill he was going to get. She stepped into them with her back still toward him so he was denied even a glimpse of heaven.

"T.J. After the horizontal mambo, it's a little silly not to use my name."

"Maybe I like using your title. Kinda makes me feel important."

"Only if you're bucking to be the missus Dr. Jackson."

As soon as he said it, he wanted to take it back. Making disparaging remarks wasn't the way to ensure she wanted to continue seeing him after this little fiasco. His face must have

shown his thoughts because she walked back to him to reach up and pat him on his sternum.

"That's okay, Doc. Thanks for the offer, but I'm just fine single. Most of us witches don't do monogamy really well." She shrugged. "Hey, we're just like you."

His mouth dropped open and he felt his eyes bulge out. Indignation flooded through him until he caught her mischievous expression.

"You're pulling my leg."

"Yep. Had you going there, didn't I?"

Gullible fool, he called himself. It did manage to put the moment of his slip behind them, though. Starting to take a step, he froze when he spotted the broken glass from the burst bulbs.

"Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up. I'll get my revenge later. Any chance of singing a little song and having little birds swoop in to clean up this glass so we can walk? My shoes are still out on the porch with the remains of my pants."

"Sorry, that's a privilege reserved for princesses. Alas, I wasn't born so blessed. Just one master mage in the making, that's me. Give me a sec and I'll see what I can do."

Carefully moving away from him and closing her eyes, she began mumbling. From nowhere, a breeze began to tickle his skin. For the first time, he felt fear as he saw the wind drive toward her and whip his shirt around her naked torso. Something the color of deep wine tangled around his leg. Bending down, he found himself holding the bra he'd shoved out of the way earlier. Curiously, he examined it. It had come off way too easily. Sure enough, the straps worked on slides

around the back to allow for flexible straplines. Once it was unhooked, boom. Instant access. His sister had one similar and was prone to leaving her laundry at his house for his cleaning lady to do. The cleaning lady was determined that all the female laundry belonged to his fictional lover so always put it away with his.

A sharp sound made his gaze fly up to Emma and the sight of blood streaming down her arm. All around her, the glass particles whirled in an ever tightening stream. Pain showed on her face, but she never wavered with her rising arms. The higher they rose, the more the glass coalesced into a single line of fragments in the cyclone of wind.

With a shout, her hands flew open and the glass flew across the room to the trash can. With more precision than most basketball players he knew, the shards dropped through the lid. He stared in disbelief. What, exactly, had he gotten himself into?

"That's what I get for being cocky and showing off."

His feet were already moving before his gaze had left the trash can. Reaching for her arm, he grinned as he parted the sleeve of his shirt. When she pulled away, he lifted his gaze to hers.

"Relax, sunshine. Before they let me work on the dead, they made me practice on the living. You're in good hands."

Emma rolled her eyes at him, but stood still while he looked at the scratch. By rights, he should pour that pepper on it just to return the favor, but it really wasn't that bad.

"It's just a scratch," he told her as he leaned forward to make a show of kissing the clean part of the shirt right above

the gash. "You'll live. Unfortunately, I'm not at all certain I can say the same for my shirt. You've managed to bloody all my clothes. If I don't make it out of here, take my advice and burn the evidence. Someone will be sure that you did me in."

Her eyes widened and she paled just a bit. Pulling her to him in a hug, he let the teasing laughter bubbling up inside him flow out. Lord, it felt good to laugh. He tried to remember when the last time he'd actually laughed just for the sake of laughing. Teasing, flirting, taunting, yes. But laughing for the joy of a moment? No, it had definitely been awhile.

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## Chapter Seven

The sound of his laughter made her lower belly flip. She liked him. Fate had slipped in and tossed her a curve ball. Why would she feel so at home with someone she wouldn't have spoken to on the street?

Simple. Sometimes a girl needs to be beat over the head with a baseball bat to put some sense into her.

She owed Vick an apology and even bigger thanks.

Staring at him, it took a moment to realize he'd said something requiring a response.

"I'm sorry?"

"Does that nifty trick you did on my ass work on yourself? Speaking of, why didn't you do it earlier instead of marinating it?"

"I tried. I'm surprised you're not too sore to walk on it. It backfired. Be glad you were unconscious or you'd have been very upset with me. And to answer your question, it's easier to heal someone else."

"Why? It's your body, you should be better at it."

"Then you'd be out of a job."

It came out tart and she found her blush. Taking a deep breath, she tried to decide exactly how much Magical Theory 101 he could handle on such a short trip to the dark side of reality. Trying again, she carefully picked out her words.

"The sensations of healing can distract you and cause you to lose focus on the spell. Spells without focus can do all sorts of nasty things like make the wound you're trying to heal

worse. This is just a scratch. It'll be fine once it stops bleeding. You said so yourself. Aren't you glad all those years of medical school are paying off?"

"Oh, yeah."

The way he said it made her think he meant something that flew right over her head. Letting her confusion show, she stared blankly at him. The man should run around nude more often. He had the kind of body Greek sculptors begged to molest.

"It's just a scratch, T.J. No advanced medical training required."

"Ah, yes. But, consider this. All those frightful years of medical school put me in that morgue. Thanks to the holes you guys put in his brain, he asked me to work a double so he could take the night off to take Melissa out to ask that fateful question. So, there I was, just waiting for you to come in, magically truss me up, and haul me away to work your wicked way with. It's called 'karma' and she's suddenly become my best friend."

Green eyes stared into hers long enough for her to realize he was waiting on more reaction to his pronouncement. The euphoria that the cut had snapped away came back with a rush. Rising up on tiptoe, she kissed him lightly.

"You're a goof."

"Probably," he said as he reached down to tuck her hair out of her face. "But you'll be amazed at how fast I'll grow on you."

"You keep saying things like that. What, exactly, do you think you've found? I'm not exactly the kind of woman you usually go out with."

"And you keep saying things like that. How do you know what kind of girls I go out with?"

