



A Silver Halloween Treat

MASQUERADE

Kayden McLeod

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Dedication

This one goes out to Stacey, who was the first person to read *Masquerade* after I had created it.

Trent, Brigit, Kristin and Cindy for always encouraging me, and being there when I needed them.

Finally, my reviewers at *Siren Book Reviews*, who stepped up to the plate and flourished wonderfully, and allowed me the time to write my first shape-shifter novella.

Chapter One

Nightmares always had a way of instilling fear, even in the bravest of folk.

Abigail knew, in theory, dreams every now and then meant something, but she had no clue how *this* scene pertained to her, short of giving her a healthy respect for her rambunctious subconscious.

It could have something to do with it being three days short of Halloween, a time when all sorts of monsters came out from under their self-imposed guises, to play under the light of the moon at midnight, the witching hour at its peak. Many of them celebrated this time of year, for good reason.

The possibilities of mischief and creating unimaginable havoc would be at their peak of power and potential, though she wouldn't know much about that.

Abigail wandered a decrepit graveyard, the kind people of today never saw anymore. The unevenly cut hills, gnarled live oaks, and chipped gravestones of varying heights and intricacies made her shiver in apprehension. It seemed her dream-self wasn't quite as courageous as her wakeful-self. Normally, she feared nothing, not even death. Yet the undeniable urge to cower in terror now hung over her head.

Abigail looked down to see she carried a single white rose tipped in fresh blood, a substance her subconscious mind told her she craved. This fact made little sense to her. She wasn't a vampire but something else entirely. She knew they existed and was even acquainted with a few of them, but even so, this fact didn't faze her terribly much as she continued up the unseen path.

A simple, formless black nightgown shrouded her body. Rocks littered the ground, cutting deeply into her bare feet. Her thigh brushed upon a roughly hacked-up tombstone, which sliced her clean open. The heavy, humid air filled with the sickly sweet scent of her life-fluid. Her teeth and gums ached painfully, as if her canines fought to extend. Why? What... or *whom* was she feeling?

It surely wasn't her. It couldn't be. While many traits of hers were unusual, this was not one of them.

Her gaze darted about. The oaks were winter-bare, even though it was merely fall. The branches dipped and reached into the nothingness of the icy cold night, curling toward her in a menacing fashion.

A shuffling and then a moan caused her to lift her head, but her body would not stop to properly assess the situation like she would at any other time. A moment later, the sound of something being ripped or torn caused a foreboding she could not escape.

Just what lay out there in the darkness, waiting while she was powerless to stop herself from just meandering into its grasp?

A piercing howl, not so much different than a wolf's but just enough that Abigail knew it wasn't an everyday animal, sent an excited thrill along her erect spine.

"Even in dreams, you're going crazy. You know that?" she said softly, unable to quite bring herself to speak at a normal volume for fear of disturbing the... dead? Why would she care about such things? Alas, she remained terrified of what resided *below* the ground.

The soil began to slope upward toward an old granite angel with half-extended wings. Its face, stance, everything about it seemed more sinister than angelic in the shadowy light thrown from the partially cloud-covered stars which lent little comfort to her.

The left arm looked sawed off, but as she grew closer, Abigail realized someone or *something* had snapped it, off leaving the edges not as clean as they appeared at first glance.

Abigail felt unstoppably drawn to the statue, like a magnet which pulled her bruised feet against her will. A trickle of wetness worked down her leg from the wound which throbbed with the rhythm of her heartbeat. Her breath came in ragged, hard-won gasps of terror when she

thought about the unseen adversary.

Something *did* watch her, semi-aware of her presence just as she was of it.

Stopping in front of the statue, she reached with her free hand to touch the saintly features staring out at her in warning.

Abigail wanted to turn back, to go back to where she'd come, though the likelihood of that was close to nil. The dream had begun *after* her entrance to this place. Therefore she didn't know how to get out, nor which way to turn and run if the need arose to maintain her safety. Her instincts screamed that specific allotment of time fast approached an end.

The guttural howl sounded again, far too close; near enough that every hair on her body rose to attention at the unnerving sound.

Panic froze Abigail's breath right there in her lungs. Her blood pounded through her at an alarming pace, giving her a headache and lending a hazy quality to the scene around her.

Then a figure stumbled from behind the nearest trunk, one so incredibly wide, it was no wonder how it hid this man — or what she thought to be a man.

When he saw her standing there, displayed so vulnerably beside the broken angel, the silhouette froze in

motion, foot not even touching the dead grass.

He snarled, gaze moving to the space on the ground at his side before cutting back to her. His quiescence seeped into Abigail, and she stood at *his* mercy. Not that there would be any. Not from him.

When he moved into the light, she shook in foreign cowardice. Somewhere, deep inside, Abigail knew him. It was truly impossible not to recognize him, even if her mind wouldn't bring up the facts associated with the creature before her.

He rushed into motion, leaping into the air. Abigail didn't so much as flinch when he landed in front of her, revealing a masquerade of 'human' flesh. Whatever this thing was, it had never been as such. It certainly wasn't like her.

His long, dull hair lay upon his shoulders, saturated with filth and leaves, falling around him in a disarray of stringy, dirty white. His red-rimmed blue eyes focused on Abigail and her alone, flickering with a predatory nature that grated against her own.

She felt as though he'd made a silent declaration while they maintained eye-contact, and somehow she knew he had claimed her in some form. In which context, though, she had no idea.

Something within her flared, sparked *back* into

being and reminded Abigail that she would never be weak or compliant. This time wouldn't be any different, dream or no.

"Abigail," he called. His shallow voice grated on her nerves. In the back of her mind, the possessiveness with which he said her name angered her.

Her eyes strayed to the rounded object in his hand, a gore-stained, severely mangled skull. With little room to doubt it could be an old bone dug from the ground, she cringed. She knew this because the chunks of flesh still attached were *fresh*, the bone beneath luminescent in the moonlight.

Next her gaze moved to the base of the tree, and she saw the decapitated corpse there. This entity must have killed and eaten parts of it — stripping it nearly bare before her arrival.

The man was a monster, no less.

The stained clothes were enough evidence of that fact. Its garb wasn't of this time but that of olden days long since gone — a parted shirt bared a blood-coated chest, broken up with ties of blue which held the material together upon ashen flesh, and tight-fitted pants flared over grimy, sodden boots.

This thing had made a real mess of its snack, something she would never do. Abigail had seen and done

a great many things in her life, but this had never been among them.

Run, damn it, run! she screamed at herself. *Make your feet work. Do you wish to end up like its past meal? Turn tail and get the hell out of here!*

The man began to speak in a language she ill understood — or perhaps he did in fact speak English, but his growls garbled it past recognition. Eventually, though, the words became clearer to her.

"Abigail, so beautiful," he said calmly, not looking in her direction, but at whatever lay behind her.

She backed up until she collided with the nearest tombstone, stupidly pleased she could finally move of her own accord and thinking herself safe. Surely now she could escape.

Wrong.

"Mine." He stared pointedly at her, and she sneered in response.

"I belong to no one," Abigail snapped. As usual, her tongue got the better of her.

His eyes narrowed on her. "I beg to differ, *moj ljub*. I want you, and I always get what I want."

His hypnotic eyes enraptured her, for a moment, looking past the gruesome image he represented and seeing just the man.

Distraction could be a bitch. In this case, that was a definite.

The dirt burst underneath Abigail's feet, spraying up to her knees. A bare-boned hand escaped the soil and grabbed her ankle in a painful grip, joints biting into her flesh as the second arm revealed itself from the swirl of dirt.

"Abby, you will never escape me."

She screamed.

Chapter Two

It had been three days since the prophetic dream, not that Abigail minded forgetting it almost the moment she'd awoken the morning after.

She had enough on her mind to fill at least three brains as it was.

Abigail rushed around because of her last minute preparations. Her best friend Dina, her only friend at that, followed her around at a similar pace. She also jotted down random observations, which were inserted into her friend's hurried speech about several things at once. And none were stated in any particular order. This was normal for the owner of Elegance, Inc. to the point that the few people allowed in her life expected nothing different.

"Decorations..."

"Done several days ago, but you know that. Now you're just being obsessive. Like every party you've handled before, this one will be a smash." Dina scribbled on her notepad nonetheless. Abigail felt it more a show for her own peace of mind than to appear busy.

Friends as good as they were knew those little nuances about one another. At least, one would think, wouldn't they? Abigail knew many undiscovered secrets lay between them, but they had quite the 'don't ask, don't

tell' policy.

"The tables and chairs we ordered, they are set up, aren't they? My, I didn't even phone to check..."

"Done this morning."

"Then why do I feel like we're missing something?" Abigail demanded.

Dina shrugged, obviously trying not to laugh. Both of them knew they hadn't gotten to where they were today as fast as they had without such eccentricities kept in the forefront of their minds at all times.

Abigail, and Dina under her, had begun the flourishing party-planning business a few years back, learning how to work together toward one goal: perfection. Neither would accept less at any time.

"We're going to be late," Abigail muttered, riffling through her normally spot-on memory for anything she'd overlooked. "Again."

"Already so, dear." Dina grabbed Abigail's jeweled clutch and the scarlet and black mask which would cover half of her face. She always looked out for her older companion in such ways, sometimes acting like her personal assistant without having to be asked. "Too late to do much about it."

"I would've forgotten that," Abigail said, honestly upset over a silly little thing. She never did anything so

asinine!

Why did her libido have to cause her this much trouble? It was one of those rare times she wished to be normal, that her cycle didn't affect her this much. But Abigail would never be so lucky. Her condition was irreversible.

Dina handed her the mask she planned to wear tonight, a requirement to attend the All Hallows Eve Masquerade Gala the Jerichos put on every year.

Especially an event of this magnitude, which Ada and Darwyn Jericho had bade *her* to create. Weeks of brainstorming and consultations with caterers and decorators had gone into this particular celebration. Dina and Abigail had prepared every last detail, enjoying one of those rare occasions when they had a 'sky's the limit' budget to do with as they saw fit.

Abigail grabbed her brand-new, red spiked heels with thin straps that wrapped crossways up her calves to her knees. They made her feel sexy, something she needed as of late, especially considering her 'condition'.

She was in sore need of a good romp in the sack, the reason why she'd chosen scarlet for her costume. The vibrant, eye-catching color complimented her deeply bronzed skin, emerald eyes and dark hair.

"Oh my, I really do love that dress," Dina

murmured, gently straightening the layered satin that bunched into abstract fabric roses starting at the waist and worked in a loose zigzag down the long train of the elaborate ball gown. Abigail had expensive taste and always had; the dress reflected this.

Not that Abigail worried over money. For instance her favorite red and black onyx jewel set, completed with antiqued silver, was worth just as much, if not more. The pieces were a carefully set spider-web design, placed over the smooth crimson gem of the locket, dangling earrings and a largely cut ring that fit over her black satin, elbow-length opera gloves.

The phone rang, and Dina went to answer it while Abigail picked up her heated curling iron to fix a few imperfect espresso ringlets that fell down to her waist, while the rest piled artfully on top of her head. Of course, she could afford a hairdresser, but Abigail enjoyed doing her own hair. Her natural red highlights glimmered in the soft light.

"Yes, yes," Dina said quickly, a Russian lilt leaking through her in— animation. Whoever was on the phone to inspire this in her normally unruffled friend? "She will be *right there*, and everything will be right as rain. I promise."

She hung up, her delicate fingers curled into claws, displaying her agitation.

"What?" Abigail turned, accidentally touching her neck with the iron and yelped.

"The caterer brought *lamb*," Dina said under her breath.

"They were supposed to bring prime-rib and lobster ravioli for the entrées," Abigail exclaimed with a thread of anger. "I did not order any such thing as *lamb*." The last word sounded like a profanity.

"Yes dear, I know. We must hurry, or Mr. Jericho will be very upset." Dina paled, taking in the bout of anger sizzling within Abigail, who stared back at her, knowing full well Abigail's unstable temper during her 'time'. Backtracking, she continued, "We will fix it. Do not fret. But..."

"But *what*?" Abigail demanded heatedly. Oh, how she hated that word. It always meant there would be more bad news.

"The musicians have not shown yet, let alone set up. Adrian and Ian are scurrying about trying to figure out something to entertain the guests in the meantime, but..."

Damn it! There it was again.

