



FUR FACTOR

An Ellora's Cave publication written by

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MS Reader (LIT) ISBN # 1-84360-408-6

Mobipocket (PRC) ISBN # 1-84360-409-4

Other available formats (no ISBNs are assigned):

Adobe (PDF), Rocketbook (RB), & HTML

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Ellora's Cave Ltd, UK

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Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. FUR FACTOR has been rated NC-17, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

Chapter One

Abstinence wouldn't be quite so bad, Graham decided, if not for the lack of sex.

Nursing his fifth scotch and wishing it were a fifth of scotch, the Alpha of the Silverback Clan of New York City spent his Saturday night in a manner no self-respecting werewolf should ever have to endure—single and celibate.

At least he didn't have to spend it alone, he reflected, although the type of companionship he could expect to find at his friends' post-wedding engagement party left a lot to be desired. A bit long in the tooth for his taste. Graham preferred women who hadn't been painting the town red back when his ancestors still thought of the cotton gin as a newfangled contraption. Plus, seeing that he'd just broken off his on-again-off-again relationship with one particular vampire, he didn't feel any great compulsion to go start a new one. Immortal women all seemed to be just a little too demanding.

Why he bothered to sulk here in the corner, rather than excusing himself and getting out there to meet the Lupine woman of his dreams, remained a mystery. He couldn't blame a fear of commitment like so many human men seemed to do. Werewolves relished the idea of a mate-bond and lived to beget lots of new generations of baby Lupines, and even Graham looked forward to the day when he would rear his own cubs in the traditions of his clan and his ancestors. Commitment sounded just fine to him. It wasn't fear that had him in this mood; it was boredom.

Graham suffered from a huge, honking case of the sameold-sameolds. Everywhere he looked, he saw the same faces, the same habits, heard the same gossip and fucked the same women. Oh, their names and hair color might change, but deep down, they were all the same to him. The realization depressed him. What had happened to the carefree, rakish wolf he used to be? These days he acted more like a priest than a playboy.

He blamed the women, of course. What other reason was there for an attractive, healthy Lupine in his prime to suddenly go cold turkey from the pleasures of fucking? He still enjoyed the act, after all, so his problem wasn't physical. Never in his life had he experienced any problem getting an erection when the situation called for one. He had no trouble getting it up, but lately he'd had a bitch of a time getting it back down, and that he blamed on his partners.

If he remained unsatisfied after a screw, he must be screwing the wrong women, right? The conclusion sounded logical to him. As long as he ignored the fact that he'd been screwing some pretty amazing women.

Take Natalie for instance. The blonde vampire he'd recently broken off with made most supermodels look like sideshow freaks. With her pale hair, pale skin and radiant blue eyes, not to mention a body that put Venus to shame, she looked like an angel sent to earth to reward the truly righteous. The fact that she had the morals of an alley cat and the ruthless ambition of Napoleon Bonaparte explained why she'd spent the last three months writhing beneath Graham's pounding cock instead of singing in a heavenly choir. No one had ever accused him of being righteous, or even true.

The point was that he had no reason to be bored. Natalie knew sexual tricks to put a houri to shame and had the stamina of an undead Olympic athlete. She was willing to try anything, no matter how depraved, and if it got her off, she'd do it again until she could give lessons to the experts. How in God's name could he have gotten sick of that?

He didn't know, but he had.

He'd gotten sick of all the women, and all modesty aside, Graham Winters had a lot of women. Some were little more than one-night stands, some recurrent companions, and some, like Natalie, had bordered on casual relationships, but none managed to hold his interest for more than a few weeks. The only reason Nat had lasted so long had more to do with his disinclination to deal with the fit he'd known she'd throw than with any real desire to keep her around. He'd spiced up their last few weeks together by inviting thirds and fourths into their play, but eventually even that hadn't been able to keep his interest.

When he started leaving all-night orgies with his muscles trembling in exhaustion and his dick still hard as a pike, he threw in the towel. Now that he knew no woman could satisfy him, he saw no reason to keep torturing himself with sex that wore him out everywhere but where it counted. That had led to Natalie's dismissal, complete with the expected and unpleasant scene, and eventually to this—his thirteenth night of celibacy, spent in Dmitri's living room at his friend's post-wedding engagement party.

Nursing his scotch, he glanced around the room and wondered how much longer etiquette required him to stay. He viewed Dmitri as a brother, and he genuinely liked Regina, so he was glad to share in the celebration of their recent nuptials, especially since he'd had to duck out on his best man duties at their reception to deal with a fire in the kitchen of his club. What he wasn't so glad of were the speculative glances currently being aimed in his direction by a large number of the room's single—and some not-so-single—women. He worked at ignoring their interest, but he knew it was only a matter of time before one of them decided to layoff the staring and commence with the come-on.

"I vote for the redhead. She looks like the type who's ready for anything. Plus I don't think she's wearing panties."

His friend and beta appeared at Graham's side, carrying a dark brown beer bottle and wearing a repressed smile. Logan Hunter knew all about Graham's predicament and seemed to find it amusing. Graham shot him a narrow look.

"She never does," he grumbled. "But I doubt Shelley is going to put the make on me, not after the last time we went out."

"Did you spill a drink on her dress or something?"

Graham shook his head. "I criticized her blowjob technique."

Logan winced around a chuckle. "Ouch. Okay, maybe not the redhead then." He glanced back to where Shelley stood, whispering to a couple of other women. "Could be her friend, the one almost wearing the green dress. Do you think those are real?"

"On vampires, they're always real. They can't afford to bleed out during surgery just to get implants." He gave the other woman an assessing look. "Besides, not even silicone can make tits that firm. Hildie works out."

Raising his beer for a drink, Logan rolled his eyes. "And I'm sure you'd know. Is there a woman here you *haven't* fucked?"

"Regina."

"She doesn't count. Dmitri would break your legs, wait a couple of hours for them to heal, then break them again. And after that, he might get cranky. I'm talking about the rest of them. The ones who aren't married to your best friend, and aren't from our pack, since they're all practically family."

Graham took a quick look around, followed by a longer look. On his third sweep of the assembled crowd, he stopped and pointed toward a grouping of furniture occupied by three very attractive females. "There," he said. "Those three. I haven't slept with a single one of them."

Logan followed his gesture and sighed. "Yeah. Regina's closest friends, who are probably the only human women here tonight, and we both know you don't do humans."

A grin flashed across Graham's face. "I thought about doing the one on the right. Ava. She's the one Dmitri had me staking out before he changed Regina. I came real close to watching her from the other side of my dick, instead of from the front seat of my car. But she's human."

"According to anyone who's ever done business with her, that's just a front. She's really a shark."

Graham shrugged. "Anyway, you asked who I hadn't screwed. They're it."

"Just those three."

"I think so." Draining his glass, Graham scanned the room one last time, dismissing each of the women he passed. His eyes never seemed to pause more than half a second on any of them, no matter how attractive nor how skimpily dressed, until they drifted over one curvaceous ass and skidded to a grinding halt. He could almost smell rubber burning.

His eyes caressed the full, generous lines of her backside encased in a form-fitting skirt of some clingy, black material. The fabric draped over that delectable tush, showing him each rounded curve in heart-stopping detail. Surprisingly, he couldn't tell

if she was wearing panties, but unlike Shelley's lack of lingerie, the idea of this woman bare beneath her dress made his dick stand at attention.

"And her," he growled, all his attention focused on the woman whose face he still hadn't seen. If it looked half as good as what he had seen, he'd be a very happy man. "I haven't had her. Yet."

* * * * *

Missy sidled into the party more than two hours late, but the way she figured it, Reggie was lucky she'd come at all. Especially in this dress.

She tugged surreptitiously at the hem, trying to make it fall more than four inches below her crotch. No dice. Every time she pulled, the hem sank, but so did the neckline. She could either flash the world from above or below, and neither held much appeal.

How in God's name did I let them talk me into this? She wondered for the gazillionth time. Not even threats and bribery should have induced her to put on this poor excuse for a dress and let her friends serve her to her latest Fantasy Fix on a silver platter. She'd barely escaped the last two rounds with her pride intact. She should have run screaming at the idea of round three. Unfortunately, it was way too late for that.

Her friends had devious natures, and with Missy's own compulsion to please on their side, they took ruthless advantage. They knew Missy harbored an intense reluctance to go on her Fantasy Fix dates, but she'd done the first two rounds because they asked her to, and because she didn't want them thinking she was an even bigger coward than they already believed. But a soft heart and a latent stubborn streak only went so far. Two rounds had been the limit of Missy's good nature, and she thought they must have guessed that, because this time they had arranged for her to meet her Fix at an event they knew she couldn't avoid – Reggie's engagement party.

Never mind that Reggie's wedding had taken place two weeks ago, which Missy knew for a fact because she'd been the maid of honor. Reggie and Missy had been best friends since high school, and Missy could never skip a party in her friend's honor. So here she was, dressed like a French whore and trying desperately to come up with a way to make this third Fix turn out just like the other two, because she had the hideous feeling that this time, luck would *not* be on her side.

She gave up tugging at the front of her dress and wormed her way into an alcove where she turned her back to the room and yanked the dress down over her ass. It pulled the neck down until her breasts threatened to fall out of the clingy material, but if she just kept her face to the wall, no one should be able to see that, and what they could see would be almost decently covered.

She didn't think Ava, Danice and Corinne had seen her, but she knew it was only a matter of time. They would be keeping an eye out for her, since she was so late and had refused to answer any of their calls to her cell phone thanks to the blessing of caller ID. Once they realized she had arrived, her reprieve would be over, and she would have to face her latest Fix, whoever he happened to be.

The last two rounds, the gods themselves must have been looking out for her, because those Fixes couldn't have gone better if she'd planned them herself. Her kidnapping mountain man had turned out to be her older sister's high school boyfriend, and the idea of fucking little Missy Roper in a secluded cabin for forty-eight hours had turned him an interesting shade of green. He'd given her a pair of his sweats to change into, roasted her some marshmallows and checked into a hotel room until it was time to deliver her back home. As he walked her to the door of her apartment building, he'd even made her promise not to tell Ava how their Fix had really turned out. Like that had been hard. She'd rather have told her parents she'd decided to become a leather-clad, bisexual dominatrix.

She'd rather have *become* a leather-clad, bisexual dominatrix.

Those same gods must have appreciated her prayers of thanks afterward, because they looked out for her on Fix #2 as well. In that one, the buff fireman who had rescued her from the deliberately stuck elevator at Ava's office building had been willing to give her the ol' college try – right up until he pulled off her mitten-knit hat and seen the dull ash-blond color of her hair. That's when she started to remind him of his four year old daughter, which in turn reminded him of his ex-wife and *that* reminded him of how much he wished he were still married. Instead of a quickie in a stopped elevator, Missy had spent close to two hours listening to the tale of Bobby's broken heart and looking at pictures of his little girl. Little Mandy looked like a real sweetheart, and even if Missy couldn't see the resemblance, she vowed to send the child a birthday card every year to show her gratitude for rescuing Missy from her rescuer.

She hadn't even had to worry about Bobby spilling the beans on that one. The day after her rescue, he'd moved back to Boston to be near his daughter and to try and persuade his ex-wife to take him back. All Missy needed to do was blush whenever anyone asked her what happened, and she was home free. The way conversations with her friends usually went, blushing turned out to be no problem.

Missy occasionally wondered if "friends" was really the right word to describe their little clique. Reggie seemed more like her sister than her friend – someone who loved her unconditionally, but also delighted in tormenting her, sometimes drove her crazy and would defend her to the death or the homicide. Corrine and Danice were more like drinking buddies. They had a great time together, despite the fact that they had less than nothing in common, and no one could make her laugh quicker.

Then there was Ava.

Ava simply defied description. She presided over the lot of them like a bitch-goddess, dispensing gifts or torment, depending on her mood. Ava wasn't the sort of person you just "liked" or "got along with." She made you work too hard for that, but she was loyal and fierce, and Missy could easily picture her ripping the heart out of someone who hurt one of her friends. Missy loved her for that, which probably explained why she put up with all the crap Ava managed to put her through.

Like tonight.

Missy had dressed in this ridiculous pseudo-dress, taken a cab to the Upper East Side, walked through Reggie and Dmitri's front door looking like a call girl on the clock, all because of Ava. If not for the other woman's meddling, she would have shown up looking like she usually did, in slightly baggie khakis and an oversized sweater, or in an ankle length skirt and a diaphanous tunic top, basically looking like a kindergarten teacher. Since that's what she was, Missy saw nothing to be ashamed of. After all, where would the world be without kindergarten teachers? Lacking the basic skills of sharing and tying their shoelaces, that's where. Her friends could make fun of her profession all they wanted. Missy loved kids, and she refused to feel embarrassed that the innocence of her career mirrored the current innocence of her sex life, because if her friends and this sad excuse for a dress had their way, that innocence wouldn't last the night.

Peering warily over her shoulder, she tried to locate her friends. At least then she'd know what parts of the room to avoid. She saw Reggie standing next to Dmitri—surprise, surprise—while they chatted with a distinguished looking older gentleman with a shock of grey hair. He was the senator Missy always thought looked like her Grandpa Harry. Well, except for his fangs. Grandpa Harry had a temper, but even he didn't suck a person's blood. Missy didn't particularly care what the senator chose to suck as long as he kept Reggie engaged in conversation and kept her attention off of Missy. *One down, three to go.*

She found the others all clustered together in a small conversational grouping near the fireplace. Ava lounged in an overstuffed armchair, making the seat look more like a throne, while Corinne and Danice sat on the sofa to her left. Each held a glass of champagne, and they all kept casting glances at their watches, the door and each other, in that order. Ava looked less than pleased.

It served her right, Missy thought, quickly facing the wall before they noticed her. It would have served them all right if she hadn't bothered to show up at all. No rational person could have blamed her. She had just walked into a room full of vampires and werewolves and God only knew what else, looking like chum at a shark convention so she could be set up on a date she really didn't want to go on with a man she'd never met and whom she had no interest in dating, let alone sleeping with. Maybe she ought to rethink that whole "friends" thing.

Okay, now you're just being unfair, she scolded herself, taking a deep breath and immediately following up with a tug to her neckline. She couldn't really blame her friends for not setting her up with the man she actually *was* interested in sleeping with, since his name remained a secret she intended to take to her grave. She knew her chances with him ranked somewhere below laughable and probably on par with her chances of bearing the next immaculate conception, because as the entire Other social world of New York knew, Graham Winters did not date humans.

She stared morosely into the leaves of a potted ficus while she absorbed the sharp sting of that knowledge. It wasn't news; she'd known it from their very first meeting, but even after six weeks, she still hadn't quite managed to work her way out of

crushing disappointment and onto grudging resignation. She still floundered in the morass of wishful thinking, thanks to her unruly hormones. The darn things put her on full alert every time she set eyes on his drool-inspiring body or knee-weakening green eyes. That reaction gave her yet another reason to keep her face to the wall. The last thing she needed was to let him distract her. She knew he was probably in the house somewhere, so she'd be wise to stick to the shadows and avert her eyes until she could make her escape.

But, Lord, wouldn't she just love to get her hands on him.

She sighed wistfully and dismissed the mental image of running her hands all over his broad, muscled chest. If she didn't cut this out, she'd leave herself open to attack. Her friends could spot her any minute, and when they did, she had no doubt they'd swoop down on her like a pack of attack dogs and drag her kicking and screaming to meet her Fix. Now that she thought about it, that would explain the dress, too. They knew she couldn't struggle in the darn thing without it snapping like an overstretched rubber band. If she so much as threw a punch, her breasts would probably fall right out of the bodice. The idea of the dress's reaction to a swift kick made her shudder.

Her friends were even more devious than she had imagined, and frankly, instead of intimidating her, the idea made her that much madder. After all, she could appreciate that they wanted her to have a good time, but really, she was beginning to feel more like a John or a hooker than a date. While the idea of being fixed up with a man to fulfill all her fantasies had sounded like a good one at the time, sobriety and two failed rounds had brought her to her senses. There was only one man Missy could imagine hopping into bed with after having exchanged less than twenty words, and since he wasn't interested, she found that she wasn't either.

When rebellion struck Missy, it struck with a vengeance. To hell with her friends and their Fantasy Fixes! Missy was a mature, independent woman capable of making her own decisions and getting her own dates. In fact, it would serve them all right if she thumbed her nose at their chosen match for her and picked up a sailor to take home. Hell, she should just pick some guy out of the assembled guests at random and take *him* home! If she couldn't have the man she wanted, she could at least have a man of her own choosing. That would show them that Melissa Roper was not a woman to be trifled with. Or at least, she was a woman who picked her own men to be the triflers.

Feeling brash and defiant, Missy spun around to face the room. She *would* pick up a man, one who was about as far from the Fantasy Fix—and from the object of her secret fantasies—as she could, and she'd take him home and end her six year celibate streak without the “help” of her interfering friends. How about *them* apples?

Her defiance lasted all of three and a half seconds. That's when she saw Danice leap to her feet and heard her yell, “Melissa Jane Roper, where the *hell* have you been?” At that point, bravado abandoned her, self-preservation instincts kicked in, and Missy did the smartest thing she could think of.

She turned tail and ran, just as fast as her three-inch heels could carry her.

She made it all the way across the living room, beating a path straight for the French doors that let out onto the side patio. She teetered on the very edge of making good her escape when a warm, solid object stepped into her path and blocked her exit. Missy slammed into it hard enough to knock her slightly silly, but the thing that really stunned her was feeling the immovable object wrap powerful arms around her and press her against the entire length of a very muscular and decidedly masculine body.

“Well, well, well,” the object rumbled in a voice so low, she could feel the vibrations through the soles of her shoes. “Where do you think you’re going in such a hurry, gorgeous? I was hoping you might decide to stay awhile. With me.”

Chapter Two

Graham saw the object of his unexpected lust spin around and race toward him as if the fires of hell licked at her heels. Clearly, he must have done something very good to earn this kind of reward. He couldn't think what it might be, but he didn't care. When Miss Sexy Ass flung herself headlong into his arms, he offered up a quick prayer of thanks and decided to worry about the particulars later.

He initially wrapped his arms around her to keep her from falling, but he pressed her closer and held on for a slightly less noble cause. She smelled amazing—sweet, and rich and edible—and she felt luscious pressed up against him, all soft and warm and deliciously rounded. The breasts flattened against his shirt, were surprisingly delicate compared to the generous ass he'd already drooled over, but their nipples beaded on contact and nudged his chest, and he reminded himself that size didn't really matter. Not when he compared it to the importance of her killer ass, her mouthwatering scent, and the soft curve of her belly that currently pressed against his very appreciative cock. For all that, he could forgo the pleasures of a huge pair of tits and still consider himself a very lucky man.

He took a deep breath and felt his cock harden. God, no woman's scent had ever gone to his head (either one) like this. He appreciated a female's fragrance as much as the next Lupine, but normally, human women couldn't grab his attention with a pair of pliers. They tended to smell like artificial chemicals and sterile soaps to his kind. Even when it wasn't offensive, it wasn't exactly compelling either. But this woman had him panting with nothing more than her luscious scent and her equally luscious ass.

When he expressed his appreciation for her with a suitably suave comment, he saw her head jerk up and found himself looking into a pair of meltingly brown eyes the size and shape of china saucers. A man would have to be very careful not to get sucked down by the undertow he saw in those things. He ignored the vague sense of recognition he felt when he looked at her, because he felt certain they'd never met before. Graham was not the sort of man who forgot an ass like this woman sported. He'd been bored, not blind, but if he had his way, this woman would be relieving that boredom for the night.

He smiled his most seductive smile, the one that made women melt and pant and compare him to a fallen angel, and loosened his grip enough to lean back. He looked down at her while he waited for her to respond to his pass. And she did respond, just not in the way he expected.

"Um, excuse me," she muttered, tearing her chocolaty gaze from his, ducking beneath his unsuspecting arms and darting behind him to let herself out the French doors.

“What the hell?” he muttered, scowling. No woman had *ever* turned down that kind of invitation from him.

Beside him, Logan laughed. “Never thought I’d see the day.” The other Lupine grinned. “The amazing Graham just struck out with a woman. And a human woman at that.”

Graham scowled, both at Logan’s taunting words and at the reminder that he’d gotten all tied up in knots over a woman from another species, no matter how good she smelled. What the fuck was wrong with him?

He wasted about half a millisecond wondering about it before his instincts kicked him in the ass. He didn’t care if this woman was from another planet. He still wanted inside her. Bad.

Shooting Logan a sharp glare, he caught the door before it could swing closed behind Miss No-Time-to-Chat. “That was only the first pitch,” he said. “Next one goes over the fence.”

Ignoring his friend’s snort, he disappeared through the doors and into the night, intent on pursuit and capture.

* * * * *

Hello, Twilight Zone, it looks like I’ve come to visit, Missy thought even as she pulled herself out of Graham’s arms and darted outside. She wondered if she had conjured the encounter just by fantasizing about him earlier. That was the sort of storyline the Zoners really went for, right? And since she’d just finished reminding herself how entirely uninterested Graham had been in her before fifteen seconds ago, an alternate reality made the most sense of any explanation she managed to conjure. Either that, or she’d dreamed up the whole thing. Now that explanation had logic and all sorts of sensible possibilities.

Jogging across the living room with lights blazing and civilized, carpet-covered hardwood had been tough enough in her heels, but Missy quickly found jogging across the pitch-black patio to be impossible. Reggie and Dmitri must have assumed no one would want to go outside in the unseasonably cold spring night, because they hadn’t left a single outside light burning. That might be fine for the other guests, but for Missy it threatened to break her ankles.

She stumbled to a halt on the uneven brick and debated kicking off her shoes and running barefoot. Then she noticed the cold of the masonry seeping up through her soles and discarded the idea. All her friends wore heels as well. The going wouldn’t be any faster for them, so if luck stayed with her, she might still be able to out-walk them.

She peered into the darkness around her and blinked, trying to force her eyes to adjust to the dim light. The high, garden walls blocked most of the streetlights, and since the moon was barely a new crescent in the sky, she didn’t even have that light to illuminate her path. The day anyone could see stars in the night sky in New York City would be the day after it sank into the mouth of the Hudson.

Wishing for the enormous purse she usually carried, complete with the flashlight she stocked for just this sort of emergency, Missy cursed the tiny clutch her friends had provided to go with the slinky, black dress and began to pick her way slowly toward the gate to the street beyond. If she could just get a cab before her friends caught up with her, she could be back in her apartment and her flannel PJs inside twenty minutes. Add a cup of cocoa laced with Bailey's, and she might once again be a happy camper.

The hand that clamped around her upper arm and dragged her to a halt dashed her hopes of happiness, and startled her so badly, she squealed. Not screamed, not shrieked. Squealed, like one of her girlish students confronted with an inquisitive gerbil. Embarrassed, she spun around to face her pursuer and found herself looking up into Graham Winter's too-handsome face.

Oh, Lordy, she thought, swallowing hard past the knot in her throat. *I have just entered the Twilight Zone. Why else would he keep looking at me like that? Unless I died of embarrassment from wearing that dress and this is my eternal reward...*

Now that would be a heaven worth dying for, she decided, even while her logical mind told her to get a grip and find out what he really wanted, because as much time as she had spent noticing the mouthwatering werewolf over the past six weeks, she felt positive he'd never even realized she existed. When he paid any attention to Reggie's friends at all, it usually consisted of circumspectly ogling Ava or casually bantering with Danice. He'd never bothered to give Missy a first, let alone a second, glance, so why was he now looking at her like a particularly juicy soup bone?

"Um, hi," she ventured when he failed to say a word. "Did you want something?"

She saw a flash in his sexy, green eyes and realized she shouldn't have been able to see much of anything in the dark. Were his eyes *glowing*?

She tried to back up a step, but he held her firmly. She cleared her throat. "It's very nice to see you again, Graham, but I was just leaving. Maybe I'll see you around some other time. Buh-bye."

She twisted halfway toward freedom before his hand on her arm stopped her. Looking back at him, she saw his mouth turn down in a scowl.

"When have I seen you before?" he demanded, his tone of voice less than happy.

Now that was proof positive about how little attention Graham had ever paid to her. She'd been Reggie's maid of honor, and he'd been Dmitri's best man. They'd walked down the stinking aisle together, and he didn't remember who she was?

Miffed, and more than a little hurt, she tugged at her arm and scowled back at him. "Around. I'm a friend of Reggie's."

"Where are you going?"

She gave up trying to yank her arm away and began trying to pry up his fingers one by one. They stayed stubbornly attached to her flesh. "I was going home," she grumped, "until you decided to go all Conan the Barbarian on me."

"Why were you in such a hurry? You ran right past me."

“Actually, I ran right into you, but that’s neither here nor there,” she said, looking around as if she could wish a crowbar into appearing close by. Nothing else seemed likely to break his grip. “Like I said, I need to get home. There are some people here I’d rather not see, if you must know.”

Impossible as it seemed, his scowl deepened. “A man people?”

She started to shake her head then caught herself. “What business is it of yours?”

He responded to her defiance by jerking her body closer and breathing in like he was trying to inhale her or something. He planted his other hand on her ass, pressing her hips against him until she could feel the thick length of his erection prodding her through their clothes. “I’d like to make it my business,” he growled, and oh my God, was his hand *kneading her ass*? “I’d like to make everything about you my business, from the taste of the juices that drip down your thighs when you’re hot for me, to the sounds you make when you come. That means I want to know if I have to get rid of some moron before I stretch you out on my bed and fuck you.”

Missy reeled at his answer. Of all the things he might have said to her, she couldn’t imagine one that would shock her more. The man who had been so unimpressed with her for six weeks that he couldn’t remember who she was, now wanted to do things to her she’d only imagined in her sexiest fantasies? Okay, where was Rod Serling?

She stiffened, because for a split second, it occurred to her that maybe Graham was supposed to be her Fix. She’d certainly fantasized about him enough lately, but the fantasy her friends had drawn for her third round had been about an intellectual type and playing doctor. Missy could no more picture Graham playing a detached medical professional than she could picture herself playing a whip-wielding dominatrix. Some things just exceeded the limits of her imagination.

There was no way Graham could be her Fix, so why had he suddenly decided he wanted the woman he’d never bothered to notice? Maybe this wasn’t the *Twilight Zone*; maybe she was on *Candid Camera*. She was about to look for a TV audience when she heard the door from the living room open and the sound of a woman’s high-heeled shoes tapping against the brick. Suddenly it didn’t matter why Graham wanted to take her away from the party, so long as he did it soon. Like now.

She stopped struggling to get away and instead let him press her up against his groin until she swore she could vouch for the fact that he’d been circumcised. “No moron,” she reassured him, struggling valiantly not to melt and run all over him like warm hollandaise sauce. If she could just get him to smuggle her away from the house before Ava found her, she could explain later about where they’d met before. “No man at all. You know, it is too bad that we’ve never gotten a chance to get to know each other, isn’t it? Since you brought it up, why don’t we get out of here and really take the opportunity to get acquainted?” Knowing she only had one chance to get him to rescue her before her friends reached them, she bit the bullet, took a deep breath and slid her hand down his chest, over his taut abs and down over the bulge beneath his fly until he went absolutely still and tense before her. “What do you say?”

He didn't say anything. He scooped her up in his brawny arms, tossed her over his shoulder and sprinted for the patio gate. Two minutes later they were three blocks away and still flying, and Missy was trying to figure out how to explain to the werewolf she'd just teased that she really didn't intend to sleep with him.

Miracle, anyone?

* * * * *

He didn't set her down until he reached his second floor bedroom. His house sat adjacent to Vircolac, the club he owned and operated for the Other population of New York, and on a Friday night like tonight, the club was loud and boisterous, but his bedroom was quiet, private and secluded. So secluded that Missy knew for certain no one would hear her if she screamed.

She didn't particularly want to think about why she might decide to scream.

The minute her feet touched the floor, she scrambled backward, trying to put some distance between them. The difference between fantasizing about something and actually doing it had just hit home for her. With a vengeance.

Graham stalked after her, his head lowered, his powerful body moving lithely and inexorably toward her. He looked tight and coiled, like a cat ready to pounce, or a wolf ready to leap to the kill. The expression in his glowing, green eyes made Missy feel a lot like lunch.

"Um, Graham, I think we need to talk about this." She kept her eyes on him, afraid to blink when he had that look of intent etched across his angular features.

"No talking," he growled. His voice had lowered, becoming even rougher and deeper than she remembered, like honey-coated gravel. "Too late for talking. Time to fuck."

She almost tripped over her own feet when she stepped off the edge of the carpet and met the bare, wood floor where it disappeared beneath the door. She backed steadily toward the hall. If she could just make it that far...

She did, thumping back against the door with an awkward "Oomf!" She'd been closer than she realized, but she hoped it had been close enough. Her trembling fingers closed over the cool, metal doorknob and began to turn. Before her nerves finished processing the signal from her brain, he surged forward and pinned her against the unyielding wooden surface.

Missy yelped. Her purse flew into a dark corner. She tried to pull back, but caught between Graham's stony muscles and the closed door, she discovered a new appreciation for an old cliché.

Graham leaned forward, his late-night stubble rasping against her skin as he buried his face in her neck. His hot breath scalded her, and the feel of his mouth against her flesh made her shiver. When his lips parted and his teeth closed delicately over the

tendon that ran from neck to shoulder, her shiver turned into a shudder, and her panting turned into a whimper. His rough tongue rasped her skin, and he groaned.

"The way you taste," he growled, his hands gripping her hips, pulling her tight against his erection, kneading her hips with restless fingers. "So sweet. So hot. Want more."

Oh, God! Missy's head dipped back without her permission, baring her throat to his hungry mouth. Her brain was telling her to scream, to run, to turn the damned doorknob and get the hell out of there. But her hormones were telling her to stay, to beg, to wrap her legs around his waist and hold on for the ride she might never be invited on again. Instead of doing either, she stood back against the door and trembled and panted and felt her juices soaking through the thin cotton of her panties.

"Smell so good," he grunted, nuzzling around her neck to lap at the hollow at the base of her throat. He ran his tongue up the soft, white curve, and her throat spasmed beneath it in a convulsive swallow. "Wet, thick, creamy. Want it."

With every word, his voice became more guttural until she could barely understand what he was saying. But she understood the feel of his hands and his cock and his hot, hungry mouth.

He pinned her lower body to the door with his hips, freeing his hands to explore her. She felt one glide over her ribs and close around her breast, roughly squeezing the soft mound. The other reached up to tangle in her hair, angling her head into place as he swooped down and claimed her mouth in a kiss.