For the first time, honest temper vibrated from his body. Uh oh, the gig was up. Time to come clean.

"Charlie likes to talk to his bodies. There has been a time or two that we've had to hide until we were sure we could sneak the bodies away without being seen. To listen to him tell it, you're the original Casanova."

"Damn. Just goes to show that you can't even bare your soul to the dead because you never know who is lurking. Let me clear this bit up. I go out on the occasional Friday night and live a little. I do not have a revolving door to my house and the only woman who tends to be proprietary over me is my sister. She's afraid she won't be able to mooch off me once I find the right woman to settle down with. I think you two will get along famously."

"Again, there you go. Relationships based on extreme situations very rarely work, T.J. They're as bad as relationships based solely on sex."

"Well, I guess we'll just have to base ours on mutual desperation." Before she could object, he continued. "I'm desperate for a woman who has more substance than fashion and parties and the size of my bank account. You're desperate for a man who can keep you happy. See? Perfect match."

Turning so he wouldn't see her grin, she walked back around him to begin picking up the pots from the floor. Silence stretched between them, but it wasn't weighty or uncomfortable. A glance over her shoulder saw him bending over to pick up the wooden breadbox flashing a long line of thigh.

*Good idea. Definitely going to have to find some side slit dresses and skirts to taunt him with.*

Just like that, she realized she planned to keep him. Aunt Anne would be happy enough about the arrangement because it meant his knowledge of their little otherworldly distractions wouldn't be a problem.

T.J. was right. Karma really had decided to turn over a new leaf for them. Feeling happy and domestic, she began to hum as she pulled the plates down and filled them with their lukewarm breakfast. The tiny table across the room sat in the sunshine and she wished she had more to offer him. Before, when he was complaining, it hadn't bothered her one iota.

Just went to show how one good lay could screw up a woman's thinking. She found herself wondering just how many IQ points she was going to lose before Vick and Phil came back.

"You're doing that Cheshire cat smile, again. What are you thinking?"

"Nothing. Just how I need to get you fed so I can carry on with the plan."

"What plan?"

"The use-you-and-abuse-you plan."

"I notice you didn't say throw me back."



He slipped into the opposite chair carrying the pitcher of water that had been saved from the counter swipe by being in the sink. Setting the glasses on the table with one hand, he poured with the other while she settled in her chair. It was all so frightfully domestic.

"The jury's still out. Give me until morning to put you through your paces."

"Fine, but if I'm going to continue to wear a toga, we're seriously going to have to negotiate your costume. Maybe something in purple leather..."

"Oh stop. It's not like you're going to need clothes, anyway. If you eat quickly, I might be able to track down an old sewing kit from Granny's day."

"Someone in your family tree was traditional? I'm shocked!"

"Can the sarcasm. She was as inept at it as the rest of us, but she had a tendency to lose her buttons, so kept a sewing kit around here somewhere. It wasn't a big one, but it should have an old dull needle and some thread."

"How did she come by a problem with buttons?"

Emma hesitated and blushed. For the first time, she understood the joke. "She always said it was what she deserved for riding herd on the mangy wolves. Granny Evelyn had a thing for the alpha werewolf of the time despite having at least a decade on him."

Closing her eyes, she tried to erase the image.

"So you're still going to be frisky when..."

"Oh, please stop. No more. Not thinking about my grandmother having sex, thank you very much. You? You, I can think about because I have all sorts of naughty plans."

"No. I'm holding out. No more boy toy until you find the sewing kit to fix my pants. I refuse to be totally naked when your pals show up. It's embarrassing. I didn't even put up a decent struggle."

"Oh, all right. You go get them after we eat while I go dig through the shoe boxes in the closet. I'm sure it has to be there."

"So tell me about werewolves and why my body...err...patient's dead body was such a problem? It's not like he didn't die of natural causes. Well, if you can consider being hit by a car natural causes, anyway. It was an accident, hardly murder."

The change in topic caught her off-guard, but she rallied quickly as her mind raced to decide exactly how much she could tell. Aiming for nonchalance, she shrugged and answered his question with a question.

"What's there to tell?"

T.J. didn't buy it. It was obvious from his expression. His next question showed just how shrewd his intelligence was.

"You can start why you're sneaking bodies out of the morgue that have nothing to hide. From what I overheard, the deal is to keep everyone none the wiser as to the very existence of things that go bump in the night."

She had an awful realization and blurted it out without thinking.

"You knew."

He simply shrugged and answered. "Of course I knew. Okay, suspected. Some of those bodies you've been sneaking out passed through my exam table. Granted, I thought the families came and picked them up since they were hardly victims of foul play, but still. I may not have pegged them as werewolf, but anomalies made it obvious that they were other. You just filled in the missing piece."

To say that knowing her lover had intuitively come upon the reason the clean-up crew existed was terrifying was an understatement. If anyone knew, they'd be just as likely to see him locked away in a missing person file while his body fed the fishes. It was not a comforting thought.

They stared at each other over the eggs for a moment. Something about the ease he exuded while sitting there in his sheet made her decide that her best course of action was to get him vetted by the coven and under her personal protection. Aunt Anne was just going to love him, literally.

"They're not all werewolves, but you've got the general idea."

He smiled at her and her stomach did a little flip. Putting down her fork, she watched him devour the plate like a starving man. Her errant thought was that if he ate plain eggs and canned corn beef with such relish, what would he do for a true cooked meal?

It sent a shiver down her spine and anticipation tightening her gut.

When his plate was empty, he looked at her unfinished breakfast forlornly. "You going to eat that, sunshine? I might need the energy if that light in your eye is any indication of

your intentions. Not that I'm complaining you know, but a man's got to have food if he's going to keep his lover humming."

His tone combined with a wagging of his eyebrows that made her laugh as she shoved her plate across the table to him. It was easy to put the long-term consequences in the light of the mischievous little boy act.

When the plate was empty, he pushed it back and grinned at her.

