



Secrets

Volume 6

The Best in Women's Sensual Fiction

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*"...anticipates every female fantasy: the Bodyguard, the
Tutor, the Werewolf, and the Vampire. I give it Six Stars!"*

—Virginia Bentley, New York Times Best Selling Author

[version info]

Love's Prisoner
by MaryJanice Davidson

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To my reader:

I've always been intrigued by good guys who have to do bad, and werewolves are prime examples of that. It's tough to be a sensitive, 21st century guy when you turn furry, howl at the moon, and crave raw meat once a month. It's even worse if you're in love with someone who not only thinks you're delusional, but at times actively despises you. Stick two people like this in an elevator, add one power outage, and watch the sparks fly . . .

I hope you'll email me or visit my website to tell me what you thought about Love's Prisoner. I love to hear from my readers, and I like getting suggestions on what you think I should write next.

Chapter One

Engrossed as she was in Glamour's Do's and Don'ts, Jeannie Lawrence scarcely noticed when the elevator jolted to an abrupt halt. She did notice when the lights went out.

"Oh, come on!" she cried, slapping her magazine shut. Getting stuck in an elevator during a power outage was nowhere on her to-do list. Today, anyway.

"Not now," a voice muttered, and she nearly shrieked. She hadn't known anyone else was in the elevator with her. When she had her nose in a book or magazine, she wouldn't have noticed if Barney the Dinosaur was in the elevator with her.

"Well, this is a fine fix, huh?" she asked the voice. "Of all the days to drop my ad copy off early! I guess it's true—no good deed goes unpunished. What are you going to be late for? Me, I'm trying to beat the rush hour traffic to the bridge. I can't stand it when—"

"Hush."

The voice was a pleasant baritone, one she liked despite its abruptness. She hushed, not offended. Some people didn't like talking to strangers. Or maybe this guy was claustrophobic. Or—what was fear of the dark? Darkophobic? Whatever it was, he was clearly unhappy to be trapped in an elevator for who knew how long. Poor guy. She hoped he didn't get the screaming meemies. There was nothing worse than a grown man having hysterics.

"Sorry," she said, then added, "I'm sure we won't be here long."

She heard a sound and recognized it immediately: the man trapped with her had taken a couple steps

back. Almost as if he was trying to put as much space between them as he could.

Exasperated, she said, "For crying out loud! I don't have cooties. Anymore," she added, hoping to lighten the mood.

"Be quiet. And step into the far corner. Now."

"The hell I will!" She turned toward the voice. "Look, just because you're feeling antisocial doesn't mean I—"

"Don't." No pleasant baritone that time. That one sounded like a growl, like he'd forced the word out through gritted teeth. "Don't come near me. Keep away. When you move, you stir around the air currents and I get more of your scent."

"And that's bad, right?" Great, she thought with grim humor. Trapped with someone who skipped his medication this morning. Why didn't I take the stairs?

"No. It's not bad." His voice, low in the dark, was a throbbing baritone she could feel along her spine.

"It's . . . extraordinary."

"Gosh, thanks." Uh-huh. Clearly a nutcake, sexy voice or no. She hadn't had time to put perfume on after her shower. He couldn't smell a damn thing, except maybe a lingering whiff of Dial soap. "Do you have a special doctor you tell these things to? Someone you should call when we get out of here?"

He barked laughter. "I'm not insane. I'm not surprised that's the conclusion you've drawn, though. What is your name?"

"Jane Doe."

He chuckled softly. "What harm could it do to tell me your real name?"

"All right, but only if you promise not to freak out on me. More than you already have, I mean. It's Jeannie Lawrence." There were a million Lawrences in the greater St. Paul area, she comforted herself, so if he was a serial killer he likely couldn't track her down when this was over. "Now remember, you promised . . ."

"Actually, I didn't. Not that promising would have done any good." He sighed, a lost sound in the dark. Absurdly, she felt sorry for him, this perfect crazy stranger who talked so oddly and in the sexiest voice she had ever heard. "You smell wonderful."

"Don't get started on that again," she warned.

"The moon's coming. I can feel her." She heard him swallow hard. "There isn't much time."

"Boy, have you got that right." She put her arms out in front of her, feeling in the dark, then stepped forward and banged on the elevator door. "Hello!" she shouted. "Anybody up there? A nice girl and a raving lunatic are trapped in here!"

"You're ovulating," he said directly in her ear, and she shrieked and flung herself away from him, so hard that she bounced off the far wall and would have fallen had he not caught her. Even in her startlement, she was conscious of the easy strength of his hand, in his scent, a crisp, clean, utterly masculine smell that she liked very much, despite her sudden fear.

"You—" Her mouth was dry; she swallowed to force moisture and finished her rant. "You scared the hell out of me! Don't sneak up on me like that, for the love of—and you can let go of me, too." She yanked her arm out of his grip, her heart yammering so loudly she felt certain he could hear it. And what was that absurd thing he had said? Had he really said—

"It's too late. You're ovulating," he said, his voice a low rumble in the dark. "You're . . . in heat, to put it a little more crudely. And I'm too close to my change."

"Then empty your pockets," she said rudely. "Let your change out."

"You don't want me to do that," he said softly. "Oh, no."

She supposed some women would be reduced to panic at this turn of events, but this weirdo with the sexy voice and strong hands had no idea who he was dealing with. She had a black belt in karate, could drill a dime at fifty yards, and had once put a would-be mugger in the hospital with cracked ribs. If this guy tried anything with her, he was going to have a very bad day.

"Look, I'm sorry you're feeling . . . uh . . . unwell, but if you just stay calm, they'll have us out of here in no ti—"

With that same shocking suddenness, his hand was behind her neck, tilting her face up, and she could feel his mouth near her temple, heard him inhale deeply. "You're in heat," he murmured in her ear, "and the moon's coming up." He inhaled again, greedily. Frozen by his actions, she waited for his next words. "I'm very sorry."

Then his mouth was on hers. Pressed against the far wall of the elevator, she could feel his long, hard length against her body, could feel his hands on her, could hear his rasping breath. She had the absurd sense he was wallowing in her scent, glorying in it. And she came absurdly close to relaxing in his embrace, to kissing him back. Instead, moving independently of her brain, her hands struggled up and pressed against his chest, hard, but it was like trying to move a tree.

"Oh, Christ," he groaned into her hair.

"Don't—"

"I'm sorry."

"—stop it—"

"I'm very sorry."

"—before I break your—"

"Do you believe in werewolves?"

"—big stupid—what?"

"I'm a werewolf. And my change is very near. Otherwise I might be able to—but the moon's too close. And so are you."

"What are you talking about?" she cried.

"I'm trying to explain. Why this is going to . . . why this must happen. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," she hissed, shoving at his chest again. This time, it worked. Or he stepped back.

"You're a liar." Odd, how he could make that sound like an endearment. "I can smell your fear."

"I'm not sure how to break this to you," she said through gritted teeth, "but I'm not afraid of any man. And I don't smell."

"Not afraid. Anxious, then," he soothed. "I don't blame you a bit. If I was trapped in a box a hundred feet off the ground with a werewolf an hour from his change, I'd be out of my mind."

"About the werewolf fixation," she said, striving for a note of humor—she'd always had a perverse need to make light of any seriousness. "I confess this concerns me a bit. Perhaps there's a support group that can help. Men-who-love-werewolves-and-the- women-trapped-in-elevators-with-them."

He laughed, a throaty chuckle.

"Couldn't you have waited another hour to have your nervous breakdown?" she complained, pleased that she amused him. If she could keep him distracted, off balance, maybe the power would come back on and she could—

Then she felt his hands on her arms, gently pulling her forward. "I am sorry," he said, his voice heavy with regret. Again, she caught his pleasant, utterly masculine scent, and again she fought her unwitting

attraction. Jeannie didn't plan to let him do anything he'd be sorry for. She took a deep breath and prepared to strike him, palm out, with all her strength. A crippling blow, and, if she nailed him on the bridge of the nose, a killing blow. She hoped she would get him in the forehead or cheek. She didn't want to kill the lunatic. That was her thought as she smashed her hand into his chin and felt him rock backward with the blow.

"Ouch," he said mildly.

She felt her mouth pop open in stunned surprise. She hit him, she knew she hit him! Her hand was numb from the force of it. He should be unconscious, or at least groaning on the floor.

"That was some punch," he continued, as if commenting on a drink and not a blow it had taken her four months to learn. "You've had training."

"You're out of your mind," she whispered. Or she was. Could it be true? Was he a—ludicrous thought—werewolf? She felt for him in the dark, sure he had to be bleeding, and her fingers encountered his smooth cheek. She jerked her hand away. "You're completely crazy, you know that?"

"No." She sensed him step close to her and threw another punch, no more fooling around—and her fist smacked into his open palm.

He had blocked her punch. In itself, almost impossible unless he was also a black belt. And what were the chances of being trapped in an elevator in the Wyndham Tower with a crazy man who was also a black belt? More worrisome, he had seen her strike coming. Whereas she couldn't see her hand in front of her face.

She felt his fingers curl around her small fist, felt his thumb caress the knuckle of her first finger. Her knees wanted to buckle, either from sudden, swamping fear or the sensation his warm fingers were calling forth. "Brave Jeannie Lawrence," he murmured, his voice so low it sounded like tearing velvet. "What a pity you didn't wait for the next elevator."

Then he deftly swept her legs out from under her and she was falling—but he was coming down with her and cushioned her fall and was on top of her in an instant, his mouth on her throat, his hands busy at her blouse. She shrieked in anger and dismay, raining blows on his shoulders, his chest, his face, and he took them all without being deterred from his task. She heard a rending tear as he ripped her blouse away, tugged at her bra . . . then felt the shock of it to her toes as his warm mouth closed over her nipple. She tried to lunge away from him but he pinned her easily with one hand on her shoulders, while the other tore at her clothes. "I'm sorry," he was groaning against her breast, "don't be afraid, I won't hurt you . . . ah, God, your scent is driving me out of my mind." That last ended on a growl, an ominous rumble that filled the dark elevator.

She drew in a breath to scream the building down—and sobbed instead. He was too strong for her, she was punching him and clawing him and kicking at him and he was barely noticing. This . . . thing he meant to do, it was really going to happen. To her. Daughter of a cop and a Special Forces veteran, a man and woman generous with their teaching, who never wanted their daughter to be a rape or murder statistic. Jeannie could pick a lock and knock out most men with one punch. But she couldn't stop this man from taking her by force. Never mind the fact that her mind kept shrieking that this wasn't happening to her, this was not, was not, was not. It was.

"Don't cry," he begged, and she could feel his hands shaking as he gathered her against him. "We'll be done soon. It won't hurt. I'm so sorry to scare you."

"Please don't," she whispered, hating the way she sounded—so helpless, so frightened—but unable to do anything about it. "Please don't do this."

He groaned again and squeezed her in a rough hug. "I have to. I'm not mated, I don't have any control over this, just like later I won't have any control over—but you don't believe me, so we won't talk about that." His voice was still soothing, and now his hands were beneath her, stroking her back, forcing her chest up, and his mouth was buried in her throat, kissing and licking and even—very gently—biting. She could hear his breathing roughen in the dark, heard another rip as her skirt was torn. She remembered herself and struck out at him again, blindly, connecting hard but with no apparent effect. He shredded her linen skirt like it was paper . . . Christ, he was strong! But his hands on her bare flesh were gentle, almost languid. They were everywhere, stroking her skin, sliding across her limbs, and she felt her nipples harden so much it was almost painful. When his lips brushed across one she almost wept with relief, even as she was pushing against his shoulders with all her strength. He rubbed his cheek against that same nipple, his stubble rasping across the sensitive bud, and her fingers curled into fists so she wouldn't touch him with tenderness. She couldn't give in to him, no matter how—

Stubble?

He had been clean shaven two minutes ago.

She shoved that thought away, hard. His rough tongue swept across her nipples, a blessed distraction that made her want to scream, made her want him, and she hated wanting him. She tried to remind herself that this man was raping her, but the only thing she could really understand was that he was making her feel as no one had ever made her feel. She was no stranger to sex, but the only man she had ever been intimate with was her college boyfriend, and that was almost three years ago.

In the back of her mind, a constant refrain: this isn't happening. It's not real. Ten minutes ago I was on my way home; now I'm having sex in the dark with a stranger. Thus, this is a dream. It can't be happening, ergo it's not happening. Tempting to believe that voice, to give in to the pleasure he could so skillfully offer her, to . . .

She realized she hadn't hit him in quite a few seconds. That she no longer wanted him to stop. That traitorous thought alone galvanized her into raining more blows on his head, until he caught her wrists and pinned them above her head with one hand.

"Enough," he said hoarsely, and she cringed, wondering if he was going to hit her back. "I don't blame you one bit, but . . . enough, Jeannie."

He pinned her knees apart with his own, kept her hands out of his way by keeping them above her head, and bent to kiss her. He jerked back and her teeth snapped together, bare centimeters from his mouth. He could apparently see in the dark like a cat.

Or a wolf.

She put the ridiculous thought out of her mind as quickly as she could. That way lies madness. That way lies . . .

His thumb was stroking the soft cotton of her panties. And moving lower. Her breasts were pressed against his chest, her knees were flat against the carpet, forcing her thighs wide apart, and now his damned fingers were—were—inside her panties. His breathing was so harsh in the dark, almost panting, and she could feel his body thrumming with tension, could hear his teeth grinding together as he fought—what? It was clear he was in the grip of urgent lust, that he wanted to surge inside her and thrust until he could no longer move, but something was holding him back. And now his fingers were delicately brushing the plump lips between her thighs, stroking so sweetly and tenderly . . . and then his thumb slipped between her nether lips while his tongue thrust past her teeth and she nearly shrieked, so intense was her pleasure.

He groaned into her mouth and then his fingers were spreading her plump folds apart and his thumb was slipping inside her and his tongue was licking, darting, and she sobbed with frustration and strained against him. His fingers danced across her slick flesh, sweetly stroking, probing, oh so gently rubbing a circle around her throbbing clit, a circle that got smaller and smaller . . . and then his thumb was dipping inside her again while his fingernail flicked past her clitoris, and she shivered so hard she nearly bucked him off.

He growled. The sound did not frighten her. It kindled her blood, made her want to growl back, made her want to sink her teeth into his flesh while his flesh sank into her again . . . and again . . . and again . . . She realized dimly that he wasn't growling, he was saying her name, but his voice was so thick and deep she could hardly understand him. "Jeannie—let your—hands go?"

"Yes!" she screamed, wild to touch him, to feel his flesh against hers, to rip off his clothes as he had ripped hers. He released her wrists and in a flash her arms were around him, pressing him closer, she was tearing at his shirt, frantic to get the damned cloth off him and he was helping her and now her clothes weren't the only ones in shredded ruin, after all, what was sauce for the goose was sauce for the werewolf, and—

His hands were beneath her buttocks, raising her to him, and she could feel that long, hard, hot part of him nudging for entrance. For an instant, reason reclaimed her. Was she really going to do this? This crazy thing? She had no protection and without it, in this day and age, she was taking her life in her hands. And why was she cooperating in her own rape, for the love of God?

"Wait—" she said in a thin, high voice, but he drove forward, thrust into her with power and searing heat and her good sense left her; she threw back her head and screamed until she thought her throat would burst, screamed at him to never never stop and still he came, that hot hard length parting her, filling her, and it should have hurt, it should have, he was very large and she hadn't known a lover in years, but her need for him was as great as his for her, and instead of hurting, she needed more.

When he was seated completely within her, somehow, somehow, he made himself stop; he gathered her against him and she could hear the furious hammering of his heart. His hands behind her back were hard fists and he was shaking as though he had a fever, and still he stopped. When he forced the words out she could barely understand him.

"—doesn't—hurt?"

"No," she gasped, wriggling against him, his throbbing cock within her making her frantic. "No no no please, please you can't stop now you can't you can't you—"

"You're—very small—sure—doesn't hurt?"

"—you can't you can't please I please don't make me—"

"Don't—be afraid—tell truth." He took a deep, shuddering breath; his fists were still clenching beneath her and, very distantly, she heard carpet tearing. "Can try—wait—if you—"

"—beg, don't make me beg, please please please PLEASE!"

He pulled away but before she had time to groan her disappointment he slammed forward. His mouth covered hers, his tongue mating with hers as he took her again and again, as they made love so fiercely the elevator shook. And above it all, beyond it all, she could hear someone screaming with hoarse joy and dimly realized it was she making the noise.

Her orgasm slammed into her as he was, spasms so fierce she could actually feel her uterus contracting. He stiffened at the height of her climax, threw his head back, and roared at the ceiling in pure animal triumph.

For long moments, she didn't think she would ever be able to move. She could smell the scent of their lovemaking, could hear his heavy breathing, hear her own. Her pulse thudded in her ears and she was damp with sweat and . . . other things.

He pulled back and out, his hands frantically feeling her limbs, her neck. "Are you hurt?" he asked hoarsely. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," she said tiredly, ready to sleep for a week. A year. "No, it was a surprisingly painless rape." She felt him flinch, and wondered who she thought she was fooling. It might have been rape for the first minute, but after that she had been an eager participant. Shame made her flush.

"Jeannie—I'm so very sorry. I don't expect you to understand." She felt his hand on her arm and cringed back, hating herself, hating him, and most of all, hating the fact that she wanted to do it all over again, right now. Right here. "I'm sorry," he said again, quietly. "My poor Jeannie. You were so brave."

"Don't call me that," she snapped. She tried to pull her shredded blouse together, but might as well have tried dressing with confetti. "Don't call me anything. Don't talk to me at all."

"We need to get you out of here," he said urgently, completely ignoring her order. "And quickly. The moon's almost up."

"Do not start that again," she ground out.

"Out," he was muttering, "Need to get you out. Not safe here."

"Brother, have you got that right." She started to stand and nearly pitched forward; she would have thought her eyes would have adjusted to the dark by now, but she was still effectively blind. And exhausted. And—how was this for the stupidest thing ever—she wanted him to put his arms around her and promise everything would be all right.

What if she was stuck in here with him all night? What if he decided to take her again? Could she fight him off? Did she want to?

She heard him stand, heard him bang experimentally on the elevator roof, then heard the groan of metal as he somehow forced the locked hatch. She shook her head at the sound, amazed at his strength. He could have broken my neck, she thought dumbly. Anytime he wanted.

"Why the hell didn't you do that twenty minutes ago?"

He gripped her waist and lifted her up, up . . . and through the small trapdoor. "I had other things on my mind," he replied shortly. "Like how badly I needed to touch you."

"Bastard."

"Yes," he said quietly. "But now I can think again. For a while."

"Don't flatter yourself," she mumbled, cautiously getting to her knees on top of the elevator. She heard him chuckle beneath her and then abruptly, shockingly, he was crouching beside her on the roof. Off the floor and through the trap door in one bound, apparently. It was almost enough to make her wonder . . . But that was ridiculous. This was the 21st century, and there were no such things as werewolves, dammit!

"Why have we left the relative safety of the elevator, to teeter out here on top of the elevator, you nutcake?" she asked with saccharine sweetness.

"I'm definitely planning on falling in love with you," he said casually, in a tone he might have used to ask her to close the window. "Any woman in mortal danger who can tease her assailant after being terrified is definitely worth taking to mate. Just so you know."

"Save it for your parole hearing, pal," she said. Before she could elaborate on what the judicial system would do to him with her blessing, she heard their death warrant: the elevator cables groaning from

stress. She belatedly realized she was in danger of more than forced sex this evening. "Oh, God," she said, abruptly terrified. Had she thought she was scared when Tall, Dark, and Horny had taken her against her will? She hadn't known what scared was. "Oh, God—what should we do?"

"Live," he said simply and, absurdly, she took comfort in that. She had to, because never was the dark more terrifying. She could hear his rapid movements, hear twangs as parts of the cable give way under the stress, hear the elevator doors two feet above her creaking as they were forced open.

"Be careful!" she said sharply.

"Always," he said, and suddenly his hands were on her again, and she felt herself effortlessly boosted and shoved. She reached out and clutched wildly, and felt the carpet in front of her. The building was as dark as the elevator had been, but she could tell he had held her up, almost over his head (no one is that strong) and boosted her through the elevator doors. In the pure dark, she could sense no one else around, which was just as well, given the shredded ruin of her clothes. Now his hands were on her heels, and he shoved, hard. She zipped across the carpet as if it was wet tile, her entire front going warm from the friction (he's not crazy, he really is a werewolf).

She turned around and crawled back toward the open doors, groping for the drop-off. "Come out!" she cried in the dark, hearing the sharp twang of more cable parting. "Jump out! Quick! You can do it, weirdo!"

"Stay back from the doors!" he said sharply. "You can't see a thing, you'll fall right back down here. Stay —"

She would obsess about that for weeks, that his last words were warnings to her. Because at that moment, the main cable parted and the elevator car plummeted five floors into the basement. Her rapist had become her savior. And paid the price with his life. She shouldn't have cared. She should have been relieved. And she was relieved. So relieved that she put her face down on the dusty carpet and sobbed as if her heart would break.

Chapter Two

Of course, there were questions. There were always questions. And when she stopped crying, Jeannie tried to answer them. No, she didn't know the elevator passenger's name. No, she didn't know how he'd managed to break the hatch lock and lift her several feet to safety. No, she didn't know how he'd overridden the safety locks on the doors, forcing them open. No, she didn't need to see a doctor. No, she couldn't identify the body—when they found it—because she had never seen his face. No and no and no. She supposed she could sympathize with the building's management. A half-naked, hysterical woman cheated death on their property and now only wanted to go home . . . of course they were loathe to let her go.

She had her chance to tell them what he had done to her, how he had forced her—there was even a lawyer in the room to take her statement (the building management's corporate counsel, doubtless prepared to beg her not to sue)—but she couldn't do it. As much as he had scared her, used her, she couldn't bring herself to lay charges against him. If the price for her life was forced sex and mind-numbing pleasure, she was going to count herself very lucky indeed.

She saw a doctor at their insistence, a doctor who raised his eyebrows at the shredded ruin of her clothes but said nothing, a doctor who could tell she had recently had sex but, after her rude replies to his

carefully phrased questions, said nothing to the others. Probably assumed it's my nature to seek out quickies in elevators, she thought darkly, and at the thought of her "quickie" partner, crushed and dead, she nearly started crying again.

The doctor had tried to insist on an overnight hospital stay; she had been firm. Like mountains were firm. She would not stay, she would spend the night in her own bed, thank you, will someone call me a cab?

They gave her a cab voucher—her purse was at the bottom of the elevator shaft, along with her wallet, ATM card, credit cards . . . and her rapist/savior. The cab came. She got in. The cab dropped her at home. She got out. Went inside. Threw her clothes away. Showered for a long time. Wept for a longer time.

Three weeks later, about the time she noticed her period was late, her martyred rapist/savior showed up on her doorstep.

Chapter Three

Michael Wyndham III stepped from the car, nervous as a bridegroom. Which, he supposed, he was. It had taken him nearly three weeks to track Jeannie down, weeks of frustration and guilt and worry. But now he was going to see her again. The thought of taking in her scent, maybe even touching her, made his pulse pound in his ears. Oh, he had it bad.

He grinned. It was marvelous, to find his mate. And in such a strange way! His father had tried to tell him, but Michael had never believed, had always figured one female was as the next. But he had found his mate through purest luck and, best of all, most wonderful of all, she was an extraordinary human! And homo lupus, unlike homo sapiens, mated for life.

Now to persuade Jeannie, who thought her future husband was nuttier than a granola bar.

Derik and Jon got out of the car and the three of them examined the apartment building before them. Minimum security—not that that would be a problem for three werewolves in their prime—and a pleasing location, right on the lake, with a park across the street. Best of all, less than a four hour drive from the Wyndham estate.

"Remember," he told his men. Derik and Jonathan were his closest friends, his fiercest protectors. "She was scared to death. I forced her, and she had to assume I died. She'll be terrified when she recognizes me."

"If she recognizes you," Derik reminded him. He was as blonde and fair as Michael was dark. "Her eyes aren't as good as yours. It was probably pitch dark in the elevator to her."

"If she recognizes me," Michael agreed. "I'm just reminding you, you'll need—"

"Patience," Derik and Jon echoed, then laughed at him. Michael rolled his eyes and cuffed Jon in the back of the head.

"It's true," he said, "I might be repeating myself."

"Quit fretting, Michael," Derik said. "We'll not muss your mate."

"Do you think she's pregnant?" Jon asked with hopeful curiosity. He was a curly-haired redhead with boyish features. He looked all of sixteen, and was twice that. "The pack has been after you for a long time to mate and provide an heir. It would be wonderful if she—"

"Was pregnant and happy to see our pack leader, and embraced our lifestyle with open arms, and settled into the pack as if she was born to it?" Derik shook his head at his friends. "None of this is going to be easy, for her or for us. Better that she not be pregnant. Then Michael can let her go."

"Enough," Michael said sharply. Let her go? Let that witty, beautiful, sensual woman go? In his dreams, his ears still rang with her cries of ecstasy. Let her go?

Moot, he comforted himself. She was surely pregnant. Her scent had been all sweet ripeness, like a bursting peach. And beneath him, she had felt—

"Excuse me, O mighty king of the werewolves," Derik said dryly, "but you're about to walk into that pillar."

"I am not," he said, swerving at the last moment. He grinned at his friends, who rolled their eyes. Jon had taken a mate last year, and thus knew exactly what his pack leader was going through. Derik had not, and thus thought his leader was being foolishly sentimental.

"She was scared," he said aloud, remembering, "but she never showed it."

"I still think this is nuts," Derik said gloomily. "And bad luck. Of all the times to get stuck in an elevator—with an ovulating female who couldn't fight you off, who just happens to be human and not believe in werewolves—"

"Gosh," Jon interrupted with a grin, "what are the chances?"

Derik ignored his friend. "—who's going to go right out of her mind when we try to bring her home. Man, I hope she's not pregnant."

"It will work out," Jon said, but they both heard the doubt in his tone. "Humans mate with werewolves all the time, and vice versa."

"All the time' was a gross exaggeration ('once or twice a generation' would have been more accurate), but neither Derik nor Michael pointed that out.

"Jon's right, pardon me while I choke on that phrase," Derik said, giving his pack leader a friendly clap on the shoulder that would have felled a human male. "It'll work out. C'mon, chief. Let's go get your mate."

At least, Jeannie thought grimly, I don't have to worry about chasing anyone down for child support. She was in her bathroom, staring at the double pink line which, the instructions assured her, meant she was positively pregnant. One bout of sex after going without a partner for three years, and she was well and truly caught.

Among other things, it was problematic that her baby's father had been a little unhinged. It was also problematic that he was dead. Jeannie had no idea—none at all, not even a smidgen of an idea—what to do now. Her mind, after taking in the double pink line (such an innocuous color for such a momentous event), had shut down, and the same thought kept cycling through her brain: now what? Now what? Now what?

There was a firm rap on the door and, annoyed at the intrusion, she went to answer it. She peeped through the eyehole and saw three large men standing quietly on the other side of the door. They were dressed in dark suits; the one in the middle was the tallest, with dark hair, and he was flanked by a blonde and a redhead.

What fresh hell is this, she wondered. Normally she would have at least asked for their names before opening the door, but the shock of that double pink line was still governing her actions, and she swung the door wide.

The one in the middle was almost enough to distract her from her news—he was, simply put, one of the finest looking men she had ever seen. He was tremendously tall, with longish, wavy black hair that looked thick and touchable; her fingers itched to see if it felt as lush as it looked. His eyes were a funny, gorgeous color—the pupils were large and dark, the irises yellow-gold. His nose was a blade, and his mouth had a sinfully sensuous twist to the lower lip. His shoulders were ridiculously broad; his coat was belted at a slim waist.

"Yuh . . ." She coughed and tried again. "Yes?" She glanced at his companions and they wouldn't lose any beauty contests, either. One blonde, one a redhead, both fair and green-eyed, powerfully built and even broader across the shoulders than the brunette.

All three of them were staring at her. She covertly felt her face to make sure ants weren't perched on her nose or something equally disgusting. "What's up, boys?" They must be selling their hardbody calendars door to door, she thought, that's the only explanation for the abrupt arrival of three gorgeous men on her—her!—doorstep. .

"Jeannie," the brunette said. With that one word, she recognized his voice—that deep, velvet voice—and went cold to her toes. Forcing her expression to remain neutral, she raised an eyebrow at him.

"Yes?" she said, with just the right amount of impatience.

His shoulders slumped a little and the blonde man shot him a look of compassion. Mouth drawn into a sorrowful bow, he said haltingly, "I—ah—this is difficult, Jeannie. You probably don't remember me . . . whurggggh!"

He said 'whurggggh!' because she had hoisted her sneakered foot into his testicles with all her strength. His breath whooshed out in an agonized gasp and he crashed to his knees. She shouldered past the astonished redhead and bent over him, shaking a finger in his face.

"You bet your demented ass I remember you! A) Thanks for saving my life, and B) drop dead! Again, I mean! Now get lost, before I lose my temper—"

"You haven't lost your temper yet?" the blonde asked, aghast.

"—and forget that you saved my life and remember that you raped me in an elevator that was about to plummet into a basement. If you'd taken five more minutes to get your jollies, we'd both be dead! You're lucky I don't call the cops on you!"

"I don't think he feels lucky right now," the redhead said, staring at the rapist/savior, who was clutching himself and writhing on the floor in an undignified way.

"And as for you two," she said, rounding on the redhead, who took a step back and covered his crotch with both hands, "your friend here has some serious psychological problems. He thinks—"

"—he's a werewolf," the blonde said from behind her. She whirled, part of her not liking the way the three of them, purposely or not, had boxed her in very neatly.

"You know about the delusion?" Now might be a good time, she thought uneasily, to step back into my apartment and close the door.

"We share the same delusion," the blonde said, smiling at her with very white, very sharp teeth.

"Well, great," she snapped, concealing her unease . . . which was rapidly turning to fear. At her tone, the blonde's eyebrows arched in appreciation. "Maybe you can share the same shrink, too. You—what are you doing?"

He was sniffing her, like a dog. He didn't touch her, but he got entirely too close and sniff-sniff-sniffed her neck. "Shit," he said, right before she shoved him hard enough to rock him back on his heels. He turned to her felled giant, who had been helped to his feet by the blonde. "She's pregnant."

The brunette grinned in triumph, and he stared at her with a gleaming gold gaze, a gaze too proud and possessive for her taste.

"Congratulations," the redhead said politely, "to both of you."

To her astonishment, the blonde reached out and put his hand on her flat stomach. "Here grows the next pack leader," he said respectfully. "Congratulations, ma'am."

She gritted her teeth. "Hand. Off. Now."

He complied hastily. Before she could think of what to do or say—nothing had been controllable since that double pink line—the brunette spoke up. His color was coming back, and he had recovered from a ball-stomping much faster than she expected. "Jeannie, the short version is: I'm a werewolf—as I believe you heard—the pack leader, you're pregnant with my heir and successor, I have enemies who would steal my mate and unborn child so it's not safe for you to stay here, you have to come home with us."

Without a word, she turned around and went into her apartment, firmly closing the door in their faces, twisting the deadbolt with a click. Once inside, she started shaking so hard she looked around for a place to sit down.

"Jeannie?"

It was the brunette, calling her from the hallway. Sure, like she'd open the door and say, 'Yes, dear?'

"Jeannie, get away from the door."

Having seen his strength before, she had a good idea what was coming, and went at once to the small chest on the living room endtable. There was a tremendous thud and her door shuddered in its frame. She flipped the top of the chest and grabbed her 9mm Beretta, cursing herself for being so paranoid about gun safety that she kept the clip—fully loaded—in her bedroom. No time to go for it now—THUD!

—her door had just been kicked off the hinges.

She turned, her palm cupping the handle of the gun to conceal the emptiness where a clip should be, and leveled it at him, sighting in on the hollow of his throat. The brunette—odd, how she still didn't know his name—stepped across the threshold into her home. His friends, she was relieved to see, were nowhere in sight.

"You're going to shoot the father of your child?" he asked with honest curiosity. He picked up the door and set it neatly aside, then strolled toward her.

"In a New York minute," she said coldly. "Stop. Turn around. Go now."

"I can't imagine your rage and hurt and frustration." His tone was serious; he never even glanced at the gun; his gaze was locked on her face. "I told you I had no choice, and I hope someday you'll be able to see me as more than a conscienceless monster."

"Kicking down my door wasn't a good start to that end," she said curtly. "Last chance, Romeo."

"Sorry."

Before she could figure out how to keep bluffing him, he had zipped forward, so quickly she couldn't immediately track the movement. He slid forward, under her gun sights, across her prized hardwood floor, and tackled her around her knees. With one hand he cushioned her back as she fell to the floor; with the other, he pulled the gun from her grasp. Hefting it, he knew at once it had no clip, and he smiled at her. "Good bluff. I never doubted you." He tossed it over his shoulder.

"Get off me!"

"I will. Wait. Tell me now, while we have some privacy—you weren't hurt that night? After, I mean? I had to be rough when I threw you out the elevator door. There wasn't time to—"

Part of her anger—a tiny part—diminished. He was a wannabe kidnapper and a rapist, but he was awfully concerned for her well-being. She remembered his concern that night, too, after he had taken her. Him on top of her, both of them still panting, and his hands running over her limbs, checking for injuries, making sure she wasn't hurt.

"No," she admitted through gritted teeth. "I wasn't hurt. Not even a skinned knee. They told me you died."

His gold eyes twinkled at her. "Just a couple of broken legs. But I'm a fast healer. Were you sorry? When you thought I was dead?"

"No," she said stiffly, remembering her sobs, the way it had taken her an hour to stop crying after the elevator fell down the shaft.

"If I had died," he whispered, leaning in close, nuzzling her ear—to her annoyance, her entire left side started tingling. "If I had died, I would have taken a beautiful memory with me. I would have died sated, knowing my seed had found a home, knowing the bravest woman I ever met was going to mother my child."

"Shut up," she said thinly, bringing her hand up to push his face away—he went easily, and she had the feeling he went because it pleased him, not because of anything she had done. "Shut up, I hate you, I wish you had died."

"I know," he said sadly. "Your opinion is not about to change." Abruptly, he shifted his full weight on her, and she felt his fingers come up and settle on the junction between her neck and shoulder . . . and start to squeeze. Black roses bloomed in her vision and she felt herself fading, fading, using up precious strength to get him off her rather than trying to drag his fingers away from her neck and what the hell was that, anyway? Was that—

Chapter Four

She woke in an unidentified bedroom . . . and came to consciousness yelling. "What the hell was that! Did you actually use the Vulcan Neck Pinch on me, you freak?"

Then she realized she was alone. The bedroom was small—the bed took up nearly the entire room, and paneled with pastel-striped wallpaper. There were two large windows on each side of the bed, and . . . And the bedroom was moving. She bounded off the bed, swaying for a long moment as a wave of dizziness swamped her, then lurched to the nearest window.

The bedroom was on a highway. Traveling roughly seventy miles an hour.

There was a short 'rap-rap' on the door, and then Tall, Dark, and Weird stuck his head in. "Are you all right?"

She whirled on him and he grinned as she snapped, "I am so sick of hearing that question from you—usually after you've done something horrible to me! No, I'm not all right! I'm a rape victim and a kidnaper victim and a— a pregnancy victim and a Vulcan Neck Pinch Victim and now I'm in some sort of mobile bedroom—"

"It's an RV," he said helpfully, easing into the room, keeping his hands in sight. She felt like a rabbit, easily spooked, like she might bolt any second. Apparently he had the same impression, because his voice was low and very soothing. "I wanted you to be comfortable for the trip."

"How very fucking considerate of you," she said with acid sarcasm. "Why, I don't know when I've been

kidnapped by a nicer man."

His smile faded. "Jeannie, I have enemies who would kidnap you and take your baby from you and then kill you, all so they could raise the next pack leader and have a voice of power. How could I let that happen to you?"

She took a deep breath and forced calm. On top of everything else—the physical power, the sexy voice—did he have to be so handsome? If she'd gotten a look at him in the elevator before the lights went out, he probably wouldn't have had to force her. Much. "Look. I'm not saying you're a liar, okay? I'm not saying that. I'm sure you believe all this stuff."

"Thanks," he said dryly.

"But the fact is, you can't force women in elevators and then show up and yank them from their homes and take them who-knows-where. You can't. Don't you know it's wrong? Don't you care?"

He sat on the edge of the bed and nodded soberly. "I do know it's wrong. By your laws."

She threw her hands up in disgust. "Oh, here we go."

"I do care," he continued. "As angry and humiliated as you are, I'm as embarrassed to find myself having to play the villain. But it's far worse to use you for my pleasure and then never give you another thought. Especially when I knew you were ovulating, knew there was an excellent chance I'd made you pregnant. How could I turn my back on you after using you? How could I never look in on you, make sure you were out of danger?"

"Fine!" she shouted, stomping toward the bed. "Look in on me! Tell me you're not dead! You could have apologized for forcing me and scaring me and—and other stuff, and I could have thanked you for saving my life, and then you could have gone your way and I'd have gone mine. Instead you do this," She gestured to the RV bedroom. "I loathe rooms on wheels," she hissed.

"There was the small matter of my enemies finding you," he reminded her calmly.

"Very small—you knew my name and it still took you three weeks to find me."

"Even if there was only a chance in a thousand you were in danger, do you think I'd risk you for an instant?" he asked sharply. "You're angry with me now, but what if I had never come back in your life . . . but my enemies had? You would have died cursing my name. I couldn't have borne that."

"Oh, please." She turned her back on him. "You don't give two shits for me. I was a piece of ass you couldn't resist. That's—aaah!"

He had come up behind her with that liquid, silent speed she had seen before, startling her badly. His hand fell on her shoulder and he turned her toward him. His eyes, locked on hers, were gold and blazing.

"Do not say that again," he said with an icy calm that terrified her, even as it fascinated her. "It's disrespectful of me, as well as yourself. I'm not in the habit of forcing unwilling females, despite what you must think."