"Oh, I will fix them." Abigail snarled, feeling the bloodlust beat at her. The color of her eyes bled out a black so deep it rivaled the onyx. It didn't take much to set her off, and once that happened, there'd be hell to pay.

Such carnage would be easy for her to do,
especially being a werewolf.

Chapter Three

Cyrus stood at the bar drinking straight Crown Royal, the only way he wanted his Canadian whisky. To dare touch it with anything else other than ice was sacrilege. He'd thought this way since he'd first felt that special burn sliding so smoothly down his throat.

He surveyed the extravagance of the ballroom, from the empty pearl-white stage to the tables in the midst of being set with salads, breads and appetizers to the covered entrées that smelled so good to his sensitive nose, even from here. The darkly carrot-colored tablecloths highlighted the black dishware just waiting for someone to pick them up.

The meticulous pumpkins placed cleverly around the room were carved with absolute care, sitting in every available crevice. White and gold pillar candles littered several surfaces as far as the eye could see. The waiting staff were decked out in ebony black and burnt orange garb, their colorful masks depicting the feel of the season.

How could a masquerade ball have turned out better? Well, short of the band not showing yet and any other technical problems he didn't care to know about. However, Adrian had set up a decent sound system to play throughout the room to make up for the silence, and the

guests had barely noticed the difference.

Suddenly a familiar entity stood next to him, one which hadn't been there a second before. The life of a vampire had such frequent instances, and Cyrus had long since become used to it.

"A good turn out," Darwyn Jericho, one of two Leaders of the North Vancouver Coven of Vampires said causally.

Cyrus waited for the catch, some order that did not come— at least in that moment. He knew better than to put anything past his Leader, who possessed an odd sense of humor when it suited him, which was often.

"Dar, whenever you throw a party, there isn't an invitation that goes unnoticed or unheeded. You have every human political member, person of power, and anyone worth a damn in the entire Greater Vancouver area attending tonight," Cyrus replied, his Russian accent making his deep voice thrum with an erotic timbre women loved.

And he worked it to his every advantage.

"Well, really I must give credit to Abby. She knows how to plan a party."

The reminder about the party-planner responsible for everything around him bought on a whole new train of thought. Cyrus looked around for Dina and wondered what

had made her so late.

He tried to hide the annoyance, but Cyrus didn't quite manage. It was a rare occasion when he could actually have an excuse to see Dina without worrying over ridiculous little things such as who might see them together. This was a bed they had made themselves; now they had to lie in it.

Many enigmas revolved around the two, and this made them both rather paranoid. Most likely to the point that it exceeded what the situation called for, yet neither stopped pretending. No one suspected anything, given the fact most thought vampires and werewolves didn't get along in the first place.

How little did they know.

"But obviously Ms. Elegance, Inc. doesn't know how to keep the problems at bay."

"Bah!" Darwyn waved his attitude off. "I can promise you, upon Abigail's arrival, all will be set right immediately. She's garnered many contacts in this hobby business she's created, and all of them bend over backward for her. I just know she's already on the phone yelling at whomever she must to make this perfect, just as she has for every event she's done in the past."

"I have yet to meet your party goddess. I know she is a friend of Dina's, but other than that, not much."

"Oh, do you know Dina?" Darwyn latched on, and Cyrus winced.

"I have an acquaintance with her. It's a small town."

"Not that small. I wouldn't have figured you the type to associate with her... kind."

"And what type would that be?" Cyrus snapped, forcing Darwyn to raise a brow at the uncharacteristic insolence.

Just what he needed. Darwyn was nosey when he wanted to be, and until that point Cyrus had been especially careful, lest anyone find out he wasn't a regular vampire like so many at the gathering this evening. Something about the comment got to him, however. Of course Darwyn and Ada knew he was *different*— but they allowed him his secrecy because of his loyalty. He didn't need to give them any more reason to inquire about it.

Thankfully, or else he would have to move on to 'greener pastures'. No one could know who and what he was. If that happened, anarchy would take on a new meaning.

"No offense meant."

Cyrus sighed. "None taken. So then, tell me more about this party-planner. You seem fond of her."

"I am. But there isn't much to know, really. She's a territorial wolf."

And this explains what exactly? Then the information sunk in.

"A werewolf, you say?" Cyrus's ears perked up with interest. He didn't know there were other wolves in the Lower Mainland.

"Yes. Abigail approached Ada and I some time ago, asking for the right to live on our lands, mainly to hide from others of her kind. She doesn't want to be under any Alpha's rule and wishes to find her own way in life. As I said, she's territorial. Every time a stray mutt comes here, she slaughters it so it cannot move on to tell stories of an 'unclaimed' land with a she-wolf who inhabits and protects it. "

Cyrus stiffened. "Then why does she associate with Dina? She's a wolf."

"I haven't been able to figure that one out, and I've not asked. Dina is a very special case indeed, but I suppose we all need friends who understand us." Oh, Cyrus knew that well. Darwyn gazed at him strangely, obviously intrigued by his Coven member's interest. "It also helped that I asked Abigail to get along with her, but I never expected them to get on like this."

"And what if this Abigail causes problems for our Coven?" What he really wanted to know and couldn't outright ask was why Cyrus didn't know about her

existence. Surely she wasn't *that* good at hiding. He couldn't dispute she'd been kept under his radar. Dina had never mentioned Abigail past the fact they were friends and she was Dina's employer.

"She has sworn her allegiance to us, Cyrus. Any favor I ask is completed without qualm or question. It never matters what it is, and for that I will protect her this night and any other— as much as I can in the position I'm in."

"And what happens *this* particular night?"

"The Armstrong pack is here tonight."

"So? They're from Calgary and are only visiting here, under *your* jurisdiction and rules. How does that affect her?"

"Are you not listening? First off, Abigail doesn't know they're here— yet. And unlike most wolves that travel to Vancouver, they're a special case." Darwyn sighed. "During Abigail's migration here, she came through *their* territory, and they had— well, they didn't quite see eye to eye. The Alpha's son stumbled upon her and tried to claim her but failed miserably. He sees this as a slight and is determined to change Abby's mind."

Cyrus cringed. He knew werewolves and their traits all too well. A lone wolf would always be subject to a pack's law while in their turf. If Abigail had fought that, it could be grounds to kill or capture her, to force the she-

wolf into their way of being.

He thought of the implications this mess could pose to his current lifestyle, one which had taken much getting used to, and one he refused to give it up now that he had finally found peace.

Vampires could be terrible in their possessiveness; whether people, place or thing, the wolves took this to a whole other level of insanity. Abigail's practices and ideals were abnormal for any she-wolf, foreign even to him. So it was logical to assume it would be just as much to the Armstrongs, who would insist on treating her much like any male would a female. Subordinate just didn't quite cover it.

Cyrus had one goal in mind at the end of the day, and that was his own best interest. This meant the Jerichos had to stand and *stay* strong. He would do whatever he had to in order to see that happen.

"And what should the Coven watch out for?"

"That's the funny thing about interracial politics, Cyr. It isn't *supposed* to be our concern or business. And unless they make too much noise around humanity, there isn't anything in the conciliate law that states we can interfere. Any decency they extend is a show of respect to me and mine but no more. There isn't a legal binding. They have no government, for each pack is law, the only one."

Of course, Cyrus knew that far better than Darwyn did.

"What exactly happened between Abigail and the Armstrongs?" Cyrus worried over what the rival pack would do if they found Abigail unreceptive to any advances. If they shifted to their animal form and started ripping up the mansion, he would have to step in and kill if necessary before it affected humanity. He had little doubt the ruling brothers, Ian, Adrian, and Cole, would be right behind him.

"Sabern is used to the most timid females of the pack, but he had never encountered a lone female before or knew what it took for a woman to survive centuries without a family to back her up. Abigail is a very special lady, and it took her a lot to come to terms with it after she left her own pack in search of brighter horizons. But she pulled through and continues to do so. Abigail will *never* be tethered to some male with his head so far up his ass he coughs shit every time he speaks. Oh no, our wolf is another breed entirely." Cyrus had to fight laughter at that, but Darwyn continued, "For Sabern, it became a challenge. This is why they asked for an invitation to this party."

Cyrus growled, feeling the urge to pace back and forth and think this through, though he was denied the luxury.

"The full moon is tonight," Darwyn added the observation in a distant manner. "I wonder if that affects their kind in any way that would harm us."

"Not typically. The lunar cycle has little consequence to our— *their* lives" Cyrus swore in his head at his mistake in words. Darwyn smiled, and he knew his Leader had caught the slip.

Darwyn nodded but said nothing about it. "A full moon on All Hallows Eve, a time of dark magic, where the veil between the realms is lowered and all creatures of the earth are more powerful."

That little fact wouldn't help the Armstrongs but it would him. Most definitely. Cyrus wasn't the average, and he knew things that would terrify others. He had the feeling he'd need all of his vast knowledge this night. There was only one more thing he needed to press before he allowed the subject to float from his grasp.

"*Why* did you allow this mess so close to home?"

"Because Cyrus, now they're under *my* roof, where I can see the happenings, and not on the outskirts of the city, or even worse, in another Coven's territory where Canadian vampires are ill-equipped to deal with werewolf mentality."

"That's because most vampires don't know they exist."

"That they don't, my boy. That they don't."

* * * *

"Do you want to be fired? You know I can ruin your name in this town!" Abigail snapped into the phone.

Seated in the sleek black limo reserved for Abigail's personal use, Dina tried to keep her friend's raging temper in a semblance of balance before they arrived at the venue. Abigail knew she wasn't normally *quite* this bad, but her hormones had peaked at an all-time high, making any little thing which set her off all the more dramatic.

"It is too late, ma'am. You will have the lamb."

Abigail heard that undertone of 'so deal with it'. That didn't sit too well with a werewolf in heat, who was bitchy to the tenth degree because of it.

"Oh, no." Dina's face fell into her hands.

"You *did not* just ma'am me, you asinine, moronic child! I ordered this through Geneviève three weeks ago, and she always delivers. I demand to speak with her this instant. And if you know what's good for you, make it happen."

"I can't do that. Only important clients are to disturb her."

"I fall under that category. Let me guess, she put you in charge?"

"That would be correct, ma'am," the snotty little assistant purred into the phone, grating on Abigail's very last nerve.

"Do you understand who I am?"

"No, ma'am," the assistant replied with a 'who the hell cares' undercurrent.

Oh, how I wish to reach through the phone right this moment and choke the life from you... Blood pounded in Abigail's ears, and she knew her eyes would be completely black by this time. She breathed in through her mouth and out through her nose repeatedly. It didn't help. If anything, it worsened the need to kill the annoying little human.

When Abigail spoke again, she clearly displayed her supreme acting skills to perfection. "Dina, get the musicians on the phone right now, and find out where they are. I don't care if they're in Timbuktu, get them to that party."

The words hadn't even left her mouth before Dina's cell phone was out of her purse. Abigail felt her control all but perish again, and being so close to the Jericho mansion, she had come to terms with two things: rip this woman's head off fast *and* fix the dilemmas.

"Get your boss on the phone," Abigail repeated into the receiver, watching her nails extend and dig into her

knees right through her dress.

"I am sorry, ma'am, but my boss isn't available..."

If she heard that one more time, she refused to be held responsible for what she would do. Abigail knew beyond a doubt Geneviève always took her calls, no matter what time or day. And the owner of the catering company never just took off when there was an important event such as the Jericho's Gala.

"Make her available, *now*," Abigail said. "You will do as I tell you, right this instant, or it'll be the last thing you ever do—I will make it my life's number one goal to make yours a living hell on earth. That's a promise."

Then she heard the most angelic sound in the world.

"Who are you arguing with on the phone, Claire?" Geneviève asked in a syrupy sweet voice which held all the venom she expected of the gorgeously elegant woman who was her contact.

"The owner of Elegance, Inc. is not happy that she received the best lamb dish the chef has on his menu," the assistant said in a haughty voice, clearly expecting Geneviève to agree with her. "He didn't have time to fix what was ordered. We are simply too busy, so I gave him the okay so we could make all the booked events for this evening. Ms. Weber feels we should correct the mistake, and I have told her we just do not have the time."

"You are speaking to *Abigail* in such a way?
Woman, are you looking to get fired?"

The assistant stumbled over her words at the harsh reprimand but didn't get a single one out before Geneviève grabbed the phone, speaking before her mouth was anywhere near the receiver. "They gave you *lamb*?"