"Do you realize how good you look in my shirt, even if you did manage to bloody the sleeve? Guess it won't make such a good souvenir of the weekend, after all."

She chuckled and began to tie the tail into a knot while his gaze locked on her hands. The little boy cuteness faded with a rush of heat that made her feel wanton and womanly in a way no one had ever managed. Keeping up the banter, she shook her head and volleyed back.

"Speak for yourself. Blood stains come out in the wash if you know the trick. Peroxide. Didn't you know that? You *do* work around blood all day."

"Sunshine, if it were up to me to do my laundry, I'd have nothing to wear. My sister was my roommate through medical school and now I have a cleaning lady who takes care of it. Contrary to my current situation, I'm not a nudist at heart."

Unable to resist, her gaze dropped down him and she had to close her eyes against the visual.

"Pants. Bloody and torn or not, we've got to get you back in your pants."

"What's the fun in that?"

She fought the laughter that welled up and lost.

"Have mercy on me. Cover your body so we can talk. I barely know you."

"On the contrary. You know me biblically. Isn't that all that counts?"

Standing up, she reached over and picked up his breakfast dishes and stacked them on top of hers.

"Pants. Then conversation. Unless you really were planning on this being a weekend fling..."

"Check. Pants. Be right back!"

Still chuckling to herself as he bolted out the back door, she carried the dishes to the sink and began to fill it up from the rooftop reservoir of hot water. He made a kissy face at her through the kitchen window as he moved around the wrap-around porch.

She felt young, light, and free with him. Part of her wanted to just roll with it and let the vetting process be damned. He had managed to keep their secret for God knows how long without any incentive. She was sure she could come up with enough reasons for him to stay quiet now.

That brought her mind back to the current crisis. Half of her hoped the werewolves had come to see who all the fuss was about. She knew they had heard the gunshot. But, knowing Aunt Anne, things had probably been pretty entertaining while she was talking sense into the werewolf drama. If anyone could prevent a werewolf war, it was Aunt Anne. Drying the dishes, she heard the front door open.

"Um, sunshine? I think we have a problem."

"What's that, T.J.?"

"My pants are gone."

"What?" Turning, she found him standing there still wearing the sheet wrapped around his waist with his shoes in his hand.

"Gone. Vanished. Lost. No longer where..."

"I get the picture, T.J."

"Where do you keep your sheets?"

The look on his face was entirely too angelic to trust.

"Why?"

"Costume negotiations. If I have to wear a sheet, we should just host our own private toga party. Didn't you go to college?"

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## Chapter Eight

T.J. watched his idea lodge in her mind and allowed himself the luxury of fantasizing. Of course, since they were isolated with limited supplies, the sum of his efforts landed them in bed with her finishing what she had started on the floor. It wasn't lack of imagination. It was simply using what was available. Somehow he thought his Boy Scout leader would be disappointed in him.

"I went to college," she defended, but her heart wasn't in it.

"But you lived at home and didn't experience the life, right?"

The way she ducked her head was adorable and totally gave her away. He spared a brief thought to wonder if that pepper in the morgue had been more than just pepper. Did love spells really work?

"I have a question from the ignorant non-magical perspective. Why did you shove pepper in my face at the morgue? You obviously don't need spells to get your magic done."

She blushed and hurriedly turned around to put the plates in the cabinet after she dried them. She mumbled something too low for him to catch.

"I'm sorry, sunshine. I missed that. What did you say?"

This time when she turned back to answer there was the fire of temper in her face.

"I'll have you know that that was an herb mixture designed to help me center my spell so I could make it work. I've been a little erratic lately."

"You seem to have a handle on it now, broken glass cut notwithstanding."

Her temper flash morphed into acute embarrassment and the blush went from her breasts which were barely covered by the vee of his shirt all the way to her hairline.

"If you must know, Dr. Jackson, my magical state was being sidelined by my physical one so I should probably be thanking you for taking care of that little problem for me."

"Speaking of problems—costume negotiations. Toga party? One good trick deserves another, after all."

"And it looks like we arrived just in time, Phil. And Emma's already got him practically naked for us. Oohh, he is naked under that sheet, isn't he?"

T.J. stiffened and slowly turned to face the back door. Vick and Phil were on the porch staring in through the screen door with the white van behind them on gravel drive. They had been so wrapped up in each other that they'd not heard them drive up.

"I thought you guys had a body to deliver and a situation to defuse."

Emma's voice was acerbic and she tossed the dishtowel on the counter to move up beside him. As much as he appreciated the show of support, it rankled his pride that she thought he needed to hide behind her. He opened his mouth to throw in his two cents worth, but Vick spoke up first.



"Auntie Anne had the situation well in hand. She had both alphas talking about more open relationships between packs to broaden the gene pool. I've got to hand it to your aunt, Emma. She definitely knows how to keep men on their toes."

"Well, damn. I thought the werewolves were going to keep them out of the way."

T.J. made no effort to hide his disgruntlement as Phil pushed passed Vick and opened the door.

"Is that breakfast I smell?"

Emma sighed and threw up her hands.

"Knock yourselves out. There's still some corned beef left in the pan and probably enough eggs to feed you two. But if you eat all of them, you're going down the hill to beg John Randolph for more. He's still not too happy with you after the last time you two were up here."

"Totally not my fault." Vick threw up his hands with a smug tone and absolutely no apparent guilt. "The man shouldn't be skinny-dipping in a pond if he's not open to voyeurism."

"It was his own pond," Emma reminded him. "And well away from prying eyes if certain people had not gone wandering about."

"A man sees a pile of clothes hanging from a tree and he's got to check. What if dear farmer John had fallen and needed help?"

"After hanging his clothes?"

"You never know."

T.J.'s gaze found Phil's as he roamed past toward the tiny refrigerator. From the resigned look on his face, this was not the first time he'd heard this particular story.

"You just live to hope."