He ate at her, nibbling and tugging and sucking on her lips until they parted, then licking and teasing and taunting until they opened wider. His tongue plunged deep and took her. Missy moaned, and he stole the sound and swallowed it, taking it into himself as he forced himself inside. She didn't require much force, though. All he had to do was flick his tongue against the roof of her mouth, and she opened wide and begged his tongue to enter her. He thrust it deep, over and over, in and out in the primal rhythms of sex.

It drove her crazy, the way he seemed determined to taste every inch of her mouth without allowing her to do the same. She'd dreamed of this so many times, and in all of those dreams, her favorite part had been when she'd gotten to savor the feel and the taste of him. Whimpering her displeasure, she waited until he thrust deep, then tangled her tongue with his and sucked. His flavor amazed her, as rich and dark as Turkish coffee, as addictive as caffeine and twice as stimulating. Abandoning her grip on the doorknob, she wrapped both arms around his shoulders and pulled herself up against him.

Growling, his sounds both a threat and a promise, he wedged his foot between hers and forced her legs apart. His knee came up high between them until it forced the hem of her clinging skirt to rise along the surface of her thighs. Already stressed beyond its design, the dress abandoned all pretense and rolled up like a window shade to settle in a narrow band around her waist.

Missy gasped in shock, but Graham just rumbled a satisfied purr into her mouth and slid his hands down over her hips to cup the back of her thighs. One after the other, he forced her legs to hitch up and wrap around his waist until he held her up with her arms around his shoulders and his hands beneath her ass and his groin pressed intimately against her.

Behind her closed lids, Missy felt her eyes roll back in her head. She'd never been so aroused in her life. If she'd had a weak heart, she felt sure this would have killed her. As it was, that overstressed organ raced and stammered with every new sensation he forced on her. His kiss consumed her, and as amazing as he tasted, she felt pretty sure she'd black out from lack of oxygen if he didn't let her catch her breath soon.

She pushed against his shoulders and turned her head to the side, succeeding only in making his mouth shift from her lips to her throat. He kissed her, lapped her, nibbled at her, drawing the flesh hard against his teeth in a rough love bite. Her head knocked hard against the door, but she barely felt it. Instead, she felt his hands slide from her ass down the backs of her thighs to just above her ankles. He urged her legs higher against him and showed her how he wanted her to hook her ankles together behind his back to ride his hips more securely. Immediately, his hand shot back up her leg, this time traveling along the sensitive inner surface until he cupped her through the soaking crotch of her panties.

Missy hadn't worn hose, since Ava told her it would clash with the dress. Instead, she'd worn a pair of sheer, silk thigh-highs that clung to her legs like perfume. Ava had also dictated that Missy should wear a lace bra so see-through it barely qualified as lingerie and a pair of matching thong panties. When she dressed for the party, Missy donned the bra, but drew the line at the butt floss. She refused to spend the whole evening fighting the urge to tug the cloth out of there, so she pulled on a pair of her own, white cotton bikinis instead. Now, she wished she'd worn a stainless-steel chastity belt, because the feel of Graham's hand cupping her through the thin layer of cotton almost killed her. She whimpered and pressed down onto his fingers.

"Graham, please!" she whimpered. She wasn't sure if she was begging him to touch her or to fuck her, but either response would be fine with her just then. So long as he didn't think she was begging him to stop, everything would be okay. She got the impression a nuclear assault wouldn't stop him, so she figured it was safe to be non-specific.

He growled again, the sound even more animalistic than before. Instead of being frightened, Missy gloried in it. This was beyond her realm of experience, but not beyond the realm of her fantasies. The idea of being wanted so badly was at least as arousing as what his hands and mouth were doing to her. She felt trapped in her own fantasy world, felt like an entirely new, brazen creature, one she'd never known before. She gave into this new side of herself, feeling the freedom and adventure of it arousing her as much as his hard body pressing against hers.

She buried her hands in his thick, dark hair and pressed his face closer against her. He lifted her higher against the door and lowered his head until he could catch the

neckline of her stretchy dress in his teeth. One sharp tug and the thing disintegrated in his mouth. He turned his head, spat out the pieces, and when he looked back at her breasts, covered only by the sheer bra, his eyes glowed an even brighter green.

“Taste,” he growled, and that was all the warning Missy got before he ripped open her bra and his hot, avid mouth closed over her left nipple.

He sucked greedily, forcing the ruched peak hard against the roof of his mouth and drinking from her as if she were his only source of nourishment. Missy moaned. She felt like he drew her soul out of her through her breast, but all she wanted was for him to suck harder, to take more of her into the wet furnace of his mouth.

He did. He sucked with bruising strength, then pulled back until just the nipple remained inside his mouth. His straight, sharp teeth nipped at her, hard enough to sting, but not hard enough to injure, and he leaned forward again, stretching his jaw wide and sucking at her flesh until almost her entire, petite breast disappeared between his lips. His free hand reached up and closed about her other breast, kneading with rough motions, pulling at her erect nipple with strong, lean fingers.

She felt them tugging at her, making her crazy, and even as they moved, the hand between her legs went to work. He hooked his forefinger in the crotch of her panties and tore, ripping the panel right out from between her legs. Then his fingers were sliding through her slick folds and spreading her abundant moisture all around her swollen lips and soft, aching clit.

His fingers closed around the nub of flesh like it was another nipple, tugging and pinching in a gentle mimicry of his hand on her breast. Missy cried out, her heels digging into the small of his back, her thighs clenching as she tried to lift herself away from his tormenting fingers.

His growl this time held as much menace as passion. His fingers abandoned her clit to tangle in her pubic hair and pull her back down where he wanted her. She moaned and settled back into place, even as her thighs tried to close against further sensory overload. His waist held her knees apart, keeping her spread and available, and he took shameless advantage. He tweaked her nipple again, making her yelp, then his hand shifted and smoothed, and he penetrated her with one, long, unyielding finger.

She cried. Real, honest-to-god tears rolled down her face at the feel of him inside her, even only this much of him. She wanted more, but the neglected tissues of her pussy had a hard enough time dealing with this small invasion. Missy hadn't had sex in six years, not since college, and then her partner had been nothing like Graham, the experience nothing like this rioting orgy of heat and pleasure and sweat. She wondered now if she would be able to take his cock, considering how much his finger stretched her disused muscles. She felt his finger withdraw and press back a second later, followed quickly by another. Two strong fingers pressed deep, tunneling through her body's resistance and showing her it was way too late for doubt. If he was going to fuck her to death, she intended to enjoy as much of the experience as she could.

Using one hand to tug at his tousled hair, she managed to dislodge his mouth from one breast and guide it to the other. He greeted her neglected nipple with a quick nip and a soothing pass of his rough velvet tongue before sucking it deep into his mouth. Missy felt every draw like a pulse between her legs, and knew Graham could feel it too when he began timing the thrusts of his fingers to the clenching of her inner muscles.

God, he was going to kill her!

Desperate to feel more of him inside her, she slid one hand down between their bodies and into the waistband of his slacks. The soft heat of her palm met his busy fingers and brushed against her clit on the way, making her shudder. Graham groaned, then groaned again when her fingers closed around his erect cock.

Missy echoed him with a murmur of satisfaction, squeezing his thick length and savoring the smooth texture of his skin and the heavy, solid feel of his cock. Her fingers couldn't quite close around him, because her hands were very small, and Graham was not. He filled her fingers to overflowing, and Missy wanted to know if he'd fill her pussy the same way.

She drew her hand away, and Graham punished her desertion with a sharp nip to her breast and a deep, twisting thrust of his fingers. Missy cried out and bucked her hips against him, but she remained determined. She quickly, if clumsily, unfastened the buttons of his pants and tugged down his zipper, lifting his cock out of its confinement with a sigh of satisfaction. Graham's entire body stiffened, and he pulled his mouth and hand away from her heated flesh, grasping her hips and shaking her until her eyes met his.

"Now!" he growled, and the urgent command in his voice made her cream. He lifted her hips higher until his cock nestled between her labia, pressing firmly against her entrance.

Missy saw the savage urgency in his eyes and felt a wash of excitement instead of the fear she half-expected. She echoed his exclamation. "Now!"

Her shout ended on a scream as Graham's fingers bit hard into her hips, lifted her briefly above him and then slammed her weight down onto his rampant cock. The thick length tunneled endlessly into her, forcing her muscles to stretch wide to accommodate his girth. Sensations overwhelmed her. She couldn't decide if they consisted mainly of pleasure or pain. In that moment, it didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was inside her, thrusting hard and deep until he ground to a halt, the tip of his cock almost nudging her cervix.

"Graham, wait!" she gasped, bracing her hands against his shoulders and fighting hard to regain her breath, her equilibrium, her identity. She felt like her entire self boiled down to the rippling clasp of her cunt wrapping snugly around his cock. "Wait. Please."

Though her eyes had closed to slits, she could see his eerily glowing eyes flash in the dim light of the bedroom. "Too late," he growled, pressing her hard against the door as he began to fuck her.

In her position, impaled on his thrusting cock, held in place by the tenuous grasp of her watery legs around his waist and the biting grip of his fingers on her hips, she could do nothing else but cling to him and let him fuck her.

He pounded into her hard and fast, and she struggled to decide if she loved it or hated it. She'd thought she knew what sex was, but Graham Winters was showing her she had no clue. With his cock reaching deeper inside her than she had thought possible and his corded muscles bunching and shifting against her, this man—this werewolf—seemed intent on teaching her that what she'd thought of as sex had as much in common with this urgent, primal act as a werewolf had in common with a Chihuahua.

His hands shifted to her ass and tugged. "More," he rumbled, his lips drawing back in a snarl. "Take more."

More? God, she could barely take what he was already giving her! How could there possibly be more? She shook her head, unable to speak, fighting for each ragged breath she managed to draw into her starving lungs.

"More!" he insisted, and his demand became an order. The hand on her ass tightened and pushed, while the other moved to her stomach and thrust between their heaving bodies. His middle finger hooked in the top of her slit, just above her clit, and pulled. The movement forced her to cant her hips upward, tilting her pelvis and changing the angle of her pussy until she felt him slide impossibly deeper inside her.

Missy sobbed at the feel of another inch of steely cock gliding home. The head butted her cervix, nudged her darkest corners, and now she could feel his pelvis grinding between her legs, feel the impact of his hips against hers that had been missing from his previous thrusts. Finally he had buried his whole length inside her, and he filled her so deeply, she tasted his thrusts in the back of her throat.

"Graham!"

Her cry was a plea, a protest and a demand for more. He answered the last, ignored the others. Pinning her against the door, now hot and slick from their sweaty bodies, he rode her hard, his cock hilted inside her with each thrust, making her muscles ripple and contract on each entrance, collapse and yearn on each withdrawal.

She wanted desperately to thrust back against him, but her position made it impossible. He controlled her every movement, holding her still and open for his powerful thrusts. She felt the constricting band of her tight dress where it settled around her waist, felt the rasp of his dress shirt under her hands and against her breasts. She felt the rough fabric of the pants he still wore low around his hips while he fucked her. She'd never felt anything so savage or so amazingly good.

The tension built inside her until she sobbed for release. He bent his knees for leverage and thrust high and hard inside her, and she sobbed through an endless, pulsing climax. Her cunt clamped tight around his cock, milking him with slick, wet muscles until he slammed her back against the door and roared. Fingers gripping, muscles clenching, he crushed her between the hard door and his hard cock while he emptied his semen inside her in hot, heavy spurts.

She melted over him, clinging to his waist and his shoulders with the last of her strength. Her breath sawed in and out of her lungs on ragged gasps. Her muscles felt like melted pudding, and they trembled under the least little exertion. If not for the solid door behind her and Graham's heavy weight in front of her, she would have trickled to the floor and lain there for at least a week.

Graham stirred, and Missy wondered where he got the strength. His hands cupped her ass and held her in place while he crossed the room with three long strides and tumbled her back onto the bed. She landed with a thud in the middle of the silk-covered mattress and grunted when Graham settled his weight on top of her. He heaved a rough sigh and buried his face in the crook of her neck, his tongue lapping the salt from her skin with lazy strokes. She read more sleepy satisfaction than amorous intent in his actions and offered up a breathless prayer of thanks. She had just about enough energy left to close her eyelids, and she'd be out like a light.

Her hands groped along the mattress, looking for a blanket to pull over them, but she found nothing. The only covering on the bed seemed to be the fitted silk sheet. In fact, she couldn't remember seeing sheets or blankets or even a bedspread pooled on the floor from a restless night's sleep. Too tired to wonder about it, she contented herself with Graham's body heat, which seemed more effective than an electric blanket anyway.

Tangling her legs with his, she shifted her hips and felt his half-hard cock still nestled inside her. She mulled it over for a moment, decided she liked the sensation and wrapped her arms around him. Her last thought before she tumbled into unconsciousness was that no woman could possibly need a Fantasy Fix if she got to spend one night of her life with a lusty lycanthrope.

Chapter Three

Honey and vanilla.

Graham's nose twitched, followed closely by his cock, as he slid gradually from sleep to waking. With his eyes still closed, he concentrated on the scent surrounding him, an intoxicating blend of honey and vanilla that reminded him of shortbread and sex and warm, melted ice cream. The thought made his stomach growl.

He nuzzled his face into a soft nest of hair and inhaled deeply to make sure he hadn't just dreamed up this woman with her mind-blowing scent and her passionate responses. Now that he'd found this woman, he'd be damned if he'd let her get away. Unless he was very much mistaken, Graham Winters had just found his mate.

Normally, a new mating, especially for a pack alpha, was a cause for celebration. When your entire culture was based on the pack mentality, anything that led to the perpetuation of the pack won praise and respect, so he ought to be feeling just terrific at the idea that he'd finally found the one woman he could be happy with for the rest of his life. He just had two problems.

The significance of the first slammed into the back of his head like an iron pipe with a grudge the minute he looked down at her. With her hair soft and ruffled on the pillow, her makeup worn away by time and exercise, she looked completely different from the way he remembered her. Instead of the brazen, blonde sexpot in the too-tight dress, she looked like a little girl, all fair skin and pink cheeks and child-like innocence. Her thick, brown eyelashes lay in soft arches against her cheeks, and her rosy lips were parted and slightly pouting. She looked like a china doll. A very human china doll.

Interspecies dating wasn't exactly *verboten* among Lupines, but it hardly represented the norm, either. His kind tended to view humans as amusing and occasionally useful, but hardly the sort of mates you brought home to mother. After all, Lupine instincts still dictated that the strongest, the fastest and the most dominant were the ones most likely to survive and most likely to reproduce. Humans, in contrast, could barely compete with newly whelped pups, let alone with mature wolves.

Graham knew all that, but it didn't seem to be doing him any good. Every time he tried to picture getting on with his life without Missy, his beast raised its furry head and growled, long and low and menacing. He expected to drool at any minute, but those instincts certainly made it clear that giving this woman up, human or no, was *not* an option.

And that led him neatly to dilemma number two.

The woman lying unconscious in the middle of his bed wasn't an anonymous and interchangeable human. She was Missy, Regina McNeill Vidâme's best friend and pseudo little sister.

He had just fucked Melissa Jane Roper, and the consequences already loomed large in his mind.

First of all, Regina would try to kill him. He'd only known his friend's new wife for a few weeks, but that was plenty of time for him to learn how protective she felt toward her quiet, wallflower friend. Melissa had been Regina's maid of honor, and though she'd faded into the background for him until last night, Graham clearly remembered the things Regina had told him about her.

"Missy is a sweetheart. Probably too sweet," Regina had explained at the rehearsal dinner while he'd sat, politely bored, beside her. "Don't be offended if she doesn't talk to you much, even if you are the best man. She's always been kind of quiet, especially around men. That doesn't mean she's some sort of Pollyanna or a nun or anything. It just means she's more likely to listen than to talk. And she almost never says anything bad about anyone, but I just don't want you to think she's ignoring you or anything."

Graham hadn't noticed the woman enough to know whether she was ignoring him or not. With her hair in a neat, subdued braid, and her body-camouflaging clothes, he'd paid her about as much attention as the flower arrangements on the tables at the restaurant. Even when he'd practiced escorting her away from the altar, he'd barely realized she was with him. Her grip on his sleeve had been so light, and she'd held herself so far away from him, that he might as well have been alone.

"Ava is trying to corrupt her, though," Regina had continued. "Now that I'm settled down, Missy is Ava's next project. If she has her way, Ava will turn the poor thing into a maneater."

Something in him rebelled at the idea of Missy being shaped into some sort of femme fatale and then set loose on unsuspecting males. It had to be the fact that she was his mate, because pack leader or no, he'd never exhibited much of a possessive streak before, especially not when it came to women. To him, they made an interesting diversion, but could be easily exchanged for the flavor of the week. Missy was the first woman he'd ever wanted to possess so completely that no other man would even dare to look at her. That, as much as his obsession with her sugar cookie fragrance, convinced him she really was his mate, no matter how inconvenient that might be.

He sighed, and Missy reacted to the small sound, frowning and shifting in her sleep. She rolled over to face him and buried her face in his chest hair. The tip of her cold nose brushed his nipple, and she nuzzled it sleepily, pressing a small kiss to the tight surface before snuggling back into sleep.

He fought hard against the urge to hook her leg over his hip and slide his cock into her sleepy-soft pussy. After last night, he knew how quickly she could be aroused and readied for him. If only the knowledge didn't make his mouth water, he wouldn't be in this predicament.

That wasn't precisely true, he admitted grudgingly as he tried to keep his hands from straying down the silky smooth skin of her back to caress her amazing ass. Graham had the distinct feeling that he'd been doomed from the moment he'd first smelled her. Why could the smell of warm cookies stir him to previously unknown possessiveness when hideously expensive, French perfumes only made him want to sneeze? He'd heard about the sort of instant knowledge other Lupines had when they met their mates, but he'd never expected it to hit him on an air current that smelled like tea biscuits and warm woman.

If he could draw her fragrance permanently inside himself and smell her every time he breathed, he would be a very happy man. As it was, he was a hungry man with a hard-on.

Frowning, he eased his arms from around her and slid off the bed. The loss of his body heat made her shiver. His bed had no blankets on it, because he never used them. He generated enough body heat to keep warm in anything short of a blizzard, but his human guest didn't. He dug through his closet and found a spare blanket he kept around for moving furniture. Lucky for him, he'd washed it after the last trip, so it was clean and would serve to keep her warm. He wrapped it around her, trying not to notice the way she curled up into a little ball beneath it, one hand resting under her cheek, the other tucked between her legs just above her knees. The urge to slide his hand in there with it, only higher, gripped him, but he shook it off and pulled on a pair of jeans before he padded barefoot down to his kitchen.

The pitch blackness outside the windows told him it was still the middle of the night, and the clock on the microwave read four-oh-two. A little late for a midnight snack, but it was either food or fucking, and he figured option two had already gotten him in enough trouble. He needed a few minutes to get his equilibrium back. Finding his mate apparently knocked a wolf for a bigger loop than he'd thought.

He rummaged through the refrigerator for a minute, dropping a hunk of roast beef to the counter when he heard a knock. He darted out of the kitchen and down the hall to answer the door before the thumping could wake Missy. Not until he had the door halfway open did he remember she was human and asleep, and likely wouldn't have heard the knock if it had been on the bedroom door, let alone a floor down and a few rooms away.

"You busy?" Logan asked as he stepped inside and closed the door after him. "I didn't want to interrupt anything..."

Graham scowled at the other man. "Save the meaningful glances," he grumbled. "I was just grabbing something to eat."

He stalked back into the kitchen with Logan prowling after him. He didn't bother to worry that there was an emergency. When you ran a twenty-four hour nightclub that catered to vampires, lycanthropes and other assorted supernatural types, you got used to working at four in the morning.

"So what is it?" he asked, slicing off some chunks of raw beef. He dipped one in horseradish before popping it in his mouth. "Did Lourdes get blood on the carpet in the dining room again? I swear, I'm going to make that slob wear a bib next time he wants to eat in."

Logan shook his head. "It's not the vamp. The club's fine. This is pack business."

"At four a.m.?" Graham couldn't keep the surprise from his voice, but as his beta, Logan knew the pack almost as well as Graham did. If it was important to his second in command, it better be important to him, too. That philosophy had saved him a lot of trouble over the years. "What's up?"

Logan snagged a piece of beef and looked around the room. "Are you sure you want to get into this with her still upstairs?"

Graham didn't ask how his friend knew Missy hadn't left. Her scent permeated the air, too fresh and intense to be just a remnant. It made his balls tighten, and he reminded himself to breathe through his mouth. The urge to force Logan to do the same, by breaking the other man's nose, surprised him.

"She's none of your business," he growled, trying to be civilized, but unable to stifle the instinct to stake a claim. "Forget about her. She'll stay put. Now what's going on?"

Logan gave him an odd look, but shrugged, licking a smear of horseradish from his thumb. "Curtis."

"Shit." Graham's reaction was pithy, but appropriate, since his cousin and chief headache, Curtis MacAlpin, had a lot in common with the stuff. Both were composed chiefly of waste and bile, both tended to turn up underfoot at the least opportune moments, and both stank to the high heavens. Only in Curtis' case, the stink was more of a moral one than a physical one. "What's he done this time?"

"He's been grumbling for months. You know that, right?"

"Logan, what has he done?"

The beta sighed. "He's sent up a Howl for the next Moon Night."

Graham cursed, long and creatively, and clenched his fist so hard that beef blood oozed out of the meat and trickled from between his fingers. Howls were the Lupine equivalent of a town meeting. Packs had them occasionally when there was trouble brewing, or when one of the members had big news, like the formation of a new pack or the birth of an alpha's new pup, to announce.

"And what the hell made him think he had any right to do that?" Graham growled. "He's mid-pack. He's got no right to lead a howl. *I'm* alpha. That's for me to do."

Logan settled his long frame onto one of the stools that butted against the kitchen counter and raised his eyebrows. "We all know that, Graham. The problem is that Curtis doesn't care."

"He'll start caring once I rip a bloody stripe out of his hide. He needs to learn his place."

"I agree. The problem is that Curtis knows his place, and he doesn't like it. He wants your place instead."

Graham's eyes narrowed. "He's thinking of challenging me? That puny little cub? He's barely twenty-five, and scrawny to boot." Graham's scowl stretched into a savage grin. "In that case, let him at it. It'll take me five minutes to knock him back down to size, and we can forget all about this."

"It's not going to be that easy."

Graham raised his brow. "Are you implying he's strong enough to fight me?"

Logan rolled his eyes. "He's not strong enough to fight most of our infants. But he's clever, and that could be more dangerous. If Curtis were planning to issue a traditional challenge, he'd have been taken down months ago. Remember he has to go through the entire rank before he gets to you. Even if someone like Bran or Ethan didn't manage to take him out, he'd never get by me."

Graham acknowledged that with a nod. Logan had earned his place as beta a long time ago with a combination of intelligence and brute strength. The only pack member he'd never taken down was Graham himself, partly because of the loyalty between the two men, and partly because neither of them could be absolutely positive who would win and weren't sure they wanted to know.

"True enough," Graham acknowledged, "but if Curtis isn't going to challenge me, what are you all worked up about? There's only one road to alpha, and you just said he's not taking it."

"See, that's where you're wrong," Logan said, his gaze level and intense. "Curtis isn't going to challenge you because he thinks he won't have to. He's going to call for you to step down."

Graham snorted. "He can call until he's too hoarse to howl for all the good it'll do him. I'm alpha of this pack, and I mean to stay that way."

Logan grimaced. "You might not have a choice."

"What are you talking about?"

"I think Curtis is going to call on Breeder's Rights."

The term sounded vaguely familiar, but Graham couldn't place it. Lupine society overflowed with so many old traditions and rights and laws and customs that only an anal-retentive history professor could keep track of them all. As alpha of the Silverback Clan, Graham had more important things to worry about than whether or not someone had forbade the eating of deer meat on Tuesdays in Februaries with blue moons.

"Old Lupine Common Law," Logan explained when Graham just scowled and shook his head. "It started back in the Dark Ages, as far as I know, when the humans were hunting us down just a little too successfully. In order to ensure our survival as a species, the elders made it a law that the alpha of any pack must be a member of a proven breeding pair. That way, they guaranteed that each pack would produce a next

generation strong enough to do the same. An alpha without cubs didn't do them any good."

The information left a sour taste in Graham's mouth, like rotten meat. He pushed the rest of his snack aside. "And Curtis thinks that because he fucked a brick-stupid omega and got her pregnant, he's suddenly the big wolf on campus?"

"Brick-stupid omega or not, Frannie whelped a healthy pup," Logan pointed out. "According to Common Law, that means something."

"Fuck Common Law!" Graham snarled. "I'm not stepping down so my cousin can feed his megalomaniac delusions of grandeur, especially not when he hasn't got the balls to challenge me to dispute like a real alpha contender."

"Hey, I'm on your side," Logan said, leaning forward to meet Graham's furious gaze. "But Common Law still holds a lot of weight with the pack, especially with the elders and the conservatives. You and I know there's a lot more to being alpha than getting cubs, but traditions die hard for Lupines."

"What do you suggest? I just step aside and let Cousin Curtis take over my pack and lead them all to hell in a hand basket? Should I wave to them on the way down?"

"You can take your sarcasm and shove it up your ass," Logan barked, scowling. "I'm trying to help you here. All I'm saying is that you're going to need to tread pretty carefully if you want to get around Curtis's argument. It would be a lot easier if you'd at least taken a mate."

Graham stilled, not sure he felt quite ready to share the news of his mate, not even with his beta. Logan would have to know eventually though, and the knowledge rankled. It felt almost like sharing her, and he still didn't have this possessive streak quite under control. He forced his mind away from the sleepy, sexy blonde in his bed and gritted his teeth.

"Even if you were newly mated and didn't have cubs yet, they'd have to give you one season of moon cycles to prove your fertility as a breeding pair," the beta continued. "If she got pregnant, the challenge would be thrown out and things could go back to normal."

Shit. Graham knew it would be hard enough to explain to Missy about their mate bond. How was he supposed to break the news that he needed to knock her up as soon as possible? And it was all her fault. If she hadn't been wearing that ass-flaunting dress, he'd never have noticed her, and never have gotten close enough to smell her. Damn her and her sugar cookie scent.

Logan stared at him, brows knitting together and head tilting to the side. "What are you thinking?" he asked. "You've got a really weird look on your face, and if you inhale any harder, I think your face might cave in. Not that I don't agree she smells fabulous, but—"

"Keep your nose to yourself, Hunter." The possessive warning lashed, jagged and sharp, between them.

Logan eyed his alpha's feral snarl, and his eyebrows shot toward his hairline. "Tell me you're not thinking what I think you're thinking."

"It's none of your damn business what I'm thinking," Graham growled, scooping up the remains of his snack and dumping the lot into the garbage. He needed to get back upstairs to Missy.

"It is if you're thinking about taking someone you just met last night to mate. And it's doubly my business if that someone happens to be human!" Logan grabbed Graham by the arm to keep him from leaving the kitchen. "That makes it pack business, Graham, and the pack will not appreciate having a human as its alpha female."

Graham ripped his arm out of the other Lupine's grasp and growled a warning. "I don't care what the pack wants, Hunter. The pack will do what I tell it to do, or it will face the consequences." His snarl held a world of menace and more than a hint of frustration. "If it's so important that I take a mate, then let the others live with my choice of one."

Logan's hands curled into fists in his effort to keep them to himself, a wise move if he wanted to leave the alpha's house with both intact. "They would be able to live with any choice you made if it was one of our own kind. Silverback alphas have been bred by your family for the last seven generations, but you won't breed the eighth if you insist on getting your cubs on a human."

"It's not like it's never happened before. We've been interbreeding with the humans from the first, and our genes are always dominant. Our pups are still Lupine."

"But they're not fullbloods. They're mongrels, and none of the pack are going to be willing to submit to a mongrel alpha."

"They'll submit if he's strong enough to make them," Graham proclaimed, arrogant and unyielding in the knowledge that the decision had already been made, sometime when he wasn't looking. It was irrevocable. Missy was his mate. Case closed. "Alpha isn't a matter of heredity anyway. It's a matter of power. If my pup isn't strong enough to lead the pack, someone who is ought to have the job."

"And give up seven generations of tradition?" The confusion in Logan's tone drained away some of Graham's anger. If his beta didn't get it, he ought to get used to no one else getting it either.

"Traditions can be broken and new ones founded, but a mate is permanent."

Logan went for a new tactic. "Lupines may mate for life, but humans don't. What happens if she changes her mind?"

Graham's eyes narrowed dangerously. "She won't."

"It's been known to happen."

"Not this time."

Logan was silent for a moment. "It really doesn't matter to you what I say, does it?"

"No."

Graham knew it to be absolutely true. Missy was his mate. Whether he would have admitted that after one night if not for the challenge from Curtis was a moot point. He needed a mate, and his instincts wouldn't let him have any mate but Missy. He met his friend's gaze with a steady one of his own.

Logan sighed. "Does it matter what she says, then?"

Graham thought of the things she'd said when he'd had her pinned against his bedroom door, and the things she'd said when he'd woken her an hour later with his tongue buried in her dripping pussy. His lips curved into a smile, and his cock hardened beneath his jeans.

"No," he said, heading for the stairs and feeling a lot happier about his decision than he probably had a right to. "It doesn't matter at all."

Chapter Four

I could always say I was drunk.

Missy lay in the unfamiliar bed, curled up beneath a nubby, cotton blanket that didn't quite combat the chill of the room, and practiced the fine art of not panicking.

He didn't spend much time talking to me, so he probably won't remember if I was slurring my speech. Wait, he can probably smell stuff like that, and I know I didn't smell like a brewery. Darn it.

She'd woken up when Graham left the bed. Sleeping in a sixty-degree bedroom was fine when you had a werewolf radiator cranking out heat beside you, but once he got up, the cold brought awareness back in a hurry. Not that she hadn't pretended to still be unconscious. Until she figured out how to handle this situation, she had every intention of playing possum.

Except you can't stay here forever, unfortunately, her inner voice told her. So that really isn't an option. Better go to Plan B.

There is no Plan B.

There should always be a Plan B.

Squeezing her eyes shut, Missy groaned and yanked the blanket up over her head. The movement let some of the icy air seep into her cocoon, and she felt her skin pucker into gooseflesh. She doubted even a higher power could deliver her from the situation she'd managed to get herself into. Even she couldn't quite grasp the reality of having been kidnapped and screwed senseless by the wickedly sexy werewolf of her dreams, who had never been able to remember her name before last night.

To be precise, he couldn't remember it last night, either. In fact, I'm not quite sure he's managed to figure it out yet. You may still just be slut du jour.