Abigail sighed. There would be instant restitution for the slight. "Yes! Of all the affairs to screw up for me, it had to be this one— and why do you have such insolence working for you?"

"Don't worry, Abby. This particular nuisance won't be working for me much longer."

Abigail smiled at that, but her irritation and hormones still reigned. It would definitely be a long night.

Chapter Four

"Deep breaths, dear. Geneviève is on her way, and the musicians will be here shortly. There isn't a thing to worry about, hear?" Dina said as they exited the limo in front of a house big enough to easily fit five normal sized houses inside of it.

Darwyn had always known how to live, and he'd taught her well. While Abigail had been rich most of her life, she'd rarely settled anywhere long enough to become established. She'd always been on the move, avoiding packs like the plague when she could, until she stumbled across British Columbia, a place bare of wolf and plentiful with vampires.

Even so, she still kept herself and her presence known on a slim-to-none basis. Abigail could not be found by other wolves if she was concealed under the heavy stench of bloodsuckers. She would always be loyal to the Jerichos for that gift of freedom.

"Don't forget your mask again, Abby. It's the rule of the masquerade ball, just as you set it." Dina offered her said object but stared at the bright full-moon shining like a beacon in the sky.

It seemed prophetic to both of them.

Abigail slipped on the jeweled mask, delicately

fitting it over her nose and under her eyes. It had been made especially for her. In fact, the entire ensemble was custom-made to suit her expensive and particular tastes.

She started to calm down, and felt her blood pressure slow. The threat of transformation skittered further and further away, but then her nostrils flared, as she scented the wind, and all that changed.

Dina's throat rumbled quietly. Her body whirled toward the house with her fingers curled into fists, nails extended. "Wolves."

Anywhere else in the world, one of their kind wouldn't question it. In Abigail's realm, the only wolf permitted here other than her was Dina. No one else would survive a single day past discovery. They didn't even possess the luxury of explanations. Abigail always had and always would 'shoot' to kill on sight.

Safer that way when one considered she could ill afford someone leaving to tell of women who wandered the earth alone without a clan to protect them. All too soon, there would be others sniffing out this place, and they *always* underestimated Abigail. One did not reach almost six thousand years of age without knowing a thing or two—or several hundred.

"Who?" Abigail asked more to herself than to her companion. "The numbers are far greater than just one."

Abigail sniffed again, dragging the long inhalation out over seconds. Almost like tasting wine, she sniffing it, before swishing in around in her mouth before swallowing. It allowed her to get the best feel for the full embodiment of taste, separate each ingredient and indentify each one.

Except this was far from a pleasant experience.

"The Armstrong clan, many of them. Not all, just the— males, I think," Abigail answered. "So very predictable that only the males came and the females stayed behind, along with the Alpha and his mates."

"That would be correct," Ada Jericho said from Abigail's side. Neither wolf jumped, or barely even reacted to the vampire's abrupt presence.

The Coven Leader had dressed in a flowing emerald green silk dress that tumbled around her to the pavestones of the drive. In her hand lay her feathered black mask on a thin stick she could hold in place, different than Abigail's self-fastening choice.

"Why are they here?" Abigail asked.

"For the party, of course. Though their underlining itinerary would most likely have to do with *you*, darling. They've been looking for an excuse for safe passage into our territory for some time now, knowing we do not bode outsiders well."

"Then why did you allow them in? Why not deny

them?" Abigail asked. She respected and loved this woman and knew well enough if the Armstrong pack was present, Ada and Darwyn had good reason for it.

"To deny them this, would be to incur their wrath and cunning." Ada stared at the house malevolently, and Abigail fully expected the entire place to burst into flames. It wasn't as if Ada's capabilities didn't cover such things. "They want you, Abby, if not this way, then another—perhaps when we're not watching so closely. We thought this the best route, for not even you can slaughter so many full grown werewolves."

"True." Abigail sighed and then stiffened. *Oh, this will be so bad.*

"What is it?" Ada looked around wearily, as if expecting a threat somewhere.

"Abby's in heat," Dina said softly. "They will smell it upon sighting her and will react like the animals they all are."

"Shit." Ada whirled toward Abigail, which made her dress spin out around her. "What should we do?"

"Nothing. Dar hired me to put on this party, and as the planner I have to be here to ensure everything goes smoothly. That's what I do, and I'll deal with whatever they throw at me, any way I must."

"Are you sure that's best?" Dina asked nervously.

"I'm a woman of my word, and I created this business based on that. I won't tarnish my reputation because some mutts invaded our territory, no matter their reasoning."

* * * *

Cyrus stood alone at the bar when Ada walked back into the party with Dina and the woman he now assumed to be the party-planner, Abigail.

He liked to think himself suave and not so easily ruffled, but that single moment in time proved both wrong. The moment he laid eyes on the she-wolf, he went weak in the knees and a fine sweat worked over his body.

And *that* was from across the room.

He stared at his hand which shook ever so slightly. To make matters worse, Ada made eye contact with him and smiled, making a beeline straight for him with the wolves in tow.

It would be a very rough night.

"Cyrus, may I introduce you to Abigail Weber, the party-planner," Ada said, her smooth voice revealing nothing of her increased heart-rate which pounded in *his* ears, signifying her anxiety.

He discreetly sniffed the air, but what he came up

with blew his mind. *The wolf is in heat*. When his mind filtered this information to him, his cock hardened, making him crave the party-planner like nothing else. The whiskey he treasured like a favored lover didn't even come close.

The worst impact to his libido had to be how Abigail reacted to him. Her breath shuddered into her lungs, heart thumping faster than Ada's. Her hand curled around her black clutch, holding it tightly to her stomach, right over her womb.

Cyrus was thrilled to know he wasn't the only one affected.

Her exquisite beauty rivaled and surpassed any female in the room, regardless of race. Even with her mask covering the top half of her face, he could still see the perfect lines of her face— and her body was enough to drive the sanest man mad.

"Hello, *milyi*," he replied softly, and he swore she sighed at the sound of his voice.

"Ahh, Cyr, such a charmer." Dina smiled gratefully.

Dina knew something he didn't, though this didn't surprise him. This was a normal occurrence, one he had long since accustomed himself to experiencing. She was a strange animal to say the least, but that was his Dina.

"You know him?" Abigail whispered to her friend.

"Very well. We have known each other for *years*."

Dina didn't meet her eyes when she said it. Protecting him no doubt, as much as herself.

"Cyrus, I highly recommend you ask our Abby for a dance," Ada said— an order under the guise of a request. *"And keep an eye on our new friends. This most recent development, I am sure you have noticed by the state of your pants, has not gone undetected by them. I was foolish enough, not taking into account her going into heat. It will spur them on even more."*

"Then kick them out."

"Cyr, the point of knowing what they do, and when they do it is still important to me. Abigail will fight to the death for her territory. And I outright refuse to leave her alone for this coming battle. Sabern wants her, badly. I can smell it on him. And while Abby is a strong wolf, she can't take them all on, even though she will without thought or question. And if they threaten us, she will lay her life down in protecting our Coven for taking her in. I cannot stand that thought. I know there is much about your past life you have not told us, and I will not pry now, but I have a feeling you are capable of adequately defending her."

Now that was definitely true. He looked Dina in the eye over Abigail's head, seeing the cold expression she hid from everyone else, the feel of friendliness leaving her for a brief moment. Dina had full intentions of protecting

Abigail. She cherished this rare, real friend in her life, and what these vampires didn't know about his long-time companion could and would kill the rival pack.

The same could be said about him.

What was his *real* name?

Nikolay Rostovtzeff. The ex-Alpha of the only werewolf pack of Russia. He was a self-exiled wolf, turned part vampire by an Original Cursed One some two-thousand years before.

That Cursed One was Alexandra Sergeyev, better known today as Dina to anyone who mattered enough to know her at all.

Together they were a breed unto themselves. A breed no one but them knew existed. However, he had a feeling tonight that would change.

And anything they did would be to keep Abigail alive.

Chapter Five

Abigail had to admit in the safety of her own mind Cyrus wasn't what everyone thought him to be.

Now what that would be, she had no idea.

The second thing she had to admit was he turned her on like nothing else ever had. Perhaps it was her cycle at its climax making her wish he would touch her, even upon just meeting him, but she sensed it was something more than just that.

Her animal instincts were clawing at her, making her want to crawl up his body when he called her the Russian endearment of darling. Abigail didn't know the language, but she knew enough from Dina who often spoke in both languages. It had confused her when she'd asked her friend if she had been born in Russia. The response had been blatant and quick no, quickly ending any further inquiry. Abigail hadn't pushed, though most times Dina spoke English fluently with no discernable accent except when angered or overly excited.

However, Cyrus was indisputably Russian— she could hear and see it in him. Especially with his long, straight blond hair and stunning, lucent blue eyes which remained uncovered by any mask. They pierced her soul and hypnotized her; a perfect, sensual creature if she'd ever

seen one.

"Would you care to dance with me, *kotyonok*? It really would be my pleasure to escort such a beautiful lady across the floor."

Oh my, did he have to be charismatic too?

"Yes, I would like that very much," Abigail responded. Her breath stopped again when he reached for her hand in a soft yet firm grip and brought it to his plush lips. The tips of his day-old beard brushed her sensitive skin and sent a zinging sensation through her nervous-system, putting her libido into absolute hyper-drive.

I need to get laid like nobody's business.

When had been the last time she'd allowed a male to touch her? A decade? Two? Regardless, it had been too long. Whenever she finally relinquished the primal need and gave it freedom, it was always a one-nighter. A wham-bam, thank you mister, sort of thing. Oh yes, her brothers and their harems had taught her well before leaving the family pack countless millennia ago. This mentality had served her well, very well. Abigail would continue to do so.

And now, her sights were set on Cyrus. And she *always* got what she wanted.

She had little doubt he would blow her mind, and her, his.

* * * *

Cyrus would have Abigail.

His cock pulsed in his pants. It pressed against the generous material, and he made no move to hide it, especially when her eyes strayed there often.

His matching suit jacket lay unfastened over a cream silk shirt with the top two buttons left undone. This now seemed a smart choice with his body heating with her resting against his chest. Abigail was a perfect fit; her curves molded to his like she'd always been there. Such temptation, the likes of which he could never conceive.

Her delicate yet wild scent tantalized him. He could already see why Sabern wanted her so much. For tonight that was too bad, even though he had the unavoidable feeling it would be far longer than just that. He'd already staked his claim, just as much as the she-wolf in his arms had hers. That was unmistakable. "You did a wonderful job with the party."

Abigail sighed, her full, luscious breasts heaving for him, pushing against the strapless gown he quite simply adored on a figure as flourishing as hers. "They screwed up the menu and music, though. Two problems! Two. That's horrid."

"And did you fix these occurrences?"

"Yes. The band is due within the next fifteen minutes if not sooner, and the owner of the catering shop promises me she will be here with what my client ordered pronto, or there will be hell to pay." Abigail snarled again under her breath, eyes burning with anger.

Being surrounded by wolves set her on the constant defensive, but at the end of the day, they wouldn't matter. Despite the differences in law between vampire and wolf, he had the best of both worlds. Being a seven-thousand year old creature born of the animal and infused of the stuff monsters were made out of, and then add in his proficiency with black magic— well, he made one hell of an enemy with so many weapons at his disposal.

Cyrus became distracted by the feel of the satin under his hands. Both the woman and the dress. Damn, she felt *so* smooth. Did she really have to drive him wild with that heated, horny expression so few women wore as well as she did? Abigail embodied bold and daring, and he *really* liked that.

Timidity didn't touch this wolf, and he doubted it ever would. That made the man interested in her as more than just as a sex-toy, as he normally chose his partners. He had known her all of fifteen minutes, and he was already done.

Could he get away with kissing her— stealing her

lips with his, rolling his tongue with hers until they both couldn't handle it anymore and were forced to find seclusion?

Just as his head tilted forward to do just that, they were rudely interrupted.

"Can I cut in?" a smooth voice inserted into their dazed, personal world.

Cyrus twirled Abigail away and to the side automatically, having no intention of letting this one go.

Ever.

* * * *

Cyrus's lip curled back over his teeth, blue eyes darkened to a blackish-blue— an all too familiar trait to Abigail. A wolf threatening to change form. But he was a vampire. He reeked of it. Didn't he?

Could she trust her own senses?