"Sorry," she said quickly, through numb lips. Then, despising her fear, she added coldly, "Remove the hand."

His hand fell away. "And now I've frightened you," he said with real regret. "Forgive me, Jeannie."

"It's just that, since you don't even know me, I don't see how you can claim to feel anything for me," she said carefully.

His hand came up slowly, carefully, and when she didn't flinch, settled on her cheek like a dove's touch.

"I do know you," he murmured. "There is much more to you than beauty."

She flushed; against her hot skin, his hand felt cool. "I'm not beautiful."

He laughed. "With all that curly blonde hair?"

"It's frizzy," she corrected him.

"And all those adorable freckles?"

"Ugh."

"And that pale skin, like the richest cream?"

"When I go to the beach I look like a fucking vampire, thanks very much, and could we get off my looks, please?"

"Then we'll just have to talk about your intelligence and courage and razor wit," he said with faux regret.

"What a bore."

She laughed; she couldn't help it. And immediately bit off the sound.

"I've never heard you laugh before!" he said, delighted. "Do it again."

"I can't laugh on command. Look," she said briskly, getting back to business, wondering how long he was going to be touching her face, "let's talk facts, here. Facts, not delusions and you're the king of the werewolves and you've got enemies out to get me even though they don't know me—cold hard facts. Where is your home?"

"Barnstable, on Cape Cod," he said, amused.

"Ah, yes, Cape Cod," she said sarcastically, "a hotbed of shape-shifters. I always thought so. The tourists had to be going there for some reason . . ."

He laughed again, and his hand slid down, toward her collarbone. She knocked it away and backed up, so fast that she hit the far wall. Startled, he went after her, politely backing off when she kicked out at him.

"Don't touch me there again. Ever. Ever ever. If you do, I swear I'll—" She couldn't think of something bad enough. "I'll do worse than rack you in the 'nads."

Understanding dawned. "I wasn't going to knock you out again," he said. To her amazement, he actually sounded hurt. "I just like touching you."

"I don't give a shit! You're contemptible, showing up uninvited, pinning me down and pinching me until I was out cold—"

"I had a feeling," he said dryly, marching to her and dragging her, kicking, out of the corner. He shoved her gently to the bed and then walked around it, standing on the far side of the room. "I had a feeling you wouldn't cooperate in your—uh—removal. Steps had to be taken. But think about this—think about the things I could do to you if I didn't cherish your well-being."

She'd been trying not to. She had realized in the elevator he could have killed her, crippled her, as easily as stomping a spider. If he wanted to hurt her, he'd had ample opportunity. Hell, she'd visited upon him the worst pain a man can know . . . and there had been no retaliation.

"It's still wrong," she said firmly.

He shrugged. "You had more questions?"

"What happens when we get to Cape Cod?"

"You'll stay at my family home."

"Until?"

He hesitated. She gritted her teeth and repeated the question.

"Until you accept your destiny and freely agree to stay with me. Us."

"Forever?" she asked, aghast.

He nodded.

"You've kidnapped me forever? Unless I escape or blow the place up or whatever?"

"Yes." He paused. "I don't expect you to agree right—"

She launched herself at him. It was time to take advantage of the fact that he wouldn't hurt her, and do some major damage. Her first punch missed—he caught her wrist in time—but her simultaneous kick hit the mark, and he winced as her foot cracked into his shin.

"I hate you!" she was shouting, raining blows down on him. He held her wrists and took her kicks stoically, only blocking the ones to the groin with his thigh. "You can't do this! It's not my destiny, you weirdo, it was just dumb luck! I won't stay with you, I won't! I have a life! And it does not include hanging out on Cape Cod with a creep who thinks he's a werewolf!"

"Understood. But it doesn't matter; you're staying." At her shriek of rage, he continued. "And while we're talking, I don't like being hit, or kicked," he said calmly, wincing as she brought her foot down on his instep with all her strength, "so there will be consequences in the future."

"Fuck your consequences!" She brought her head forward in a devastating head butt; he jerked his head aside and she ended up banging her forehead into his neck.

"Starting now," he said, and pulled her too him so sharply she lost her breath. Then his mouth was on hers in a bruising kiss that stole the strength from her knees. He pinned her arms to her sides and, when her teeth clacked together in an attempt to bite him, contented himself with gently nibbling her lower lip.

"Don't," she managed, and when her mouth opened his tongue slipped past her teeth.

He pulled back before she could gather the sense to bite him again. He was breathing hard. Almost as hard as she was. His effect on her was infuriating and she practically gnashed her teeth in rage.

"So," he said coolly, but his eyes gleamed, "now that you know there are consequences, feel free to punch away. Because, afterward, I can put my hands on you without feeling a bit guilty, under those conditions."

"You should die of guilt," she choked out. "I hate you."

He was staring at her mouth, his own a line of sadness. "I know."

He left, slamming the flimsy bedroom door behind him. Jeannie sat down before her knees betrayed her.

Chapter Five

"This," Tall, Dark, and Disgusting said to the fifteen or so assembled people, "is my wife-to-be, Jeannette Lawrence."

"Ma'am," the small crowd said in respectful unison.

Jeannie opened her mouth to tell them exactly what she thought of what's-his-name, but the black-hearted bastard beat her to the punch.

"She's here entirely against her will," he went on, "and isn't happy about it. She's also pregnant by me—" A happy gasp from the crowd.

"—and not happy about it. It happened, as some of you probably guessed, during the last full moon."

Nods. Sympathetic glances. She bit her tongue, hard, so as not to shriek with embarrassed rage.

"Thus, she will be rude, throw things, and do her best to escape," he went on casually, as if she wasn't standing at his elbow and hearing every word. "She doesn't understand her vulnerability and can't appreciate her delicate position. And she won't thank any of you for pointing it out." He paused. "Be patient with her."

Jeannie rolled her eyes. At the edge of the crowd, a petite, elfin blonde woman saw it and winked at her.

"Moira, if you'll show Jeannie to her rooms?"

The small blonde nodded and stepped forward at once. Psycho Boy turned to her and asked with ridiculous politeness, "Did you have any questions, Jeannie?"

"Just one." She paused. He waited, the crowd waited, expectantly. "What the hell is your name?" Score! He flushed a little, and there were a few outright laughs in the crowd. Moira giggled, and quickly choked off the sound as he glanced at her with a frown. "Ah—that's right, we never got around to that, did we? It's Michael. Michael Wyndham."

"Great," she said, unsurprised. After the month she'd had, nothing could surprise her. The Wyndhams controlled a vast shipping empire and were reputed to be slightly more wealthy than God. The father of her child owned the tower she'd taken the ill-fated elevator in, probably owned the magazine she worked for. It figured. "Psychotic and rich."

"I'm afraid so," he said with an irritatingly sexy smile. She looked away, disgusted.

Moira led her out of the yard, into the astonishing mansion she'd glimpsed from the RV. After her last confrontation with Tall, Dark, and Wyndham, she'd cried herself to sleep. And when she woke, they had been pulling up to the most beautiful manor home she had ever seen. She was so stunned at the home's size and majesty, she hadn't said a word when Michael gently led her out of the RV and introduced her to the household staff who, the redhead (whose name was Jon; the blonde had introduced himself as Derik) had assured her, all shared Michael's "delusion."

She was so impressed with the ocean-side mansion, she could hardly fret about being kept prisoner by fifteen people who were all as nutty as Wyndham. True unease would come, she had no doubt, in time. Like as soon as her shock and surprise wore off. Then there'd be hell to pay. Then there'd—

"I hope you'll come to like it here," Moira was saying, leading her through a home that made *Gone With The Wind's* Twelve Oaks look like a claim shanty. "We've been waiting for you for a long time."

"Waiting for me?"

"For our leader to take a mate," Moira explained. She was a lovely, delicate blonde with eyes the color of the sky, and skin so pale it was almost translucent. She was tiny; almost a head shorter than Jeannie, and Jeannie herself was five-ten. "He needs an heir. It's just unfortunate that . . ." She trailed off, seemingly embarrassed.

"You don't know how unfortunate," Jeannie said dryly. "Look, Moira, I don't suppose there's any chance you'd help me—"

"Don't even ask, ma'am," she said firmly. "I'd die for Michael. Any of us would."

"In other words, don't waste your breath asking anyone else to crack out of this pokey," she finished.

"Your 'pokey', ma'am," Moira said with a grin, throwing open a set of mahogany doors. Jeannie stepped into the most beautiful room she had ever seen—all gleaming blonde wood floors, lush throw rugs, a fireplace large enough to roast two pigs, and several doors. And the bed! A king-sized monstrosity, large enough to comfortably sleep a family of six.

"Bathroom, closet, closet, balcony," Moira was saying, opening all the doors.

"Whoa!" Jeannie said, staring, goggle-eyed. Moira giggled again. "Okay, so, this place ranks high on my Top Ten List Of Places To Be Held Prisoner. But it still sucks, you know."

"Hmmm?" Moira said, turning down the bed.

"Being held here against my will," Jeannie reminded her impatiently. She waited for Moira to blush, to acknowledge guilt, to do something . . . something besides shrug and look unconcerned, dammitall.

Then a thought struck her, and she asked sharply, "Where does Wyndham sleep?"

"His is the adjoining room," she said simply.

"Over my dead body!"

"You'll have to discuss that with him, ma'am."

"And stop calling me ma'am! I'm not ninety!"

"As you wish, my lady."

"Out!" she hissed, and to her relief and surprise, Moira obeyed at once. Jeannie threw herself on the bed, which enveloped her at once in an eiderdown embrace. She was too mad to cry again, which was a relief—she'd done entirely too much crying lately. Now was the time for action!

"Would you like to have something to eat before you try to escape?"

It was Wyndham, poking his head through the doorway that doubtless adjoined his rooms to hers. She'd like to slam that door shut, watch his eyes pop out as his neck broke.

She glared up at him from her bed. "I want to go home."

"Yes, I know."

"Now!"

"Sorry."

She reared up in the bed, tottering to stay balanced on her knees amid all the fluff of the quilts. His mouth twitched as she struggled to right herself. "Wyndham, I'm telling you this for the last time: I won't stay here with you. I won't have anything to do with you. You're a criminal and a jerk, a miserable combo."

"You're not afraid," he said with a satisfied sigh. "I knew you wouldn't be."

"Don't flatter yourself. I'm too pissed to be afraid. Listen, dickhead: there are going to be some horrific consequences if you try to keep me here. We're talking broken bones and FBI raids. I'm out of here the second the opportunity presents itself."

He actually looked alarmed—at the chance of losing his sex toy? Or a deeper reason? Then his expression cleared. "There will be consequences if you try to escape," he said simply, stepping into her room and softly closing the adjoining door. He had changed from his suit to khaki shorts and a white t-shirt, and if possible, looked yummier in casual clothes that showed off his finely muscled legs and upper body. He was ridiculously tan, ridiculously handsome. "Are you going to try to escape soon?" he asked, as if inquiring about the temperature in her room.

"You—you—" She sputtered wordlessly at his absurd question. "You're not supposed to want me to get away."

"You won't get away. We'll catch you. I don't want you to leave—it's dangerous. So, as I warned you earlier, there will be consequences if you try and escape."

"What consequences?" she asked, but had a sinking feeling she knew.

His gaze was level. "Elevator consequences."

Her mouth went dry, even as her heart sped up. "Seek help, Wyndham. As quickly as possible."

"Do you think I'm pleased with this scenario?"

"Yes! I think you're very pleased," she said bitterly.

The bum actually looked hurt. She couldn't believe his nerve. "It's the only way I can think of to keep you from trying to leave," he sighed, "since you don't believe me about the danger."

He walked to the bed and stared down at her. A blind woman could have seen the hunger in his gaze. "I won't lie—part of me wants you to try and escape," he husked. "Don't misunderstand—I'm sorry about the circumstances that brought you here. And I'm sorry you don't like my home."

"I never said I didn't like your home," she interjected sharply.

"But if you try to escape, just as if you try to hurt me again, I can take you without guilt."

"You—"

"I can hardly stand to be this close to you without touching you," he said, and for a moment she saw such pain and longing in his gaze, she had to glance away. "Having you sleeping just a few feet away is going to drive me mad. But I won't take you again by force, Jeannie—except as a deterrent. Because," he added sadly, "as much as I long for your touch, I know you can't stand to be near me, that you despise me. So lovemaking relieves my hunger while punishing you." He turned away. "I wish it could be different between us," he said without turning around. "I'd give anything for things to be different."

"You know what I'd give anything for?" she asked sweetly, groping behind her for something to throw at him, and finding nothing more deadly than a pillow.

He laughed shortly, and left the room. The pillow smacked into the door and fell to the floor with a fat thump.

Chapter Six

Since Wyndham, the sadistic cretin, was panting at the thought of her escape, and since he'd alerted the household she was an unwilling guest, Jeannie decided to stay put for a while, provided her situation didn't change (read: Wyndham didn't decide she was in heat again, or Moira didn't spike her milk with broken glass).

So she took lunch with Wyndham and his staff, who were obviously more friends than employees, in a dining room that had more windows than a solarium. Sunlight splashed across the table and gleamed from the blonde wood floors. She sat in the finest dining room she'd ever seen and commented on how delicious everything tasted. They had all been watching her expectantly, and seemed disappointed when she didn't throw things or leap across the table through the French doors that led to the beach.

"How long have you known you were expecting our leader's child?" Derik asked, sliding the bread basket toward her.

She helped herself to another piece of the sun-dried tomato and basil loaf and looked at her watch.

"About six hours and fourteen minutes."

Wyndham looked up from his soup. "You did one of those home tests? You haven't seen a doctor?"

"I had an appointment for this afternoon. Which I missed. Guess why, King Psycho."

He remained unruffled, though she saw a few of the staff hiding smiles. "Well, then, you need a doctor. Moira, see to it." He glanced at Jeannie with a frown, then added, "A female physician, if you please."

"Yes, sir."

"Like there are so many werewolf doctors to choose from?" Jeannie interrupted sarcastically. "What, is there a directory or something?" As the others laughed, she had a sudden thought. "Oh, will we have to go to town for that?"

Derik, seated at Wyndham's left (she was at his right), snickered. "Nice try. The doctor will come here."

"Well, goody for him."

"Her," Michael corrected sharply.

Jeannie raised her eyebrows, said nothing, and ate her chicken. Wyndham was jealous? Of a male doctor? Ridiculous. Still, that might be a handy button to push. She filed the thought away.

"Are you mad because you think we're all crazy, or because you're here against your will?" Jon asked curiously.

"I don't think that's a fair question," Michael said reproachfully.

"Yeah, I mean, there's so many reasons for me to be furious at all of you, how can I pick just one?"

"I meant," Jon said, flushing a little, "the full moon is in three days. And you could watch some of us change, or even one of us change, and then you wouldn't think we were crazy anymore, so it might be easier to accept—um—are you okay?"

She could actually feel the color draining from her face, could feel the trembling in her hands. She dropped her spoon in her soup and fled the table, running, running, for her rooms.

Michael caught up with her on the stairs. She wrenched away from him and kept going. Never one to take a hint, he followed her into her bedroom.

"The full moon?" she asked, hating the shrill, panicky note in her voice. He shut the door to assure some privacy; she barely noticed. "The full moon again? I can't go through that again! I can't go through that craziness with you again! Don't you touch me!"

He had been reaching for her, ignored her shriek and pulled her, struggling, into a firm embrace. "It's all right," he said into her hair. "I had planned to leave the grounds when my change came. I wouldn't have forced you again. I promised you I wouldn't force you, except as punishment."

"What good is a promise from you?" she choked, resting her forehead against his shoulder. He smelled so good. It was as comforting as it was irritating.

"I've done many things to you, Jeannie, but when have I broken a promise?"

She shrugged sullenly. Then stiffened, remembering. She leaned back to look at him. "But what about the others? They all think they're werewolves, too, they all—"

"You have nothing to fear from the females, because as my mate, you're alpha female. No, listen, Jeannie—if it's a delusion, at least we all have to follow the same rules, right? And the males won't—can't—touch you without my permission." His voice hardened. "And I won't give it. Ever. So you have nothing to fear."

She choked on a laugh.

"You really don't," he said, pressing a warm kiss to her brow. "Now come back and finish your lunch. You don't want the baby to starve, do you?"

"No," she sighed. She glanced at him again; he had put an arm around her shoulder and was steering her out the door, back to the dining room. A thought struck her—late, but her thought process was continually being thwarted by shock upon shock. "What do you think? About my being pregnant, I mean? I never got a chance to ask you. Not that I care either way," she added hastily.

"I'm thrilled," he said simply, giving her a warm smile. He leaned close and she had the sense he wanted very much to kiss her. Something—belated concern for her feelings?—held him back. "I love children. The pack needs the continuity of succession. And I get to keep you now, don't I?"

His voice ended on a teasing note, but she wasn't amused. "For a minute there, I was almost liking you," she said evenly, pushing his arm away. "Thanks for turning back into a creep."

At the dining table, the other werewolves—people—were still glaring at Jon, who was miserably embarrassed. "I'm really sorry," he said at once upon seeing Jeannie. "I shouldn't have reminded you about the full moon. I forgot that—" He paused, glanced at Michael, blushed harder. "I have no excuse. I'm so sorr—"

"Please stop," she said, rolling her eyes and sitting back down. "I'm the one who should apologize. I can

assure you it's not my usual M.O. to drop cutlery and flee for the bedroom when the word 'moon' is introduced into the conversation."

The others laughed, Michael harder than anyone. Jon smiled at her with pure gratitude. And Derik forked another chicken breast onto her plate.

"How about a tour, Moira?" she asked briskly, after the lunch dishes had been cleared away. "Might as well check out my new home."

"She'll try to escape," Derik warned, finishing the last of his peach sorbet.

"I know," Moira said defensively. "You don't have to tell me everything, Mr. Right Hand Man."

"Bring her to me once you've found her again," Michael said casually, but his eyes were gleaming in a way Jeannie didn't much care for.

"Hello!" she shouted. "Prisoner still in the room, here! Can you have this conversation where I can't hear you?"

Moira giggled, and extended a hand. Surprised, Jeannie took it. "Come on," she said. "We'll start with the gardens. If you cosh me over the head to escape, try not to muss my hair."

"For God's sake," she muttered, but obediently followed Moira out the door.

She had, in fact, decided to escape in the next day or so—well before the full moon. Michael's assurances aside, she had no intention of sharing a home, however sprawingly luxurious, with twenty people all sharing the same delusion. And she didn't plan to be in the same state with Wyndham when he went through that again. She wasn't afraid of being forced, so much as being forced to pleasure. Her cheeks burned with humiliation every time she remembered how he had made her scream in ecstasy. In a flash she was back in the warm, dark elevator, Michael's cock surging between her thighs, her fingers digging into his skin, wordlessly urging more, more . . .

She shook herself, and concentrated on the tour. Now was no time for daydreaming. Now was the time to plot and plan and eventually escape these crazies.

In the rose garden, Moira said in a low voice, "We don't blame you. For being upset, I mean. It must have been . . ." She trailed off, then asked timidly, "Was it very awful?"

"Huh? You mean being stuck in the elevator with your boss? Well, the lights went out, so we couldn't read my Glamour . . ."

"It's kind of you to joke, but . . . I can't imagine how it must have been for you—a pure human, and an unbeliever, besides. Tearing clothes and scratches and bites, and being forced on your knees and taken without so much as a 'please' . . . I suppose you had to see a doctor." She looked as though she was going to burst into tears. "I suppose you—you tore and . . . and—no wonder you hate him. Us."

"Uh . . . yeah. Yeah, it was an unending torment. What's that building over there?"

As Moira obediently showed her the gardener's shed, Jeannie's mind whirled. What Moira imagined hadn't been at all what happened. Michael had gone out of his way to soothe her, to bring her pleasure, to make sure she was ready for him. He'd had that much control, at least. What would sympathetic Moira think if she told her it had been the most exciting, pleasurable sexual experience of her life? What did that mean, that he'd been nearly out of control, but cared for her enough to do his best not to hurt her, even to bring her pleasure?

In a flash, she was back in the warm, dark elevator—

Jeannie pushed the thought away with a firmness she didn't feel.

"You can't leave the grounds," Moira was saying casually, "until we kill Gerald. But after that, it should

be all right."

"What?" She nearly fell into a rose bush. "Now you're talking about killing someone so I can leave?"

"Didn't our leader explain about Gerald?"

"Frankly, I tend to tune him out when he's babbling about all the reasons it's okay for him to break the law where I'm concerned."

"Your law," Moira pointed out calmly, "not ours."

Jeannie bent to sniff a rose so gray it was almost silver. "Okay, I'll bite. What is your law?"

"Safety of mates and children first, above and before everything else. Michael has to keep you safe.

Because he knows it's right, and because he must set an example. How could the rest of us follow someone who can't even protect his own mate?"

"I'm not his mate," she said sharply.

"Yes," Moira said simply, "you are."

Jeannie stewed over that one for the five minutes it took them to walk from the rose garden to the beach.

"How does Gerald fit into all this?" she asked at last.

"He's our enemy. He went rogue five years ago. His mate was giving him nothing but female cubs and he wanted an heir, someone he could train to challenge the pack leader. He's too cowardly to try a challenge himself; he wanted a son to do the dirty work." Cute, delicate Moira spat in the sand to express her disgust.

"Whoa, whoa, watch those loogies." Jeannie took off her shoes and wiggled her toes in the surf, scanning the horizon and judging the wisdom of swimming to England to escape. Still, this was a fascinating delusion. "His mate was giving him daughters? Did the creep never crack a biology textbook? Sperm chooses gender."

"Gerald is . . . old-fashioned," Moira said reluctantly. "He represents the pack before the Wyndhams took over. Savage, undisciplined. Gerald killed his mate after the birth of his fourth daughter. Michael would have killed him, but for the intercession of Gerald's other daughters, who begged their leader to spare their father's life. Michael did, but banished him. Now Gerald's rogue, and the only way he can come to power is if he gets his hands on the pack leader's child."

"Thus, I be kidnapped," Jeannie said dryly.

"If you ever crossed Gerald's path, he would kill you to revenge himself on Michael—for what is worse than the loss of a mate? Or he would keep you until you whelped, take the child from you, and then kill you. And he would be well-revenged indeed, for he would be as father to the next pack-leader, and come to power quickly. And we would be back in the days of savagery and blood." Moira turned an unblinking, wide-eyed gaze to Jeannie. "It would be the end of all of us." Pause. "You can't leave while Gerald lives."

Despite herself, Jeannie felt a thrill of fear. Determinedly, she pushed it away. It was all part of their delusion, it was a way for Michael to justify kidnapping her. She wouldn't believe it.

There had to be a way out of here.

Exhausted—either from the wild events of the last few hours, or fatigue brought on by an early pregnancy—when Moira brought her back to the mansion, Jeannie went straight to her room and stretched out on the bed to nap. The bed was ridiculously comfortable, her room astonishingly beautiful, and if she wasn't being held here against her will she'd probably be having the time of her life. Hell, she thought drowsily, watching the light play against the rich gold wallpaper, there hadn't been

anyone in her life since college. Under different circumstances, she'd gobble Wyndham with a spoon. She'd rape him. Gorgeous, rich, intelligent, and a gentleman—when he wasn't raping and kidnapping. A real catch. And those eyes . . . those eyes . . .

Yes, she could definitely wish things had been different, that they had not met in such drastic fashion. But, as her mother used to say, done can't be undone. Her mission was not to play nice with the lunatics, it was to get the hell out of here.

With that unsettling thought, she drifted into sleep. And found herself in the elevator again—for the last month, she'd stumbled into that elevator two or three times a week. Only this time, Michael didn't save her. This time, he used her and left her, turned his back on her and left the elevator in one bound, leaving her in the car, in the dark, and there was a terrifying Snap! as the cables parted and then the sickening sensation of free fall, her feet left the floor and her head banged on the ceiling and her stomach climbed into her throat and she screamed all the way down, screamed for him to save her, and—

"Jeannie . . . hush, Jeannie, it's all right. You're safe here."

"Ha," she said weakly, opening her eyes. To her surprise, while she dreamed she had been pulled into his embrace. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding her in his lap like the world's biggest doll.

As she rested her head against his chest, she was absurdly comforted by the thud-thud of his heartbeat in her ears. "Do you dream about the elevator often?" he asked, his voice against her ear a deep rumble.

"No," she lied. In a moment she would have to pretend outrage and shove him away. In a moment. For now, it was too damn nice to be held with tenderness. Even if he was crazy. Even if he'd landed her in more trouble than she'd ever been in. "No, never."

"I do, too," he said softly, as if she'd told the truth. "Only, in my dreams, I can't save you. And down you go. And I wake up with a scream in my throat."

She shuddered against him, closing her eyes. He stroked her back and murmured to her; she caught no words but was comforted by tone. "In mine," she whispered, "you leave me. You use me and leave me and the elevator falls into the basement and they scrape what's left of me into a jelly jar."

He tightened his grip. "Never. I'd die myself before letting that happen to you."

"I know," she said and, to her surprise, she knew that as a fact, as she knew her own name. "You proved it, didn't you? But I can't help dreaming about it."

"Nor I," he agreed.

She noticed his right nipple, which was about two inches from her mouth, was stiff. Probably from her; every time she opened her mouth, breath puffed across it. She had the absurd urge to kiss it. To taste it. Run her tongue across it and test the texture. Her mouth had actually gone dry from her sudden, startling need to take part of him into part of her.

He was rubbing his cheek against the top of her head and she could feel that odd tension in his body, as she had felt it the night in the elevator. He wanted her, she realized with a bolt of excitement. But he was afraid to do anything, afraid she'd fight him, scream the house down, call him names. He wanted to preserve this temporary peace between them as long as he could. What would he do, she wondered with a strange, thundery joy, if I leaned over and kissed his nipple? And slid his shorts down to his ankles and took him into my mouth?

"I came to get you," he said, and she thought his voice sounded thick, "because the doctor is here."

In a flash, she remembered herself: she was pregnant, by him, against her will, in his house, against her will. She sat up and shoved him away. Christ, she mentally groaned, standing up and walking out the door, what was I thinking? I've got to get out of here before I forget I hate this creep.

The doctor, who introduced herself as Rose Madison, was waiting for them at the foot of the stairs. Jeannie greeted her with, "Nice to meet you, I'm Jeannie Lawrence, they're all crazy and they're holding me prisoner, mind getting me out of here?"

The doctor, a small brunette with whiskey-colored eyes, was all commiseration as she explained she, too, was a werewolf, and she was very honored to be tending to the pack leader's mate as well as her future pack leader, and would my lady mind peeing in this cup?

Jeannie snatched the plastic cup out of Dr. Madison's hand, shot a sizzling glare toward Michael, ignored Derik's smirk, said loudly, "I hate every one of you," and marched into a nearby bathroom.

Within half an hour, Dr. Madison had confirmed her pregnancy and handed her what looked like—yes, it was. An ice cream bucket full of pre-natal vitamins.

"What the hell?" she asked helplessly, hefting the bucket and astonished at its weight.

"You'll need at least four a day, due to your increased metabolism," Dr. Madison informed her.

"Sure I will," she said, humoring her. Dr. Madison let that pass, cautioned her about her diet, and told her she would see her again in two weeks.

Sure you will, Jeannie thought. She glanced around at Michael, Moira, and Derik. Now or never. If any of them came with, she was toast. "Dr. Madison, can I talk to you in private about—uh—a female thing?" she asked, feigning embarrassment.

"Of course," the doctor said quickly, even as the others did a respectful fade. "Come, walk with me to my car."

Once outside, Jeannie glanced around again, saw no one, and followed Dr. Madison to her car, a nifty little Ford Taurus. "Uh—the werewolf thing. Should it turn out to be true, will I have a litter? Will I have a puppy?"

Dr. Madison laughed kindly. "No, you won't have a litter. Two, at the most—and that is rare for our kind. And werewolves don't change until puberty. He or she will seem like a perfectly normal-looking child until, oh, about age thirteen or so." She grinned. "Then all hell is going to break loose. Don't worry about being human mother to a werewolf, though. Our leader will help you. We'll all help you."

"It takes a village to raise a werewolf," Jeannie said wryly, casually hefting the huge container of pre-natal vitamins. Who ever heard of taking four a day? The doctor had given her enough to last ten years.

"To raise the next pack leader, certainly." Dr. Madison turned to look at her with a serious gaze. "One thing, though. Your child will be highly prized. Not only because of his status in the pack, but because often the child of a human/werewolf mix is able to control their Change. To turn into a wolf at any time, not just during the full moon."

In spite of herself, Jeannie was fascinated by the complexity of the fantasy. "Is that why the others don't resent me? I'd think, if anything, a human would dilute the strain."

"Not in this case. Human mothers are prized. Smart, courageous ones even more so. Every time you snap at Michael or crack a joke, or make a determined effort to hide your fear, they like you more. He likes you more."

"Oh," Jeannie said, completely mystified.

"Well," Dr. Madison said reasonably, "who wants a dishrag for a consort?"

"Not me," she said, and swung the heavy container, hard sidearm, at Dr. Madison's head. The blow knocked the small woman into the car, where she bounced off and hit the gravel drive, hard. Jeannie prepared to step over Dr. Madison's unconscious body, and was astonished to see the woman was still clinging to consciousness.

"Don't," she slurred, trying to get to her feet. "It's too dangerous. Gerald will kill you."
"Sorry," Jeannie said, and she was. The doctor was almost a foot shorter, after all. But tough as hell. Jeannie jumped into the car, starting the engine with one twist of the keys conveniently left in the ignition. "Christ," she muttered, slamming the car into first gear, "hit her over the head and her only concern was for me. Damn." If she wasn't careful, she'd get attached to those loonies. She was down the lane and out the gate before the alarm was raised.

Chapter Seven

Knowing better than to outrun them—who knew how many fleets of cars, choppers, and what-have-you Wyndham had at his disposal—she screeched to a halt in front of the Barnstable Police Station. Sprinting up the stairs, she burst into the station and yelled, "Help! I've been kidnapped by a group of nuts who think they're werewolves!"

The three people in the room—the desk sergeant, an off-duty patrolman, and a plainclothes detective—turned to stare at her. "Quiet town," Jeannie mumbled, keeping an ear cocked for the sounds of pursuit. "I'll take this one," the detective said. He was a large man, a good four inches taller than she, with mud-colored brown hair, eyes the same color, and fists the size of bowling balls. He gestured to a door at the end of the hall. "C'mon, honey. Tell me all about the big bad wolf."

"Werewolf," she corrected him, walking down the hall. At his nod, she pushed through the door and found herself outside, in a small alley. Surprised, she turned—and ran smack into the detective's chest. To her shock, he shoved her away, hard.

"You've got Wyndham's stink on you. You must be his new bitch," he snarled, snuffling her ear. She jerked away, appalled. His tongue flicked out and ran across his thick lips; he looked about as evil a creature as she had ever seen. "And is that his little bitty babe I smell in you?"

"Are you Gerald?" she asked dumbly.

"I was. Now I'm going to be stepdaddy to the new pack leader." His big fist came looping through the air toward her; she ducked under it, darted forward, and snatched his sidearm out of his holster. In a flash she had the barrel jammed into the soft meat of his throat.

"Guess again, Detective Stupid," she growled. "Christ, has everyone gone crazy? Am I the only sane person in an insane world? Can it be that—?"

"If you're going to kill me, get it over with," Gerald grunted, "but don't make me listen to you whine."

"Oh, shut up," she snapped. "Who else on the force thinks they're a werewolf?"

"Thinks they're a werewolf?" As she dug the barrel deeper into his flesh, he added, "Three others. They're all on Wyndham's side. Too bad for you they're on patrol, eh?"

"Guess again, rogue," a cool female voice said. Jeannie snapped a gaze over her left shoulder and saw two uniformed patrolmen and another plainclothes detective—this one a woman—pointing guns at them. At Gerald, hopefully.

"Our leader told us you'd probably stop here first," one of the patrolmen said, almost apologetically.

"Step away from Gerald, please, ma'am."

"You might want to mention to Michael that I had everything under control," she said, obeying.

"If I were you, ma'am," the detective said, not taking her gaze off Gerald, "I would not mention that I had even met this man, much less drew down on him."

"Good advice," Jeannie mumbled. She tucked the piece into the back waistband of her jeans, ignoring Gerald's burning glare. "I like to keep souvenirs," she told him, then let herself be escorted to a patrol car. In the back (feeling like a POW, to tell the truth), her curiosity impelled her to ask, "Are you guys going to get in trouble? For pulling a piece on a fellow cop, a member of the brotherhood, that sort of thing?" "Pack business is private," the lady detective said, turning around to look at her through the mesh. "And Gerald doesn't outrank me." Her buddy behind the wheel laughed at that one, and Jeannie shook her head, wondering what the joke was.

To her surprise, the cop-werewolves let her keep the piece. To her further surprise, upon return to the mansion she was not instantly dismembered. Instead, Dara, the chef, politely asked if she wanted to eat and, upon declining, Jeannie was escorted to her rooms and locked in. That was it. No yelling, no threats, no thunder-voiced Michael promising doom. No Michael, period.

"Well, hell," she said, looking at her watch. She'd been free for all of twenty-seven minutes. She tucked the pistol away in a bedside drawer and prepared to kill a few hours.

She amused herself watching daytime reruns (The Brady Bunch and Wings were particular favorites) until dinner time. Moira, pale and quiet, brought supper.

"What's up with you?" Jeannie asked, pouncing on the covered plates. She lifted the lids to reveal prime rib, baby red potatoes, green beans. Bliss, except for the green beans—blurgh. "And why hasn't your lord and master been in here to play 'Jeannie is a bad girl'?"

"He's so angry," Moira practically whispered. "He's staying away from you until he calms down. When he heard Gerald had his hands on you—the builders are coming tomorrow to fix the holes in the wall." The bite of prime rib stuck in Jeannie's throat. With an effort she swallowed, coughed, and said, "So, the cops ratted me out, eh? Fascists. Did they mention when they came on the scene, Gerald was saying hello to the barrel of his gun? Held by me? Because I got the drop on the overconfident son of a bitch?" Moira flashed a smile, which eased the tension lines around the smaller woman's eyes. "They did. They practically fell over themselves assuring our leader you were never in any danger. You made quite an impression on them."

"You should see the mark on Gerald's neck, you want to see impression," she chortled, forking down another bite of the delicious prime rib.

She was halfway through the meat before she realized it was raw. She waited for the urge to puke, or faint, but it didn't come. Moira saw the look on her face and quickly explained, "It's normal, my lady, don't fret. You're growing a werewolf, after all. You'll crave raw meat throughout your pregnancy."

"My God!" Jeannie said, putting down her fork. "I'm catching your delusion!"

Hours later, she was soaking in the tub—which was more like a miniature pool—when the bathroom door opened and Michael said, quite calmly, "You put yourself in danger. You put my unborn child in danger. On purpose."

She swallowed a mouthful of water and sat up, looking behind her to see him standing in the bathroom doorway, stone-faced. She opened her mouth, but before she could speak he said, "Finish your bath," and walked out.

An hour later, she was still in the tub. Wrinkled and shivering, but defiant. He wasn't the boss of her, dammit! She'd get out of the tub when she was damned good and ready, thank you very much—

"Jeannie. If I have to remove you from the tub, you won't like it."

—and that was right now. She climbed out of the tub, dried, and shrugged into the clothes she'd been

wearing earlier. She wrapped her soaking hair in a towel and padded into the other room to take her medicine.

Wyndham was apparently a helluva boy scout, because he'd kindled a respectably-sized fire in the fireplace. He was crouched before the flames, balancing on the balls of his feet, and she had the impression he'd been in that position some time, waiting for her. He turned his head when she entered the room and came to his feet at once.

"Why aren't you wearing a nightgown? There are plenty of clothes for you to wear."

"They're not my clothes," she pointed out. "You stocked up before snatching me, didn't you? Bought a bunch of stuff in my size? I saw it earlier. Well, forget it. I'm wearing my own clothes."

By firelight, his eyes were yellow. His voice, though, was still cool and calm, which reassured her somewhat. "Everything in this room is yours."

"This room isn't mine. Nothing here is mine. Now, about this afternoon." She swallowed and lifted her chin. "I admit to some remorse about cold-cocking the doctor, but . . ."

He crossed the room and tore the shirt off her body, ignoring her outraged squawk, then leaned down and tugged at her leggings until they, too, were shreds. "Your old life is over!" he shouted as he dragged her to the bureau. He yanked open a drawer, found a nightgown, thrust it at her. "You belong to me, and you will wear my clothes and stay in my home and be safe and you will damned well like it!"

Shocked at his rage and loss of control, she couldn't grab the nightgown and it floated to the floor. "You weren't this out of it in the elevator," she said, brushing the scraps of t-shirt off her arms, hating the way her hands trembled. "What's your problem?"

"My problem," he said with savage sarcasm, yanking the towel from her hair and furiously towel-drying the soaked tresses, "is a willful mate who doesn't care about her own safety or, apparently, my child's."

"I'm not your mate!"

"You are. And all your protests won't change the fact. Werewolf law is a hell of a lot older than human law, Jeannie, and as such, you're mine, as the child is mine, forever and ever, amen." He finished drying her hair and tossed the towel at her. "So I strongly recommend you get over it."

"I hate you," she said hopelessly, furious at herself for not being able to come up with anything better.

"I suggest you get over that, too," he said carelessly. He pulled his t-shirt over his head, unbuttoned his shorts, let them drop, and stepped out of them.

"Wrong," she said, and oh God, her throat was so dry. "Not in a thousand years, pal. Never again."

"I'm not your pal," he said coldly, but his cheeks were flushed with color and his gaze was hot. "I'm your mate. It's time you were reminded of the fact."

"And you can't wait, can you?" she hissed. "All day you've been hoping I'd escape, so you can rape me. Again. Well, I did try, and now you get to play—or at least you think you do—so why are you so mad?"