And that's what was turning her stomach into a Gordian knot. Missy was not the slut type. She was a kindergarten teacher, for heaven's sake! Kindergarten teachers were not sluts. They were plain and kind and boring and wore sensible shoes and unflattering clothes. Missy had been living with those guiding principles for the entire four years of her teaching career and had even gotten in some practice while she was still in college. After her disastrous experience with Jim from her child psychology practicum, she had pretty much resigned herself to the whole frumpy spinster with cats scenario, and she was okay with that. After all, someone had to be the frumpy spinster. Cliché preservation could be an admirable cause, and Missy had been serving dutifully until some twisted instrument of Fate had decided to step in and make her fantasies come true.

How the heck was she supposed to deal with that? She wasn't the type of woman who lived fantasies, not even when her friends handed them to her with a great big bow on top. This one night had managed to set her entire world tipping into surrealism. The only thing that kept her from convincing herself that she had dreamed the whole thing was the irrefutable physical evidence. Like the fact that she was lying in a strange bed, under a strange blanket, in a strange room. Naked. Whisker-burned. And sore in some really uncomfortable places.

She winced and sat up, then immediately shifted her weight onto one hip, pulling the blanket with her to wrap it around her like a cape. That's when she realized she had no idea what to do next.

The problem with abstinence, she decided, was that once you got out of practice, picking up on the ritual behaviors of sex stopped being second nature. Once upon a time—back in college when she'd actually had sex occasionally—the idea of what to do the morning after had seemed like second nature. But now, as she sat in the strange bed, the language of bedroom etiquette made about as much sense to her as the things Dmitri mumbled in Russian when Reggie exasperated him.

Was she supposed to stay where she was? Maybe she should throw off the blanket and pose across the sheets or something, so she'd be ready when Graham came back to bed. Or maybe she should feign asleep, so she could pretend that he woke her when he crawled back in. That way she could take her cues from him. If he seemed like he wanted to talk, she could do that, or if he seemed like he wanted more sex...well, maybe she could suffer through that, too. After all, Graham may get to sleep with women four times prettier than her every day, but she knew the chances of her ever again getting the opportunity to snuggle up to a man half as gorgeous as Graham Winters—precisely nil.

But, oh no! What if the reason he had disappeared was because he realized who he'd gone to bed with, and he just wanted to get away from her? Maybe he woke up and had a coyote moment, and he'd really left to give her the chance to be gone before he came back? *What the heck was she supposed to do?*

"Okay, first, calm down," she told herself, closing her eyes and taking a couple of slow, deep breaths. "No need to panic. Everything's okay. Just breathe." That worked for about fifteen seconds before the demons of embarrassment and low self-esteem made themselves known by raking icy fingers down her back and urging her to get while the getting was good. No matter how remote the possibility, there was no way she'd survive it if Graham came back and he really was disappointed in her. She'd rather cut and run now, before he left her heart and her ego in shreds on his bedroom carpet.

She eased carefully to the side of the bed and slid to the floor. The boards chilled the bottoms of her feet, but she ignored it while she hurried around the dimly lit room in search of her belongings. If she could get dressed and sneak out before Graham returned, she might actually get to preserve her illusions and treasure this as the best

night of her life instead of the stage for her most humiliating one. But where the heck was her left shoe?

She found it tossed into a corner between a dresser and the wall, along with her purse. She grabbed both, then nearly jumped out of her skin when her purse chimed at her. Terrified Graham would hear the noise, she grabbed her cell phone and flipped it open before the first ring had ended.

"Hello?" She kept her voice low and cast a wary eye toward the bedroom door. It remained closed.

"What is the matter with my friends? Do none of them have the *least* little trace of manners in their stubborn bodies? What is it about them that compels them to run out on prearranged meetings with perfectly luscious men, who are then left wondering what the hell is going on, while I am forced to explain that it isn't them? It's my lame-brained, flaky, irresponsible and uncivilized friends."

"Don't start with me, Av," Missy hissed, gathering up her ruined panties and bra and the balled up wad of black fabric she assumed was her dress. "I've had a really bad morning so far, and I don't need you adding to it. I think you've done enough already."

"It's only four twenty-two. There hasn't been a morning yet," Ava dismissed. "Besides, you deserve everything you get for running out like that. Do you have any idea how hard it is to explain to a man why his blind date took one look at him and ran from the party? Do you?"

"That's not why I ran. I didn't even see the guy. And why the heck are you calling my cell phone at four thirty in the morning?"

"Why the hell are you answering?"

Missy froze. "Um...I asked first."

"Oh, that's very mature, darling," Ava drawled. "If you must know, I'm calling your cell phone to try and find out where you are in the middle of the night, since you didn't go back to your apartment."

"How do you know I'm not at my apartment? Where else would I go?"

"If you're at your apartment, why don't you roll over and tell Stephen I said hello, since I gave him the spare key you left with me and told him to wait for you."

The silky tone made Missy blanche almost as pale as the idea of a strange man waiting in her apartment for sex, because if this Stephen guy was her Fantasy Fix, he wasn't planning on discussing the finer points of macramé with her. "I can't believe you sent a man to my apartment to wait for me to come home and have sex with him. Don't you realize how creepy that is? Ava, I gave you that key so you could water my plants when I went away to visit my parents, not so you could let strangers into my apartment. How do you know he hasn't emptied my apartment and pawned my stuff?"

"Really, Melissa, a successful surgeon at Cedar Sinai is hardly likely to hock your television, now is he," Ava said. "Besides, I've known Stephen for years, and he's

perfectly harmless. You'll love him. If you'll get your butt back to your apartment and let him introduce himself."

Missy risked taking her eyes off the door and crossed to the other side of the bed. She knelt and stuck her head underneath, looking for her right shoe this time. Any second now she might have a complete outfit. Or as close to one as she could come with that ridiculous dress and tattered lingerie. She grabbed the high heel and struggled to hang on to the tact and diplomacy that usually came to her a lot more easily.

"Okay, I think we need to communicate a little better here," she began, rocking back onto her knees behind Graham's massive mattress. "I didn't run away because I realized I had left my iron on. I'm just not interested in being Fixed, Ava. I admit, I should have mentioned this before, but there it is. I'm sorry."

"I don't care if you're interested. I didn't lay off of Regina, and I'm not about to lay off of you, darling. You will get Fixed, like it or not."

"Ava, we're getting into the realm of creepy again. This is sex we're talking about. 'Like it or not' seems a little harsh."

She could practically hear the other woman setting her jaw. "You know what I meant, Melissa. You will like the Fix if you'll just cooperate. Now go home."

"While there's some strange man probably sitting naked on my sofa? I'd really rather not."

"Stephen will wait all weekend if he has to, Melissa. He's very anxious to meet you. Besides, what else are you planning to do? The others all know I'll kill them if they harbor you."

"So now I'm *The Fugitive*?"

Ava swore in exasperation.

"For your information," Missy informed her, "I was on my way home when you called, but there's no way I'm going there now. As soon as I sneak out of here —"

A large, masculine hand reached down and plucked the cell phone from her hand, flipping it closed and tossing it onto the bed in front of her. "I'm afraid you're not leaving anytime soon. I'm not nearly finished with you yet."

The sound of the rich, growling voice froze Missy right where she was, on her knees in the middle of a strange man's bedroom floor. She hadn't even heard him come in, let alone heard him cross the room. Why hadn't the stairs creaked or something? It was just plain unnatural for a set of stairs in a house as old as this one not to creak.

She risked a glance over her shoulder and found herself staring straight at the fly of his blue jeans — which was unfastened — and the intriguing shadows that filled it. She swallowed hard and tried to pretend her legs hadn't gone all liquid. She clutched her clothes to her chest and yanked her gaze away from his groin, dragging it up over his well-muscled and beautifully furred chest. That did nothing for the liquid problem. In fact, it only compounded it. She could feel her pussy growing damp, despite the raw, sore feeling it had protested about only a few minutes ago.

Darn thing doesn't know what's good for it.

When her eyes finally made it as high as his face, she saw the look of amusement there and stiffened. "That was rude. I was talking to someone."

He folded his arms across his chest and gave her a stern look. "You were planning on leaving without saying goodbye. I consider that to be pretty rude."

The challenge of maintaining her dignity while stark naked and kneeling at the feet of a gorgeous hunk of a werewolf made Missy fidgety. It also made her lie. "I never planned on not saying goodbye. I was just going to—"

"Sneak out of here.' I heard."

She was thoroughly sick of staring up at him, but until she figured out how to distribute her pathetic bundle of clothes to cover all vital areas, she thought she'd stay put. "Sneak is just an expression."

"Which means to move stealthily in an attempt to avoid detection." He prowled a step closer to her, and she scooted a few inches further away. In a minute she'd have rug burn to go along with her whisker burn. "That sounds pretty rude to me, Missy."

She halted in mid scoot. "What did you call me?"

"Missy."

She latched onto it like a barnacle to the bottom of a boat, and stress made her snap things she never normally would have said. "Oh, so now you remember my name? Last night you didn't even remember meeting me before."

He scowled. "I was...distracted."

"I don't care if you were struck temporarily brain dead. You don't forget someone you walked down a church aisle with!"

"It's not like it was *our* wedding. I was there for about fifteen minutes before I got the call that the club's kitchen was on fire, and I'm sorry if I didn't spend the entire time—" He cut himself off. "Wait a minute, what the hell am I doing? This is completely not the point. The point is that you are not going anywhere right now."

Missy stopped inching toward the door and bit her lower lip. "Well, you can't keep me here."

"Wanna bet?"

Before she could manage a properly outraged response, he grabbed her by the upper arms and tossed her gently down onto the bed. She bounced twice, which made it difficult to scramble away before he coiled his muscles and leapt up after her. At that point, the fact that she had two hundred pounds of grinning werewolf lying on top of her made it impossible. Either way, he had her trapped.

She stared up at him with her mouth hanging open and her eyes practically popping out of her skull.

His grin widened. "You were saying?"

Something made rather irrelevant by her present position. "Okay, poor choice of words, since you obviously *can* keep me wherever you want me. But it's still illegal and immoral. And really mean."

He shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a werewolf. Haven't you heard? We're monsters."

"You are not," she retorted, wriggling experimentally beneath him. "So if you're done showing off and acting all big and bad, would you mind getting off me?"

Her wiggling brought her hips up against the pronounced swelling of his erection, concealed by his jeans, and he growled softly, his eyes going all glowy and aroused again. "As a matter of fact, I would," he said, lowering his head to flick his tongue against the turned-down corner of her pouting mouth. "I think I like it right here."

Her traitorous body responded that it liked him right there, too. In fact, it would like him even more if he took off his jeans and shifted his hips just a tad to the right, but her mind had the good sense to be outraged and indignant. If only it weren't also struck temporarily dumb by the heavy, masculine, hot, sexy, orgasm-inducing feel of him.

She swallowed hard.

He traced the motion in her throat with his tongue, which made her swallow again, which made him trace again, and she figured she had maybe five more seconds before he reduced her to a quivering mass of goo.

She cleared her throat and moaned when the sound made him stutter his tongue against the sensitive skin. Her hands pressed against his shoulders, and she mustered one last coherent protest. "Um, I really do need to be going. I have things I need to do."

He reached up and locked both of her wrists in one of his big hands. Then he used his tongue to investigate the hollow at the base of her throat and the smooth curves of her collarbone. "At four thirty in the morning? I don't think so."

"Maybe I'm an early riser."

"I know I am. Wanna see?" He ground his erection against her and wriggled his eyebrows suggestively.

It took some doing not to be charmed by his sense of humor and his blatant sexuality. "No!"

He grinned. "Liar."

She felt the blush rising in her cheeks. "What I want is for you to let me go."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes. Why do you want me to let you go?"

He looked down at her with his disconcerting green eyes, and Missy suddenly realized she really couldn't remember why she felt so determined to leave when she still had fantasies he could be fulfilling. And he certainly wasn't helping matters by rubbing his thumb gently against her wrists that he still held pinned above her head in an unbreakable grip.

She shrugged. "Why do you want to keep me?"

The smile spreading across his face reminded her of sunrise and fallen angels and wicked, wicked intentions.

"Silly question," he growled, though it sounded more like a purr, as he brushed her crumpled clothes aside and bared her body once more to his gaze. She saw the light of appreciation in them and fought not to show how much she liked that he enjoyed looking at her.

She tried to mold her expression into a scowl, but she knew it probably looked as forced as it felt. "Silly answer. I doubt very much that you can't get sex any time and from anyone you want."

He leaned down to lap at her nipple, wetting the tip and making it stand out from her breast. He pursed his lips and blew, watching as the crest tightened further. "But I don't want it from anyone. I want it from you."

Missy squirmed and fought to keep her breathing from turning into panting as he left one breast and moved to the other. She wanted to concentrate on what he was saying, especially since it seemed more likely to be a product of wishful thinking than hardcore reality. But she defied anyone to concentrate while Graham played with their tender bits. It couldn't be done.

He scraped his teeth over her skin then lifted his head to survey his handiwork. "In fact," he purred, "I think I only want it from you from now on."

"But why?" she moaned.

His mouth closed over her neglected nipple, drawing the aching peak inside and sucking rhythmically. He pressed it firmly against the roof of his mouth, and she could feel his tongue rubbing in tiny strokes against the underside. The sensation made her want to cry out and when he pulled away, she nearly did.

"Because you taste so good," he murmured, shifting until he could slide his tongue down the center of her chest and dip teasingly into her navel.

Her muscles clenched, from her abdomen to her ass, her pussy to her toes. He breathed warm currents against her skin and ruffled her pubic hair with the tips of his fingers. Her hips arched reflexively into his hand, and she bit back a moan when his hand slid lower and eased open her swollen folds. Her moan changed to a gasp when he buried his face in her curls and inhaled deeply.

"And you smell even better."

His murmur had become a growl, and when he slid his tongue along the path of his fingers, Missy echoed it with a breathless cry. He circled her clit in a wave of hot, moist sensation before dipping into her center and drinking her wetness. Her free hands slid into his hair and cradled him to her while his tongue drove her crazy. Her nerve-endings seesawed between pleasure and pain for a brief second until his head came up.

"You're hurt," he said, the growl back in his voice. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"About what?" She barely recognized her voice, as breathless and soft and drugged as it sounded.

"About the fact that I hurt you," he grumbled, pulling back from her and sliding off the bed. "From now on, I expect you to tell me."

He scooped her up in his arms and stalked into the bathroom while she was still trying to reconnect the synapses he'd blown with his clever tongue. As soon as the darned things got back into working order, she was going to get mad. The man was growling at her because of something *he* had done! Logic, anyone? She glared up at him from the edge of the bathtub where he set her down. "As I recall, you weren't real interested in anything I had to say at the time you were making me sore, Conan."

Graham scowled at her and turned on the faucet, testing the temperature before plugging up the drain and letting the tub fill with steaming water. "Next time, say it louder."

She crossed her arms over her chest to still the hopeful flutter inside. "Is there going to be a next time?"

"Damn straight," he retorted. "It's just a matter of how soon before it happens."

He turned his back and rummaged under the sink, coming back with a paper, milk-carton-looking container labeled, "Epsom Salts." He dumped a handful into the tub and stirred to dissolve the crystals.

Missy watched and brooded. "Are you always this dictatorial?" she finally ventured.

Graham twisted off the taps with a grunt. "I am now, so get used to it."

Without waiting for an invitation, Missy eased herself down into the water. Naked under water, even clear water, was better than naked in plain sight. She winced when the heat stung her raw skin. "What's that supposed to mean?"

The werewolf looked down at her with a hard expression. "That you'll be spending quite a lot of time with me, so you'd better get used to my foibles."

Her eyes widened, but she couldn't tell if they did it because of his abrupt declaration, or because he punctuated his words by stripping off his jeans and sliding into the tub with her.

The oversized, old claw-foot was plenty big enough for the both of them, as long as they didn't mind touching. Graham obviously didn't. He settled his large frame into the opposite end of the tub and stretched out his legs on either side of hers until his feet rested on the outside of her thighs. He draped his arms over the sides of the tub and pinned her with a probing stare. "How does this feel?"

Missy wrenched her gaze from his damp chest, complete with its rough-smooth mat of hair and the flat brown nipples that made her mouth water. "How does what feel?"

His expression softened infinitesimally, and his mouth quirked up at one corner. "The bath. Is it helping any?"

Hoping her blush could be blamed on the heat, she nodded and sank up to her chin. "It's lovely. Thanks."

"Good."

They soaked in silence for a few minutes while Missy tried to figure out what event had landed her in this alternate universe, because she didn't want to accidentally repeat it and get herself tossed back into reality. She much preferred the existence where sexy, charming werewolves fell head-over-heels in love/lust with plain, average kindergarten teachers to the one where she couldn't get a date unless her friends arranged it, and the last two men she'd gone out with had both decided they'd rather be celibate than have sex with her. She intended to cling to this little fantasy until it shriveled up and died. Then they could try to pry it from her clutching fingers.

The hot, salted water began to work its magic on her, easing her sore muscles and soothing the raw feeling between her legs. Too bad it couldn't sooth the raw feelings of confusion and fear and doubt that lurked under her blustering declarations. She draped her hair over the back of the tub to keep it dry and let her head rest against the cool, enameled iron. Her eyes drifted shut of their own accord, and she stifled a yawn. With the adrenaline of the evening fading from her system, Missy began to realize just how short her nap in Graham's bed had really been. She felt like she could sleep for a week, but she didn't want to miss a second of her fantasy fulfilled. God, what wouldn't she give if this one encounter really could go on forever? She couldn't imagine anything more heavenly than to have Graham so enamored of her that he never stopped touching her. All the sexual exertion might kill her, but boy, would she enjoy the trip.

When he picked up her feet and began to massage the arches with firm pressure, she sighed in pleasure.

"You're welcome to do that for the rest of my life," she murmured and drifted into that cloudy, peaceful state between sleeping and waking where the sound of the lapping water and their quiet breathing faded into a soothing metronome in the back of her mind. She felt like she just *might* sleep for a week.

Or at least until the water began to cool.

"I'd be happy to do it for the rest of our lives," Graham murmured, his voice distinct and warm and rumbling through her sleepy state. "So why don't you make it easy for me and move in with me."

Chapter Five

Graham wasn't quite sure where the words came from, but once they were out, he realized how good they sounded to him.

"Very funny."

She stiffened, and he felt his own muscles echo the posture, but the way she failed to open her eyes or even lift her head from the back of the tub gave him the impression she might not be taking him all that seriously. He tried again. "Move in with me," he said. "I'll give you regular foot rubs, pick up all my own socks, and I promise you all the sex you can handle."

He watched her eyes open and fix on him. Their warm, brown color looked soft and a little bit hurt. She stared at him for a long minute before she spoke. "It's not nice to tease a woman while you're rubbing her feet. We're too vulnerable. Be serious, okay?"

"Didn't I sound serious?"

"No man sounds serious when he asks a woman to move in with him on their first date."

"Technically, this wasn't a date. For it to be a date, we'd have to go out somewhere and do something other than have mind-blowing sex."

She blushed at that, and he found the bright rise of color beneath her pale skin to be charming. Infinitely more charming than the way she started to shake her head.

"If you were serious, then you're also insane." She pulled her feet from his lap and started to sit up straighter until the movement brought her breasts above the water line. She quickly sank deeper and pulled her knees to her chest and out of his reach. The expression she wore now looked upset and a little sad. "I really wish you hadn't shattered my illusions quite so soon. I should be going. Can I have a towel please?"

"No."

She looked over at him, her eyebrows lifted high and her eyes wide and startled. "No?"

"No, you can't have a towel. If I give you one, you'll dry off and go home, and I'm not ready to let you leave yet."

"Haven't we already been through this once?" She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. "You really can't keep me here."

His instincts urged him to demonstrate to her how wrong she really was about that, but he beat them into submission. If he wanted this woman to be at ease with him, he'd have to go slowly. He was learning she wasn't quite as delicate as she looked, but

he knew he could still spook her if he wasn't careful. He thought limiting himself to asking her to move in with him, rather than informing her that she would marry him and bear his pups, like he wanted to do, was pretty restrained. But apparently the situation called for even greater delicacy. He hoped he would be able to manage it.

"I have no intention of holding you prisoner," he said, even as he squashed those very impulses. "But let's be logical about this. What do you plan to do when you leave here?"

"I'll go home."

"To the naked stranger sitting on your sofa?" He remembered the parts of her phone conversation he'd overheard. He had to clench his jaw to keep from expressing exactly how he felt about any man other than him being in Missy's apartment, let alone being naked and lying in wait for her. "You didn't sound very happy about that idea earlier. Have you changed your mind?"

He saw the impact of his reminder in the brief droop of her shoulders before she squared them again and lifted her little chin defiantly.

"I can go to a friend's house," she said.

"You mean to one of the people who got you into this situation? The ones you were running from last night when you bumped into me?" He almost regretted pointing that out when he saw her chin sink and her expression fall into regretful lines, but he had goals to remember. Everything he was doing would be for the best in the end, for him and for his mate. "Is that really what you want to do?"

He heard her sigh, saw her shrug. "There isn't much else I can do. Except maybe call the police, and I don't want the poor man arrested. I just want him out of my apartment."

"You can stay here." He held up a hand when she started to protest. "Wait, calm down. If you think I'm insane for wanting you to move in, fine. Don't move in. Just spend the weekend. Once it's safe and whatshisname is gone, you can go back to your apartment, and I'll wait until after we've had a few real dates before I ask you again."

In reality, he had no intention of ever asking her to move in with him again. Next time, he'd just tell her. Less room for argument that way. He saw her start to waiver and pressed his case.

"It's just a couple of days. You can be home in time for work on Monday morning."

"I don't have to work on Monday," she murmured, chewing on her lower lip until he wanted to sink his own teeth into the pink flesh. "Next week is spring break."

He filed away that useful tidbit and pressed when he saw her debating herself. "That's even better. In case the loser doesn't clear out until he goes to work Monday. It gives you a buffer. Besides, you didn't tell Ava where you were, did you?"

She shook her head. "How did you know I was talking to Ava?"

"None of your other friends are that intimidating," he said. "So if you didn't tell her where to find you, you're safe. I'm sure they'd never think to look here, right? Why not

take advantage of that? You get to keep them out of your hair for two whole days. Doesn't that sound pretty good?"

She tapped one slender finger against her shoulder while she thought, and he tried to focus on that instead of on her luscious mouth. It didn't cool him off any, but he did manage to stay on his end of the tub.

"Won't my being here mess up your plans for the weekend?"

He tried not to grin triumphantly. "I don't have any plans for the weekend. You wouldn't be messing up a thing," he assured her.

She pursed her lips. "And where exactly would I sleep?"

"Was the bed not comfortable?"

She eyed him with an odd expression, and Graham couldn't tell if she was offended or intrigued or disgusted or overcome with lust. This was why humans should have tails. Or at least bigger ears. They made reading expressions so much easier.

"You could be a gentleman and offer me your guest room," she finally said, watching him intently.

"I'm not that much of a gentleman," he said, flashing her a grin. "Besides, how am I supposed to convince you to move in with me after this if I don't get you to indulge in more incredible sex?" She blushed, which he found adorable, and he fought to keep from drooling. He doubted she would appreciate the Lupine compliment.

"You really want me to go back to bed with you?"

"Right now, if you're willing."

She shook her head like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "There's no reason for you to act like this. You could have any woman you wanted just by giving her one of those killer smiles of yours. Why should you want me? Don't enough women give in easily for you?"

He couldn't have stifled his grin if his life depended on it. "You're jealous."

Missy laughed, still shaking her head. "No," she denied, "just confused."

He saw gooseflesh on her skin and realized the water must be getting cold. He climbed out of the tub and grabbed a towel from the cabinet. "You don't have to worry, though, because I'm not interested in any other woman."

Ignoring the water dripping off his own skin, he wrapped the towel around Missy and rubbed the terry cloth gently against her skin. He debated telling her why he wasn't interested in any other women, but figured his chances of keeping her in his house were a lot better if he didn't bring up the term "mate-bond" for another day or so. He would give her time to get used to him first.

He hunkered down in front of her to dry her legs and feet. He'd bet she didn't wear above a size six shoe; her feet were that tiny and delicate, with high arches and toes polished a blushing shade of pink almost the exact color of her skin when he pushed her into coming for him. The thought made him harden instantly, and he fought not to lean forward and bury his face in the thatch of light brown curls that shielded her sex.

Having it so close and convenient didn't seem to be helping his willpower any. He forced his eyes back to her feet until he could feel her gaze on the top of his head.

He looked up. "What?"

She shook her head. "I was just wondering something..."

He stood and finally took pity on her, wrapping the towel around her body so she could unclamp her arms from in front of her breasts. He hoped she realized exactly what the show of chivalry cost him. "What were you wondering?"

She tucked the cloth more securely around her and tucked her hair behind her ears. She looked down at the floor and shrugged. "Why you're acting like you're so interested in me."

"Probably because I am." He thought about grabbing her hand and wrapping it around his aching cock, just to demonstrate exactly how interested he really was, but there was that whole problem with her being likely to run from him, screaming.

"Yeah, right."

He frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I have a little trouble believing that I'm all of a sudden irresistible," she said, her chin lifting again to meet his eyes with her own. The way she could turn from bashful flower to rebellious firebrand fascinated him. "You've known me for six weeks and tonight is the first time you've looked at me like I was more than an extension of the wallpaper."

"I've obviously been a moron," he countered, enjoying the way her brown eyes had gone warm and sparking at him. "What else were you expecting? I'm a man. We're morons by birth."

"Some of you are more moronic than others," she agreed. "But I'd really prefer it if you didn't act as if you've suddenly realized that I'm utterly gorgeous and sexy and everything a man has ever dreamed of."

"But you are."

She shook her head and her expression took on a hint of anger. "Just because I teach kindergarten does not make me a simpleton. Don't lie to me, please."

The way her skin flushed and her breasts rose and fell with her angry breathing made his beast sit up and howl. Her indignation turned her scent sharper, more bitter, more heavily spiced. He wanted to lick the pique from her skin until it turned to lust, and then he wanted to lick it from between her thighs until it turned to satiation.

"I'm not lying," he said, forcing himself to concentrate on the conversation. "I really am a moron, and I really do think you're utterly gorgeous and sexy. Didn't you figure that out when you had me so hard and hot that I devolved into a monosyllabic cretin just because I couldn't wait to get inside you?" He shook his head. "That's not the kind of thing I can fake."

"From what I understand, you don't have to fake a thing," she snapped. "You've got quite a reputation, Graham. I hear there's not more than a handful of women you've

ever met that you haven't ended up in bed with. So forgive me if I don't think it's an accomplishment that I gave you an erection."

An unexpected spear of hurt coursed through him. He had enjoyed every single one of the women he'd taken and had no reason to regret a single one, but somehow his mate made him want to wash away his past. He raked a hand through his hair and frowned.

"You're making it sound like I only wanted you because you were there. Like I would have just as soon had someone else."

"Exactly."

Frustration made him want to howl. It succeeded in making him pace. "It's not like that," he growled, trying to think of a way to make her understand his need without terrifying her so badly she'd run. "I want *you*, Missy, not just another female body."

"Yeah, right."

"I mean it. I've had plenty of female bodies. You were right about that," he admitted, and had to grit his teeth against the hurt he saw flicker in her eyes. "But that means I know the difference between them and you. I don't want another woman. I didn't invite another woman to spend the weekend with me."

He saw her shake her head and strode back to her side, grasping her by the arms and forcing her to meet his gaze. He needed to impress her with the truth, and he hoped she'd be able to read it in his face. "I didn't invite another woman to move in with me. I've never invited a woman to do that. Just you."

"But that's what I don't get," she whispered, her eyes wide and confused as she gazed up at him. "Tonight is the first time you've ever spoken more than five words to me, and all of a sudden you're crazy about me? That doesn't make any sense."

For the first time in his life, Graham regretted being a werewolf. If he'd been a vampire like Dmitri, he could read her thoughts to figure out exactly how to reassure her, but instead he floundered for a way to make her trust him without also making her see him as an even weirder creature than she already did.

Unable to resist, he reached up to stroke her silky hair, remembering the way it looked spread out on his silk sheet. He wanted to see it there again, now, but he wanted more than that. If he were going to convince this woman to be his mate, he'd have to move slowly. And if that wasn't a matter of teaching an old dog new tricks, he didn't know what was.

"Why don't you stop thinking about it so hard and give me a chance?" he suggested. "You've already agreed to stay here this weekend, so let me use it to convince you that I'm serious."

"Sex is not going to —"

He chuckled and gave into the urge to hug her until she squawked a protest. "I promise sex will only be part of it," he teased, loosening his grip only slightly. "We'll do

other things, too. Things people do when they want to get to know each other. Like talk ...and watch movies...and play games...and order Chinese. What do you say?"

She met his gaze in silence, and he could see her searching for some clue. He hoped what she found would reassure her of his sincerity. Finally she drew a deep breath and nodded once. "All right," she agreed. "Since I'm stuck here anyway, there's not much I can do to avoid you, I suppose."

He laughed triumphantly and hugged her again. "Perfect!" He planted a great big kiss on her surprised mouth before he pulled away and headed for the bedroom door. "Hang on a second, and I'll dig up something for you to wear. Then I'll take you out for breakfast. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

He couldn't quite contain the spring in his step as he left her staring after him. As soon as she got dressed, he'd take her out to his favorite diner and feed her. With the things he had planned for their weekend together, she'd need to keep up her energy.

Chapter Six

Missy pulled on the black slacks Graham had provided and silently thanked whatever employee at his club had provided them. The idea of putting on her super-short dress from last night made her shudder, especially considering she lacked any sort of underwear to put on beneath it. The scraps left after Graham had torn her lingerie off her last night now graced the trashcan in the bathroom, and she struggled not to wriggle at the unfamiliar feel of going panty-less.

She didn't worry so much about the bra. Being a long way from a D-cup, she could get away without one, especially since the shirt she wore was one of Graham's and could have fit three of her. She had to roll the sleeves almost up to the shoulders and tie the bulk of the material at her waist to keep from being overwhelmed by the thing, but it was comfortable, and the roomy fit hid the fact that her breasts were bare beneath it. All she really needed now was something to hide her feelings.

Having the man of her dreams devoted to fulfilling all her fantasies went to a girl's head, and Missy could only pray it wouldn't go to her heart. Graham had just offered her the opportunity to spend an entire weekend living out her dreams, and she'd seized it with both hands. As much as she wanted to protect her feelings, she'd never be able to forgive herself if she didn't do everything she could to have this one interlude with Graham. She knew perfectly well it couldn't last forever. No matter what level of lust and curiosity Graham felt for her now, she knew it wouldn't last. She just hoped she could be satisfied with her memories of this weekend when it ended. She couldn't bare it if she spent the rest of her life in love with a man who had gotten bored with her.

Graham stuck his head in the bedroom door just as she was contemplating her bare feet. Somehow her stiletto pumps from the night before just didn't go with the outfit.

