



SOMETHING *INS*
TO *Now*
ABOUT

AZURA ICE

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Something to Howl About

A1Night Stand Story

By

Azura Ice

Chapter One

Basil stepped down from the steam-powered stagecoach. The Desert Patch Steampunk Getaway left him in awe. One of his good buddies at the welding shop had prodded him for months to try 1Night Stand's services. He was thankful he had.

He stood in the center of the sandy street, gazing at a perfect replica of an Old West town. He'd tried for three years to register, but the long waiting list never seemed to shrink. Somehow, Madame Eve, who handled 1Night Stand, had managed to get him an entire weekend. A thrill wound through him at the thought of meeting his date for the night.

He sighed, recalling his last relationship. *If nothing else, maybe I'll get lucky and end my dry spell. Damn, has it really been six years since Patrick and I were together?* Instead, he said aloud, "I can't believe how long it's been since I had a vacation."

The steam coach driver climbed up the ladder and reached for two suitcases on the roof. "I know how you feel. I woke up one morning to find out my daughters had all graduated from high school and the wife and I were looking at our fortieth wedding anniversary."

"Sounds as if you've had a good life, though."

The man nodded. "Indeed, I have. I can't complain."

He envied the guy. He wanted a good life with someone to love—or at the very least a companion who didn't dump him for broader shoulders and more money. He hoped Madame Eve had found him the perfect date for the night. Looks didn't worry him, but he did want someone levelheaded, smart, and witty. Someone who had compassion and integrity would be nice, too. Most of all, he hoped for a guy who would understand and accept his unique secret. Yes, it seemed like a tall order, but if he was going to dream, then he'd dream big.

Regardless, the most important part of his stay centered on the underground rumors about this place. There were whispers the resort catered to those who

shared his affliction. Such people were difficult to find and all the more reason for him to investigate during his stay.

He turned, looking for the hotel. There, on the bottom step of the building's entrance, stood a tall, lanky man. Dressed differently from the others wandering around the street and sidewalks, he had to be a guest. Designer jeans clad his slim hips, and a crisp Western shirt was tucked into his waistband. Without a hat on his head, the blazing sun revealed silver and blue strands glimmering in his black hair. Basil expected to see a pair of expensive cowboy boots on the guy's feet, but instead, bare toes poked out from the hem of his jeans. For some reason, he found the lack of shoes erotic, but despite the cowboy's dark, handsome looks, he preferred fair men.

The stranger took a last drag off a cigarette and dropped it in the sand can next to him. Releasing a cloud of white smoke into the air, he regarded him with interest.

An unidentifiable feeling wiggled through him. The guy acted as if he knew him, but he'd never seen him before. After a moment, the man nodded, ascended the steps and entered the hotel.

Basil shook away his thoughts and chuckled, handing his luggage ticket to the driver. *What am I getting all worked up about?* The bar scenes tired him as well as the crazy personalities he'd met while following clues that might have led him to a cure for his curse. Maybe the stranger found him interesting or even attractive. It didn't matter anyway. All the relationships he'd had over the last ten years never lasted long once his partner discovered his true identity. And the one man he wanted most, he couldn't have.

Wind whipped up the thoroughfare, and a hot, dry wind intensified the sun's effects. His excitement over being at the resort didn't help either. At least the hotel had air-conditioning.

The driver found his small overnight duffle and tossed it down. With a bag in each hand, Basil halted on the plank sidewalk and looked from the general store to the bathhouse to the livery. Cowboys on horseback rode up and down the street, actors in period costumes meandered around doing mundane chores. A

soiled dove peered over the swinging doors of The Cursed Revolver Saloon. He smiled, feeling like he'd stepped into the first half of the nineteenth century.

Once he'd checked in, a young woman wearing a simple, blue gingham dress, petticoats, and black lace-up boots escorted him down the hall on the ground floor. She opened the door to his room.

"An authentic Western costume is in the closet for tonight's Saloon Fest." She handed him the key. "Madame Eve set this up for you and also sent us your sizes, so everything should fit." She paused in the threshold, her dark brown gaze sweeping him from head to foot. "Please remember to remove your costume before nightfall. Otherwise, you'll be required to pay for it, and they're very expensive."

"Duly noted." He nodded. "Oh, by the way, can I get a wake-up call at four-forty-five p.m.?"

"Most certainly."

"Thank you."

She left quietly.

The mention of the cowboy tavern forced his thoughts back to his best friend. He'd met Jason three-and-a-half years earlier when he and his wife, Samantha returned from their Cancun honeymoon. The three of them hit it off instantly, but he never breathed a word about his attraction to his friend.

From the beginning, Jason had known he was gay, and took a lot of ribbing about their friendship, even getting into a bar fight and receiving twelve stitches in his forehead. Still, he maintained their friendship as if nothing had ever happened. The jerk who started the fight had looked even worse with a broken nose, a busted upper lip, two missing teeth, and facial lacerations.

Basil laughed softly. The guy had no idea his pal boxed three times a week to stay in shape—and oh, what a beautiful shape he maintained.

One big fear taunted him. What if the gossip about Desert Patch proved untrue? He shook the thought away. It had to be true because what sane, unafflicted person would stay where he thought his life might be in danger? His friend wasn't there, and Basil didn't want to end up in a fight at the resort when he'd tried for so long to secure a reservation.

Regardless, a return trip to Desert Patch might never happen, so he planned to make the weekend a memory that would last forever.

He wondered once more about his companion for the night. Would he be blond? Maybe a redhead or someone with eyes the color of tropical waters. Excitement gripped him. Madame Eve had assured him she'd find the perfect one-night stand.

A knock startled him.

"Yes?"

"Delivery for you."

Cautiously, he opened the door. A young fellow gazed at him. He held up a bucket of ice with a bottle in it.

"I didn't order anything."

"It's a gift, sir."

"Very well." He widened the door, accepted the bucket and its contents, and tipped the guy.

Alone again, he set the metal ice container on the nightstand and untied a card on a string around the champagne bottle's neck.

"Your secret admirer." He frowned. "Who the hell would...?"