Emma and Vick's faces swung around to include him in the conversation. Emma's was surprised, but Vick's was anticipatory.

"Dr. Jackson, a man never knows where he's going to turn up a closeted treasure. The best prizes are those buried under a rock-hard facade."

The way the man's gaze traveled to the knotted sheet left little doubt exactly what he meant. Emma stiffened beside him and reached out to take his hand. With a tug, she headed to the doorway without another word.

"Where are you going?" Phil demanded. "You can't leave me to Vick's cooking. He can't make eggs like you do."

"Then you can starve or, better yet, trot on down the mountain to the diner. We have other plans."

"Now, Emma. If they're heading out for real food, shouldn't we consider tagging along? Complex combustion engine here, remember?"

The look she gave him sizzled. "You have no clothes and I believe the sign says shirts and shoes required."

"But I bet it says absolutely nothing about pants."

The bark of laughter behind them made them both look. The look on both men's faces was absolutely priceless. T.J.'s mischievous streak snapped and his hand slipped to the knot on the sheet. With a flick of his fingers, the knot loosened and

a quick tug pulled it loose. Without breaking stride, he simply dropped the sheet and crossed through the doorway.

The hoots behind them assured him that Vick and Phil had gotten whatever cheap thrill they had hoped for.

"I didn't have you pegged for an exhibitionist, Doc."

T.J. just grinned and tugged her along toward the open doorway to the bedroom. There were a lot of things about him that she didn't know but that's what kept a relationship going in those early stages.

Closing the door behind them, he leaned against it and did his best to ignore his nudity. He reminded himself that he had started this journey as a cheap trick to get her over her frustration.

He should have felt cheap, but he couldn't manage it. Clearly, she could have had anyone she wanted at any time she wanted. However it had come about, she had chosen to be with him.

"How long has it been, Emma?" He didn't need to clarify the questions. She understood instantly and the laughter faded.

"About a year. Evan was more attracted to Aunt Anne's position than he was to me. I was simply the means to an end for him."

"What happened?" There was an element of fragileness to her voice that made him want to cross the room to hold her, but he knew that she would take that as pity and that was counterproductive to what he had in mind.

"Aunt Anne and I were supposed to go to Atlanta to help one of the master mages she knows with a problem, but he

cancelled at the last minute. I came home to find Evan in bed with the stripper he had been fooling around with. He was using me to usurp the coven all along."

The raw pain was too much for him to handle and he was moving toward her before he made a conscious decision about it. The little voice inside his head whispered warnings about getting too close, but he ignored it. She didn't resist when he pulled her close but neither did she soften against him.

"Vick's right as much as I hate to admit it. Your ex was an ass. I'm a much better catch."

She jerked at the jest and looked up at him. With the inches between them, she blinked as she focused before the first chuckle escaped.

"You don't think much of yourself, do you?"

"Hey, babe. I just call it like I see it. And I bet I'm a better lay, anyway."

She laid her head against his chest and laughter washed over them.

"Oh, I don't know. I think my judgment was a little compromised due to my deprived state. Guess you're just going to have to convince me, huh?"

The challenge was paper thin to guarantee a change in topic and T.J. was man enough to let it happen. He leaned down to kiss her and what started as a gentle press of the lips became so much more.

Gathering her against him, he marveled at how well she fit against him as he pushed her against the bed. Emma broke

the kiss with a gasp as the backs of her knees pressed against the mattress.

"Uncle. I give. It's my turn to be on top, remember?"

"Your wish is my command, dear lady."

And for once, he actually meant it. Spinning around, he tossed himself backward on the quilt and grinned up at her. Sexist as it was, he wanted a nice soft bed under him if she wanted to be on top.

"Up. We have to turn the bed down, T.J. My great-grandmother made that quilt and I'm not going to be the one responsible if it falls apart in the wash."

Springing back up, he joined her at the end of the bed and smiled down at her.

"I don't even get to toss you on the bed for the thrill of it since I'm going to let you have your evil way with me?"

Instead of answering, she hurried up to one side of the bed while motioning him up the other with a wave of her hand.

"Can't you just wiggle your nose or something?"

"Magic for convenience is wasted effort, T.J. Do your part or..."

She didn't have to finish her threat. His hand was on the covers faster than hers was. If it had been up to him, he would have thrown them back heedless of whether or not they found the floor, but Emma had other ideas. Carefully, she turned the quilt back and folded it until it draped decorously across the end of the bed.

Then her eyes found his and he realized she had been using those moments to compose herself. He watched, fascinated, as she moved around the bed until she put him

between her and it. She planted her hands firmly against his chest and shoved.

He didn't think she had the kind of strength to push him over, but she surprised him. The bed bounced as he found himself flat on his back staring up at the same smile Eve gave Adam over the apple.

"My turn."

The uncertain woman who had first tied him up was gone and the full-blown temptress stood in her place. Under his fascinated gaze, she slowly unbuttoned her pants and used a slow sway of her hips to push them down. The underwear matched the bra. How had he missed that? Oh yeah, desperation had blinded him. And then it was gone, too.

Licking his lips, he stared at her as she began to hum to go along with her strip tease act.

She climbed on the bed with a sinuous grace that made him glad he was a man. He felt his body spring to attention at the lascivious look on her face. There was just something about a woman intent on ravishment that made his blood tingle.

"And you said you didn't like to be dominated," Emma teased.

T.J. winked at her husky voice even as his body gave away just how much he liked what she was doing.

"Emma, sweetheart, I never said I didn't like to be dominated. I just said a man's got to be on top that first time. It's even written down somewhere. Promise."

Her hands slipped across his torso, but froze at the clatter of pots from the kitchen. T.J. had a moment to wonder if the

men in the house were going to be an impediment to their plans before she lifted her gaze to his with a hint of his own mischievous streak shining back at him. The look made him wonder just how agile her hands were as they resumed tracing his abdomen muscles. The thought did absolutely nothing to rein in his fast evaporating control.