"I never expected you to end up in Gerald's literal grasp," he growled, stalking toward her. She took a great, clumsy step backward and nearly tripped over an endtable. He was there to steady her, his hand on her arm surprisingly gentle. "Jesus! He could have torn your throat out and you wouldn't have known it until you woke up in the afterlife!"

"The only one in danger of throat trouble was Gerald," she retorted, and swallowed to get the lump out of her throat. "I had his gun. I—"

"There was no bullet in the chamber, you idiot!" The heat of his rage baked her face; he shook her so hard her hair flew into her face, her eyes. "The gun wouldn't have fired! Gerald knew it, he could have killed you at any time! Now he knows your status, knows where you are, knows if he gets you he gets

the next pack leader. You've been reckless and you might have paid the price with your life, if my people hadn't gotten there in time, you stupid, stupid . . ." Then she was crushed to him in an embrace so tight it drove the breath from her lungs. His chest heaved and he shuddered all over, trying to force calm. "How could you have risked yourself? Risked our baby? Frightened years off my life?"

"I didn't—I didn't—"

His mouth was suddenly on hers in a bruising kiss even as he moved, pulling her with him. The backs of her knees connected with the bed and she twisted away from him, gasping, only to have him casually toss her on the bed. He stripped off his undershorts and she couldn't help but stare at him, at the thing that had gotten her into this mess. Fully erect, almost curving under its weight, thrusting from a lush nest of black hair, she looked for a long moment, almost spellbound. Then her gaze was drawn upward until she was staring into his gleaming gold gaze.

"I can't," she whispered, but oh, part of her wanted to. "Not with you. Not again."

"You will. Only with me."

He climbed onto the bed, easily avoiding her kick, and then his chest was settling against hers and his hands were in her hair, tugging, forcing her head back. He dipped his head and inhaled her scent, seeming almost to savor her, but she could feel that hot, hard pressure against her lower stomach and knew he wasn't going to be satisfied with just her natural perfume.

"Don't."

"I can't help it. I've always loved your scent."

"Don't!" she said, almost gasped, as he licked her throat. "I don't want you. Don't do that!"

"It doesn't have to be punishment," he said, and sounded almost—could it be?—desperate. "Let me make it good. I want you," not your body. I don't want to take by force what you could share with both of us."

"Don't you understand?" she screamed at him, startling him, startling herself. "I can't! The qualities that make you like me also fix it so I can't . . . give . . . in." No matter how much I want to, she thought desperately. "Now leave me be!"

"Please," he said again, and his eyes were haunted. "I'll overlook what happened. I shouldn't have backed us both into this corner. Just let me—" He dropped a soft kiss to her throat. "You'll like it."

That's what I can't bear, she said to herself. Oh, God, anything but that—anything but me begging him again. I'd rather be taken in anger than reduced to humiliating screaming and begging, shouting myself hoarse while I come so hard I can't think straight . . .

And he was wrong. He was wrong to keep her here, Gerald or no Gerald. Her outraged pride could never escape that fact. Nobody held Jeannie against her will, God damn him.

"I'll escape again," she said through gritted teeth, as he licked the underside of her left breast. Her nipple rose, a taut pink rosebud, and he rubbed his cheek against it. She whimpered, the tiny sound escaping before she could lock it back.

He smiled at the sound. "I was so afraid," he said quietly, pressing his mouth to her cleavage for a brief, sweet kiss. "So terrified. When they told me who you'd run to. When they told me that mate-killing bastard had actually put his hands on you." His head dropped to her shoulder. "Jeannie, I was so scared for you," he said, so low she could barely hear the words.

She wanted to comfort him. She wanted to thank him for his concern. And she hated every tender feeling he was calling up in her. Forcing on her. Better to be forced, better to be victimized, than a willing prisoner. Anything but that.

"I think I could get a better deal with Gerald," she said with cruel casualness. "As soon as I escape again—and I will—I'll have to track him down. At least he'll leave me alone until the baby's born."

He froze against her and she held her breath. He raised his head and gave her a long, level look.

"I will leave," she said evenly, and felt shame, and felt anger at feeling shame. "I won't stay here against my will. Let me go now, tonight, or I'll find Gerald just as soon as I can." A bluff—she wasn't going near Gerald on a bet—but Michael wouldn't know that.

He said nothing. Instead, he calmly rose and padded out of the room, stark naked. She went limp with relief, unable to believe she'd gotten off so lightly.

She rose from the bed and put away the nightgown he'd thrown at her earlier. She'd meant what she had said, about not wearing clothes he'd picked out during his shop-for-my-future-prisoner spree. It wasn't to be borne, not any of this male-domination bullshit, and if he thought she was the type to . . .

He was back, carrying something.

He kicked the door shut behind him, his face dark with anger, then he unscrewed the top to the tube, squeezing a handful of—of something onto his hand. He rubbed the handful all over his turgid cock, until his member was shiny and slick with lubricant.

She watched this cold procedure—his expression never changed—with her mouth hanging ajar. Then understanding hit and she turned to run . . . somewhere. But his hand was on her elbow before she'd even taken a step. He thrust her, screaming her denial, face down on the bed. She scrambled to her knees and he let her, then he grasped her hips and plunged inside her. She shrieked again at the shock of it, the brutal intrusion, the taking of her for punishment.

He reared behind her, plunging and withdrawing, and her screams of anger—for, in truth, this didn't hurt, but it couldn't exactly be called pleasurable, either—gave way to furious weeping. He never missed a stroke, and after a minute he was shuddering behind her.

He let go of her hips and she dropped to the bed, which shook with her sobs. He let her cry for a long moment, then put a hand on her shoulder and eased her on her back. She couldn't look at him.

"That was for what you just threatened to do," he said hoarsely. "Never think of going near him. He'll kill you. I couldn't bear that."

He left her on the bed, going around the room and shutting off the lights. She tried to get a grip on herself, tried to stop crying, but it was all too much—the stress of the last three weeks caught up with her, not to mention the stress of the last minute and a half.

When he eased into bed beside her she cringed back, expecting to be used again, but he shushed her and pulled her, oh so carefully, into his arms, as if he thought she might shatter if handled too roughly. His large warm hands stroked her back and he pulled her face into his throat. In the dark, his voice rumbled against her cheek, sad . . . almost lost. "You wouldn't know this, but . . . that's how a werewolf punishes his mate. Using her but withholding pleasure. You had frightened me so badly, you weren't listening, I—I couldn't think of what else to do." Pause. "And I was very angry, tremendously angry." He licked the tears from one cheek and, when she didn't cringe or flinch, but just sobbed softly and steadily, he licked the tears from the other. He licked the ones that had dripped to her chest, chasing one errant tear all the way to her nipple.

He trailed soft, sweet kisses down to her naval and she could feel herself stiffen beneath him. He paused, obviously expecting a protest, but the agony of her recent humiliation was too great, and she was afraid to stop him. "It's all right," he said sadly, reading her mind, or perhaps smelling her fear. His tongue flicked out, caressed the cup of her navel, moved lower. "No matter what you do or say, I'm done with

cruelty for tonight. I've found I don't have the taste for it when you're involved. Do you want me to stop? Leave?"

Wary of werewolf tricks, she said nothing, but couldn't stifle a gasp of protest when he settled himself between her legs. He started lapping the inside of her thighs, cleaning his seed from her, and a treacherous warmth began to spread through her limbs. She could feel herself relaxing by inches when long minutes went by and all he did was nuzzle and kiss and lick her inner thighs. When his tongue brushed her clitoris, there and gone again, she didn't even have time to squirm before he was back to tending to the less sensitive skin of her thighs. Then his tongue was delving inside her, darting, flicking, probing . . . and then back to her inner thighs.

Soon the trips to her inner thighs were shorter, and all his attention was on her cunt, which had begun to throb in delighted abandon. She tried to bite back a groan, but he heard the muffled sound and murmured, "It's all right to like it."

Not with you, she thought despairingly, and nearly groaned again when he suckled her clit, swirling the impudent bead with his tongue. Then she felt his finger ease into her and her back bowed off the bed, her teeth biting her lips bloody in her efforts not to show him how his wonderfully skilled touch was affecting her.

Everything clenched within her, and suddenly her orgasm was blooming through her like a dark flower. Even as sweet aftershocks made her limbs tremble, he was pulling her toward him, and then he was on his back and she had straddled him. Murmuring encouragement, he took himself in one hand, nudged her thighs a bit further apart, and then his tip was in her, while she braced her hands on his chest to keep from falling.

He stopped. She looked at him in the near dark.

"Go ahead," he urged softly, hoarsely. "Take me inside you. Or not. This time, it's your decision."

Still she didn't move, wary, wondering what he was up to, wondering if he was going to punish her again, the black-hearted (he's never hurt you) bastard, oh, how she hated (you were no match for that crooked cop) him, wished him dead, hated him for humiliating her (if the cavalry hadn't shown up, you'd have been toast) and then bringing her pleasure. He was contemptible, and she was trapped (you don't really think they're all crazy, do you?).

She shut out the despicable voice and abruptly, hatefully, let her weight drop on him, slamming him all the way inside her, until she could feel his tip touching her womb. Then she lifted . . . and dropped again. And again. Beneath her, Michael gasped, a ragged sound. "Jeannie—"

Lift. Drop. Again.

"Stop, Jeannie, you're not—this is all for me, you're not getting any—"

Again.

"—please, stop it, stop it, let me help you come again, don't do this—"

Again.

"—don't do this, don't, don't—"

Again. She kept it up, riding him with savage intent, ignoring his pleas that she slow down, that she allow herself pleasure. She used him as he had used her, and from the look on his face, her expression was every bit as mean and ugly as she felt. After an eternity, he threw his head back, his protests ending in a ragged groan. She felt him pulse within her, felt her muscles grab at him greedily, milking him, and hated herself almost as she hated him.

Without a word, she climbed off him and curled up on her side, away from him.

I'm trapped, she thought with dull despair. They're all nutty, the whole town's infected, they're all in on it, they'll help him keep me. I can't get away, and if I try again, there's more of . . . of this.

I can't get away.

I can't stay.

She wept again, silently, ignoring Michael's soft entreaties that she look at him, that she forgive him, that she try to understand.

"You're pregnant with a child who will grow up to safeguard and lead some 300,000 werewolves across the globe. That's bigger than your pride, Jeannie. Your safety has to come before everything. I'm—"

"Don't say you're sorry again," she said coldly, and he shut up.

Chapter Eight

"You've broken her!"

The accusation brought Michael wide awake. After leaving Jeannie, he'd paced his room for hours, wondering what, if anything, he could have done differently. Werewolf discipline had been a mistake—or had it? If it kept her from fleeing to Gerald, it was worth the tears and hatred. He'd rather she hated him forever than love him and die tomorrow.

It all came down to their natures, to the fact that he had different rules than she was used to, but she couldn't accept this because she couldn't accept them. She thought they were all deranged. Perhaps Jon's suggestion had been correct. If she saw them Change, even one of them Change, she could look at her situation in an entirely new light.

But oh, she would be terrified, would expect to be forced again. Could he put her through that, even though he knew he was right?

Was he right?

Finally, he'd dozed off at dawn, only to be brought awake by his door slamming open and Derik shouting at him.

"What?" he asked fuzzily, blinking sleep out of his eyes. He looked out the window . . . and was startled to see it was mid-afternoon. "What's the matter?"

His boyhood friend slammed the door so hard, a splinter the length of his forearm jumped off the frame and landed on the floor. "You've broken your mate, that's what's the matter. She's been curled up in the window seat all damn day, won't speak a word to anybody, won't eat a thing—naked, for God's sake, she won't get dressed, won't talk, won't eat—"

"You're repeating yourself," he said sharply, quelling the dart of worry that made an instant appearance at Derik's words. "Is she hurt? Has anyone seen to her?"

"She's not hurt," Derik said, aggravated, "I keep telling you, she's broken. You smashed her spirit. And we think that rots." He paused, coughed. "Sir."

"We?" he asked, sliding from the bed. "My loyal staff and pack members, you mean?"

"I can smell her all over you," his friend said quietly. "You took her again, didn't you?"

"When I heard about Gerald—that he'd actually had his hands on her—"

Derik groaned and collapsed on the bed. "Not mate-punishment, tell me, tell me you didn't take a human for punishment?"

Silence.

Derik sat up and glared at his pack leader. "Jesus, Michael, she's delicate! She's human. You shouldn't have done that, no matter how badly she scared you. You can't treat her like a werewolf, even if she is your mate."

A low growl got Derik's attention, and he dropped his eyes at once. "Okay, hell, I'm upset. I shouldn't tell you how to handle your female." He paused, then burst out angrily, still keeping his eyes respectfully downcast, "But you'd better get up there and fix it, O mighty king of all werewolves, because your mate is in a sorry state and it's all your fault. She's got to eat. And it would be nice if she got dressed, too."

"I can't go near her," he said, pacing the same stretch of carpet he'd walked so many hours last night.

"I'm part of the problem. She doesn't understand our rules, doesn't understand—"

Derik looked up. "Then make her understand," he said, clearly exasperated.

"I'm trying!" Michael managed to restrain himself from kicking a hole in the dresser. "I'm trying, but how do you teach a blind person how to look at things? How do you tell a deaf person what a symphony sounds like? You can't make them. You can only hope they get it . . . even though your worst fear is that they never will. You know she's my mate, and I know . . . and we both know she's alpha female, and a valued member of the pack. But she doesn't understand any of that. It's too soon. A month ago, she'd never met me. A month ago, I had no idea I'd—I'd—"

"Fall in love?" Derik asked quietly.

Michael groaned. "How could everything turn to shit so quickly? She hates me, Derik, and I can't blame her for that. I've been a disaster for her since I stepped on that elevator. The worst thing is, even if she saw me Change, if she knew we weren't crazy, she'd be terrified."

"But what's the alternative?"

The pack leader had no answer.

"Please, ma'am, please . . . Jeannie . . . try some of the bread. Dara saw how much of it you ate yesterday, she made a whole loaf just for you, won't you please try just a piece?"

Moira's entreaty became a soft drone as Jeannie looked out her window, out to sea. The ocean looked exactly like she felt: grey and stormy. The weather matched her mood; it was a perfect day to stay inside and brood. Even the sand looked cold and forbidding, like dirty snow. She'd give anything to be a weredolphin, a weregrouper, a wereminnow, anything that could swim the sea and never never come back to this crazy place. Her stomach, which had been gnawing and rumbling most of the morning, had finally quit and was now a still stone in her abdomen. Vanquished. Defeated.

The way she'd like to defeat Michael Wyndham.

They'd tried to get her dressed. Moira and another woman, one she didn't know, had come in and gently pulled her from her window seat, and dressed her in clothes that weren't hers, clothes Michael had bought for her when he was dreaming about stealing her. She tore them off her, not as spectacularly as Michael had torn hers, but enough to get her point across and then, naked, she had gone back to the window seat, resting her forehead against the panes and wishing she were a wereguppy.

Moira whispered that she understood, she could smell Michael all over her and understood completely, but why punish the baby for the sins of the father, and wouldn't she please try some of this soup?

Somehow, the day passed. Jeannie was thinking harder than she had in her life (ha) but couldn't see a way out of the trap (except to quit letting your pride call the shots).

Night came, and she dozed off in the window seat, ignoring the cramping in her legs. And there came a point in the dark when she was gently lifted, carried, and placed in bed. She roused herself enough to

catch Michael's scent and tried to fight all the way back to wakefulness, to get back to the window and look out at the sea and freedom, to get his hands off her, his wonderfully comforting hands . . .

"Go back to sleep, Jeannie. The window will be there tomorrow."

Reasonable advice, she thought muzzily, and sank back to sleep.

Michael, keeping uneasy watch out Jeannie's window, turned when she sat up. He saw at once she wasn't really awake; her dreaming, wide-open eyes looked right past him.

She got out of bed. Having a good idea of her destination, he followed her out the door, steadying her on the stairs when her sleeping feet stumbled. Jon, back from a late-night hunt, passed them in the dark, his eyes widening appreciatively at Jeannie's nudity. Then he saw she was asleep, saw Michael behind her, and passed on after a polite nod to his pack leader.

She wandered aimlessly on the lower level, until he gently steered her toward the kitchen. Once there, he opened the fridge for her and saw the small plastic container with her name on it. He popped the lid and caught the rich, savory scent of raw ground beef mixed with raw eggs, onion, and lots of salt and pepper. He handed the container to Jeannie, who did not hesitate to grab a fistful and eat it. She ate until the container was empty, and while he shut the fridge and put the container in the sink, she delicately licked the raw meat from her fingers. He watched her without words.

Then she woke up.

He saw it at once; her dreaming gaze became clouded, then utterly astonished. She looked down at herself, then looked around, saw him, saw where they were.

"I—thought I was dreaming."

"You were hungry," he said simply. "So you sleep-walked down here to feed the baby."

"I ate—I ate all that raw hamburger?" She touched her mouth, revolted. "I can still taste it."

"You were hungry," he said again. "And I think the taste in your mouth is good to you. It's just the idea of it that tastes bad. Jeannie . . . can you see me? Do you know where we are?"

"We're in a kitchen. Yes, I can see you." She added, with a snap of her old fire that heartened him, "Ask another stupid question."

"It's pitch dark, Jeannie. A month ago, in equal darkness, you couldn't see anything."

A long, strained silence, broken by her whisper. "What's happening to me?"

"You're pregnant with a shapeshifter," he said simply. "You share a blood stream with the baby. You'll eat raw meat and see in the dark and probably get stronger before you birth the baby. It's natural."

"It is not natural. None of this is." She rubbed her face. "Oh, Jesus, I'm catching your delusion, you've all got me turning as crazy as you are . . ."

"That's not true," he said, reaching up and stroking her shoulder, lightly, a butterfly's touch. "And I think you're coming to know it."

"It has to be true," she said, almost moaned. "What's the alternative? That everything you said was right? That everything you—everything you did to me was understandable? Okay, even? That's not acceptable, I won't tolerate it!"

"Jeannie . . ."

She broke away from him and ran out of the kitchen, navigating her way past boxes and stools without hesitation, though most people would have been effectively blind in such utter darkness.

He came to her room the next morning to find her huddled in the window seat, looking out at the near-

full moon with a dazed, almost hypnotized expression.

"Jeannie," he began, and then trailed off helplessly. His fingers itched to touch the smooth skin of her back; luckily, his hands were full. His lack of physical control had gotten her into this mess. Christ, he was like a pup around her, only thinking about physical pleasure, about the sounds she made when she . . . "I'm glad you ate your breakfast."

"Starving myself doesn't work," she said hopelessly, not turning around. "It just makes me sleepwalk and search out raw meatloaf, for God's sake. Better to have my scrambled eggs, please go away." He decided it would not be prudent to mention her cravings would get worse, not better, before she gave birth.

"I brought you something."

She didn't answer.

He set the suitcases down, bent, unsnapped all four catches. At the sounds, she snuck a glance over her shoulder, then came off the window seat in astonishment. "My clothes!"

"Some of them," he confirmed, while she elbowed him out of the way and took a closer look. "I went to get them last night. I can't have you running around naked for the next eight months, can I?"

She grinned at him, so wide and natural he actually felt his heart catch: ka-THUD! "Thanks!" She made an aborted movement with her arms; for a moment of pure astonished happiness, he thought she was going to hug him. Then the moment passed and she was wriggling into panties, shorts, and a sweatshirt. Well, what did you expect, fool? he asked himself bitterly. That she'd kiss you and say, 'Hey, PsychoBoy, I forgive you for the whole raping thing—twice—and love you and want to stay with you forever, thanks for the clothes.'

He turned to leave.

"Michael," she said tentatively.

He turned around, hope jumping in his chest like a rabbit. A continuously lusty rabbit hopelessly infatuated with someone who hated him. "Yes, my—my dear?" He'd almost called her 'my own mate', a common werewolf endearment he was positive she would not appreciate.

"Michael . . . can I ask a favor?"

He waited. She looked out the window at the moon, nearly full, the moon which would ripen tonight and call to his blood. Her eyes were wide with distress, dilated with fear. "Can I please stay somewhere else tonight? I promise I won't try to get away. I'll—I'll do whatever you want, if you don't make me stay in the house with—with all of you tonight."

"It's not safe for you anywhere else," he said, as gently as he could. "And I'm still planning to leave. You don't have to worry about a repeat of what happened last month." She didn't have to worry no matter where he was, he thought but did not say, because she certainly wasn't ovulating this time. What he would likely want to do in wolf-form is hunt food for her, then stay close. Following her from room to room, drinking in her scent, worshipping her with his eyes. She'd be terrified . . . or hate it—him . . . or both.

He closed his eyes against the pain that thought brought, then opened them as she did something he never thought she would do . . . never thought she was capable of.

"Please!" she begged. "I don't feel safe here! It's beautiful here, but I don't feel safe in your home."

Every word was a knife in his heart, but she didn't notice, just rushed on in her agitation. "Every minute that goes by, I feel like something terrible will happen, something I'm in the middle of! Please, please let me stay somewhere else. I'll do anything, Michael, anything you want."

"Don't beg," he said thickly, "I can't bear it," but she wasn't hearing him. She crossed the room in an instant and flung herself into his arms; he hugged her to him automatically, stepping backward with the force of her assault. "Jeannie, listen. It's not—"

He quit talking because her frantic mouth was on his, her hands were pounding on his chest and then scratching the fabric of his shirt, her scent—orchard ripe, succulent peaches—overwhelmed him. The force of his return kiss bent her backward. "Anything," she hissed into his mouth. "Anything." The man in him managed, 'Wait! She's giving herself to you for a favor, she thinks if you take her, she can leave tonight. Stop, idiot!' before the wolf took over, yanked her sweatshirt over her head, divested her of her shorts, tore her panties in his haste, tossed her on the bed. He was on her, her limbs were entwined with his and everywhere was her scent and he couldn't get enough, could never get enough of her. He buried his face in the sweet slope of her throat, cupped her breasts with their impudent velvet nipples, kissed her so hard they were both panting when he pulled his mouth from her.

Part of him thought, even as he put his hands on her, his mouth on her, that she must be frightened indeed to give herself to him, a woman who had starved herself and gone without clothes to show her contempt for him. He made a last, heroic effort. "You can't leave," he growled, then bit her earlobe, and wondered how he could make himself leave her with his cock on fire and her musk in his nostrils. "It's not safe."

She bowed her head, resting her forehead against his shoulder. "I know. I knew you wouldn't let me, but I was desperate. I've been watching that damned moon and getting upset and now I'm . . . oh, God, I'm so ashamed."

He kissed the slope of her breast. "Don't say that."

"I am, though." She seemed content to let him nuzzle her breast; one hand was in his hair, almost absently. He gloried in her touch, in her temporary acquiescence, even as he craved more.

"Because you used your body to try and get what you want?"

She didn't answer, but he felt her swallow hard.

"It doesn't make you bad. It makes you formidable." He chuckled. "The remorse, now, that makes you human." He licked the underside of her breast, then nipped the sensitive skin. She jumped and he heard her swallow a gasp.

"I think," she said carefully, trying to ease herself from beneath him, and, because he wasn't cooperating, having no luck at all, "that since you won't let me leave, there's no reason for us to finish this."

"You're not going to send me away, are you?" He probably looked as horrified as he felt, because she got a downright devilish look in her eyes.

"Yes," she said, "I am. You promised you wouldn't force me unless it was to punish me. I haven't done anything wrong—"

"Today," he interrupted dryly.

"—so you have to go," she finished triumphantly. He could tell she was loving it, loving the power she had over him, and was curious to see if he really would leave her, when they could both feel the throbbing below his belt.

"Jeannie, I am begging you."

"No," she said, pouting, but she was watching him, watching, and he caught the sharp scent of her wariness. He groaned theatrically and stumbled from the bed, adjusting his jeans to ease the stiffness between his legs.

"About that promise . . ."

"Out!"

The last thing he saw before leaving was the delighted, surprised look on her face.

Chapter Nine

Jeannie spoke around a mouthful of chocolate. "What do you mean you're all leaving?"

Moira had made the bed, over Jeannie's protests that she 'didn't need a maid, dammit'. Now she was clearing her mistress's lunch plates, and looked up. "Only the females, my lady."

"Why?"

"Because you want us to," she said simply.

"But I never said—besides, Michael's the boss of you guys, not me."

"The alpha female has expressed distress to her mate at the thought of being around us this evening.

Thus, we depart." Moira shrugged. "Simple."

"But I'm not the—" At Moira's look, Jeannie reversed herself. "Okay, say I am. I never told you guys to go. I only told Michael."

"Werewolf hearing," Moira said with a smile, "is very acute. Besides, we can smell your torment. We don't want to add to it."

"You're really leaving your home tonight? For me? Even though I didn't ask?"

Moira just gave her a look, something along the lines of, 'yes, dummy'.

"Of course," Jeannie said slowly, "you could just be leaving so I don't see you're not werewolves."

"After everything you've seen? Felt? Eaten?"

"Ugh, don't remind me."

"You still think we're crazy? Half the town? And everyone in this house? And the father of your child?"

Jeannie harrumphed. "Well, I'm not saying you're not convincing . . ." But she squirmed under Moira's stern regard.

"Well." Moira picked up the tray. "As it is, we're leaving. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Wait!" She bounded to her feet and fought the urge to pluck at Moira's sleeve like a child. "You said the females are leaving. What about the guys?"

"The 'guys'," she said dryly, "think you should get over it. But we won't go there."

"No," Jeannie shouted at Moira's retreating back, "we certainly won't!" She kicked a pillow across the room.

There was a tap on the adjoining door, and Michael poked his head in. "We certainly won't what? And stop kicking that pillow, it's a hundred years old."

Jeannie, bending to retrieve the pillow, dropped it like it was hot. "The girls are all leaving," she said in an accusing tone.

He frowned. "Yes. They told me they were. They've gotten quite loyal to you in . . ." He checked his watch. "Seventy-two hours."

"But the men aren't leaving."

"No." Seeing the confusion on her face, he added, "The females will do what the alpha female wants, period. The males will do what is best for her. Not always the same thing."

"Fascinating. Really, and I mean that." She yawned theatrically, and rubbed her eyes, feeling sudden, surprising weariness she didn't have to feign. Then she looked at him and said, no screwing around, no

wise cracks, "I'm afraid."

"I know."

"Why do you have to sound like that?" she asked crossly, rubbing her eyes again. "All loving and nice."

"Because I have great admiration for you. Not just, as you think, your physical charms." He paused, then said, as baldly as she had stated her fear, "I love you."

She choked in mid-yawn, and stared at him with wide eyes. "No, you don't."

"No?" He smiled, that slow, sexy smile that always charmed her.

"You just love the way I smell. Michael, be reasonable," she said, trying to sound reasonable herself, "you don't know me well enough to love me." Thinking with surprised, giddy joy: He loves me! He loves me!

"Yes, I do," he said casually.

"Michael," she said slowly, wanting to cross the room and touch him, but unable to make herself take that step, "if you really love me, why'd you—why'd you shame me like that?"

"Are you going to run away and find Gerald?"

"No!" She shouted the word before she thought, then blushed furiously. "I mean, yeah, maybe, what's it to ya?"

"That's why," he said simply. "I didn't want to punish you. I wanted to take you, but I wanted you to enjoy it. I hated having to scare you." To her astonishment, she saw his hands were shaking. "I hated every second of it," he added with savage emphasis, "but I would do it a thousand times if it meant you would keep away from Gerald."

There was a short silence while they looked at each other. "Um . . . thank you? I guess," she muttered. He smiled a little. "Are you tired, sweet?"

"No," she said defiantly, but her eyelids felt ridiculously heavy. "I want to keep talking about this so-called love."

"Talk while lying down," he said, taking her arm and pushing her gently onto the bed. Before she could turn around or sit up, he had slipped into bed behind her, snuggling against her, spoon-style.

"I don't want to nap with you," she said, wriggling against him.

"If you don't stop moving," he warned, his breath tickling her neck, "you won't be napping."

She went rock-still, and yawned again. "Seriously, though. Why should I reward you for—" He loves me, she reminded herself. "Oh fine, stay then," she grumbled. "See if I care."

His rumbling laugh was the last thing she heard.

It was dark when she woke, but she could see everything in the room quite clearly. She refused to think about what that meant (you've been doing lots of refusing to think this week, huh, babe?) and instead focused on Michael, who was pacing at the foot of the bed. His face was sheened with sweat and he kept running his fingers through his hair. In the gloom, his eyes were a tortured gold. He must have fallen asleep, too, she realized, and now there isn't time for him to leave before . . . before . . .

"Michael?" The word practically stuck in her throat. He didn't turn, didn't even glance at her. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," he muttered.

Abruptly, she decided: no more fear. She couldn't fear rape if she was the aggressor. And, to be completely honest, the bastard had a touch like nothing she'd ever felt. She wanted it. At night, in her lonely bed, she craved it.

"No more fear," she announced, and stood up in the bed. Then she leapt at him. He caught her, as she had known he would, and staggered back so hard his back slammed into the wall. "My thinking is," she said into his astonished face, as she looped her legs around his waist, "I've been terrified of a repeat of the elevator scene, right? All week, I've been worrying about it. Hell, I even tried to seduce you so you would send me away. Well, if I rape you, there's nothing to be scared of. Then I can go back to sleep."

"Are you out of your—"

She kissed him. Then she bit his lower lip. He groaned and staggered with her.

"Jeannie—"

She snaked her tongue inside his mouth. His own met hers in a frantic duel before he wrenched his face from hers. "No! It's not like earlier, it's not—this close to my Change, if you change your mind I won't be able to stop." He set her down and shook her. "I won't be able to stop! And I can't bear to force you again, even for punishment. If I find out in the morning that you were frightened, hurt—no."

She ripped open his shirt.

He spun away from her, panting. "No."

"For God's sake," she muttered, and jumped on his back. Looping her arms around his neck, she ignored his hoarse demand that she stop this at once, took his ear in her teeth, and bit. He howled and grabbed for her head, trying to pull her away . . . then changed his mind and pressed her face into the side of his head, hard. She bit him again and he groaned, "I will never understand you."

"Tough luck," she said sympathetically, then bit the side of his neck, and licked the spot.

He staggered to the bed and dropped, pinning her beneath him. She released her legs and he rolled over, shoving her sweatshirt to her neck and burying his face between her breasts. "Last chance," he moaned.

"My thought exactly," she grunted, pulling the shirt over her head, wriggling to get free of her shorts. He helped her with hands that shook and in moments they were both nude.

She started having second thoughts when he turned her over and eased her on her knees. "Michael," she managed as he kissed the base of her spine. "Anything else—any other way—but I'm not sure I'm ready for this yet."

He didn't answer, and she was about to try again when she felt his tongue flick past the opening of her vagina . . . then delve deeply. She bit back a moan and thought, What the hell am I hiding from? I love it, and he knows I love it.

When his thumbs spread her wide and his tongue lapped at her exposed flesh, she groaned so loudly she was fairly certain Moira, wherever she was, could hear her. He laughed at the sound, a rumble of unbridled delight, and then his tongue was inside her again, darting and wriggling.

In less than a minute she was rocking back against his sweetly busy mouth, keening softly, feeling the familiar delicious warmth start in her stomach, feeling the all-over tightening that meant her orgasm was approaching . . .

. . . then she felt the tip of him, engorged with blood, the head so like a delicious plum, ease into her . . . and then he shoved forward, the quick, hard thrust instantly jolting her into orgasm.

She shrieked his name and rocked back, meeting him thrust for thrust, on a roller coaster of pleasure, one swooping orgasm instantly merging into another. His low groans, so like growls, fired her blood and made her want to bite something.

She felt his teeth on her shoulder, gently, and then felt him pulsing within her. She thrust back once more, greedily, then felt him slide from her.

"Oh," she said, almost sighed.

"Christ," he groaned, and flopped face down on a pillow. She giggled, and he reached out, snagged her waist, and nestled her against his side. "Tell the truth," he rasped, and when he looked at her, she saw his pupils were huge, his irises only faint rings of gold. "You're trying to kill me, right? Wearing me out before I Change?"

She laughed again. "Does that mean you're not up for seconds?"

He didn't smile at her jibe. Instead he reached out a finger and touched her mouth. Then his rough palm was cupping her cheek. "Don't be afraid," he said, his voice so deep it was difficult to understand him. "I couldn't bear it if you were afraid."

"The funny thing is," she said seriously, "I'm not. The thing I worried about most . . . I made it happen. I had to throw myself at you—literally. But I didn't mind, because it's easier to be scared if you're the passenger, not the driver."

"Don't be afraid," he said again, panting. "I can't hold it off anymore."

He began to Change. And it happened so quickly, if she had blinked she would have missed it. His features and limbs and body seemed to shift, to melt, shrinking into a furred, four-legged wolf with a lush black coat the exact color of Michael's hair, and deep gold eyes. There wasn't a smell. There wasn't even a mess. She had just witnessed a physical impossibility.

"Guh," she said, blinking, staring, before the wolf gave her a sloppy lick on her cheek. The large, furry head bent and licked her stomach, where their child nestled. "Michael, oh Michael," she whispered, reaching out a shaking hand and touching the luxurious pelt. When the wolf—Michael—didn't move away from her touch, merely sat calmly, she gave her delight and curiosity free reign, running her hands over his strong limbs, his tail, stroking the noble head, even burying her face in his rich, black coat. She realized dimly her face was wet as the pent-up emotions—fear, anger, despair—departed as easily as Michael had shed his human form.

It was all true. They weren't crazy fools. She was the fool, for blinding herself to the truth. He was pack leader, she was his mate, she carried the next pack leader. She was in danger as long as Gerald wanted power. Michael had been right to track her and bring her to his home. She had been wrong to escape.

"Michael," she whispered into his fur, "I love you."

She didn't know if he could understand her in his lupine form, but all the same, he made a deep, rumbling noise in his chest, quite like a purr. She hoped he understood. On the other hand, she had a lifetime to repeat the phrase.

The rumbling abruptly shifted in pitch, from purr to growl. She pulled back from him, instinctively knowing Michael was incapable of hurting her in whatever form he took, but still wary. He sprang from her side and arched at the balcony doors, slamming into one of them hard enough to crack the heavy glass.

"Whoa!" she said, scrambling to her feet and running for the door. "You want out? No problem, just a second." After a moment she had the door open and Michael dashed past, scrambling up the railing and then fearlessly leaping into the dark.

Behind him, Jeannie watched him drop two stories, landing in a crouch on all fours. "Well, hell," she breathed, "no wonder the elevator fall didn't kill you."

She was still staring, mouth open like a rube idiot, when another wolf darted out of the cover and went for her lover's throat. This wolf had mud-colored fur the exact color of Gerald's hair, and she knew at once who the wolf had to be . . . and who he had come for. Michael avoided the attack, and the two

powerful males squared off and charged.

He's nuts! was her first thought. Taking Michael on in his own territory? Maybe Gerald had heard all the females were gone, and assumed Jeannie would be easy for the taking . . . maybe he'd also heard Michael had planned to be gone this evening. And probably figured, tonight, or not at all . . .

Her thoughts were interrupted by a noise; she turned in time to see a butterscotch-colored wolf with Derik's green eyes rocket past her, straight over the balcony railing. Four other wolves had by now surrounded the snarling, fighting males, and Derik unhesitatingly went for the throat of the closest traitor. Jeannie turned and went at once to the endtable drawer where she had so carelessly dropped Gerald's gun—was it only yesterday? She popped the clip, noted with grim pleasure that it was full, then slapped the clip back in, pulled back the slide, and ratcheted a load into the chamber. So Michael was right, she thought distractedly, walking back out on the balcony. Gerald's gun wouldn't have fired, and he could have killed me then. Well, well. Note to self: apologize to lover, after saving lover's ass.

A distant part of her reminded her that the room was pitch dark and there was not enough starlight for her to see by. Still, she could make out everything as clearly as if it was noon: the wolves' coloring, the lush green of the grass, even some of their eye colors. Thank you, baby werewolf, she thought, and then sighted in on Gerald, who had, she noticed with detached rage, just taken a chunk out of her lover's shoulder. She had no idea how Gerald expected to hustle her off Wyndham property in his wolf form. Maybe he was part human and could control his change. Regardless, she wasn't about to stand by and let him damage others—Michael!—in his quest for power.

The two wolves were locked together in an age-old battle for territory and females, and Jeannie, whose cop mother and Marine father knew a little something about battle, waited for her chance. In the meantime, Derik had chased off his opponent and, though one leg was bloodied and one ear gone, was turning hungrily on another.

Gerald reared back and went for Michael's throat. Instead, Jeannie got his—two shots, right where she guessed the adam's apple was on a werewolf.

"How about that, Gerald?" she shouted down. She picked off Derik's newest opponent with a clean head shot, and Derik jumped back from the newly-dead werewolf with a yip that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. "In case you didn't realize, trespassers will be shot!" Thinking: thank goodness, the stories about silver bullets aren't true.

The other traitors froze, and looked up at her, except for Gerald, who was coughing out his life on the lawn.

"This is the alpha female speaking," she said, and as the fatally wounded Gerald made one last try for Michael, she put four into his head. "Playtime's over."

The other traitors—only two, now—took off, Derik hot on their heels. Michael looked up at her, coiled, and made a clumsy jump for the balcony. She gasped when she saw his wounds.

"Lucky for us you're a fast healer," she said, and popped the live round out of the chamber. She put the gun away, then went to tend to her mate.

Chapter Ten

In bed, she could hear them chatting at breakfast, even though they were a floor below her.

"And then Michael's trying to keep Gerald off his throat, right?" Derik said. She could picture him

holding the group spellbound, talking with his hands, eyes gleaming with suppressed excitement. "And I've got my hands full with those other two assholes. And Michael and I are both thinking, Cripes, are there more on the grounds? Can we take them even though the girls aren't here to help? And we're assuming Jeannie is just about out of her mind, right? I mean, I would have been scared at the sight. Then—ka-blammo! Close enough to singe Michael's fur, Gerald's got a couple holes in his throat, and we all look up and there's our pack leader's mate—naked, no less—holding a smoking gun and yelling at Gerald, who's been causing trouble since he was whelped."