Ah.... His companion for the night had probably sent the gift. He worried his lower lip. But why hadn't his date signed his name?

Perplexed, he picked up his pack and placed it on the bed. Walking to the double doors, he pushed them open. A small patio with a fountain welcomed him. The enclosure kept prying eyes away and appeared to muffle all conversations. The lattice roof provided sunshine for the flowers without frying them, and partial shade for the guest who wanted fresh air without being in the harsh light. On the far side of the patio, a large, high-backed bench beckoned one to fall into its overstuffed cushions covered in an old-fashioned paisley print.

Examining the porcelain fountain, he delighted in the solar-powered pump. The basins would shut off at dark and collect condensation to replenish evaporated water. Small fans set in the molding blew air up into the enclosed patio, cooling the day's heat seeping through the roof and back wall. As a welder, he appreciated how the pieces were seamlessly put together. Even its tiny storage

cabinets—he opened one and found a stash of erotic supplies—had been designed to look like part of the entire unit. He grinned. What other steampunk inventions would he discover during the evening?

Returning to the room, he stripped off his clothes and entered the bathroom. He eyed the cow-leather curtain, then drew the supple drape around the claw-foot tub and looked for a showerhead. Instead, a tube had been inserted in the wall about every six inches, from the top to the bottom, and another one stretched from the circular rail to the spigot. Curious, he turned a mysterious lever on the faucet. An immediate, heavy, warm mist burst from the implanted tubes. With a laugh, he stepped in and shut off the steamy shower.

Thankful the resort had opted for indoor plumbing, he ran his bath water and enjoyed a long, cool soak for several minutes. Rousing before he dozed off again, he dried off and flopped naked onto the bed then stared up at the ceiling. The flight and the steam coach ride had worn him out. The quiet overwhelmed him and he missed the sound of a television, something he always left on at home so he didn't feel so alone.

He sighed. Jason, also a fan of steampunk and the Old West, would've loved relaxing there. But he'd set the weekend aside for him and Samantha. They were to have a nice dinner the day before and talk about starting a family. The couple probably drove up to her parents' cabin that morning. The very thought pushed a needle of pain through Basil's chest.

A series of rapid knocks on the door startled him out of a sound sleep. Blinking rapidly and his heart slamming, he sat up. "Who is it?"

"Wake-up call. You requested one when you checked in."

"Thank you."

He stood, forcing the prickles sweeping over his skin to abate. Scrubbing his palms over his eyes, it felt as though he'd only dozed off moments ago. Calm again, he walked into the bathroom and poured cold water from a pitcher into a large porcelain bowl. After splashing his face, he hurried back in the room.

Donning the gunslinger attire, he slipped on the belt and holsters, sliding the prop pistols into them. For the getup's final touch, he fastened his watch chain to the vest and slipped the timepiece into its pocket.

Pulling the gold bandit mask over his eyes, he adjusted the slits and put on the simple brown hat. A pair of scuffed cowboy boots finished the costume. On the inside of the closet door, he found a full-length mirror. He'd meant to have his hair cut before leaving town, but with the hat on, only the ends were visible. The mask's color brightened his dark eyes, too. *I look quite the rake, if I do say so myself.*

Smiling, he enjoyed the excitement winding through him. He was to meet his mysterious companion at the Saloon Fest, and his date would play the part of Desert Patch's sheriff.

He glanced at the pocket watch: quarter after five. He had until roughly eight o'clock to mingle. By then the early spring sun would begin setting, and he should be back to his room and changed out of his costume.

Since guests were allowed two free drinks at the Saloon Fest, he stowed his wallet in the room's safe along with his return trip ticket to Pittsburgh. Pocketing his key, and with a mixture of anxiety and elation filling him, he stepped out and walked down the highly-polished wooden floor, his boot heels ringing out on the planks.

The clerk looked up from the check-in desk and smiled. "Your timing is perfect, Mr. Westmore. Everyone is arriving for the Saloon Fest."

He nodded to her and strode through the front doors, down the steps, and along the wooden sidewalk to The Cursed Revolver Saloon. Piano music drifted out into the street. Pushing through the swinging doors, he squinted as his eyes adjusted to the softer lighting. The saloon appeared as if someone had transported it straight out of a Western movie. Painted ladies lined the stairs and the balcony, their hair upswept in pin curls, their corsets tight and petticoats bright against dark stockings.

He let his gaze wander over the growing crowd in search of the sheriff, but it didn't appear he'd arrived yet.

"It's not often we find a new member for our resort."

He faced a tall, lanky man in his mid-fifties. Silver hair at the temples blended into a thick mass of raven-black hair. Wire-rimmed bifocals perched on the tip of his nose. Dressed in a simple brown suit and matching boots, he stared down at him with a grin.

“Beg your pardon?” Basil asked.

“You.” The man waved his hand up and down before idly stuffing a watch attached to a chain into his coat pocket. “You’re the one the resort owner told us about. You’re interested in becoming a member, right?”

“Uh...yes. I’ve tried for years to book at least one night here at Desert Patch, but I wasn’t aware I could become—”

“I’m sure you’ll fit in without any problems.” He laughed and held out one long-fingered hand. “I’m Dr. Applerite, the resort’s physician, so I play one at these events, too. See? I even carry a little black bag. It’s over there on the bar.” A low chuckle escaped him. “I’d better mingle. Enjoy yourself, Mr. Westmore.”

With that, the doc wandered into the crowd, leaving him to entertain himself.

“Are you going to stand there gawking all night?”

Behind him, a cowboy sat at the bar. His deep red mask flattered his onyx eyes. Beneath his matching hat, locks of ebony hair poked out.

“Come over here and join me for a drink.” The stranger crooked a finger, motioning him over. “You get two free. However, sip ’em slowly. It’s stout liquor.”

Basil approached the counter and stood next to him. “Thanks. I think I will have a drink.”

The cowboy motioned to the barkeep. “What’ll it be?”

“Scotch.”

“A scotch for...?” He glanced at him.

“Basil Westmore.”