*Steady there, dude. No early lift-off or she'll bail faster than the proverbial rat.*

T.J. tried to remember the last time a woman had him revved up with just a smile and then decided to let it go. Of course, the decision had everything to do with the way her hand slid down his hip to ease around the area he most wanted her to touch.

"Think we can pull this off without giving the guys a story to run back and tell my aunt, Doc?"

Before he could articulate an answer, her hand moved forward. It caressed the hollow of his hip without heading to the promised land. T.J. wasn't sure he could stand the torture and reached to grab it. His voice showed the strain as their gazes locked. His was pained, but hers was gleeful.

"Sunshine, teasing will make it a very, very short ride."

Instead of slowing down, she dropped down to kiss his stomach. T.J. had to close his eyes. The image of her smile as her tongue flicked out to slide against his skin would be burned in his memory forever. Her breath blew against the wet skin as she threw his words back at him in a whisper.

"Sorry, Doc. Guess you're going to have to just lie there and take it."

She threw her leg over him and leaned down to kiss him. It was tentative enough to let him know that her assertiveness was mostly bluster. With slow hands, he traced up the outside of her legs and let her take control. It was harder than he thought it would be, especially with the hum of conversation coming from outside the door.

When she took pity on him and moved over him, any and all concern over it vanished as she lowered herself onto him. The wet heat of her body clamped down on him and he tried to think about pink carnations, green fields, movie trivia...anything to keep from disgracing himself by behaving like an adolescent schoolboy in his first throes.

With shaking hands, temptation got the best of him and he reached up to unknot his shirt. It fell open to reveal the sheer perfection of her as she worked over him to find her pleasure. Her skin was flushed and she was making small noises with every fall of her body. Her body tightened over him like a noose on a hanging man and he distanced himself from the feeling by memorizing every line of her body flushed with excitement.

With a muted cry, Emma found her pleasure and threw her head back. The need for discretion kept him from shouting his own release as he let her carry him over the crest.

He lost all concept of space and time as she fell forward bathing them both in the spill of her hair. Lemon and herbs beat expensive perfume any day but it was going to be hell to find suitable gifts if all her needs were that simple.

The stray thought made him smile as he began to rub her back, surprised to find it damp with sweat.



In the past, he'd always thought afterglow was over-rated. Guess it just took the right woman, he rationalized to himself.

When she slipped off him to settle at her side, she popped his belly with an affectionate slap.

"Good ride, honey. Rest up so..."

T.J. cut her off with a growl. "Woman, I'd advise you not to finish that sentence. Women have an unfair advantage. Mother Nature wanted to give you a chance to run away when the deed's done. She wasn't so kind to guys. I guess Father Time really set her off."

Her laughter danced across his senses and he found himself looking into the sunlight streaming through the window for magical visuals. He was disappointed.

Time passed and they lay in the warm nest of satisfaction doing their best to ignore the men in the next room. He must have closed his eyes because he started awake with the pounding on the door.

"Hey, hate to bother the two of you, but we've got company."

Vick's voice was urgent and Phil's shout from the living room was the only warning they had before the sound of the front door crashing open shook the cabin.

T.J. immediately went into protective mode and jumped out of bed. For a brief second, he glanced about looking for his pants, and then realized he'd lost them. Literally.

"Stay here."

He threw open the door and stepped out into the living room and straight into the fight. Vick and Phil had put themselves between the bedroom and the rush of young

werewolves from outside. Of course, the only thing that gave them away was the fact they were as naked as he was.

In the distant part of his brain not flying straight into fight mode, he acknowledged the humor of the nudist colony situation. But then he saw Vick's head snap around as he was caught by a flying fist from one of the first werewolves while another flew at Phil. Two more were barreling around them straight for T.J. and there was absolutely no more time for jokes.

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## **Chapter Nine**

Emma went from snuggly drowsiness to instant panic. In the seconds of indecision she wasted lying on the bed, T.J. was halfway to the door. Scrambling after him, she dove toward the end of the bed in search of her pants. Grabbing them in one hand, she glanced up in time to see T.J. storm out of the room baring his fine and unscarred behind to the world.

"Don't fight them!"

Hopping like an indignant rabbit as she yanked on her pants without bothering to track down her panties in the sheets, Emma charged after them. She didn't cringe at the obvious crash as she struggled with her clothing. She managed to get them snapped and the ends of the shirt in her hands tying it into a frantic knot as she reached the doorway. Vick and Phil were both down, but not out. They were scrambling to their feet even as two werewolves were dragging T.J. toward the open door. Emma could see the flash of skin in the sunlight through the window and sped up.

By the time she hit the sunshine, the angry werewolves were circling a struggling T.J. in the yard. The sounds coming from the mob were not sounds that comforted her.

"Cut this out! Let him go and step away. You have no right to do this!"

Her heart sank as she recognized Noble as he stepped out of the pack and gave her a proprietary look until the wind shifted and blew her scent back at him.

"You reek of him, Emma. And here I thought you had such discriminating taste."

"Noble," she said without blinking an eye or surveying the wares he so ardently displayed. "Not wanting to roll in the leaves with you doesn't mean I'm discriminating. It just means I have better sense than to go where a thousand women have gone before. I'm allowed to be picky about the men I tie up and haul off to bed."

He narrowed his gaze and turned back to his prisoner. T.J.'s shouts hadn't earned him anything more than a bloodied nose and countless scrapes and cuts from his struggles. Emma had to give him credit. The superior strength of the werewolves hadn't proved to be an impediment from his efforts to escape.

His left eye was beginning to swell and blood was streaming down his face. It took significant effort for Emma not to cringe from the sight and the knowledge that the blood was only exciting the already violent werewolves.

Noble tossed his sable hair back from his face and only the determined set to his mouth warned Emma what he was contemplating. Suddenly, magic swirled around them and his skin split as he snarled into the sunlight. With a blink of magic, he went from man to werewolf hulking over everyone.