"You almost ready?"

"As ready as I can be," she answered, dragging her attention back to the outside world and wiggling her toes, "but I think I fall in the 'no shoes, no service' category."

He pushed the door open and held out a pair of white tennis shoes. "I looked at your heels. No one on my staff wears a five and a half, but I got a pair of sevens and some thick socks."

"Thanks." She took the shoes and sat on the edge of the mattress to pull them on. "I feel like I've taken rotten advantage of your waitresses, stealing all their clothes."

"You didn't have to steal, they were donated. Besides, the shoes came from my secretary. She had the smallest feet."

He tapped his own booted foot against the floor while she laced the sneakers tightly

and tested the fit. A little loose, but the socks would keep her from feeling like she wore clown shoes. "Okay," she announced, sliding to the floor. "I'm ready."

Graham grinned. "Great. I just need to let the staff know where we're going, and we can leave. Come on."

He took her hand and tugged her toward the door. Missy followed, trying to pretend she had a choice.

She hadn't gotten a chance to look at anything much the night before, seeing that she'd made the trip to his house and up to his bedroom face down over his shoulder in the pitch dark, but now she got a chance to look around. The old townhouse had the elegant sort of grace that nineteenth century architecture naturally seemed to impart. The dark woodwork gleamed with the richness of age, and the soothing, earth-toned décor had a masculine and comfortable feel to it. It wasn't the type of place she would have pictured Graham living in, but maybe he had sides she hadn't seen yet. The only sides he'd been interested in showing her so far were protuberant and demanding.

Expecting to be led out the front and around to the entrance of Vircolac next door, she was surprised when he made a left turn into a large study and walked up to a well-stocked section of built-in bookshelves. He reached out and pressed a button, then took hold of the shelving and pulled it toward them to reveal a well-lit and entirely undusty hallway.

"It's not quite like I always imagined a secret passageway," she said.

Graham smiled. "I could add some cobwebs and dirt, if you want." He put his hand on the small of her back and ushered her in ahead of him. "It's not really secret, though. My staff and I use it when we need to go back and forth between the buildings. Saves time. And it keeps us dry when the weather's bad."

The short corridor was papered and lit like a regular interior hallway and ended at a handsome, six-panel door. They stepped through into another hallway and turned right, emerging from behind a grand staircase into the front hall of the club.

It looked like Missy's image of the foyer of a grand, London townhouse for some rich aristocrat. It had that look of age and wealth and power seemingly oozing from its wainscoted walls. The décor seemed more like someone's home, rather than a club, but she imagined there weren't a lot of people's homes that experienced this much activity before six a.m.

She could hear the sound of voices and the tapping of footsteps beyond the open doors that lined the hall, and uniformed staff paced back and forth fetching and carrying in their crisp, tuxedo-looking outfits. Several of them greeted Graham and gave her some curious stares as their boss led her toward the front of the building and one of the few closed doors in the hall. Missy tried to ignore the glances and busied herself taking in the club she'd been wanting to get a look at.

"I just need to talk to my assistant for a sec," he explained when he paused outside the door with his hand on the polished, brass knob. "Plus, she made my introducing you to her a condition of lending you her shoes."

Missy raised her eyebrows at that, but allowed Graham to usher her into the room in front of him. They stepped into his office, which Missy identified from the filing cabinets, note boards and desks inside. One of them was covered in papers, but unoccupied. The other looked neat and organized and sported a casually dressed woman sitting behind it, her long, brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. The woman looked up when they entered and smiled. She looked to Graham first, but when her blue eyes fastened on Missy, they did so with evident curiosity.

"Good morning!" she said, bouncing up from her chair and hurriedly crossing in front of the desk to stand before the couple. "I'm so happy to meet you, Luna. I was so excited when Graham told me about you."

Missy offered the other woman a friendly smile. At least, she tried to, but the brunette seemed determined to stare at someplace near her right elbow. Her smile turned into a puzzled look, and Graham stepped forward to make the introduction.

"Missy, this is my assistant, Samantha Cartwright."

Trying again with a smile, Missy extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

Samantha took her hand and leaned forward to kiss her lightly on the mouth. Surprise made Missy jump back a little, and Samantha's eyes opened wide, meeting hers for the first time.

"What's the matter? Did I do something wrong? Luna, I apologize—"

Graham cut her off. "It's no problem, Sam. I think you just surprised Missy."

Which was true, but Missy found Graham pretty surprising, too. And what was up with this "Luna" thing?

"There's nothing to apologize for," she told Samantha with another smile. "Actually, I wanted to thank you for loaning me the shoes. That was really sweet of you."

"Oh, it's nothing!" Samantha rushed to assure her. "I'm just sorry they're not really your size."

"Well it's not like I expect your feet to shrink for my convenience," she laughed. "With the socks, these are just fine."

Graham laid a hand on her arm and smiled down at her. "Let me just tell Samantha what's going on with the club business, and we can go, okay?"

Missy gave him an odd look, but nodded. "Sure. Take your time."

He smiled at her, and she turned away to keep from going all mushy at the sheer adorableness of the expression. The man's appeal made things way not fair.

While he talked to Samantha about suppliers, accounts and correspondence, Missy wandered around the room and checked out the working environment of the man she'd just agreed to spend the weekend with. The office was comfortable and casual and a little bit cluttered to flesh out its *Architectural Digest* bones. Utilitarian file cabinets lined up against a beautifully paneled wall just beneath a stretch of individually paned windows. The desks looked like antiques, but they were covered

with ultra-modern computer equipment and reams of paper. Samantha looked comfortable and at home in a pair of faded blue jeans and a battered NYU sweatshirt. Missy felt slightly less comfortable with the fact that the other woman couldn't seem to stop staring at her.

Finally, she gave up wandering around and pretending not to pay attention to them. She leaned up against Graham's desk to wait. Samantha looked away as soon as Missy met her eyes, making Missy frown. Did she have a stain on her shirt? Was her hair sticking up at odd angles? Missy was starting to feel like a sideshow freak or something, with all the sideways looks and tension.

The possible explanation for the odd behavior struck Missy as Graham finished signing a sheaf of paperwork and said goodbye to his secretary before leading Missy out the door.

As soon as the office door closed behind them, Missy brought up her suspicions as subtly as she could manage. "Do you have something going with your secretary?" she demanded.

Graham paused with his hand on the knob of another door and cast Missy an incredulous look. "With Sam? Of course not. What the hell made you think that?"

Missy shrugged. His reaction seemed perfectly innocent, but she couldn't think of any other way to explain the other woman's odd behavior. "I don't know. I just thought she seemed kind of...uncomfortable around me. Like she was expecting me to turn into some kind of wicked witch of the west, or something."

He opened the door and pulled two jackets out of the large hall closet, helping her slip one on. "You're imagining things," he said, tucking his own jacket under one arm while he rolled up the sleeves of the one he'd lent her until her hands finally poked out of the bottom. Thankfully the old denim was soft and pliable, so she didn't feel like a two year old in a snowsuit before he finished.

"I wasn't imagining the fact that she could barely stand to look me in the eye. I'm not totally clueless, you know."

"I never said you were." He shrugged into his coat and pulled open the main entrance door to let her outside. "That had nothing to do with you. Well, not directly, anyway. It's just Samantha."

"But—"

He cut her off with a sigh. "It's a little more complicated than a one word answer, so can we wait until I get some coffee in me? The diner's only a couple of blocks from here."

Reluctantly, Missy nodded. "I guess so, but I do want to know."

"And I promise to tell you, all right?" He smiled down at her and reached out to hold her hand in his. "For now, let's just enjoy the fresh air and the company."

Missy found herself smiling. "Is that your suavely polite way of telling me to shut up?"

He nodded, flashing his charming grin. "At least until after the coffee. Is it working?"

She shrugged and smiled, letting him guide her north along the quiet street.

It wasn't even six am, but already the city was grumbling awake. She could hear the sound of traffic seeping in from the edges of the neighborhood, smell the faint tinge of exhaust in the crisp morning air. The cold made her cheeks and nose tingle, and she stuffed her right hand in her pocket, but her left, held firmly in Graham's, stayed toasty warm.

She kept her questions to herself and just enjoyed the morning walk until a magenta-haired waitress seated them in a window-side booth with thick ceramic coffee mugs and plastic-covered menus. Once they were alone again, she gave in to her curiosity.

"All right. So what's up with you and Samantha?"

Graham tossed back half his coffee like a slug of whiskey, never mind the steam that curled up from the rim of the cup. He didn't seem to register the heat, but Missy couldn't help wincing. Even after adding four little creamer cups to her own mug, she still had to set it aside for a few minutes to let it cool.

"I told you, there's nothing 'up' with me and Samantha," he said. "She's an employee and a member of the pack. That's it."

"She's a werewolf, too, then?" she asked, but his nod just confused her further. "Then why did she look like she was afraid I'd jump her? She could probably spin me on one finger like a basketball."

He got a couple minutes of reprieve while the waitress came back to take their order, and Missy could almost see him sorting through explanations in his head as he looked for the best one.

He sighed when the waitress took their menus and headed back toward the kitchen. "She probably wasn't exactly afraid of you. She was just being cautious."

She gave him a look over her coffee cup. "You've said that, but you still haven't said why. I mean, I'm really about as non-threatening as you can get. Unless she has a mortal fear of the Alphabet Song."

"Like I said, it's...complicated."

"Mary Had a Little Lamb?"

"It's a Lupine thing," he began, pausing when she rolled her eyes.

"And I wouldn't understand? Is that what you're trying to say? Forgive me, but I think I'm quite capable of understanding if you'll do me the courtesy of explaining."

He tapped his fingers on the scratched Formica and frowned. "You don't sound a lot like a kindergarten teacher at the moment."

"Somehow I don't think you've associated with many since you were five," she said. "And don't change the subject. Just because I teach five-year-olds doesn't mean I'm okay with being treated like one. What is this big werewolf secret I wouldn't

understand?"

"It's not a secret, just a point of culture."

She leaned back when the waitress set their orders down, but she didn't look away. She wanted to know what was going on. "And?"

He studied her, and she set her shoulders and lifted her chin, determined to make clear her refusal to back down.

When he spoke, he sounded matter-of-fact and just a little bit cautious. "You're her new alpha. She was being cautious around you as a sign of respect. That's what the kiss was about, too."

"But you're her alpha, not me. I'm not even Lupine."

"Alphas come in pairs, male and female. I'm alpha male of the pack, but Samantha acknowledged you as alpha female, and Lupines call alpha females 'Luna' because they're as influential as the moon."

Missy wondered if the world would ever shift back onto its axis, because it had been off kilter since he'd first touched her the night before.

"I'm not Lupine," she repeated. "I'm not even a member of the pack. I can't be a leader in it."

Graham swallowed a mouthful of bacon. "Samantha obviously disagrees."

"She can't just decide to do that, can she? I mean —"

Missy's protest sputtered to a halt when Graham slid a forkful of fluffy eggs into her open mouth and leveled a stern glance at her.

"Can we not talk about Samantha, please?" He looked a little impatient, but at least he tried to be polite. "You're only giving me a weekend to win you over, and this particular conversation is cutting into my time." Missy nodded reluctantly — since she couldn't do much else with her mouth full — and he withdrew his fork. "Good. Now finish your breakfast. We're going to have a busy day."

Graham turned his attention right back to his meal, and Missy tried to pretend she didn't interpret that comment in an entirely sexual manner. But she still had to cross her legs and press her thighs together to ease the ache her imagination and his husky voice inspired.

She looked down at her plate and began spreading blackberry jam on her toast, more to keep her hands occupied than because she wanted to eat it. Somehow, the strain of the night had her craving protein, not toast. She forked up a bite of her asparagus and cheddar omelet and tried to behave like the idea of keeping busy in his bedroom all day had never crossed her mind.

"What are we planning to do?" She met his gaze with the most casual expression she could muster, but she still ended up blushing at the devilish glint in his eyes.

"Well, you won't move in with me until we get to know each other better," he said polishing off his eggs and digging his fork into a stack of pancakes. "So today,

you're going to show me everything there is to know about you. Then tomorrow, I'll show you everything there is to know about me. Monday, I'll help you pack."

Missy rolled her eyes and laughed, but she couldn't quite suppress the little voice inside her that wailed at the injustice of the fact that by Monday, he'd be sick of her and moving on to the next woman who caught his attention. That moment of truth was still two days away, and she sure didn't plan to waste this opportunity brooding about the way it would end. In fact, she didn't plan to waste a minute sharing all the boring details of her life just so he could get sick of her that much quicker. She planned to milk every drop of enjoyment out of their time together that she possibly could, and that did not mean letting him watch while she did her laundry or finished her grocery shopping. If she only had this one weekend with him, she wanted to spend it touching him. Preferably naked. And, even more preferably – horizontal.

Then, she'd spend next week holed up in her apartment, crying her way through box after box of tissues.

"Letting you know everything there is to know about me is not going to take all day," she said, pushing away her half-eaten meal, hoping the gesture looked more like she was preparing for something and less like her stomach had knotted up so hard she couldn't swallow. "In fact, I can tell you all about me in just a few short sentences."

The voice inside her head shrieked in protest, but Missy ignored it. She ignored her pounding heart, her shaking fingers and her suddenly dry mouth and prayed for the strength to seize what she knew would be the two best days of her life. *Okay*, she thought, taking a deep, trembling breath. *Here goes. Just don't let me look like an idiot. That's all I ask.*

Missy leaned back in the vinyl booth and stretched out her legs until she could hook her ankle around his calf and pull him closer. Then she gave him what she hoped was a seductive smile and lowered her not-quite-steady hands to her borrowed shirt, unfastening the first two buttons with slow, teasing motions. She saw him still, saw his eyes drop and fix on the pale skin newly bared by the partially unfastened shirt, and she felt a sense of power that made her smile widen.

"I just turned twenty-seven years old," she said, slipping her hand into the open placket of the shirt she wore and trailing her fingers along the pale skin from her throat to her modest cleavage and back again. His eyes followed the motion as if they were glued to it. "Only child. Born in Brooklyn, raised in Westchester County. Went to Sarah Lawrence. Degree in Early Childhood Education. Never broken a bone, but once sprained my wrist playing tennis. Haven't picked up a racket since."

She continued speaking, opening another button every few words. By the time she started telling him about her parents and the fact that she was mortally afraid of jellyfish, the dimple of her bellybutton was just visible in the opening of her shirt. She saw his jaw clench and circled her fingertip around the last remaining button. It and the knot in the shirt tails were the only things standing between her and her very first arrest.

“Allergic to shellfish, but adore catfish, especially blackened. Favorite musicians include Stevie Ray Vaughn, Sarah McLachlan and the Indigo Girls.”

She paid no attention to anyone around her, since none of them paid any attention to her. They lived in Manhattan, which meant one woman in a diner with her shirt hanging open but still covering all her vital parts didn't make front-page news. In fact, it probably wouldn't even make a blip on their radar.

Licking her lips, she rubbed her foot against his leg under the table and slowly, slowly unfastened that last button.

“I like long walks in the park, breakfast in bed on Sunday mornings and watching old musicals on DVD. Biggest turn-ons are confident men who know what they want, have a sense of humor and turn furry once a month.”

She shifted slightly, baring the center plane of her pale, smooth torso to his avid gaze. A low growl rumbled in his chest, and he clutched the table top in a white-knuckled grip, but she couldn't resist pressing just a little further.

Her eyes on his face, she pushed her shirt aside just far enough for him to see the inside curves of her breasts then ran her hands between them and down to the fastening of her jeans.

“Think you know enough about me yet?” she asked, her voice husky and purring and as taunting as her subtle striptease. “Or did you need something else?”

Her fingers flexed and the top button on her slacks popped open. Almost instantly, Graham's eyes blazed a vivid, glowing green and his arm shot into the air.

“Check, please!”

Chapter Seven

They made it back to his house in seven minutes flat, including calculating the waitress's tip, though Graham didn't so much calculate as throw her a wad of cash and drag Missy out the door before she could utter another word. After that stunt, she'd better not open her mouth again until she was ready for him to put something in it.

He managed to refrain from slinging her over his shoulder again only because they were already so close to home. But lest she think he wasn't impatient for her, he fell on her like an attacking pit bull the minute the front door closed behind them.

She landed on the entry carpet with a hard thump, and he heard the hiss when the impact managed to knock most of the air out of her lungs. Whatever she had left, he stole from her in a kiss so hot and wet and mind blowing he almost came just from the feel of her mouth under his. His lips moved against hers, firm and avid, while his tongue plunged deep to tangle with hers. She tasted of coffee and woman and the sweet, wild flavor of Missy, and he wanted to devour her. He swore she tasted even better than she had the night before. Richer. More intense. Maybe he was imagining it, but in the interest of accuracy, he figured he'd better make sure by conducting a few more tests. Taste tests.

Naked taste tests.

Growling in anticipation, he closed his hands over the knot holding her shirt closed and ripped it apart. Never mind he'd just reduced his own shirt to dust rags, because the treasure that lay under it was a hell of a lot more important to him. His hands clenched into fists as he spread the sides of the shirt and bared her breasts to his hungry gaze. Her nipples beaded even before he touched them, stabbing into the air like little pebbles and making his mouth water. He popped one between his lips quickly, before he started drooling in his enthusiasm.

She murmured and shifted beneath him, creating a distracting friction against the demanding inhabitant of his jeans. A growl rumbled deep in his chest, and he reached down to open her pants. Somehow the black material disintegrated under his hands. He hadn't intended to be that rough, but apparently his instincts couldn't care less about his intentions.

Missy didn't seem to mind, judging by the way her breathing sped up and her hands slid from his hair to his shoulders and then down his back, until she could grab handfuls of fabric and pull his shirttails from his waistband. He levered some of his weight off of her, bracing his palms against the oriental carpet that covered the hardwood floor. He gave her nipple a last, fond lick and began to nuzzle his way across her chest to her other breast.

He was right—her taste had gotten richer, sweeter, hotter since the night before, but he knew he'd have to taste another few select spots before he could confirm that theory. Her neglected nipple was only next on a very long list.

Halfway across her chest, when his nose hit that heated patch of flesh between her breasts where her scent had pooled, Graham froze. In that moment he knew for certain that her scent *had* gotten stronger, and he knew why.

Missy was fertile.

He held himself over her, poised and still and trembling with the effort of restraint, and fought to keep his beast far enough under wraps not to hurt her or rush her or send her screaming from his house in terror. His nostrils flared, and he inhaled deeply, unable to control the need to drink in her fragrance, even though every drop made it more difficult to restrain his impulses. He stood on a precipice, and he knew that if he didn't pull away from her now, this minute, and get as far out of range of her scent as possible, he would make her pregnant, and when that happened, their mate-bond would go from theoretical to irrevocable. After that, it wouldn't matter what she wanted, because Graham would never be able to let her go.

Missy whimpered beneath him. Her hands tore at his shirt, but the sturdy material held fast, and she slid her hands between their bodies to attack his buttons. One after the other, she slid them from their moorings until she could push the shirt off his shoulders and out of her way. Then she bowed her body upward and ran her warm, pink tongue over one of his flat nipples, and he knew he'd passed the irrevocable stage of their bond a long, long time ago. She was his, and now he would make sure that never changed.

With a fierce snarl, he reared back onto his knees, pulling away from her just long enough to rid himself of his clothes, tossing them away and falling on hers. He shredded the fabric with fingers whose tips had sharpened into claws, and scattered them across the hall floor. When all of her skin lay bared to him, he crouched back on his heels and licked his lips.

Missy stared up at him, her eyes glassy and narrowed, her lips parted to make way for her panting breaths. "Graham. I want you," she breathed, reaching up and twining her fingers in the silky-rough pelt of hair on his chest. She tugged, and he grunted at the sharp sting of pulled hair, but didn't move.

She frowned up at him. "Now," she said, her voice louder and firmer. "That wasn't a generalization; it was an invitation. So get moving."

His beast leapt forward at that, clearly intent on fucking her senseless, knocking her up and then howling his triumph to the waxing moon. Fortunately, Graham grabbed it by the throat before it could pounce and wrestled it into temporary submission. If he frightened her now, he risked a lot more than sexual frustration. He risked a lifetime of misery, because an unhappy mate did not bode well for their relationship.

“Do I have to make it an order?” Her eyes narrowed when he failed to give her immediate penetration, and when he continued to hesitate, she slid her hand down the slowly spreading patch of hair on his chest, down his abdomen until her fingers curled around his cock and squeezed firmly.

He nearly did howl at that. Her soft fingers felt so cool and silky wrapped around his heated skin, and when he looked down, he became transfixed by the sight of her small, pale hand against his flushed shaft and the deep brown of the fur he couldn't keep from spreading.

His jaw clenched so tightly, he thought it might snap. Desperately, he fought for control, fought to keep his beast pinned inside, no matter how fiercely it struggled for freedom. Graham knew that as surprisingly bold as his mate was turning out to be, she was still too human and too new to be faced with certain reminders of his Lupine nature. He figured he could pick a much better time to change in front of her for the first time than when she had her thighs spread and her hand wrapped around his cock. Now was not the right moment.

When her other hand slipped from his chest to his thigh and then darted between to cup his balls, his beast made another lunge, and Graham had to resort to a full-body tackle and to making a certain number of compromises just to keep it in check. His beast agreed to stay beneath the surface of his skin if Graham agreed to give up the internal debate and fuck her. When her slick, clinging muscles wrapped around his cock, his beast would content itself with that and stop with the foaming at the mouth bit. It was a truce Graham could definitely get behind.

Before he could reach for her, Missy's patience ran out. She dropped her hands, pushed herself up from the floor and glared straight into his eyes. “Did you break all those land speed records so you could admire my fine eyes, or could we get on with the more interesting stuff?”

His beast growled, and the smile he gave her felt feral. When his tongue darted out to lick his lips, it rubbed against the edge of his fangs, and he smiled wider. “Interesting,” he growled. “Very interesting.”

Then he lunged.

He dove for her like a wolf diving for the jugular of its prey. She jerked with the gracelessness of instinct and rolled away. He grinned and feigned a pounce, and she scrambled to her knees to eye him warily.

“What the heck are you doing?” she demanded.

“You said you liked men who get furry. I'm letting you see my furry side.”

Her eyes widened, and he watched as her posture shifted from aggressive to wary. He sniffed, testing the air, but he couldn't smell any of the bitter taint of fear marring her rich, sweet scent.

In fact, he thought, sniffing again, the vanilla's stronger. She's excited.

The idea made his body tighten—in some places more than in others—and he began to prowl slowly toward her. He kept his eyes on hers and paced closer, carnal

intent in every motion. She scooted backward, but the fact that she was still kneeling hampered her movements. He saw how she never took her eyes off him, but he also saw when her muscles began to bunch and tense as she prepared to get to her feet.

She never made it.

Before she could even get one sole on the carpet, he leapt and brought her down in a gentle flying tackle. Wrapping his arms around her and hugging her against his chest, he twisted in midair and landed beneath her, absorbing the impact on his shoulders and back. He had her back on the floor before she could even gasp her surprise, but she was gasping the very next minute when he flipped her onto her stomach, pulled her legs apart and wedged his knees between her spread thighs.

She reared beneath him, pushing up on her hands and craning her neck around to stare at him with wary eyes. "What are you doing?"

His answer consisted of a feral grin and his hands gripping her hips, jerking them up off the floor until she knelt on all fours in front of him. Then he leaned over her, blanketing her body with his until he could nip gently at her earlobe then slide past to nuzzle his cheek against hers. She shivered, and he followed it up with a lick that drew his tongue from her jaw all the way to her hairline.

"You said you liked me furry," he repeated, placing his hands over hers and pinning them to the floor when she would have tried to scramble away. "You said you wanted me. Did you change your mind?"

He closed his teeth around the nape of her neck and held on when a shiver raced down her spine. His tongue darted out to taste the warm skin, and her scent rose to tease him, filling his senses with her sweet, heavy perfume. Every time they touched, her fragrance got stronger, more filled with honey and vanilla and the indescribable richness of her fertility. It told him how much she wanted him, but more than that, it identified her as his mate, because no other woman had ever affected him like this. No Lupine, and certainly no human. He'd never experienced a scent like hers, one that told him how ripe she was, and how welcome his seed would be inside her womb. The idea of his pup growing beneath the soft curve of her belly stretched his cock to the point of pain, and he knew he needed to be inside her soon.

"Did you change your mind?" he demanded, scraping his teeth along the sensitive column of her spine. She quaked beneath him, and her head dropped forward in a submissive gesture that made the beast within him roar in triumph. He had to fight not to bite harder, sink his teeth deeper. His beast wanted to mark her pretty skin, and lust had his mind so clouded he could barely remember why that was such a bad idea.

"No," she whimpered, snapping him out of his fog with a surge of triumph. "I want you, Graham. Please."

Her words whispered faintly, even to his keen senses, but he still heard, and he still snarled in satisfaction.

"Then take me," he growled. And thrust.

She screamed, but the sound didn't faze him. He barely heard her over the deafening pleasure of feeling her slick heat close tight around him. His cock tunneled through her dripping passage like water through a pipe, expanding to fill her until she threatened to overflow. He grunted when she thrust back against him, savoring the smooth curve of her back as it arched into his blanketing chest. Her hands twisted beneath his, trying to pull free, but he pinned her easily. Holding her still for his ravenous thrusts.

Leaning forward, he closed his mouth over her shoulder, pinning her in place as his beast demanded, barely refraining from marking her. He ground his hips hard against her cushioning bottom, pushing so deeply into her he could feel her cervix at the bottom of each hard glide. The echo of her scream had died, fading into the gasps and pleading murmurs that drove him deeper into his possessive frenzy. His beast may have agreed to remain under his skin, but it hadn't promised not to control his actions.

Growling low in his chest, he closed his teeth harder against her skin in warning, commanding her to stay still for his pleasure. His hands lifted from hers and hovered for a moment, waiting to slam hers back into place, but she never moved them. She simply locked her elbows and used the leverage to thrust harder back on his pumping cock. Greedily, his hands took advantage of their freedom, sliding up to squeeze her breasts and tease the firm nipples with twisting pinches.

Missy moaned and trembled beneath him. Her arms collapsed under her, and she landed on her elbows with a gasping cry. The position thrust her hips higher into the air, canted her dripping, clinging cunt to a new angle and allowed him to slide even deeper with every pounding thrust. Rearing back from her, he grabbed her hips in his hands, careful not to pierce her skin with the claws he couldn't keep from emerging. His firm grip held her in place and held her upright when her knees, too, would have slid out from under her.

Pinning her in place, he fucked her with hard, ruthless digs. His beast gloried in the tight clasp of her moisture-slicked muscles, in the whimpers and yelps that tore from her throat and echoed in the empty hall. Her noises sounded like mate cries in his ears. They made his balls draw up tighter, made his spine tingle and fingers clench until they bruised her soft flesh. He rammed his pelvis against her gorgeous ass and listened to the sound of his mate approaching orgasm. He felt her muscles tensing and trembling, felt her temperature soar, felt the rippling of her inner muscles grow more intense. He inhaled deeply, and her hot vanilla scent exploded in his head just as a scream exploded from her lips.

Bucking beneath him, she ground her hips against his as her cunt clenched hard around his burrowing cock, milking it with powerful, ecstatic ripples. Graham threw back his head and howled, driving into her with even greater force. He felt the head of his cock knocking against the mouth of her womb as her cervix pulsed down to meet him. The rich fragrance of her musk advertised her ripe fertility, and he exploded, pouring her full of his seed while the image of his child making her stomach jut out before her flashed behind his eyes.

With a satisfied growl, he relaxed and let his weight carry them both to the carpet. She sprawled bonelessly beneath him, panting for air even as her cunt continued to shiver around his softening cock. He growled, a soft, satisfied sound, and laid his hands over hers, lacing their fingers together in an intimate knot. She murmured something unintelligible and shifted beneath him, rubbing her skin along his as if savoring the sensation.

He hummed his approval and nuzzled her neck, licking her salty-sweet skin and nipping gently at her earlobe. "Mine," he whispered, squeezing her hands gently in his.

Her muscles tensed briefly against his, and he rolled his hips against her, emphasizing the connection of his semi-erect shaft still clasped tight inside her. He felt the shiver that raced down her spine and nipped again, a little harder this time.

"Mine." And this time it was more growl than whisper.

She turned her head and opened her eyes to meet his, which he knew were probably glowing green and possessive above her. She licked her dry lips. "Yours." She agreed so softly it barely qualified as a whisper.

"Damn it. He always gets the good ones."

* * * * *

Missy jerked beneath Graham's heavy weight and yelped at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. Her gaze shot to the door in front of her, the one that led to Graham's library and the hidden passage to Vircolac. A tall, dark haired man stood in the doorway, wearing a hungry, envious expression on his handsome face and an obvious erection beneath his faded jeans. Missy saw him and yelped again.

"What do you want?" Graham demanded, not making a move to get off her or even to separate their bodies. Missy understood the not getting off her bit, since it would have left her totally naked in the middle of the suddenly crowded room, but she didn't understand the fact that he stayed buried between her thighs and even pressed his hips more firmly against her ass while the other man stood staring down at them.

"Graham!" she hissed, while she tried to pull her hands free from his. "Aren't you going to ask him to leave?"

He pinned her hands to the carpet and ignored her question. "Logan, get your eyes off of her and tell me what you want."

The man named Logan ignored the first half of the order, ogling the swell of her breasts where her position crushed them against the floor. "You didn't answer your intercom when I tried to page you, and I had news. Of course, now I see *why* you didn't answer..."

Missy glared at the interloper and squirmed to free herself from Graham's hold. "Tell him he can come back and tell you his news after we're both dressed," she told her possessive werewolf, but he didn't bother to respond. The only muscle he moved was the one that was slowly hardening and lengthening inside her.

“Yeah, I’ve been a little busy,” Graham said dryly. “And I’d like to continue being busy for another three or four hours—”

Three or four hours? Missy felt her mouth go dry and her thigh muscles lodge a formal complaint. She tried again to scoot away from Graham, but he held her still and rolled his hips against hers as he continued speaking.

“—So why don’t you tell me whatever you think is so important and then get lost?”

He punctuated his suggestion by sliding a knee between Missy’s thighs and pressing them wide apart so he could sink deeper into her. A heated rush of emotion raced through her, so tangled she couldn’t really figure out what exactly she was emoting. Anger and arousal and embarrassment and excitement all blended together into a thick, soupy morass of feeling until she couldn’t decide whether to elbow Graham in the eyeball and run for cover, or to throw back her head, lift her hips and fuck him right there in front of his friend.

Judging by the hot, avid look in the friend’s eyes, she could guess what his vote would be.

Hot and confused, she lay beneath her werewolf lover and did the only thing she really *could* do. She let him have his way.