A vampire's eyes filled with blood when angered, and no hint of it teased his gaze. It justified her assumption that this man was not what people thought.

Abigail sniffed a long inhalation and still smelled nothing amiss, though with growing urgency, she *sensed* something just out of reach. Sight told her nothing other than his feral expression turned her on even more. This

dominant display only made her want him more, if that were possible. This strange reaction to something she typically found annoying in others didn't so much as faze her. Strange.

"No, you cannot, I am afraid this one is *mine*."

Cyrus's arm tightened around Abigail's waist, crushing her to him.

Her breasts mashed against his side, heaving as his body went on the defensive. Sabern snarled, but it didn't do a lick of good. He'd picked the wrong vampire to tangle with. This Abigail knew.

It wasn't a show. Cyrus didn't pretend. He had bloodlust in his eyes, and when Abigail turned to Sabern, so did she. "You heard the man, take a hike. I'm *taken*."

"The hell you are! I came here for you. And I will make sure I collect what I am *owed*." Sabern's dead black eyes held no white to speak of, showing her what little control he had.

Good. That made two of them.

Surely he couldn't be this idiotic! Several hundred humans surrounded them, and the unspoken rules clearly stated to avoid blatant shows of what they were.

A question teased her mind. Could she kill him if the need arose without detection of both the humans and his pack-mates? She had little doubt she could, especially with

him being the much younger wolf and having little experience. But their location and situation bothered her. For once in her long life, she *cared* about such things.

But then again, on further consideration, the vampires could control the minds of the humans dancing and milling around them. But it wasn't very respectful to stain their immaculate white marble flooring with the mutt's blood. Was it?

Regardless, Abigail smiled in satisfaction at the fantasy, wanting, needing to do it. Of course the rest of the pack began to close in and reveal themselves in the swelling crowds.

However, they weren't the only ones.

And with them, the brawl drew closer.

Chapter Six

The Jericho Coven as a whole surrounded them from all sides, dead gazes all falling on the Armstrongs while the humans remained oblivious. This made the wolves nervous, and with good reason.

The vampires were well known for brutality and cold-hearted decisions that made the wolves look like children at play. The race held abilities wolves would never see, and had no little comprehension of the manipulation of energy and the use of magic. While the animals were capable of it in a much weaker degree, just as humanity could be, their kind rarely had the patience to learn it.

"I highly recommend you leave my Coven member and guest alone, now," Ada said both quietly and malevolently, stepping between them.

Cyrus smiled with long, sharp fangs painfully evident in his mouth. They caught and held the wolves' attention. His Leader knew damned well he was about to strike, and screw the consequences. Playing referee and preventing chaos came with a Leader's job description.

Ada might not have a clue in regard to what he was, but she knew enough to fear what he was capable of.

"And what will you do about it? I stake my claim here, Mrs. Jericho, and there isn't anything you or your

government can do to me. It is our pack law," Sabern murmured smoothly, the epitome of fake refinement now.

"I can't do anything?" Ada planted her hands on her hips in defiance. Oh woe to those stupid enough to oppose her will in her own house. "Not a thing?"

"No, ma'am," Sabern replied with relish.

At this point, Cyrus had heard enough. No one, and he meant no one, spoke to his Leader and dear friend like this. He wouldn't stand for it. He gently kissed Abigail's hand and moved away. She lifted a brow, clearly wondering what would happen next.

"No, there isn't." Cyrus stepped around Ada, looking at no one. "But there is much I can do, *volk*."

"Your government won't let you. Vampires have no business in pack issues," Sabern snapped viciously.

"And who, pray tell, told you I was a vampire? Or that the Council ruled *my* actions?"

"You belong to their Coven."

"And that means I am a vampire? I pledged my alliance to them for taking me in, but nothing more. I am no more ruled by their law than Abigail is. Am I, Ada?"

"That is true," Ada said quietly, ignoring several sharp looks from her members congregated around them. The vampire Council, their government, didn't even know of his existence, not really. He'd asked Ada for that, and

she'd allowed it.

"Then what are you?" Sabern demanded.

Dina stepped up beside her companion with black eyes and a cold smile. "He's a wolf. What else? Smell him, *really* smell him— doesn't his scent seem off to you? Look at his eyes— don't they seem different than the vampiric kind and more like us?"

Sabern's gaze flitted back and forth between them, confusion evident on his face, but of course none of this meant anything to him. "I don't understand."

"Of course you don't. No one ever does. But allow me, sir, to enlighten you some," purred Dina. "To enlighten all to those who dare come after my dear friend, who is now protected by the strongest wolf among us. But first, I beg a question."

"What would that be?" Ada asked wearily. She did not like these happenings, not one bit.

"Am *I* a wolf?"

Every vampire and animal stilled, carefully debating that inquiry. A strange, but very apt one. Perhaps, by the end of this, they would see the differences between Cyrus and Dina, and then, *them*.

"Yes, you are," Abigail answered first, but before she'd thought it through, only relying on what she'd known, not what she was about to find out.

Dina closed her eyes and whispered a spell backward, releasing the energy from her form until her body shed the 'camouflage'. Unlike Cyrus, she didn't have the natural luxury of concealment *his* mixture allowed. Hers required a constant maintenance to hide what she was. The two of them were opposites of sorts.

Ada hissed and leapt back toward her mate. "A first!"

Darwyn laughed, a full throaty sound of amusement. "An Original Cursed One, a first of our kind—converted to a werewolf!" He slapped his knee. His chuckle expanded to his Coven, but their laughter was far more nervous than his. "How can this be?"

Dina turned to him with a brilliant smile, fangs and all. "You see, when I was born to this existence, I didn't understand it or my brethren, and quite frankly lost my way both literally and figuratively. I travelled through to the harsh winters of Russia, near death and weak from my long journey, making me ill-equipped to handle the situation when I stumbled across Cyrus some two-thousand years past. We didn't know what the other could be, and our instincts told us to attack the other. The only thing neither accounted for during the brawl was blood transfusion between two powerful races through the wounds we'd sustained." Dina seemed to leave it at that, but her audience

was enraptured. Dramatics had a good home with her.

"And what happened?" Ada implored Dina to continue.

"We transformed into a montage half-breed of sorts, though we are by no means a matching pair, having different bases before conversion. For you wolves, vampires are like leeches, you see, becoming whatever they eat. And my birth blood will transform anything to vampirism or a variation of it, similar to how you can convert a human to become a werewolf. When mixed together, it is only a matter of *what* that thing becomes when the conversion is finished."

"So what does that make you then?" Darwyn asked Cyrus, who just smiled.

"A surprise."

"I thought wolves and vampires hated each other," Sabern said stupidly, obviously not seeing the sufficient proof of the contrary around him. "Yet you're still here, together? How did that come to be?"

Dina looked toward Cyrus, leaving the decision of how many revelations had to be made for the sake of Abigail and her near future. He just prayed that giving himself up would actually help her. Short of killing them, he didn't know of another option. Not that he opposed the murders, but that fact had to be left up to Ada— for now.

She was who he spoke to now, not the mutt who'd asked the question.

"A great many days passed while the blood of wolf and vampire warred for dominance within us, altering us in two separate ways. Dina and I realized while lying in feet upon feet of snow, exhausted from the fight and shift, we were alone because of what had transpired. The best way to explain it— we learned to get along in a world in which we no longer belonged."

Dina no longer resented him for forcing this life on her, though there'd been a time she had. That fact made him so happy, because she was all he had now.

"I had no place in life before that confrontation with Cyrus. No purpose or real knowledge of what I was, or what I'd become. Neither did he, and that put us on a level playing field. We helped each other, dealt with the other through good and bad. And much bad came for us, fusing us together for eternity. Shortly following our conversion, we had to deal with the present and cut ties with it. Cyrus was the Alpha of his pack and had to make the hard decision of leaving everything he'd known behind to avoid anyone finding out what had emerged that day."

"Wait— you're Russian," Sabern stated the obvious and watched Cyrus stiffen. He'd known this moment would come when the conversation had begun. "There is only *one*

pack in Russia and has been for as long as anyone can remember. The present one is the son of the deceased Alpha..."

"Nikolay Rostovtzeff," Abigail finished for him. "He left his pack unannounced or died, no one knew which. He was never seen again in two thousand years. His son picked up where he left off and hasn't been removed since."

"That is true," Cyrus replied. "But I'm not him—any longer." That was true. No longer the power-hungry wolf who scoured tombs to find new ways to branch out and take over more land, killing packs where he found them to spread out, keeping prisoners to quickly enlarge his numbers to the hundreds— and his son had done him proud in that regard. They were still strong and indestructible.

"Wait! There was more to it— a woman he left with." Abigail paused, gaze raking over her friend. "Dina, *you're* Alexandra Sergeyev, the sorceress who bewitched him?" she exclaimed, the quickly moving emotions flitting across her face as she went through werewolf history.

Dina nodded. "One and the same, but I bewitched no one." She turned back to a very stumped Sabern. "Let it be known, the legend himself has made his claim, and it is your *duty* to step aside. I know the laws of your pack well. Do you want to know why? As a vampire by nature aided with the blood of a wolf, I can read your minds in a way

normal vampires cannot."

Fury sparkled in Sabern's eyes, and Cyrus knew it wouldn't be that simple. When the mutt stepped toward Dina, he moved between him and his friend. Sabern's lip curled back, but he paused wearily, nostrils flaring as he debated the intelligence of coming up against Cyrus.

"This doesn't stop me. Nikolay gave up his rights as a wolf to embrace his vampire side. That means he has no place in this. Abigail is purely an animal, as I am. We have not forsaken what we are, and that makes her subject to our rule, not his." Sabern stared down Cyrus. "I reject your claim. It has no place among our business. Stay out of it."

"Then it is your death," Cyrus stated.

"No, it is yours." Sabern moronically leapt at him, forcing Dina to react on impulse.

Dina pushed power at him, and his body froze in midair for a moment. She flicked a finger, which sent him flying back into his brethren, but not even that stopped him and he tumbled head over heels. On his feet in an instant, he charged, and Cyrus was there to meet him.

"Did you really think it would be that easy?" Cyrus snarled in Sabern's face and gripped his throat in a stranglehold.

Sabern's hand came up to cold-clock him in the temple, but the vampire-wolf didn't even flinch. Out of the

corner of his eye, Cyrus watched Abigail wince, yet watching with a lustful expression mixed with violence, something the she-wolf knew and respected. Their existence wasn't for the faint of heart.

His hand tightened even more, and he felt the pulse beat against his fingertips. Temptation filled Cyrus to just kill him right then and end it, but how would that impact his Coven who shielded him? Would the Armstrong Alpha come after *them*, when Sabern had barely scratched the surface of justifiable cause? Not that the animal recognized it often, but being the Alpha's heir might fuel the decision for vengeance upon his friends, and not just him. He couldn't risk that unless absolutely necessary.

To prevent the enticement, Cyrus threw the mutt from him, and Sabern fell to the marble on his side, sliding several feet away from them.

"Now that the macho display is finished, I believe Cyrus should take his woman away, where we can discuss this at further length, *alone*," Dina said sharply, knowing Sabern had an argument while he tried to get up but fell back to the ground in short order, looking unwell.

"I think that is the best idea I have heard tonight." Cyrus twisted his upper body to face Abigail. "My lady, what say you?"

"I believe I have had enough of the present

company," Abigail answered, looking him square in the eye.

Interesting. Cyrus doubted he'd frightened her in the least.

* * * *

Cyrus reached behind him without looking, and threaded her arm through his as he headed through the French doors that lead into the secluded hallway.

Her mind spilt between the touch of the man, and the bastard to chase after her. What arrogance! To think she would ever want Sabern— hadn't she made herself perfectly clear in Alberta when she decked him for just touching her? Or the fact that she'd fled the Prairies shortly afterward, looking for better accommodations, never to return? Sabern had tracked her to British Columbia. How, Abigail didn't know, but it didn't really matter now. He and his friends were here, already causing trouble.

"You are really *the* Russian Alpha? Or was that just a ruse to scare them off?" Abigail asked softly. "I have seen Dina pull some pretty crazy stunts when painted into a corner,"

She wished for the answer to be none other than yes. It could be the only thing that would force them to

back off, and Abigail knew it. At least if they were intelligent.