Emma started to run down the steps, but Vick's hand on her arm stopped her. She hadn't even realized they had followed her out, but he and Phil flanked her in a show of solidarity. With a grateful smile, she turned her attention back to the yard and the raging werewolf.

The look Noble cast Emma over his shoulder gave her the clue she needed to act as he surged forward with his claws raised.

"NO!" Her magic was just there at her fingertips. She cast the spell without thinking and watched with mounting horror as the werewolf muscled through it even as the two mages behind her threw their strength into it too.

T.J. threw himself back against his handlers. His arms bulged with the effort to get away, but neither her restraint spell nor his efforts stopped the graze of claws across his chest. Blood spurted from the slashes, but the cuts weren't deep enough to do more than hurt.

She would have loved to think that was Noble's intent, but she knew him well enough to know he didn't respond well to obstacles in his path. And in this case, the path led directly to her pants.

"Great, just great," T.J. complained and thrashed even harder. "It's not enough that my colleague calls me a dog, but you have to make me one, too. I never liked rabbits, just so you know."

Emma's mouth fell open and she wasn't the only one. His comment shocked the werewolf holding his left arm enough for T.J. to wriggle free. He came out of the hold fighting. His fist connected with the jaw of the werewolf on the right and he threw himself at Noble's back with no apparent regard for his safety.

Somewhere, her panic broke something loose and she drew more magic into herself than she'd ever called before.

Throwing the magic out without a definitive direction caused an explosion like she had never seen before.

The cabin splintered around her and everything in the path of it was leveled. Emma saw it all happen in slow motion. The debris field looked like the aftermath of a tornado centered on the three mages as timber and glass cascaded around them to bowl over the werewolves who had stood past the initial blast and were running away.

Her gaze locked on T.J. where he lay motionless with a slab of timber across his chest. Noble lay unconscious beside him, once again in his human form.

Her emotions had been washed away with the release of magic, but they returned with a vengeance at the sight. Rushing down the steps of the porch that was all that remained of the cabin, she fell on her knees beside him. Green eyes blinked up at her as she cupped his face.

"You freaked at the possibility of burning it down, but blowing it up is okay? Sunshine, we're going to have to talk about your definition of worst-case scenarios."

He coughed as she helped him sit up and they both surveyed the scene. T.J. let out a whistle as Noble groaned next to him.

"You don't know how to do anything by half measures, do you, sunshine?"

"She's always been an all-or-nothing kind of gal. Why do you think I've spent all these years chasing her?"

Emma let her gaze fall on the werewolf as he turned his head to watch them. T.J.'s gaze met Noble's and they had a

moment that only a man would understand. Suddenly, they were both smiling as if Noble hadn't just tried to kill T.J.

"God, men. Save me."

Her mutter brought her baffled looks from both of them. Giving up, she stood up and threw up her hands.

"I give up. Aunt Anne's going to kill me, so you'd better be worth it."

As if on cue, the woods were suddenly lousy with werewolves in canine form about the size of ponies. She recognized the grizzled shape of the pack alpha, Dexter, loping into the clearing, but the smaller female beside her was an unfamiliar blonde. To make it even stranger, Dexter carried what appeared to be a man's rugby shirt in his mouth. Confusion swirled in the surrealistic atmosphere.

Without breaking stride, the two werewolves shifted into human form and the woman snatched the shirt from Dexter's mouth.

"My cabin! What have you done to my cabin, Emmaline Carmen Feltman?"

Emma sat down on the ground, hard. Aunt Anne yanked the shirt over her head as she continued her tirade.

"And you, Noble. I asked you to come check on her because my girl is entirely too smart to handle the rifle without provocation. And what do you do? From the looks of that poor boy's chest, you picked a fight. I don't have time for your ego."

By the time Aunt Anne finished, she was close to Noble as he struggled to get to his feet. He shouldn't have bothered. Aunt Anne thumped him on the back of the head hard enough

to send him sprawling down again. Part of it might have been the dizziness of the spell, but Emma was willing to bet most of it was the sheer strength of a werewolf in a temper.

Aunt Anne, a werewolf? Who would have thought it? But how? Werewolves were born...

And the light went on. Gran hadn't just had a fling with the werewolf way back when. She had made a family with him. So many pieces from her childhood snapped into place, not only about Aunt Anne, but also about her mother. It suddenly wasn't such an impossible reality to digest.

Aunt Anne stopped and looked sadly around the clearing at the remains of her home. Emma was afraid to say anything. Sorry just didn't cover it.

Dexter tossed Emma a smile and moved up to put his arm around Aunt Anne's shoulders. He towered over her, but Emma realized they fit. Standing next to him, her tough-as-nails aunt was softer without losing her edge. When he kissed Aunt Anne's temple lovingly, she snuggled underneath his arm with a move that was ingrained habit.

"It's okay, pumpkin. We'll make the lads rebuild it bigger and better. It'll be exactly the way you want it. I promise. We were talking about adding on anyway."

"At least Emma found something to break her block."

Emma opened her mouth only to snap it shut as she blushed furiously. There was no doubt her aunt's nose had already made any denial moot.

She felt like she was sixteen, when her mother found her first secret note to her first crush. Rallying, she faced her aunt and put on her big girl attitude.



"Aunt Anne..."

"I see the charm, Emma," Aunt Anne cut her off. "He's got an ass I would have chased when I was your age."

"Did chase, Anne. And I like to think I still have it," Dexter fairly purred.

*Oh God. Aunt Anne and the alpha werewolf. Must scrub brain.*

The thought made a hysterical giggle bubble up, but Emma managed to choke it back. The werewolves were fading out of the trees to ring the clearing. Some she recognized, some she didn't. Seeing the unfamiliar faces brought her back to the problem at hand.

"The body," Emma blurted out. "The Wymettes?"