"Then what?" Moira asked excitedly.

"Then she drills my guy, puts a few more in Gerald, binds Michael's wounds, and ate a big supper at 2:00 a.m."

"I knew it! I knew Michael had chosen wisely! And you said she'd never fit in, Dara."

"I did not. I said after a few months, she'd never fit in her clothes. That's all."

Hearing her staff speak of her with such admiration brought a warm flush to her cheeks. And really, she hadn't done all that much. Just saved the day.

The thought made her laugh out loud. Beside her, Michael was sleeping deeply, and stirred at the sound. She hushed at once and examined his shoulder. The wound looked months old, and she again thanked God for werewolf metabolism.

She touched her stomach lightly, with love. There was a werewolf growing inside her, which should have scared her—should have creeped her out at the very least—but instead, she was filled with a joyful acceptance of her future. She didn't know much about werewolves, but she was going to learn, oh yes. Michael would help her. Her pack would help her.

A large brown hand covered hers, and she looked into Michael's golden eyes. "My own mate," he said slowly, savoring the words, "and so brave. Even when we were in the elevator, you were brave."

"Well, of course. You weren't going to let anything happen to me."

"As you, apparently, won't let anything happen to me," he said wryly. "Remind me to instruct you on the finer points of werewolf etiquette. Number one: never interfere with a Challenge." But he was smiling as he said it, and she knew that, though his male pride might be a bit ruffled, he was pleased with her.

"And number two?"

"Always take a human to mate," he said, and pulled her to him for a long kiss. When he pulled back, she was breathless, and his eyes glinted with satisfaction. "Before we were so rudely interrupted last night, you told me something. I very much want to hear the words again."

"So you can understand me when you're a—"

"The words, Jeannie."

"I love you. Dork. What, you think I'd shoot a man for just anybody?"

"For a while," he said seriously, "I wondered if you might shoot me."

"I was an idiot," she admitted. "A blind fool. It was all right in front of me, and I wouldn't accept it."

"You were perfect," he assured her, "considering the circumstances. The words again, Jeannie, please."

"I love you."

"Let me show you how I feel," he whispered, and kissed her.

Their lovemaking was slow and almost dreamlike, and for Jeannie, who had only known fierce, fast, couplings with this man, it was like discovering a whole different side to her mate. He took his time, touching her with skilled reverence, gaining pleasure from her own. Even when she was begging him to enter her, tugging on his shoulders and whimpering pleas that made his eyes narrow with lust, he held

back. "No," he said, almost moaned, "this time, I want it to last."

Shuddering with pleasure beneath his hands, she had the sense that he was finally touching her as he had always longed to, and she gloried in it. When he slid into her she shivered in his arms and gasped her love, and he closed his eyes in gratitude, deeply moved. He opened his eyes and she stared into his curious gold gaze. "Oh, Jeannie," he breathed, "I love you, too, my dearest, my own mate." They rocked together, both of them creatures of savagery and passion, and cried out until they were hoarse. And when they were done, and drowsing in each other's arms, Jeannie had time for one thought before she spiraled down into sleep: Thank God I didn't take the stairs.

About the author:

Mary Janice Davidson is the author of several romance novels. She's been writing since she was thirteen; Love's Prisoner is her first erotic romance. She lives in Minnesota with her husband and two children, loves reading, and has a soft spot for werewolves. You can email her at alongi@usinternet.com or visit her website at www.usinternet.com/users/alongi/index.html.

Version history and scanner's info

Version 1.0—scanned, OCR'd and spell-checked from Red Sage Publishing's Secrets vol. 6. I just got annoyed when Derik's Bane came out, and I found out it was the third in the series, but the first two novellas were only available in a relatively obscure group of anthologies. One of the things about the #bookz community I love the most is that someone can spend the time tracking this stuff down, and everyone can benefit. It makes it a little more time-effective to do this, while if I was just buying and reading for myself, I'd probably never get this obsessive about it *grin*.

Version 2.0 –February 18, 2005—proofread and corrected by The_Ghiti. If you find OCR-related errors, please fix, increment version number by 0.1 and re-post.

Love's Prisoner
by MaryJanice Davidson

Trapped in an elevator, Jeannie Lawrence experienced unwilling rapture at Michael Windham's hands. She never expected the devilishly handsome man to show back up in her life — or turn out to be a werewolf! Will she accept her destiny to be his mate?

Secrets

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never gave a thought to her old life. No conflict in that time, while good for the pack, meant there'd been nothing to distract Moira from her troubles.

Michael's utter happiness with his mate only made Moira more acutely aware of her own loneliness. She loved them, but could watch them snuggling, smell their lust, only so long before she needed to walk, or snivel in self-pity.

The pack, Moira thought grimly, was no place for loners. Werewolves were enormously social and tended to mate for life as soon as possible. Loners got into trouble, and a loner who got into too much trouble went rogue. Rogue was bad.

Very bad.

She shivered, remembering Gerald. He was the only rogue male she had ever run across and, by God, he was enough. Gerald was on her mind because his estranged eldest, Geraldine, had just left Wyndham manor after a brief visit.

After Gerald had been driven out, Geraldine had remained loyal to the worthless bundle of fur. Since no pack would welcome a rogue, the two had wandered the country for years. Admirable loyalty, but the price the poor girl had paid! Her father had been dead a year and Geraldine still roamed.

No, a werewolf alone did more harm than good, and she had no business begrudging Michael and Jeannie their happiness. Better to leave the house and take her poor attitude with her. Thus, the rose garden in February. Thus, she would probably catch a cold from skulking in the sparse snow—and serve her right! Thus, there was a stranger on the grounds.

Her thoughts derailed in sudden confusion as she sniffed and caught the scent again. Stranger, yes. Male. Not pack. Probably a reporter; Michael Wyndham was a charismatic, handsome billionaire frequently courted for interviews. Now that he'd married and had a daughter, "journalists" (her lip curled) constantly tried to get a picture of the baby for People magazine.

She would find the man and escort him off the grounds; the Wyndham estate was private property. Her woes aside, there was, as always, duty. She turned to search and saw the stranger about fifteen yards away.

She was suddenly furious with herself because he wouldn't have crept up on her, downwind or not, if she hadn't been busy drowning herself in an ocean of pity. And she was also amazed, because he looked . . . well, amazing.

The stranger, who was rapidly approaching, had dark blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. He was quite tall, easily a head taller than she was, dressed in jeans so faded they were nearly white, and a black duster which swept past his knees. And his eyes . . . his eyes were the color of the ocean on the first day of winter, dark blue and filled with restrained fury. She caught his scent again: clean and crisp, like freshly ironed linen. Male linen. Incredibly gorgeous, highly masculine linen. Linen she could wrap herself in, sink her teeth into . . .

Her mouth popped open, both at the man's sudden appearance and his exceptional good looks. He was the handsomest non-pack member she'd ever seen. Too bad she had to kick him off their property. He opened his mouth and she spoke, too; they said in unison, "You can't be here."

They reacted in unison, too: "I can't be here?"

Moira stared at him, almost afraid to speak, and heard him say, "I'm really sorry. It's incredibly dangerous here. I'll try not to hurt you."

His unbelievable speed so shocked her, she let him hit her. He struck her with the flat of his hand, just below her chin, hard enough to knock her back into the frozen ground, hard enough to render a human

unconscious.

Instantly, he was lifting her into his arms, carrying her away like a demented bridegroom. Demented and blind—he hadn't noticed she hadn't been knocked out.

Outraged, she seized his nose and twisted. He howled and dropped her; her butt thudded into the dirt. He clapped both hands to his face, but not before she saw she had given him a nosebleed. Good.

"That hurt." She flipped to her feet and growled, literally growled. She could feel the fine hairs on the back of her neck come to stiff attention. If she'd been in her wolf form, her fur would have been standing out in bristly spikes. "You're an interloper, a trespasser, a creep, and this is private property."

"This is a derribe blace," he warned nasally, still clutching his nose. "You cad be here." He seized her elbow with a bloody hand and tugged. She set her feet and didn't move. He pulled harder. She kicked his ankle and heard the 'crack' and his groan at the same moment. "Lady, for Christ's sake, I'b drying do save your life here!"

"My life doesn't need saving, moron, idiot, twit. Get your degenerate hands off me or I'll snap your spine."

"Fuck it," he muttered. He let go of her so abruptly she staggered. Then he stepped back, pulled out a gun, and shot her in the throat.

Jared watched the gorgeous blonde topple over and had to fight a sigh of relief. Cripes, what a balls-up! He hadn't thought she'd ever go down. His own damned fault—he was so worried about really hurting her he'd gone too easy. Hadn't had the heart to give her a really firm slam. And he'd paid the price: his nose was still streaming blood. The tranquilizer had worked (thank goodness for the Boy Scout motto!), but now what?

After years of research, of greasing palms, of knocking skulls together, of doing anything to get the information he needed, finally, finally, he had the murdering bastards cornered. His reconnaissance trip had instantly been cut short when he'd run across the woman. He'd been watching the Wyndhams for weeks and had their routine memorized . . . this was the time of day when the grounds were usually deserted. But there she was—obviously she hadn't read his recon notes—right in the line of fire, looking at him with those big eyes, probably getting ready to inflate those pipes and screech like a banshee.

Who would have thought a five foot nothing girl with eyes the color of pale violets would be so hard to knock out? Who would have thought she'd pack such a wallop?

Who would have thought he wouldn't be able to stop staring at her?

He knelt, pulled the tranquilizer dart out of her throat, and checked her pulse. Nice and strong. Weirdly strong. It was as if she was in a light sleep, not a drugged unconsciousness. If he didn't know for a fact that werewolves were all men, he'd wonder . . .

He picked her up, surprised again at how light she was. His dirty laundry weighed more. Now what to do with her? He couldn't leave such a delectable morsel lying around for anyone to nibble. Besides, if she had the freedom to wander Wyndham's grounds, she was probably a source of information. Perhaps a slave to the werewolves.

Anger swelled at the thought of this little sweetie at the beck and call of those monsters. Well, he could help her, and she could certainly help him. When she woke up, he'd pump her for whatever info she could provide.

The thought of pumping the blonde brought a surge of heat to his groin, which annoyed the hell out of him. You've got a dirty mind, buddy, he told himself. Just because you haven't gotten laid in a while . . .

He started back toward his truck. Wyndham and his pack of murdering dogs weren't going anywhere. His sister had been waiting too long in her grave for vengeance. He'd get the information he needed, see blondie on her way, and come back to avenge his sister. God help anyone who got in his way.

Chapter Two

Moira opened her eyes and said, "I'm going to rip off your skin for that." Beside her, the idiot-twit-jerkoff who'd shot her jumped in surprise. She heard the 'thump' of his book hitting the floor, and sat up. And nearly fell herself, as a wave of dizziness slammed into her. She quickly shut her eyes, and groped for the edge of the bed. "As soon as I get my hands on you. Death. Agony. Screaming. I foresee all of these happening to you. Perhaps several times." He had picked up his book, and now she felt cool hands on her, easing her back. "Take it easy, cutie. The trunk packs a punch." "Believe me, schmuck, putz, moron," she said. "You don't know what a punch is." "You shouldn't even be awake yet," he soothed. She seized his wrist, twisted, ready to crush the bone into splinters, already hearing his screams . . . "Cut that out, it tickles." "Dammit! How long am I going to have the strength of a newborn?" She had meant to shout thunderously. Instead what came out was a pitiful wheeze. "Probably for the rest of the day." And did the lout have the gall, the temerity, the nerve to sound apologetic? After punching her and shooting her and trespassing? "Why were you trespassing?" She opened her eyes and took in the room at a glance and a sniff: cream and white bedroom, south-facing window, double bed, wool blankets, hardwood floors in dire need of a waxing, mothballs in the closet, cedar lined wardrobe. And him, sitting on the lone chair, holding his book (Vengeance for Dummies) and looking at her with honest interest. His dark blue eyes were thoughtful, and bracketed with laugh lines. As if he ever laughed. His hair was down from the ponytail; the sandy strands brushed his shoulders. "I'm glad you asked," he said. Unfortunately, she'd forgotten the question. "That's a bad place. Do you work there? Do they force you? It doesn't matter. You don't have to go back, sweetie." "Thanks, sweetie." Ugh. Had this oaf been sent to warn the Wyndhams about something? Alarm pierced the fog produced by the drug. "Is Michael in danger? Or Jeannie?" His face didn't change, but his lips went white. And his scent . . . it shifted so quickly it nearly burned her nostrils. Acrid smoke. The smell of danger, the smell of hate. "How long have you known him?" he asked slowly, pleasantly. "Wyndham?" Be careful, Moira. "Forever," she said shortly. "He's my boss." And a whole host of other things you'll never, never understand. "And if he's in trouble, you've got to tell me. And if you're bringing trouble to him or his, I'll kill you." "God, you're beautiful," he said softly, which was not the usual response to a death threat. "You should see how fierce you look. He's not worth that kind of loyalty. If you knew what he was . . ."

If you knew what I am . . . She was starting to get really, really angry. Oh, for a full moon right about now! It wasn't just the humiliation of being snatched practically from her front yard. It was that he was an ordinary man, nothing special at all, and he had made it look easy. "Who are you?" she practically snapped.

"The UPS guy. But we were talking about you, cutie."

"We were not." She felt like leaping from the bed and throttling the information out of him. "And you haven't answered my question."

"Well," he said with maddening reason, "you haven't, either."

Like that, is it? Think you can outsmart me, monkey boy? We'll see.

"My jaw," she said, "hurts like hell." She made her eyes go big; blinked pathetically. "Why'd you hit me? I wasn't doing anything."

Monkey boy had the grace to look embarrassed. "Sorry," he muttered. "I didn't want you to raise the alarm. Besides, you don't want to be there, anyway, hon. It's a bad place. It's going to get a lot worse, too."

Moirira wasn't listening anymore. Her head was clearing, though her body still felt as limp as overcooked pasta. An alarming series of facts was ripping through her brain.

Fact: this man managed to get on the grounds without anyone spotting him until he was on top of her.

Fact: he knew how to fight.

Fact: he had come armed.

Fact: he had drugged her, taken her away, and no one knew, and no one had stopped him.

Fact: he didn't like Michael.

Fact: he seemed to like her.

Fact: she had to stop this man.

Fact: she couldn't do shit until she had her strength back.

Fact: she couldn't let him leave until she had her strength back. More, she wouldn't leave, not until she better understood exactly what he represented for her pack.

Conclusion? Nakedness was in her future. Possibly quite a lot of it. He was a man and she had, quite frankly, a nice rack. He'd take one look at her tits and forget everything except his name. She'd buy recovery time and pump him for all the information she could.

It was annoying: she could count on one hand how many times she'd gotten laid in the last two years; she was extremely selective. Or, as her friend Derik put it, "weirdly frigid." Now she had to expend precious energy to seduce this human.

Moirira was not a promiscuous woman by any means . . . not, in fact, strictly a woman at all. A pack animal first and forever, everything she was, did, and said was shaped by that knowledge, that identity.

When the leader was in danger, the pack was in danger.

When the pack was in danger, she'd do whatever it took.

"My head," she whispered, breath-soft.

"What?" the idiot said, bending closer.

Fighting the urge to shriek, "Gotcha!" , she put her mouth right near the cup of his ear and murmured,

"My head hurts soooooo much . . . may I please have a glass of water?"

"Oh. Sure. I'm sorry, I should have . . ." Moron Boy moved away, and she couldn't help staring at the exceptional way his butt filled out the seat of his jeans. Yes indeed, the world-class ass had a world-class ass. She wrenched her thoughts back on a more business-like track . . . then remembered his butt

sort of was the business at hand, at least until her metabolism blasted the last of that hateful trunk out of her system.

The idiot came back with a glass of water, which she promptly spilled all over her blouse. "Oh, it's cold!" she squealed, inwardly groaning—Derik would be laughing his head off if he could see this—and outwardly shuddering as her nipples came to stiff attention. What's-his-face had been helping her sit up, and nearly dropped her back into the pillows. "Do you have a shirt I can borrow?" She fumbled at the buttons of her soaked blouse.

Jared blinked, taking in Moira's smooth, pale skin as she stripped the wet fabric away. He wondered if she had a fever. He wondered if he had a fever. He knew who this little cookie was. He'd taken her prints while she'd been unconscious, scanned them into his laptop, and found out her name over an hour ago. Technology was swell.

Moira Wolfbauer, place of residence: Wyndham Manor. Place of business: Wyndham Manor. Employer: Michael Wyndham. But she'd tried her hand at social work just out of college, lucky for him, and thus her prints were on file. Mother deceased, father unknown. He'd pretended to know none of this, of course, and began a gentle interrogation, and hadn't been pleased to hear how protective she was toward the Wyndhams.

Obviously fond of the asshole, what was she up to? She'd threatened to kill him, had assaulted him, and was pulling off her blouse and—yep, there went the bra—a frothy, lilac-colored concoction that exactly matched her eyes.

All right.

It would take more than a wet blouse to distract him.

He was Jared Rocke and he would have his vengeance. He was Jared Rocke and she had the nicest rack he'd ever seen, all creamy white skin with nipples the color of wild roses. He was Jared . . . uh . . .

Rocke . . . and . . .

"Aren't you cold?" he asked hoarsely.

"Extremely," she whispered, her hands on his shoulders, pulling him down, her mouth by his ear, her small white teeth sinking into his earlobe, and the sensation shot straight from his ear to his groin.

He groped, seeking a blanket to cover her, and instead his hands found the delicious firmness of her breasts. She arched against him, her tongue in his ear, and his mouth found her throat. She wriggled delightfully, tugged at him, and then his shirt was sliding off his shoulders and floating to the floor. Her wriggling had been to good effect; she was nude, he was nude, their clothes a tumbled heap on the floor. Her soft skin made for an erotic contrast against the wool blankets, and for a moment all he could do was stare. Her violet eyes were huge, dominating her face, the arched golden brows above them making her look sweetly surprised. Her short hair was a delightful muss of tumbled blonde curls, curls so light they were almost silver, and her limbs were slim but strong-looking. Her nails were short, almost brutally so, and he had time for a quick, analytic thought: They're short because she bites them all the time. He wondered what a cookie this cute had to worry about. Men probably fell over themselves trying to take care of her.

Then she opened her arms and he fell into her embrace, and that was the end of his analysis. For the first time in years, thoughts of vengeance fled his mind as he buried himself in her creamy softness.

Moira braced herself for the oaf's full weight, but to her surprise he caught himself on his hands and came into her gently, almost carefully. His hand caressed her messy hair, and then his mouth came down on hers, his tongue skimming across her teeth and, when she obligingly parted her lips, probing her

mouth. His taste overwhelmed her, all smoky masculine heat, and she gasped.

She'd never mated with someone who wasn't pack. This was partly out of self-imposed obligation to her mother and partly out of pure concern. She had always, in some part of her subconscious, worried about hurting an ordinary man. And really, wasn't that her problem? She had promised her mother she wouldn't mate into the pack . . . but couldn't bring herself to mate with an ordinary human. Now here she was, buying time, and he didn't seem so ordinary, this man, and his hands, what his hands were doing, that didn't seem all that ordinary eitherrrrrrrrrr . . .

"Oh!" Her hips bucked. He moved, kneeling beside her, and his thumb settled back atop her clitoris, his fingers spread and resting against her thighs, barely touching, almost not touching, but moving so slowly and delicately that she could almost . . . feel it . . . and it was driving her crazy. Meanwhile, he had reached for her breast, was pinching her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, hard enough to almost hurt. Between the throbbing of her nipple and the light, delicate, feathery touch between her legs, she was halfway to a climax. Ridiculous! He'd been touching her for less than a minute. She wasn't a goddamned windup doll. She didn't even like him. She didn't even . . . she didn't . . . she . . . she felt a flood of heat between her legs and reached out.

She found him, hard and hot and long, and squeezed, and his eyes tipped up and he stared blindly at the ceiling, the muscles in his neck standing out in rigid relief. He turned his hand and his thumb was now wiggling inside her.

Moira reached for him again but he kept that maddening distance, almost as if he were afraid to be too close to her. She opened her eyes wide, and in the afternoon light had a postcard-perfect look at him, at the way the light bathed him, made him seem more tan than he was. She could see the muscles moving beneath his taut flesh and, reaching up, felt the tension in his abdomen. He was holding himself back, rigidly so, and she wondered why. She could smell his urgent lust and it kindled her own; she knew he wanted to shove her down and bury himself inside her until they were both screaming. So why did he hold back?

More, she wondered how she could have gotten caught up so quickly in what had started out as a stalling technique, an act she had been prepared to dislike, or at least find dull.

He smiled at her, reached for her, cupped her chin in his hand. They stared at each other and Moira forgot to breathe, so amazed that there could be such a tender, perfect moment between strangers. Then he eased her over, onto her stomach, and nudged her thighs apart with his knee. She could feel his thumbs on either side of her spine, pressing, soothing, and instinctively arched into his touch. Then she felt a silky firmness, and realized he was dragging the tip of his cock down her spine, between the cleft of her buttocks, and pausing at the opening of her vagina. She waited expectantly, but he paused. Bent. Murmured.

"I'm Jared."

She said nothing, just surged toward him.

"And you're Moira."

The bare tip of him was teasing her nether mouth, almost easing inside but not quite, and she swallowed a groan. His fingers were on her, spreading her wide for him, but still he didn't enter, still he lingered.

"Say it, Moira."

"Jared." The word was nearly wrenched from her. "You're Jared."

He chuckled, deep in his throat, almost a purr. "Nice to meet you."

He pushed forward and was almost—almost!—inside her, but not quite. She began to shake. Had she

imagined she'd have the upper hand in this seduction? Had she really?

"Please . . ."

"Moirra, we're going to have a nice long talk when I'm finished." Coming inside her now, the full, engorged head pushing, pushing. "About you . . ." Another inch, "the company you keep . . ." Another. "And your boss." Abruptly he was gone from her, and she could have cried. His finger replaced his cock, dipping, teasing, feeling her slippery wetness, and then he was stroking the tight bloom of her anus, gently rubbing the rich core of nerve endings there. She made a surprised sound which escalated to a muffled shriek as he slowly pushed his finger past that tight muscular ring.

"Easy."

"Don't." She tried to scramble away—she had never, no one had ever—but he nudged her again and she couldn't get the leverage she needed. When he was up to the first knuckle she felt his cock at the mouth of her vagina, and there was no gentle easing this time, this time he was instantly inside her, while his finger slid around slowly, out just a touch and then back in, no big dramatic strokes, just an overall pressure and gentle wriggling. She could feel him everywhere, filling her up, taking everything . . . "Yes, we'll have a nice long talk," he said, his voice so gritty she could scarcely understand him. He pulled out and his finger stilled; she was reasonably certain her heart would stop. "About your unfortunate choice of associates." He slammed all the way in.

She screamed.

She screamed into the pillow as he thrust, rocked, as he took her again and again, one hand on the small of her back, one hand . . . doing things inside her, doing things no man had ever . . . and always his cock, throbbing and huge and a terrible thing, doing his bidding, ignoring her pleas, her cries, just shoving and thrusting, and it was a terrible thing, a terrible wonderful thing, because somehow the tables had turned, she wasn't using him, he was using her.

She would kill him. She would kill him for making her scream. She would kill him if he stopped.

"Moirra," he groaned. He wouldn't let her move, wouldn't listen to her cries, but his hands on her were gentle. "Moirra, ah, God." His tempo increased, he slammed into her, the bed moved, she braced herself and shoved back as hard as she could, because she could sense it, feel it, her orgasm was on the horizon, was almost there, and another finger joined the first inside her, stretching her, and that was enough, that tipped her over.

She tried to throw back her head and howl, but all that escaped was a wild groan as she bucked against him. She felt him clench behind her, felt his seed pour into her, could actually feel the temperature change as he heated her up from the inside, and came again, so quickly and fiercely that white spots danced on the edge of her vision.

He pulled out of her, away from her, and she collapsed, alone, on the bed. She lay on her stomach for long moments, shaking from the aftereffects of the most cataclysmic sex (with a human! a human!) she'd ever had, then finally rolled over and looked at him.

To her surprise, he'd pulled on his jeans, had sat down in the chair and was watching her with hungry interest, the way a wolf watches a limping fawn. She could still smell the musk they had made. Could smell herself, on him.

"Now," he said, smiling, and she didn't much care for that smile, not at all, "let's talk about your boss."

Chapter Three

Moira sucked in her breath in a startled, hurt gasp. "You . . . you were using me."

He blinked. "Well, you were using me first. In fact, you sort of gave me the idea."

She glared. She felt like a fool—where did she get off, accusing him of anything? She sounded like a brat. Well, she couldn't help it. Right now, she felt like a brat. He was right, but that didn't make accepting it easier . . . or lessen the hurt. However, she would eat her own eyeballs before letting him see how she felt. "Yes, that's true, I did start things," she said slowly. "It's just as well, since you apparently enjoy forcing women to get them to do what you want."

Score! Bright color jumped into his cheeks. Suddenly she felt a bit better. It was hard to feel triumphant, though, when her thighs were still throbbing from what he'd been doing to her. For a while—a teeny, tiny while—she'd forgotten all about the pack, about this man being a threat to her leaders. It just . . . just went completely out of her head. She could count how often this had happened on one finger. Yesterday, she would have been able to count it on no fingers.

Jared cleared his throat, obviously piqued to see her interest was elsewhere. "Now . . . where were we?"

Oh, right. Your scumsucking boss. You—"

"I'm not telling you spit about Michael Wyndham, you cretinous globulous fornicator, and you can just—stop laughing!"

He'd thrown his head back at "globulous" and was still chortling, despite her specific order to the contrary. He finally stopped and looked at her admiringly. "Has anyone ever told you how you insult people in threes? Cretinous-globulous-fornicator? Schmuck-putz-moron? Anybody mention this before?"

"Yes. Michael Wyndham, for one." That wiped the smirk off his face. "I don't know what you want with him or his, but he's—"

The brother I never had.

"—my dearest friend and not only am I not going to tell you things about him, I'm going to put you to the floor if you go near him with harmful intent."

Of course, now Michael would be laughing at the thought of her defense, because a pack leader who couldn't fight off intruders wouldn't be a pack leader very long. Still, her pride demanded some sort of action.

He shook his head at her. "You poor kid. You have no idea what he is, do you? I suppose you're fooled by a pretty face."

"I wasn't fooled by yours," she said coldly. He grinned. It made him look years younger. It made him look nice. When he most assuredly was not.

She sat up suddenly, testing herself, pleased to find she wasn't dizzy. In a bound she leaped out of the bed and stood on the floor, fists planted on her hips. Jared's gaze lowered to her breasts and she could practically hear his I.Q. dropping. Pretty soon his mouth would fall open and a silvery line of saliva would start tracking down his chin. "I'm out of here, schmuck, putz, idiot. I don't appreciate being kidnapped and drugged and—er—seduced—"

"Technically," he pointed out mildly, "you were the one to introduce sex into the equation. I was just—er—a willing pupil."

"Details. Anyway, stay away from the Wyndhams, or I'll pull off your ears and you can use them for cufflinks." With that, she whirled and marched toward the smell of Comet cleanser . . . presumably the bathroom.

It was the bathroom. Excellent. Shutting and locking the door behind her, she ignored the laughter

coming from the bedroom. Moira had always been the shortest person in any room and was used to people—men—laughing at her fierceness. The laughter usually stopped when they had to spit out their back teeth to avoid choking.

It was time—past time—to get the hell out of Dodge. She didn't trust herself to remain around The Insufferable One. When he laughed he threw his head back and she thought about nibbling on his throat, licking until she tasted his sweat and—oh, yes, it was time to leave.

She spotted the window above the toilet and opened it. Three stories up—hmmm. Big house. She could easily get to the ground, but there was the small problem of being naked. Not that she cared—no werewolf cared—but she was supposed to pretend to care. A lot more humans lived in this town than werewolves, even here, the seat of Michael and Jeannie's power.

She snatched at the shower curtain—a silly thing with imprints of grinning ducks, and were the little bastards mocking her? They were!—and tugged it down. There was a paft-paft-paft! sound as the curtain hooks disengaged, but she didn't hear approaching footsteps. Good.

In a flash she wrapped it around herself, a sort of plastic, duck-laden toga. Wriggling through the window with a minimum of grunting, she dropped to the porch roof, about twenty-five feet straight down.

And fell through it.

That wasn't in the plan, she thought, dizzy with surprise. Stupid old Cape Cod houses with shoddy porch roofs! And are those splinters in my . . . aarrgh! This day is never going to end. She slowly climbed to her feet and heard Jared thundering down the stairs.

She ran.

Chapter Four

Moira limped into the combination dining hall/family room at Wyndham Manor (or, as Derik called it, Carnivore Central). For a moment she just watched them, drinking in the cozy domestic scene. She'd brought chaos and bad news (and splinters) with her, and was loath to disturb them.

Derik, her oldest friend, was deeply engrossed in a back issue of Martha Stewart Living. He was tall, broad, rippling, muscular, etc., etc., and made a quiche like nobody's business. His Chilean sea bass, served on a bed of sautéed spinach, could make grown men weep. Derik was convinced Ms. Stewart was a cleverly concealed werewolf, and read each magazine to tatters, looking for clues. When the article on steak tartare came out, he was sure she'd made a fatal slip.

Jeannie and Michael, her pack leaders, were stretched out on the carpet in front of a crackling fireplace. Baby Lara was lying between them. She would carefully extend a bare, pink foot (a foot that looked quite a bit like a pork chop with toes), giggle while her mother tickled it, then would withdraw, and slowly extend the other foot for her father.

Jeannie had settled in, if not seamlessly, at least with minimal trouble after that first hellish week. Moira often wondered if Jeannie thought of her old life. She'd never had friends to the manor, and never talked about her family. It was almost as if she hadn't really come alive until Michael had—almost literally!—swept her off her feet.

Moira felt the usual envy crawling up from the back of her throat, and fought it down. She was happy for Michael. She was. And she adored Jeannie. It was just . . . hard to take sometimes. That was all.

They were so happy, and she'd just had the best sex of her life with a man who was trying to pump her for information.

She delicately cleared her throat ("Ah-CHEM!"), gratified to hear the yells of dismay. After the bruising her pride (and bottom!) had endured today, she was grateful to be surrounded by family.

Jeannie, her best friend and the pack's alpha female, was yelling the loudest. The leggy blonde rushed over to her, holding baby Lara and raking Moira with her piercing, blue-eyed gaze.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"Glah!" Lara added, waving a chubby hand.

Moira caught the baby's hand, kissed it gently. Lara had her mother's lungs, and her father's charisma.

With a headful of dark, glossy curls and eyes the color of good cognac, she was a striking infant.

Michael took her in at a glance—bumps, bruises, smelling of sweaty sex and plastic, tired and pissed off.

"Who should I kill?" he asked calmly.

"Are you okay?" Derik asked, hurrying over to join their small group.

"Only my pride has been savaged." She felt the shower curtain start to slip and adjusted it. "But probably permanently." Directly to Michael and Jeannie: "Can we talk?"

"Don't pull that," Derik protested. A broad-shouldered blonde, he and Moira had often been mistaken for siblings. Except for the fact that he towered over her, they looked a great deal alike, although Derik's eyes were the green of wet leaves. "I want to hear what happened, too. Start with, 'I went for a walk,' and finish with 'then I walked in wearing a ducky shower curtain'."

"Not now," she said, and hated it, because Derik really was like a brother to her, and she had no secrets from him. He'd informally adopted her as a littermate when she'd come to live at the mansion after her mother's death.

But the pack leader deserved to hear about the threat first—Jared had named Michael specifically.

Michael would decide who to tell, after. "Come on, you guys. This shower curtain is itchy."

Jeannie unceremoniously handed Lara to Derik. The baby yelped in protest, then shrieked happily as Derik tossed her four feet in the air. "Later, Moira," he called after them. As in, You'll be telling me the whole story, right?

"Later, Dare." She used the nickname he'd had since they'd been small. The man would do anything if you triple-dog-dared him.

She marched into the soundproofed den and waited until Michael shut the door. Then she told them how she'd spent her afternoon. She left out nothing, save for how astounding and wonderful the sex had been. She was feeling very guilty about that.

Michael's eyes were thoughtful, distant. "Huh."

"'Huh', he says." Jeannie shook her head in annoyance. "Let's go back to the house and find out what this Jared's problem is." Moira could see every one of the woman's protective instincts was aroused. "Or have him arrested."

"For?" Michael asked mildly.

"Trespassing." She was scowling, but leaned into him for comfort. The scowl eased as he gently rubbed her shoulders. "Being a flaming asshole. Rape."

Moira coughed. "Uh . . . it wasn't exactly . . ."

"Never mind semantics! He's out to get you, Mike. I won't have it, I tell you I will not have it!"

Moira didn't say anything. Jeannie had become one of the family, and was so utterly fearless, it was often hard to remember she wasn't a werewolf. This was hardly the first time someone had come

gunning for Michael. He controlled an admirable fortune and had three hundred thousand werewolves at his back. He was a tempting target.

"I really think we need to go over there and fire a warning shot into his spine," Jeannie continued. Michael was still rubbing her shoulders, and she raised her hands and closed them over his, gripping tightly. "Fix him somehow. Neutralize his ass."

"What do you propose we do, dear one?"

"Um, hmm, I'm not sure, let me think, how about . . . lock him up!"

"Then he skips bail and he's out and about with a hidden agenda. No."

"You're insufferable. Must you always think of every stupid little thing?"

He smiled at her. There weren't many people who dared speak to Michael Wyndham in such a way. The pack had been deferring to him since he was in training pants. He loved his wife's sharp tongue. "Every stupid little thing? I thought of going after you, didn't I?"

"Har, har."

His smile faded and he looked right at Moira, who'd been watching their interaction with undeniable longing. "Moira, will you go back?"

"Of course." She had figured out the problem as quickly as Michael had. Obviously Jared was a dangerous man . . . but was he alone? What exactly did he want, and why? And how far was he going to go in order to achieve his goal? Did he want to bring down just Michael, or Jeannie and baby Lara? The entire pack? For what purpose? When? She cursed herself for not having thought of this before jumping out the window. But there was time to make up for it. "Let me get changed and I'll leave right away."

"Leave?" Jeannie's fingers were twitching and Moira could tell, just tell, her friend was wishing for her gun. "Why?"

Moira started sidling toward the door. When the Wyndhams fought, chandeliers shook and foundations cracked. And Jeannie, a good woman in all things, was still a human. She would never be pack, and could never truly understand their motivations. She'd get it intellectually. But she would never feel it.

"Moira is going to go back to that house, and stay with Jared, and get all the information out of him she can, however she can." Michael said this with admirable calm, then waited.

Jeannie's eyes widened and seemed to actually bulge. "Stay put!" she snapped at Moira, who was tentatively reaching for the doorknob. "Moira, you don't have to go."

"Really, I'd be more comfortable up in my room—"

"I meant back to him."

"Of course I have to. We need to know what he's up to. And I'm in a unique position—he thinks I'm a cute bimbo twit. Also," she added, ignoring the rush of heat to her cheeks, "he likes fucking me."

Jeannie gaped at her, then swung toward Michael. "Michael, don't make her go! She doesn't have to—to whore for us."

Moira laughed, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Werewolves don't whore," he said, fighting a smile of his own, "and I'm not making Moira do anything. She only came here as a courtesy, you know. To—how d'you put it? Keep us in the loop." He glanced at her over the top of his wife's head and they shared a moment of perfect understanding.

"It's not right," Jeannie said stubbornly.

"Protecting us? Your daughter? Our friends?"

"Well . . . okay . . ." She exhaled sharply, puffing blonde strands out of her face. "I feel stupid having to say this out loud, but she shouldn't have to sleep with him."

"It's a sacrifice I'm willing to make," Moira said, straight-faced, but her cheeks felt very warm now. Michael looked at her sharply, and arched a dark eyebrow.

"Moira," he said, "can take care of herself. It's not like you to moralize, Jean."

Jeannie looked from her husband to her friend. She looked at them the way one might look at a new form of life: with superstitious awe.

After a long moment, Jeannie shook her head. Usually the difference between their cultures and species didn't seem so great, but today the gap yawned. "You'll do as you please," she told him, "you always do. But expecting Moira to put herself in danger for you, to have sex with a bad guy for you . . . that's going too far. It's—" She glanced at Moira and stopped. Moira was staring at her with a total lack of comprehension. "Oh, forget it. I'm obviously the only one who's got a problem with this. Fine, knock yourself out, have a grand old time, don't forget to write."

She marched across the room, punctuating her exit by slamming the door. Michael turned and looked at the couch. "It's about as uncomfortable as it looks," he mournfully informed Moira. "What a pity I'll be sleeping there, probably for the rest of the week."

Who are you kidding? Try a month. Moira smiled wanly. "It's actually a little flattering—if she didn't think so highly of me, she wouldn't have such a problem with me going back. But I can't think of how to explain it to her . . . why it's not a problem. Why I have to do it . . . in fact, why I should be halfway back to the house already."

"Yes, but first this. You've got to be really careful. Not just for your own sake. If Jared gets too close . . ." He smiled, showing his teeth. They looked very white and very sharp and might have fooled someone slow to notice the smile didn't reach his eyes. "I'd hate for my wife to have to shoot another bad guy on my property. The noise might wake the baby."

"He won't get close to them. And even if he did," she said matter-of-factly, "it will be very hard for him to harm my lady and my future sovereign while I'm chewing on his spinal cord."

Now the smile did reach his eyes. "Oh, Moira. Have I told you how much I love you today?"

They laughed together, like littermates.

Chapter Five

Jared told himself to stop worrying about Moira.

Impossible.

Which was annoying, because he had far more important things to worry about. His sister's murder had been too long unavenged. He was in place at last, ready to strike, a blonde, blue jean wearing hammer of vengeance.

But instead of oiling his guns, practicing his sleeper hold and making sure his revenge T-shirt was clean—in general, fantasizing about blood and screaming and other good stuff like that—he was fretting about blonde.