Graham used one knee to force her thigh high and to the side so he could sink another breathless fraction of an inch into her pussy. She tried to bite back a moan at the feel of him tickling her sensitized walls, but he accompanied his leisurely thrust with the glide of his hand between her and the floor until he cupped one breast in his hand and squeezed the nipple between two callused fingers. A moan escaped against her will, and her eyes flew to Logan’s face while she flushed crimson in embarrassment. She couldn’t believe Graham was making love to her while a man she’d never met before stood in the doorway and watched! And she couldn’t believe that she was actually looking at said man and meeting his gaze while her lover plowed rhythmically into her body, but there was something about Logan that made it impossible to look away.

Maybe it was because he looked so much like Graham, she thought, trying desperately to distract herself from the tension building in her well-used pussy. Both men had the same massive, broad-shouldered, slim-hipped build, the same air of lazy grace when they moved. Logan was darker than Graham; his hair lacked the toffee colored streaks that highlighted Graham’s, but he had the same dark stubble even in the middle of the day, and his eyes glowed with the same feral light she saw in Graham’s whenever her lover was angry or excited. Or aroused. That meant Logan was another Lupine, and a hungry Lupine at that.

She gulped. A slow grin spread across Logan’s face, curving his well-defined lips in a wicked smile. Casually, as if she weren’t watching—or maybe as if she were—he reached down and adjusted the fit of his jeans, which only served to draw her attention to that impressive bulge.

“I don’t suppose you’re in the mood to share?”

Missy caught her breath and tensed, every morsel of erotic curiosity withering inside her. It was one thing to contemplate the other man's physical attraction, but the minute he uttered the words, her mind, heart and body gave them a resounding veto. She had no desire for any man but Graham, no matter how sexy the other man might be.

Graham spared her a protest by narrowing his eyes and answering Logan with a menacing growl. "Don't ask stupid questions, Hunter. Especially not when you already know the answers."

Missy shivered in relief, and would have relaxed, but Graham continued his sexual torment, firmly grasping her other breast and kneading the soft mound with possessive fingers. She got the feeling he did it for more reasons than that he liked her unimpressive breasts. It was a mark of ownership to him, a warning that no matter what Logan might want, everything Graham touched belonged to him, the alpha, and beta Logan would have to find his own woman.

Logan sighed and nodded, and just like that, it was as if someone had flipped a switch. Instead of devouring the sight of Missy sprawled on the hall carpet being fucked within an inch of her life by a horny and unabashed werewolf, the beta fixed his gaze on the wall behind them, straightened his spine and pretended that she wasn't even there.

Graham nodded and hunched his hips higher against Missy's pliant bottom. "Now tell me what the hell is going on, and then get the fuck out."

"It looks like our Curtis is a little bit over-confident," Logan said. "He wants to go into the Howl with new contenders all lined up. He told the rest of the pack tonight is a matehunt."

Missy heard Graham swear, something soft and sibilant and extremely vile, but she almost drowned him out with her own gasp. His fingers clenched hard, pinching like metal clamps around her firm nipples, and the wave of pleasure-pain that washed through her almost sent her over the edge. As it was, her eyes drifted shut, and she forgot all about the other man in the room. All she could remember was the feel of Graham's cock sliding in and out of her damp pussy and his rough, tender hands clasping her breasts. Around her, the men continued to talk. She heard their words, but they had no meaning compared to the hot, aching itch that tingled through her sensitive clit. She moaned, and Graham gentled his grasp, unclenching his fingers and rolling her nipples softly between them.

"He can't do that," Graham growled, his hips slapping against Missy's with a force that took her breath away. She could feel the anger in him, but she didn't fear it. "He's already called a howl against every one of our customs. Now he thinks he can call the matehunt, as well? That little shit needs to be taught a lesson."

"You'll have to teach it at the hunt," Logan said. "The females are already arriving, and from what they tell me, the males who have been out of town are on their way back. There's not much we can do to keep it from happening now."

“Shit.”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

Graham’s movement stilled, and Missy whimpered in protest, pushing her hips back against him to try and encourage his thrusts. He braced one arm on the carpet in front of her and stroked her hair with the other, murmuring soothing noises even as he continued his conversation with Logan. “Okay, so did you come in here just to ruin my day, or do you have a suggestion for how we should deal with this?”

“I don’t think we have much choice but to go along with it. If you call it off, it will look like you couldn’t control Curtis well enough to keep him from issuing orders without your consent. And if you let it go but don’t participate, you get the same problem, plus the pack will wonder if Curtis has a point and Breeders Rights should be invoked.”

“Translation: I’m fucked coming or going.”

“Basically.”

Frustrated, impatient, and not understanding a word of what was being said, Missy decided she’d had enough. If Graham was going to get her all hot and bothered in front of a stranger, he damn well wasn’t going to get away with leaving her that way while he discussed obscure Lupine traditions. He had started this little exhibitionistic fiasco, and he could darn well finish it.

Leaning down, she drew her tongue over the hairy, warm surface of his forearm and followed with the teasing scrape of her teeth. She heard a pause in his speech and took it a step further.

“Fine,” she heard him say as she snaked one hand around behind her to stroke against the smooth, sensitive skin of his hip. The muscles tensed beneath her fingers, and she smiled. “We’ll go ahead with the hunt. I’ll make sure I catch the right one. That should take care of most of Curtis’ plans, right?”

“With luck,” Logan answered as Missy dragged her fingernails in a sensual pattern against bare flesh. “Anything that’s still a concern can be answered at the howl, I would think.”

“Ri-iiiiight.”

Graham’s voice broke and stuttered as Missy let out a deep breath and deliberately clenched her inner muscles hard around his swollen cock. She heard the tremor in his voice and grinned, relaxing and then rippling again, allowing her pussy to milk Graham’s cock with a slow, sensuous massage. Looking up, she saw Logan watching her out of the corner of his eyes, and she raised her brows deliberately. The beta cleared his throat.

“Is there anything else you need?” he asked, fixing his gaze politely on the opposite wall. Missy clenched again, and Graham’s only response was a hoarse growl and the soft, grunting noise he made as he renewed his thrusting rhythm in Missy’s aching cunt.

"I think that's all," Missy said, her voice brazen, even though she couldn't keep the heat from rushing to her cheeks. She rolled her hips in blatant encouragement and moaned. "You can go now."

She wasn't quite sure where that tone of command had come from, but maybe it was the same place where she'd gotten this ridiculous, latent exhibitionist streak. In any event, she didn't really care, so long as it worked, and it seemed to. Logan nodded and gave her one last wistful glance just as Graham uttered a fierce growl and clamped his teeth on Missy's vulnerable shoulder. She threw her head back on a cry, but from beneath her half-lowered lashes, she saw Logan suck in a deep breath, shudder and readjust the fit of his jeans. Then she didn't see anything, but she vaguely heard the click of Logan closing the library door behind him over the rumbling in Graham's chest and the broken cadence of her own gasping cries as he lowered his weight onto her back and began fucking her in earnest.

His cock sliced into her like a blade, and she bucked hard, at once trying to escape him and to get closer. He met her with even heavier thrusts until the tension coiling inside her snapped, and she melted around him like cream on a hot summer day, thick and moist and liquid. She desperately sucked in air to feed her starving lungs, throwing her head back until it rested on Graham's shoulder. Her body arched tight and curved like a bow against his, and his sharp, white teeth sank possessively in the flesh of her narrow shoulder while he emptied his cum inside her. His climax went on and on in breathtaking pulses that seemed to last forever. Over and over she felt flooded by him until finally he shuddered and then fell back to the carpet in a sticky, sweaty mass of very sated flesh.

Feeling limp and exhausted, she offered no protests when Graham rolled to his side and drew her against him, curling protectively around her much smaller body. She hoped drowsily that no one would walk in on them this time, but when he used one of his large, powerful hands to brush the hair tenderly from her face and his warm, raspy tongue soothed the mark he'd left on her shoulder, she almost decided she didn't care if someone did.

Must be that exhibitionist streak.

Chapter Eight

When she finally got dressed—in a second set of borrowed clothing—Missy padded down to the first floor and peered cautiously into Graham's study. He'd told her he'd wait there for her because he needed to talk to her about something. She tried to ignore the knot in her stomach that insisted he planned to tell her how disgusting he thought she was for behaving that way in front of Logan. He wanted to tell her he'd changed his mind about having her stay this weekend, and he'd call her a cab, but she had to get out of his house before she made him sick.

Okay, calm down, she urged herself, pausing outside the door and taking a deep breath. I doubt he's going to tell you he's disgusted by something he started, so don't panic. Whatever happens, happens. You knew going in that this wasn't permanent, so don't whine about it ending sooner than you hoped. Just think about the memories he's leaving you with. You're lucky to have those. No sense in getting greedy and wanting him, too.

Her inner voice made a lot of sense, but that didn't mean Missy liked what it had to say. She knew very well that her arrangement with Graham was never meant to go beyond the weekend, but that hadn't kept her from hoping. She knew she was a closet romantic, but this seemed kind of ridiculous. They had great sex together, but nothing would convince her that a man like Graham couldn't have great sex anytime he wanted, with anyone he wanted. He certainly didn't need her around.

Tugging the hem of her donated shirt, Missy pushed the depressing thoughts from her mind and stepped into the study, knocking softly on the doorframe.

Graham glanced up from a pile of papers and looked her over. Her T-shirt was a little too snug, and the jeans a pack member had lent her were a size too big everywhere except around her butt, so the waist had an alarming tendency to slip down and let her navel play peek-a-boo with the outside world. Before today, none of Missy's parts had ever played peek-a-boo with anyone. She tugged again at the shirt hem, and his eyes followed the movement. She felt his gaze like fingers on her skin and even before she looked up to see them glowing, she felt the heat they radiated.

"Than—" She broke off on a squeak, cleared her throat and tried again. "Um, thanks for finding me something else to wear. I feel like I'm raiding the closets of every woman you know." Then it occurred to her just how many women he knew, and she quickly changed the subject. "Catching up on paperwork?"

She nodded to the documents he'd been looking over and played nonchalant. His expression told her how obvious her ploys were, but he went along with it.

"No. My manager is handling the club for the rest of the weekend. This is just a time killer until you finished getting dressed."

Missy shrugged and buried her hands in the front pockets of her jeans, then quickly pulled them out again. Pushing down on that particular garment was a bad idea, though the look in Graham's eyes when they followed the movement said he approved. Heartily.

"Well, I'm dressed. What's next? I'm not hungry enough to order Chinese, but didn't you say something about watching movies? I really want to see the new horror flick that just came out."

Graham rose from his seat behind the desk and took her hand, leading her away from the door and tugging her to sit beside him on the sofa. When he didn't say anything, she started to get nervous.

"Oh, wait. Something came up, right? Wasn't that why your friend...um...dropped in?" She winced at the memory. Maybe he really did think she was a slut. "So that means you're going to be really busy for the rest of the weekend and you have to cancel. It's okay. I understand. You'll call when you get free to reschedule, so I should just wait to hear from you. Okay. Let me just grab my purse—"

She made it almost off the sofa before Graham closed one strong hand around her elbow and tugged her back down, straight onto his lap and this time pinning her in place.

"You aren't going anywhere," he grumbled, and Missy saw the glowy green thing was happening to his eyes again. "I am going to be busy this weekend, but you're going to be busy with me. We're not nearly done yet."

Missy thought about her sore thigh muscles and the ache between her legs—that for once was *not* caused by lust...at least, not by a resurgence of lust—and her eyes widened.

"We've got a whole bunch of things to talk about, and not a lot of time, so you get the Reader's Digest condensed version. Listen up."

She couldn't quite decipher the reaction she felt to having him clarify that, "we're not done yet" to mean they weren't done talking, rather than they weren't done with sex. If the idea of more sex aroused her, she'd be a masochist, because walking had already become an interesting challenge, but if it didn't disappoint her just a little, she figured she wouldn't be female. "All right. Fine. But can I get off your lap first?"

He tightened his arms and shook his head. "No. So did you hear any of what Logan had to tell me?"

Missy blinked, scowled and crossed her arms over her chest. Then she processed the question and blushed a rather unique shade of crimson. "Do we have to talk about that?"

Graham looked puzzled. "Well, yes. Why wouldn't we?"

Rolling her eyes and wishing she lived in the alternate reality her Lupine friend seemed to inhabit, Missy fixed her gaze on the rich, brown leather of the sofa and gritted her teeth around her answer. "Because I find it a little humiliating to remember

being screwed on a hallway carpet by a man I just met in full view of another man to whom I have never been introduced. But maybe I'm just funny that way."

His chuckle made her eyes narrow and her fist swing, but he caught the blow before it could impact against his chest. "Ah. I understand."

He raised her hand to his mouth and nibbled the backs of her knuckles, which only succeeded in making her angrier. Damn him for still being able to arouse her even with the memory of that embarrassment fresh in her mind.

"You're not being funny, just human." He grinned. "Sorry, but I forgot about that little quirk of yours."

"Quirk?"

He ignored her yelp and freed her hand so he could pull aside her shirt collar and examine the reddened bruise where he'd bitten her. She'd seen it when she changed and had wiped away the faint traces of blood that had dried there. All in all, it looked worse than it actually was.

"Quirk," he repeated, tracing the faint marks left by his teeth. "It's easy for me to forget you're human when you smell so damned good, but then you get all embarrassed about something perfectly natural, like sex, and it all comes back to me. You people are so weird about that."

"Weird!?"

He leaned forward to lave the bruise with his tongue and made her almost swallow hers. "Yeah. See, Lupines aren't embarrassed by sex. It's natural and healthy, not to mention a hell of a lot of fun. We've all seen mates fucking since the time we were pups, and we don't really see any reason to bother with the kind of inhibitions you humans like to wrap yourselves in."

"I am not wrapped in inhibitions," Missy protested, struggling for dignity while her bare toes curled and her belly launched its newly familiar tumbling routine. "I'm not ashamed of sex, but that doesn't mean I want strangers to watch me having it."

Graham's hand slid under the loose waistband of her jeans and cupped her warm mound. His fingertip briefly tickled her dark curls before sliding between her lips and finding the moisture hidden there. "Now, now. Tell the truth, Melissa," he sing-songed as he closed his teeth around her earlobe and tugged delicately. "Having Logan watch us turned you on."

"It did not." She wrapped her fingers around his wrist and pulled hard, but his hand stayed buried between her legs, and he slid one finger deeper to press against her opening.

"Liar. I was right there. Right *here*." His finger penetrated, sliding deep, the rough, callused surface abrading her already tender interior walls. "I felt you shudder around my cock. It didn't feel like disgust to me."

She bit back a moan, her nails digging into the leather upholstery. "I-i-it was surprise."

"No, *this* is what surprise feels like." His finger withdrew in a reluctant glide and suddenly thrust back, three fingers this time that stretched and filled her. Her head fell back on a moan even as her muscles clamped around him. "I recognize surprise. I also recognize pleasure." One nail lightly scraped inside her, and she gasped. "And want." His fingers worked forward and backward in a relentless sawing motion that brought tears to her eyes and set her pussy on fire for him. "And need."

"Graham!"

His fingers thrust hard, his thumb pressed against her clit, and he screwed his hand against her so his little finger rubbed lightly against her perineum. She shuddered.

He bent over her until she felt his breath against the mark he'd made on her shoulder, and his voice sounded in her ear like the voice of temptation itself. "You weren't hot and wet because you were embarrassed, Melissa. You didn't press back against me in disgust. Your pussy didn't cream around me out of anger. Having Logan standing there watching us made you hot."

She whimpered a protest, even as her hips lifted toward him, pressing against his clever fingers in a blatant demand for more.

"Admit it, Melissa." His voice was a growl and a purr, and it caressed her hot skin with puffs of humid air. He screwed his fingers deeper, ruthlessly driving her higher and closer to the precipice. "You liked it when he watched us. You saw how hard it made him, how much he liked watching you. How he loved seeing you pinned to the floor while I fucked you from behind like the big, bad wolf."

His hand closed around her thigh in a grip just short of bruising and shifted it to the side, spreading her wide and giving him more room to play with her dripping pussy. His thumb pressed harder, moved in tighter circles around her engorged clit and sent clenching bursts of pleasure straight to her womb.

"No," she muttered, shaking her head. Beneath the frantic haze of her arousal, she knew he was right. She *had* been aroused when Graham fucked her in front of Logan. She'd have been aroused if he'd fucked her in front of the Pope, but her conscience didn't like having to admit it.

"Yes." He shifted his thumb to pinch her clit against her pubic bone, and she shuddered and squirmed to get away. He didn't let her move an inch, unless it was an inch closer to him. "You loved it. And you loved it even more when I told him I wasn't sharing."

The tension inside her built to the breaking point, to the point where she was ready to shove her *own* hand down her jeans just to finish herself off. He caught her wrists in his free hand and held them captive as if he sensed her thoughts. She moaned and pressed herself harder onto his thrusting fingers.

"I'll never share," he growled. "No one else will ever touch you the way I'm touching you. I'll kill anyone who tries."

She heard the violence in his tone, but he kept her too hot to care.

“And the reason for that, Melissa Jane,” he continued turning his head so that his lips brushed hers and his luminescent eyes burned as they stared at her heavy-lidded brown ones, “is because –” He punctuated his words with a hard dig of his fingers and a firm press against her clit.

“You.”

Thrust.

“Are.”

Twist.

“My.”

Press.

“Mate!”

He shoved his three fingers deeply inside, and held them there while her orgasm consumed her. She broke apart, raining down on him in tiny little fragments, each of which pulsed with the heavy rush of blood in her spasming pussy. She sobbed and curled her hands into fists and moaned her pleasure into his mouth when he caught hers for a hungry, possessive kiss.

She tore her lips from his after a few seconds, desperate to catch her breath. His shoulder offered her a hiding place and a refuge while she tried to put her scattered wits back together, and he held her there tenderly. He released her wrists, and she curled her trembling arms around his neck, feeling his finger slip from between her legs, ruffle affectionately through her curls and then slide around her waist to cuddle her close. He petted her like a kitten, and she found it soothing. At least, until her brain kicked back into gear.

“I’m your *what?*”

Her head spun around so fast that she knocked him in the nose with her forehead, and Graham winced.

“My – ow! – mate. Hey! Hold still before you cause any permanent damage.” He pinned her arms to her sides and scowled down at her. “Like I was saying –”

“I don’t want you to say anything else, since you aren’t making the slightest bit of sense. What I want –”

It was his turn to interrupt, so he shook her gently. “What do you think I’m trying to do? But you need to shut up long enough for me to get a word in edgewise, okay?”

Her teeth clicked shut, and he glared at her for another minute before he seemed satisfied that she intended to behave. “If you’d been listening when Logan and I were talking –”

“You were having sex with me!” Her disbelief mixed with embarrassment and exploded into something that looked a lot like anger. “How was I supposed to listen to anyone –?”

Graham slapped his hand over her mouth and gave her a reprimanding look. “If you’d been listening,” he continued, arching the cup of his hand to avoid her sharp

teeth, "you would have heard what was going on, and all of this would make a lot more sense."

Ha! She'd believe *that* when she heard it. She crossed her arms over her chest and arched an eyebrow over his fingers.

"Logan has been keeping me up to date on some trouble a lesser member of the pack is causing. Unfortunately, the upstart gamma in question is my cousin, Curtis."

Missy subsided from fulminating into listening. She was just constitutionally unable to not give anyone the benefit of the doubt. She inclined her head for him to go on.

"It turns out that Curtis thinks he'd make a better alpha than I do."

She snorted, and Graham grinned.

"Thanks. That's what I think, too. Anyway, alphas aren't like elected presidents or anything. Our packs operate a lot like wolf packs. Alphas earn their position by being the strongest, and if another Lupine wants to be alpha, he or she has to prove their worth by beating the current alpha in a fight. And no, there's no way my cousin could beat me."

She rolled her eyes at his arrogance, but inside she admitted she couldn't really picture *anyone* beating Graham in a fight, fair or foul.

"But like the spineless little coward he is," Graham continued, "Curtis has come up with another way that he thinks he can use to have me ousted. There's an old Lupine tradition that says only Lupines with mates can be alphas of their pack. My cousin thinks he can force me to step down because I had never chosen a mate. Until now."

His eyes, deep and green and glowing locked onto her and made Missy's stomach clench. They made some lower things clench, too.

"Now," Graham said, leaning toward her until his forehead rested against hers and she could feel his breath tickling her face where it wasn't covered by his hand, "the rules no longer apply. Because now, I *have* a mate. I have you."

She had to let the rumble of his voice settle before her muscles could relax and his meaning could penetrate. And that's when she bit him. Hard.

"Shit!" Graham jerked his hand from her mouth and shook it, then examined the delicate teeth marks she'd left in the fleshy part of his palm. "What the hell was that for, you little savage?"

Missy pushed herself off his lap, planted her hands on her hips and glared at him. With him still on the sofa and her standing on the ground, she was almost taller than him. No more craning her neck while she chewed him out.

"Don't call me a savage, you barbarian!" she countered. "I'm not the one who figuratively just whacked someone over the head with a mastodon bone and dragged her by her hair all the way to his cave. What do you mean you 'have' me? Did I miss the part where I get to have a say in whose 'mate' I am?"

Graham rubbed the marks in his hand with the opposite thumb and frowned. "I'm Lupine, not Libertarian. You don't get sole dominion over your life when you mate with a werewolf."

"And that is just the point. I did *not* mate with a werewolf. I don't remember doing anything of the sort."

His eyes narrowed. "If you want me to ruin another set of clothes, I could refresh your memory."

"Don't be an ass," she dismissed. "That was sex. Your definition of mate seems to include a lot more than that, buster. You aren't talking about the verb anymore. You're getting all noun-y here."

Missy watched while his mouth tightened and he crossed his arms over his broad chest. "And what if I am?"

"Then we need to talk about it," she said. "You can't just *announce* that I'm your mate. That's like just *announcing* that we're married. It doesn't work like that. You have to ask first."

Graham snorted. "Maybe humans ask, but like I said, I'm not human."

She glared at him, drawing herself up to her full height, which wasn't much, but which made her feel better. "Yeah, well, I am, so you can't just treat me like some cocker spaniel. I don't take orders from men who don't ask my opinion about the important things."

"It doesn't matter what your opinion is. It doesn't even matter what my opinion is," he growled. "We're mates. It's a fact. There's no asking, no negotiating, no backing out. It's a done deal, and you'd damned well better get used to it, or I can't be responsible for what happens tonight."

She opened her mouth for another tirade, but his words stopped her. She eyed him suspiciously. "Why? What happens tonight?"

"I was trying to explain that before you decided to strike the latest blow for feminism."

She ignored the tense, snappish tone of his growl and took a step back until she could perch on the edge of the coffee table. "Fine. Finish explaining, then. But it doesn't change the fact that I am *not* your mate."

He snarled at her, the corner of his mouth kicking up to reveal his even, white teeth and the extent of his foul mood. "You'd damned well better hope you are my mate, otherwise you won't like what happens to you tonight. We're going to a matehunt, sweetheart, and if you don't let everyone know you're already taken, you're going to get *a lot* closer acquainted to *a lot* more werewolves than just me."

His threat made her eyes widen and her muscles stiffen. "What are you talking about? What's a matehunt?"

"A matehunt is what Logan came to tell me about. It's what Cousin Curtis is pulling next," Graham explained, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees

until he got so close she could feel the heat radiating off of him like a pool of lava. She swallowed hard, then did it again when he grinned at the show of nerves. Only his grin didn't look amused. It looked predatory.

"A matehunt is a traditional way for my kind to form breeding pairs," he explained. His voice was low and rumbling and more than a bit threatening. "It's where all the unmated members of the pack gather in the nearest wooded area, Central Park in our case, and the females get a thirty second head start."

"F-for what?" she stammered. His eyes burned into her and made her shiver. She shivered harder when he chuckled evilly.

"For making the hunt more exciting," he murmured smoothly. "Because after thirty seconds, the males shift into our wereforms. Then we're turned loose, and we go hunting."

Her eyes opened even wider. Her jaw dropped to her chin, and her breath stopped dead in her throat.

"And do you know what we do when we catch a female, Melissa Jane?" He purred it. Not the way a kitten purrs when it gets its belly rubbed, but the way a lion purrs when it's ripping through the tender belly of its prey.

She shook her head and squeezed the edge of the table like a stress ball.

"We fuck them."

Darting forward so quickly she couldn't have stopped him if she tried, Graham nipped her earlobe hard enough to sting. Missy yelped and jumped and tried to squirm away, but Graham was too fast. Before the command even traveled from her brain to her legs, he was on her, pushing her back on the table and pinning her there, crouching over her like a wolf over its prey.

"We pick the one we want for a mate," he continued, holding her hands firmly against the cool wood and subduing her struggles with easy strength. "We chase her down. And we fuck her. There's no seduction, no asking what she wants. She knows what she's in for when she decides to run, and once she does, she can't back out. When the males give chase, they're in rut. Their instincts are in control, and there's no werewolf alive who can control his need to mate when he's in rut. If a hunt didn't end in sex, it would end in death. Which do you think is a better choice?"

Missy froze beneath him. The open savagery of what he was describing seemed so foreign, so incomprehensible to her. It fascinated her even as it frightened her.

"But deaths are rare," he continued, voice harsh, eyes glinting. "They only happen occasionally, when more than one of us wants the same woman. Do you know what happens then, Melissa Jane?"

Missy whimpered. He loomed over her until he blocked out the rest of the room, not that she would have been able to focus on anything but him. He filled her senses like air filled her lungs, and she was starting to believe he might be just as vital.

"If she's fast enough, she might run again until another male catches her and fucks her. But if she's too hurt or too tired to run anymore, or if one of the males who caught her is the one she wants, she just lays there and watches while we fight over her. It's not usually to the death, but you can never tell. Some Lupines are just more...aggressive than others."

She trembled, trying not to picture the dark forest, the smell of rich soil and fresh blood, the sound of fangs biting and claws ripping, or growls and screams and the eerie silence of victory.

"Then whoever wins gets to fuck you again, only by that point, the winner is usually more beast than man, and he's not likely to care about your pleas for mercy. All he wants is to fuck, and the only thing he wants to fuck is you."

He leaned down until his words growled directly into her ear and from there directly into her womb, which twitched and spasmed and sent rivulets of moisture to dampen her rippling pussy and the crotch of her jeans.

"At that point, his beast is in control, not his man, and beasts aren't known to be tender lovers. They fuck hard and fast and brutal, and they do it over and over until the sun comes up and dispels the hunt magic from the air. By that time you may or may not be able to walk, but it won't matter, because the winner will have you declared his mate, and he'll have as long as he wants to work off the residual hunt lust. I hear it only takes a week or two. On average."

She closed her eyes and shuddered, then squeezed them tight because she knew he felt it and didn't want to see the look on his face while he taunted her.

"Hmm. Was that fear, I wonder? Or arousal?" He nuzzled the tender hollow of her neck and rasped the sensitive skin with his tongue. "Because you'd be smart to be afraid. Lupines, like wolves, are pack hunters. Sometimes if the female is especially sought after, they'll work in teams to bring her down. Four or five, or even six Lupines will hunt her together, and they'll all take turns fucking her before they fight. After all, since they all helped catch her, it's only fair that they should all get at least one taste."

His tongue licked a damp path across her throat to lave against the bite mark he'd left there. He scraped his teeth over it with exquisite delicacy before he lapped his way up to her ear. He tugged lightly at the plump lobe, swirled his tongue along the outer edge and breathed quietly inside, "I have a feeling you'd be *very* sought after."

Missy whimpered, unsure if it was from fear or anger. His quiet threats and overwhelming strength finally snapped her control, and she flew into a fury, bucking and writhing and kicking to try and free herself from his grasp. It was a futile effort, especially considering he already had her hands pinned, but she fought until he used his weight to subdue her, stretching his body along hers and pinning her in place.

"Maybe now you can see some advantages to being my mate," he growled, rearing up to give her a stern look of warning. "We *will* be going to the hunt tonight, Missy, but if you go as my mate, I can keep you safe."

She glared up at him, fuming. "I'd be safer if I didn't go at all."

"Maybe, but that's not an option for you," he said firmly. "It's my pack, so I *have* to go. And if I'm going, you're going."

"Why? For heaven's sake, I'm not even Lupine. I'm human. You can't hunt humans."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why not? We're predators. We'll hunt anything that runs away." She sputtered, but he bulldozed right over her. "Besides, like I said to you a few minutes ago, since no one knows about you yet, I'm not officially mated, which means I have to participate in the hunt. And since you're my mate, you're the one I'm going to be hunting."

She almost felt her eyes pop right out of her head. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Oh, no. No way! After what you just told me about these hunts, do you honestly expect me to go wandering out there alone in a park full of horny werewolves? You're out of your mind!"

"Did I let on that you had a choice?"

His look matched his words for sheer arrogant gall, and she could almost feel the smoke coming out of her ears. She had to take a very deep breath before she could actually speak. "Look," she bit out, "You may have to abide by these traditions of yours, but I don't. You may doubt my determination to get the hell out of here way before this hunt of yours starts, but I don't. And you may think that a few hours of sex makes us mates, but I don't. So. Get. Off. Of. Me!"

She used all her strength to break free and all he did was look vaguely surprised.

"Is *that* what this is all about?"

The genuine shock in his voice pierced her determination, and she paused. "Is *what* what this is all about?"

He drew back until he knelt astride her with his hands still cuffing her wrists and a half-surprised, half-bemused look on his face. "You think this is all just about sex."

The accusation in his voice did not sit well with Missy.

"What else is it about? We haven't spent four out of every five minutes in each other's company naked because we were sharing macramé techniques. I mean, we're practically strangers. I don't even know if you have a family!"

His bemusement slid into a grin, the kind that made her forget why she was mad at him. "My parents are retired and living in Bermuda. No brothers or sisters. A slew of aunts, uncles and cousins." He pulled her up until he could wrap her arms around his neck and tug her into his embrace. His green eyes caught hers and held them. "And one very sexy mate."

His lips descended toward her and almost made it before she jerked herself back to reality. "Not so fast," she protested, turning away and pressing against his chest to hold him at bay. "You are not going to turn this into more sex."

He gave her a comical pout. "But we only have eight hours before the hunt starts. I figured we shouldn't waste it."

"And how is that going to prove to me that this mate thing is about more than sex?"

The new pout wasn't quite so comical. "I told you it isn't. You're not just a warm body. You're my mate. What am I supposed to do? Take a lie detector test?"

Missy looked – and felt – decidedly unsympathetic. "You might try explaining to me how you came to the conclusion that I was the girl for you based on having known me for –" she glanced at her watch, " – twelve and a half hours."