“My name is Cassius Fenwate.” He held up a tumbler full of amber liquid. “You’re the new guy. Nice to meet you, and welcome to Desert Patch, our little slice of hot, volatile heaven.”

“Volatile?”

“Let’s just say this bunch is known for settling matters in the street, out in the desert—” His obsidian gaze burned into Basil. “Or in the sheets. You’re the guy I saw get out of the steam coach today.”

An image of the stranger assessing him and smoking a coffin nail rose in his mind. “Ah, outside the hotel.”

“That’s me. You certainly caught my attention.”

Something sinister laced his words. Sensing a possessive vibe from him, Basil said, “I’m meeting someone here tonight.”

He smirked. “Aren’t we all?”

Basil’s attention drifted from person to person, and couple to couple. “This is a mixer?”

The cowboy burst out laughing, the sound loud and harsh. “You really haven’t been here before, have you?”

“Nope. 1Night Stand secured my first reservation here.”

“You wouldn’t be here unless someone with major clout or connections pulled some strings for you.” A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth, his lower lip much fuller than the upper one. “Desert Patch has to be careful about letting only the *right kind* of people in here. Bring in normal ones and it becomes a security issue.”

The man’s reference to normal people struck him as derisive. Still, as the new guy, he didn’t want to alienate anyone until he grasped everything there was to know about the place.

He nodded. “I understand.”

“Do you really?” Leaning closer, he sniffed Basil’s neck. “You’re an Easterner, right? You’re not from along the coastline but a little inland.”

“You can sum me up solely by my scent?” He gaped at him. He had a lot more to learn than he ever thought.

“Sure.” Cassius’ gaze traveled from his face, down his body, and back up again—the possessive manner leaving him feeling somewhat violated. “You really are a newb, aren’t you? How long has it been since you found out?”

“Nine years, but I haven’t found another one like me in all that time, so I haven’t had anyone I could learn from.”

“Well, my friend—” Cassius clapped him on the shoulder, “You’re about to discover you’ve found a home away from home.”

His keen inner sense screamed at him to walk away, but he wasn’t entirely sure whether the guy might be messing with him or not. He didn’t want to be rude, and he did have a drink to finish.

“Why don’t you come up to my room?” Cassius leaned over, sniffing along his neck again and up farther to his ear.

He fought the urge to bare his fangs and snarl.

“I’ve never fucked an Easterner before,” the man pressed. “I’ll give you something to howl about.”

Danger crept up his spine until the hair rose slightly on his nape. “I appreciate the invitation.” He kept his voice soothing. “But as I said, I really am meeting someone here. It was all set up before I even arrived in Desert Patch.”

At that moment, a tall, well-built cowboy stepped through the saloon doors with a big tin star on his vest.

With relief, he added, “If you’ll excuse me, Cassius, I think my companion has arrived. Thank you for the conversation.”

He held his drink away from jostling bodies in the dance area and pushed between two tables of giggling, painted ladies sitting on the laps of several gunslingers playing poker. The sheriff saw him heading his way and smiled. Basil couldn’t see much of his face, but something about the man drew him.

Before he reached the sheriff, he recognized a familiar scent, combined with the essence of a fresh, crisp cologne tantalized his nose. He grinned and delight flew through him.

Jason.

Chapter Two

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m your 1Night Stand companion tonight,” Jason answered with a big smile.

His friend’s presence couldn’t be a coincidence. Happiness filled him to the brink of exploding. Questions fired through his mind so fast he couldn’t think straight.

“How could Madame Eve have known about who I...well...you.”

“I don’t know,” Jason began, “but the rumor is she has some sort of special ability to pair the right people, and she chose the perfect place to, uh...*rendezvous*.”

“I can’t believe you’re here...and you’re my companion.”

“I know what you’re going to ask.”

Basil raised an eyebrow.

A sigh escaped his friend. “You want to know about Samantha and me.”

He nodded.

“We’re getting a divorce.”

“But why?”

Jason swept his hat off and ran the opposite hand through his golden hair.

“I’m sorry,” Basil said. “I must admit you’ve really shocked me.”

The music grew louder, preventing his pal from offering an explanation, and it seemed the crowd grew more raucous, too.

Without warning the piano music ended. He turned to face the saloon. A melodious chime sounded and a man wearing a peddler’s suit stood on the small stage, holding his hands up in the air.

“Tonight,” he called out, “is the full moon. You are all welcome to be yourselves here in the Saloon and anywhere else on the resort, but if you’re wearing loaned or rented costumes for the event, please disrobe and pass your clothes over to our scarlet ladies before your change. Enjoy the evening!” He stepped down and returned to his table in front of the stage.

Basil could only stare as guests stripped free of their costumes. Shimmers, like heat ripples rising from baked pavement, flowed across some of the disrobed people, and others transformed in bright flashes, as if someone had tossed handfuls of glitter over them while standing in a spotlight. In their places, dozens of werewolves appeared, some coal black, others brown, red, gold, and silver.

Mouth ajar, he snapped it shut. After so long, he'd finally found others like himself.

"Are you all right?" Jason asked.

He jerked his attention up to meet his friend's, realization almost flattening him. "You knew about me the whole time?"

"Yes."

"Are all the residents and staff members werewolves?"

"Shh." His friend glanced around. "Yes, but they prefer shapeshifter or lycanthrope to werewolf. Some are very touchy about paranormal-racial words."

"Holy shit. I do have a lot to learn."

Laughter bubbled out of his companion.

"I take it you're probably a lifelong member of Desert Patch?"

Jason nodded, his eyes mischievous behind the mask, his grin growing ever wider. "I have been from the start. Lycanthropes must be very careful where we gather. The human world is still terrified of us and refuses to believe we exist, so our clubs, resorts, and other gathering places must be hidden and disguised."

