

The background is a solid red color with a subtle pattern of heart-shaped confetti or small hearts scattered across it. The hearts are in various shades of red and are slightly out of focus, creating a soft, romantic feel.

*Unexpected
Consequences*

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Unexpected Consequences
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It took a sick sense of humor to put a seasonal display of flaming red heart-shaped boxes of past its sell-by date chocolates next to the pregnancy tests in the pharmacy section of the supermarket. It was holiday overstock behind a large sign just begging people to take it home at a discount. It wasn't Valentine's Day consequences worrying me. Nope, it was Christmas.

I stood in front of the racks of tests, smelling stale chocolate for what seemed like ages, and didn't pick one up. Somehow, taking a test in my hand even to read the back of the box made the situation so much more *real*. Instead, I pushed my dark hair back behind my ear and wished I'd taken Destiny's advice about pulling it back.

"Yasmine," she had said to me before we left home. "Show off that pretty face. Get your hair off it. It'll make you feel better to have some random guy do a double take."

I had ignored her. The last thing I wanted was random male attention right now.

After a year of fighting the alpha females to defend my place by Kale Henderson's side, I had walked away from the pack after the epiphany that the battle would never end. In the werewolf world, it was fight or flight. Kale viewed my request for him to be more demonstrative in his support of my position as cheating. He argued the pack needed to respect me on my own strength. What he hadn't understood was that his pack would never fully accept an unpedigreed mutt as his mate without some show of his intentions toward me.

The argument boiled over at the last full moon run when I was jumped. Pack law rendered the challenge invalid because the two jealous young females had snuck up behind me instead of challenging me to fair combat one at a time. Unfortunately, they nearly tore my left arm out of the socket before Kale and one of his lieutenants had gotten them off.

I shivered at the memory of shifting to stand naked in the clearing with the cold punctuated by the warm blood dripping from my fingertips. I had matched Kale stare for stare as he rendered judgment on the encounter. He hadn't looked at me as a lover would. Kale's gaze had been cold and distant. It had made me feel unworthy and broken something deep inside me. The sensory memory of the cold rocks cutting through the soles of my feet as I walked away made me shift in my low-heeled boots. I caught myself shrugging the still stiff shoulder and forced myself to stop.

Two weeks past and silence was my answer from Kale. Going quietly into the night wasn't his style. In the past, he always chased me down and tried to have his say. Not this time. Maybe he had finally decided he deserved one of those fancy bitches his mother was always throwing his way. Unshed tears blurred my vision at the thought.

"Oh, come on already, just pick one. It's been long enough for any of them to work."

I jumped at the sound of my sister's voice. The background aroma of the old candy had obscured her approaching scent. The fact we weren't truly sisters despite our insistence to the contrary was evident at a glance. We were as different as, well, cats and dogs, literally speaking. Destiny was a lioness that had been dropped off at St. George's Home for Abandoned Children a few months after I had met the same fate. Unlike me, her richly varied blond mane was pulled back into a tidy ponytail that made her look like a child at first glance. Her diminutive stature only encouraged the misconception.

Since attempts to adopt us out had failed, the nuns running the home had finally allowed us to room together. Something had drawn us together, but it wasn't until we were in college that we'd discovered the duality of our natures. Destiny was the only family I had ever truly known. It didn't matter that our alternative forms weren't the same. Together, we had weathered a fair number of challenges and storms in life. And together, we would get through this one. Taking in a deep breath and letting it out, I reached out and snatched a box blindly from the shelf.

"Not that one, silly. You're a little late to be worrying about that," Destiny's voice held laughter and understanding. I knew she was making light of the situation in an attempt to ease my anxiety. It helped, after a fashion.

A glance at the box made me cringe. Destiny was right. I definitely was not in need of an ovulation indication kit.

"Why do they put these with pregnancy tests?" I groaned.

"For the same reason they put these with them," Destiny picked up a box of condoms and waved them about before putting them back and picking up another box. "It's all about the same thing. What about this one?"

I stared at the box she held up, not really seeing it. I supposed one was as good as another, so I nodded and returned the ovulation kit to the shelf. My gaze followed the pink and white box into the cart and I sighed. Frozen dinners were stacked across the back. "I don't think the freezer will handle those."

"It's either these or learn how to cook. If both freezers go out on me again, we won't lose much," Destiny replied.

I couldn't help but smile and nod agreement. Destiny had a point, and since she was footing the bills at present, it was better not to argue. Besides, if one of us decided to try to cook, the house was liable to burn down. I would never have believed something as small as fresh home cooked meals could spoil a woman until I was back to frozen dinners and powdered creamer for my coffee. The look on my face must have given me away.

"Buck up, Yas. You'll be back to fancy dinners before you can blink. I'll be eating these cardboard boxes all by myself."

I jerked my gaze to meet Destiny's tawny one. Mischief sparkled there. It made me feel ungrateful. Destiny's insight was always uncanny. It was what made her such a good private investigator. It was also why we had grown apart in the last year. Sometime after I moved into Kale's fancy house, I'd stopped trying to share things with her.