With a disgruntled sigh, Graham pulled away and flopped back on the sofa where he glared up at her from a lazy slouch. "I just know. It's a Lupine thing."

"And again I wouldn't understand?" Her voice sounded dry even to her own ears, but it didn't seem to affect Graham. He continued to scowl at her while his fingers drummed impatiently against the leather cushions.

"I didn't say that, but I'm not sure you'd believe me if I told you."

Missy folded her arms over her chest, crossed her legs at the knee and raised her eyebrows. "You won't know until you try me."

Chapter Nine

Graham wrapped a mental noose around his impatience and hauled on it hard. The scent of her that had driven him wild earlier now verged on driving him insane. He'd been right about her fertility, because the subtle changes in her scent told him unequivocally that Missy was pregnant.

His beast gave a mental roar of triumph, and he had to fight not to echo it aloud. The swell of emotions generated by that knowledge threatened to choke him, no matter how hard he struggled to beat them back. The sense of pride and excitement, joy and possessiveness that stirred to life inside him all but knocked him on his ass. But that was nothing compared to the surge of love.

Love.

God damn it! He had fallen in love with her! What the hell was he supposed to do now? Wanting her was one thing. Lusting after her generously round ass and the soft swell of her belly was totally okay with him. All well and good. Even being charmed by her chimeric flashes of timidity and boldness didn't bother him. He didn't mind laughing at her jokes or valuing her opinion, but damn it, why did his stupid heart have to bring love into it? Why couldn't it be happy with lust, friendship and respect?

She cleared her throat and pursed her lips, and Graham fought the urge to squirm like an eight-year-old before a parental firing squad.

"I'm waiting for you to explain it to me, Graham," she said. "And don't give me that bull about me not understanding. I want an answer."

He rubbed his hand absently against his chest, right over his heart, and knew he wasn't quite ready to tell her his big secret. If she still struggled to come to terms with the way they both burst into flames when they mated, no matter who was watching, then she damned sure wasn't ready to hear that he loved her and that he'd deliberately made her pregnant when he'd known good and well he could have prevented it. Some things were better left unsaid. At least until he could be sure there was no turning back for either of them.

"You smell," he blurted out, then watched as her eyes widened before narrowing into thin little slits of pique.

"I *smell*?" She growled, doing a fairly good imitation of him in a mood. "You're telling me you want me to be your mate because I stink? Somehow, I'm missing your logic."

"Not stink. Smell," he clarified. "Smell wonderful." Her lips were still thin and straight, so he pushed on and tried to explain something he'd never before tried to

define. "Lupines have acute senses of smell, thousands of times better than humans. Even better than most dogs. Everything around us has its own scent, and a lot of our social customs are built on the information we get that way. It's just ingrained. We're born smelling, even if it takes a few hours before we open our eyes."

Her mouth softened, just a fraction, but he saw it.

"It's only logical that we use that sense of smell when we mate. It tells us who we're attracted to and who we're not," he said. "The most beautiful female in the world won't appeal to a Lupine if she doesn't smell right."

"What smells right?" she asked. He could hear the reluctant curiosity in her voice, but it was still progress.

"You do."

"Clearly, I'm not the first woman who did. Did you tell any of them they were your mates?"

Damn it! Why couldn't he have found a stupid mate? It would have made his life a hell of a lot easier. "No, because none of them were. You are," he repeated, as forcefully as he could without grabbing her and shaking the sense into her. "Lupines mate for life, which even wolves don't always do. But like humans, we don't always wait for our mates just to have sex."

"Which means you still have to explain how the way I smell makes me your mate."

He raked a frustrated hand through his hair and glared at her. "You're asking me to explain instinct here," he complained. "It's like me asking you to explain why humans get all freaked out when they see us on full moon nights."

"That might have something to do with the fur factor," she said, her tone wry.

"See, some people cling to the crazy notion that werewolves aren't real. I hear it helps them sleep at night."

"What I mean is that the fear they feel is instinctual, not rational. You can't really explain something like that."

"At least I tried."

"You just smell different!" He was frustrated now, and it showed in his voice. He considered it a lucky stroke that it didn't show in him changing into something a little less human and tearing the stuffing out of his sofa. "Other women smell like sex. They smell...available. Like musk and perfume. You smell different. You're...fascinating. All rich sweetness, like honey and vanilla."

She rolled her eyes. "Great. I smell like vanilla. The most boring of all flavors. And this is supposed to convince me I'm irresistible to you?"

He shot forward so fast that he saw the surprise widen her eyes when she blinked and found him leaning so close to her that their noses almost kissed.

"You are anything but boring, Melissa Jane," he growled, meeting her brown eyes and holding their soft gaze with his own. "Remember, vanilla comes from orchids and

was once paid as a high tribute to the Aztec emperors. If they could have smelled your scent the way I do, they would have demanded you, instead of a few orchid pods."

Her lips parted, drawing his eye like a beacon. Unable to resist, he leaned another fraction of an inch closer and traced the soft gap with the tip of his tongue. He felt the rush of air when she gasped and closed his teeth delicately on her lower lip, nibbling and nipping and tugging at the sensitive flesh.

"No one else smells like you, Missy," he murmured, cupping his hand around the nape of her neck. "No one else ever has, and no one else ever could. You smell of honey and vanilla, and warm, sexy woman."

He saw the softness in her eyes, felt the tension sap out of her muscles until her arms uncrossed and her body melted closer to his. His hands closed on her, tight and possessive, and he drew a deep breath to drink in her scent.

"You smell damp and delicious and like I could devour every drop of you and still not be satisfied." He licked her lips, a slow, lapping taste that drew more of her scent into him and made hunger knot heavily in his stomach. "You smell like my mate."

He reached out to draw her closer, but the movement must have startled her because she slipped away at the last minute and put the width of the coffee table between them.

"Okay, maybe you're right," she said, eying him warily. "Maybe the mate concept *is* a werewolf thing that I wouldn't understand, but I understand that this hunt of yours is a glorified excuse for rape, so forgive me if I decide to call this one a miss and stay in tonight."

Shit! Could a Lupine die of frustration? Because if it hadn't happened before, Graham felt pretty sure it would in a few minutes if she didn't let him get his hands on her. Never mind that his hands—and other assorted parts—had been on and in her for most of the last twelve hours. He still wanted more, and not getting it felt like the purest form of torture. He couldn't look at Missy without wanting her, and the pain of it made him cranky.

"Like I said, you don't really have a choice," he snapped. "You're going to the hunt, and I'm going to hunt you, and when I catch you, I'll change back to human form and fuck you until you're too goddamned tired to tease me any more. Then we'll be declared mates, and we'll come back here so I can fuck you some more. Understand?"

"Don't take that tone with me, Graham Winters." Anger shot sparks from her normally placid brown eyes and nearly caught him on fire. "I don't take orders from you, no matter what delusions you happen to be sporting, so don't think you can tell me what I can and can't do."

"Jesus Christ, Melissa!" He bellowed his frustration until it bounced off the walls in a vibrating echo. "What the fuck do you want me to do? Hunt someone else? You want me to go to the Park without you, chase down some faceless Lupine and fuck her instead? Would that make you happy?"

He stalked over to her until they stood toe-to-toe and could glare at each other up close and personal. Apparently unsatisfied with the positioning, Missy scrambled up to stand on the coffee table, which brought her more or less eye-level with him.

"No! No, it would not make me happy, but damn it, Graham, what do you want from me? I'm out of my league here, and I can feel absolutely everything around me spinning totally out of my control. Did you want me to do a little cheer and take off my clothes *before* we get to the park? Just so I can make *your* life that much easier? Give me a break here! I'm scared!"

The words popped out of her mouth like a cork from a champagne bottle, and all the bluster fizzed out of her like pale foam. She seemed to shrink as he watched until she once more looked like the shy and vulnerable woman he'd picked up in Dmitri's garden. He wrapped his arms around her and cuddled her close.

"Aw, baby. I'm sorry," he murmured. "I know you're scared, and I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you unhappy. I swear. Shh.... It's okay. I promise, it'll be okay."

She stood rigid in his arms for all of two and a half seconds before she melted into him like sweet, vanilla cream. Her arms wrapped around his neck, and she held him close, burying her face in his shoulder and trembling.

"I'm scared," Missy repeated, her voice whisper soft now and choked with emotion, but at least half of that sounded like anger to him. "In twelve hours you've managed to turn my entire world upside down." She raised her head until he could see her expression, and the frustration and anxiety there made him want to kick his own ass for upsetting her. "Yesterday, I taught a room full of five-year-olds how to tie their shoes, and today you're telling me I'm going to have to run for my virtue through Central Park tonight, pursued by a pack of werewolves, one of who thinks I'm his mate. I feel like I just got sucked into an alternate reality, and can't decide if it's based on dreams or nightmares."

Graham reached up and tucked a soft strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm sorry. I should have realized how hard I was pushing. It's not fair to you. I know."

She looked up at him with those big brown eyes, her lush, completely kissable lips trembling, and he cursed himself again, because as much as he regretted frightening her, there wasn't much he could do to make the fear go away. He had as little choice in the hunt as she did, and he'd be damned if he'd give her up in addition to his place in the pack. Those were two things he had no intention of living without.

He brushed a kiss across her forehead and cradled her head in his hand, massaging her scalp with his fingertips.

"Shh..." he soothed, stroking his other hand in gentle circles over her back. "It'll be okay. I promise."

She lifted her head and pulled back—the whole three or four inches he allowed her—to meet his gaze with a scowl. "Damn it, would you stop being all perfect for just a few minutes?"

Graham blinked. "Huh?"

"You're doing a knight in shining armor routine, but its effectiveness is somewhat marred by the fact that you're vowing to rescue me from a situation *you* got me into. It's like stealing my car and then offering to help me file the insurance claim."

The woman could change her moods so fast, she left him dizzy, Graham decided as the first squeezing knots of a headache began to form behind his eyes. Shit. She was actually causing him mental anguish! And this was his mate?

"First of all," he growled. Sighing, he took a deep breath and started again in a normal tone of voice. "First of all, I did not get you into any situation—"

"Yeah? Then what do you call this matehunt thing?"

"—because I have as little control over any of this as you do," he continued as if she hadn't interrupted. Only louder. It was safer than giving into the urge to shake her. "I didn't call the matehunt. I didn't start the tradition that says I have to take a mate to be alpha of my own damned pack. I didn't pick me up at a party, tease me half out of my mind, invite myself back to my house and then try to sneak out in the morning without even saying goodbye and thanks for the multiple orgasms. Those would all be you, Missy. Not me."

She screwed up her face like she'd eaten something sour. "You're the one who had to go and be a werewolf."

He gave a short bark of laughter. "Yeah, because God knows I did that just to piss you off."

She at least blushed at that. "You know that's not what I meant. You're just making everything so darned...complicated."

"Welcome to real life."

The words caught her with her mouth open and her lungs full, probably because she was preparing to bellow at him some more. Instead, her jaw clicked shut, and she pushed herself off the coffee table so she could pace over to the front window. He didn't particularly like that she felt the need to put distance between them, but he didn't push it. Not when he would have to push her so far and so hard later that night.

Still, he could hear her exhausted sigh from across the room.

"If you have to screw someone tonight, I rather it were me than some other woman, I guess," she said. "Not that I wouldn't rather forget this whole insane tradition of yours even existed, but that didn't sound like one of the options."

She looked back over her shoulder, and he searched her expression for some sort of clue as to what the hell he should do next. In the end, he settled for being honest. "It's not."

"Yeah. That's pretty much what I thought." She turned to stare out the window at the street outside, which annoyed Graham. He wanted to see her face, and it seemed like she was hiding it from him. "So I guess I'm going to get to see a real-live Lupine matehunt. Even if it kills me."

"I won't let anyone hurt you."

He could barely hear her answer, she spoke so softly. "I know."

Chapter Ten

Missy stared at the wall like a lobotomized inpatient and let the conversation drone on around her. Half a minute ago, Graham had dumped her in this room full of women she didn't know, with the exception of his secretary, and deserted her. Never mind that she'd been too dazed to protest, she still planned to blame everything on him.

She felt Samantha's hand tugging at her elbow and looked up at the other woman who had rushed over to greet her, the second Graham had left her at the door.

"Luna," the brunette murmured, urging her to face the crowd that had gathered around them. "Everyone's been waiting to meet you. Can I introduce them to you?"

There she went with that "Luna" thing again, even though Missy still didn't understand how she could be the alpha female when she wasn't even Lupine. Shouldn't they have rules about this kind of thing?

"Sure," she agreed, since she couldn't think of a way to *disagree*, and let Samantha lead her over to a large, almost throne-like chair and urge her to sit. The symbolism was not lost on her. She looked up at the Lupine who stood at her side like a sentinel and sighed. What the heck had she gotten herself into?

"This is Lucy Fallon," Samantha introduced, as a tall, black haired woman who looked capable of taking on Xena in a fair fight stepped up before the chair and looked down on Missy with an expression of obvious disapproval. "She's a police officer in Alphabet City."

Ah. That explained it. She probably worked the late, late shift, too. The one when all the bodies tended to be found.

"It's nice to meet you," Missy lied. She felt horrendously awkward, unsure if she should be shaking hands or nodding her head or letting people kiss her ring—not that she was wearing one. Instead, she just smiled and hoped this wouldn't take too long.

Lucy stared at her until Missy saw Samantha frown. When the silence stretched for another few seconds, Samantha started to growl, and Missy looked at her in shock. She got an even bigger shock when she saw the secretary's lips twist and bare her teeth in a snarl.

"I just introduced you to your Luna," Samantha snapped, her voice sounding a handful of octaves lower than it had just a few seconds ago. "Be careful you don't offend her with your bad manners."

Lucy narrowed her cop's eyes, dark, flat and vaguely unsettling, and bared her own teeth in a sneer.

"My manners are fine for meeting a human," she hissed without looking away from Missy's face. "It takes more than you calling her by the title to make her my Luna. She's *human*. The fact that Graham is fucking her does not make her my alpha."

The woman turned her back on Missy and began to stalk away, and it didn't take a Lupine Emily Post to make the reluctant alpha realize she'd just been insulted. Big time. It didn't matter that she'd never asked to be anyone's Luna. She still wasn't the type to stand back and let herself be insulted.

"You may be right. Sleeping with Graham probably doesn't make me alpha," she agreed, raising her voice so it echoed clearly among the quiet crowd that had gathered to watch the interplay. She waited until Lucy turned back to face her before she finished her statement. "After all, it obviously didn't do much for you."

She knew she'd scored a hit when she saw Lucy's face alternately pale and then fill with bright color. Great. Not only was the woman a cop with an attitude, she had to be a jealous, scorned lover, too? That might just make Missy's day. Still, she'd made her stand, and she couldn't back down now.

Casually, she crossed one leg over the other and smoothed an invisible wrinkle in her ill-fitting jeans as if she wore yards of fine-woven silk. "But there's a difference between you and me, Lucy. Graham may have fucked you once upon a time." She flicked her eyes up and down over the woman's tall frame, clearly insinuating that she couldn't understand that piece of Graham's past folly. "But I'm the one he made his mate."

"Bitch!"

If the woman had sprung first and cast aspersions later, she might have been able to knock Missy into another dimension entirely, but as it was, all she managed to do was hit the back of the chair and send it tumbling ass-over-end with herself on top of it. Missy had slid out of the seat before the "b" sound had fully formed on Lucy's lips and by the time the Lupine realized her prey had escaped, Samantha and another woman had stepped between the would-be combatants and faced Lucy with their teeth bared.

"Back off!" Samantha snarled, and Missy had to blink twice before she convinced herself she was looking at the same brunette she'd accused of being timid earlier that morning. Funny how a little violence could change her opinion about someone.

Climbing to her feet, she dusted her hands off on her butt and peered out from behind two Lupine shoulders, which meant she really couldn't see a darned thing. Wedging her hands between her self-appointed bodyguards, she pried them apart and stepped forward until she could look her attacker in the eye.

"Be careful whom you call a bitch, Lucy," she warned, meeting the other woman's furious gaze with a level one of her own. So what if her knees were knocking on the inside? In this case, appearances were all that mattered. "Only one of us gets furry once a month, and believe me when I say, it ain't me."

Lucy growled and shifted her weight forward. The women standing just behind Missy started to step forward, but Missy held them back with upraised hands. If by

some weird twist of fate, she really *was* Graham's mate, she did not plan to spend the rest of her life letting someone else fight her battles and defend her from the big, bad she-wolf.

"Let me make this perfectly clear, Lucy," she said, her voice firm despite her inner unease. "The fact that I'm not Lupine has not escaped anyone. Not me and certainly not Graham. If he doesn't mind that I'm human, then it damned sure isn't any of your business. Do you understand?"

"It's my business when he parades you in front of the pack like an equal," the Lupine snarled. "It's my business when you set yourself up as alpha female despite the fact that you couldn't win a tug-of-war with a newborn pup. You're weak, and in our world, a weak leader is a dead leader."

"But I don't have to be as strong as you." Missy held herself tall and steady and dared any one of the women in the room to challenge her, Lucy included. They might be able to kick her butt, but that didn't mean she had any intention of cowering in front of them. "I am the alpha's mate. That makes me alpha whether you like it or not. I don't care if I can't fight you and win, because if you lay one single hand on me, Graham will rip out your intestines and feast on them. So tell me again how I don't deserve to be alpha."

Lucy met her steady gaze for one heartbeat. Two. Three. Then she visibly swallowed a very bitter pill and looked away. Missy felt her knees almost buckle with relief.

"Very good," she nodded, pretending to be confident and self-assured and powerful and a hundred other things she'd never been in her life. "I'm glad to have met you, Lucy. Now get out of my living room before I forget to be a gracious winner."

The other woman stalked out the door like she had a hot poker jammed up her rear, but at least she left. When the door closed behind her, Missy took a very deep breath and let it out on a sigh.

"Well," she said, turning to face Samantha. "That was fun. Why don't you introduce me to everyone else?"

* * * * *

Spending an entire afternoon with a room full of unmated female werewolves turned out to be one of the most educational experiences of Missy's life. In between some of the most blood curdling and frankly terrifying descriptions of sex she'd ever heard, she managed to piece together the story of Lupine mating, matehunts and being alpha in a much more coherent manner than Graham had been able to manage.

"So he was really serious about that," she said, sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the empty pizza boxes. It was now around dusk and she'd been "chatting with the girls" for most of the afternoon. "If Graham hadn't taken a mate, his cousin could honestly force him to step down from being alpha? Just because he didn't have a mate and pups? Isn't that a little insane?"

Annie, the woman who had formed the other half of her Lupine shield against Lucy, shrugged. "It's tradition. That's just sort of the way things work."

"Yeah, but that doesn't make it less insane."

"Well, you've got to realize that things weren't always so easy for Lupines as they are now," Samantha explained. "Now we're integrated into the rest of the world, even if we're still a great big secret. But a few hundred years ago, people used to burn us at the stake for being disciples of Satan."

"I thought stake burning was for witches."

"A fallacy, actually, since most witches were hung. Werewolves got burned. Or beheaded. Or shot with silver bullets, once gunpowder made its debut."

"Yay." Missy grimaced.

"Exactly," Annie nodded. "So you can see how making sure that each pack would have a successive generation to keep us from dying out became a pretty high priority. We might really be just legends, if it hadn't been for Breeder's Rights."

Missy guessed that was true, but she wasn't quite sure why it still applied in the twenty-first century. And she *really* wasn't sure why it applied to a human. She swirled her glass of soda and watched the ice cubes circle like racers on a NASCAR track. "Do Breeder's Rights apply in this case?" she asked as she raised her head to meet Samantha's eyes. "I mean, no matter what Graham may say about me being his mate, it can't really be true. Can it?"

Annie looked slightly aghast. "Of course it's true! Lupines don't lie about mating. The bond is sacred."

"I didn't mean I thought Graham was lying," Missy soothed. "Just that he might be a little...confused. I mean, he's Lupine, but I'm not. I'm human. I don't even know if we're...compatible that way. Are Lupines and humans the same species? Can we even *have* babies together?"

"Of course," Annie said. "Lupines and Humans are related in much the same way as wolves and domestic dogs. They are biologically a different species, however they share such a large statistical percentage of mitochondrial DNA that they can and do mate and produce reproductively viable offspring. In fact, empirical evidence would seem to support the hypothesis that the offspring of a Lupine-human union may even have a more vigorous reproductive system than either of its respective parents, due to the introduction of new and varied forms of DNA into the genetic pool."

Missy blinked. "Oh."

Samantha leaned forward to murmur an explanation. "Annie is a biology professor at NYU. Genetic research."

Missy repeated. "Oh." Sure she was. Why not? Why put limits on the surrealism that was fast coming to encompass Missy's life? "Then you're saying that Graham could get me pregnant?"

Annie shrugged. "Sure."

"Has that happened before? I mean, are there lots of little Hu-pines running around?"

Samantha grinned. "Not so much. I think Anne was giving you the theoretical data, not a case study. There are stories about it happening in the past, but I've never met anyone who was mated to a human. It's supposed to be a trip, though. The stories say the some of the pup's talents can leak into the mother. She can sort of borrow the quicker reflexes and better night vision thing while she's pregnant. Isn't that wild?"

Missy's eyes widened. "Yeah, wild."

"Mind you, it's just conjecture," Annie said, "but due to the physical connection between mother and pup, it does make a sort of logical sense."

The repetitive use of the word "pup" leached the color out of Missy's face faster than the flu. "Would I have...puppies?"

Anne saw Samantha's grin and raised her a chuckle. "No, so you can calm down. Lupine pups look just like human babies. Shifting is something we have to learn how to do. Some precocious pups learn it as early as seven or eight, but most come into their abilities around puberty."

Relief made Missy sag against the legs of the armchair she'd been leaning on. "Okay. That's slightly less terrifying. Mind you, only slightly, because, hello? Horny teenagers not hard enough to deal with, but horny teenager who can turn him or herself into a werewolf?" She shuddered. "But I'll take what I can get."

Samantha looked at her as if Missy had just handed her the key to the city. "So you're okay with it then? You don't mind being Graham's mate? You don't mind having babies and staying with the pack?"

When she put it that way, the speech made Missy shift uncomfortably, so she hedged. "Well, I'm not running away screaming, am I?"

"I think there's a bit of middle ground between running away screaming and living happily ever after with our alpha." Annie gave Missy a stern glance.

Missy squirmed. "Give me a break here. This is a lot to adjust to, you know. Before last night, I didn't even know Graham wanted to take me out to dinner, let alone that he was going to pull this mate thing on me. I need some time to get used to this."

"You've got about three hours." Samantha glanced at the clock and back at Missy. "You might want to hurry it up."

The reminder of the time and the hunt that would take place later that evening made the knots in Missy's stomach pull tight. "Yeah, right. The matehunt. About that..."

Samantha crossed her arms over her chest and looked at Missy. "What about it?"

Fidgets overcame her, and Missy sighed. How was she supposed to explain to someone who had grown up with Lupine culture that the idea of being chased through the dark of Central Park by a pack of aroused werewolves didn't exactly get her juices flowing? In fact it froze them as solid as a glacial crust. "Look, I know this is a tradition

for Lupines, but it's really not something I can even conceive of. I mean the whole idea is...terrifying."

Annie nodded. "I'm sure it is, for a human. I mean, you're a woman to begin with, which makes you by definition weaker than a male, and then when you add the fact that you're human to the equation and our men are easily ten or twenty times stronger than a non-Lupine —"

Missy groaned and buried her face in her hands.

"Annie," Samantha snapped. "You are not helping."

The scientist blushed like a teenager. "Oops. Sorry."

"Luna, you have nothing to be afraid of. Our Alpha will protect you. You'll never be in danger. There is no chance of one of the other males catching you. Graham would kill them before they touched you."

Somehow, Missy's nerves demanded a little more soothing than the other woman's hand patting her knee. "And what if something goes wrong? What if Graham gets hurt or distracted? What happens then?"

"It won't happen," Samantha repeated. "The Alpha will not allow it."

Missy's laugh strangled on her frustration. "I don't think fate particularly cares what Graham will 'allow.' Luck isn't something that's going to show its belly just because Graham plays big, bad wolf."

Samantha blinked at that. Her brows furrowed, and she looked over at Annie, confusion plainly written on her face. Missy just shook her head to realize that these women honestly couldn't fathom the idea of a person, a being or an idea that wouldn't bow its head before the Silverback Alpha.

Annie shrugged, as if to indicate she didn't know what the Luna was yammering on about either, and turned back to Missy. "But Luna," she explained, with the slow deliberation math teachers used when dealing with dense seven-year-olds, "the Alpha will protect you. You just have to trust him."

Trust a man whose sanity she was beginning to doubt?

"Sure," Missy muttered. "Right. No problem."

Chapter Eleven

Missy hurried across the street and kept her ass to the wall until Graham put a hand at her back to push her forward.

"Come on," he growled. "We're running late. The hunt will start any minute."

"Well, excuse me for trying not to flash the whole island," she muttered, letting him herd her down the empty path into the quiet park. "This outfit you gave me to wear is ridiculous."

"It offers ease of movement. Did you want to be running from the pack in heels and a miniskirt?"

"How much worse could that be than skintight spandex and biker boots?" Missy griped. "I feel like a cross between a Hell's Angel and a go-go dancer. What's wrong with jeans and a good pair of sneakers?"

"They don't give me nearly as good a view of your ass."

He punctuated his comment with a theatrical leer and a light smack to her bottom. It wasn't enough to make her flinch, but when his hand lingered to cup and squeeze, she did shoot him a dirty look. "Why am I not surprised that's the real answer?"

Graham grinned and continued to lead them deeper into the park while Missy tried to ignore the nervous fluttering in her stomach. She would have called it butterflies except that the damned things were breeding like rabbits, and no matter what clever, pop psychology technique she used to try and calm them down, nothing worked. In the end, she just had to grit her teeth and bear it. After a few minutes, Graham led the way off the path altogether and pulled her through the trees into a thickly wooded area.

About the only thing she could see in the pitch-blackness was the glowing light of his eyes, and those didn't quite cast enough of a glare to light her path. She had to resort to clinging to Graham's side and stepping very carefully to avoid tripping over roots and rocks. For his part, Graham steadied her when she needed it, but he pushed her relentlessly forward all the while. She felt a little like the helpless blonde in a B-movie, which didn't do much for her mood.

"Where the heck does this hunt happen?" she demanded after another ten minutes of scrambling over boulders and between tree trunks. She hadn't known there were this many trees on Manhattan, let alone that Graham would expect her to climb over them all. "We must be practically in Albany by now."

"Sh! Look."

Mr. Monosyllabic pointed through the next stretch of trees and urged Missy in that direction. At first she thought it was another werewolf thing, but after a couple of blinks and some furious staring, she thought she could make out a cluster of orange firelights in the distance.

"Is that it?"

Graham nodded and nudged her forward. "And they're almost ready to start. Hurry."

She decided not to mention she'd been hurrying for the last hour, ever since Graham pounded on the door to the bathroom where she'd been dressing and told her to move her sexy ass. Those were his words, not hers, and they'd been the only things to stop her from slamming the door on his toes. He did seem rather fond of her behind, after all, and Missy could appreciate a man with good taste.

As they strode forward and the trees began to thin in preparation for a clearing, Missy could make out the glow of some sort of lamps and a big ol' bonfire about thirty feet ahead of them. It was a wonder the FDNY hadn't swarmed all over the Lupines like bees at a flower show. When they got close to the tree line, Graham tugged her to a halt.

"Remember what we talked about?" he asked, his eyes green and glowing in his serious face.

"Of course." How could she have forgotten? Her "mate" had lectured her on the finer points of her behavior tonight for at least forty-five minutes. "I stay close to you and keep Samantha and Annie nearby just in case. I keep still until the hunt starts and don't stare directly into anyone's eyes, but don't look down, either or they'll think I'm submissive. Don't crowd anyone too close, and don't get offended if someone tries to sniff me. Remember that the wolves are people too, and I should keep my mouth shut unless I have something of earth-shattering importance to relate. Oh, and when the hunt starts, I should run like hell directly north."

She finished the litany with her hands crossed primly in front of her and her eyebrows hovering somewhere around her hairline. Graham stared at her for a few seconds, then gave a curt nod.

"Good enough," he growled. "Let's go."

He tugged her wrist so hard she almost went flying. He muttered an apology, but Missy couldn't be sure how much attention he paid to it, since he never bothered to slow down. As they got closer to the pack gathering, she could feel a new sort of tense energy building inside him. Every step seemed to make him wilder, more feral, less civilized. His body temperature shot up until the touch of his bare hand on her arm felt like a heating pad had been laid directly on her skin. It was bearable, but decidedly hot. She shivered.

When they stepped out of the concealing shadows of the woods, she fought to keep that shiver from turning to a shudder. Everywhere she looked, the clearing was filled with werewolves, more Lupines than she had ever thought she'd see. The animal forms ranged in size and color from small, red-grey wolves the size of coyotes to some big,

black monsters she swore were the size of Shetland ponies. Luckily for her nerves, not everyone was in wolf form.

Normal, human-looking pack members milled about the clearing or stood in groups, talking in a disconcerting mix of words and growls, yips and snarls. This went beyond *Twilight Zone* and straight to the Sci-fi Channel, especially when a small group stepped out of the tree line on the other side of the large bonfire. Missy had to blink three times before her eyes agreed to filter what she was seeing to her brain, which only grudgingly translated it into understandable terms.

These guys were werewolves.

Real werewolves. Not just Lupines, who looked like humans and could even behave like them when the situation warranted. Not even Lupines in wolf form, who looked like they could step right into an Animal Planet special and make themselves at home. These werewolves were about as hairy as wolf forms, but the resemblance ended there.

Four of them traveled in their own small pack, each walking on two legs that bent in the wrong direction. Their knees arched out behind them, making them look permanently coiled and ready to spring. Missy couldn't tell their colors until they stepped close enough to the bonfire for the flames to illuminate their fur, and then she was almost sorry they had.

One had a coat the mottled, char-grey color of wood ash that faded to dirty, grey-white on his chest and belly. Fascinated, she followed the color changes until the fur shortened to a plush, velvety-looking pelt that covered but couldn't conceal the lycanthrope's heavy and very human genitalia. Her eyes shot back to his—he was very definitely male—face and stayed there, and she made darn sure not to look lower than the sternum on any of his friends.

Two of the others had the red-grey, coyote color she'd already noticed looked most common among the wolf forms present, and the last werewolf sported a light brown pelt flecked with black and grey, like the brindled greyhound Missy's downstairs neighbor had rescued from a racetrack last year. Judging by the snarl that curled the brown lycanthrope's muzzle, though, she doubted he had much in common with the friendly and mild-mannered Turtle.