Normally she just killed the threat, but as the minutes pushed on, she seriously doubted she could attempt such a massacre without getting herself killed or captured. If not, they would return home only to come back with more of them to finish off the job. They could force her will with those high numbers at Sabern's back. And Abigail, the lone wolf she had made herself, would be nearly defenseless— unless...

Cyrus abruptly whirled on her, but she didn't react. He could be so wild, and now that she looked, she could see the trademark wolf shape of his eyes, the slightly off way the pupils stood in the sea of blue. She could tell, even though it was tied at the back of his head, his hair was thicker than most humans', more luxurious and shiny, like hers.

"What would you believe, *kotyonok*?"

"Well, first off I find it interesting that you endear me with 'kitten' while I am a wolf. Secondly, yes I do believe you're the one mama wolves tell scary stories about to keep their pups in line. You aren't normal for a vampire. Even the way you move isn't a thing like them. It makes total sense that you'd be a vampire-wolf. And while I believe it, to even contemplate that you are Nikolay is truly

mind-boggling. Everyone thinks you're dead!"

"I preferred to keep it that way. I am not the same animal anymore. I'm a new man with new wants and needs."

"Which are?"

"To be left alone. Even now, if my pack found out I still lived, they would want me to return and rule them as I always had. But Alexandra showed me a different side to life, one I wanted. I see everything differently now," Cyrus said so sadly, it made her heart clench.

"Then why reveal yourself so suddenly?"

"To protect you."

Even though it mirrored her hopes, Abigail still had to question this, never used to any sort of help from anyone, let alone strangers. "Why? Why endanger yourself for a petty problem such as this?"

"To me, freedom, your continued survival *as you want it*, means more to me than my secrecy."

"I don't understand why you would do that for me. You just met me..."

"Somehow you befriended Ada, Darwyn and Dina. And that's no small feat. To me this speaks volumes. You attract my attention in ways no other has been able to. Do not mistake me, Abigail. I am mostly, if not all, animal even still. I do not think in vampiric or human terms, and

that means I work on instinct alone. I want *you*, and I know this. That's enough for me. And for that, I will protect you from the menaces which threaten your peace of mind."

Abigail knew enough of the legends and myth surrounding this animal and was able to wade through the bullshit and see the truth beneath it. Nikolay, or Cyrus if you will, was a tired man. She knew the mentality in which he spoke. She really did. It was why she stayed here in North Vancouver, disposing of those who would disrupt her newfound way. To be happy and content with who she was and not running about from place to place having to fight for her own ground to stand on every single day, now only every other. Cyrus was the same as her.

She saw that same emotion and need in him. Abigail couldn't tell his experiences or back-story to the man he was today, none other than what he'd spoken of. But they were akin. The same went for Dina— Alexandra. It didn't matter what her friend had been born or named as but only what she encompassed *now*.

Abigail's heart truly swelled for the first time in centuries when it came to these two lonely people, who could be in a crowded room and have nothing or no one who understood them.

So, she did the only thing she knew to do.

Abigail kissed her legendary animal with

compassion and passion in equal measure. His response was immediate and death-defying to her. She would've done anything to get more of him.

And he all too happily obliged.

Chapter Seven

Cyrus growled savagely, feeling her skin heat under his hands.

Abigail allowed him to press her body against the wall as he ripped off her mask and threw it over his shoulder. He wished to just rip off the dress, but Cyrus doubted he would get away with the destruction of her expensive silken gown.

She pulled back from him, staring up at him with eyes that snapped with adoring fire, making his heart race. The height of her cycle shone through them, making him yearn in a way he hadn't felt in over two thousand years. Cyrus felt closer to her than he had dared to be with anyone in just as long, and for once he didn't mind in the least.

There had been a day when he'd craved all women who came to his bed, but as Alpha he'd never taken a proper mate. Cyrus had bred with several, just as his son did now in his stead. To be tethered to one female when in charge of so many wasn't wise when it came to a male wolf challenging the throne and the chance they stood at winning. Oh no, having as many 'heirs' as possible would be key, especially if full grown enough to help in the defense of their *rightful* position. It was their law, a failsafe to keeping the 'crown'.

Yes, he had cared for and loved them in his own way—it had been nothing above that. And despite it all, after these many years, he yearned for this she-wolf in a way he hadn't *any* of them. None had possessed her fire and grace in equal measure, not her eternal beauty and sex-appeal.

Abigail beckoned to him. Not intentionally of course, but something deep inside of her, a trait or something like it, made her instantaneously endearing to him. It would be idiotic to ignore the lulling pull of this wolf.

They looked at each other for long, silent moments. His whirling emotions were mirrored in her eyes, even the confusion at feeling such things. It gave him hope that Abigail might have the same sentiment.

"I want you," she whispered, a thread of sound that wrapped around his cock in a stranglehold.

Cyrus fully understood that before she'd said it, but the words held a fathomless meaning, filling him with joy and possessiveness the likes he barely conceived. He couldn't stand not having her right *this* instant, to be buried deep inside of her, kissing her—making her moan out his name while making her come.

But it remained to be seen if she could let him under the full skirt that trailed to the marble floor so beautifully,

accenting her ample figure, which begged to be touched—by him. Stupidly, he thought of Sabern touching her.

The thought of any other man, especially that Armstrong mongrel, induced immediate bloodlust fantasies he would make damned good on. This idea alone made his lip curl back over his teeth, and a low growl escaped his throat that made Abigail's eyes heat even more.

Abigail was *his*. She wanted him. Cyrus could see it, and it only made his need worse. Same as the wolf, he would know something like this automatically and not have to spend weeks or months debating. It was the animal, the best and worst part of them.

"Please, Cyrus?"

"You have me, *milyi*. I am nowhere else, but with you."

"I know." She looked at his chest, when he wanted nothing more than to maintain eye contact with her.

Cyrus's fingers slipped under her chin, bringing her face back up to kiss her more thoroughly. He smelled her with his finely tuned sense, sinking into her curves and cherishing every one of them when he could finally run his tongue along them.

He picked her up by the waist to place her on the granite topped wooden cabinet against the wall, unable to hold back anymore, knowing she would not deny him this.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked, the spark flaring in her eyes and telling him the story of the fantasies going on behind them.

"Mmm, to taste *other* parts of you." Cyrus pushed at the heavy skirts, reminded of days of old when women knew how to dress properly, unlike nowadays. He favored this garb she wore and sensed red was a commonly used color with her, which suited him fine. With her creamy complexion and dark curls, it set off everything else elegantly and tastefully. Another concept the modern day woman overlooked.

Finally getting the material to her hips, he groaned at the sight of her bare sex. He loved to imagine that while Abigail had been dressing, she'd known going panty-less would drive *him* nuts. "A vixen."

"As if you aren't lethal on the senses," Abigail murmured, breath hitching when he smiled suavely.

"Only when it suits me, sweet. And you, *definitely* suit me."

Cyrus kissed her inner thigh, moving up as Abigail shifted back and forth, impatient for him.

* * * *

*Will he ever get that blessed tongue where I need it?
He might kill me before he's through.*

Said tongue swirled around in circles up her thigh, making her squirm. Daresay, Abigail was ticklish, but she would be damned if that particular nuisance in her genetic makeup would be revealed to a wolf such as Nikolay Rostovtzeff. She'd rather die first.

As he reached her apex, her thighs widened without thought, hands hiking the skirts further up her legs so she could watch him lick her with an unobstructed view. Her womb clenched, tightened— and she couldn't help but wonder how much of this she could take before outright begging him to fill her.

He continued to tease her, getting almost there before pulling back again. Abigail growled, inducing a dazzling smile from him. Waiting with bated breath, she suspected the world could explode around them and she wouldn't even look away.

Cyrus's mouth finally closed over Abigail, and her back arched at the feel of him, shoulders pressing against the walls for leverage when his teeth gently pulled her clit, tongue just entering her between while he sucked over and over again.

Abigail moaned loudly, not caring who heard, if anyone could have over the five-piece band now playing on the other side of the wall. She hadn't even noticed their arrival until that moment, a rare lapse in attention to her

job. This showed how much Cyrus enraptured her. Time meant nothing to them as he tongued her, not a care in the world, and he was in no hurry to finish. Abigail's body moved helplessly with the strokes he so skillfully gave her, losing herself in each one.

Abigail's hand caught in his long white hair, bunching tightly until he groaned, telling of his like for this. Unlike most wolves, he seemed to revel in the dominant nature she'd repressed for so many years before learning how to live with it and allow it to flourish. She just wasn't the timid 'do as I say' type of woman. Never would be.

"Damn..." Abigail's hips rocked against his mouth, allowing the friction to drag her closer to orgasm. The heavy heat spread in her womb and made her thighs which clutched his head weaken under the onslaught of his talent. "Yes... just like that..."

Abigail had to admit to shock at even having the capability of speech. His obvious excitement of pleasuring her grew to unimaginable proportions, infecting her. His hands slipped under her legs and curled on her upper thighs to try and get closer as he took more of her into the warmth of his wicked mouth.

And then she came in a blaze of heat that sucked her into an oblivion she'd never known.

* * * *

Cyrus went out of his mind with need so precise his cock ached. While Abigail orgasmed above him, the erotic movements of her body incited him further. His head left the space between her thighs and loomed above her.

He couldn't deny anything Abigail asked of him. The utter excellence she presented to him would drive him to new heights to indulge her every fantasy. She made him feel things he *wanted* to feel, hadn't in so long and never wanted to stop. Abigail knew who he was and still stayed here with him.

An expected and welcomed gift he could ill explain in words that would ever make sense to her, most likely to him as well.

When Abigail looked at him, her gaze was unlike the average she-wolf's. There'd never be begging to be found. She *demand*ed of him. This creature was contrary to any woman he had ever been with, and to say it turned him on embodied understatement.

Cyrus adored how Abigail took what she wanted when she wanted it; no questions asked. None needed. He would gladly be on his knees for her, to plead with Abigail, just to be inside of her. Cyrus pulled his silk shirt from his pants, undoing the belt and button to release him for her

inquisitive inspection. The flush high in her cheeks had his shaft bouncing in anticipation.

He too didn't care for underwear, and from the sight of her, Abigail appreciated the gesture. His cock throbbed, a constant reminder of the need of her. "Abby..."

"Hmmm?" Her soft, alluring voice almost pushed him over the edge of his control.

Almost.

"Do you want me inside of you?"

"Oh yes."

"How much? *Tell me.*"

Underestimating her again, he expected her to blush, but Abigail was above such feminine motions.

"Cyrus." She took hold of him and ran her long French manicure up his length. "There isn't anything I want more than to feel your hardness entering me, filling and stretching, to sink so deep inside of me, to feel your balls slapping my ass as you fuck me."

All right, so control is overrated, he told himself.

He moved her leg and flung it over his shoulder, complete with a spiked heel that made her delicately muscled ligament seem impossibly longer and sexier. His fingers worked over the heel to the tip of her shoe, while she led his cock to where it *belonged*.

Cyrus couldn't shake the possessiveness. The head

of his cock passed her tight folds, and nothing could've been better. Blood pounded in his ears as he fought to take his time. Not small by any stretch of the imagination, he tried to be careful, really he did, but his dear Abigail had other plans.

"Mmm, so good." Abigail's hips pushed toward him and took all of him, wrapping him up with her exquisite warmth. Muscles clamped down, and he had to fight himself not to give in to his body's needs so soon after his entrance.

He buried himself balls deep back inside of her, which induced them to groans of pleasure, which were music to his ears.

"I love how tight you are..." Cyrus murmured. He moved his hand behind her back, pulling her to the very edge of the counter and lifting her off of it. Abigail slung her one free leg around his waist, fitting herself to him.

In this position Abigail opened beautifully, allowing for the maximum penetration, and yet still remaining vulnerable to him. Her arms met around him, making it easy to bend his neck to kiss her, which allowed the she-wolf to taste herself on his lips while her body sublimely milked him.

How can I possibly last?

Just as he thought that, her channel maddeningly

tightened, her increasingly fast breaths signifying she would come for him again. Abigail moved herself with him, up and down his length. This time they plummeted over the edge together.

Breathing rough and uneven, he shuddered under the power she wielded over him. Cyrus' forehead met with hers, smiling in the aftermath.

"Thank you, *moj ljub*."

"For what?"

"For being more than any one man could ever ask for."