For a long moment, Basil returned his attention to the werewolves wandering around the saloon. In one corner, a female and male nuzzled and rubbed against each other. Behind the bar, the barkeep had only half transformed, but he supposed it was a hell of a lot easier to pour and serve drinks with hands, albeit hairy ones, than with paws. He stared at the women, whose breasts were covered with a thinner, finer fur. He couldn't help gaping at the scene as he wrestled with the confusion and surprise spiraling through his brain. The wild aromas whisking around the building on air-conditioned currents urged his inner beast to change, but he couldn't. The moon wouldn't be full for a few hours yet, and he hadn't learned to shift at will.

"Hey, I'm talking to you."

He snapped his attention over at his friend. "I'm sorry."

"Look." Jason set his hat back on his head. "Can we go somewhere quiet?"

"Sure."

"My room or yours?"

"Uh, mine is only a short walk from here," Basil replied as if in a dream.

"Good, let's go."

Throwing one last look at the lycanthrope revelers, he caught sight of the cowboy still sitting at the bar. The man had transformed. He rose to watch him, his eyes ablaze with red feral heat, lips curled back in a snarl. Basil didn't know whether it was a challenge, anger, or plain wolfiness. Slowly, the odd man-wolf extended his arm. Ripples rolled down it, and instead of a paw, he used a hand and pointed. Shimmers moved up to his face, his muzzle shifting enough so human lips appeared.

"You," he mouthed, "are mine."

Jason's warm palm landed on Basil's shoulder and he started. "Watch the one over there at the bar," he said in his ear. "He's a troublemaker."

"Yeah, I picked up on him pretty fast."

"Come on."

He followed his friend out onto the planked walk. Strolling side by side to the hotel, he asked, "So, why am I always in horrible pain when I transform and most everyone in the saloon morphed through ripples, shimmers, or flashes of light?"

"They're *natural* lycanthropes."

"You mean they were born with the werewolf gene?"

Jason nodded.

"So, anyone changed by a werewolf goes through the painful version?"

"Yes, whether they're bitten by a natural one or a changed one doesn't matter."

"I thought I was going to go crazy before I found someone like me. Here you were a werewolf the entire time. Why didn't I sense it? While I'm thinking about it, why couldn't I detect it in anyone here on the resort?"

"You're still young. In werewolf years, you're barely out of your teens. It takes time to learn how to use your senses, including your sense of smell. Our smell,

sight and so on are our powers. They're overwhelming, confusing, stubborn to wield at first, and empowering."

Basil snorted in derision. "I stay in a constant state of confusion."

"You need to defeat an Alpha," Jason returned. "It's how you gain your full powers and the strength to handle them."

A shiver flowed through him and he grimaced. "Great, there's nothing like having my ass handed to me."

"Think of it in a different way." Jason chuckled. "A ghost drains batteries and people's energy in order to manifest itself. If a turned werewolf defeats an Alpha in battle, he or she gains full use of his or her senses."

Pondering the information, he ascended the hotel's steps in time with him. What could have possibly happened between Jason and Samantha?

His friend must have sensed his attention. He turned and looked at Basil as he opened the door. "I'll tell you everything once we have privacy."

"Did it end horribly?"

Shaking his head, Jason followed him into the lobby. "No, I expected it would be worse if she ever found out what I am, but she was eerily calm about it."

Basil led him up to his room. Closing the door behind them, he asked, "What happened, Jason?"

"Samantha has always known I'm bisexual," he began. "But she never knew anything about me being a natural lycanthrope."

"Why didn't you tell her before you got married?"

"We only loved one another as friends. She married me to shut my family up about settling down, and so her mother would leave her alone about grandchildren. Samantha's only stipulation for our marriage was she wanted a career first and children later."

"How'd she find out about your lineage?"

"My mother." Jason sat on the edge of the bed. "Mom thought Samantha already knew about our family. Samantha mentioned her mother had asked when we planned to start a family, and then Mom blurted something about wanting

grandchildren so our natural werewolf gene could be passed on before I grew too old to sire offspring. Samantha freaked.”

“She could handle a marriage of convenience.” Basil summed up the story. “And she’s fine with you being bisexual, but she couldn’t deal with having a lycanthrope husband or children?”

“No, and trust me, I understand her reasons, but I think our farce marriage became too much for her. After she calmed down, she announced she wanted a divorce, but not because of me and my lycanthrope family.”

He frowned. “Then why?”

“You.”

As his answer soaked into his brain, he could only stare at his companion. “I broke you two up?”

“No, no, no!” Holding his hands up and shaking his head, Jason sighed heavily. “She used you as her excuse to get out of an unhappy situation.”

“H-how long have you two been split up?” He didn’t want to be hopeful, but hope soared through him all the same. “Have you been keeping your breakup quiet?”

“Yes and no. Samantha left me two weeks ago, so I told you the story about dinner and the trip to the cabin so you wouldn’t guess something was wrong.” He shifted position, leaning on one forearm, and threw him a soft expression. “I didn’t tell you because I wanted the smoke to clear first. My family has been impossible about our impending divorce. Mom is the worst. She’s always known I’m bisexual, but she ignored it. And I didn’t want you to feel as though you were the cause of the breakup—and you’re not the cause, okay?”

He shot him a worried glance. “All right.”

“I’ve known for a long time how you feel about me.”

He’d taken great pains to hide his feelings, but it didn’t surprise him Jason had picked up on it. Looking back, his friend had always been able to sense whatever he thought or felt. It was one of the many reasons he loved him so much.

“I tried really hard to hide it because of Samantha.”

“She’s a good reader of eye and facial expressions. She said she suspected your feelings for me about three months into our marriage.” He smiled. “I told you earlier, a natural lycanthrope’s senses are stronger than a *made* wolf’s.”

“Will she cause you any problems with the divorce?”

“No, we had a pre-nup.”

“What’s next?”

“Let me love you.”

Faced with what he wanted most, he panicked, his heart quickening, pulse thrumming in his ears. What if he didn’t please him? What then?

He opened his mouth to say something, but several hard, firm knocks on the door interrupted him.

Jason quirked an eyebrow and slid his gaze to the door. “Expecting someone?”

“No.” He strode across the room. “It’s probably someone from the front desk.” Placing his hand on the knob, he called out, “Who is it?”