"Have taken their boy home to be cremated. Dr. Jackson's report convinced them that it really was natural causes. Doc, you might want to pay closer attention to that data recorder. Some of the things it has on it...tsk, tsk. Shame on you."

T.J. scrambled to his feet, sputtering indignantly.

"Lady, that's privileged information. You can't just take my data recorder..."

She waved her hand airily and gave him such an appraising look that Emma's ire rose jealously. It was totally irrational, but she couldn't help how she felt.

"You do have good taste, Emma."

"Thank you. Now, would you please tell me how you came on the spot like this?"

"Well, we sent Carl to check on you while we were going over the data recording with the Wymettes. He came back with a pair of bloody pants and this wild story about some

strange man afoot. One of the females recognized his scent and that made Vick and Phil come clean. So, we sent Noble to check on you while we saw the Wymettes off. I thought I could trust him, but apparently not."

Her displeasure made Noble drop his head. He still sat on the ground where she had put him and was looking distinctly uncomfortable under the scrutiny. Dexter took a step toward him and smacked the back of his head even harder than Aunt Anne had.

"When your alpha tells you to do something, you do it without question. You're not allowed to have an opinion that contradicts hers. Got that?"

Rubbing the back of his head, he glared up at the man he had been chosen to replace in a few years. Nodding sharply, he glanced at Emma before acknowledging his order.

"Yes, sir. Can I stand up now or are you going to put me down, too?"

"It's less than you deserve, scamp." Dexter scowled, but offered him a hand up. "But I understand the motivation. Now, the girl's made her choice. You'll respect it or you'll answer to me. You will not disrespect my niece by continuing this fiasco. Since we can't have a normal fighting for mating rights, I'll champion him. You're not ready to face me in a challenge just yet. By the time you are, he'll have her comfortably settled."

Having her future settled in front of both her and T.J. made her embarrassment burn hotter. T.J. apparently only latched on to the pertinent fact as far as he saw it.

"Does this mean that I'm not going to howl at the moon next month?"

"Of course not. Where do these myths come from? Now, Emma carries the gene so her children could find themselves on four legs when they hit puberty, but a simple scratch just won't do it." Aunt Anne scoffed affectionately as she strolled over to Emma just as the van rattled around the bend to park in front of the cabin. Vick and Phil looked out uneasily.

"Dexter has some clothes in the trunk that was in the closet that should fit him. Noble, start looking for it since I lay the blame for this disaster on you. It's not like Emma can take him home naked. The poor guy doesn't look like he's going to be much good to you tonight, honey, and it's not like you can hole up here anymore."

"My bed's more comfortable, and I'm reasonably sure we can get the locks changed before my sister needs her laundry done," T.J. commented as he tried to be nonchalant—and failed miserably—as he strode over to stand behind Emma. It effectively covered his anatomy from prying eyes. She stepped into him so her back was pressed against his front just to make sure. Emma made a silent note to herself that they would be using her bed until after she had a chance to meet his sister fully dressed.

It was openly proprietary, but the way the female werewolves were checking him out had not escaped her. Idly, she wondered if she could tattoo her name across his backside when no one was looking. Maybe that would get the message across.

Dexter looked at them and shook his head with a kind smile. Emma remembered all the times he had played with her as a child and realized she wasn't upset about her aunt's arrangement. A tremor of unease raced through her as his expression turned dark and he met T.J.'s gaze with a challenging one.

"You do realize what will happen if you break her heart, right Doc?"

"You'll eat me."

Dexter's laughter rang across the clearing, shocking many of the werewolves digging through the wreckage.

"Glad to know where we stand, son. Just make sure your life insurance stays current and properly documented."

"Dex!" Aunt Anne scolded.

"Well, the girl's got to be taken care of, Anne."

"Can we leave, please?" T.J. whispered in her ear. "This is just getting crazy."

"As soon as we find you some pants, T.J. We'll get you home and cleaned up. Then you can show me exactly how much more comfortable your bed is."

She winked at him and he grinned back with delight.

"They really won't eat me, will they?"

"Well...keep me happy and I'll see what I can negotiate for it."

"Never had a woman complain."

"There's a first time for everything."

The world faded around them as they shared a look only reveled by lovers. He was leaning down to kiss her when a pair of jeans and a shirt were thrust against her chest.

"No harm, no foul, Doc. Best man won and all that?"

T.J. reached around Noble to grab the clothes and shrugged.

"Just don't come begging to me when someone shows you the same treatment."

Noble nodded and looked down at Emma.

"Be happy. And if I need to take him in hand, let me know."

Ignoring the indignant objection from T.J., she winked at Noble.

"You're on. Now get dressed, if you please. I have plans."

Laughter and jeers met her announcement and Emma realized that, for the first time in a very long time, she felt as if her life just might actually work.

With a final look at her aunt busy pointing things out to the naked men piling up articles that could be salvaged, Emma grabbed T.J. by the hand and hauled him toward the van.

Vick opened the door and reached out to drag her into it by the arm. Emma started to object, but T.J.'s hand pushing her back stopped her. In this case, a strategic retreat was just the right speed.

T.J. scrambled into the van after her with far less grace than she would have expected making her bite back a laugh. Nothing like a brush with a pack of psychotic werewolves to shake even a playboy out of his grace.

Phil's voice called from the front of the van.

"Do we bolt or stay? I don't think they can get to us if we lock the doors. Auntie Anne won't let them come through the glass...I don't think, anyway."

His tone said he had more doubts than he wanted to own up to. Emma didn't blame him one iota.

"I vote go, if I have a say. Somewhere in all that chaos, the lady mentioned my bed and I've a mind to see it in one piece."

T.J.'s voice surprised her in its certainty. Considering what he had just been through, there was no wonder he wasn't feeling charitable to her relations.

Aunt Anne and Dexter? Emma wondered if the shock of it would ever wear off. Vick's chuckle warned her that the werewolves may be cowed by the powers that ruled, but he was another story.

"Really, Doc? Beds aren't all they're cracked up to be. It's all about position."