Unexpectedly, Abigail blushed when he enfolded her more securely in his arms. Cyrus couldn't help the rush of happiness or how his eyes closed, and breathed in the scent of her that made him smile widely, already needing to take her again.

But that just wasn't in their cards.

"I am not good enough, but you can whore yourself for a self-proclaimed legend? Is that the difference? I need to have *imagined* notoriety? I am the next in line to a large pack and a proven heir, and what is he? Nothing more than a washed up myth." Sabern stood just inside the open French doors leading back into the Masquerade Gala.

Cyrus snarled, slipped from his haven and placed Abigail securely on the ground before letting her go. He

fixed his clothes, though not one to care about his nakedness. One of many downfalls of being a wolf, was that privacy of this capacity was a constant issue. His concern paralleled closer to the fact that a fight would be on the horizon. He could sense it. "You dare not only to interrupt me but to insult my woman?"

"Your woman? I claimed her long before you even knew she existed." Sabern fidgeted, telling of either fear or excitement. The mutt didn't strike Cyrus as intelligent enough to fear him like he'd hoped, so there had to be an ulterior motive to this confrontation. Something had happened inside his head between the confrontation and now.

Cyrus sniffed the air, trying to scent out the other Armstrongs, but only Abigail's scent filled his nostrils. Normally this wouldn't have been a bad thing, but his uneasy reflexes told him something bad would happen in short order.

Abigail calmly righted her dress, smoothing it over her body, and stood at his side, running her hand up Cyrus's arm. "Sabern, I am not, nor will ever be, anything of yours, play-toy, mate, or otherwise. I have great distaste for worthless varmits. Just because your daddy thinks you're capable of running a wolf clan doesn't make you anything more than a useless child. I am well over five thousand

years old. What use do I have for you, when you haven't even met your fifth century?"

"You bitch!"

"Well, duh." Abigail laughed throatily, and Cyrus joined her shortly thereafter. "A female dog in heat no less."

"So, this is how you want it to be?"

"No, Sabern. This is how it *is*."

Sabern growled in frustration, debating one thing or another behind those cunning eyes. But what? Then his attention turned to Cyrus with a vengeful smile. "How about the two of us go outside, and take care of this like the animals we are?"

"What do you mean?" Cyrus answered, concerned when Abigail stiffened at his side. She was far more up-to-date on the current wolf practices.

"A fight to the death, the prize will be the lady's hand."

"*Now* I am a lady?" Abigail snorted her displeasure, which hid the thrum of nervousness from Sabern's proclamation. "What happened to bitch? I liked that far better."

But it was too late. Cyrus was already following Sabern to the end of the hallway and outside.

He felt Abigail's weary gaze on his back.

* * * *

"Argh, men! It always has to be a bloody pissing contest." Abigail turned to collect her clutch the same moment a chill went up her spine.

Sensing someone behind her, Abigail whirled with her leg up to connect squarely with the chest of an Armstrong wolf, spilling her purse and contents to the floor. He grunted and grabbed her heel, twisting her leg. One thing the mutts never expected, she knew how to fight.

Abigail turned with the move, so she faced away from him. Her spiked shoe screeched on the stone flooring in a flowing movement that appeared more dancing than defending herself. The wolf hadn't anticipated it, and released her enough to yank her foot from his grasp.

The wolf went to grab her again, but Abigail ducked just as his arms closed in the air above her head, hitting his kneecap hard with her hand. It offset his balance, and she came up into a loose stance, her side facing him as her martial art classes had taught her. His lip curled back, and he didn't even get to move before her closed fist smashed into his face with trademark animal strength, nose bursting with ruby-red blood that rivaled her dress.

He stumbled back into the wall while she tested her

equilibrium on heels that seemed such a dumb idea in hindsight. Not even a hair had gotten out of place, and that made her pretty darn proud of herself.

"Hey asshole, didn't your mama ever teach you not to hit a woman? Especially this one, because, frankly, I have no beef with biting back."

"Bitch."

"My, my— is it in the male's genetic make-up that says creativity must skip you? I swear, I can just hold a tape-recorder up to one of you and just repeat it whenever I feel the need to hear any of your crap."

"Now isn't this one just a hellcat?" a voice said from behind her, followed by several men bursting into laughter.

Abigail turned to see another four brawny wolves ready to fight. She swore in her head, but outwardly appeared detached and motionless. Then she smiled.

If it was a fight they wanted, despite her chances of winning, it would be a fight these dicks would get.

No, that would be wrong. Dicks were useful.

"Never call me a cat, mutt. *This* dog will take you out."

Chapter Eight

Cyrus burst into the night at the same time the doors to the ballroom slammed open to spill out the Jericho brothers: Adrian, Ian, and Cole. Dina practically fell out behind them with a snarl on her beautiful lips, lipstick so red, it looked like fresh blood.

Sabern was nowhere to be found.

Cyrus snarled, looking left and right. He saw nothing, smelled not a thing to tell him where he'd gone. "You coward, come back and fight me."

"Where are the wolves?" Dina demanded harshly, staring back at the ballroom with malevolence.

"Sabern wanted to fight me, so I followed him out here. None of the rest was present." Cyrus yelled across the flagstone patio, far louder and more animalistic than was strictly necessary. "Did you see the others?"

"They went into the foyer opposite from where you and Abigail went. But when we saw trouble brewing, we came to you. I sensed the others move into the hallway and you out here. You left Abigail *alone*?"

"Yes," Cyrus muttered, but then it dawned on him far too late. "It was a fucking trap." He ran back through to the hallway to reveal it empty save Abigail's black purse on the floor, its contents spilled in every direction.

"Dina, where is she?" Cyrus didn't even turn to see if they occupied the space behind him. He already knew. "Track her."

She stopped at his side to pick up the clutch. Dina had much experience with tracking. Even though most wolves were proficient at it, her vampire blood and all the power that entailed gave her a massive boost in almost every area. The best of both worlds.

Dina closed her eyes, and the vampire brothers closed in tightly around them. They looked in every direction at once, prepared if an ambush would come at them. The Jerichos would not be caught unaware again.

"North— Sabern is telling them to hide in the depths of Grouse Mountain until they can gain safe passage back to Alberta."

"Where are they *now*?"

"Cedardale Park, about to cross through to Capilano View Cemetery," Dina replied in a trancelike state typical of stretching one's consciousness outward.

Stupid wolves. They could've gone anywhere, but they headed directly where it would serve Cyrus the most good— and them the worst.

"Perfect," Cyrus said with relish. Dina opened her eyes, grinning with a mouthful of sharp fangs— not just the canines, but a wolf's smile.

The Jericho brothers stared at them wearily, not understanding. But they didn't need to. They would soon enough.

"Yes, it is. Midnight is in about twenty minutes. Do you remember the incantations? I think we should teach them a huge lesson they will *never* forget— if they survive it, that is."

"When someone practices black magic as much as I have during my past lifetime, one never forgets it. Those sorts of memories are branded into one's mind for all of eternity, even for a washed up myth."

"You aren't washed up," Dina snapped impatiently. "You left your pack for good reason, Cyrus. It wasn't a mistake. There would've been anarchy if we had stayed, and you know it. All your sons, the members would have demanded they become like us. And that is something the world could not stand. We don't fall under the Council my brethren created and there'd be no law to govern *us*, pack or otherwise. They very well might've destroyed humanity as we know it. We left to protect others. Do not allow these mutts to undermine the hardest decision you ever had to make."

"And I just allowed the wolves to know who and what I am," Cyrus said, worried over Abigail and what they would do to her. "If they escape us, they take that

knowledge and Abigail along with them."

"Then, my Nikolay, remember your roots, who you once were."

"What do you mean?"

"Slaughter them *all*, as Abby would've done; leave no survivors to tell the tall tales. She may not be able to take all of them on, but *you* can. Use your magic of old, your hard-won skills to ensure that knowledge never moves past the Jerichos, who will die with your secret safe. You know this," Dina said coldly.

"I have a feeling whatever you two are planning isn't good. You know, black magic and the like are illegal..." Ian said apprehensively.

"You're right," Cyrus replied, his confidence coming back in stride, "for full-blooded *vampires*. Wolves are another story entirely, and by default neither Dina nor I fall under the same rules as you. Come now, boys, don't you want to have some fun? The establishment can't touch me, and I'll keep you far enough away from these activities that they won't come after you either."

Adrian smiled mischievously. "Just let me tell Mother and Jezebel where we're headed, and then we're off."

"What's the plan then? Kick some ass at the graveyard?" Cole, the biggest of the three brothers, rolled

his shoulders.

"We will be to a degree, as I will not risk you to your vampire Roguedom. As for the rest, I have an army for that. I'm nothing if I don't go out with a bang." Cyrus grinned.

"An army?" Cole inquired.

"You'll see." Cyrus looked at Dina. "Be a doll and teleport us there, my little vampire-wolf."

"With pleasure."

Chapter Nine

Even though Capilano View Cemetery was lush with greenery, it appeared creepy minutes short of midnight on All Hallows Eve.

The witching hour. People didn't call it such without just cause.

Few knew that better than Cyrus, practitioner of the darker arts for thousands of years. He had read about the subject in almost every country of the world where he could attain the tombs and scrolls. Over the centuries, he'd sent parties of wolves out scouring for these texts to bring directly to him.

Even though his vast collection had been lost to him upon leaving Russia, the knowledge had never left him. The black magic he intended for tonight's lesson required none of the typical talismans or objects often associated with the practices. Power of the mind, the spoken words, and direct connection with the earth were the only tools he needed.

"They're entering the cemetery now and haven't smelled us yet." Dina paced at his side, as eager to have Abigail back in their keeping as he was.

"Adrian, take your brothers and block off every corner to this place, miss not even an inch. Make them as

powerful as you can, and spare no expense of energy. I don't want any stupid human teenagers coming in on a dare or the wolves being able to get back out," Cyrus instructed and then watched them silently disappear to take care of it. "Dina, timeframe?"

"Two minutes and counting."

"You sonofabitch!" Abigail screamed from the other side of the trees, just over the hill. "Let me go."

Cyrus smiled at the sound of anger in Abigail's voice, proving they had not harmed her. Perhaps roughed her up a little, but he would make them pay for any mistreatment they'd dealt her.

"So the hellcat can't fight her way out, can she?" one of the wolves replied, and then a sharp grunt pierced the air.

"I recommend you don't call me that again, varmint!"

Cyrus shook his head in amazement and happiness. Of course Abigail would've been mouthy even now.

The wolves appeared, damned near walking right into Cyrus and Dina before stopping to gape at them. Predictable. They just didn't understand their power. Had they honestly expected them to sit back and do nothing?

Surely, they would've known better.

"What are you doing here?" Sabern demanded.

Okay, obviously not.

Sabern's grip tightened on Abigail, and Cyrus focused on it, as did Dina, a growl ripped from her throat. Sabern yelped, leaping away from Cyrus' woman in surprise. Abigail stared at her arm, brow cocked, obviously wondering about the commotion. Dina would never allow her friend to feel the pain Sabern did.

"To get Abigail back. I thought that would be obvious," Cyrus replied evenly, though his mind filled with hot rage at the need to have her back at his side.

"She *isn't* yours."

"I beg to differ." The back of Abigail's fist snapped up to connect with the remaining captor's cheek, forcing him to stumble back from the impact, holding his face.

Cyrus surveyed them, taking in the various bruises they had gained from their captive. He would credit none other than Abigail for these injuries. It made him so damned proud of her.

The injured wolf swore viciously, eyes bleeding out to black at her impertinence. His spine bowed as the change abruptly came upon him, arms vibrating and chest heaving outward as his mass distorted. His roar of anguish filled the night, a tribute to the pain that would come. Falling to all fours, the wolf howled as his skin rippled. Muscles contorted and reformed while he bayed at the bare full-

moon in a voice rapidly changing from human to animal.

A russet wolf stared at him with human hatred, an emotion that rarely if ever touched the actual animal they mimicked. His ears rotated back and forth, adjusting to his current form as Sabern snarled from the lack of control. It was a mark of the young and inexperienced, and such things only got better with age.

The one on Abigail's left lunged forward to grab her, but she darted from his grasp and ducked under the fourth, kicking his leg so hard as she ran past, he buckled to the ground.

"Seven minutes till the 'clock' strikes," Dina said in a loud, clear voice just as Abigail stumbled to the space between them. "Gosh, that sounds so cliché."