“I’m here about the champagne,” came a muffled reply.

“Champagne?” asked Jason.

“Ah, I bet the bottle—” Basil gestured at the metal bucket on the stand. “Was sent to the wrong room. Good thing I didn’t pop it.” He opened the door and froze.

With a huge, smug grin on his face, Cassius stared back at him. Still dressed in his gunslinger costume and red mask hanging around his neck, he exuded confidence and something...dangerous. “Surprised?”

“Uh...” The enormity of the situation slapped Basil hard. “What are you doing here?”

“I sent you the champagne.”

“Why?”

An amused snort escaped the man. “I like you.” He crossed the threshold. “And I want you.”

“Look, Cassius...” Although taken by surprise, he refused to back up and let him in. “I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

“I saw you when you got off the steam coach.” Determined, the guy edged into the room a few more inches. “You saw me, and our gazes met across the street.

You checked me out as thoroughly as I did you, so I knew we were going to hook up tonight. It's why I sent the bottle to your room." He winked. "When we met again in the saloon, you let me buy you drinks."

"The drinks were already *free*."

"It's the principle of the matter."

"You're interrupting our evening," Jason said, his tone annoyed.

Cassius' teasing expression turned to surprise, followed by thinly veiled anger. He stepped around Basil and swept his gaze across the room until he focused on Jason, who had risen to stand next to the bed.

"You're with *him*?" Cassius whirled on Basil.

He held his ground. "Yes, and I *told you* I was meeting someone."

"I staked my claim first!" A feral glow lit the man's eyes.

"You are mistaken," Basil returned with a calm he didn't feel. "Take your bottle and get out."

"You're mine!" Baring his fangs, Cassius growled at Jason, the sound rolling through the chamber like distant thunder.

"You heard my partner," Jason admonished. "Leave, *now*."

"You haven't seen the last from me." A long, black claw spouted from his index finger and he pointed it at Basil while backing away. "You belong to me."

"Out!" Basil stalked to the exit, his hand connecting with the intruder's shoulder. He pushed him into the hall and slammed the door in his face.

"Mister Fenwate," said Jason. "He thinks he owns everything and everyone."

"I've never heard of him until tonight. Who is he?"

"He's one of the first to buy stock in Desert Patch. He also comes from old money and an even older lycanthrope family, one with members in the government. Their money is daunting, but the political ties are what really frighten people."

"Great."

"Aw, don't worry about him. He knows the residents here at Desert Patch won't tolerate trouble, so he won't cause any." He motioned for Basil to join him out on the patio and opened the double doors. "Besides, if anyone upsets the tranquility of a Castillo-owned property, Madame Eve will make sure Jackson

Castillo bans the offender from all their resorts.” He smiled at him over his shoulder. “Why don’t you grab the bottle and the glasses? There’s no sense in letting the bubbly get warm.”

Collecting everything and following him out, Basil put away his anger. He didn’t want Cassius’ interference to spoil their time together.

Outside, he placed the bottle and glasses on the edge of the fountain. Above them, the colors of the sunset peeked through the lattice ceiling. Jason raised the big cushions on the bench, revealing its metal frame beneath, and grasped handles on either end of it. With a firm yank, the bench lowered to create a large, square cot.

“When I stay here, I enjoy relaxing on these patio loungers and looking up at the stars through the lattice work,” he explained. “The cut-out effect is cool against a sky full of brilliant stars.” He held one hand out to Basil. “Come here.”

His heart galloped so hard he gasped for air. He approached his friend and stood trembling in front of him.

Jason brushed the backs of his fingers along his clean-shaven cheek. “You have no idea how long I’ve waited to be with you.”

Incredulous, he gaped at him. “Really?”

Jason nodded. “Deep down I knew things wouldn’t work out between me and Samantha. I did my best to make her happy, but my heart has always belonged to you.”

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out between you, but the other part of me is glad it didn’t, too.” A soft chuckle escaped him. “Is that terrible?”

“No.” Jason slipped his arms around his waist. “I feel the same way.”

At his touch, Basil’s pulse quickened further. “Good. I—”

Jason captured his lips, and every thought in his head fled to the four corners of the desert. His first kiss with his soon-to-be lover tasted of mint and something subtle yet intoxicating. Moaning, he kissed him back. His hard cock pressed against the buttons of his trousers, the pain both irritating and exciting. At his soft groan, Jason pulled him closer, sandwiching their erections between their bodies, the costumes thin barriers hinting at what they could do to one another should they remove them.

Jason released him and stepped away. “We better take off our costumes before we end up having to pay for them.”

“What about the champagne?”

“Later.”

Laughing, he pulled off his boots and removed his clothes. He stood in nothing more than his briefs. As Jason took off his costume, Basil couldn't help but admire the man's physique. Oh, he'd watched him play flag football in nothing but a pair of shorts and his Reeboks, but this time the revealed skin was for *him*. He would get to touch the honed muscles he'd always pined for and know how it felt to have their bodies pressed and straining together.

Jason stepped out of the ring of garments and stood naked in front of him. His erection bobbed with his movements, the skin pale and marbled with light blue veins.

A lump formed in Basil's throat, and his heart crashed against his ribs.

“Take off your briefs,” Jason ordered softly. “I want to see your cock.”

Basil gulped the knot down, tearing his gaze away from him, and did as commanded. Straightening, he waited as Jason's gaze swept down his torso and lingered on his manhood. His skin heated under the appraisal, and the longer he assessed him, the more blood pounded in cock until the head bumped rhythmically under his navel.

Shimmers passed over Jason, faint enough to be an illusion, but something primal built in his partner. The illumination brightened, and sparkles swirled around him until his muscles twitched and bulged, claws erupted from his fingers and toes, and the beginning of a muzzle appeared. Growling, he shook like a dog shedding water from its coat, and the transformation stopped.

“Are you all right?” Basil asked.

“I'm fine.” He grinned. “I want you so badly you're actually bringing the beast out in me.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It's good. It takes overwhelming sexual attraction to force a natural lycanthrope to shape shift when aroused.” He threaded their fingers together and

drew Basil to the padded cot. “Sex in werewolf form is amazing, but it’s a lesson for another time—after I teach you all the things you need to know.”