Missy opened her mouth to ask a question but snapped it shut again when Graham dropped his grip on her arm and stepped forward out of the shadows that concealed them. Surprised, she scrambled after him. No way did she plan to be alone in this clearing, thank you very much.

Still looking more like a GQ cover model than the Terror of Central Park, Graham strode across the carpet of moss and leaves and into the bonfire light. Hurrying to keep pace with his ground-eating stride, Missy followed until he stopped near the same pile of jumbled boulders where the werewolves had paused.

"Curtis," she heard him growl.

The brown lycanthrope stepped forward, and Missy got her first close-up view of a Lupine in wereform. He was covered from head to foot in a coat of coarse, plush fur, though it seemed to grow thicker at his back, neck and upper chest, like the ruff of a real wolf. And as she'd noted on the grey werewolf, it shortened to a velvety pile on his abdomen and stomach. She made a point of skirting away from looking at his sex and moved right along to areas less likely to freak her out.

He stood upright like a man, but his legs were the hind legs of an enormous wolf, with feet like a dog's paws, only a whole lot bigger. His arms were long and thickly muscled with vaguely human hands that were tipped with lethal, curving claws. His head looked almost completely canine, with neat triangular ears and a long, pointed muzzle full of razor sharp teeth. Missy couldn't vouch for the sharpness of those teeth, but she decided to go with her instincts on that one. They certainly *looked* razor sharp.

She stood beside Graham, kept about a half step behind him, and decided she really didn't need to be any closer to any of the lycanthropes. Her view was fine from right where she was. In fact, it might be better from Nebraska. She stifled the urge to go see.

"You're being very impolite, cousin," Graham said, his voice low and rough and so menacing Missy shivered even though he wasn't talking to her.

The brown lycanthrope swung his head in their direction and snarled. Muscles clenched to keep from recoiling; Missy blinked and almost missed the most amazing thing she'd ever seen. One minute she stood looking at the lycanthrope Graham called cousin, and the next, reality shifted, leaving behind a man where the werewolf had been. The man had hair the same brindled-brown color of the werewolf's fur and eyes the same yellow-gold. He also stood there stark naked.

"Not impolite," the lycanthrope said with a sneer, "just impatient. It's been too long since the last hunt."

"Hunts are a dying tradition. Our females seem to prefer to choose their mates in a more modern fashion."

"A more *human* fashion. I, for one, hardly call that progress."

"But then, it isn't your call to make."

Missy kept one ear on the conversation—if you could call their verbal sparring match a conversation—but both her eyes were locked on the other three lycanthropes. As she watched, that same shift happened. The three forms blurred around the edges. Their features and outlines faded and became indistinct. She saw movement and a sort of rippling wave, and then everything came back into focus and the werewolves were suddenly men. Naked men. The transformation had her so fascinated, she barely stopped herself from demanding they do it again.

"If you don't want to lead our pack in the ways of our people, then don't be surprised if someone else does, Cousin." Curtis snapped, pulling Missy's attention back to the matter before her.

She heard the growl before she felt the movement and well before she saw anything, because there really wasn't anything to see. It all happened so fast, she

doubted film could have caught it, but suddenly Graham wasn't just growling at his cousin; he had his hand wrapped around Curtis' throat while the other man's toes dangled three inches off the ground. Instead of shouting or struggling, Curtis laughed.

"I haven't challenged you," he pointed out, his voice hoarse and rasping, but clear. "It wouldn't do much for your reputation if the Silverback Alpha killed a member of his own pack without provocation, would it?"

Missy saw Graham's jaw clench and saw the first hint of fang flash between his lips when he spoke.

"Oh, I've been provoked," he snarled, "and I know just who's behind it all, too. Did you think I wouldn't notice a gamma in my own pack calling a howl in the Silverback name? Did you think I wouldn't care about an unscheduled and unauthorized matehunt in the middle of my territory?" Graham tossed his cousin aside as if touching the other man's skin had contaminated him. "I am still alpha of this clan, cousin, and I know precisely what you're trying to do."

Curtis landed on his feet in a coiled crouch and sneered up at his clearly stronger cousin. "You may know, but you can't stop me," he taunted. "Not unless you can produce a cub before next week, *cousin*. I thought I was doing you a favor. After all, if you can manage to catch a female tonight, you have an entire week to hope she comes into heat so you can fuck her for that pup you need so badly."

Missy snarled this time, before Graham even got the chance. She wasn't sure where the sound came from, just that it ripped out from between her lips as she took an instinctual step forward.

Curtis' head snapped around, his feral yellow eyes fixing on Missy and narrowing to menacing slits. "Well, what have we here?" he growled, taking a prowling step toward her. "What's this, cousin? Some new prey for us? She's pretty enough, in that totally ordinary way some women have, but she smells...human."

His mouth twisted, and he reached for her, but touched only air. Graham leapt in front of Missy, forcing her back a few steps and facing his cousin with his lip curled and his fang-like teeth bared. "Stay the fuck away from her," he ordered. "She's mine."

"Yours?"

Missy watched Curtis' expression twist and contort as if he'd scented something foul, and her own eyes narrowed.

The Lupine took a step toward her, and Graham snapped at him. "*Stay away*," he commanded, his eyes flashing hot and angry in the near darkness. "I don't want you anywhere near her."

Curtis offered them a look of wounded innocence so insincere it appeared plastic. "But I don't mean anyone any harm, cousin. I'm simply curious. It's not often a human is offered up to us on one of our hunts. I do hope she doesn't get too badly hurt. Some of our males can get a bit...rough, in all the excitement." He bared his teeth, but no one watching could have called it a smile. "I'd hate to see her pretty skin torn off."

"No one will touch her."

"Ah-ah. Now who's being rude?" Curtis chided. "You know the terms of the hunt as well as I do. She belongs to whoever is strong enough and fast enough to catch her."

Missy opened her mouth for a truly unladylike retort, but her attention strayed when a wave of excitement so intense even she could feel it rippled through the crowd. Samantha and Annie appeared on either side of her, each clad in a Cooper Union sweatshirt, comfortable jeans and tennis shoes. Missy shot Graham a dirty look.

"The moon is almost up," Annie said. "When it breaks over the tree line, the hunt will be on."

"Stay close," Samantha murmured, leaning down a little to speak directly into Missy's ear. "That rat, Curtis, has something planned. I can feel it."

"I believe you. Trust me. I'm not about to go wandering off by myself. I promise." Missy eyed Curtis suspiciously while he and Graham continued to snarl at each other, even though she no longer understood a word either one said. They'd gone from English to Lupine, and now communicated with grunts, growls, snarls, yips and barks. Samantha and Annie seemed to know what they were saying, but neither one bothered to fill Missy in. She couldn't decide whether or not she minded.

"I see he's got Larry, Moe and Curly with him," Annie said, her disdain clear as she nodded at the three Lupines who had accompanied Curtis.

"Greg, Marco and Paul," Samantha clarified, her eyes also fixing scornfully on the trio. "They're Curtis' right hand idiots."

"Um, I think idiot number three heard that," Missy said, as the man pointed them out to his friends. He detached himself from the small group and swaggered toward the women.

"And what are you supposed to be?" Paul sneered. "The human's bodyguards?"

In human form, he stood maybe five-ten, with an indifferent physique and strawberry blond hair. Missy remembered his wereform had been at least six inches taller and about a hundred pounds of muscle more imposing. She raked a deliberately dismissive glance up and down his frame, pausing to give an extra sneer at his unimpressive, semi-erect cock. He snarled.

"She needs very little guarding," Samantha retorted. "Alpha keeps one eye on her all the time. And he hates to see worthless little pups annoying her."

"You shouldn't antagonize me, Samantha. It's a hunt night," he snarled. "It's bad strategy to piss off one of our males. He might decide to catch you and make you pay."

"You couldn't catch me with a baited hook," Samantha scoffed. "And you couldn't take me if you did. I'm beta female in this pack, Paul. I would never let myself be mated to a little gamma nothing like you."

Paul didn't appreciate that remark, and he demonstrated his feelings by springing full force across the ten feet separating them and attempting to drag Samantha to the ground beneath him. Missy jumped out of the way, and fortunately Samantha was

quick enough to do the same. She spun neatly out of reach and snickered when Paul grabbed air and tumbled to the hard packed ground.

"You see what I mean," Samantha taunted, sneering down at the fallen male. "You're pathetic. Beneath me. I think even less of you than I do of your boss, and I think he's a worthless little nothing who disgraces the name of the pack. Don't think I'll ever let you touch me, because it's never going to happen."

The look of rage that contorted his face made Missy fear she was about to witness bloodshed, but before the fallen Lupine's muscles could do more than shift and bunch, a sharp command cut through the tension.

"Melissa. Come here. Now."

Graham's hard tone matched his stony expression, but Missy quickly thought better of arguing. In any other circumstances, she might have objected to the ring of dominance in his voice, but these circumstances fell way far short of ordinary. She had stepped into his world the minute she followed him into the Ramble, and for the moment, she had to live by his rules.

The rationalization worked long enough for her to hurry back to his side like an obedient little mate. She halted next to him and looked up at his granite profile. He didn't bother to look down, but she knew he was aware of where she stood, down to the very inch. His eyes remained on his cousin.

"She seems quite obedient," Curtis said in a tone of voice that made Missy's teeth clench and her knuckles itch to make contact with that snarky smile. "I wonder if she'll respond so quickly when I order her to spread her legs for my cock."

Disgust spoke for Missy, because her common sense had obviously taken a vacation. "I don't think that will be possible," she replied, letting her expression telegraph how loathsome she found him. "I find it's hard to come running when I'm doubled over vomiting at the thought of you touching me."

Curtis' arm twitched, as if it longed to strike out at her, but Graham's menacing presence and warning growl kept him in check. "I told you, you will never touch her. I'll kill you before you lay a single finger on her. She is my mate, and she will run to no one but me."

"Mate?" Curtis' question hissed out, soft and sibilant and full of icy rage. "She's no fit mate for one of the pack. She's human. They aren't worth the bite of our teeth."

A slow smile spread across Graham's chiseled mouth, making him look wicked and smug and too sexy for Missy's own good. Even in the midst of their dicey situation, just watching that little grin curve his lips made her want him. She tried to ignore the spark of lust, but it got tougher when she felt an answering surge of heat rush through him and saw his glowing green eyes light with that particular heat she recognized all too well. The intensely primitive animal energy she'd recognized coursing through the crowd had been building, winding tighter with each passing moment, and now, it seemed, even Graham couldn't contain the effect it had on him.

She shivered and forced her gaze away from his face so she could focus on the pack, but he trashed that idea by sliding a hot, rough hand around her waist to rest over her barely rounded tummy.

“Oh, I think this one is worth a lot,” he finally said, replying to Curtis’ taunt in a way that made the other man’s eyes narrow. He rubbed his palm in slow, soft circles over Missy’s stomach, and his gaze never wavered from his cousin’s. “In fact, I’d say she’s priceless, now that the next Silverback Alpha grows fast and strong inside her. Congratulate me, Curtis. Missy is going to make me a daddy.”

If Curtis’ expression displayed a sort of abject and angry shock, Missy figured her own wasn’t too dissimilar. Did Graham mean what she thought he meant? Had he just told his cousin that she was pregnant? That she was even now carrying a little werewolf? He had to be out of his mind! She couldn’t be pregnant. And even if she were, the embryo would have to be less than forty-eight hours old, and no one could know something like that so soon, so he had to be using the lie to taunt his already furious cousin.

“You lie!” Curtis hissed at them, sounding more like a reptile than a Lupine, but Missy felt inclined to agree with his accusation. Not that she intended to contradict Graham in front of him. Whatever game the man was playing, he knew a lot more about it than she did, so she would cheerfully go along with whatever he said. She could rip him a new asshole later. When she wasn’t facing a forest full of strange werewolves.

“Do I?” Graham drawled.

“It’s a trick! A trick to buy yourself time, but you won’t be able to lie to the council. They’ll know whether or not you really bred her—”

“I don’t need to lie, Curtis. And if you weren’t so blinded by greed and ambition, you’d realize I’m telling the truth.”

Missy thought the man’s head might explode, his rage was so blatant and so intense. She watched as his eyes narrowed to angry slits and his muscles tensed and his nostrils flared, and he turned that rage onto her.

“You bitch,” he growled, his body coiling into a tight spring as he took the first threatening step toward her. “You think you can come into the middle of my pack and ruin all my plans? I’ll rip that brat right out of your fucking stomach!”

Curtis lunged toward her, but Graham was faster. He picked her up around the waist and swung her out of the way, blocking his cousin’s charge with his own body. Missy felt the shockwave of impact ripple through his muscles and into hers, but he held on long enough to get her out of Curtis’ range. By the time he set her aside, Samantha and Annie had raced over, and he handed her to them. “Keep her safe,” he growled and before her eyes, he began to change.

Missy watched, torn between awe and fear while her lover began to transform from a normal, human-looking man to something much, much more dangerous. In a matter of seconds, his muscles and tendons stretched and reshaped themselves, growing

larger, denser, harder where they covered his elongated bones. He went from an intimidatingly large man to a terrifyingly huge beast. In his wereform, Graham stood at least seven feet tall, every inch thick and ripped with muscle. His thighs looked as powerful as a Mack truck, and his shoulders could have blocked out the sun. Thick, plush fur grew to cover his body, a dark, rich shade of chocolate black that faded to toffee on his belly and groin, and bore a light frosting of silvery-grey directly between his shoulder blades. Only his eyes looked familiar, even in the wolfish face with its long muzzle and sharp, jagged teeth. She saw those eyes fix on her, and she swallowed, instinctively taking a step backward.

He held her gaze, and stepped toward her. "Don't be afraid of me. I would never hurt you, my mate."

Mate. The word had sounded weird and exotic when he'd used it before. Now it seemed almost frightening. Even though she'd known he was a werewolf from the first moment she'd met him, she'd never really *known* it before. Not until now. This instant, when he loomed before her looking like a creature from her nightmares and sounding like the man she loved.

It took several deep breaths and a whole lot of mental affirmations, but Missy finally squared her shoulders and stopped backing away from him. "I'm not afraid," she lied, hoping no one would look too closely at her trembling knees and call her bluff. "I have no fear of my mate, or of any other member of his clan. The Luna of the Silverback Clan doesn't need to be afraid."

"Bitch!"

Graham spun around and threw himself in front of his mate just in time to foil Curtis' next attack. This time Missy got to see a transformation at high speed, because Curtis shifted even as he jumped. By the time he and Graham met, there in a tangle of fur, teeth and rending claws, both were in wereform and neither had any intention of giving in.

The moon stopped them.

Before teeth could tear and claws could shred, a low, haunting noise filled the clearing and launched itself into the crystalline night sky. One lone wolf sounded the howl and everything else in the woods fell into silence. Even Graham and Curtis froze, turning as one with the rest of the pack to watch the bright, silver crescent slowly rise over the treetops like dawn over the eastern ocean.

"It's almost time," Samantha spoke into her ear, but when Missy turned to look at her, she saw the Lupine's eyes glued to the luminous night sky. "Be ready. When the moon is up and the howler goes quiet, run."

The woman's soft words made Missy's stomach clench, and she gritted her teeth against a wave of panic. "I don't know if I can do this," she whispered. "I don't know if I can."

"You are Luna. You can do anything you need to do. And you need to do this."

The Lupine's words ended as the last quivering note of the howl died, and the moon broke free of its woody veil. A single heartbeat of silence followed, and then the woods exploded in a fiery blaze of excitement.

Hard hands shoved against Missy's back as her two Lupine guards leapt forward, propelling her along ahead of them.

"Run!"

And the hunt was on.

Chapter Twelve

Her boots pounded against the hard earth of the forest floor as she ran to the north for all she was worth. Adrenaline drove her forward with Samantha and Annie bounding along, one at each side. They pushed hard through the dense brush, and she charged forward, ignoring the sharp sting of thin branches snapping against her and cutting into her exposed skin. Missy had never been much of a runner, and now she wished she'd run track in high school. The experience could have come in real handy.

"They're following us!" Annie shouted so they could hear her over the pounding of footsteps and the crunch of debris under their shoes. "Curtis' goons. They must be after Missy!"

"Tough shit! They can't have her!" Samantha crowded closer and Annie followed suit until Missy felt caged in by them. In these circumstances, being caged didn't seem like a bad thing.

I feel like I'm in an old episode of The Fugitive or something, Missy thought, feeling her legs already begin to deaden and become heavy from the unaccustomed demands she placed on them. Only I'm even less anxious to be caught than Richard Kimble ever was. He didn't have sex-crazed werewolves after him!

"Left!" Annie shouted and veered in that direction, forcing Missy to follow. She saw why when a dark figure crashed out of the trees just a few feet from their path and sped toward them. "Sam, they planned this! It's a Goddamned ambush!"

Samantha growled a response and darted in front of the approaching figure to cut him off. The ash-colored lycanthrope roared his displeasure and backhanded the brunette with enough force to send her flying several feet. Her head struck a tree trunk, and she slid to the ground in a heap. Greg, the grey werewolf, turned back to Missy and leapt forward.

"Come on! Faster!" Annie braced her shoulder against Missy's back as if she could force the human into even greater speed, but Missy's limited energy was already failing her.

"I can't!" she gasped, every breath painful as it rasped in and out of her abused lungs. They felt like they were on fire, burning from the inside out.

"You don't have a choice!"

Well, since she put it that way...

Missy tucked her chin to her chest and tapped into a store of energy she didn't know she had. A fresh surge of adrenaline spun her pumping legs even faster as she and Annie struggled to escape. Even with her eyes resolutely trained on the ground in

front of her, dimly lit by the heavy moon overhead, Missy could see Annie racing a few steps in front of her. The Lupine kept glancing back, a look of concern and unease on her face, and Missy knew the other woman was holding back for Missy's sake. Without the human to worry about, Annie probably could have been at the state line by this point, but she kept her pace deliberately slow so she could stay close. If Missy didn't already feel like the most pathetic excuse for a Luna ever invented, this cinched it. She was *so* not cut out for this.

She figured that was pretty obvious a nanosecond later when she shrieked like a little girl. She had a good reason—what normal person wouldn't shriek to see a two hundred and fifty pound werewolf jumping out of the trees at them?—but in present company, she still felt like a scared little girl.

"Annie!" She shouted for her remaining bodyguard and darted left just in time to evade a huge, grasping hand. "Annie!"

The woman was by her side so fast Missy barely saw her move. All she saw was a blur of cotton and denim and then her attacker stumbled backwards under the force of Annie's body weight slamming into his chest. "Missy, run!"

Her head whipped around, and she saw the reason for Annie's cry. A familiar brindled brown form wove through the trees as it loped toward her with a frighteningly long stride. It was Curtis, and he was making a beeline for Missy. Spinning like a top, she threw herself forward again and ran as if her life depended on it. At this point, it probably did.

Her boots pounded against the uneven ground, and her heart pounded against her ribcage, but she could feel Curtis gaining on her. She wasn't enough of a twit to look behind her so she could fall over a log like a horror movie scream queen, but she also knew she wasn't going to be able to outrun him. She was a five-foot, three-inch human, and he was a six-foot, seven-inch werewolf with the stamina of a freight train. All she could do was hope she could evade him until Annie or Graham or Samantha came to her rescue. Feminist though she was, the idea of rescue sounded more like a blessing than an insult.

"Bitch!"

When she heard Curtis' voice close enough behind her to whisper that kind of sweet nothing in her ear, she screamed—horror movie clichés be damned—and dodged sideways. Curtis moved faster.

He caught her by the arm and spun her around forcefully. His glowing, yellow eyes sent distaste crawling through her, and the expression in them didn't do much to set her at ease. Hate radiated off him, so intense she could almost see it distort the air between them like heat waves. She saw his eyes narrow as his lip curled in a snarl. His mouth was open, tongue lolling out as he panted from his run and from his struggle with Graham. She didn't know how he'd gotten away, unless he'd bolted while Graham was distracted by the moonrise, but it didn't much matter *how* he'd gotten away, just that he had and that he'd come after her.

She recoiled when he leaned closer, but he followed the motion, his wolfish muzzle pressing close and scenting the air around her. She heard the quick sniffs as he drew in her scent, felt the rush of air against her skin when he pressed his snout close up against her neck and drew deeply. She gritted her teeth against the urge to scream and jerked her head away.

“Bitch,” he growled again, rearing back just enough to meet her eyes with his own. “My cousin didn’t lie about it. He did get himself a cub, on you. A filthy human.”

He held her with one powerful paw/hand gripping each of her arms just above the elbow, but her instincts wouldn’t allow Missy to stand still. She squirmed and struggled, and tried not to think about the incongruity of watching that canine mouth move and hearing human sounds issue from it. She also tried not to think about what it meant that her scent had convinced Curtis she really was pregnant.

“He would shame our kind by letting a half-breed grow up to lead our pack!” Curtis ranted, shaking her in his fury. “Allowing human blood to taint the Silverback line. Well, I won’t have it. I’ll cut that brat from your belly before I let it play alpha over me!”

Missy snapped. She literally felt something give way inside her, and she knew she carried a child. She also knew she would kill anyone or anything who tried to harm it. Growling a pretty fierce sound of her own, she brought her booted foot down hard on Curtis’ bare one then followed it with a quick knee to the groin.

Unprepared for a struggle from the “pathetic human,” he took the blow square to the balls, and his grip loosened. Doubled over in pain, he made the perfect target when Missy linked her hands into one giant fist and brought it down hard at the base of his skull. It would have felled a human, but in wereform, the heavy ruff and thick muscle protected him, and Curtis remained standing, bent at the waist while he struggled for breath.

Ripping free of his loosened grasp, Missy ran again and just hoped she was still heading north like Graham had ordered her to do.

An angry howl told her Curtis wouldn’t be down for long, and she dug deep for the last of her reserve strength. She found it in her belly, where the baby she now knew she carried rested, tiny and warm inside her. Thinking of nothing else but protecting him so that she could flay the skin off his father’s back when she saw him again, she fled deeper into the forest.

If she hadn’t been running for her life, she might have taken time to wonder about how she saw so clearly in the heavy darkness, but she really had other things on her mind, like listening to her back-trail for the sounds of Curtis’ pursuit. She concentrated so hard on what was behind her that she didn’t see what was in front of her until she ran headfirst into it.

Missy bounced off something hard, resilient and thick with soft, plush fur. She backpedaled quickly and looked up – way, way up – into Graham’s wolfish features.

He stared down at her with the same eyes she'd come to recognize, though they now glowed bright and constant. The hands he reached out to steady her with were strong and gentle, despite their tips that gleamed lethally sharp. He was still covered in fur, still in the wereform she'd first glimpsed in the clearing right before he attacked Curtis, but when she looked into his eyes, all she saw was Graham. The same Graham she'd fallen wildly, irrationally and irrevocably in love with.

"Stay put," he growled, picking her up and depositing her on the far side of a fallen tree a split second before Curtis leapt out of the shadows and launched himself at Graham's throat.

Graham countered, throwing himself into the battle. They met in mid-air, claws ripping, teeth tearing, before they even made it to solid ground. Missy had never seen a real fight, not between men, not between wolves, and certainly not between wolf men. They grappled a little like wrestlers, but mainly they fought like animals, using teeth and claws and sheer physical might to try and force the other into submission. The moves were so fast and furious, so brutally contained, she could barely see what was going on. All she saw was the twisting shift of muscle and a few bits of red when one or the other landed a swiping blow of razor-sharp claws, or tore through fur and flesh with strong, white teeth.

They fought for control, a struggle for the dominance of the alpha position just like it had been explained to her earlier in the day. While Graham, Annie and Samantha had been explaining the nuances of werewolf etiquette to her, they'd mentioned dominance fights, since several inevitably broke out during a mate hunt. Emotions and hormones ran high on these nights, and when two males wanted the same female, they settled the contest with a fight, the more dominant winner getting the girl. Fights in a mate hunt usually ended with one Lupine giving in and submitting to his stronger opponent, showing his belly and averting his eyes to show his subordinate pack rank. The only problem was that this fight between Graham and Curtis wasn't really about her. It wasn't a matter of who got the girl, it was an Alpha Challenge, and those fights could and often did end only in the death of the subordinate were.

Missy knew Graham was stronger than Curtis and could easily handle his cousin in a fair fight, but in the short while she'd known Curtis, Missy had begun to doubt. Graham's cousin would offer a fair fight. She just hoped Graham wouldn't count on honor to keep their struggle weighted in his favor.

She fisted her hands into knots to keep from wading into the fray and helping Graham beat his cousin into a bloody pulp. She only held herself back because she knew she'd be in the way, which might prolong the fight, and she wanted this over with as soon as possible so she could beat up on Graham herself.

She winced every time she made out a blow that Curtis landed and bit her lip to keep from cheering every time Graham sank his teeth into his cousin's lousy hide. The struggle continued, fast and mostly silent, punctuated only by the occasional grunt or snarl as each of them tried to rip the other's throat out. The tangle of fur and teeth made it hard to tell where brown ended and brindle began. Then she heard Graham howl and

saw a dark red strip appear on his upper chest, and she jumped forward, not caring whose way she got in as long as she could get her hands around Curtis' neck and choke the life out of him for hurting her mate.

Lucky for her, she was still as slow as a human because a hand on the back of her body suit pulled her to a halt before she got more than a foot closer to her goal. Her surprisingly sharp vision picked out Annie's form easily, and her angry growl turned into a sigh of relief when she saw Samantha following close behind. She'd been afraid Graham's secretary had been hurt badly, but Samantha looked completely conscious and relatively unharmed as she jogged to her Luna's side.

Missy's sigh turned into a blush when she saw Logan bringing up the rear of the arriving entourage. After this morning when he'd seen Graham fucking her in the front hall, Missy figured she'd probably keep blushing in his presence for the rest of her life.

"What do you think you're doing?" Logan snapped as soon as he got close enough. He didn't bother to comment on her red cheeks and mortified expression. "That's an Alpha Challenge. You can't just go barreling in there like Joan of Bloody Arc. You could get hurt!"

Missy's blush faded in a rush of anger. "Don't tell me what I can't do," she snapped. "I'm Luna here, and that's *my* mate getting his hide torn to shreds!"

Logan scowled and straightened to his full height so that he towered over her by about a foot. He crossed his arms over his chest and dug in his heels like a mulish man. "You may be Luna, but I'm beta. Your authority is over the females, not over me. I will defer to you under normal circumstances as a sign of respect, but I will not and cannot let you place yourself in danger. You belong to the alpha, and I protect what's his."

Ignoring the difference in their heights, weights, ages, experience, physical strength, fighting ability and species, Missy stalked the few steps it took until she stood toe-to-toe with the blustering male, tilted her head back and stared him down through narrowed, brown eyes. "I'll place myself any damned place I want to, buddy," she bit out in a dangerously soft voice. "And instead of spouting off about how you're protecting me, why don't you do something useful, like protect the one who's currently getting his *hide sliced off!*"

By the time she finished yelling, she was standing on her tiptoes and leaning forward until Logan was practically bent over backward from trying not to touch her.

"Um, before you take my head off," he ventured, his expression changing from mulish to amused, "maybe you want to take a look at your mate and tell me if you still think he needs my help."

Surprised, she pulled back and turned in Graham's direction just in time to see him lift Curtis over his head and slam the smaller were to the ground before planting a foot on his chest to keep him down. Curtis lay belly up, yelping while Graham crouched above him, one foot on his chest and one hand wrapped tight around his throat.

"Yield!" Graham growled in a voice so thick and savage and predatory it barely sounded like human English.

Curtis spat out a foul curse and then made a violent choking noise as the hand around his throat tightened.

"Yield," Graham repeated, and Curtis finally complied, hatred burning in his muddy yellow eyes. As they watched, the smaller lycanthrope went limp and relaxed beneath his foe, and he turned his head, averting his eyes from his cousin's harsh, triumphant features.

With a growl of satisfaction, Graham stood, keeping one foot on Curtis' chest as he turned and locked his eyes on the other people around him. Actually, his eyes locked specifically on Missy and sparked an even brighter green.

"You. Leave. Now."

Missy jumped at the tense, gravelly command, but Annie and Samantha were already turning away. More than happy to get away from the Mr. Hyde version of her lover, she took a step backward, freezing when Graham growled, the sound loud and deep and full of menace.

"Take him. Away. Go." Graham's eyes never left Missy, but Logan moved forward to obey the order. The beta grabbed Curtis as soon as Graham lifted his foot and began dragging the bloody and battered lycanthrope back toward the clearing where the pack had gathered earlier.

Suddenly left alone with her mate, Missy took a deep, shaky breath and turned her gaze toward him.

Graham stood in the center of the small area where he and Curtis had fought, his chest heaving, his muscles tensed and bunched, ready to spring. He still wore his werewolf form, and his fur was matted and darkened with blood where Curtis had injured him. The worst wound looked like the one on his shoulder where his cousin's claws had bitten deep, but already, the bleeding had stopped. Lupines healed at an amazing rate, and Missy was getting to see that first hand, but she still couldn't quite convince herself he was really well.

"Come here."

She heard him, but her feet seemed to be glued to the ground. She was too busy fighting the conflicting instincts that urged her to go to him and run her hands over his magnificently furred body to assure herself he was really okay, and to turn tail and run as fast as she could back toward civilization. Instead of doing either, she remained locked in place, her eyes wide and fascinated as she ran her gaze over him from the tips of his pointy ears to the claws on his bare feet.

Except that she never got as far as his feet, because her gaze skidded to a halt when she saw his erection, long, thick and jutting high above his tightly drawn balls. That was about when her mind turned to jell-o.

"Here," he repeated, gesturing impatiently. "Now."

But the fear wouldn't let her. He was intimidating enough in human form, but the sight of him in werewolf form, tense and intent and aroused, bent her reality just a little too

far. She recognized the light in his eyes, recognized his desire for her, but her mind couldn't get past his fur and his teeth and the frantic desire to *get away*.

She started to turn, to flee, but his growl stopped her, not to mention the fact that he leapt across the ten feet separating them in a single bound, landing between her and escape with the grace of a cat—or a wolf—and began herding her backward.

"Don't!" he growled. "Don't run."

She almost did. Her instincts almost took over, sending her hurtling through the dark forest, but then she looked into his eyes, and her heart contracted.

He was in there. Her Graham. His eyes shone out at her from the face of the monster that terrified her, and she felt her fear begin to ease. His gaze, even sparking with raw hunger, was kind, reassuring and familiar. She focused on it and found herself relaxing as a thought occurred to her. Growing up, her favorite fairy tale had always been Beauty and the Beast, because her heart ached at the loneliness of the huge terrible Beast and the unfairness that he had to change into something more human and more handsome just to give some spoiled Beauty a happily ever after. If Missy had been Beauty, she had thought, she would have wanted her Beast to be her beast forever, not turn into some sappy Prince just when she admitted she loved him.