He didn't dare go back out to the porch. Every time he saw the hole in the roof and the scattered debris on the floor, he cringed, an action frowned upon by the Marines and the varied underworld types who'd helped him prepare for this week. She had been so desperate to get away from him that she'd flung herself out the window! She had been so desperate to get away from him she had fled on foot—with nothing more than a duck-laden shower curtain covering that lovely bod! As each hour passed he felt

more and more like a Grade A jerk . . . and more and more frantic with worry.

He'd canvassed the quiet neighborhood, with no luck. She'd probably holed up somewhere to nurse a thousand wounds (and a million splinters). Probably dying! All because of—

The doorbell rang.

Jared blinked. No one in town knew who he was, it was too early for Girl Scout cookies, and was there still such a thing as a Welcome Wagon?

Had Wyndham sent the Welcome Wagon?

As was his habit, Jared fretted while he cleaned his guns. So he actually held a freshly oiled Beretta. It was a moment's work to slap a full clip in and slide a load into the chamber. Still barefoot and shirtless from his earlier (incredible, wonderful, marvelous lovemaking) tryst with (beautiful, gorgeous Moira) blondie, he padded to the door. By the time he reached it, the delicate tapping became an insistent pounding. Jared flung the door open, his gun already leveled.

At Moira's forehead.

"You're a limited man," was all she said, walking past him. Carrying a suitcase, no less. He stared. He couldn't help himself. She looked as pretty as a spring daisy, wearing a yellow dress which made her eyes seem a darker lavender, almost purple. The hem of the dress stopped a modest inch below her knees, which did nothing to disguise the fact that she was walking around on a world-class pair of stems. The back of the dress plunged in a deep V, showing off creamy white skin.

"Well," she said, when it was obvious all he could do was gape at her, "I'm back."

"Huh?"

She rolled her eyes and muttered something under her breath. "I . . . said . . . I'm . . . back . . ." she enunciated loudly, as if he was feeble or deaf. Right now, he felt feeble. "I'm staying with you until we get this mess straightened out."

He had the dim feeling he was in the presence of a greater intellect. And awesome tits! He shook his head, hard. Focus, moron, he ordered himself. "Mess?"

"Yes. You're here to do something wretched, horrid, awful, to my friend and boss, Michael Wyndham. I'm here to talk you out of it."

Now he was focused, laser-sharp. "No chance."

"Why?"

"He—he's a monster. He killed someone I loved."

Not a blink from blondie. Not a twitch, not a fake show of sympathy. Just a cool, "No. He didn't."

Jared was surprised, both at her assurance and her inference. And frankly, not hearing her ooze sympathy was something of a relief. Women were either scared shitless of him, or felt sorry for him. Neither was conducive to hominess. And he didn't want Moira's pity. He especially didn't want her fear. It was very important she not be afraid. He couldn't bear it if she flinched back from him. Jesus, why the hell did he care? Why should it matter if she was scared shitless of him? It would just make his job easier. And how could she defend the monsters so quickly, without knowing any of the details?

"Maybe not him," he said at last. "But one of his dogs."

At 'dogs' her upper lip curled, revealing lovely white teeth. He plunged ahead, unable to believe they were having this conversation. He was explaining things to the woman who worked for the man who murdered his sister! "Whatever or whoever, Wyndham is responsible. I don't give two fucks for the details. He's the boss dog. So he's going to tell me where I can find the dog responsible."

"I'll be glad to help you find out who hurt the person you cared for," she said quietly, hefting her suitcase and starting toward the stairs, "but you're wrong about Michael. Totally utterly completely wrong. I'll be around until I can convince you of that."

He watched her climb the stairs, silent. After a moment he wrenched his gaze from her legs and forced himself to think. His gut told him Moira was one of the good guys. His brain screamed exactly the opposite. But he was not the world's greatest thinker, as his father, training instructors, and commanding officers had pointed out on several occasions. He was alive today because he'd listened to his instincts and ignored his brain. He'd be a fool to ignore his gut now, when he was so close.

Moira was a veritable treasure trove of information. Not that she planned on telling him shit. His admiration, already high, went a notch higher. She was a safe, and if he cracked her with just the right tools, he'd get the gold.

After a while he unloaded the gun, put it away, and went up after her.

Chapter Six

"So . . . what? We're roomies?" Jared asked

"Yes." Moira unpacked the suitcase, shoved her clothes into the empty bureau by the window. And tried very, very hard not to show how pleased she was to see him again. She wasn't the first woman in her family to feel like this, she remembered with excitement and despair. Her mother, too, had been torn between desire and duty. Except her mother had been human, and her father a beta werewolf who left to form his own pack. Left her mother, pregnant and alone in a city by the sea. If not for Michael's father taking them in . . .

There was a lesson there: love made you stupid. On her deathbed, her mother had praised her former lover, who'd planted his seed one night and then left to better himself. Moira loved her mother, but hated weakness.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do—I think," Jared was saying, sounding confused—as usual. "And I'm glad to see you're all right. In fact, I'm pretty interested in hearing the tale of your trip back to the mansion. And what you did with my shower curtain—I bought a new one, by the way, in case you need to—uh—freshen up. But I'm still a little confused."

"I'm not surprised."

He ignored the sarcasm. "What exactly do you do for Wyndham?"

"I'm his accountant."

"His accountant."

"Yes."

"Uh . . . you don't look like an accountant."

"Obviously I do, because I am one." 'Accountant' was understating it a bit. She had a Master's in Business Finance, another Master's in International Business Relations, and (this one had been for fun) a Master's in Japanese Literature. "What does your accountant look like?"

"I don't have an accountant," he admitted. "I made about eight grand last year."

Eight grand! She'd signed off on that much for the birthday celebration the week Lara had been born. Heck, her Christmas bonus had been almost twice that. "Hmm. The revenge business isn't terribly lucrative?"

He smiled, which, annoyingly, she felt down to her knees. "That's about right. You know, Moira, if you're going to stay here, we should probably set up some ground rules."

"Such as . . . ?" Here came the tiresome human stuff . . . he'd sleep on the couch, they'd draw up a bathroom schedule, they'd talk out their feelings in a really really constructive way. He'd explain about how difficult it was to be a modern man when all he really wanted to do was cry and share his enlightened consciousness with some poor bitch, and she'd pretend not to be semi-conscious with boredom.

She squared her shoulders. She would endure much for Michael and Jeannie and Lara. Torture. A physical beating. Sharing feelings in a constructive way. "I'm hearing what you are saying," she said, obediently quoting Redbook. "What rules?"

"Well," he said, and she noticed—how had this escaped her?—that he was unbuckling his belt. Now he was sliding his jeans down his long thighs and he wasn't wearing underwear. Now he was kicking the jeans in a pile, pulling his shirt over his head and yanking the band out of his hair. He grinned and then they were flying backward and landing on the bed, his cool nakedness pressed against her, warming her through the thin fabric of her dress. His hair tickled her chin and smelled like wild perfume. "The first rule, I think, is that we should be naked, pretty much all the time."

She laughed. She couldn't help it. Then she was laughing into his mouth as he kissed her. Her hands raced over him, greedy, and he was groping her with about as much finesse. She didn't care. Something about his scent drove her right out of her mind. She thought his first rule was a fine one.

Their thoughts:

He wants to hurt the pack.

She works for the monsters.

But in this moment of clean lust, logic had no force. The only thing that mattered was skin on skin, mouth on mouth. Preferably for hours.

There was a purring riiiiiiip, and then her dress was in pieces. "I'll care about that," she said, panting, "later."

"I'll buy you a new one." He issued a low growl, and then his mouth was on one of her nipples, and then, even better, his teeth were.

"That dress was worth one tenth of your total earnings last year."

"God, I love it when you figure out percentages in your head," he moaned. She could feel his beard stubble between her breasts . . . on her stomach . . . between her thighs. "Now talk to me about IRA rollovers and 401(k)s."

She started laughing so hard she lost her breath entirely. Which was all right, because at that moment his tongue darted inside her, and she wouldn't have been able to breathe anyway.

Her hips bucked against his mouth and he reached up, seized her waist, and shoved her back firmly against the mattress. All the while his mouth busily explored between her legs, his lips sucking and kissing and his tongue was probing. Moira heard herself scream.

He pulled back abruptly, leaving her teetering on the edge, and she screamed again, this time in frustration. She scrambled toward him, but he caught her elbows and flipped her. Her face hit the pillows as she was forced down on her stomach.

"God, you have the most luscious ass," he groaned, and she felt his hands on her, his fingers kneading her skin, hard.

Hard enough to mark my flesh, she thought with black excitement. Her blood was up so high she

literally saw red; the room before her was cloaked in a red haze. Her tongue felt thick in her mouth. She flipped back over, and grabbed him, and he laughed at her. But he quit laughing when she locked her ankles behind his back and forced his pelvis toward hers. Women had superior lower body strength anyway, and besides, she was probably twice as strong as he was, possibly three times. He let her do it. In fact, he helped—put his hands between her thighs and gently held her apart, so that when she levered her back up off the mattress to meet him, his cock slid inside her without pause. Right up to the hilt.

They stared at each other for a long moment, then started rocking together. Her legs were still wrapped around him but now he was holding her, too, holding her and kissing her deeply while they thrust against each other, while the bed squeaked out their rhythm.

Now his mouth was on her neck and he was gently biting her throat, then greedily sucking her flesh. His mark, she thought again, and spun away into orgasm.

A moment later, so did he. Through a gaze slitted with pleasure, she watched his eyes roll back, felt him stiffen all over.

"Christ," he managed, right before collapsing on her.

"Yes, indeed," she replied. She started to push him off her, but he clung like a lamprey. "For heaven's sake, I need to get up and wash."

"No," he muttered sleepily. "Keep my smell on you. For a while."

A reasonable request. One she liked too much. She started to get up, but his arm tightened across her waist like a bar. She could have snapped it at the elbow, but didn't. Instead she nestled up next to him, and fell asleep.

Chapter Seven

Moirra snapped awake in the dark. Where the hell was she?

"Don't. Don't. Don't."

Everything locked into place: she was in Jared's rented house. His stirring had awakened her. And what on earth was wrong with his voice? He sounded like a boy, not a man in his prime.

"Don't be dead. Oh, Jesus, don't . . . don't be. Dead. Dead. She's dead. My sister's dead! Somebody help me!"

She reached out a hand, too late. He sat up so abruptly the back of his head banged into the headboard, flung his arms out hard, belted her right below the eye. It didn't slow him down, or even bring him fully awake.

He lurched from the bed. She pressed a hand to her now-throbbing eye and forced her pupils to dilate. Suddenly what had been dark became light, and she got a good look.

The big, badass werewolf hunter stumbled around the room, hoarse sobs locked in his throat, compulsively rubbing at his hands. "Everywhere." His voice broke. "There's blood and it's just . . . oh, it's everywhere. Renee, my poor Renee."

He collapsed to his knees and scrubbed at the imaginary blood. Moirra watched, horrified. In his recall of the night he found his sister's body, Jared had made the scene all too real for her. She could almost smell the blood.

What are you staring at him for, fool?

She was out of the bed in a bound and actually found herself stepping around the imaginary pool of blood. She bent to him. "Jared, love, it's a dream."

"Renee. Poor Renee. She fought and he . . . he . . . and I was too late. If I'd gotten home just half an hour earlier . . ."

You'd be dead, too. "Renee's out of her pain, dearest. Come back to bed."

"I can't—bed?"

"You're dreaming, Jared. It's just an awful, awful dream. Renee knows you tried. Renee knows you loved her—love her still. You've given your life up for vengeance, isn't that so?"

"It's . . . yes." Sounding stronger now; the boy's voice was leaving. The man was coming back.

"Lie down with me." She pulled him easily to his feet, although he had twelve inches and fifty pounds on her. She brought him back to bed as she would have led a child. "It's all right."

"No," he said, already slipping back into sleep. "It's never going to be all right."

About that, you may be right.

"Watch out, Moira. They're werewolves. I know it sounds incredible." He yawned, snuggled against her shoulder. "But they're the monsters from the fairy tales. Wyndham and his dogs."

"I know," she said softly. Thinking: Oh, what will you do when I tell you I'm one of the monsters? And why did she care?

She was awakened by a delicious tickling between her breasts, and cracked one eye open to see Jared, nibbling her cleavage. It was still dark out—not even five o'clock in the morning.

"Did your mother wean you a bit too early, Jared?"

He snorted, the sound muffled against her flesh. "Very funny. Let's take a shower. My mouth tastes like a dead rat shat in it."

"Thanks for the visual. You should write for Hallmark—yee-ouch! Well, you should. And why are we getting up?"

He wouldn't look at her. "Can't sleep," he muttered. "Every time I fall all the way under, I—I wake back up. C'mon."

A few minutes later, morning ablutions completed, he was soaping her all over while the scalding shower beat down on them. Moira groaned aloud from the sheer pleasure of it. Her motto had always been, if it doesn't turn your skin bright red, it's not a shower.

They weren't talking about his dream. She wasn't sure he even remembered stumbling around the room, washing his dead sister's blood off his hands. She decided not to bring it up.

"You're probably the smartest woman I've ever met," he informed her out of nowhere, rinsing her breasts off again, then lathering his hands and running them over her slippery flesh. "And definitely the prettiest."

"Where'd that come from? And thank you. You're probably right. About the smart thing, I mean."

"And so modest!"

She shrugged under the water. "My whole childhood, I was my mother's doll. Little, blonde, cute. Something to be dressed up and fussed over. All she talked about was my looks. So it was all people talked to her about. I was a smart child, really smart. So I talk about that. My looks are boring."

"They're certainly not boring, cutie," he said, "but I can see how that would have been a major pain."

"Yes, it was. Sorry to digress into 'poor Moira's poor childhood' silliness." She shrugged, embarrassed.

"Also, I think my breasts are clean enough."

"They're filthy," he solemnly informed her. "Really. Yech. I won't rest until I can eat off them." She felt her lips twitch. "Indeed." His hands felt marvelous on her skin. She enjoyed the sensation for a moment, then went back to his earlier, most interesting comment. "The smartest, huh?" The pack took her brains for granted, and men who didn't know her didn't care that she was smart. She found it refreshing and marvelous to run into someone who noticed her brains, commented, and thought she was just fine. "Really? I mean, you must have known a lot of women." Given your boudoir skills, I would guess thousands.

"Mm-hmm," he said carelessly. "You've probably got twenty, thirty I.Q. points on me, easy." He sounded as threatened as if he was telling her she had two, three cup sizes on him, easy.

Opening her eyes wide, she ignored the stinging spray. "And that doesn't bother you?"

"Hell, no." He shrugged, water bouncing off his broad shoulders. "Everybody's good at something."

"Well." She chose her words carefully. This was one of the most interesting conversations she'd had in a while. "I'm definitely book smart. You're more . . . tricky, like. In a lot of ways, that's better than having a head for numbers."

"I know," he said casually.

"Now who's being modest?" She goosed him and he slapped her hand away.

"Careful, I almost maimed you with my incredible reflexes."

"Oh, sure."

His smile faded, and suddenly he looked through her, not at her. Just like that, he was somewhere else.

"I was always good at fighting. Busting skulls, that stuff. I got in lots of fights as a kid—I mean, guys were always following my sister around, Renee, her name was . . ."

"I know."

He stopped talking. His hands stopped moving on her body. His eyes were narrow, blue slits. "How d'you know?"

"You dreamt about her last night. You were calling her name."

"Oh." She couldn't tell if it was the heat of the water or embarrassment at his vulnerability that made his face redden. "Okay. Say, I didn't hurt you, did I? Sometimes the nightmare . . . it makes me thrash about a bit. Sleepwalk, too."

"No," she lied. Of course she'd had a spectacular black eye during the night. And of course it had healed by morning.

"Oh. That's good." She pumped shampoo into her palm and started washing his hair, running her fingers through the long strands. He arched unconsciously beneath her touch for a moment, then continued.

"Anyway, I'd get into fights to keep the boys respectful, you know? And my dad, before he died he signed me up for all these martial arts classes, and boxing, that kind of stuff. To keep me out of trouble—he figured if I was punching people in a class after school, I'd be too tired to get into fights. By the time I graduated high school I could pretty much kick anybody's ass. The Marines really liked having me around."

"I'll bet. That's why you took it upon yourself to find Renee's killer. It was your job to protect her. And when you couldn't, that last time, the least you could do . . ."

"Yeah."

They were silent, and then Jared rinsed his hair and started running his soapy hands down her back, started kneading her buttocks.

Moira thought, his body is his weapon. He's been using all those fighting skills to track down his sister's

Could this man be the one? She would never worry about accidentally hurting Jared; he could take care of himself. Certainly it was no problem if he were to accidentally hurt her . . . she was a fast healer, and pain was, at times, almost a friend to her. Best of all, most wonderful of all, he absolutely didn't care that she was an adding machine on legs. That alone made it worth staying with him.

How, she wondered forlornly, had the tables turned so quickly? Yesterday she would have seen him dead. Today tears sprang to her eyes at the thought of him leaving.

"Moira, Moira," he whispered, his words almost lost under the thrumming of the shower, "a guy could fall in love. But if you're holding out on me . . ." He came into her, hard, a brutal shove, and she bit back a cry of mingled pain and pleasure. ". . . you'll live to regret it."

He picked her up, pulled her legs around him, and held her easily, pinning her against the slick tile like a butterfly to a board. He shoved, shoved, shoved, and it hurt, she wasn't ready for him, and she loved it, loved being used roughly. Had she really disdained coupling with a human because she thought they were weak? She had thrice his strength but, without leverage, could only take it. Take him. His length filled her up, took her over, he was deep, so deep. He was shoving angrily but his hands were gentle; she had a flash of intuition

and then could only concentrate on what he was doing to her. She squirmed against the tile. "You're hurting me," she whispered.

Now his thrusts came easier because her body was easing his way, was flooding her with wetness.

"I'm sorry," she gasped.

"Don't you dare!" was as far as she got before she could feel him pulsing inside her. Abruptly, he pulled away, leaving her shaking with need.

"What the hell are we going to do, bright eyes?"

"It's a simple question, Moira," he said patiently, giving her nipple an impudent tweak. Oh, how she hated him. "A guy could fall in love, but I've got to keep my priorities straight."

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and forth against the shower wall. "You're smack in the middle of a mess, gorgeous, and I don't envy you at all. The question is, what are you going to do about it?"

"Please. Please. Please." The word was wrenched out of her, shoved out. "Please, Jared. Don't make me beg."

"But, sweetheart," his mouth very near her ear, "you are begging."

She moaned, lost. He took pity on her, knelt, gently spread her apart and lapped, lapped, lapped. She came at once, a shallow spasm that did nothing, that left her wanting him inside her, her need for him a bestial craving. "More," she gasped, demanded, urged. Begged.

He wordlessly led her from the shower, both of them dripping wet. Bent her over the tub. Took her again and again, until the room rang with her screams, until her legs wouldn't support her any longer and she collapsed to the floor, still feeling the spasms from her last orgasm.

Without a word, he lifted her to her feet, dried her with a big, fluffy towel, and tucked her into bed as if she were a precious treasure. Left her to nap.

Humans are weak, was her last thought before spinning into sleep. In a pig's eye.

Chapter Eight

When she woke, hours later, she was alone in the bed and utterly ravenous. The smell of frying bacon filled the room, filled her head, and she hurriedly pulled on some clothes and flew down the stairs. She burst into the kitchen just as Jared slid three eggs onto a plate laden with bacon, toast, sliced tomatoes, home fries, and sausage links. "Morning, sunshine. Do you want some—" Snatching the plate away from him, she sat at the table, grabbed a fork, started shoveling. "—breakfast?"

"Nnnnf."

He grinned down at her. "God, you are the perfect woman. Super smart, awesome in bed, and you eat like a lumberjack." He ruffled her curls. "A sexy lumberjack."

"Mmmfff nnnnggg mmmm," she said, or something like that. She swallowed. "This is good. Thanks very much. Being hungry does nothing for my manners." Human manners, she amended silently.

"I can't believe you're not throwing food at me." He turned back to the stove. "After this morning."

"Yes, yes, very non-PC, you beast, it's over between us, hate you forever . . . salt?"

He turned, blinked at her, then shook his head and nodded toward the salt shaker.

"What, I have to get up?" she complained. "You're standing right there."

"Cripes, you've got nerve!" He whipped around, exasperated. "You know, technically you're my prisoner. I mean, I did kidnap you."

"Yes, and then you lost me." At his scowl, she added, "Plus, you're standing right there. Besides, you and I both know you'd eat your own feet before hurting any woman. So spare me the 'you are my prisoner, fear me' crapola. And pass the damned salt! Please."

"I'll do it," he said, smirking, "if you'll show me your tits." He paused, obviously braced for shrieks of feminine dismay at his crude request . . . and nearly fell onto the frying pan as her T-shirt hit him in the face.

"Salt."

"Right." He fetched it for her, gave her left breast a friendly squeeze, and returned to his eggs.

"Thank you. Now there's bacon grease on my nipple."

"I'll take care of that for you," he said, scooping eggs onto another plate. He snapped a glance at her over his shoulder, and winked. "Later." He sat down across from her and fell to.

"Great. You could just pass me a napkin, you know."

"Spoilsport."

They ate in friendly silence, until Jared finally asked, "Do you remember last night?"

"Vividly."

"I mean . . . my dream."

"Yes." She stopped mopping egg yolk with her toast and looked up. "I'm very, very sorry about your sister."

He looked at her thoughtfully. She noticed he hadn't pulled his hair back in a ponytail, and had to keep brushing back the sandy blonde strands, keeping them out of his face. "And afterward. What I said afterward . . . I'm pretty sure I told you they're werewolves. Over at Wyndham's."

"Yes, you did." She answered his unspoken question. "I already knew."

Thunderstruck silence, followed by, "And you work for them?"

"They're my family." Get it? My family? Don't make me say it, Jared. Figure it out.

He shoved his plate back, stood, started pacing. She unobtrusively pulled his half empty plate toward her. Ah, two pieces of bacon left . . .

"Jesus, if I didn't know for a fact that all werewolves are male, I'd be really worried about—"

"What?"

"Don't try to deny it, pretty spy. You know, I had to take a long and very fucking strange road to get to this house, this town, and on the way I met some exceedingly weird people. And heard some strange shit."

"Werewolves are all men." She could barely get the sentence out without giggling. "Who told you that?"

"I paid good money for that information," he said proudly. "And I got it from an honest-to-God werewolf. I watched the beast change . . . into a bigger beast. And when the moon went down and the sun came up, he told me all about werewolves."

All about bullshit, more likely. "How'd you get him to talk?"

"I was resting the barrel of my shotgun against his testicles while we played Twenty Questions."

"Yes, that would do it." So he'll never guess the truth about me. Not unless I tell him outright, or show him. So: good? Or bad? Moira practically squirmed at the odd dilemma. Good for Moira-the-werewolf, because her main goal, always, was the pack's safety. Bad for Moira-the-woman, because this put more distance between her and Jared.

And why did she care?

He looked nonplussed at the way she hadn't been horrified to hear about the shotgun, and the testicles. That, in fact, she seemed to hardly be paying attention to his revelations. He resumed pacing. "Which is why you shouldn't be working there. What if one of them bites you, for Christ's sake? I didn't think to ask if a woman could get infected that way . . ."

"You're worried one of them will bite me?" She kept her voice calm, deliberately reasonable, unworried, in contrast to his violent emotions. His anger, coupled with fear for her, burned her nostrils. He was worried about her. She was annoyed and pleased at the same time.

"You might wind up . . . I don't know . . ."

"I do know. The biting thing is an old wives' tale. You're a werewolf or you're not. It's a whole different species, Jared, not the measles. Not something you catch."

He digested that, and she could practically hear the wheels turning in his mind. Could see the thought on his face: Why would she lie? No reason, ergo it must be the truth. She couldn't help but be warmed at this sign of trust between them. Never mind why would she lie . . . why should he believe her? And yet he did.

"A hundred years of bad movies are wrong?"

"Not to mention a thousand years of folk lore." Moira suddenly remembered the time she and Derik were kids and had gone to see An American Werewolf in London. They had laughed so hard they were kicked out not forty-five minutes into the movie. "The truth is always much more boring than the fable it grew from."

"What if one of them kills you?"

"Never, ever happen."

"Bullshit. Put down that piece of toast, it's mine."

"You left your plate," she protested.

He threw up his hands. "Can we stay on track, please? One of them has killed, you don't deny that, right?"

"Right. But tell me why you think Michael knows who killed your sister."

Jared blinked, surprised at the abrupt question, but answered readily enough. "Everything traces back to Wyndham manor, to your boss. Ev-er-ee-thing. The police even had a suspect, but the guy got away clean. He worked there, lived there, probably even had a family there. Then I got close, and he was smoke. Wyndham told the cops he didn't know a thing about it, which was just about the biggest lie since 'this won't hurt a bit'. The suspect worked for Wyndham practically his whole life."

"Was this . . . about a year ago?"

"How'd you know?"

"I'm just trying to figure out the timeline."

"The name I had was Gerald somebody," Jared confirmed.

Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. She strove to look thoughtful, rather than horrified. This was good news and bad. Good news because Gerald was dead, and thus unlikely to be murdering anyone else's sister now that he was so much meat in the ground. Bad because Jeannie, Michael's wife, had shot Gerald. Multiple times.

Of course Michael had denied knowledge of Gerald's whereabouts. He couldn't very well tell the police the truth: that Gerald was beneath the White Ivy rosebushes on the south lawn and, oh by the way, officers, would you like some tea before you haul my mate away in chains? She's pregnant, so make sure she takes her pre-natal vitamins in prison.

"I think I can help you," Moira said slowly. She had no idea what to do. Tell Jared everything and trust him to keep Wyndham secrets? Ha.

Tell him nothing and neutralize him? Hit him when his guard was down and bite the back of his neck until his strong heart stopped beating and his gorgeous eyes closed forever?

I've got a crush on the idiot.

Moira knew her limitations. She was intelligent—okay, that wasn't a limitation—but numbers were her game. She had no gift for leadership or strategy. That was Michael's job. She was a foot soldier, plain and simple.

Jared needed to hear about Gerald, but not from her. From Michael and Jeannie, and no one else. Would Jared follow her to Wyndham manor, unquestioning? Just trot right on over to what he assumed was the

belly of the beast?

Ha.

"There's something on the back of your neck," she said sweetly.

"What?" He brought his hand up, brushed ineffectually. She put her hand on his shoulder, gently turned him around, and punched him at the base of his skull with her knuckle. Jared obligingly dropped without a sound, and she caught him on the way down.

I'm going to hear about this one for a while, she thought grimly, slinging him over her shoulder like a sack of toys.

Chapter Nine

He opened his eyes and saw he was surrounded by monsters, in a living room or den of some sort. Michael Wyndham, Moira, and Wyndham's hottie wife, Jeannie, were all bending over him, their faces like concerned moons. He was lying on a couch, and could hear the cheerful crackle of a fire nearby.

"You . . . bitch!" He sat bolt upright, then clutched the back of his neck, which was incredibly stiff.

"Aarrgghh! What'd you hit me with, a piano?"

"I'm sorry, Jared." Moira-the-Judas had the nerve to look abashed. She blinked her big purple eyes at him and spread her hands helplessly. "I had to bring you here—we have things to tell you—but I didn't think you'd come if I asked."

"So you coshed me over the head with an iron and kidnapped me?" His hand slid down and around, but his holster was empty.

"Don't get too far up on that high horse of yours," Jeannie Wyndham said dryly. "You did the same thing to my friend yesterday." She waved his gun at him. Jared felt alternately nervous and aroused to see such a pretty woman handling his weapon so comfortably. "My best friend. And since you kidnapped my friend and are here in town solely to hurt my husband, you look stupid trying to sound outraged."

"Jeannie," Michael said quietly.

"Well, he does."

"Give him back his gun, please."

"Speaking of stupid." Despite her comment, she popped the clip, ratcheted a bullet out of the chamber, and gave him back all three, absently puffing a hank of blonde hair out of her eyes as she did so. He was so surprised he nearly dropped them on the floor.

"Will you listen?" Wyndham asked quietly. The guy had funny eyes—dark brown, ringed with yellow, dog's eyes, monster's eyes—but his voice was deep and soothing. Too soothing. Jared knew there were people in the world who could make you like them. It was a talent, like being able to raise only one eyebrow. Even knowing all he did about Wyndham, Jared still wanted to shake the guy's hand and hear what he had to say. Watch it, he warned himself. "Mister—ah—Moira?"

Moira cleared her throat. "Sorry. We should have done this right away. Jeannie and Michael Wyndham, this is Jared . . . uh . . ." She flushed. "I never did get your last name."

"And after all we shared," he said mockingly, and was gratified to see her blush deepen.

"Knock it off," Jeannie snapped. "You're still on my shit list, buddy-roo. I don't know why we're all tiptoeing around you. As far as I'm concerned, you're the bad guy." She smirked at him. "And you know what happens to the bad guy in books and movies, right, Jerked?"

"It's Jared," he said, and to his surprise he had to fight a smile. "Jared Roche."

Jeannie's eyes widened. "Roche? Your last name is Roche? Oh my God, that's the silliest name ever."

Wyndham was looking heavenward, as if for divine intervention. "Jeannie . . ."

"Seriously. It's like a bad romance novel. 'Jared Roche brooded darkly before sweeping Shanna Silverington into his strong, rugged embrace.' Barf. What's your nickname? Rocky? Rocco? Double barf."

Incredibly, Jared could feel himself relaxing. He sensed no menace from any of the three—of course, he hadn't sensed menace from Moira before she'd bashed him with a serving tray, either. Still, Moira was so contrite, and Wyndham so polite, and Mrs. Wyndham so refreshingly rude, it was hard to stay tense. And what the hell did that mean? That Moira was right? The monsters weren't all bad?

He coughed to cover his confusion. "My nickname in second grade was Jared Poopypants, for an incident I refuse to go into, no matter how long you and your husband torture me. Creditors call me Mr. Roche. My friends call me Jared. I don't know what you guys are," he added truthfully.

"Let's find out," Michael said genially. "Something to drink, Mr. Roche?"

"Barf," Jeannie said again, but went to the wet bar.

"Yeah, I'd love a beer," he admitted. "And a bottle of aspirin."

Wordlessly Moira stepped behind him, and then he felt her kneading his neck with her small, supple fingers. By the time Jeannie handed him an ice-cold, foamy beer, his neck felt much better. "I'm still pissed at you," he muttered.

She bent to whisper in his ear. "I know. You can take it out on me later. At the house. In your room."

Her mouth was hovering outside the cup of his ear and his dick was paying close attention to the conversation. "Do you know any rope tricks?"

". . . your sister."

"Mr. Roche?"

"Jared," he said automatically, trying to shake off the surge of excitement Moira's words had brought. Talk about the wrong place and time! "It's Jared."

"Thank you. I'm Michael, and you've met my wife, Jeannie. I was saying how sorry I was to hear about your sister."

"You'll be even sorrier when you hear the stuff I've been able to dig up."

Michael sat across from him holding a tumbler half full of Scotch. Moira declined a drink, staying behind Jared and gently rubbing his neck, and Jeannie sat next to her husband with a glass full of milk. At Jared's stare, she mumbled, "Still breastfeeding."

For some reason that made him laugh out loud. It seemed to emphasize the wholesome attributes of the room they were in, the pleasant people he was talking to. Death had no place here . . . not where women breastfed well-loved babies and potential girlfriends promised bondage games.

"I guess Moira can tell you what's been going on as well as I can," he said, because he wanted to hear what Moira had to say about the situation.

She ruffled his hair in response and started to speak. She spoke for quite a while, finishing with, ". . . and Jared's been tracking the killer. I think—I'm sure—it's Gerald."

Wyndham and his wife looked at each other. Jared was still trying to figure out why he hadn't loaded his gun and killed everyone. Except Moira. Probably except Moira—he still couldn't believe she'd gotten the drop on him so easily. He couldn't believe he was still thinking about the clothesline coiled neatly in the garage! 'Rope tricks', she'd said. Jesus.

The woman—Jeannie—had thrown him off-guard, that was why he was off his stride. She was about as adorable as Moira, and what a temper! She hung around werewolves all day—was married to one!—and hadn't been killed or mutilated or anything like that.

It was sure something to think about.

Then there was his pretty, purple-eyed Moira. She was hiding stuff from him, but he was seeing it less as duplicity and more as loyalty. There was nothing he admired more than loyalty . . . hell, loyalty to his family had brought him here. It was all pretty damned confusing. He hadn't counted on it becoming confusing. It had seemed pretty fucking black and white just a few days ago.

"Gerald probably did kill your sister—and I'm very sorry," Michael said.

"Really really sorry, Rococo," Jeannie added. "I don't know what I'd do if something horrible happened to Michael or Lara."

Sympathy from the dogs—well, the dog and his wife—he hadn't expected. He had to look away from the genuine kindness on their faces. Liking the dogs was not in the plan. No, sir.

"I only met the man twice . . . and the second time I killed him," Jeannie added candidly. Jared looked back in a hurry.

"Jeannie . . ."

"Michael, we've got to tell him." She took a big slug of her drink, and went on passionately, unaware of her milk mustache. "If I go to jail, I go to jail . . . but I don't think Jared's the type to rat out the killer of a killer."

"No, ma'am, I am not. Why don't you tell me what happened."

"Yes, why don't I? Okay. Gerald was this disgusting horrible werewolf—and no, that's not redundant, so don't say it. Although it's an opinion I had myself not too long ago," she added, giving her husband a formidable frown. "Anyway. This jerkoff was a wife beater, a puppy kicker, a daughter smacker. And he got the idea in his head that his wife was giving him too many girl babies . . . he really wanted a son. Never mind biology and X chromosomes and that any idiot knows that sperm dictates the baby's sex . . ."

"Honey . . ."

"Right, right, I'm staying focused. I am. Anyway. He kills his wife—nice, huh? And my husband decided the guy's ass was grass, except Gerald's daughters—he had three—intervened on their dad's behalf. Begged for his life. So Michael felt sorry for the girls and banished Gerald from the pack. So he went away and did whatever rogue werewolves do.

"Then, when I got pregnant and turned up here, Gerald snuck back to town and tried to kidnap me. He got onto the grounds during a full moon and hurt a lot of people, so I shot him. The end."

"And when was this?"

"Almost a year ago."

Jared shook his head. "That's not right. There have been six or seven murders since then. Same M.O. I've been researching every murder that matched my sister's."

Moira turned to him, surprised. "A serial killer? I thought you were focused on your sister."

"I started out focused on one death. Then, when I started digging, I realized there was a lot more going on."

"All the murders happening during a full moon," Michael said.

"Yes. That's how I knew it was one of you . . ." Freaks? Monsters? Degenerate killers? ". . . people."

Michael let that pass. "And do the victims all look alike?"

Wyndham, Jared realized with growing excitement, knew something. "Yes. They're all between five foot

two and five foot four. They've all got long dark hair parted on the left, and blue eyes. Very pale skin." Jared watched Moira's eyes widen with understanding. "What is it, babe?"

"You've just described Gerald's late wife," she said, almost gasped. "That's exactly what she looked like!"

"But Gerald's dead," Jeannie protested. "Nobody's got any reason to kill women who look like his wife."

"Are you sure he's dead? I mean . . . he's a werewolf."

"Yeah, that's right." Jeannie replied, nodding. "A werewolf. Not a living god."

Michael coughed modestly. "Well . . ."

"Shut up, honey. Werewolves are perfectly mortal. I put multiple bullets in Gerald's head. He's deader than the dodo bird, trust me, Rocky."

"Well, his daughters aren't," Moira said quietly. "Maybe we should go have a talk with them. Don't they still live around here?" Then she froze. Everything within her locked for a long moment; shock had rendered her incapable of moving, even blinking.

"Moira . . . Moira!" Jared shook her arm lightly. "What is it? What's the matter?"

She gulped. Looked at Jared, then at Michael. "Geraldine," she said hoarsely. "Geraldine killed Jared's sister. Geraldine killed them all."

Uproar. But Jared said nothing. Just kept his gaze on Moira while she continued. "Remember, Michael? She was here early this week. Passing through town, she said. She's a loner, a drifter . . . Geraldine—"

"Geraldine, named for her father," Michael said with deadly quiet. "Geraldine, the eldest. The son Gerald wanted more than he wanted anything. How long did he pour poison in her ears, I wonder? How long has she been killing her mother over and over again, to appease her father, himself a year in his grave? If we can track her movements . . . match them to the deaths . . ."

"Oh, she can't!" Jeannie protested. "You guys are wrong. And it's not me being humanly naive, it's not. You're wrong, is all . . . it's not Geraldine. She was in this house. She played with my daughter, for God's sake. She's the sweetest thing, even nicer than Moira."

Moira, who knew herself to be far from nice, just shook her head numbly. And Michael, who'd seen Moira tear apart two armed men once upon a time, simply said, "Gerald did not kill those women. Geraldine did. And you know it, Jeannie . . . just give it a minute."

"No," she said stubbornly, but a species of frightened doubt drifted across her face. "She didn't do this. I've had her in my home, and she didn't do this thing."

"That may be true, ma'am," Jared said politely, but he was standing up, "but appearances can be deceiving. As everyone in this room probably knows. I'm going to go check it out. Bye."

"Not by yourself, you're not," Moira said, and was on her feet and after him in an instant.

"Indeed," Michael said. He was on his feet.

Jared spun. "No way. This isn't yours."

Michael and Jared were now chest to chest, and Moira saw with dismay that her leader's shoulders were up and he was leaning far forward, almost looming over Jared, although the men were close in height. The classic stance of a werewolf defending his territory. "You're wrong about that, Jared. In fact, the plain truth is, this isn't yours."

"Tell that to my sister. Where were you when one of your damned out-of-control dogs was ripping my sister in two?"

Moira winced.

Michael's eyes—a weird gold color—went even more yellow. His mouth thinned and turned down in a sorrowful bow. "Exactly. That's why this—this ungodly mess is mine. For your sister. For all the other

sisters. I was asleep at the switch. Now I have to fix it."