The thought of running free in the night together and making love in lycanthrope form rocketed more desire through him. His cock throbbed harder, and he groaned softly.

“Come here.” Jason lay on his side across the cushions. Leaning over, he pushed a button on one of the fountain’s hidden cabinets. A door popped open and he reached inside it to pull out a tube of lubrication. “Let me see if I can give you a reason to moan even louder.”

Chapter Three

The low rumble of Jason's voice shot gooseflesh over Basil. He knelt on the bench, the pillows crinkling beneath him, and settled into his arms. He kissed him, their tongues dueling, hands roving over one another's bodies. Basil couldn't touch enough of him, wanted their first time together to last forever.

His breathing grew more erratic, and when Jason palmed his ass and drew their pelvises together, he almost lost his composure. He lay trembling in his arms, his heart racing, skin aching to be caressed.

Jason reached toward the nightstand. A moment later, the top clicked on a tube of lube, and something inside Basil clicked, too. He relaxed and nuzzled Jason's neck, flicking his tongue out every once in a while to taste his skin. With fingers sure yet gentle, Jason spread lubricant into the crack of his ass then pushed against his shoulder, indicating Basil should roll on his back.

Jason settled between his thighs. "This is your last chance to say you no," he whispered. "Once we go all the way, you're mine."

Basil looked up at him. The brightness of the rising moon and stars filtered through the trellis roof, illuminating him in a patchwork glow. His dreams of being with his handsome friend had finally come true. A natural lycanthrope, he could teach Basil about his powers as well as what he needed to know to survive as a werewolf. For the first time in his life, he felt complete.

"I want you. Always have and always will."

"Good." A sexy smile tweaked the corners of Jason's full lips. "I have to mark you so other lycanthropes know you're mine."

Adrenaline kicked into his bloodstream. His nipples tightened and tingled. He couldn't wait to feel the firm planes of Jason's chest skin-to-skin with his. "I'm ready."

His lover shifted his position, his weight pleasantly heavy, and pinned Basil's cock against his belly.

Fire raced through him, his breath catching, blood rushing to his erection, hardening it more. Lava settled at the base of his spine and surged into his balls, contracting them so much it proved painful. As Jason pressed against his opening, he gasped and tried to relax. He'd never wanted to please someone so much.

"I don't want to disappoint you."

"You won't." Jason pushed into him inch by inch. "You could never disappoint me."

Basil cried out and clutched him, fingers biting into muscles. Pain and pleasure filled him. Although Jason slid into him slowly to make it as comfortable as possible, his member stretched Basil. He fought not to tense, and the stinging discomfort faded as his body accepted the intrusion. He felt skewered, full, and so excited he battled to keep from coming. With his cock wedged between their bellies, the throbbing grew twice as strong. He wanted him to pump into him over and over until he begged him to stop. Floating on a wave of pure sensation, he snapped his legs around Jason's driving hips and raised his own to meet every one of his thrusts. The heat building in his groin grew to epic proportions until he thought he'd burst apart in a shower of splinters.

Capturing his mouth, Jason mimicked the motions of his cock with his tongue. Basil moaned and sighed, wanting, needing his friend buried in him to his root. Tingles swept over his skin until he could only cry out and let Jason pump into him again and again.

The moment he thought he would come, Jason bit down on his trapezius muscle, derailing his attention, the pain in his shoulder shocking him. He sucked in startled breath.

A low growl erupted from his lover and he bit harder.

"Ungh!" He stiffened. "Damn!"

Blood trickled over his skin, the heat of it somehow erotic. The liquid pooled beneath his shoulder and grew sticky.

When Jason released him, euphoria rolled through Basil and he came, the orgasm so intense he shouted, not caring if neighboring residents heard him. His cries awakened something in Jason, who thrust harder, faster, his groans

changing to powerful growls. Heat filled Basil and the throbbing of Jason's cock urged him to orgasm again. He ground his member against his lover's abdomen, their skin slicked with his hot essence.

Jason collapsed, breathing heavy against his neck. "Pure bliss."

"Let's rest and do it again," he replied, his strength evaporating.

Laughing, Jason rolled to one side and laid his hand possessively on his chest.

The moisture collector in the fountain kicked on.

"You awake?" Jason asked.

"Yeah."

"Hungry?"

"Famished."

"Me, too." Rising onto one arm, Jason yawned. "We worked up an appetite."

He chuckled. "Hey, I'm stocking up on calories so I have plenty of energy to last throughout the night."

"Oh, really?" A smile resided in his lover's voice.

"Really, and I plan on having dessert, too, so—" He frowned, his wolf senses catching something out of the norm. He tipped his head to one side, listening intently.

With a slight nod, Jason indicated he'd heard it, too.

An aroma teased his nostrils. He sniffed harder, tipping his nose up in the air.

"What did you scent?"

Shaking his head, he replied, "Nothing, I guess. It was so quick it might've been something carried by the wind from the saloon or maybe a neighboring balcony."

"Come on." Another yawn drifted from Jason. "If I don't get up, I may fall asleep for a few hours and ravage you again about three in the morning. If I do, you'll have to wait for your meal, which will be breakfast."

"Let's get dressed and eat a late supper," he suggested. "I'd hate to wake up gnawing on the mattress."

Laughter rolled out of Jason. “Well, I better feed you before you start picking bed feathers out of your fangs.” He stood and contemplated his clothing. “Damn, I’ll have to put on my costume and return to my room for my clothes.”

“Go ahead. I’m not going anywhere. I have to get out some fresh clothes, too.”

“I’ll meet you here in—”

The lattice ceiling crashed in on them with the splinter of wood and the squeal of nails pulling free. Falling backward under the bulk of the structure, Jason missed the bench and landed flat on his back across the patio. Pieces of wood hit the bottle and glasses, shattering them. Bubbly dripped from the fountain’s rim, and debris lay strewn over the terracotta tile.