Well, here was her fairy tale. Her Beast stood before her, wild and fierce in appearance, but a better man inside than most human males could ever hope to be.

"Here," he said again. "Now."

Missy went.

She drew a deep breath, still a little shaky, but effective, and crossed the small distance between them until she had to crane her neck to meet his gaze. She lifted a trembling hand to his chest, forcing her fingers to uncurl so she could lay them against his soft fur. She gasped, and he growled. Then he took two steps back and clenched his own hands into fists.

"Don't," he growled. "Too dangerous. Don't want to hurt you."

Feeling another layer of her fear melt away, Missy slid her hand down further, over his flat nipple, and marveled at the similarities between his human form and this one. He might be so large now that she felt like an under-endowed Barbie doll next to him, but in either form, he trembled the minute her fingernail scraped over the tightly drawn flesh. "You won't," she murmured, and she was beginning to believe it, too. "You won't hurt me."

He gasped, the air hissing through his clenched teeth. "Won't want to. Won't be able to stop."

That made her pause, both hands now pressed flat to the heavy muscles of his torso as she contemplated the implications of his lack of control. The things he'd explained to her that morning came flooding back. She could remember the chill fabric of the sofa pressing against her bare skin, the heat of his body looming over her. She could remember exactly what he'd said.

"We pick the one we want for a mate. We chase her down. And we fuck her. There's no seduction, no asking what she wants.... When the males give chase, they're in rut. Their instincts are in control, and there's no werewolf alive who can control his need to mate when he's in rut. If a hunt didn't end in sex, it would end in death. Which do you think is a better choice"?

He stepped back to evade her touch and hauled in a deep breath. "Don't touch. Can't shift if you touch. Need control."

Even in rut, a state he'd said none of his kind could control, he was trying to protect her. He was afraid he would hurt her if he ended the hunt by fucking her in his wereform, and Missy could see why. Even in human form, he was strong enough to crush her with his bare hands. In wereform he was more than a foot and a half taller than her and probably two hundred pounds heavier. He overwhelmed her, standing completely still. But he was still her Graham, and he needed her.

She bit her lip, torn between fear and love, unsure if she could give him what he needed, sure she couldn't live with herself if she didn't. She hesitated for long heartbeats, debating and agonizing and finally saying a quick, fervent prayer.

Then she laid one hand back on his chest, meeting his eyes as she slid it down over his velvety pelt to curl around the shaft of his flagrantly erect cock.

"You need me," she whispered, leaning forward until her tongue could dart out and caress his nipple. She felt the shudder wrack him and smiled. "And you can have me."

Chapter Thirteen

For one heartbeat he remained utterly still, and Missy wondered if she'd made a horrible mistake. Then his clawed hand curled around her wrist, prompting her to look up at him once more.

"Don't tease," he growled, his teeth bared in a feral expression, but his eyes still full of Graham. "Need you. Now."

Her other hand wrapped around his balls and cuddled their soft weight. "Then have me. Now."

He broke. The fierce tension binding him in place snapped like a rubber band. He reached for her, burying his hand in the neck of her body suit and ripping it from her with one, rough tear. He fisted his hands around the tattered cloth and snarled. "Last chance."

Fronting a defiance she hoped looked more convincing than it felt, she unzipped her boots and kicked them off into the underbrush. "It's about time."

She had about half a second to look tough and feel terrified before he sprang, wrapping his arms around her and carrying her to the chilly earth under their feet. He rolled so she landed on top of him, and not the rough ground, but the move still took her breath away. Before she could so much as draw a breath, he lifted her and deposited her on her knees beside him. She sat back on her heels, prepared to chew him out for continuing to try and save her, but before her mouth could even open, he planted a hand between her shoulder blades and tugged her gently forward until she knelt on all fours. When he got on his knees behind her, she curled her fingers in the rough carpet of pine needles and braced herself for a brutal entrance and a short, wild fuck. She got neither.

She heard him move behind her and tried to look around to see what he was doing, but he placed his hand on the back of her neck to pin her head in one position so that all she could see was the back of her own hands. He held her there while he positioned himself behind her, bracketing her legs with his own so she could feel the heat of his muscle and the velvety pile of his fur against her bare skin. She expected to feel his cock pressing immediately against her entrance and burrowing inside, to feel his weight draping over her back and surrounding her while he claimed her as his mate. Instead, she felt a stir of warm breath against the top of her buttock and then the hot, wet glide of his tongue sliding slowly along her spine, vertebra by vertebra until she wanted to scream. She managed to contain the sound, but she couldn't contain the shudder that rippled through her. Graham reached the nape of her neck and swirled his tongue in

the little hollow at the base of her skull, and the sensation made her teeth clack together on another violent shiver.

She heard a low rumble, more a purr than a growl, and his tongue traced a damp path from her neck to her ear to flick the lobe and tease the sensitive shell. Her hands clenched in anticipation, and her back arched to press against his chest, needing the contact of his heat against her bare skin. He made another rumbling noise and nuzzled his way around to her other ear, treating it to the same arousing torture.

"Graham," she murmured, savoring his name like she savored the sensations of his touch. She shifted her weight to press her bottom against his groin, feeling the familiar contours of his hard cock and the unique, heady sensation of fur caressing her. She had looked on this mating as a chore or a favor, something she would do for him because he needed it, despite how it might frighten or unsettle her. Only she felt perfectly settled and not at all afraid. She felt eager and had the achy, wet pussy to prove it. Neither her body nor her heart cared what he looked like, because she knew this was Graham, and every time she got within fifty feet of him, she wanted him. Suddenly empty and needy, Missy began to shift her hips in a languid thrusting motion, rubbing her ass firmly against his cock and feeling it swell even harder against her. "Graham," she repeated. "I want you."

She heard him growl, heard his breath rush out in a hiss and felt it feather against her skin. He let his weight drop above her until he covered her like a blanket and his hands rested palms-down on the earth beside hers. His head fell until he rested his velvety chin against her shoulder. He surrounded her, and she shook with excitement.

"Can't go slow," he bit out. His voice sounded loud and rasping in her ear. "Can't be gentle. Sorry."

She hitched her ass up high so his hard cock nestled between the round cheeks and wiggled her hips so they rubbed teasingly against his length. "I don't need slow, or gentle," she hissed. "I just need you."

This time, she felt *him* shudder, and then his hands were gripping her hips with bruising force and his weight lifted off her. "Sorry," he repeated, poised for one heartbeat at her twitching entrance, before he thrust his pelvis forward and buried his cock deep in her grasping cunt.

The long, high howl that tore from Missy's throat sounded more Lupine than human, and she wondered at it for a heartbeat before the feel of Graham's shaft impaling her tender flesh drove every thought from her mind except the need to get closer to him. She braced her clenched fists against the forest floor and locked her elbows, using the leverage to force her hips higher and harder against him.

Graham grunted his appreciation and pulled back until just the head of his cock remained inside her. She bucked, trying to force him deep again, but he held her in place with his powerful hands.

"Mine," he snarled, teasing her with a shallow thrust that moved no more than an inch or two against her sensitive opening.

Missy moaned and tried another thrust. Again he held back. If this was his idea of fast and rough, they needed to have a serious talk. Right after he got on with it and fucked her!

"Mine!" His growl was more forceful that time, but his thrust was not, and Missy decided he had developed a fondness for torture.

"God, Graham, please!" she gasped, shaking and shivering beneath him, her pussy clenching hard around the meager number of inches he allowed her, trying desperately to lure him deeper. But he resisted.

"Mine!" More force this time, along with one, blessedly hard thrust that sent his cock driving deep inside her, nudging her cervix before he drew back and paused again just beyond her entrance.

Her entire body clenched and shook under his brutal teasing. Her breath panted out in shivering sobs, and she had to clench her teeth hard to keep them from chattering. He reduced her to practically begging, and she would do it gladly if it meant she would feel him driving her hard and fast toward orgasm. "Graham!"

"Mine!" His hands clenched on her flesh hard enough to bruise, and he began to ease out before her muddled mind finally grasped what he wanted.

"Wait!" Half gasp, half scream, the word tumbled from her in a rush, and she just prayed she'd spoken clearly enough for him to understand. It must have been enough, because he paused, the thick, plum tip of his cock barely breaching her pussy, but he wasn't pulling away anymore and that was important. Now she just needed to get him back inside her, and she could die a happy woman. She drew a deep, shuddering breath, licked her lips and give him everything. "I'm yours, Graham. Your lover, your mate. Whatever you want me to be. Yours!"

"Mine!" And he thrust forward so hard, Missy thought she'd died. He pierced her to the core, his thick cock tunneling through her moisture until he filled every aching bit, and when he started moving, she thought she'd been reborn.

After that thrust, he kept his promise. He fucked her hard and fast, his shaft pounding forcefully within her, his hips thudding against her ass with the raw, slapping sound of sex. Every forward motion drove the air out of her lungs and every withdrawal made her sob for more. It was fast, hot and primal, and it made Missy understand what it meant to be claimed as his mate. Every time he filled her, she felt like a brand of ownership burned deeper into her skin, and every time he pulled away, she wanted to beg him to mark her more indelibly. He had hunted her and fought for her and now he was making her his. The logic of it resonated on an instinctual level, and she gloried in it.

Graham tightened his hands on her hips and jerked her back to meet his thrusts. She cried out, a sound of pure excitement, and he pounded into her pussy with even greater force. She felt the tension in her belly knot harder, felt her thighs clench and her heartbeat race double time in her chest. Her climax approached like a tornado, quick

and powerful, and she reached toward it, wanting nothing more than to be swept up in the force of her mate's fierce sexuality.

She threw herself back against him, pressing every possible inch of her skin into his hard frame, but when he leaned forward and caught her shoulder between his dangerous jaws, she fell forward into the storm, her entire body clenching with the force of her pleasure. The orgasm ripped through her, and she came with a howl at the very instant that his teeth cut through her flesh, marking her forever as his one, true mate.

In the haze of her pleasure, she heard his growl, felt him pull away and lap at the small wound he had made. She felt him thrust deep within her and stop, holding his cock high and hard inside her spasming pussy, and then she felt him swelling. She felt his cock twitch and throb and grow impossibly thicker, stretching her tender flesh until she cried out and threw her head back on a wild moan. Graham echoed the sound with a roar, gave one last mighty lunge and began coming.

The force of his final thrust knocked Missy's legs out from under her, and she sprawled in an inelegant mess on the cold ground. Graham followed her, collapsing on top of her and blanketing her with his heat. While she felt boneless with contentment, she felt his presence still hard and thick inside her while he pumped her full of his semen. She lay still, struggling to catch her breath, content to have him in her forever, loving the feel of him finishing inside her.

But he wasn't finished.

He jetted a load of sperm into her and relaxed, the tension fading from his muscles even while his cock stayed rock hard within her. Missy frowned and turned her head until she could rub her cheek against his plush fur. "Are you okay?" she murmured sleepily. "Aren't you...?"

"I'm not finished," he growled back, though the sound lacked any sort of ferocity and sounded more like the natural gravel of his wolf form's voice. "Not nearly finished."

Then she felt his cock twitch inside her and fill her with another burst of hot seed, and her eyes opened so wide she thought they would pop out of their sockets. Her pussy twitched at the fresh stimulus, and she gasped. "What are you – ah!"

His tongue slipped out to caress her cheek, followed by a gentle nibble to her earlobe. "Lupines have a few other things in common with wolves," he rumbled as his cock stopped throbbing to rest inside her again. "In our wereforms, the males climax like wolves, staying inside the female and coming in lots of short bursts over an extended period of time."

Missy's pussy clenched involuntarily, sending another shiver coursing through her. She noticed that his cock felt just as hard as it had before he started to come. "How extended a period?" she managed to gasp while she struggled to bring her rioting nerves under some semblance of control. It wasn't working.

“Well, it varies,” he drawled, and if he’d been in human form, Missy was willing to bet she’d see one of those wicked grins curving his mouth. “But it’s usually around twenty minutes or so.”

“Twenty minutes?!” Her voice squeaked out like a rusty hinge, and her pussy clenched while he made a sound in her ear that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle.

“About that. Sometimes a little more.” He brushed the hair away from the side of her neck and gave a nibble. “I hope you’re comfortable. This could take a while.”

Chapter Fourteen

They didn't make it back to his house until shortly after dawn. It would have been even longer if Logan hadn't been an extremely efficient beta and left a duffle bag with a change of clothes for each of them along with Graham's cell phone at the base of a tree a few yards from where they'd spent the night. If Missy tried really hard, she could almost keep herself from thinking about the sounds the Lupine must have heard coming from their part of the forest. The man just knew way too much about her sex life.

Some things it didn't pay to dwell on, so she let Graham bundle her into some clothes and call a cab, and she didn't even protest when he carried her swiftly out of the Ramble and to the nearest park entrance. The cab was already waiting for them. He loaded her inside, slid in after her and gave the cabbie his address. Then he cuddled her in his lap all the way home, where he swept her right up the stairs and into bed. When she tried to protest and mumble something about talking, he shushed her and told her there would be time for that when she woke up.

She woke up just after one, sore, hungry and determined to have that talk. Pushing up into a sitting position, she tucked the bed's only covering—a mismatched sheet obviously added just for her benefit—under her arms and looked around. Graham was nowhere to be found. She was debating whether or not to waste her energy by working herself into a good mad when the door opened, and he stepped inside carrying a breakfast tray, looking quite human and decidedly gorgeous. His eyes fixed on her, and she blushed.

"Good morning, sleepy head." He smiled, kicking the door shut behind him and carrying the tray to the bed. "How are you feeling?" He set the tray over her lap and took a seat next to her, taking care not to upset her breakfast when the mattress shifted under his weight.

"Fine." She shrugged, picking up a piece of buttered toast and trying not to blush harder.

"Good." He reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "You did a fantastic job last night, but I wanted to make sure nothing that happened gave you any bad moments."

Ignoring the twinge of sympathy for a man who walked so blindly into a trap of his own making, Missy set down her toast and raised an eyebrow. "Bad moments?" She pretended to think about it. "You mean like when your cousin sent his goons chasing after me, and they hurt one of my new friends trying to get to me? Or were you talking

about when Curtis grabbed me and threatened to kill me for daring to be chosen as your mate? Because, no. Neither of those caused me any real problems.”

He started to relax, but he must have taken a closer look at her face, because the tension flooded back into his body.

Smart man, she thought. *Occasionally*. “Of course, I suppose you could have been referring to the part where I had to stand by and watch someone try to kill you because of me. Or when I saw him slice your chest open so that you bled all over yourself. Was that what you meant?” He shook his head and opened his mouth, but Missy wasn’t quite finished. “No, neither of those bothered me, really. But thanks for asking.”

He forced an uncomfortable smile and reached for her, but Missy pulled away to glare at him. He winced.

“Now that I think about it, though, there was one part of the night that did really upset me, and now that you mention it, I’m not sure I’ve really dealt with it yet.”

“Baby, I’m sorry,” he began, his green eyes dark with regret. “I know I hurt you. I should have been more gentle. I should have waited until I shifted back before I ever laid a hand on—”

Missy brushed off his apology with a negligent wave. “I wasn’t talking about the sex,” she said, clearly dismissive. “That was fine. No, I’m upset about something else entirely.”

Now Graham looked confused, which was just how she wanted him. “I don’t understand.”

“Oh, I’ll tell you,” she said, her tone so sweet it made him shift uneasily. “It’s just a little thing. You might not even remember it. It’s the part *where I found out I’m pregnant, you twit!!!*”

She shouted so loudly the silverware clanked together, and Graham winced like he’d been hit with hurricane force winds. Missy figured Category 4 had nothing on her.

“Missy, I—”

“Were you ever planning on telling me?” she demanded, rising up on her knees and planting one hand on her hip while the other clenched the sheet across her bare breasts. “Did you think I might like to know about something like that before you announced it to a bloody stranger? Huh? Did that ever occur to you, Mr. High and Mighty Alpha?”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Well, I don’t really care what you meant,” she shouted, far from finished. “That was a lousy thing to do! You treated me like some sort of secret weapon, like this whole thing was a plot to knock up the first bimbo who came along just so you could rub your cousin’s nose in it, and that sucks. It’s my body, damn it! I deserved to be the first one to know it was growing something.”

Her anger dissolved on a snuffle, and she cursed whatever hormones were already hard at work turning her into a blubbering idiot. Then she cursed whatever

ones made her glad when Graham wrapped his traitorous male arms around her and snuggled her close.

"Aw, baby, I'm sorry," he murmured, letting her bury her face in his shoulder while he drew her into his lap and rocked her like a child. "I know it was lousy, and I apologize. I should never have treated you like that, but my cousin had me trapped. Telling him about the baby was the only way I could think of to keep you safe. I was hoping that if he knew about the cub, he'd realize his plan was futile and he'd give it up."

Missy snorted. "Yeah, and that strategy worked really well."

"I noticed." He hugged her close and pressed a warm kiss to the top of her head. "I almost died when he went after you, and letting him live after he touched you was the hardest thing I've ever done. I never wanted to put you or the baby in any danger. You have to believe that."

She did believe that, just like she believed the big moron was in love with her, but she still intended to make him say it. "I do," she whispered, nuzzling his throat and letting her arms snake around his chest. "I believe it. But I'm still hurt that you told him before I knew, and I don't understand how you did know."

"Your scent," he explained, kneading her back with soft, affectionate circles. "Like I told you, I recognized you as my mate the minute I smelled you. When you got pregnant, your hormones started to change, and that changed your scent. Pregnant women all have a similar sort of scent. It's hard to describe, but it's a little bit like...pumpkin."

She pulled back to frown at him. "Pumpkin?"

"Like pumpkin pie," he clarified. "Rich. Spicy."

She took a second to digest that. "And is that a good thing?"

He grinned. "Am I happy you're pregnant? Sweetheart, I'm ecstatic. I can't think of a single thing that could make me happier."

Missy could think of a single, very important thing that would make *her* happy, but they were getting closer. She could sense it building in him, but it would require a few, well-placed digs before she finally uncovered it. "Does that mean you didn't deliberately get me pregnant? That you want me and the baby for ourselves instead of to satisfy some weird Lupine laws?"

Graham drew a deep breath and opened his mouth to answer. Then he snapped it shut and frowned. Missy felt her stomach knot.

"Are you saying you *did* just want the baby because of your damned Breeder's Rights thing?"

"God, no!" he assured her, his arms tightening around her to keep her from escaping. "That's not the part I hesitated over. I don't give a shit about Breeder's Rights. The elders can decide whatever they want, but anyone who wants to take over the

alpha position of my clan will have to kill me first. I'm not giving in just because of an archaic tradition."

Missy felt her eyes widen and her jaw drop open. "Then...are you—are you saying you deliberately got me pregnant?"

"You make it sound like I had it planned," he protested, looking grumpy and uncomfortable and very sweet. "It wasn't like that at all. It's not something I had in mind, but when you came into heat—"

"When I *what*?"

"Ovulated," he corrected quickly. "When you ovulated, I knew what would happen if I came inside you, and I did it anyway. As soon as I pictured you having my baby, I knew I wanted that. I knew exactly what would happen, but I did it anyway. So yeah, I guess it was deliberate."

How had this conversation spun so far out of her control? The man created more questions than he answered. "Okay, first, how did you know I was ovulating?"

He gave her a look that said it should be obvious. "If I can smell when you're a few hours pregnant, I can certainly smell when you're fertile. It doesn't take a rocket scientist, just a good nose."

"So you really want this baby."

He hugged her. "I'm over the moon, honey. Like I told you, you couldn't make me any happier."

Unable to pull free to hunt up a blunt object to knock some sense into him, Missy had to resort to point-blank bluntness. "Is it *only* the baby that makes you happy? Do I have anything to do with it?"

He jerked back to stare at her with an expression of abject confusion. "What? Baby, of course not! I love you, just like I love the baby. How can you not know that?"

"Because you've never told me so, you hairy twit!" Frustration made her yell and curved her mouth into a pout, but she could feel her tension melting away. "Remember, I'm the human here. I have no magical powers. No mind reading, no wonder nose, nothing. If you feel something for me, you need to *tell* me, okay?"

His lips twitched into a slow smile, and he leaned down to press a kiss on the end of her nose. "Okay," he agreed, and snuggled her close against his chest.

They sat that way for a few more minutes until Graham brushed her hair away from her face and pressed a kiss to her temple. "You know, for all our strength and speed and heightened senses," he said, smoothing his hands over her back with lazy strokes, "werewolves are really different from vampires. We're not just humans who've been infected with the virus and had our DNA mutated. We're an entirely different species. Closely related, yeah, but still different from humans."

Missy lifted her head and frowned up at him. "What?"

"It's actually lucky that we share enough common DNA with humans to make reproducing fertile offspring possible," he continued, ignoring her question. "A few

more separations in our genetic code and we'd be like oil and water. We're really lucky."

She pushed away from his chest to stare at him in confusion. "What are you yammering on about?"

Again, he ignored her. "Because some people just sort of assume that because we're both different, werewolves and vampires must have a lot in common. But it's just not true. Other than being faster and stronger and those kinds of surface things, vampires and Lupines are as different as night and day."

"And your point is?" By now, Missy's spine had straightened like a poker and her arms rested in a fold against her chest.

"I just made it. My point is that Lupines and vampires are really very different from each other."

"Well I knew that," she said, exasperated. "What I want to know is why you're bringing this up now."

He gave her an entirely, suspiciously innocent look. "Well, I just thought that since you're such good friends with Regina, and you know Dmitri and all, that you might be a little confused."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, I think that even with my human senses, I can tell the difference between fangy and furry, Einstein. You can relax."

His green eyes opened wide, and she could swear he actually batted his eyelashes at her. "Oh, so then you *haven't* assumed I can read your mind?"

His sledgehammer subtlety finally got his meaning across, and Missy groaned. "Oh, for heaven's sake. Yes, I love you! Are you happy now? I really don't think that elaborate torture session was quite necessary."

Graham shrugged, grinning his wicked grin. "Maybe not. But it was fun." She reached out to thump him in the chest, but he caught her hand easily and brought it to his lips. "I need the words just as much as you do, honey."

Missy humphed, but she knew he was right, and frankly, she was still in a fairly charitable mood after hearing him declare himself. Blame it on the hormones.

Letting her head drop back to his shoulder, she rested a hand on her unchanged tummy and sighed. "It doesn't seem quite real," she murmured. "What if we're wrong and I'm not really pregnant?"

"Well, I certainly would be willing to put my all into trying again," Graham said with a grin, "but we're not wrong. He's in there, honey, growing up quick."

She looked up at him. "Do Lupines grow that much faster than humans?"

"Not once they're born, but a standard Lupine pregnancy is only about five months."

Missy's eyebrows shot up and her lips parted in surprise. "Five months? I'll only be pregnant for five months?"

“More like six, in your case,” he said. “I called an obstetrician—a Lupine—to ask her if she knew anything about mixed pregnancies, and she said when a human woman has a Lupine baby, her pregnancy is usually about six months long. Longer than Lupine, shorter than human.”

“Usually? I thought this didn’t happen a lot. Lupines and humans together.”

Graham shook his head and shifted his grip, one arm still supporting her back with his hand resting on her bare hip. The other reached out to tug away her sheet and bare her to his appreciative gaze. “Not often, but it’s not entirely unheard of, either. Dr. Howell knows enough about it to take good care of you. In fact, she told me to have you go to her office this week for an exam, just to make sure everything’s normal with you and the pup.”

Missy gave up the sheet after a brief struggle. Graham was simply too strong, and she was simply too easy. He traced little circles around her nipples to watch them pucker. She shivered. Then she registered what he said, and she tensed. “The pup?” She swallowed hard. “Um, Graham, Annie and Samantha told me I wasn’t going to have a puppy. Please don’t tell me our baby will be born with a tail.”

He laughed out loud and hugged her. “Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. ‘Pup’ is just an expression. We tend to call our children ‘pups’ or ‘cubs,’ but they’re normal babies. Unless you were Lupine—which you’re not—and you happened to be in wolf form when you went into labor—which you won’t—you don’t have to worry about whelping anything but a normal baby.”

She gave a sigh of relief. “Maybe I should make an appointment to see that doctor. I think I’ll have a lot of questions to ask her.”

“We’ll call tomorrow. I’d like to go with you, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course not,” she assured him, shifting in his arms and pressing the breasts he’d been teasing against his broad chest. “I’d like to have my mate with me. After all, this is your baby, too.”

He smiled and leaned down to kiss her. It started out as a sweet, affectionate gesture, but Missy took care of that by reaching down between them and unfastening his jeans. When she slipped her hands inside to curl around his already erect cock, he groaned into her mouth. Smiling against his lips, she freed one hand to yank his T-shirt up over his taut stomach. He took the hint, jerking it over his head and tossing it to the floor before returning to devour her mouth in a deep, hungry kiss. She matched him for a moment before pulling away and pressing a hand to his chest to urge him back onto the mattress. He got rid of the tray first, then stretched out on the cool silk sheet and opened his arms as if to offer himself to her. Missy was not about to refuse.

Smiling a smile that even *felt* wicked on her lips, she reached for the waistband of his jeans and tugged them off. Dropping them on the floor, or maybe on top of the breakfast tray, she knelt astride his thighs and leaned back to get a good look. Lordy, but the man got her hot every time she looked at him, and when he was naked, looking

at him got her wet, too. As if her body were drooling for him. Heaven knew her mouth was.

She watched him run his gaze over her and blushed, but didn't make a move to cover herself. An entire weekend with him convinced her that Graham really did love the way she looked, which made the feeling mutual. She certainly had a hard time resisting the lure of his beautifully muscled chest.

"You're gorgeous," he growled, reaching up to cup her breasts in his large hands, cuddling their petite curves and rubbing the nipples with callused thumbs. "I love you, baby."

The words felt even better than his hands and made Missy shiver. Smiling, she leaned down and set her mouth against the hot, steady pulse at the base of his throat. Her tongue dipped out to taste the salty, musky flavor of his skin, lapping at the small hollow before beginning a slow, teasing descent. She worked her way down his body with an excruciating lack of haste, pausing for long moments at each of his nipples, tracing the contours of his muscles, the crisp hair and smooth silk of his skin. She spent a few tense minutes investigating his belly button just so she could savor the rough, purring sound of his moans, but when he rolled his hips against her, she took pity on him and resumed her trek south.

His cock rose to greet her, already thick and hard and begging for attention. How could a girl resist? Missy didn't even put up a fight. She leaned down, rubbing her cheek against the surprisingly smooth flesh like a kitten begging to be stroked. She felt his hands bury themselves in her hair and his fingers massage her scalp as she parted her lips and drew him in.

He slid easily past her lips, a warm, welcome presence that filled her mouth and made her hum with pleasure. She swirled her tongue around the head and heard him moan. The sound did as much for her as a well-placed caress, sending warmth shooting through her body to pool as moisture between her legs. Loving him was almost as good as being loved by him, and it gave her a sense of power and control that she relished. Especially after last night.

His hands continued to cup the back of her head, cradling it gently as she settled into a lazy rhythm of licks, nibbles and gentle pulls that made him harden even further in her warm mouth. Her fingers rubbed the tender skin at the crease of his hips while she sucked him, one straying further and further toward the inside of his thigh with every caress. When it finally reached its destination, it feathered lightly across the drawn skin before curving to cup the weight in her palm. Softly, she kneaded the sensitive globes, timing her squeeze and release to coincide with her suckling. In minutes his hips began to rock gently, sending his cock gliding between her lips in a restless motion.

Missy drew back, placing a soft kiss on the head of his cock before she crawled up to kneel, straddling his hips with her palms braced flat against his chest. She felt his thick length pressing against her inner thigh and smiled. "I love you, too," she murmured, then slowly began to sink onto his hard cock.

Graham growled, the sound familiar and exciting, softer than the growls of last night, but sounding no less aroused for coming from a human throat. It still made Missy shiver, which made her muscles clench tight around his shaft, which made him growl again. Life couldn't get any better.

She let gravity pull her slowly down his length until her butt rested against his hips and his cock rested to the hilt inside her. The feel of him made her want to howl, but she restrained herself. Not out of embarrassment, but because she wanted to conserve her breath for better things. Like a hard, fast ride to the edge.

Dragging her hips up, she pulled almost entirely free of him before plunging back, savoring the feel of him tunneling through her pussy, stretching and filling her and making her burn. She settled into a rapid rhythm of lift and fall that he echoed with powerful upward thrusts. Within minutes, Missy was panting, her lungs straining to grab enough oxygen while her pussy strained to keep Graham's amazing cock lodged deep inside her. She felt torn, wanting to continue making love with him forever, but needing the intense climax she could sense building on the horizon. She slowed her movements, unable to choose, until Graham took the decision out of her hands.

Strong fingers closed around her hips, anchoring her in place while he flipped their bodies, settling her on her back and himself firmly between her thighs. "Wrap your legs around me," he growled, and she complied, lifting them high to curl around his waist and locking her ankles together in the small of his back.

The move seemed to drive him deeper, and she cried out, "Now. More."

He gave her more. Bracing his hands against the mattress, he bowed his back to press deeper inside her, pausing as if he were savoring the fullness of their connection. Then he drew back and began fucking her in a hard driving rhythm that had her clutching at his shoulders and digging her heels into his spine to try and pull him deeper. He filled her until she wasn't sure she could take any more, but she wanted more and demanded it. His thrusts became shorter, harder, digging inside her with frantic force. She welcomed every second of it, letting him drive her higher and higher up the peak until he sent her hurtling over the edge in a climax that curled her toes and clamped her pussy around him with enough force to drag him along with her. He emptied himself with a roar before collapsing in a hot, boneless heap on top of her.

He must have dredged up a last little bit of energy from somewhere, because he had enough to nuzzle her neck and plant a soft kiss on the damp skin there. Missy couldn't offer much more than a breathless sigh in return, but she felt his lips curve in what she was sure would be a self-satisfied grin, if she had enough energy to turn her head and look. Which she didn't.

"I've changed my mind about using earth-shattering sex to convince you to move in with me," he murmured after a brief pause, presumably to work up the energy for speech.

"Hmm?" Missy hadn't built up enough reserve yet for anything so complex.

"I'm not going to do it. I've got another plan."

Her eyelids felt weighted down with lead as she drifted in a state of utterly sated contentment, but she managed to work up a burst of energy to communicate. "Huh?"

"It still involves plenty of sex," he assured her, and she smiled through her haze, "but this time I'm going to use it to convince you to marry me. What do you think?"

The smile that lit Missy's face didn't require energy. It was the kind that came from her soul, and she couldn't have stopped it if she'd tried. That left her one last thread of energy, which she used to give the only answer that mattered.

"Yes."

The End

Also by Christine Warren



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