"I'm sorry, Destiny. I shouldn't..."

"Stop." She waved away my half spoken apology. "That's what family is for. It's frozen dinners for this week, but I'll be billing at the end of the week. Maybe someone will actually pay up and we'll go out for steaks." Her tone said she didn't believe it and neither did I.

Destiny specialized in both the supernatural and the accompanying desperate cases. It meant that she worked long hours and waited even longer to be paid for them. In years past, I had been her office manager when things were good. When times had been bad, I had gone and gotten a job to pay the bills until they got better. Maybe it was time for me to consider that option again. We were already reverting back to pre-Kale days by pulling my ancient bed from the attic and setting it up in the file room that had once been my bedroom.

"Food is food," I stated philosophically, digging down deep for some hint of enthusiasm. "It beats being hungry. If I want red meat, I'll go out and hunt for it. These are great."

"We should do that. Go hunting this weekend. A little freedom is good for the soul."

Destiny didn't see the woman turning into the aisle as we left it. It was probably just as well. It's funny how people react when they only overhear a snippet from a conversation. The look of horror on the stranger's face would have been too much temptation for Destiny's sense of humor. Having people run away screaming was fun, but we had better things to do today.

I shortened my longer strides to follow her to the checkout counter. Waving away the bored teenager wearing a bagger's smock that glanced up from texting on his cell phone, I bagged the groceries while Destiny paid. It gave me something to do with my hands. I needed the distraction.

Tension mounted on the walk to Destiny's second – no, third – hand sedan. I did my best not to cringe over it. The car was lovingly labeled Hazel and had seen better days with her previous owners, but it was dependable. Neither of us spoke on the relatively short

drive home. As if she understood my mounting angst, Destiny pulled up to the curb in front of the old painted lady that doubled as home and office.

"Go on in and get it out. I'll be in to hold your hand before the three minutes are over." Her tone was warm enough to bring tears back to my eyes. Was it the stress of the situation or hormones that had my emotions so close to the skin?

"Thanks," I said. I wanted to say more, but grabbed what bags I could carry and stepped out onto the sidewalk. She pulled away from the curb and down the alley next to the house.

I juggled the bags while fishing the single key on the ring in my pocket. The house smelled like citrus candles when I let myself in. It never stopped amazing me how homey Destiny kept the place no matter how often I stepped across her threshold.

A previous owner had turned the house into a duplex somewhere in the seventies if the appliances were anything to go by. It suited us and had been a major reason we'd pooled our resources fresh out of college for the down payment. In the downstairs kitchen, I fished out the pink and white box.

My fingers trembled as I opened it. For a moment, I debated waiting for morning. The information on the box assured me it wasn't necessary. I was late enough for an accurate reading.

There is no gracious way to pee on a stick. I did the deed and capped it. Setting it on a paper towel on the counter, I washed my hands and walked away. I used the microwave timer because it was easier.

The freezer was empty, but I put the effort into arranging the boxes. I heard the back door open and sighed in relief.

"It took you long enough. I thought you were going to hold my hand." I called without looking around the tiny freezer door. The heavy sound of a man's footsteps on the tile made me jerk back. The door swung shut revealing my uninvited visitor.

"I'll be happy to hold your hand, Yasmine," Kale said, looking perfectly at ease in the tiny gold and avocado kitchen. In a leather jacket, designer jeans, silk shirt, and Italian shoes, he embodied wealth and privilege that should have been out of place.

My anger was short-circuited by the sheer male perfection of him. Only inches taller than me, his dark hair was artistically styled to frame the rugged planes of his face. Involuntarily, I inhaled the scent of him deep into my lungs. Leather, imported aftershave, and a musk uniquely his own caused me to shiver.

I stared at him dumbly. I wasn't sure what hurt more: Destiny's betrayal or Kale's presence. My gaze locked on his quicksilver eyes. Knowledge shimmered there, and the knife twisted deeper in my soul.

"Kale." I cleared my throat to chase away the strained whisper. "Where's Destiny?"

"I believe she said she had some work to do." He didn't even bother to cover the fact they had schemed this between them.

"She told you." Anger was coming back. I welcomed the heat of it. God, let me get angry. It would lessen the pain. I couldn't believe Destiny would set me up like this.

"She suggested I might want to make a personal appearance instead of relying on the telephone to make amends when I called this morning." He shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. It was the only indication I had that he wasn't as comfortable as he seemed.

I opened my mouth to blast him, but the shrill beeping of the microwave cut me off in more ways than the obvious. The indicator panel scrolled "ready" in bright red letters. Oh, how little the manufacturer knew. It was a reality check. Deep down, I knew Destiny understood me better than any other person alive. I knew why she had invited Kale this afternoon.

The next few minutes had the potential to change my life forever...and Kale's as well. When I looked back on it, I would remember who held my hand for the rest of my life.

Destiny knew all my secret longings. She knew how important it was to me to have the fairy tale trappings. Kale brought me back to the moment with soft words.