Startled, Basil crouched on the cushions, his senses honing in on the slight scent he’d caught moments ago. The dust settled, and moonlight poured in on an ebony lycanthrope, its red eyes ablaze with anger.

Throwing the lattice to the side, Jason scrambled to his feet. “Cassius Fenwate.” He snarled, shifting into werewolf form. “You jeopardize your life by attacking us like this.”

“He belongs to me,” Cassius said, his words guttural.

Basil rose to his full height as his body transformed in the moonlight. “No, I don’t.” The pain of morphing muscles and bones pierced him, but his fury washed the discomfort away. The cowboy had no right to claim him, and he wanted no part of him. “Get out while you still can.”

“You’re a turned lycanthrope and can do nothing. I’m an Alpha, so you’re coming with me.” Cassius turned toward Jason. “But first I need to teach the blond bastard who’s boss. No one comes into my territory and takes what is mine.”

He lunged at Jason, but Basil growled and leapt, bearing Cassius backward into the fountain.

Chapter Four

Water sloshed out of the basin and rushed across the terracotta. Bolts ripped free, and metal shrieked and pinged.

The acrid smell of adrenaline pumping through Cassius assailed Basil's nostrils. The jerk had taken his quiet, laid-back mannerisms as a sign of weakness. He finished his transformation, power roaring through him. His stretching skin burned, but the water cooled the places where his fur appeared. He swung at his attacker, connecting with his muzzle and slicing his paw open on the fiend's teeth.

Cassius kicked him square in the chest. He crashed through a wall only to find the black werewolf on top of him again. Somewhere out of sight, Jason shouted something about defeating an Alpha. Bits of dust and debris settled on Basil's face and prickled his eyes. He managed to get his paws up in front of him before Cassius snapped at his throat.

He jumped to the side, but Cassius hung on. They rolled across the sand and into an illuminated breezeway running between the hotel and the restaurant next door. Grabbing him by the shoulders. Basil flipped him over then slammed Cassius' skull off the flagstones several times.

Surprised shouts rent the night, and he glanced through the breezeway at the main street, where a group of onlookers had formed. Springing to his feet, he stepped away, watching his enemy with caution.

"I would have showed you a good time," Cassius said, his words garbled. "I chose you first."

"I don't want you." Waves of anger washed through him. "You're not my type."

His opponent staggered into an upright position. "Oh, and the blond bastard is?"

"Yes."

"What does he have that I don't?"

"A heart. Compassion. Integrity."

“Such shit is highly overrated!” Cassius jumped at him, his teeth bared. “I have money and ties to powerful people. You could have had anything you wanted.”

He snorted. “I already have what I want.”

The werewolf moved so fast Basil barely had time to guard his throat. Cassius slammed into him with such force it knocked the air from his lungs. They wrestled to the ground, snarling and snapping, then rolled into the street where guests cheered one or the other opponent.

“Cassius!” Jason yelled. “Leave him alone!”

Cassius’ weight vanished. Sitting up, Basil blinked and watched his attacker turn on Jason. Red settled over his vision. He righted himself and raced toward the breezeway where Jason readied for battle.

A howl ripped free from Basil, his only thought of his lover’s safety. The red deepened his vision further and heat seared his brain. Launching at Cassius, he struck him in the center of the back. They hit the ground with force, the air whooshing out of the Alpha. He gripped Cassius by his furry shoulders and flung him through the air. He catapulted into a horse’s trough, splashing water in all directions, soaking the dress of nearby woman. Horses whinnied in fear and shied away, tugging on their tethered reins.

Females, both in human and lycanthrope form, cheered Cassius, urging him to his feet to kick his ass, while the males shouted for Basil to finish him.

Wallowing in the trough, Cassius managed to stand, water running off him in rivulets. He jumped out of the wooden tank and began to transform, but stopped the change at half-man, half-wolf. His glowing eyes dilated.

“Last chance.”

“I have chosen another,” Basil said.

Completing the transformation to full werewolf form, Cassius roared and raced toward him. Raw power surged from the center of Basil’s chest, a power he’d never experienced. It invigorated him, calmed him, giving him the certainty he would not be defeated. As his assailant bounded into the air, he caught him by the throat, flipped him on his back, and sank his teeth into his neck, pinning him to the sand.

Cassius panted heavily, his fear rank in Basil's snout. He need only clamp down tighter and Cassius would know he'd draw his last breath.

The crowd yelled and hooted their approval.

Cassius wheezed and shifted into human form. "You son of a bitch!"

A warm hand settled on Basil's shoulder.

"You've won," Jason said. "You've defeated an Alpha."

As his lover's words penetrated his brain, he remembered his earlier explanation. Another burst of power and strength filled him by defeating an Alpha in battle.

Four security guards, dressed as Old West deputies, approached and took Cassius into custody.

"A guest next to your room saw Mr. Fenwate jump from a balcony through your patio ceiling," a guard said. "You'll be given a new room with an enclosed porch and your weekend is on the house."

A deputy on either side of Cassius heaved him to his feet and led him to the jailhouse.

"Come across the street to my office," a male voice said. "I'll check you over and make sure you're going to heal properly. Sometimes a newly-made Alpha has trouble healing until the body acclimates to the sudden changes."

Glancing behind, Basil found Dr. Applerite holding a blanket out to him. He relaxed and returned to human form, enjoying that he could do so at will. Accepting the cover, he wrapped in it.

"Thanks, Doc."

Jason brushed a lock of hair from his face. "Are you all right?"

He smiled. "I'm a new Alpha with my full powers, and I kicked the ass of a werewolf who wanted to tear us apart. I'm fine. Matter of fact, I'm amazing!"

Cracking up with laughter, Jason hugged him. "Yes, you are."

Basil opened his eyes and blinked several times. Except for an oil lamp burning at low wick on the dresser, darkness bathed the room. After the haze of

sleep lifted from his mind, he sat up and glanced around. The glow of a either a tablet or cell phone outside the patio door caught his attention.

“Anyone here?”

The light extinguished followed by rustling and footsteps. “Yeah, I didn’t go anywhere.”