"Um, hello?" Jeannie tapped Michael on the shoulder. "Any reason you both can't go? I mean, don't get me wrong, all this chest-beating and me-boss batcrap is enthralling, really, but don't we have a murderer to catch?"

Michael unhunched. Jared turned to look at Mrs. Wyndham, who stared back with raised eyebrows.

"She's right," he said after a long moment. Moira sighed with relief.

"She often is," Michael said fondly. "What a pity it appears to go straight to her head."

"What a pity you're going to bed with a fractured skull, pal." But Jeannie smiled as she said it, and the tension in the room ratcheted down several notches.

Chapter Ten

Who would go and who would stay turned out to be a moot point as Geraldine had a job. "Which I s'pose we should have thought of," Jeannie commented.

Interestingly, Geraldine was a cemetery caretaker. According to her supervisor, the job was seasonal and Geraldine attended to it when she was in town. "Sure I gave her the job," he replied to Michael's questions. "Felt sorry for her. Nasty business with her dad, eh?"

By necessity, Geraldine's hours were flexible. As she could be at work or at home, the two couples split up. Michael declined to let the rest of the family in on the problem, preferring instead to leave Lara in the pack's protection.

"If we can't handle this ourselves," he explained, "we deserve to get eaten. And if we do get eaten, I want to know Lara's safe."

"Yuck-o," was Jeannie's only comment.

Based on what the cemetery supervisor had said, the group felt sure Geraldine was most likely to be at work, so Michael and Jeannie took that address. On that issue, Michael would not budge.

"Arrogant asshole," Jared growled, jerking the car into reverse and squealing down the cemetery entrance—backward.

"Yes."

"Pushes people around all damn day."

"Yes."

"Wife seems nice, though. In a scary kind of way."

"She's beyond marvelous."

He grunted. "How come you didn't mention it?" He brought the car around. Tires squealed. Gravel flew. Moira, nigh-invulnerable werewolf, tightened her seatbelt. "What?"

"No. I mean, how come you didn't tap me on my shoulder like Mrs. Wyndham tapped Mikie? And suggest we both go find Geraldine? I mean, you're super-smart. You must have figured it out. After all," he added with a grin, "you weren't suffering from testosterone overload like me and Michael."

Shocked, Moira replied, "That wouldn't have been my place." A beta female, thrusting herself between two alphas squaring off? Moira's mama didn't raise no fools. "Besides, I figured out who murdered your sister. What . . . did I not reach high enough for you? Are you implying I'm an underachiever?"

He had the grace to look abashed, and quickly changed the subject. "Listen, when we get there—"

"I am not staying in the car."

"Yes, you are. I'm not having anything happen to you, too."

Touched by his concern, it was a long moment before she could speak. When she did, she told him a bald truth: "I'm not having anything happen to you, either."

He smiled at her. "Guess we're fucked, then."

"Guess we are." As far as romantic declarations of love went, this one left much to be desired. So how come you can't stop grinning, you twit?

Jared pulled into Geraldine's driveway sedately enough, and Moira noticed he had a pleasant look on his face. "That's right, Geraldine, nothin' to worry about out here," he muttered, still smiling inanely as he shut off the engine. "Just a fella who wants to ask you a couple of questions . . . nothin' to get excited about . . ."

"Jared, really." Moira didn't try to hide her exasperation. "Now I'm definitely not staying in the car. You need me for this. You've got this silly idea in your head that because the full moon isn't until tomorrow night, Geraldine is harmless. I can assure you that's not the case. Soothing words and silly grins aren't going to put her at ease. She's going to know what you want the minute she gets close enough to smell you."

He had been nodding politely during her lecture, but now smirked. "And me without my Old Spice. C'mere, sugar."

What on earth was wrong with the man? she thought before he grabbed her and pulled her close. She would have imagined he'd be a bundle of nerves, this close to confronting his sister's killer—Probable killer, her ever-logical mind interjected.—but he practically whistled in contentment.

"Listen, weirdo," was as far as she got before his tongue plunged into her mouth. With anyone else this kiss would have been an alarming development. Since the tongue belonged to Jared, it was actually a quite enjoyable development. Yes, indeed. Most pleasant. Especially the way his lips were so soft, the way he kissed and licked and nibbled and—CLICK.

—handcuffed her to the steering wheel.

Moira sat stock-still for a thunderstruck moment. Then, heedless of the lurking Geraldine and the quiet neighborhood, she shrieked. "What did you do?"

"Uh. Moira. Not so loud." He rubbed his ear. "I don't have to answer that question, do I? It's—what d'you call it—rhetorical."

She tugged experimentally. She couldn't get over the fact that he'd ruthlessly distracted her and then shackled her like a dog.

When she spoke, her voice was quite calm, but Jared looked at her warily anyway. "You carry handcuffs in your car?"

"Hey, I was a Boy Scout before I was a Marine."

"Boy Scouts carry handcuffs?"

"Okay, well, I'm out of here." And he was . . . he was opening the car, getting out, standing up. "Sorry, honey. But no way are you going anywhere near that killer. Not while I'm still breathing."

"Something which can be rectified!" she shouted. He winced and shut the car door. "And I'm a killer, too, you moron!"

He snorted, then turned and started for the house.

Moira fumed inside the car. Oh, it would serve him right if she stayed docilely put while Geraldine

cuisinarted his entrails. For two cents, she'd do it.

Yeah, right.

"Lord, love has made me a fool," she mumbled aloud. Inwardly, she added, I have fallen in love at last. With a man who has spent his entire adult life hunting my kind. She normally got quite a kick out of irony. Not today.

She gave the handcuffs a hard yank. Metal groaned, but didn't break. She pulled again, and slipped her hand out of the now too-wide handcuff loop, then smacked it irritably, watching the cuffs swing from the steering wheel.

Well, that was that. No way would Jared be able to overlook that little feat of superhuman strength. One way or another, this would all be over tonight.

One way or another, this would all be over tonight. Jared expected to feel hot exultation, but instead only felt relief. Relief, and the hope that there could be a future with Moira after this was behind them.

Assuming she would speak to him ever again.

Well, he didn't care if she gave him the silent treatment for a damn year, if she was safe. Ten years. He'd take furious over dead any day.

Jared paused on the porch, unsure what to do next. Ring the doorbell, he supposed, and look into the woman's—Geraldine's—eyes and see if he could find murder there. He hadn't counted on the dog being a woman. He hadn't counted on a lot of things when he started this strange journey.

He heard a light thump behind him and turned just in time to see Moira's sneakered foot slip up and out of sight as she pulled herself up on the porch roof.

He ground his teeth. Christ, the woman was a damn monkey! He should have known someone that smart would have learned how to pick a lock . . . probably kept the picks in her hair as barrettes or whatever.

Now she was on the roof, probably finding an open window . . . aarrgh!

He raised a fist to pound on the front door when it suddenly jerked open, hard enough to blow strands of his hair back from his face.

An enormously tall woman stood before him, grinning. Her hair was the color of damp dirt, as were her eyes. She had incredibly white teeth, which made her smile hard to bear. Quite thin, her collarbones stood out clearly against the yellow T-shirt she wore, a color which accentuated her sallow complexion. She wore faded jeans with old stains on the thighs and knees—mud? Blood? She was barefoot and he saw her toenails were long enough to curl over the tops of her toes. He wondered in a distant part of his mind if she clicked when she walked on a wooden floor.

She looked cruel and hard, so he was unprepared for her soft, sweet, lilting voice: "Hello. Can I help you?"

He stared at her. His back itched where his gun was pressing against his flesh. "Uh . . . yeah. My name is Jared Rocke. Uh—" Why have you been killing women who look like your mama? How have you been able to fool the Wyndhams for so long? Are you aware you're the most frightening thing I've ever seen, and I used to live in Miami? "You're Geraldine Cassick, right?"

"Yes, of course." The woman's smile widened, if that was possible. Jared nearly shuddered. He had no idea how this woman had been passing herself off as human for so long. "Rocke. How's your dead sister? By the way, your cunt of a girlfriend isn't fooling anybody."

At "your dead" he reached for his gun. At "by the way" she slapped it out of his hand so quickly he didn't see her move, and didn't realize she'd cut him with her nails until later. At "isn't fooling" she

seized his shirt collar and yanked him inside her house, shoving him hard enough to send him sliding across the hardwood floor, where he fetched up against the wall with a sickening thud. For a half second he thought the top of his head had fallen off. White stars exploded before his eyes.

"Now I'm really gonna kick your ass," he groaned, hoping his vision would clear soon.

"I'm terrified," she said in her weirdly cute, feminine voice. Her dad must have hated that voice, he thought dazedly, especially when he wanted a boy so bad. "Actually, I'm relieved. I can get rid of you and get back to business. I did not like having you sniffing up my backtrail, Roque."

"It's Roque. You were waiting for me."

"Of course I was!" she said. She crossed the room with terrifying swiftness and squatted down to look at him. He could see two—no, three—of her heads, floating around him in a shaky semicircle. Her six eyes were gleaming, fanatical. "Where better than to hang out and wait for you than here, where Michael-king-shit-werewolf and his monkey bitch live? My home, where I know everyone and they know me and oh, isn't it terrible about my dad, but you're all right, Geraldine, you poor, poor thing."

Jared shook his head, desperate to clear it. Ten seconds ago he'd been standing on her porch. "Just in case I hadn't already figured you were off your fucking rocker," he informed her in a croak, "I think I've got it now."

She ignored him. "Except, Jared, you were supposed to kill them." Geraldine's tone became sweetly reproachful. "You were supposed to come to me first, because you figured my father had been doing the killings, and I would have told you the killer was Michael! But you—did—it—all—backwards." Each word was punctuated by a brisk, hard shake.

"It wouldn't have worked, nutjob," he managed, fighting to loose himself from her grip. Cripes, she was barely holding him, but her fingers felt like steel. He smashed his palm into the underside of her jaw, but her head barely moved. "You shouldn't have framed a dead man, Geraldine. That's where you took a wrong turn."

"I'm going to kill that half-breed cow you've been fucking," she informed him with conspirational tenderness. "I can smell her all over you. She actually let you touch her? Let a nasty, smelly, monkey touch her?"

He tried to bring a knee up, hard, into her belly, but she shifted easily. She started choking him, throttling him almost absent-mindedly while banging his head against the floor. "Mm—not—smelly—" was what he managed before things started to go dark around the edges.

Suddenly her grip relaxed, and he sucked in painful breaths. Geraldine's face was, as if by magic, slashed in four long streaks, bleeding. So much blood, it rained into his face, splattered his shirt.

"Half-breed is all right," Moira said, and he realized she was directly above them. Geraldine whined, clutched her face and scuttled back, blood pouring through her long-nailed fingers, pattering to the floor. "It's tactless, but accurate. Calling me a plump herbivore is not. Also," she added, glancing down at him, "I'm not speaking to you. But I will save your ass."

"—get—out—of—here—"

"Oh, shut up. And you," she said to Geraldine, stalking toward her, "are a nasty, smelly, wretched creature. Look at you. You look like you're going to Change any second. Feeling the stress of the coming full moon, Geraldine? How rude of you to show it."

"You're surprised by how I look," Geraldine hissed back, flipping to her feet. "That's because you never saw me. No one has ever! Seen! Me! Not your precious Michael or his bitch-dog or Derik or Mother or —my—my—"

"I don't care, Geraldine. It's too bad you had an unendurable childhood, but what gives you the right to kill? Worse, kill helpless humans? Nothing. Those women did nothing to you."

Jared watched the two women circle each other. They moved strangely—more like big cats than an accountant and a cemetery caretaker. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Everything hurt, his throat was on fire and he was seeing two Moiras and two Geraldines, but he still couldn't look away. He noticed they were very careful about where they put their feet. It was almost like a dance or ritual—something very old, something stylized.

"No," Moira was saying, "those poor women did absolutely nothing to deserve their fate."

"They did! They—"

Moira went on, implacable. Her voice rang with truth and scorn. "You've shamed us all. You're crazy, but part of you knows. Part of you knows everything you are is wrong, and everything you've done. Your father—Gerald—was the worst creature I've ever known. But that doesn't excuse you."

"Don't you talk about my father. You're not fit for him to piss on."

Moira shook her head. Her outrage had fled; now she just looked terribly tired. "You fooled us for a long time. But it's over now. You're not killing anyone tonight."

"Wrong, half-breed." Geraldine leapt. Moira dodged, pivoted quicker than thought, and sent her small foot into Geraldine's side. Jared's eyes widened; the 'crack' was very loud. Amazing! In between collecting college degrees for the hell of it and running the Wyndham finances, his Moira had apparently found time to get a black belt in karate.

Incredibly, Geraldine ignored the pain of broken ribs. He couldn't believe it, but she was still moving, and moving quickly—she spun and regained her center as rapidly as an adder. Too quickly for him to follow, both women were literally at each other's throats, locked in a brutal battle.

He tried to get up. He tried. And again. But . . . too hard, everything hurt, his head was spinning, everything was so fast, how did Moira adjust to things happening so fast? It was almost as if she, too, possessed that same inhuman speed and agility, as if his Moira was one of the . . .

Geraldine howled and all the hairs on the back of Jared's neck came to rigid attention. It was every bad or frightening sound he had ever heard, times ten. Everything that was in him wanted to run from the sound, get the Hell out and never, never come back. The part of his brain devoted 100% to survival was wide awake and screaming at him to leave.

As if in response to the unearthly noise, Moira had made a final, desperate leap, and now she was—God, was she biting Geraldine? Her teeth were fastened at the juncture between Geraldine's neck and shoulder. The killer shrieked again and drove an elbow back into Moira's stomach. Moira grunted and held on. Geraldine's fist came up in a blur and then Moira was tumbling away. Geraldine pounced, quick as a cat.

Jared crawled toward them. He had no idea why. He sure as shit couldn't help Moira in his condition. But somehow he was on his knees and he crawled, crawled. He saw Moira's hand come up, try to shove Geraldine away. Saw her claw for Geraldine's eyes. He crawled faster.

He wouldn't let this bitch kill another woman he loved.

He groped for his pants leg, for the small pistol in the ankle holster. Geraldine hadn't known about it, or hadn't cared. It was practically a toy, anyway. A one-shot Derringer. His Marine buddies would laugh themselves into hernias if they saw him with it.

He stopped crawling. He heard another wet snap and didn't know whose bone had broken. Moira was kicking Geraldine away, turning, trying to get distance. Geraldine was giggling through a mouthful of

blood. Jared found the pistol . . . and dropped it right out of his bloody grip.

"Geraldine," he croaked, "your daddy died screaming."

That got her attention; she snapped her head around so fast he practically heard it. Her eyes were huge; the irises looked like gold-flecked mud. "What? What did you say, monkey?"

"Which word didn't you understand, cow, goat, uh—mammal with extra stomachs?"

"Ruminator," Moira suggested faintly, trying to get to her feet and failing. He could see the bulge in her left leg, below her kneecap. He'd heard her bone break.

The monster would pay for that. "Ruminator, thanks, babe. Oh, Geraldine?" Groping, groping. Got it.

Hang on. "After Moira and I settle your hash, we're gonna find your dad's grave and fuck right on top of it." Hang on. "That's not gonna be a problem, is—uurrggh!"

Geraldine had jumped high in the air—impossibly high, his rational mind had trouble believing this wasn't a fantastic illusion—and landed squarely on top of him. That was fine. That was perfect. "Bite me, dog," he growled. "Let's see those pearly whites."

Her head swooped toward his, ready to tear out his throat. For my sister. For my love. He could smell Geraldine's breath: rank, meaty. This is the last thing my sister saw. Oh, God, help me now. He brought the Derringer up, jammed it into her mouth so hard he felt teeth break. Had time to register the killer's almost comical look of surprise before he pulled the trigger and blew the back of her head off.

Geraldine fell forward, onto him. He screamed, in horror and despair and rage for the dead. "Moira!" he roared.

Somehow, Moira heaved the corpse off him. And that's about when everything went black.

Chapter Eleven

Jared opened his eyes, and Moira shrieked.

"Owwwww!"

"I'm sorry," she said at once. He could see she was quite pale. Her eyes dominated her face and their color was deep, nearly purple, startling and mesmerizing at once. "I'm just really, really happy you're awake."

"Amen, sister." He started to sit up, hardly able to take his eyes off her, then just as quickly gave up and flopped back onto the bed. "Argh, even my hair hurts. Is it dead?"

"Yes."

"Where am I?"

"Wyndham Manor. Also known as Dogs R Us."

"Funny girl." Jared glanced around the lush bedroom, which was roughly the size of his last apartment. Sunlight streamed through the west window. It was late, then. They'd gone to Geraldine's before lunch. "Geraldine. God, what a mess."

"That," Moira said tartly, "is an understatement. FYI, none of the others can face you right now. They're so embarrassed they didn't see this before. Years ago."

"They shouldn't be." Jared paused. Yes, he had really said that. Weirder, he'd meant it. Blaming the dogs—err, Moira's employers—had become habit. Bitter, but comforting in its familiarity.

But ten minutes with Geraldine had changed his mind about a lot of things. She'd been so fast, so ruthless. So inhuman and, at the same time, heartbreakingly victimized. "You guys thought you solved

the problem when Gerald was killed. Who could blame you? You wanted the nightmare to be over. I don't think there's blame in that."

"Ha!" Moira's tone was bitter, and Jared could see she would be blaming herself for a long time. She, who prided herself on her fine intelligence, hadn't noticed the killer living four miles from her bedroom. A difficult pill to swallow. He doubted Moira would do so gracefully.

He almost smiled. Christ, he adored her. She could have been killed—they both could have—but she never quit. She looked as innocent and delicate as a Hummel figurine, but had the temper of a wolverine and the tenaciousness of a pit bull. With rabies.

His thoughts derailed in sudden confusion. Geraldine was dead. His sister was avenged. Now what? Settle down with Moira? His life had been about vengeance since . . . well, since forever. Would there now be room for other things? Was it possible? The idea was as wonderful as it was terrifying.

Vengeance was a cold blanket, but he'd been able to wrap himself in it for years. Was there room now for more?

"I just don't understand how she held together so long," Moira muttered. She made a small fist and thumped her leg in agitation.

"I don't know how werewolves blend in with any humans," he said frankly.

Moira shook her head. "It's necessary. It's a skill learned early. What you saw—that wouldn't have fooled anyone. I think Geraldine was tired. She was tired, she wanted to be done. She quit holding herself together and stayed in her little house and waited for it to be over."

Jared thought back to the look on Geraldine's face when he shot her. Surprise, and . . . relief? He would have bet his gun collection on it.

"By the way," the love of his life interrupted his thoughts with heavy sarcasm, "Mister-I-can-take-on-a-werewolf-in-her-prime-so-stay-in-the-car-Moira, you're not moving from that bed for a week. Among other things, you've got a nasty concussion and cracked ribs."

"I've got . . ." Memory returned; he lunged forward. "How's your leg?"

"Lie back down." She gently pushed him back against the pillows. "My leg?"

"It broke. I heard it break. Maybe we should take you to the hospital. Has Wyndham called a doctor?"

"Wyndham set it for me. You know, it wouldn't hurt you to call him Michael. Stop trying to get up." She sat down in the chair next to the bed, and propped her leg up on the mattress. The swelling was nasty, but Jared couldn't see the lump of broken bone any longer. Her leg was tightly wrapped in elastic. Not plaster.

"Huh. I guess it didn't break."

"Jared."

"Lucky for you, sugar, because that could have been nasty."

"Jared."

"And by the way, you must have had some kind of adrenaline rush in that hell house. You were tossing Geraldine around like she was made of paper. It was like watching the Hulk. A short blonde Hulk."

"Jared."

"And I'm not staying here, cutie. Not even for you." He tossed the blankets back. "This place creeps me right the hell out. I'm heading back to my place, and I'd love it if you came with me. In fact, I insist on it. I need a sexy nurse to take care of me."

She was staring at him. Why was she looking at him so strangely? Part of him knew, part of him was pulling back the veil so he could see. He willed the understanding away. "Moira? Come on, let's book.

What do you say, babe?"

"I can't do that."

"Sure, it's easy. We'll scoot down to the truck, hop in, make a quick stop at the Colonel's—I'd kill another werewolf just for some fried chicken—"

"I'm a werewolf."

He didn't blink. "No."

Her eyes widened. For a minute he thought she was going to fall out of the chair. She'd clearly been braced for any reaction except calm denial. "Yes, I am. I'm a werewolf. Tonight when the moon rises I'll be hairier than the drain in the locker room at the YMCA."

He calmly folded his arms across his chest. "No."

She leapt to her feet. Her cheeks were flushed, her forehead burning like a lamp. "Jared, stop it! You know I am, you must know. I'm a werewolf."

He shouted, although it hurt his head like hell. "I'm not having this discussion, no way, uh-uh, count me out, folks." Of course she wasn't. It was impossible. They were the monsters. She was Moira. Ergo, nuh-uh, not happening, no way.

She bellowed so loud he feared for the mirror across the room. "I'm a werewolf!"

No slouch in the vocals department, he roared back, "The hell you are!"

Moira's temper snapped. "Of course I am, you idiot! Adrenaline rush! Come on!"

"Science is on my side."

"Bullshit is on your side. You would have seen it before now, if you'd allowed yourself."

"You are not," he repeated stubbornly.

"I am, so, a werewolf."

"You're just saying that so I don't think they're all scum. Which, by the way, they are."

"They aren't, and I am one."

"No, you're not."

"How can you say that! You can only fool yourself for so long."

"Because I can't care about one!" he roared. "That's absolutely impossible and not in the plan! You're not you're not YOU ARE NOT! You leap around like a monkey because you've got a gymnastics background, you heal quickly because—I dunno, you've got a super immune system—you don't get tired but big deal, one of my buddies can go for three days without sleep, he does it all the time and it never bothers him except he gets really bad breath from drinking all that Mountain Dew . . . people are different."

She was holding her head in her hands. "Oh, my God. You're a moron."

"I mean, don't get me wrong." He could hear himself talking fast and faster, almost babbling, but it was impossible to stop. "You're definitely weird. I'll give you that. But the stuff you can do, it's all within the realms of good old homo sapiens."

"So I'm a liar? Or just crazy?"

He had no answer for that one. After a long pause, he said, "I don't know. Maybe after working for werewolves all this time you think you're . . . I don't know. I'm not the brains of this team."

"You got that right," she muttered.

"I just know you're not one of them. You're not. I won't believe it." And you can't make me, he added silently, stubbornly.

"Why?"

Because she had nothing, not one fucking thing, in common with Geraldine. Because he wanted to marry her and have kids with her and his kids weren't going to be fuzzy. Because his sister's killer was dead and he wanted to finally build a life without grief. Because.

"I just won't."

"You said you couldn't care about a werewolf," she said slowly, and now she stood, and walked to the door (without a limp, his mind pointed out treacherously) and turned. Her eyes shone with unshed tears.

"I take that to mean you think you care about me."

"Yes." He paused. "I'm sorry. I had about a thousand nicer ways planned to tell you. I didn't mean to just blurt it out in mid-yell. I do care, Moira. From the minute you hightailed it down the road dressed in my shower curtain, I never wanted anything bad to happen to you, ever."

She winced away from him, as if his words hurt her. "You care about a lie then, Jared. There's no shame in not knowing things. But I won't be with someone who puts on blinders on purpose. And won't take them off, no matter what he hears and what he sees." She wrenched open the door and fled.

"Moira, don't go!" He slapped his hands over his eyes and writhed in agony. "Oh, God, my head . . . fuck."

The door slammed open, hard enough to crash against the wall and stick as the doorknob was imbedded in the wood.

A large, blonde man filled the doorway. Filled. His hair was the color of the sun, cut brutally short. His eyes were a deep, mesmerizing green. He was broad-shouldered and the T-shirt he wore did nothing to hide his excellent muscle definition. Given the man's ridiculously good looks and powerful build, Jared assumed he was dealing with a Wyndham werewolf.

"I'm going to shove your head so far up your ass," the man said with ominous calm, "that you'll be able to kiss your own colon."

"Go chase a mail truck," Jared snapped. "I've got bigger problems than whatever bit you on the ass today."

The man blinked. Held up one finger. Paused. Turned. Left. Jared heard a muffled sound from the hall—a snort? A chuckle? Then the stranger returned, looking stormier than ever. "You blew it, Monkeyboy."

"It's Roche."

"Moira hasn't given a guy so much as a come-hither look in years, and you had her. She was yours, all you had to do was ask! She saves your life, helps you avenge your sister, then finally screws up her courage and tells your bigoted sorry ass the truth, and you rejected everything she is."

"Did you actually say come-hither?"

"Stop making me laugh. This is a serious thing, ape face."

"It's Jared Roche, do I have to paint it on my forehead?"

"I'm going to throw you out the window." This in the same tone someone else might have said, "I'm going to fix you a cup of coffee." "The fall will probably kill you, but you'll be out of Moira's hair, and it'll make me feel better. Also, you deserve multiple broken bones for making my friend cry."

So saying, the man moved with that same terrifying quickness Geraldine had demonstrated. He seized the footboard of the bed and shoved. As if it was sliding across ice, the bed zipped across the carpet and slammed against the far wall . . . uncomfortably close to the window. But to Jared's human senses, the man had finished with ". . . making my friend cry." and suddenly his bed was against the window. He supposed he should have been terrified.

"Bring it on, German Shepherd!" His head pounding, Jared thrashed feebly among the blankets. "As

soon as I get out of this bed, we'll see who goes out the window!"

"Crud." The man blew out his breath in disgust. "I forgot your injuries wouldn't have healed yet. You guys are made of tissue paper, I swear."

"Derik!"

"What?" The man turned. Wyndham's wife stood in the doorway, hands on her hips. Jared inwardly groaned.

"Keep your hands off him," Jeannie warned, looking cutely threatening.

"I was only going to slap him around a little," Derik said defensively. "Wasn't even going to break the skin. Much."

"You and what army, Liver Snack breath?" Jared jeered.

"See? See? This guy's an asshole squared. And he made Moira cry." Derik kicked the footboard. Jared heard the 'crunch' of splintering wood. "For which he will bleed and puke and beg."

"Moira would jam your ass up to your shoulderblades—"

"Worth it," Derik said stubbornly.

"—and you know it. Besides, that's why I'm here. Ole Rockhead's got a concussion, so I figured I'd shriek at him for half an hour or so until he agreed to go after Moira."

At last the bickering couple had his attention. "Go after her? Where's she gone?"

"You think she was going to stay here? Tonight? She's out of here, pal. I doubt she'll be back until she gets word that you've moved on. Let me know," Derik added with a giant, toothy, terrifying smile, "if you need help packing."

Jared threw back the bedcovers again and stood. Instantly, the floor rushed up to his head. "What the—?" Jeannie and Derik were bending over him. "You can't go anywhere," she informed him, while he tried to get up off the floor. "Geraldine really rattled your cage. You've got a bad concussion and about a zillion minor injuries."

"My knees work," he said through gritted teeth. Slowly, painfully, he rolled over onto all fours and started crawling for the door.

"Aw, nuts," Derik sighed.

"What?"

"I could get to like this puke."

Hand, hand, knee, knee. Hand, hand, knee, knee. What the hell had they done with his clothes? Oh, well . . . Derik could use a good mooning. Hand, hand, knee, knee.

"What if one of you guys gave him a transfusion?" Jeannie asked.

"It'd probably work," Derik replied indifferently. "Speed up his healing for a day or so. Enough to fix him up."

"Well, let's give him some blood, then."

"Forget it. He's too stupid to let you help."

"Hello?" Jared called irritably. He kept his gaze fixed on the bedroom door, which was now a mere eighteen miles away. "I can hear you two."

"I disagree," Jeannie said. "Not about him being stupid—"

"And me without my gun," Jared muttered.

"—but he'd probably do it if it meant he could get to Moira that much sooner. And Derik, it's really important he get to her before sundown. Isn't it?"

"Don't yell, I'm standing right in front of you. And I'm telling you, he won't do it. His tiny little mind

can't get around the idea, and even if it did, he's a bigot. He's a—an anti-werewolfite!"

"Dammit, you two, am I even in the room?"

"Shut up," they said in unison. Then, from Jeannie, "No, wait. Derik, pick him up, would you?"

At once Jared felt himself effortlessly lifted and scooped into Derik's arms, as if he were a baby. A big, scowling, hairy baby. "I have to go," he nearly shouted, "and you two aren't helping." Moira was out there alone, thinking God knew what . . . because he was a jackass. He had to fix it right away. The thought of her unhappiness tormented him. He'd rather swallow a wasps' nest than be responsible for her pain.

Derik placed him on the bed, and Jeannie slapped her palms against his chest to keep him from rising.

"Jared, if we give you a pint of werewolf blood, your injuries will be healed within the hour."

He stared at them.

"I told you," Derik said triumphantly. "Too dumb. He has no idea what you're talking about. Look, any minute he's going to start drooling."

There was a 'thud' as Jeannie's sneakered foot landed on Derik's instep. The smile on her face never wavered. "What do you say, Rocky?"

"I say you guys better not let word of this get out," he replied slowly. Thinking: I'm going to pay a high price for my foolishness . . . but if it'll get Moira back, it's worth it. "People will hunt you down just for the properties in your blood. You'd be werewolves and we'd be . . . vampires, I guess."

"Okay," Derik muttered, "not so dumb."

"Let's do it," he said firmly. "Right now. I gotta find Moira. She made me care and by God, she's stuck with me."

Jeannie pretended to wipe away a tear. "That's so beautiful."

"What are we standing around for? Make a fist, Lassie Boy. Somebody get a needle," Jared ordered.

Derik snorted. "A) I wouldn't piss down your throat if your heart was on fire . . ."

"Gross!" Jeannie cried.

". . . and b) I'm not giving you shit. Besides, we keep some blood on hand in case Jeannie gets hurt, or one of our other human friends."

"Derik," Jeannie said reprovingly, "you shouldn't—"

"Back off, blondie. I've known Moira my whole life. I'm not much interested in helping someone who makes her feel the way Fucko did today."

"Fucko is going to try to make things right," Jared said. "So get me that blood—"

"Don't say it," Derik warned.

"Fetch!"

Chapter Twelve

Jared ran. He ran past the rose garden, into the woods. His headache was gone. His pain was gone. He felt like he could jump over the mansion. He felt like he could defeat an army. All this, from a pint of werewolf blood.

He understood the pack's secrecy, the way they kept to themselves. And he respected their discipline in a way he never could have before. What was to stop werewolves from taking over the world? From slaughtering humans like cattle? Wyndham, of course. Wyndham kept them in line. And dealt with the

rogues, when he had to.

He'd never love them, Jared thought, leaping over a felled tree trunk, nimble as a gazelle. Or a wolf. But he could sure learn to respect the hell out of them.

He turned his thoughts away from the pack, toward Moira. He could actually smell her . . . her light, flowery scent, like spring violets, called to him. He had thought finding her would be tricky in the woods, the dark. About as tricky as tying his shoes. Jeannie had warned him the effects of the blood—the heightened senses—would wear off by daybreak, but he didn't care. He only needed a little more—there!

He burst into a clearing and saw her. She was nude, kneeling on the grass. She was crying, he saw with dismay, and soothing herself by rocking back and forth.

They all have their favorite places, Jeannie had said. Places they go when they don't want us to see them. Or hear them. Moira's is the clearing just past the orchard. She'll be there, Jared, and you'd better be nice to her when you find her.

He had promised. He would have promised anything. And now here was Moira, so upset she hadn't spotted him. Here was Moira, sobbing so hard her back shook with it. He had done this. Through stupidity or willfulness or plain Rocke stubbornness, he had wrought this.

He had no idea how to fix it.

He took a slow step forward just as Moira threw her head back. "Oh!" she cried, almost screamed. "Oh! Ohhhh . . . ohhhhhhhhhhhh . . . ouuuuuuhhhhhh . . . oooooooooooooo!"

One minute he was watching her cry, helpless. The next—and it was that fast, that quick, if he'd blinked he'd have missed it—she was standing on four paws. Her champagne-colored fur riffled in the brisk wind. The moon came out from behind the clouds and still she cried up at the moon, a wolf who dreamed she was a woman, or a woman who dreamed she was a wolf.

He sat on the ground. He hadn't thought to, but really had no choice . . . his knees unhinged and bam! He was on his ass in the leaves. Suddenly, he was very glad—very glad—he didn't have his gun. He didn't want his hands anywhere near a weapon right now when he was so terrified. And fascinated.

He'd seen a werewolf change before, of course. Had been revolted, of course. But that had been a thug, someone he used for information. It hadn't been someone he cared about. Someone he'd held, kissed, made love to in the dead of night. Showered with. Cooked breakfast for. Oh, hell, it wasn't Moira.

And he'd denied her. Told her she couldn't be a werewolf. Shrugged off her confession, turned his back on what she was. For what? For vengeance? Renee was revenged. For his stupid, human sense of the way things should be? Or simply because he didn't know how to open to her?

"Moira," he said, but what came out was a whisper.

She turned and looked at him. In the moonlight, her eyes were dark purple. She was as gorgeous a wolf as she was a woman.

She stepped away—no, cringed away, and he felt his face get hot with shame. He had done that. Taken a fearless, gorgeous creature and made her cower like a whipped hound. In a flash of understanding, he realized Moira was all the things he cared about—good, intelligent, strong, willful, charming—because of her heritage, not in spite of it.

Too bad he hadn't figured that out a little earlier.

"Moira," he said again, just as the wolf—just as his wolf spun and ran out of the clearing.

He sprinted after her. "Wait! I get it now! You're a werewolf! Great! Good! I figured it out!" And all she had to do was change right before his eyes because he was so fucking stupid. But he wouldn't say

that . . . not when she already knew . . .

"It's okay! The kids can be furry! I don't care, I swear!" Could she even understand English in her wolf form?

A tree branch swiped him across the cheek, hard enough to make his eyes water. He plunged ahead, ignoring the pain. "Moira, come back! I don't care that you've got more chest hair than I do!"

He was glad Jeannie had insisted he borrow a pair of Wyndham's sweatpants. They afforded his legs some protection, but the branches were scratching the shit out of his arms, chest, and face. It didn't matter. He had it coming, anyway.

Tripping over an exposed root, he went sprawling, sliding on his stomach across the forest floor. Gasping, he rolled to his feet and saw another wolf, one much bigger, with fur the color of sunlight and eyes so vividly green they were nearly hypnotic. The wolf's paws were as big as each of Jared's hands. Muscles flexed and bunched beneath the luxurious pelt as the wolf started toward him, laughing.

Laughing?

Yes. A wolf-laugh—Jared hadn't imagined such a thing was possible. The wolf made chuffing noises in its throat, and there was definitely an amused gleam in its eyes. Still, as it crossed in front of Jared, the wolf let out a warning growl and Jared realized that although the wolf didn't like him, it couldn't keep from laughing.

Derik.

And, on the heels of that thought, Jared realized he was in the middle of a forest filled with werewolves. "I don't care," he said out loud, but of course he did care. He cared a shitload. "I'm not leaving without Moira."

He saw her, peeking at him from behind a tree. She had stopped running, then. Or . . . maybe heard him and came back? His heart pounded giddily at the thought.

"Moira, I'm sorry. I'm about ten thousand kinds of fool. Don't run anymore, and don't be afraid."

Slowly, the small, light-colored wolf came forward, staring at him. He couldn't read her expression as he could Derik's. In this moment, he had no idea if that was a good thing, or a bad thing.

She scratched at the dirt with her paw. Even her paws were small and delicate; the claws looked like mother-of-pearl. Scratching at the dirt . . . symbols?

Letters.

He went down on one knee to look. The moon was riding high, so bright it was hard to look at, lending more than enough light so he could see . . .

I-D-I-O-T.

He grinned down on her. "Oh, baby," he said, and gently reached out to touch her thick, glorious fur. "It must be love."

Chapter Thirteen

Moira moved silently through her room. Jared was asleep in her bed in the mansion, but she was too tired to be surprised. Sunrise after the moon had ridden her always left its mark; all she wanted was a quick shower and a ten-hour nap.

She remembered last night fairly clearly. Of course she didn't process information the same way as a human and a wolf. But she remembered seeing him in the clearing, knowing he had watched her

Change. She remembered her hot shame, and running.

And then he'd come after her, Moira recalled.

She turned on the shower and stepped inside before the water had time to warm. He had come, had run after her yelling the silliest things, and making as much noise as a herd of rhinos on speed. Derik had actually rolled onto his back and waved all four paws in the air; it had been just too funny.

And despite his feelings on the subject of Jared—his loudly voiced feelings—Derik, a creature of irresistible curiosity, had gone back. He always liked a good show. Moira had followed, more concerned that Jared would trip and drive a branch through his eye than anything else.

And there he had been, scratched, bleeding from half a dozen places, and smelling strongly of the werewolf blood Jeannie had no doubt transfused into him. He hadn't flinched from her wolf form, hadn't pulled a gun on her.

Instead, he had told her the most amazing things. And touched her fur with a child's wonder. Even now, she could hardly believe he'd done that.

But now what? Happily ever after? Was it possible? More, was it what she wanted?

She finished showering, toweled herself dry, then slipped into bed. Beside her, Jared didn't even stir. She wasn't surprised; he was likely more tired than she was.

Time enough to worry about their future (what future?) later.

She woke, practically purring. Flexed, hard. Gasped. And came, her orgasm a sweet surprise, like peeling an orange and finding a chocolate inside.

Jared's head was between her thighs, his fingers held her apart as he slowly and steadily licked, licked, licked. Given how wet she felt—how terrific she felt!—he'd obviously been at this for a few minutes at least.

"Jared . . ." A groan.

He laughed against her flesh. "Shut up, darling." His tongue, inside her. Now gone, and lightly stabbing her throbbing clit. His fingers, inside her, now gone. Rubbing, getting slick with her juice.