"Yasmine, please. Don't send me away. Please." His voice held a pleading note I'd never heard from him. In all the years I'd known him, I'd never heard him beg. It shocked me enough that I felt the desire to fight wash out of me. He must have felt it because his face softened.

Movement made me jump. His hand reached across the distance between us. One step would have closed it but he didn't take it. Instead, he waited for me to meet him halfway. I stared at it for a moment. My hand reached up and the warmth of his palm sent a small shock through me. Kale gently squeezed my hand and let out an unsteady breath.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Another beep from the microwave reminded me to move. I didn't walk past him. Instead, I walked to lean against his quiet strength. Kale's free arm wrapped around me and pulled me close. My emotions were fragile and the shaky breath I let out turned into a sob.

"Why didn't you come sooner?" I demanded into his shoulder.

"I thought you might want some time to breathe. Lord, Yasmine. The way you walked away, I wasn't sure if you would forgive me. I was an idiot. Granted, it took Suzanne to make me see it."

Suzanne. My tears gave way to a chuckle. The thought of his big sister taking him to task made the world seem a little more right.

Destiny was right. She would have held my hand and I would have been grateful, but Kale was who my heart wanted to face this with me. The realization made me wonder what else her instincts had tipped her off to. Another beep made me pull back and step away from him.

"Ready?" Anxiety and anticipation mixed inside me to wash away the anger and pain.

"Let's do this thing." Kale allowed me to lead him to the bathroom. "Do you want to look and tell me, or do we do this together?"

Part of me wanted to know first. But as I opened my mouth to say it, some of his excitement reached me through the tangled haze of my own emotions. A closer inspection of his face showed it was more than excitement. It was eagerness. I couldn't deny him.

"Together. Wait to look until I tell you." The smile that spread across his face made the decision worthwhile. I led him through the narrow doorway and took a deep breath. "One. Two. Three. Okay."

We both turned to face the sink and stared at the two tiny pink lines boldly staring back from its bed of plastic. Two pink lines. Kale's arms came around me to hold me up as my knees threatened to give way. Two pink lines. A baby.

Kale pulled me close and dampness against the back of my neck made me straighten on my feet so I could pull back enough to look at him. Tears tracked silently down those perfect cheeks. His face shown with joy, and he pulled me closer to him.

The kiss started as a gentle caress, a tasting of the salty tears lingering on his lips, but it bled to heat and hunger before either of us broke for air. Laughing, I reached up to wipe away his tears.

"Your mother is going to have a fit," I predicted.

"Only because I haven't done this sooner," he retorted.

I hardly thought his mother had been secretly hoping for grandchildren, at least not from me. Before I could ask what he meant, he dropped down on his knees in the tiny bathroom and pressed his face against my abdomen. He kissed it through my chenille sweater and looked up at me with a suddenly solemn expression.

I felt my giddy smile fade under that look.

"I had this long speech prepared, but I've forgotten most of it." He reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a well-worn velvet box. My gasp was loud in the close quarters. "I'm an idiot, but I believe I've already said that today. This ring has been

weighing down my pocket since Christmas, but I was too proud to ask the question. I was afraid of the answer." He opened the box to reveal a huge sparkling diamond. "I love you. Marry me. I promise to spend the rest of my life making up for being the dumbest wolf in existence."

Fresh tears slid down my face making me glad I never wore make-up. Kale was everything I'd dreamed of in my "happily ever after" dreams as a child. I loved him with every part of me.

"Okay."

The hope in his expression dimmed. He made no effort to pull the ring from the box and put it on my finger. Dropping down on my knees to face him, I cupped his face in my hands reveling in the slightly abrasive feeling of his whiskers.

"I love you. I love you when you're doing something only a Neanderthal would understand. I love the way you look at me across a room and everyone else in it melts away. I love how you worry about little things and let the big things knock you over the head. You're the only man I've ever wanted to spend my life with. Yes. Let's get married."

I felt his smile return under my hands, but the watery sheen of my happy tears obscured it. His mouth found mine again and I was glad the room was as small as it was lest we get carried away.

It was amid much laughter that we finally climbed to our feet and managed to get the ring on my finger. Hand in hand, we walked into the kitchen to find Destiny sitting on the counter swinging her feet.

"See? I told you I was going to be eating those cardboard boxes all by myself."

Her tawny gaze sparkled back at me. I held up my left hand and she nodded. "Took him long enough."

We all laughed, but no one disagreed. I decided not to be mad at Destiny for meddling. Maybe one day, I could return the favor. Ah, the sweetness kind of revenge is when it's been simmering...

About the Author:

Kaye Chambers has led a wild life. With her college degree in hand, she set off on an adventure to find herself. She's soaked in the hot springs in Iceland in the middle of a blizzard, sat on a volcano to watch the magic of the Northern lights, stood on the coast in the eye of a hurricane, and been awed by ruins of pagan temples. Somewhere along the way, she found herself along with her wonderfully supportive husband. Marriage, children, and life went in a different direction and her personal goals went with off in another. Finally, in 2005, she sat down and began to write. She hopes to put all the wonderful inspiration of her life into the pages of her books for the enjoyment of her readers.

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