Cyrus laughed at her misplaced humor, enfolding Abigail in a brief hug, his unease calming now that she was with them. She smiled at him with something too close to adoration, something he hadn't expected to govern her face.

"Until what?" Sabern growled suspiciously.

"You'll learn why you don't mess with a legend."

Dina practically danced on the spot, and the wolves watched her, at least until she hissed at them with extended canines protruding past the rest of her sharpened teeth. A few leapt back, growling. They had even less of an idea of what to make of her than they did Cyrus.

Sabern stepped forward, and Cyrus met him halfway while two of the closest wolves snarled and yipped from human mouths. The others looked at each other warily, not possessing quite the same arrogance as their temporary Alpha.

"Do you dare challenge me?" he demanded.

"Of course. You're in *my* playground now, mutt," Cyrus replied.

Sabern growled, ready to shift as his skin began to tremor, like a million bugs ran underneath his skin. Cyrus would've bet money he'd thought that would help him in this fight. Even without his plan in place, Sabern's animal form would not have helped him.

"I say you show these dogs what you *really* are, Nikolay. Just what makes you different from them," Dina taunted, thinking much along the same lines as him, as usual.

Cyrus smiled, liking this idea. Of course, it would be the perfect prelude to the coming show. Unlike the mutts, Dina's blood had warped his own beastly form. While they changed into a typical wolf with all the characteristics that entailed, Dina and Cyrus were anything but.

The wolves before him compacted their size, whereas he *gained* mass, well over twice as much.

Concentrating, Cyrus closed his eyes and let the shift overcome him. The marrow of his bones tingled, and the sensation moved outward, the skeletal system the first to undergo this transformation.

Muscles multiplied, stretching and advancing. The pain was excruciating, much more than it once had been, but Cyrus was used to it. This was a part of him now, two millennia later. Dina handled it even better than he did, going out of her way to go through the procedure often to keep up her tolerance. But she hadn't been the one to hide under the guise of being a bloodsucker.

Next, Cyrus's height grew, leaving Sabern to stumble away from him when Cyrus threw his head back and bellowed at the moon. His arms flew out to his sides and elongated, making his show of dominance all the more dramatic. He welcomed the fear he felt and smelled around him, all except Abigail's. But she didn't cower as they did, she stood tall to see the outcome with an endurance he was proud of.

Unlike the mutts, he didn't fall to all fours— oh no, a vampiric wolf walked on *two* legs, unless it chose otherwise. The note of his vehement howl dragged on, never to complete until the change had finished, leaving him living-proof of what people truly should fear.

Standing over eight feet now with coarse white and

grey fur, Cyrus stared down at the cowering wolves. He smelled their fear, but it was not enough to please him. He remembered his days as Alpha before the advantages he currently possessed, nonetheless striking terror in all who crossed him. He'd reveled in the savage brutality of every moment as he'd torn down the surrounding wolf clans, sought dominance and a healthy dose of respect. Back then, he had allowed them a choice: follow him or die.

It had gone fifty/fifty, but those who'd served him had prospered. None of these mutts would be given that choice. Oh no— they would learn vampires and werewolves weren't the *only* 'fictional' monsters present in this graveyard.

"Less than one minute, Nikolay," Dina reminded him.

"How nice it is to hear my *real* name spoken again. It reminds me of who I really am," Cyrus snapped through a mouthful of long teeth, far longer and sharper than the opposition's.

"Impossible! What the fuck are you?" Sabern backed up to be surrounded by his pack.

"Your worst nightmare, you insignificant, little thing."

And then they tried to run.

Dina whispered under her breath, stopping them

dead in their tracks. Upon finishing, she spoke, "Oh no, boys, please enjoy the demonstration of our power. You have very rare front seat tickets."

"What are you talking about?" one of the other mutts whispered with panic.

Dina didn't answer him but spoke to Cyrus. "Midnight." Then she continued on in a different language, that of spells and sorcery none but Cyrus even remotely understood.

She called to the elements, demanding they heed her will. The sparse cloud-cover multiplied, expanding over the horizon until it hid the moon and stars, stealing the bit of light it lent. Lightening cracked when Dina raised her hands to the heavens, and a light sprinkling landed down upon them. It began to pick up, bringing about a torrential downpour. The rain became so dense, it made seeing more than a few feet ahead sufficiently difficult.

"Excellent." That one word escaped Cyrus's mouth somewhat garbled, but no one missed it.

He finally looked back to Abigail, who stared at him with an expression filled with alarm. Cyrus inwardly winced but knew time was of the essence, and her timidity of the situation would have to be dealt with at a later date.

Before he had even finished turning back around to face the wolves, he began the incantation that would set off

the grand finale, the chorus mixing in with Dina's.

"What are you doing?" Sabern yelled as the winds picked up around them.

Dina paused in her chanting. "Showing you why you don't fuck with folklore like us. You have no idea what kind of animal you've poked into being, no clue what we will do to you because of it. Had you left Abigail alone, you could have continued your life oblivious to all of this. But now, we must show you why not to mess with what's *ours*."

Cyrus lowered his large body to the ground, the spell needing *direct* contact with the earth and for good reason. He plunged his hand into the dirt, right through the grass covering the gentle slope, while continuing the spell in a language never used anymore.

"And you will rise for me," Cyrus finished in English, and Dina laughed with malicious delight. The power of the moment had caught them both in its firm grip.

When their voices died off into the storm, the magic was already wrought. Profound silence reigned. Wind came with a vengeance that blew the women's hair in every direction. Cyrus chuckled, and by the end, it turned into an eerie howl.

"What did you do, Cyrus?" Abigail asked shakily.
He'd finally pushed Abigail past anxiety and had

frightened her, along with the others. Cyrus's eyes closed, willing the change to reverse to ease her a little. Of course, she wouldn't understand the darker arts, but he couldn't help that. It was too late.

"Ensuring your freedom stays yours, *moj ljub*. Perhaps I took it too far, but this is such a release. You have no idea what this feels like for me, to finally be open about myself after so long."

"What are you?" Abigail sidestepped him when he moved toward her.

Oh, how that hurt him, but he refused to allow it to show on his emotionless face.

"This is what vampire blood does to a werewolf, similar as my blood did to Dina. I am sorry if I repulse you now that you see me for what I really am." Cyrus wasn't sure how to take her ever-changing expression. What he did know was it saddened him even more.

Abigail jolted back to herself, shaking in the chill of the weather. Her back straightened, newfound resolve filling her eyes. "You don't. It just took me by surprise. That's *all*, promise. Just takes some getting used to."

Her shy smile alone lit his world just then, despite everything that went on around them. Could it be she accepted him, differences and all? Abigail was a gift unlike any other, one he would cherish always.

In his anger, Sabern beat at his enforced cage, but Dina would not release him until it suited her to do so.

"Silly mutt. I am more powerful than you can possibly imagine, and your puny fists do nothing to my magic."

"Come, Abby, let me show you what the quest for power gave me, and will continue to give you," Cyrus beckoned, and it pleased him that she took his hand.

"Like?"

"You will see." Over the gale, Cyrus heard the ground being disturbed in the distance, and he smiled as he realized his long-unused magic still worked just as well as the day he'd learned it. "Dina, you may let them go, if you please. They cannot escape us with the brothers protecting the land."

Dina nodded the same moment Abigail took Cyrus's hand.

Chapter Ten

Abigail was nervous. Of course she would be. Who wouldn't?

Being out of her realm of experience, she didn't know how to take most of it, but the one thing she understood above everything else now was Cyrus meant *her* no harm. He'd been sincere in his efforts to protect her, even coming to her rescue, something she'd been unacquainted with, but could fast get used to.

What could she say? Cyrus got under her skin.

Off a little in the distance she heard an eerie groan, one sounding like the entity emitting it was in unexpected pain. It didn't sound human— or anything even close to it. Before she could inquire about it...

"Sabern, something is coming out of the ground, by that grave," one of the wolves said anxiously. "What should we do?"

"How am I supposed to know?" Sabern snapped with his eyes wide. "I don't even know what's going on."

A piercing shriek of anger erupted from behind them, and all but Cyrus and Dina whirled to see what came for them now. The ground bulged, and something unidentifiable tried to emerge.

Another one of the younger wolves lost control and

exploded into his change with fits of screeching, adding to the strange noises going on around them.

Abigail didn't know if she should be concerned, considering Cyrus and Dina appeared completely unruffled by all of this. Her attention never stayed on any one thing before something else dragged it to the next sight, and she couldn't escape the feeling everything had barely begun.

Suspense petrified the atmosphere— or would that be whatever Dina whispered now? Could it be that she fed the wolves fear? Because they became increasingly severe in their actions, far more than Abigail would've expected from an animal. She didn't know anymore than they did about the goings on, yet she remained far calmer than they could claim.

"I play for keeps." Dina stared her in the eye. "I can read your mind much like I can theirs, Abby, and always have been able to. For vampires, there are a wide range of spells that do a vast amount of things. Of course I would use it in making them panic, like they would have preferred for you."

Cyrus's arm snaked around Abigail's waist, and his lips pressed against her hair. "Watch the children scatter, and do not worry over the next little while. None of these monsters will harm you; they were raised only to protect you. By the time we are done this night, the Armstrongs

will never invade your territory again, *kotyonok*."

"But what if I want to fight?"

"Then by all means, do as you see fit. If you wish to impose your revenge on them, do so. Only know what is about to happen will not harm you."

Abigail didn't know a thing about black magic, never dabbling in any such art, but as she looked at her friend she knew Dina had. In a strange way, it comforted her. That, along with their confidence over the coming battle.

No longer fearing Sabern and crew would drag her back to Alberta, she felt renewed. If they escaped this situation alive, Cyrus would never let them come back. Abigail had never felt sheltered before, but she did now and she would pin that fact on the man at her side.

A ragged groan had Abigail whirling in the opposite direction to see a hand burst from the nearest grave, the frayed flesh barely clinging to the grayed bone that showed through the decay. Her superior senses had her wincing from the putrid smell it brought. The ground itself shook like an earthquake on the verge of its peak. Graves in front and behind them ruptured in geysers, throwing dirt over the enemy, but strangely missing Dina, Cyrus and Abigail.

Confusion reigned, and as promised, the wolves scattered.

The scene around her made Abigail remember the dream from days ago, before meeting Cyrus. In that vision there had been a different time and feel, but some aspects had been the same. The creatures escaping their dirt confines, the trees —though covered in green and not winter-bare this time— the man with her in those images... was Cyrus.

Perhaps the hair was a little shorter, and the absence of blood made him seem more civilized, but it had been *him*. So Cyrus had appeared to her in a dream. Why? Had it been a prediction of him coming to her?

Perhaps, but she remembered the comment he had made in that dream. "Abby, you will never escape me." A comment that, when she'd awoken, had disturbed her on a very deep level. Now, Abigail found she wanted it. She had trained herself to be a certain way, but this fact didn't change the fundamental need not to be alone anymore, not now that she admitted it to herself. She just needed it to be on her terms with the right man.

Abigail understood this now, what it could *come* to mean, and it made her smile. For the first time in her life, she didn't mind the prospect of an alpha male possessing her, because Cyrus liked the fact that she wasn't a quiet, docile wolf but the exact opposite.

Then it hit her; every part of the dream began to

make sense. Her craving blood could be attributed to the mixed breeds of her old and new friends, to tell her of them. The fear and the inability to get away had been the enemy's, not hers. All rolled into one vision, she just hadn't read the signs right. Dreams were never realistic, and the information never just given to you. Deciphering was key.

Then her smile widened as a figure staggered behind one of the wolves. His comrade backed away, stupidly pointing but unable to say anything. He moved toward an intricate tombstone, never seeing the dangers that awaited him there. The tombstone made her burst out in laughter. It was that of an angel—one with the right arm missing. Its face heralded no warning this time, but seemed to be at peace. How strange for the goings on around it.

The moment he stepped over the grave, arms, shortly followed by a torso, sprouted from the ground to drag him under the surface in a sea of dirt, and they both disappeared. His screams cut off abruptly once his head passed the surface. The dirt paused in the air for a moment, as if frozen in time, but only briefly. Abigail watched in fascination as it flew back into its former place, grass and all covering it like it had never been disturbed.

"That's so cool!" Abigail exclaimed. Yeah so, she'd always had a twisted sense of humor. And this definitely amused her once she got over the shock value. This was

almost humane compared with her methods.