"Says the man that hasn't had his naked body pummeled by rabid shapeshifters on a whim."

"And a nice view it was, too."

Emma stepped in before the banter could turn ugly.

"Home, Phil, if you please? Aunt Anne will be able to find me when she's done here and I don't think I trust T.J. on his own until the fervor wears off. Noble's not one to let something he wants go so easily."

T.J.'s disgruntled look confused her. What had she said?

"You call that easy? Lady, they nearly..."

"Nothing. And I told you there would be consequences the next time you called me 'lady.' "

Vick chuckled and Phil wisely said nothing as he carefully backed the van up so he could turn it down the winding road that lead back to civilization.

"Watch out, Doc. Emma's got that look that says she's about to take you to task. I do hope you're up for it."

"Leave him alone, Vick."

"Or what? Going to run to Aunt Anne now that you've finally gotten that itch scratched?" Honey dripped from his tone, but Emma knew what he meant. Sometimes it helped to play the card up your sleeve.

"Well, no. I was more on the lines of making a phone call to a certain man who would be more than happy to come down and finish this conversation about bullying."

If a lady had to tattle, at least it helped to know who to tattle to for the most effect. Vick got the message and glared before he slung himself into the front seat to stare moodily out the window.

"Alone at last." T.J. said with a tone full of enough heat to make her shiver.

"I hardly call this alone." Her own tone was breathless as she turned her gaze to him.

The pair of jeans Noble had scavenged for him fit like a second skin. Sitting there with the faded rugby shirt in his lap and his bare feet poking out from the hem of the jeans, he looked like he'd walked through hell for her. In a way he had. She doubted that even her healing would prevent the scars from forming from the claw marks on his chest.

"A man learns to take what he can get when he starts walking on the wild side and dealing with witches and demons."

His laughter made her knees go weak and she was glad she was sitting down. Sliding closer to him, she touched the crusting gashes on his chest.

"Shapeshifter claws are notoriously hard on the skin. I don't think I'll be able to heal it."

His hand reached up to press hers against his skin.

"That's okay, sunshine. I needed a little manly scarring to mar my perfection."

Her gaze jerked to his and the humor she saw shining there belied the seriousness in his voice. Before she had a chance to form a witty reply, he leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

"Besides, it'll give you something to think about after we get back to my place. A little motivation never hurt anyone."

"Motivation? And, for the record, we're going to my place."

"Why?"

"Because I want my chance to take full advantage of you without worrying about whether or not your sister is going to interrupt. I've had enough interruptions to last a lifetime. Now, motivation?"

"Yeah. Motivation. The last time I gave you a good tumble, you exceeded your expectations. Who knows, maybe that just means I'll have to work a little harder..."

"Oh, cut it out already. We can hear you, you know. You're going to go home and make like bunnies. Must you paint us a picture?" Phil's exasperation made both of them smile and Emma couldn't resist taunting him.

"You're just jealous, Phil."



"Damn straight, so have a little mercy for those of us who will be going home to a cold shower."

Emma took pity on him and settled closer to T.J. He put his arm around her and leaned back against the side of the van. He closed his eyes, but the tension in his body never lessened.

She must have drifted off because she jerked upright to the sound of highway traffic. Her sudden movement brought T.J.'s eyes snapping open, too.

"Relax, you two. We're almost to your exit. We'll have you to bed before you know what hit you."

"Laugh it up, big guy."

The wince on T.J.'s face let her know exactly what he meant. A beating plus a nap sitting up against the wall of a moving van couldn't have felt good against his muscles. On impulse, she reached out and flung magic over him. He shivered and stared at her for a moment before letting out a long breath. Her gaze dropped to the furrows on his chest and she wondered if they looked just a tad bit better.

"Did you do that because you have ulterior motives or just because you wanted to be nice?"

"Can't it be both?"

His gaze heated and she found herself blushing under it.

"Put your shirt on before the neighbors think I've finally flipped my noggin and started picking up strippers."

Before the shirt settled comfortably over his head, Phil was turning off the interstate. The guard at the gate didn't even blink as he waved them through, obviously recognizing the van. Opening the door as soon as the van pulled up to her

townhouse, Emma jumped out and held out her hand to T.J. but her words were for her friends.

"Ya'll have fun and don't even think about calling me. I have plans."

T.J.'s grin told her that her plans had nothing on his. A random thought flittered through her mind that maybe, just maybe, relationships based on extreme situations might have a chance after all.

He jumped out of the van and closed the door behind him.

"Okay, sunshine. Take me to bed, abuse me, and let me sleep for a good long time before you repeat the process."

"My, my, Doc. You're demanding, aren't you?"

His gaze drifted down her rumpled clothes and he grinned.

"You have no idea, but if you play your cards right, you might before it's over."

Taking him by the hand, she led him up the stairs and into her townhouse to do just that.

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Kaye Chambers has led a wild life. With her college degree in hand, she set off on an adventure to find herself. She's soaked in the hot springs in Iceland in the middle of a blizzard, sat on a volcano to watch the magic of the Northern lights, stood on the coast in the eye of a hurricane, and been awed by ruins of pagan temples. Somewhere along the way, she found herself along with her wonderfully supportive husband. Marriage, children, and life went in a different direction and her personal goals went with off in another.

Finally, she decided it was time to return to those goals she'd left behind when she began her adventure all those years ago. Writing. With the new laptop her husband gave her for the effort, she hunkered down and found a writing group. This small group of women took her in hand, helped build her confidence, and encouraged her to do what her heart wanted her to. Finally, she started pounding out pages. When it was done, she had no idea what to do with it.

So, she started entering contests. Then she started revising...and entering more contests. Encouraged by the comments, she started submitting it out to publishers and agents while turning her hand to other projects.

Making friends along the way, she's beginning to see the results of her efforts. Come look into her Chamber of Secrets and share her vision of reality...

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Love at First Shot  
*by Kaye Chambers*

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