She could smell his arousal, violent and sharp, like cedar on fire. His need kindled her own; she realized she wasn't gasping, she was panting, heaving for breath, desperate to have him inside her.

And part of her, the fraction of the one percent of her concentration not focused on coming again, thought this was just fine. He wouldn't be here with me, touching me, if he didn't still want to be with me. She felt the sweet spasms of another orgasm ripple through her, and moaned.

"Jared," she said again, and reached for him.

"Moira, sweetie, I'm going to need a little help here." He was moving up her body, touching her everywhere with hands that smelled like sex. "Also, you're going to marry me."

"I—"

"But just so there's no doubt. I mean, I get that you're ten times stronger than me and twice as smart. No problem. But between us, sugar, there's never going to be any doubt about who wears the pants in the Rocke family."

"Can't you stop talking," she groaned, wild with impatience, "and fuck me?"

"Sure thing." He had crawled up far enough so that he was crouching over her chest, kneeling on her hands. The pressure was firm, but not painful. Her leverage, however, was for shit. "But first I need your mouth."

"Wha—" Then his hot, hard length was pushing past her lips, his musky scent was in her nostrils, her

can catch. You either are one, or you aren't. You could have a transfusion every day for a year, but you'd never howl at the moon." She kissed him on the mouth, a hearty smack. "But to think that you didn't know . . . and you did it anyway . . . I love you. For all sorts of reasons, but most of all for this."

"Hey, it was nothing," he bragged. "And I love you, too. And you are going to marry me."

"Yes, so you keep telling me."

He showed her his vulnerable side as he squeezed her again. "Yeah, but you haven't answered."

"Of course I'll marry you. I've been waiting for you . . ." She thought back over the vista of lonely years. ". . . for a long time."

He kissed her again, a hearty smack on the mouth. "I've got about a million questions. Like, if you shave your legs when you're in your human form, will your wolf form have bare legs? And how much Nair do you go through in a month, anyway?"

She closed her eyes. "I think I liked it better when you refused to see the truth."

"And what if we're making love and the moon comes up? I mean, I'm an open-minded guy, but—"

"Jared," she groaned, "you're killing me. And you'd better be teasing, because that's both ridiculous and disgusting. I can see I'm going to have to get you some books."

"So, how strong are you? Can you lift a car up over your head?"

"Jared . . ."

"Not a serious car, like a Cadillac . . . how about a Volkswagen, could you lift a Volkswagen?"

"Jared!"

"Quick! Let's arm wrestle. Winner has to do all the dishes for life."

She poked him in the shoulder, hard. "I can't believe I yearned for the day you'd accept the truth."

"Be careful what you wish for, bay-bee." His teasing grin faded and he looked at her anxiously.

"Can we have kids? I mean . . . can you . . . with a regular guy?"

"Yes." And they'll be very special. You never knew what you got when a human mated with a werewolf. You might get a werewolf. You might get a human. You might get a human with extraordinary strength and agility. You might get a werewolf who could control their Change. It was always a toss of the dice. It was always exciting.

"What will they be?" His gaze was curious, wondering. His fingers moved softly over her belly, as if already feeling for the life within. She could feel him against her thigh, already hard again, and hot. Wanting her as badly as she wanted him.

"They'll be whatever they want to be," she said, and kissed him again, pulled him to her, and opened herself to him. Body and soul.

About the author:

MaryJanice Davidson has written over a dozen books across a variety of genres. Her last Secrets novella, Love's Prisoner, was a P.E.A.R.L. finalist and won the Sapphire Award for best science fiction romance. She has since been nominated for another P.E.A.R.L. (Naughty or Nice, www.ellorascave.com) and is currently working on another Wyndham werewolf story. Her latest book, Undead and Unwed, is the story of Betsy Taylor, reluctant vampire queen (www.ellorascave.com). Visit MaryJanice's website to check out her published work and upcoming books: <http://www.usinternet.com/users/alongi/>. And please drop her a line at alongi@usinternet.com. She loves to hear from readers!

Version history and scanner's info

Version 1.0—scanned, OCR'd and spell-checked from Red Sage Publishing's Secrets vol. 8. I just got annoyed when Derik's Bane came out, and I found out it was the third in the series, but the first two bits were novellas, and only available in a relatively obscure group of anthologies. One of the things about the #bookz community I love the most is that someone can spend the time tracking this stuff down, and everyone can benefit. It makes it a little more time-effective to do this, while if I was just buying and reading for myself, I'd probably never get this obsessive about it *grin*.

Version 2.0 –February 13, 2005—proofread and corrected by The_Ghiti. If you find OCR-related errors, please fix, increment version number by 0.1 and re-post.

Jared's Wolf

by MaryJanice Davidson

Jared Rocke will do anything avenge his sister's death, but ends up attracted to Moira Wolfbauer, the she-wolf sworn to protect her pack. Joining forces to stop a killer, they learn love defies all boundaries.

MARYJANICE DAVIDSON

Author of *Undead and Unemployed*

A Wyndham Werewolf Tale

DERIK'S BANE



"The Wyndham werewolves ignite a spark in many hearts."—*Romance Reviews Today*

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For Giselle McKenzie,
who has been waiting for this book for years. And for my husband, who hasn't.

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fans of Love's Prisoner and Jared's Wolf, who write me every week asking for
Derik's story. Here it is.

"What, were you raised by wolves?"

Sara Gunn, R.N., Ph.D., Sorceress

"Uh..."

Derik Gardner, amateur cook,
werewolf, Wyndham affiliation

THE PAST

The man had short brown hair, neatly trimmed. His eyes were that mold-colored shade between gray and brown, a color everyone has seen at one time or another in the back of their fridge. His skin was the color of cheap milk chocolate, and his height was supremely average. He was dressed in a suit several shades lighter than his skin tone, a white button-down shirt, and a gray tie with brown stripes. He had a plain gold wedding band on the third finger of his left hand, although he wasn't married. He wore black wire-rimmed glasses, although his eyesight was 20/20, and his shoes had never been shined. He looked like an accountant.

He wasn't an accountant.

The man gazed through the glass at DOE, JANE, born seventy-two minutes ago. DOE, JANE was a sweetly chubby infant with a wild shock of dark red hair. DOE, JANE was apparently born surprised, because her hair stood straight up from her skull, and her small reddish brows arched above her blue, blue eyes. She opened her small, wet mouth and let out a yell the man who wasn't an accountant could hear even through the glass.

"Well?" the nurse asked. She was a floater, here at the hospital—so thought those in charge of such things—because of understaffing. In truth, her presence at the delivery of DOE, JANE had been foretold six centuries ago. As had the violent death of DOE, JANE's father just minutes before the child crowned. As had, of course, DOE, JANE herself. "Is it... are they right? Is that—?"

"She who will redeem us, and our king," the man replied, "yes. She is Morgan Le Fay, among us again, and this time she will do what she could not before. This time..." The man smiled, showing a great many white teeth. Too many, it seemed, for his average, unassuming mouth. "This time, ours will be done."

The nurse smiled back. By contrast, her smile wasn't frightening in the least—she had the grin of a beauty contestant. But her eyes were dead.

They watched DOE, JANE through the glass for a long time.

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1

THE PRESENT

Michael Wyndham stepped out of his bedroom, walked down the hall, and saw his best friend, Derik Gardner, on the main floor headed for the front door. He grabbed the banister and vaulted, dropped fifteen feet, and landed with a solid thud he felt all the way through his knees. "Hey, Derik!" he called cheerfully. "Wait a sec!" From his bedroom he heard his wife mutter, "I hate when he does that... gives me a flippin' heart attack every time," and couldn't help grinning. Wyndham Manor had been his home all his life, and the only time he walked up or down those stairs was when he was carrying his daughter, Lara. He didn't know how ordinary humans could stand walking around in their fragile little shells. He'd tried to talk to his wife about this on a few occasions, but her eyes always went flinty, and her gun hand flexed, and the phrase "hairy fascist bastard" came up, and things got awkward. Werewolves were tough, incredibly tough, but compared to Homo sapiens, who wasn't?

It was a ridiculously perfect day outside, and he couldn't blame Derik for wanting to head out as quickly as possible. Still, there was something troubling his old friend, and Michael was determined to get to the bottom of it.

"Hold up," Michael said, reaching for Derik's shoulder. "I want to—"

"I don't care what you want," Derik replied without turning. He grabbed Michael's hand and flung it away, so sharply Michael lost his balance for a second. "I'm going out."

Michael tried to laugh it off, ignoring the way the hairs on the back of his neck tried to stand up. "Touch-ee! Hey, I just want to—"

"I'm going out!" Derik moved, cat-quick, and then Michael was flying through the air with the greatest of ease, only to slam into the door to the coat closet hard enough to splinter it down the middle.

Michael lay on his back a moment like a stunned beetle. Then he flipped to his feet, ignoring the slashing pain down his back. "My friend," he said, "you are so right. Except you're going out on the tip of my boot, pardon me while I kick your ass." This in a tone of mild banter, but Michael was crossing the room in swift strides, barely noticing that his friend Moira, who had just come in from the kitchen, squeaked and jumped out of the way.

Best friend or no, nobody—nobody—knocked the alpha male around in his own ... damned ... house. The other Pack members lived there by his grace and favor, thanks very much, and while the forty-room house had more than enough room for them all, certain things were simply ... not... done.

"Don't start with me," Derik warned. The morning sunlight was slanting through the skylight, shining so brightly it looked like Derik's hair was about to burst into flames. His friend's mouth—usually relaxed in a wiseass grin—was a tight slash. His grass-green eyes were narrow. He looked—Michael had trouble believing

it—ugly and dangerous. Rogue. "Just stay off."

"You started it, at the risk of sounding junior high, and you're going to show throat and apologize, or you'll be counting your broken ribs all the way to the emergency room."

"Come near me again, and we'll see who's counting ribs."

"Derik. Last chance."

"Cut it out!" It was Moira, shrieking from a safe distance. "Don't do this in his own house, you idiot! He won't stand down, and you two morons—schmucks—losers will hurt each other!"

"Shut up," Derik said to the woman he (usually) lovingly regarded as a sister.

"And get lost. . . this isn't for you."

"I'm getting the hose," she warned, "and then you can pay to have the floors resealed."

"Moira, out," Michael said without looking around. She was a fiercely intelligent female werewolf who could knock over an elm if she needed to, but she was no match for two males squaring off. The day was headed down the shit hole already; he wouldn't see Moira hurt on top of it. "And Derik, she's right, let's take this outside—ooooof!"

He didn't duck, though he could see the blow coming. He should have ducked, but... he still couldn't believe what was happening. His best friend—Mr. Nice Guy himself!—was challenging his authority. Derik, always the one to jolly people out of a fight. Derik, who had Michael's back in every fight, who had saved his wife's life, who loved Lara like she was his own.

The blow—hard enough to shatter an ordinary man's jaw—knocked him back a full three steps. And that was that. Allowances had been made, but now the gloves were off. Moira was still shrieking, and he could sense other people filling the room, but it faded to an unimportant drone.

Derik gave up trying for the door and slowly turned. It was like watching an evil moon come over the horizon. He glared, full in the face: a dead-on challenge for dominance. Michael grabbed for his throat, Derik blocked, they grappled. A red cloud of rage swam across Michael's vision; he didn't see his boyhood friend, he saw a rival. A challenger.

Derik wasn't giving an inch, was shoving back just as hard, warning growls ripping from his throat, growls that only fed Michael's rage (rival! rival for your mate, your cub! show throat or die!)

made him yearn to twist Derik's head off, . made him want to pound, tear, hurt— Suddenly, startlingly, a small form was between them. Was shoving, hard. Sheer surprise broke them apart.

"Daddy! Quit it!" Lara stood between them, arms akimbo. "Just. . . don't do that!"

His daughter was standing protectively in front of Derik. Not that Derik cared, or even noticed; his gaze was locked on Michael's: hot and uncompromising. Jeannie, frozen at the foot of the stairs, let out a yelp and lunged toward her

daughter, but Moira moved with the speed of an adder and flung her arms around the taller woman. This earned her a bellow of rage. "Moira, what the hell? Let go!"

"You can't interfere," was the small blonde's quiet reply. "None of us can."

Although Jeannie was quite a bit taller and heavier, the smaller woman had no trouble holding Jeannie back. Jeannie was the alpha female, but human—the first human alpha the Pack had known in three hundred years. Moira would follow almost any command Jeannie might make . . . but wouldn't let the woman endanger herself, or interfere with Pack law that was as old as the family of Man;

Oblivious to the drama on the stairs, Derik started forward again, but Lara planted her feet. "Quit it, Derik!" She swung her small foot into Derik's shin, which he barely noticed. "And Daddy, you quit, too. Leave him alone. He's just sad and feeling stuck. He doesn't want to hurt you."

Michael ignored her. He was glaring at his rival and reaching for Derik again, when his daughter's voice cut through the tension like a laser scalpel. "I said leave him alone."

That got his attention; he looked down at her in a hurry. He expected tears, red-faced anger, but Lara's face was, if anything, too pale. Her eyes were huge, so light brown they were nearly gold. Her dark hair was pulled back in two curly pigtails.

He realized anew how tall she was for her age, and how she was her mother's daughter. And her father's. Her gaze was direct, adult. And not a little disconcerting.

"What?" Shock nearly made him stammer. Behind him, nobody moved. It seemed nobody even breathed. And Derik was standing down, backing off, heading for the door. Michael, in light of these highly interesting new events, let him go. He employed his best Annoyed Daddy tone. "What did you say, Lara?"

She didn't flinch. "You heard me. But you won't hear me say it again."

He was furious, appalled. This wasn't—he had to—she couldn't—But pride was rising, blotting out the fury. Oh, his Lara! Intelligent, gorgeous— and utterly without fear! "Would he have ever dared face down his father?"

It occurred to him that the future Pack leader was giving him an order. Now what to do about it?

A long silence passed, much longer in retrospect. This would be a moment his daughter would remember if she lived to be a thousand. He could break her ... or he could start training a born leader.

He bowed stiffly. He didn't show the back of his neck; it was the polite bow to an equal. "A wiser head has prevailed. Thank you, Lara." He turned on his heel and walked toward the stairs, catching Jeannie's hand on the way up, leaving the others behind. Moira had released her grip on his wife, was staring, openmouthed, at Lara. They were all staring. He didn't think it had ever been so quiet in the main hall.

Michael was intent on reaching his bedroom where he could think about all that

had just happened, and gain his wife's counsel. He didn't quite dare go after Derik just yet—best to take time for their blood to cool. Christ! It wasn't even eight o'clock in the morning!

"Mikey—what—cripes—"

And Lara. His daughter, who jumped between two werewolves with their blood up. Who faced him down and demanded he leave off. His daughter, defending her dearest friend. His daughter, who had just turned four. They had known she was ferociously intelligent, but to have such a strong sense of what was right and what was—

Jeannie cut through his thoughts with a typically wry understatement. "This can't be good. But I'm sure you can explain it to me. Use hand puppets. And me without my So You Married a Werewolf guide ..."

Then he was closing their bedroom door and thinking about his place in the Pack, and his daughter's, and how he hoped he wouldn't have to kill his best friend before the sun set.

2

Derik heard the footsteps and slowed. He'd made it almost all the way to the beach but, unless he felt like swimming to London, it was time to stop and think with his head instead of his temper.

Whoever was approaching was downwind, so he didn't know for sure, but he braced himself for Michael. He'd have to apologize, or there would be real trouble. And he would apologize. He would. He owed it to his friend, and worse, he'd behaved badly. So he would apologize. Yes. Absolutely.

But it would taste like shit in his mouth.

Derik stared out to sea and shook his head at this sorry-ass turn of events. He and Mike had grown up together. Their mothers had often put them in the same crib to nap. They had experienced their first Change the same month of the same year; he remembered Mike had been as thrilled, as terrified, as drunk on the moon as he had been. They had chased together, hunted together, killed together. Had defended the Pack together.

He had no problem with Michael; he loved the big dope.

He just didn't love Michael being the boss. Not anymore.

Derik made a fist and hit himself on the thigh. This was his problem, not Michael's, and he had to figure out how to fix it, pronto. He owed the big guy respect, not just brotherly love. And show it he would, no matter how the words wanted to choke him. He wasn't some—some monkey, fighting for the sake of it. He was a werewolf, member of the Wyndham Pack, and fully grown besides. Squabbling was beneath him. So was picking fights.

He turned, forcing a smile . . . and the clod of dirt hit him right in the middle of the forehead. It exploded, and dust sprayed everywhere.

"Idiot! Putz! Dumb ass!"

"Jeez, Moira," he complained, secretly glad showing throat had been put off a bit, "you could have put my eye out."

"I was aiming for your eye, you stupid asshole!"

"Now, Moira, you know you shouldn't use such vague terms," he teased. "You gotta speak hi black and white, honey, really let people know what's on your mind."

She wasn't having it; the scowl didn't crack. She marched the rest of the way up to him— looking cute as hell in khaki shorts and a lavender T-shirt—and kicked him smartly in the shin. It hurt, too; Moira had toenails like a sloth. "How could you risk your life like that? We nearly had a fight for dominance in the main hall _- front of all your friends. In front of Lara! You're lucky Michael didn't tear your head off. You're lucky Jeannie didn't shoot you!"

He didn't want to, but couldn't help it: He felt his lips draw back from his teeth. "I could have taken him."

Moira threw up her hands. "What is wrong with you? You've been like a hungry bear all summer. This is a good time for us, Derik— Michael's brought peace, Gerald's gone, we caught the monster who'd been killing those poor girls . . . there's never been a better time to be a werewolf. So why are you trying so hard to screw things up?"

He looked at her, this fine woman, as dear to him as Michael was. Oh, yeah? a treacherous inner voice whispered. Dear to you, hub? You've got a funny way of showing it, jerkoff.

He didn't have an answer for her. "I don't know what's wrong," he said dully. "I just want to fight, all the time. Everything that comes out of Michael's mouth is pissing me off. I love him, but I could choke him right now just to watch his eyeballs bulge."

Moira's own eyeballs bulged a bit at that, but she recovered quickly. Her eyes—so fine a blue they were nearly lavender—went narrow and thoughtful. She began to pace, looking not unlike a petite blonde general.

"Okay, well, let's figure this out." He smiled in spite of himself. Moira the math genius. Every problem could be broken down to an equation and, thus, solved. Well, hell, she'd figured out where Bin Laden was hiding, hadn't she? Luckily for the world, one of the cabinet members was a werewolf. Moira had sent an E-mail, and forty-eight hours later, hello, spider hole. "Are you in love with Jeannie?"

"Wha—no!"

"Okay, calm down. It's an explanation, you know ... if you wanted another man's mate."

"Well, I don't. I mean, I like her and all, but Ac's Michael's. Just like he's hers. You can't really picture either of them with anyone else, can you?"

Moira stopped pacing and smiled at him. "No, you're right about that. All right,

then," she continued matter-of-factly, "are you in love with me?"

"Ewww, no!"

Unfortunately, she kept going. "Are you upset because I've taken a mate and am having sex with him pretty much every chance I—"

"Aagghh, Moira, please, my eardrums are gonna implode!"

She arched her brows. " 'Eww'?"

"Honey, you're too cute to be believed, but I have never—never, yuck!—thought of you that way. Never. Ugh! Did I say never?"

"All right, you don't have to induce vomiting to get your point across."

"If it'll get your mind off that track ..." he warned, fully prepared to shove a finger down his throat.

"Well, it's another theory, that's all."

"A bad, terrible, awful, yucky theory. Baby, we grew up together. You're like the sister I never wanted." He flopped down onto the sand to watch her pace.

"Don't take this the wrong way or anything, but if you put your tongue in my mouth, I'd probably barf."

"Mutual, wise guy. Actually, I was sure you were picking a fight because you've got the urge to settle down with a mate, and you're surrounded by mated couples, and ... well, I know how you feel, is all." She paused, looking pensive. "I was so lonesome before Jared came."

"Moira mated with a monkey, Moira mated with a monkey," Derik sang.

"Shut up, don't call him that! God, I really hate that term."

"I dare you to use it in front of Jeannie," he teased.

"Do I look like I want to spend the rest of the day in an iron lung? Never mind the humans in our lives ... my point is, I couldn't stand to be around Michael or Jeannie, because seeing their happiness made me feel worse. I figured that was your problem, too."

"Well, it's not. Don't get me wrong, cutie, I'd love to find the right girl and knock her up—"

"And cherish and love her," Moira added dryly.

"—but I've got time. Hell, I'm not even thirty yet "

"Well, we could see if Michael—"

"Leave him out of this."

She chewed on her lower lip for a moment, then adopted an overly innocent expression that put him instantly on guard. The last time she'd looked like that, she had encouraged Lara to cut up his cashmere sweater to make soft puppets. "We should talk to Michael, you know. He's our leader. He'll tell us what to do."

He ground his teeth in irritation. "Moira, whatever the problem is, I will figure it out. I don't need Michael shoving his snout in where it's not wanted."

"But he'll fix everything. He'll tell you how to solve your problem, and you'll listen to him, and you'll be better."

"I said I can handle this by myself!"

"You don't want his help?"

He bounced to his feet so swiftly, to a human it would have looked like he teleported. "Jesus, do I have to write it on my forehead? Whatever it is, it's my problem, not his, so he should just leave me be!"

"Ah," she said quietly. "So that's it. Also, back up before I bite off your chin."

He did, realizing he and Moira were nose-to-nose. As nose-to-nose as they could be, anyway—he was a foot taller. "Sorry. I should probably take a walk, sweetie, I'm not good company right now."

"I wonder when it happened?"

"When what happened?" he practically snarled.

"When you became alpha."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said automatically, but inwardly he could feel himself nodding.

"Oh," she said, watching him, "and you knew, of course. Sure. You knew, but you ignored it, because you don't want to hurt anyone, and you don't want to leave us. Why would you? You've lived here all your life—we all have. This is home."

He stared at her. Moira, so pretty and cute and helpless-looking . . . Moira, the most intuitive person he'd ever met. "Sometimes you're scary, you know?"

She smirked. "Of course." Her smile dropped away. "I'm only annoyed I didn't figure it out sooner. But Derik ... as you know perfectly well, one Pack cannot support two alphas. It just can't. That's why there are fights for dominance.

That's why you have to leave. Now. Today."

"But Moira, I—"

"Now. Today. Before this gets worse and you do something we'll all regret, forever." She softened her brisk tone and gently touched his brow. "Because if you or Michael died . . . none of us could bear it."

She didn't add what they both knew. If Michael killed Derik, she would leave.

And if Derik killed Michael, she would kill him—try, anyway—and leave. Would the Pack hold? Sure. It had been around for centuries and had been through much worse than the squabbles of alpha males. Would the Pack be a place of love and light any longer?

No.

He didn't dare say a word. She was speaking exact truths, her specialty, and though he could hardly stand to hear the words, he'd ignored the problem long enough. But if he spoke, he'd probably burst into tears like a kid and embarrass them both. He hadn't cried since his mother died, but these thoughts had been heavy on his heart for the last few months.

"Derik, the wolf in you wants the Pack. But the man in you would never forgive himself if he took it."

Still he said nothing, but she stepped closer, and he rested his forehead on her shoulder. They stood that way, motionless on the beach, for a long time.

3

'AAAAAAGGGGGG—"

"I'm really sorry—"

"—ggggggggggghhhhhhhhh—"

"—but the transmission's completely shot—"

"—ggggggggggghhhhhhhhh—"

"—and we'll have to keep the car for at least a week—"

"—ggggggggggghhhhhhhhh—"

"—while we work on it—"

"—ggggggggggghhhhhhhhh—"

"—it'll cost a little more than the estimate I gave you . . . Christ, lady, take a breath, will ya?"

Sara Gunn sagged against something large and greasy—not the mechanic—and concentrated on not passing out. New transmission! Eighty zillion dollars to fix, and meanwhile no car for at least a week! Now the mechanic would gouge out her eyes and make her catch up on her laundry, and the day would be complete. "We coulda caught it earlier if you had more than two oil changes a year," the mechanic ("Dave" was emblazoned on his shirt pocket) said with mild reproach. "Ask me how to save on your next tire rotation!" was on his T-shirt in migraine-inducing yellow. Sara disliked lectures from men who wore instructions on their clothing.

"I hate bringing my car to the garage," she muttered. She could feel the clammy sweat of panic beginning to bead between her shoulder blades.

"How come?"

"Because I always get expensive news!" she snapped. "Look. I'm sorry. I know it's not your fault. It was a shock, and I don't handle surprises well."

"How could you be surprised? Your car's an automatic, but it doesn't change gears unless you hold the accelerator down for at least ten seconds—"

"Well, it started okay, so I didn't think much of it."

"And the cruise control locks up on you all the time—didn't you say the car forced you through a school zone at seventy miles an hour?"

"Hey, it was Sunday at ten o'clock at night, all right? It's not like there were kids around." He frowned at her and she flushed. "Well, that's why I brought it in."

"M' point is, you got no cause to be shocked that it's an expensive problem. You're exactly like a gal who finds a lump in her tit but won't go to the tit doc and then gets pissed when he tells her she has cancer," Dave pronounced. "I see it all the time."

"First of all, that's the worst analogy I've ever heard. Second, I'm not paying

you to lecture me."

"Actually, you ain't paid me at all," he pointed out with a grin. She could be cute, if you liked them rangy and curvy and red-haired, which he surely did.

"Nope, not a cent."

"Well, I'm going to, okay? Hell, your kids will go to Harvard thanks to my stupid transmission." On "stupid," she kicked her rear left tire.

"Ha! Harvard. I coulda gone," he confided, "but I didn't want to live on the other coast."

"Trust me, it was overrated." Sara sighed and ran her fingers through her too-long bangs. If hair that grew past your chin could be considered bangs.

"Well, as long as you're doing the transmission thing, see what you can do about the clock. It goes off when I turn on my headlights."

"It does?"

"Yes. But as soon as I turn my lights off, it comes right back on, except then it's wrong, and I have to adjust the time until the next time I turn on my headlights. Also, I lost the car lighter—"

"How could you lose—?"

"I just looked down one day and it was gone, all right? Why don't you get a spotlight and shine it into my eyes? Anyway, every once in a while sparks will shoot out from the lighter, which is kind of distracting."

"I guess so."

"My horn doesn't work, either."

"Now, how did that happen?"

She ignored the question. "Also, my radio only gets the local pop station. Which wouldn't be so bad, but they play about six Lenny Kravitz songs each hour." She sighed again. "I used to like Lenny Kravitz."

Dave blinked slowly, like a lizard. "Why haven't you bought a new car?"

"It was my mom's car," she said simply. "She loved the wretched thing."

"Oh." He gnawed his lower lip a moment. Everybody in town knew what had happened to Mrs. Gunn. Nobody talked about it. He'd have felt sorry for her even if she wasn't such a dolly. And Sara was cute, with those crystal blue eyes and the flyaway mass of red curls. Her skin was perfectly white, like fresh cream . . . not a freckle in sight. He figured if she ever set foot on a tropical beach, she'd go up in flames.

"Look, Dr. Gunn, I'm sorry to be the bringer of bad news to you and stuff, but I'll get your car in as quick as I can. Shouldn't take more than a few days."

"A few days of purgatory!" she shouted, startling him. That was another thing about Dr. Gunn. You'd be having a perfectly normal conversation with the woman, when she'd start screaming. It was true about the temperament of redheads, and that was a fact.

"Meantime, I got a leaner I can let you have for"—at least forty a day, or his boss would kill him. Okay, thirty. Twenty-five ninety-five and that was his final offer—"for nothing. On account of you getting such a bad shock and all."

She smiled and he nearly fell back into the tire pile. She was cute when she was ranting and fussing and being a pain. She was completely gorgeous when she smiled. Her dimples popped into view, and her eyes crinkled at the corners and made you wonder what her mouth would taste like.

He smiled back.

What are you doing, Davey old pal? You got as much chance with Dr. Sara Gunn as you've got to grow tits and fly away.

"That'd be great, Dave," she said with real warmth. "I'm sorry about the tantrum."

"It's not the first one I've seen. You gotta temper on you like a rabid polecat." He said this with total admiration.

"Uh... thank you."

"Maybe after your car is fixed, we could have dinner?"

"Of course! And it'll be my treat, for the free loaner." She smiled at him again. The way she smiled at her students, her colleagues, love-struck mechanics. Dr. Gunn was brainy, high-strung, occasionally shrill, and had no freakin' clue she was a stone knockout.

"Thanks," he sighed. Ehh. Worth a shot. "I'll call you when I get an idea how long it'll take."

"Thanks again."

He ended up giving her the nicest loaner he had, a silver 2004 Dodge Stratus. His boss would strangle him like a rooster when he found out what he'd done. Screw it.

4

"You have to save the world.'

Derik fought to keep his jaw from dropping. "Me?"

"Yes, brain-drain, you. In fact, could you get started on that right away?"

Moira clapped her hands. "A quest! Just what you needed, oh, it's perfect, perfect!"

"A quest? Do I look like a Hobbit to you? I have to save the world? From what?"

Antonia smirked. "From who, actually."

"From whom, actually," Moira corrected.

Antonia glared at her. Moira stared back, eyebrows arched, and after a moment the taller woman dropped her gaze. Antonia was one of those rare human/werewolf hybrids, but nobody liked her much. Born of a human father and a were mother, she couldn't Change, though she had the preternatural strength and speed common to their kind.

Being unable to Change had been a tremendous burden on her as a child ... the

Pack expected much from its hybrids. Her parents tried—and failed—to hide their despair. Hers had not been an easy adolescence, as much from the tremendous pressure she put on herself, as anything ever said, or intimated. "The only thing I have going for me," she often said with bitter insight, "are my looks. And around here, gorgeous bims are a dime a dozen."

This was true. No one was sure if it was breeding or genetics or great good fortune or the omnivore diet, but werewolves, in addition to being exceptionally strong and exceptionally fast, were exceptionally easy on the eyes. Antonia had enormous dark eyes and creamy skin, long legs and the figure of a swimsuit model, but it didn't set her apart.

Nobody had a clue what Antonia was until she woke up the morning of her seventeenth birthday, made herself toast and poached eggs, then fell over in a dead faint. When she regained consciousness, she brushed the egg out of her hair and told her astonished parents, "Michael's going to get someone pregnant today, will be married by summertime and a father before Easter. Oh," she added thoughtfully, "the baby will be a girl, and the epidural won't work for the mom-to-be. Hee!"

To everyone's amazement, she had been right. It was the first of dozens of predictions, some mild ("Moira's going to get stuck with another audit. . . ha!"), some major ("Stay the hell out of New York on September 11, 2001."). She was never wrong. She was never even off a little bit. No one had seen anything like it. No one was even sure what it meant—could werewolves harness mental power as well as physical? It was a mystery to all.

And overnight, Antonia had gone from Pack Nobody to Pack Demigod. Kiss her off, and nothing might happen ... or she might foresee your death and fail to warn you, out of spite.

Now here she was, holding court in the solarium, explaining that the world was going to end unless Derik made it to 6 Fairy Lane, Monterey, California, as soon as possible.

"You guys know who Morgan Le Fay is?"

Moira nodded. Derik blinked. "Guess I'll play dumb blonde," he said, avoiding Moira's poke. "No idea."

"She was the half sister of King Arthur," Antonia explained. "She had an incestuous affair with her brother and was responsible, indirectly, for his death. She was also a powerful sorceress."

"Uh-huh. That's fascinating, hon. I like story time as much as the next fella, but this is relevant because ... ?"

"I got a line on her."

"A line on her," Moira repeated. "Toni, what in God's name are you talking about?"

"An-TON-ee-uh. And Morgan Le Fay is in Monterey Bay."

"You're a poet, and you don't know it," Derik joked, and was unsurprised to see both women ignore him.

"She's reincarnated and goes by the name of Dr. Sara Gunn. You have to get over there and take care of her. If you don't, a week from now none of us will be here."

Dead silence, broken by Moira's faint, "Oh, Antonia ... for real?"

"No, I made it all up because I want the attention," she snapped. "Yes! The world's gonna end, and we're all fucked, unless the Pack's answer to The Rock gets his ass in gear."

Another brief silence, and then Moira said, "I think—I think I'd better go get Michael and Jean-nie."

For once, Derik didn't argue.

Michael cleared his throat from the doorway. "You're going, then?"

Derik straightened up from his packing. He'd tossed a few things into a carry-on and was ready to leave. More than ready. He was taking the Wyndham jet to San Jose, California, and from there he'd pick up a rental car to the Monterey Peninsula. He'd already said good-bye to Moira and Jeannie.

"Yeah, I'm going now. In fact, I'd better get a move on."

"Well. Be careful. Don't let her get the drop on you."

"The reincarnation of the most powerful sorceress in the history of literature, fated to destroy the world in the next few days? No chance," he bragged, and was relieved to see a ghost of a grin on Michael's face. "Leave it to me. This'll be just like the time I agreed to cater your mating ceremony. Except with less flour."

"I am leaving it to you," Michael said seriously. "You knew Jeannie was pregnant again, right?"

He nodded. They all knew.

"Well, for God's sake, don't tell her you knew before I told you," Michael said hastily. "I had the worst time pretending to be surprised when she finally got around to breaking the news. And, of course, she knew I wasn't surprised, and then the shit hit the fan."

"It's not your fault you can smell it on her," he said, puzzled.

"You'd think. Anyway ... my point is ... everything I have, and am, is in your hands. It's too bad—" We haven't been getting along was the obvious end to that statement, but his friend was too tactful to say it.

"Yeah. Don't worry, chief."

Michael smiled again. "I'm not. Well, I am, a little—it's how I'm made. But, hell, if anyone can save the world, you can. I'd bet my life on it." He paused.

"I am betting my life on it."

Derik was too gratified to speak for a moment. He remembered his earlier words—his earlier actions—and felt his face burn with shame. So he wanted his own Pack—or at least, wanted to be his own man. Did that mean he had to treat

his best friend like something to be scraped off the bottom of his shoe?
"Uh . . . thanks ... but before I go ..." He slung his bag over one shoulder, crossed the room, and started to hunch lower, prepared to show throat. Michael grasped his shoulder and jerked him back up. "Don't do that," he said quietly. "For one thing, you're off to save the world, so as far as I'm concerned, the slate's clean between us. For another, Moira says you could be alpha. Since I'm pretty sure she's never been wrong about anything—" "It's annoying," Derik agreed.
"—it's best for you to get out of the habit of showing throat as soon as possible."
Derik paused. "So ... we almost had to cha-cha today, but because I'm gonna save the world, you're gonna let that go?"
"That's just the kind of swell guy I am," Michael said solemnly, and both men cracked up, their laughter sounding more like howls than anything else.

5 THE MONTEREY PENINSULA

He knew it made him shallow. he knew he was probably too old for such nonsense. He knew he should be focused on saving the world. But he couldn't help it. Derik loved convertibles. And this one was sublime—electric, eye-watering blue, with leather seats and a superb sound system. Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" was tearing his head off, because, joy of joys, he'd found a local all-eighties rock radio station. The weather was gorgeous— low 70s and sunny—and his proximity to the ocean meant that thousands and thousands of tantalizing scents were on the air.
He took a gulp and dizzily tried to process.
Derik's nose was an instrument of frightening precision, but even it could .be confused and overwhelmed. Shit, that was half the fun of a convertible! Right now he was smelling seaspray-lilacshottarmacdeerpoopraccoonsseagullfeathers—whoops! Now he was getting a tantalizing whiff of fishoceangrasslawnmowerexhaustpossumfried-chicken and—thank you, Jesus!—girlsweat and Dune perfume.
I am in California, land of babes and cool cars and movies-of-the-week, but I can't think about that until I save the world.
At the thought of what was riding on this little day trip, his heart lurched. He had always thought of himself as a mellow kind of fellow (recent events notwithstanding), and if someone had told him he'd be responsible for saving the world—not the Pack, or even his closest friends, but the world, the entire world ... well, his mind just couldn't get around it. It would try, and then it would

veer away and think about something stupid, like how great it was to find an eighties radio station so far from home.

Saying good-bye to Lara did it. Brought it home for him, however briefly. He loved that little stinker like she was his own pup. He'd die for her in a New York minute. He'd wring the neck of anybody who hurt her and snap the spine of anyone who made her cry. But if he fucked up—if this Morgan gal got away from him—Lara would never make it to first grade. Never go on a date, never experience her first Change. Never grow up to be his boss, the way her daddy was.

Shit, he'd almost burst out crying just saying good-bye to her.

Quickest done, quickest back home. Not that he was so terribly anxious to go back home—the mansion held its own unique set of problems. Derik figured you knew your life was screwed up when you were almost glad you could use saving the world as a distraction.

Well. He and Mike would work shit out. They had to. Otherwise—otherwise, he just would never go home again, even though that probably wasn't the best way to handle things.

He didn't trust himself around Mike, that was all. If he lost his temper and things got way out of hand, the deed would be done, and Mike would be dead, and he'd be Pack leader, and Jeannie would be a widow, and Lara would be without a daddy, and then he'd probably go off in a corner and blow his brains out. Better to be a (coward) loner than risk that. Way better.

Sara Gunn thrust her foot into the second pair of panty hose of the morning and, incredibly, had the same thing happen. There was a zzzzzzzzz! sound, and then her big toenail ripped a runner through her last pair of panty hose.

"Right," she grumbled. "Why is it that when I'm running late, everything goes wrong? More important, why am I talking to myself?" She jerked the nylon torture chamber off her foot and flung it over her shoulder to the floor. "Okay, then . . . it's gorgeous out. A perfect day to go bare-legged." She ran a hand down her left leg. A little raspy, but hardly Yosemite Sam whiskers. Note to self: Shave legs more often when low on panty hose.

She heard the doorbell, that annoying dum-DUM-dum-dum . . . dum-DUM-dum . . . dum-DUM-dum-dum-DUM! Dah-dum-dah-dum-dum. She cursed her late mother's infatuation with Alex Trebek and Jeopardy. Every time she had a visitor, she felt like phrasing everything in the form of a question.