"Cool?" Cyrus echoed with a cocky grin. "You are taking this so well, *milyi*."

"Much like I said, I just had to get used to it, sweetie. Had you *warned* me, I would've taken it much better. Not knowing what to expect can fuck up a woman, even one like me. I had no idea that— what are they exactly, zombies?"

"Yes, that would be correct."

Abigail's eyes narrowed as she watched Sabern back away, smart enough to stray to small portions of unused land where nothing could jump out at him. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have an enemy to vanquish."

"Be safe, *kotyonok*." Cyrus curled his hand around the back of her head, pulling her into a searing hot kiss with the screams of the enemy surrounding them. He released her with a sigh. "And kick some ass."

"I fully intend to, legend-man." Abigail damned near giggled as he smacked her butt, hand curling around her curves and squeezing.

She debated shifting to animal form, but decided against it. Abigail wanted to verbally abuse the Alpha's son as much as physically. Oh yes, this would be head to head, hand-to-hand combat. To do that, she would need hands.

"Hey, Abby," Dina called, and she turned back to

her friend with a smile. "First off, thank you for accepting us *as we are*. Secondly, do you really want to run in the mud in heels and that beautiful, though soaked gown?"

"Umm, no. But there isn't much I can do about that right now, is there?" Abby concurred.

Dina shot her a look that said 'are you stupid?'

"What?"

"Girl, I was able to create a storm out of thin air, and you don't think I can manifest some ass-kicking-suitable clothes?" Dina put her hands on her hips and tapped an annoyed rhythm with her foot.

"Well... I guess not?"

Cyrus laughed as energy raced around Abigail's form for the first time ever. And in short order, jeans and a t-shirt covered her body. She grinned, hoping Dina had put her semi-soiled dress in a safe place but was already on the run before she could ask.

* * * *

Abigail followed far enough behind Sabern that he didn't realize she was there— yet. It wouldn't last much longer. He stopped running, and leaned against a large oak tree, winded, obviously scared of every shaky move he made that might've been a misstep.

The entire way, he'd been smart, but he hadn't seen the few tombstones on the other side of the thick trunk. It made her think of the dream again—except the monster wasn't Cyrus this time.

It was her— or better yet, *them*.

"Sabern," she whispered just loud enough for his superior ears to catch. She darted around the tree when he whirled to see the empty space behind him. "Silly wolf, don't you know a Leader is never to desert his followers? What kind of Alpha will *you* make? You're nothing more than a coward."

His snarl made her think one thing: *baited; hook, line and sinker*.

Abigail made her slow way around the tree, while he silently tried to sneak up on her. It was very deliberate on her part. His position landed him directly on top of the three graves, too distracted by her now to notice.

"You know you don't belong to him, Abby. He will toss you away in no time flat. If you come back to Alberta with me, you will be next in line for the clan at my side. Where a woman of your caliber *should* be."

"No, I will be *under* your rule, under your thumb, like any other bitch you might mate with. At best you will take several mates and leave me be, but I will still be inferior. Nothing more than a pack-rat. And I will have

none of that."

"You would rather be under Nikolay's thumb?"

"The fact that you have to ask shows your stupidity." She stopped to allow him the false sense he'd won as Sabern crept up beside her.

Abigail even did him the courtesy of turning her head, pretending to be watching the other side. She felt his hand slip around her throat and tighten like he'd choke her, again underestimating her.

Sabern still expected her to come to heel, to be intimidated, and that just wasn't happening this century—or the next. He would never get her, ever. She allowed the mutt to see that in her eyes, and he was none too pleased to know the defiance there even now.

Then it took him mere seconds to figure out that this had been deliberate.

"You like to play games," he stated blandly, but his eyes blazed with anger. Sabern wanted so badly to kill her, she could see it. An animal impulse he fought with. A malicious grin spread over his lips, and she wondered what devious or depraved act he planned now.

"No more than you do."

"You are coming back to Alberta with me, whether you like to or not."

When Abigail would've spoken, something else

caught her eye, but she was forced to keep her attention focused on him so this played out as it should. The farthest of the three graves didn't explode as such, as if the zombie knew to be slow and methodical about it, unlike the others of his kind.

The hands gripped the edges of its grave and pulled itself up to the waist, pausing when Sabern's head tilted.

"What, no answer, hellcat?"

Abigail gritted her teeth, knowing she had to answer or chance him figuring out too soon. "We've gone over this, and I refuse to repeat myself. I don't go, and you die. Simple as that."

"So arrogant to think such a thing."

"Am I?"

The second grave's surface began to crumble inward as the first zombie fully escaped, to stand beside the hole from which it came and stare down at it with no emotion to speak of. Perhaps that could be because the dead had no nerve endings to control facial expression. And Cyrus would be the one to direct the bodily movement— or so she assumed.

Risking a sideways glance, she took the chance to actually look at this one, to study him as it did her. This thing looked nothing like the poorly portrayed zombies from movies, but a real dead body walking.

The zombie was mostly covered in slightly rotted, damp clothes. In fact this was the most intact one she'd seen yet, though the maggots that fell from its shoulders took away from the shoddy ensemble. The hair —on the parts of the existing scalp anyway— was sparse and a dull brown.

Its half-decayed neck turned to face Abigail, the dominating feature of his face was the empty eye-sockets, but she had no doubt he stared at her. How long had he been dead? By the smell, it had been awhile.

Sabern's hand came up to her jaw, fingers trailing down to her chin. Her lip quivered, striving for a sadistic smile, though the wolf mistook it for fear. That was until Abigail gave into the impulse, and it wasn't the only one.

Abigail's arm came up without thought, smashing into Sabern's Adam's apple with the side of her hand so unexpectedly he stumbled back, holding his neck. "I told you *never* to touch me, mutt. Stupid things like that will be what get you killed."

He glared at her while choking, and Abigail just laughed at him. She couldn't help the way her funny side entered situations like this. He'd threatened her wellbeing and her friends, something she wouldn't put up with or handle well.

When Sabern launched forward to attack her, she

brought up her foot and planted it on his chest. They maintained eye contact for that last split second before she pressed her back against the supporting tree and heaved him backward.

"You worthless whore!"

"Nice last words, asshole."

"Huh?"

The last of the three zombies had begun his ascent, showing it was already too late for the mutt. The second one, closest to Sabern's back, groaned loud enough to be heard over the raging winds.

Sabern froze, but it was done. The zombie grabbed him, biting deep into his shoulder with decayed teeth and pulling out a chunk of flesh with strings of tendons, which attached monster and victim. The wolf screamed while the second staggered forward to chomp down on his forearm.

"I promised you death, mongrel. Did you think me lying? I would rather these beings eat me alive than go under your rule. Do you understand that? But that isn't the luck of the draw. My man created these beings, and from them only I am safe. They were made to protect *me*," Abigail taunted.

All the while Sabern screamed for mercy, something she rarely if ever possessed. Abigail knew she never would've received it if the situation had been

reversed. Sabern was just an all-or-nothing kind of guy; and now, nothing would be all he got.

"Please, Abigail, please!" he pleaded, actually expecting her to relent.

"One thing you should've learned about me a long time ago, Sabern, I have never had compassion or forgiveness for those stupid enough to cross me or mine. Not once in thousands of years. A long time ago I learned we are animals first and foremost, and we act accordingly. It sure as hell ain't time for me to soften up now. Goodbye pup, and I'll be sure to send my deepest regards to your father." She ended on a sarcastic note typical of her character.

Sabern looked renewed by the mention of his parentage. "You can't do this! You won't. I *know* you won't. My father will kill all of you for my murder."

"I will burn that bridge when I get there." With that, Abigail kicked Sabern, and the zombies graciously moved him out of arm's reach of her.

They began walking backward toward the second's gravesite, never looking and only feeding. The bad part about being an animal was, they could put up with a lot more than a human could, and it would be a while before he bled out and died—but he would perish from suffocation before that would happen anyway. Sabern wouldn't survive.

However, it would be a different story for the dead, who wouldn't stop until they were good and ready to do so.

The dead tipped Sabern into the still open grave, taking two of the zombies with his weight. It would be the last time Abigail ever saw the menace, and she knew it.

Abigail watched in morbid fascination while the collapsing dirt cut off his screams, exactly how it had the first time she'd watched it. She knew then, like many times before it, she wasn't normal even for a wolf. Brutality was part of a wolf's life especially a lone-wolf like her. That had a lot to do with picking up the slack without a clan, and would always remain so. Even during her life with a pack, Abigail had been forced to be different and not pretend to be like the other females in order to maintain who she was.

Now, standing amongst the chaos, she certainly didn't regret any of her decisions in life. This beat how she'd grown up any day of the week.

The remaining zombie stared at her. Abigail returned the steady gaze into those pitted eyes. Something strange passed between them, and she wondered if he'd been happy in the afterlife, if the soul had been temporarily dragged into its body, or if this was pure 'artificial animation'.

Black magic worked in funny ways. But no matter the case, these beings had helped her, and she extended her

respect. "You can go back to bed now, and thank you. Rest in... peace." It felt so funny to say out loud.

The zombie gave a jerky nod and turned toward its grave, staggering the few yards. He stared down at his resting place for a moment before dropping back into the boiling earth. Once his body had disappeared, the gravesites settled back into perfection.

In the aftermath, all of this seemed far more like a dream that had never really existed.

Chapter Eleven

Abigail appeared over the hill from which she'd gone, and Cyrus breathed a sigh of relief to see her safe, whole, and unhurt.

Much had transpired in her absence. All of the Armstrong pack were dead, buried under the ground where they would never be found again by anyone who came looking for them, an added benefit he hadn't considered until now.

He didn't doubt the Armstrong Alpha would come for his son and in turn, them. Cyrus would be ready.

"Are you alright, *moj ljub*?" Cyrus asked, needing to hear the words of confirmation, despite the fact that she appeared fine.

Abigail smiled brilliantly. "Of course. Sabern is gone, dragged under the earth to feed your creations."

She looked around, seeing the calm and absence of the dead throughout the graveyard. Abigail looked so beautiful standing there sopping wet in jeans and a t-shirt, just like she had in her ball gown.

"As are the rest who dared travel here, along with anyone who comes after them."

"And what do we do when the Armstrong Alpha comes to find his son and friends?"

Cyrus had to hide the smile when Abigail had referred to them as *we*. Not her, or him, but a team.

"Much the same as we did tonight; eliminate the threat. You have given me purpose, and I must admit, it is nice to feel useful again. Nothing and no one will disturb you, your freedom or your lands again. Not under Dina's and my watchful eyes. Never again will you feel the need to leave this place, unless it's under your own steam. This, I swear to you."

"So, where does that leave *us* then?"

"Wherever you want us to be."

She grinned. "I like that, Nikolay— Cyrus."

"You may call me whatever you wish. I'm through with hiding, *kotyonok*."

"Only you would get away with calling me kitten," she said, smiling at his endearments.

"I better remain the only one," he responded sternly but couldn't retuning grin threatening to pull at his lips when he said it. "Well, Abby, are you ready to go home and call this Halloween at an end?"

"Yes, I am." Abigail threaded her arm into his, and walked toward a smiling Dina and the Jericho brothers who looked amazed with the night's events.

Cyrus felt like he was on top of the world, and with such a woman on his arm, he would be for as long as

Abigail would have him.

His name was Nikolay Rostovtzeff, a legend of old brought to life on All Hallows Eve, and that would be who he stayed for the rest of his days.

Nikolay looked back toward the three graves by the oak tree just over the hill, knowing Abigail would be just fine.

THE END

About the Author

Paranormal author, Kayden McLeod lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. She has been writing since she was seventeen years old, creating a make-believe world that has taken years to craft. Her family, boyfriend, and writing partners push her to think outside of the box and come up with new ideas to entertain and tantalize.

To date she has published three books; *Deadly Fetishes*, *Jezebel's Article* and *Deep Water Legends*. As well, she has in distribution a free paranormal erotica series, *Sara's Story*, and two short story blogs; *The Cornwall Coven* and *Tales Of Erosity*, written with authors Kristin Manter and Cindy Jacks A.K.A. C.J. Elliott.

Other Books Written By Kayden McLeod

Jezebel's Article
Deep Water Legends

The Cornwall Coven Series
Deadly Fetishes
Carnal Magnestim (Coming January 2011)
Demonic Pandemonium (Coming January 2011)