He stared up at a black silhouette. Gradually, his werewolf sight revealed Jason.

“What time is it?”

“You mean what day?”

“Huh?” Surprise slipped through him.

Gentle laughter wafted across the room. “Don’t worry. You haven’t slept your vacation away. I emailed the owner about what happened last night. Mr. Castillo is very upset about Cassius’ behavior, so he has authorized a full week here free of charge at Desert Patch for both of us.”

“Really? Wonderful!” He frowned, his elation vanishing. “But won’t Cassius cause problems later? You said he has political ties.”

“He’ll probably face more repercussions than he ever thought possible.” Irony laced Jason’s words.

“What are you talking about?”

“Those same political ties enjoy vacations and weekends here at Desert Patch, too.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about lycanthropes in our government.” He sat for a long moment then shrugged. “At any rate, they’ll be pretty pissed off at him for drawing attention to the resort, not to mention the damages he caused.”

“Exactly. Don’t worry about that jerk,” Jason said. “Mister Fenwate doesn’t dare make any more waves.”

He remained quiet.

“Something wrong?”

“How could I have slept...what, twenty-four hours?”

“Sleeping a long time is perfectly normal when a turned lycanthrope becomes an Alpha. Your body needed the rest to make changes and repairs.” He sighed

happily. “However, my mark on your shoulder has already healed and left a faint but attractive scar.”

“I feel as if I’ve slept for a month, but I’m anxious to get up and do something...anything.” He waved one hand at the starlight filtering down on their patio. “It appears everything in the resort is closed for the day.”

Setting the tablet on the nightstand, Jason glanced over at him with a mischievous smile. “True, but I can think of something else to keep us busy.”

One thing had bothered Basil since Jason had shown up at the resort. “I have to ask...will we both go back to our lives?” He had to be sure one way or the other

A sober expression settled over his lover’s face. “No, I want to be with you. I told you last night my heart has always belonged to you and I meant it. It’s you and me forever—if it’s what you want, too.”

Happiness soared through him.

“Well?” Jason asked.

“Ever since I met you, all I’ve wanted is to be with you.”

His partner’s smile mirrored the sensations careening through his heart.

“What do you say,” Jason began, “to me keeping you busy tonight? Do you think you’re *up* to it?”

He laughed, his cock already hardening. “You know, that jerk said he’d give me something to howl about.”

“Oh?” Jason quirked an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Yup.” He threw back the covers for him.

“I guess I’ll have to do better.” Jason removed his clothes. “Who’s going to howl first?”

He couldn’t hold his laughter in any longer. “Probably me.”

“That’s right.” His partner grinned and pushed him against the pillows. “Let’s see how loud I can make you howl.”

Sighing with contentment, Basil pulled him into his arms.

~ABOUT THE AUTHOR~

Azura Ice writes several subgenres of romance, which includes but is not limited to het, ménage, m/m and can be set in contemporary times or even in a faraway world or another dimension. Azura's muse leads her by the hand, and her fingers do the light-speed typing.

Who is Azura Ice? She's a full-time author who is owned by two crazy felines of tabby descent (although they swear they're of Egyptian lineage). Azura writes in an attic study that overlooks a beautiful valley, and enjoys her husband's company when he's permitted to enter her domain. However, if he brings offerings of coffee and an occasional chocolaty treat, she's inclined to let him in her office more often.

Azura takes her writing seriously, so she doesn't hang out on group loops (she tries to avoid shiny object syndrome), but if you'd like to contact her, interview her, etc., you can reach her at bicknellbrown@sbcglobal.net , visit her at <http://ablueice.wordpress.com> , or you can visit her other pen name sites at www.FaithBicknell.com and www.MollyDiamond.com. Talk with her at www.Facebook.com/faithbicknellbrown and her fan page www.Facebook.com/F.L.Bicknell

Sacrifices

Sky Streamers Book 2

Miln and Oshki travel to the year 1847 where they track down Randle Nyerscot, a potential killer, but their journey into the past isn't the lovers' getaway they hoped it would be. Miln soon realizes there's trouble in their historical paradise. It's his duty to protect others, but his new, much-younger mate insists their love should always come first, setting them at odds with one another.

With the help of a local, Miln discovers an orphanage held hostage and a killer injecting victims with the Bone Eater virus. Forced to make drastic decisions, he must fight for everyone's lives to save future Earth.

Can he make amends with Oshki? Or will Miln be forced to choose duty over love once more?

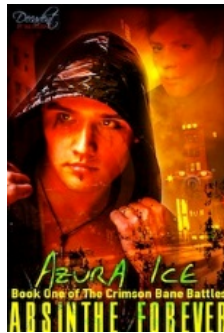


Absinthe Forever

Book 1 of The Crimson Bane Battles

Lost in bittersweet memories of Skorpe, the gorgeous hunk of Goth who crushed his heart and stole his money, Ian takes an after-dinner walk in Manhattan to clear his mind. A bizarre red fog belches from the New York City sewers, and Ian, like so many others, succumbs to its otherworldly caress. As he lies in the street, unable to move, he watches creatures composed of no more than red, glowing outlines and with eyes like flaming coals wander the streets like an invading army. Ian can do nothing except think about his vanished lover and pray that Skorpe has not been afflicted by the strange, numbing poison.

Skorpe is from Parallel Earth and on a mission to defeat the Crimson Bane. Falling for Ian wasn't in the plan. To save Ian from the Crimson Bane, Skorpe steals a large sum of money from him and leaves him to set up a safe haven for them before the Crimson Bane Battles officially begin. He returns to the city only to discover that he's too late in reaching Ian before the first attack. Can Skorpe find Ian before one of the demons delivers a killing blow to the incapacitated human?



Fire in Winter

The Edge Erotica Series

Naomi dreams of a sexual partner who will leave her sated and tired between the sheets but with no strings attached. When she falls ill, a crystal-blue-eyed stranger saves her. His gentle commands sweep her to sexual heights with magic only a fire in winter could create, and leave her wishing for a long, frost-filled season.