I will never see twenty-five again ... or twenty-eight, for that matter, and I never quite managed to move out of my mother's house. Nice one, Gunn. Not pathetic at all!

She slipped her feet into a pair of low-heeled pumps and squinted distractedly at the mirror. Hair: presentable, if not exactly glamorous, caught up in one of

those big black clips that looked like a medieval torture device. Skin: too pale; no time for makeup. Eyes: big and blue and bloodshot—damn that Deep Space Nine marathon, anyway. Suit: cream linen, which meant she'd be a wrinkled mess in another hour. Legs: bare. Feet: narrow and stuffed into shoes so pointy, she could see the crack between her first and second toe.

"Too bad, my girl!" she told herself. "Next time don't hit the snooze button so many times."

Dum-DUM-dum-dum . . . dum-DUM-dum ... dum-DUM-dum-dum-DUM! Dah-dum-dah-dum-dum.

"Be right there!" She hurried out of her bedroom, glanced through the kitchen, and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the leaner car. Finally! David, her mechanic, had at last had a chance to send over a leaner car for her use. A flashy loaner car, at that. Well, beggars can't be .. . et cetera. The other loaner had conked out after an hour— was it her fault she couldn't drive a stick?

She flung the door open. "Thank goodness you're—whoa."

She stared at the man standing on her front porch. He was, to be blunt, delicious. He was to Homo sapiens what a hot fudge sundae was to vanilla ice cream: a complete and total improvement on the original. A full head taller than she was, he practically filled the door frame. His blond hair was the color of sunlight, of ripe wheat, of—of something really gorgeous. He had swimmers' shoulders and she could actually see the definition of his stomach muscles through the green T-shirt he wore. The shirt had the puzzling logo "Martha Rocks" in bright white letters. He was wearing khaki shorts, revealing heavily muscled legs tapering into absurdly large feet, sock-less in a pair of battered loafers. His hands, she noticed, were also quite large, with squared off fingers and blunt, short nails.

He was lightly tanned and had the look of a man equally at home camping in the woods, lounging poolside, or hunched over a computer. His eyes were the brilliant green of wet leaves, and they sparkled with turbulence and lusty good humor. His mouth was wide and mobile and looked made for smiling.

He was smiling at her.

Get a grip, she ordered herself. She was annoyed to find her pulse was racing.

It is unbelievably juvenile to be panting at this man, when all he's done is ring your bell twice and stand there. He hasn't even opened his mouth and you're practically a puddle on your own doorstep. He—oh, oh! He's talking!

"—wrong house."

"What did you say?"

"I said, I must have the wrong house." His smile widened, as his gaze raked her from head to foot, taking in her bare legs, scuffed shoes, rumpled suit, and messy hair. His teeth were perfectly straight, almost blindingly white, and looked sharp. The guy probably ate his steak raw. He could make a fortune doing Chiclets commercials. "I'm sorry to bother you."

"No, you've got the right house. I've been waiting for the loaner." She nodded

at the flashy little blue convertible. "The other profs are going to accuse me of entering my midlife crisis a little early, but what can you do? Come in. How are you getting back to the garage?"

He stepped inside, and as she reached past him to shut the screen door, she was reminded all over again—as if she needed it!—just how large he was. She was not a petite woman by any means—in fact, she ought to lay off the chocolate croissants—but he made her feel absolutely tiny. She caught a sniff of him and nearly purred. He smelled like soap and male. Big, clean male.

He glanced around her kitchen. "Listen, I don't want to put you out, but can you tell me which house is number 6 Fairy Lane?"

"It's this one," she said with bare impatience. Gorgeous, but not terribly bright. Well, nobody was perfect. "I told you, you're in the right place. I'm running late for rounds, so if you could just arrange to have someone pick you up—"

"Yeah, I'll do that. 'Cuz there's obviously been a mistake."

"Tell me about it," she said, looking at him with longing. In a perfect world, he would be her pool boy. Instead, she was late for work and he had to hitch a ride back to his place of business. "Well, thanks for dropping off the car—see you."

He followed her onto the porch. "It was nice meeting you. Sorry about the misunderstanding." But, interestingly, instead of being regretful, he sounded weirdly relieved.

Odd! But, she had no time to ponder it. "Bye!"

She got the car going with no trouble—she'd heard the phrase "the engine purred like a kitten" before but had no real experience with it until now—and pulled out of the driveway. She waved to the man who should have been her pool boy, who was looking as though he'd had a touch of sun, and dropped the pedal.

6

Derik went to the nearest safe house, the one down the block from the aquarium. An adorable cub answered the door, a boy about eight years old with big dark eyes and black hair.

"Hi," Derik said. "Are your folks home?"

"Sure. What's your name?"

"Derik."

"Okay. Come on in."

Derik followed the boy into a kitchen that smelled like cookie dough and found the lady of the house up to her elbows in butterscotch chips. "Well, hi there," she said, her greeting a soft Midwestern twang. "My name's Marjie Wolfon; this

is my son, Terry. Do you need some help?"

"Just a private phone. I'm—uh—sort of on a mission to—um—never mind." He just couldn't bring himself to say "save the world." It was too bizarre.

Marjie, however, seemed to know all about it. Either that, or she was used to strange werewolves showing up at her door. "Yes, of course. Terry, show Derik the den."

"Okay." The boy snatched a fistful of dough and disappeared down a hallway. Derik followed him into the den, which had a hardwood floor, windows set into the ceiling, a computer, a phone, and a television.

"Are you from Massachusetts?" Terry asked.

"Uh-huh." He was going to have to call Anto-nia and figure out this mess. No way was that distracted cutie Morgan Le Fay. No way. "How'd you know? Am I dropping my Rs?"

The boy ignored the question. "And you live with Michael Wyndham? The Pack leader?"

Derik looked at the boy, really looked. That was pure hero worship, if he wasn't mistaken. And since he used to think of Michael's father in the exact same way, Derik completely understood where the kid was coming from. Men who took a Pack . . . ran a Pack . . . they were just . . . different. More there. And they could make you like them. It was a talent, the way some people could raise just one eyebrow. It was hard to explain.

"Yeah, I live out there with those guys. Michael's my best friend." Was? Is? Save the world first, he reminded himself. Then you can worry about it. "He's a really great guy, and his wife is supercool. You should try to get out to see him sometime."

"I'm going when I'm twenty." The age of consent, for werewolves. Eighteen was too damned young; everybody knew that. "I'm going to see if he needs a bodyguard, or maybe Lara will." The boy hugged himself and smiled. "I can't wait! I bet it's so cool, living in a mansion with all the boss weres."

"It's pretty great," Derik admitted. And it had been, until he'd fucked it up. Until he'd gotten the idea in his head that he could be a boss were. Dumb ass.

"I'll put in a good word for you, if you want."

"Would you?" The boy's eyes, already big, went huge. "That'd be great. Thanks a lot."

"What do your folks think about your ambition?"

"Oh." The boy waved his parents away in the careless manner of preadolescents.

"Mom wants me to stay out here and go to USC. Dad says I should aspire to more than being a 'spear carrier,' that's what he calls it. But I don't care. They're doing what they like. Now it's my turn. I mean, it will be."

"Well, while you're waiting to turn twenty, you could take a year or two of college, see if it suits you."

Terry shrugged.

"Terry! Get out of there and let the man have some privacy."

Terry sniffed the air. "Also, cookies are almost ready," he muttered.

"And cookies are almost ready! So get out here!"

Derik cracked up when the boy rolled his eyes and walked out, closing the door behind him. Jesus, had he ever been that young?

Sure he had; he and Michael and Moira had practically been littermates. Man, the shit they used to pull... it's a wonder Michael's mom hadn't drowned them all.

He picked up the phone and punched in the main number of the mansion.

"Wyndham residence," Jeannie answered, sounding harassed.

"Hey, Jeannie, it's me, D—"

"Lara! No! Don't you dare jump from there— don't you dare! Hello?"

"Uh, yeah, Jean, it's me, D—"

"Lara! I don't care if your dad does it all the time. Your dad's an idiot! And if you think I'm wasting my afternoon by driving you to the E.R.—hello?"

"It's Derik!" he hollered. "Can you patch me through to Antonia's house, please?"

"Jeez, stop with the yelling. Sure I will. How's it going? Save the world yet?"

"I'm gonna, just as soon as I finish my butterscotch chip cookie," he said dryly.

"All righty. Patching you—Lara!—through now." There was a smooth, humming silence, then another ringing telephone.

"That is Morgan Le Fay," Antonia said by way of greeting. "She's an unspeakably evil creature and must be stopped from destroying the world. So get your ass back there and take care of her."

"What? Antonia? How'd you know it was—"

"I don't know about you," she said, "but I don't have a lot of time for dumb questions. Also, you're boring the tits right off of me."

"Come on, you should see this girl! There's no way she's the one. She's a goof, and she's so cute. Not to mention really clueless. I think you got your wires crossed, or whatever, on this one."

"Impossible. It's her. And you know what they say about the devil and pleasing faces. Now get back there and do your job."

"This sucks," he said to the empty line, and hung up.

"Cookie?" Marjie asked brightly when he stomped into the kitchen.

He took six.

Sara Gunn, the unspeakably evil creature, noticed the van as she was parking her leaner, but shrugged it off—Monterey wasn't that big a town, and lots of people went to and from the hospital. Monterey Bay General was a teaching hospital, the largest in two hundred miles, and the parking lot was the size of a small college campus.

She hurried through the main lobby, afraid to look at her watch to see how late

she was. Dr. Cummings hated it when staff was late for grand rounds, though God knows he'd kept them waiting often enough. And even though she was Dr. Gunn, her doctorate was in nursing, so to old-school jerkoffs like Cummings, she was just a glorified maid with an extra diploma. Most days it slid off her like water off a duck, but days like today, when she knew she was in for a reaming and resented the hell out of it, she—

"Sara Gunn!"

She had been just about to step into the elevator when she heard her name and jerked her foot back. She turned, and her brain processed the half-dozen men dressed in—could it be?—flowing red robes. They had monks at the hospital now? Monks dressed in red? Like big lipsticks?

Armed monks?

An avid movie fan, Sara recognized nine-millimeter Beretta pistols when she saw them and was so startled, she froze in place. It was the context, of course. Sure. Seeing men in robes (big lipsticks!), toting guns, in the hospital, her hospital, was just. . . weird. If she had any sense, she'd be screaming her head off and hitting the floor, like several of the people around her, but she just stared, and now she was staring down the barrel of more than one pistol, and how many people could say that in life, that not only did they have one gun pointed at them, they had several, it was just too—

The one nearest her tripped on the newly mopped floor, knocking over the bright yellow CAUTION sign. He hit hard, too hard; she heard the wet snap as his neck broke.

She heard a muffled explosion from her left and flinched, but the pistol had misfired and the barrel imploded; the would-be gunman was screaming through a faceful of blood, screaming and staggering around and dripping. He'd lost all interest in her, and she could actually hear his blood pattering to the floor, which now needed to be mopped again.

The clip fell out of the third one's gun, something Sara had never seen before—a day for firsts! She didn't realize clips could fall out of guns, just slide out and clunk to the floor without anyone touching it, but this one had, and the robed man had taken to his heels, and then the lobby tipped crazily, as someone kicked her feet out from under her.

"Cross of Christ," Dr. Cummings grumped. He was lying on the floor beside her, and she realized he was the one who had knocked her down. His white beard, hair, and eyebrows were their usual chaotic mess; the eyebrows in particular resembled a pair of large, struggling, albino caterpillars. He looked like a pissed-off Colonel Sanders. "Leave the hospital for fifteen minutes, and the whole damned place falls apart. Last time I ever try to get coffee before rounds."

"Sorry I'm late," she said to the tile.

"Do you know why they're trying to kill you?"

"I have no idea. They—they knew my name." She realized she was existing in a ball of shock-induced calm. Well, that was all right. It was better than the

screaming meemies. "But they're not having much luck, is the thing, and lucky for me."

She heard a terrific explosion, magnified in the lobby, and then heard it again, and saw the last two men fall, and saw the policeman standing by the Information Desk, gun out, very pale.

"Lucky for you," Dr. Cummings said, "there was a cop here."

"Uh-huh."

"Really lucky," he said, giving her a strange look.

"I'm going to go throw up now, I think."

"No you aren't. We're late for rounds." He seized her by the elbow—for a man in his late fifties, he was as strong as a PCP addict—and hauled her to her feet, then pushed her into the elevator. "You can puke later."

"I'll make a note of it in my Palm Pilot," she said, but already the urge was passing. Damn Dr. Cummings! Or bless him. She could never decide which.

7

The pool boy was still there when she got home. He was sitting on her front steps, chin cupped in hand, obviously waiting for her.

Sara brought the convertible to a smoking halt, bolted out the door, and ran to him. She had no idea why he was still there—Couldn't get a ride? Had news about her car?—and she didn't care. After the morning she'd had, she needed to talk to someone, and Dr. Cummings wasn't what you'd call a warm and nurturing person. This walking Ken doll would do just fine.

"You wouldn't believe it, you wouldn't believe it!" she cried as he stood. She seized a fistful of his shirt and shook it. He stared down at her. "A bunch of robed weirdos came to the hospital today and tried to kill me! There were guns all over the place!"

"I believe it," he said, nodding glumly.

"And I was late for grand rounds! And then I had to talk to the police for, like, ever. And I have no idea why you're here, but I have to tell you, I'm going in for a drink before I do anything, but you can have your car back, and maybe I'll have two drinks, I—I—oh, crap." She was fumbling with her keys and finally got her kitchen door unlocked.

Wordlessly, he followed her inside. She was momentarily uneasy, then dismissed it. Lightning wasn't going to strike twice today, and, besides, she knew this guy. Sort of. At least, her mechanic knew him. She was pretty sure.

"You wouldn't believe it, you wouldn't believe it," she babbled again, pawing through her freezer for the bottle of Grey Goose vodka. A screwdriver—light on the O.J.—was just what she needed. Possibly more than one. Possibly half a

dozen. "What a crazy day! Even saying 'crazy day' doesn't do it justice—" "Wait." At his command, she fell (uncharacteristically) silent. "You're Sara Gunn?" "What? Of course I am. You know who I am. Yes. Am I out of ice? Oh, who cares. I'll drink it neat, if I have to ... is vodka good with vanilla ice cream?" "Sara Gunn of 6 Fairy Lane?" "Yes. We've been over this." He was so beautiful, and so, so dumb. It wasn't fair. Like she needed this, today of all days. "Now, d'you want a drink? Because I'm having one. Or do you need a ride? Am I supposed to keep the blue one? It's a nice car and all, but not really my style. Although frankly, the day I've had, I don't give a shit either way." Belatedly, she remembered her manners. "I'll call the garage for you and have someone come pick you up. Okeydokey?" He scowled at her, his gorgeous green eyes narrowing until they looked like pissed-off lasers. "D'you think you can ramp down the condescension a little bit, Miss Gunn? I get enough of that from my friend Moira." "Doctor Gunn," she said automatically, even as she blushed. "Sorry," she added. "It's just that you seemed . . . confused. Even more than me. And that's saying something." She reached for the phone. "I'll call the garage." He took the phone out of her hand, moving so quickly she didn't realize he'd taken it, until she saw he was holding the cordless. Odd. Odd! One second he'd been standing by the kitchen door, the next he was right in front of her. It was like watching a home movie, speeded up. Had she started drinking already? He made a fist, still holding the phone, and then small pieces of plastic were raining down on her tile. "I'm really, really sorry about this," he said dully. "It won't hurt. Just stand still." "What won't hurt?" His hands reached for her throat.

8

At the last second, she wriggled out of his grip like a greased fish and kicked his shin pretty hard for a human. It actually hurt. "What is wrong with you?" she screeched. Her eyes were starry and wild. She reeked of tension and stress and fury. "Has everyone in this town gone completely nutso bonkers today?" "Sort of." He took another swipe at her—if he could get his hands around her neck, he could end it in about half a second for her—she'd be in Heaven before she heard the snap. She ducked, and his hands closed on air. "It doesn't really matter. I'm so sorry. But I have to do this.

You're—I guess you're pretty dangerous. Sorry," he added lamely.

"Jerkoff, you have no idea! Now get the hell out of my house!" She snatched a statuette from the shelf by her head, and he ducked, but not fast enough—the five-inch-high Precious Moments figurine hit his forehead just above his right eye and exploded. By the time he shook the chips out of his hair and wiped the blood off his brow, she had darted down the hallway.

Grimly, he plodded after her. He didn't much like killing—heck, he'd only killed two people in his entire life, and they'd both been rogue werewolves. That had been a totally different thing, not even in the same universe as what he was attempting now. He'd been defending the Pack then, and that was entirely different from snapping this poor girl's neck.

This is defending the Pack, too, buddy. You'd better believe it. Now get your head in the game!

He tried. He really did. He understood intellectually that this sort of thing went against his even-tempered grain. He also understood that this woman was a threat to his family, his entire way of life. Intellectually. But he wasn't angry at her, he wasn't scared of her, she wasn't fucking somebody dangerous, he wasn't defending territory, he wasn't feeling any of the things he needed to feel in order to be okay with breaking a person's neck.

Not to mention, Sara Gunn was a stone cutie. He really liked her, even on such short acquaintance. He liked her sass, he liked her scatterbrained good humor, and he loved the way she smelled: like roses wrapped in cotton. Since she was a doctor, he figured she was the comely female embodiment of the absentminded professor, which was cute all in itself. Another time and place, and he'd be tempted to charm her into getting a nice hotel room for the day and ...

He caught up with her in the hallway, but she tripped as he reached for her neck, and he missed again. Well, of course he did. His heart was so completely not in this, it would have been funny if it wasn't so fucking depressing.

She kicked out at him from the floor and scrambled away. He reached again, and this time he tripped, falling hard enough to rattle his teeth.

Christ, will you get on? Stop drawing this out! Bad enough you have to kill her, you've got to play cat and mouse first? Scare her worse than she is? Asshole.

Except she wasn't so much scared as infuriated. Oh, he could smell the fear, an undercurrent beneath her rage, but she was primarily pissed. He really liked her for it. Any other woman-person!—would have been gibbering in the corner and begging for their life.

He climbed to his feet—only to be hit in the face with a box of tampons. The white missiles exploded out of the box and rained down on the floor.

"Get. . . lost!" she shrieked, hurling a perfume bottle at him. This time he did duck, and the bottle shattered behind him. Instantly the hallway reeked of lavender, and he sneezed.

"Out!"

"I can't," he said, then sneezed again. "You know, if you just stand still a

minute, it'll be over in—"

"Fuck you!"

"Right. Well, that's understandable. I mean, I wouldn't stand still for this, either. It's okay," he added soothingly, if inanely. What, exactly, was okay?

Nothing. Not a single goddamned thing.

He followed her into a bedroom and was momentarily startled at the sheer mess—it looked like someone had been killed in there. Then he realized that she was just a slob. There were clothes on almost every surface, and he couldn't tell what color the carpet was because of all the junk on the floor.

There were plenty of things to throw, too, and her aim was frightening—he was fast, but in her terror and anger, she was just a bit faster, raining missiles on him and shrieking like a fire alarm. He ducked about every two out of three, but that still left him vulnerable to: a jar of Noxema, an empty vase that smelled like stale water and dead flowers, a DVD case (Vertigo), a remote control, an empty box of Godiva chocolates, a box of computer discs, a hardcover copy of Stephen King's *The Stand*—cripes, how much did that weigh? Have you noticed you haven't been able to kill her? Sure, you're phoning it in, but come on— you're a werewolf in your prime. So how come she's not a corpse*. His inner voice sounded weirdly like Michael, which made him inclined to ignore it. Normally.

But he realized—on the top of his mind this time, not just the bottom—that it was true. He hadn't been able to kill her. Every time he got close, she tripped, or he did, or she scored with another missile. His head was throbbing, and it was hard to think.

Still, she should have been toast about three minutes ago.

Okay, that was it. No more fooling around. She was treed on top of her dresser, which was bare of things to throw at the moment—she'd run out of ammo, finally. Instead of cowering, she crouched on it like a cat, one with several swipes left in its paws.

"You son of a bitch," she rasped, hoarse from all the screaming hysterics. "I haven't done a single thing to deserve this—"

"Well, not yet," he said.

"—and now look at this mess! Worse than usual! My house is a wreck, there's a tear in my skirt, there's dead bodies all over my workplace, and my crazy blond stud of a mechanic's helper is trying to kill me! Son of a bitch!"

"It's been a bad day for both of us," he admitted. Then, "Blond stud?" He was absurdly flattered.

"Fuck you! I want you to get lost and leave me the hell alone!"

She had screamed that last part, shrieked it, roared it. Her fury was intense, overwhelming— he couldn't get the smell of burning cedar out of his nose—it was practically choking him.

Suddenly, startlingly, the pain in his head intensified—cripes, it felt like his skull was splitting!—and he started to get dizzy for the first time in his life.

It was extremely unpleasant. But before he could complain, or explain, everything got dark around the edges, and the room tilted, and then he didn't know anything, anything at all.

9

More exhilarated than frightened, Sara finished taping Psycho Jerkoff to her kitchen chair with her last roll of electrician's tape (a must for any single woman's toolbox). Then she stood back, looked at him for a long minute, and went to get her bag.

She supposed she should find a phone and call 911, but she wasn't too worried about what's-his-face getting out of that chair. In fact, she wondered if he'd ever get up again ... he was the color of kitchen plaster, and his body had a loose, boneless feel she didn't like at all.

She found her bag, shook the dirt off it, stepped over the spilled planter, and returned to the kitchen. She briefly wished for a cell phone— she kept losing the fucking things, and she was paying for it now—and bent to Psycho Jerkoff. She peeled up one of his eyelids and grimaced— blown pupil. Really blown . . . the thing looked like a burst pumpkin, all brownish orange leaks. The sclera was shot with red threads, and his breathing was gasping, agonal.

What had she done to him? Was it like the rapist who was waiting— But she wouldn't think about that now. What happened back then wasn't relevant to this poor fucker ... he was dying before her eyes. He had tried to kill her, but that didn't mean she wanted him to go toes-up in her kitchen. Poor dumb ass. Even his eye was—

Actually, it looked a little better. Less red, and the pupil seemed to be ... shrinking? Shrinking and pulling back, and the red was pulling back, too, disappearing, and then his perfectly whole pupil was fixed on her, and he shifted his weight, and she stumbled backward so fast she tripped over another chair and went sprawling.

10

"Well," Derik said, waking up. "That was embarrassing."

She scuttled back from him, startled. He blinked down at her. What was she doing on the floor?

"What are you doing on the—"

"That was fast," she said, almost gasped. "One minute you were out cold, and the next—"

"I'm a quick healer." He started to get up, then realized he couldn't. He was—for crying out loud! "You've taped me," he observed. "Taped me to one of your kitchen chairs. That's a new one."

"Electrician's tape," she said, gesturing to the depleted rolls on the counter.

"A must for every household. Now go back to sleep so I can call the cops, you psychotic freak."

He wriggled. He could get loose, but it would take some time. She was fiendish in her cleverness! Tape was tough, and he sure couldn't untie it.

"You might not believe this," he said, "but I'm sort of glad." And he was! He hadn't been able to kill her. She was alive, and pissed, and he was actually kind of happy about it, and relieved. It was strange, and probably stupid, but right now he didn't care. "Sorry about the mess in your house."

"Oh, shut up. Listen, you were really screwed up. How, how did you get better?" she burst out. It was as if she'd been dying to ask the question. "You had a blown pupil—do you know what that means?"

"Well," he said, "it doesn't sound very nice."

"You got that right. It's indicative of an aneurysm, get it? Brain bleed?

Nothing good, in other words. But you got better while I watched. Which is impossible."

"About as impossible as you still walking around alive. And I told you, I'm a quick healer. Got anything to eat around here?"

"I'm supposed to feed you now? After you tried to kill me?"

"I'm hungry," he whined.

"Tell it to the judge." She reached for the phone, found it gone, then spotted the pieces of the handset all over the floor. "Damn it! I forgot about that.

You're buying me a new phone, buster. And a new everything else we broke!" She knew, just knew, she would regret lending her bedroom phone to one of her former patients. Rose was a sweetie, but lending never meant lending, it always meant giving, and that was just—

"Sure, okay. Hey, listen, I've got to tell you something." Man oh man, Antonia would not be pleased. Neither would Michael. Fuck it. "I was sent on a mission to kill you." "

"I gathered," she said dryly, "judging from all the murder attempts."

"No, I mean, my family sent me here. Specifically, to you. Because you're fated to destroy the world. And it's my job to stop you. Except I couldn't."

"And you're fated for a Thorazine drip, as soon as the nice men in the white coats come." But she looked troubled, as if she was hearing a voice in a distant room, one that agreed with him completely. "And I—I might have been wrong about your eyes. In fact, after the day I've had, a misdiagnosis wouldn't surprise me at all."

"Sure," he sneered back. "Because you make them all the time." This was a guess,

but he figured Dr. Sara Gunn didn't get where she was by being a fuckup.

"Never mind. Now: "What the hell did I do with my old phone?" she mused aloud, running her fingers through her red, red hair. It kept wanting to flop in her face, and she kept tossing it back with jerks of her head. It was the brightest thing in the room; he could hardly take his eyes off it. Off her. "Did I throw it out? I don't think I did ... I never throw anything out, if I can help it... soon as you throw it out you need it again ... stupid thing."

"Listen to me. I'm not crazy, though I totally understand why you think I might be."

"Do ya?" she asked with faux brightness.

"I couldn't kill you. Get it? Never mind that I think my so-called sacred mission bites the bag; I was trying to kill you, and I couldn't do it. Don't you think that's a little bit weird?"

"No, I think you're a little bit weird." But she frowned.

"Hasn't stuff like this happened to you before? Weird days? Strangers popping up out of nowhere trying to do you harm? I can't believe my family's the only one who knows about you,"

"This is California," she said, looking more than troubled; looking vaguely alarmed. "Weird stuff happens all the time out here. And it's not even an election year."

"Yeah, California, not the Twilight Zone." He wriggled more and the tape pulled at his arm hairs. "Ow!"

"Well, sit still."

"And starve to death? Forget it."

"Oh, for Pete's sake. How long have you gone without a meal?"

"Two hours."

"An eternity, I'm sure."

"Fast metabolism. Come on, you have to have something around here."

"Buddy, you have got some nerve." She sounded almost. . . admiring? But she still looked pissed. Not that he could blame her. "Weird stuff... you probably said that because you were in on it."

"In on what?"

"Oh, like you don't know!"

"I don't know," he said patiently. "What are you talking about?"

"You don't know about the team of red-robed weirdos who tried to kill me at work." She said this with total skepticism.

"No, but I can't say I'm surprised. See, you're the bad guy."

"I'm the bad guy?"

"Yup. In fact, you're fated to destroy the world."

She touched her chest, looking flabbergasted. "I am?"

"Yup. That's why I was sent to make you take a dirt nap, so to speak. And I bet the crack team of weirdos was sent to do the same thing. So you should do three things: Feed me, untie me, and get the hell out of this house."

She stared at him.

"Don't think you have to do it in that order, either," he added, wriggling again. Fucking tape! Why couldn't she use plain old rope, like his ex-girlfriend?

"That's it," she finally said. "I'm calling the police. Right now." But she didn't move, and he could smell that she didn't mean it. She was too confused and curious.

"Okay, Morgan. Fetch the fuzz."

"What did you call me?"

"Morgan. It's your other name."

"I think I would know if I had another name."

"Obviously, you don't."

"Oh, piss off!" she snapped, which almost made him laugh. "I've had about enough of this 'mysterious stranger trying to kill me and then being all cryptic' garbage. Spit it out."

"Okay. You're the reincarnation of Morgan Le Fay."

She threw up her hands. "Oh, please! That's the best you could do?"

He shrugged, as much as he could mummified in tape as he was. "It's the truth.

You're a bad witch, back to wreck the world. Sorry."

"First of all, Morgan Le Fay wasn't necessarily bad. Second—"

"How do you know that?"

"I did some papers on her in college. Second—"

"Uh-huh. Of all the people in the world, living and dead, you picked her. I bet your minor in college had something to do with her."

"Lots of people minor in European history. And as for picking Le Fay for a research topic— me and about a zillion other people through the ages," she said, but again looked vaguely troubled, as if listening to something he couldn't hear. Which with his hearing was impossible, frankly. "Tell me, the place where you live . . . are there a lot of doctors there? And little cups of pills?"

"Very funny, Morgan."

"Don't call me that," she said automatically, but with no real heat.

"Look, at least consider the possibility. I mean, why would I come here? I live in Massachusetts, for Christ's sake, but I come all the way across the country just to wreck your house?"

"That's the theory I was going with, yes," she admitted.

"Pretty shaky," he told her. "And today not only am I here, but another group of killers? Would-be killers, I mean? And what happened to them? How come you're not dead? You avoided me and them?"

"We haven't established that you're not one of them," she pointed out. "And they ran into some bad luck."

"Yeah, I'll bet. I'll bet that happens a lot around you."

"Well..." Her brow knitted, and she looked severely cute as she pondered. Her blue eyes narrowed and her forehead wrinkled. "I've always been lucky . . . but

"I don't think that proves anything."

"Since we're going to talk for a while—which I'm totally fine with, so don't sweat it—do you have an apple, or maybe you could fix me a PB&J, or something?"

"Again with the food! You've got a lot of nerve, anybody ever tell you that?"

"Pretty much every day, back home. So, do you?"

"I don't believe this," she muttered but, praise God, she turned to the counter, plucked an apple out of the bowl, grabbed a knife out of the rack, and rapidly cut the fruit into bite-sized pieces.

She stomped over to him and stuffed three chunks into his mouth.

"Fgggs," he said.

"You're welcome. So somebody sent you here to kill me because I'm the reincarnation of Morgan Le Fay, that's what you're telling me." He didn't answer because it wasn't an actual question. "And other people are also out to get me, because of this." He nodded, still chewing. "So I shouldn't call the cops, I should leave."

"With me," he said, swallowing.

"Oh, that's rich."

"I figure there's more to this than meets the eye, y'know? So we should take off and see if we can see what's what."

She was cutting up another apple in rapid, angry motions, and he eyed the knife a little nervously; if she got pissed enough to plant it in his eye, he'd probably never howl at the moon again. He was a fast healer, but there was some brain damage that couldn't be fixed, no matter how close the full moon was.

"See what's what," she repeated. "Yeah, sure. Let's get right on that." She jammed a few more pieces into his mouth and, although eating cut-up apples had never seemed particularly erotic to him before, the smell of her and the touch of her skin on his lips was starting to, um, cause him a little problem. Okay, a big problem.

He shifted in the chair and wished he could cross his legs. "Look, you get kind of weirded out whenever I suggest that there's maybe more to you than meets the eye," he said around a mouthful of apple. "So why don't you tell me? What happened before today? How come you're so lucky?"

"I don't know. I just am. I always have been. My mom used to call me her lucky break."

"Oh yeah? Where is she now?"

"She's dead."

"Oh. Sorry. Mine, too."

"Gosh, we've got all kinds of things in common," she said, rolling her eyes and shoving another chunk of apple between his lips.

"Meant to be, I guess," he said, chomping.

"Okay, so, I won the lottery. A couple of times," she said grudgingly.

"You what?" He knew she wasn't lying, but it was still surprising. "More than once?"

"I tend to get... windfalls . . . whenever I'm short of money. And once I needed a few thousand to pay for the last quarter of school, and I won the lottery, and it was exactly the amount I needed. And I got a refund one year when I needed some extra money to—but everybody gets tax refunds."

"Yeah, but I've never even met one person who won the lottery, never mind won it twice."

"Four times," she muttered.

"Oh, for fuck's sake! And you're giving me shit like I'm crazy?"

"It doesn't mean anything," she insisted.

"Okay, Morgan—"

"Quit that!"

"—maybe you can explain how, at the exact moment you needed to get me out of the way, I get a freakin' brain aneurysm, how about that?"

"A happy coincidence?" she guessed.

"For Christ's sake."

"Actually," she said, clearing her throat, "there was a serial rapist in this area a couple years ago. And, um, he got in somehow while I was at school, but when I came home I found him dead in my kitchen."

"Brutally stabbed?"

"No, um, the autopsy showed he had a congenital heart defect, a minor one that shouldn't have given him any trouble, but for some reason, while he was waiting here to—to—well, he had an M.I. and died."

"What's an M.I.?"

"Myocardial infarction. Heart attack," she said impatiently.

He gaped at her. "Holy shit, I'm lucky to be alive!"

"Well, you really kind of are." She poked another piece of apple in his mouth.

"Let the record show I still think you're nuts. Also, once when I overslept and missed the bus, it crashed, and half the people aboard were killed."

"Jesus Christ!" It was all he could say. This was worse—and cooler—than he had ever dreamed. "That's it, that's your magic. You're phenomenally fucking lucky. All the time."

"There's no such thing as magic." But that species of hellish doubt was on her face again. "Everybody's lucky."

"Sara, for God's sake. Listen to yourself."

"The team at the hospital..."

"Don't tell me, let me guess. They were like the Three Stooges—or however many of them there were. Knocking heads, falling down, having heart attacks on the spot... and you walked away without a scratch."

"That might be true ..."

"We should go clubbing some night."

She laughed unwillingly. "Sure we should. I'm sure the police will let you out in no time."

"Oh, come on! After all this, you're still calling the cops on me? We should get

out of here!"

"You did try to kill me," she reminded him— like he needed it! He'd never live it down. Derik Gardner, badass werewolf, totally unable to kill a nurse. A nurse with a doctorate, but still. "And I've only got your word that you're not going to try again."

"Well, my word's good," he grumped. Of course, she couldn't know that. Not like another Pack member would know it. It made everything harder. Which was kind of cool. Yet aggravating. "And like I said, there's more to this than what we can smell. I think—"

"Than what we can smell}"

"Never mind. Look, let's do some digging, okay?"

"Okay!" she said with fake enthusiasm. "Do you want to be Nancy Drew or a Hardy Boy?"

He ignored the sarcasm . . . he'd had years of practice with Moira. "Let's find out what exactly you're supposed to do. I mean, you don't want to destroy the world, right?"

"This is the most surreal conversation I've ever had," she commented. "And no. Duh."

"So how come anybody who can see the future—I assume that's how the bad guys knew to come after you—says you're gonna do just that? Huh? Don't you think that's weird? Huh?"

"That's not the only thing I think is weird."

"Then hold on to your hat, sunshine."

She eyed him warily. "What? I'm not really up to more surreal revelations ..."

"I'm a werewolf."

"Damn it! What did I just say?"

11

"I'm a werewolf," the gorgeous nut job said again. He shifted in the chair and winced. She suspected he was sore ... certainly there was plenty of dried blood on his forehead and speckled all over his shirt. She felt sorry for him and stomped on the emotion. "Soon to be a hairless one, but there you go."

"Whine much? Try getting a bikini wax."

"I'll pass."

"Look, one thing at a time, all right?" Sara tried not to show how rattled she was. She suspected she was fighting a losing battle. As if her day hadn't been upsetting enough, she was actually turned on by hand-feeding Hunka Hunka Burning Looney. She could feel the stubble on his chin when she popped more apple slices into his mouth, could feel the warmth of his face, smell the apple sweetness of

his breath, could (I could do anything to him, anything at all.)
feel his ... his ...
(He couldn't stop me. He's tied up. I could sit on his lap and do ... do anything...)
Aw, nuts. His lips were moving. More nonsense about (the true you)
Morgan Le Fay, no doubt.
"What?" she asked.
"I said, one of my Pack members told me what you were going to do, and my—my boss, I guess you'd call him, he sent me here to take care of you. And not in a good way, F.Y.I."
"Sounds like a real prince," she muttered, trying not to stare at his mouth.
Derik shrugged. "More like a king, actually, and he's okay. He's my best friend, so I had to leave before I killed him."
"Oh yeah?"
"Yeah. I mean, I couldn't imagine anything worse than killing a friend."
"That's pretty bad," she admitted, wondering when she'd checked her sanity at the door. This was definitely the most surreal conversation she'd had in ... ever. "It's probably just as well you left town to kill me instead."
"To try to kill you," he corrected. Then he grinned, showing many teeth. It was so startling—a white flash, and cripes, those chompers looked sharp—that she nearly took a step back. "And I like you, too, by the way," he added, which made no sense, but who cared? "You are, in case nobody's told you, extremely cute. Are you a natural redhead? You are, aren't you?"
"Never mind," she said severely. "I'm going in the back room now, to call the police. You're extremely confused, if gorgeous, and I... have had .. . enough."
"Oh, me, too," he assured her. "I don't think I've been less comfortable in my life. So if you don't mind . . . and even if you do ..." Then he did something like an all-over shrug, and she heard tearing tape, and then he—he was standing up!
One more time: He was standing up! "Gah," she said, or something like it. How had he—how had he torn through all that—and the arm of the chair was broken, too, which was weird, and—
He was grabbing her! Well, reaching for her.
Taking her by the arms "Gah!" and pulling her into a snug embrace "Gah!" and bending his head toward hers "Ga—mmph!"
and then his mouth was on hers, moving deliciously across hers, and she was grabbing his shoulders to, um, push him away, okay, she was going with that, yeah, pushing him away, except now she was up on her tiptoes, the better to fit against him, and he smelled delicious, he smelled like the woods in springtime, and his mouth, oh God, his mouth was warm, and his breath was redolent of apples and ... and ...
He'd broken the kiss and was standing three feet away from her. She'd never seen him move. She'd blinked, and he was done. Her mind tried to process his speed

and couldn't do it. Just... couldn't.

"Sorry," he said cheerfully. "Wanted to do that for oh, about the last four hours. Now it's out of my system. Okay, maybe not. So! What's next, sunshine?"

"Gah?" she asked, raising a trembling hand to her mouth.

"I think we should put our, um, heads together and figure out what's what."

"You're not a werewolf," she said, because it was the only thing she could think of.

He sighed and walked into her living room, squatted, picked up her couch, stood, and held it in one hand, in much the same way she would hold a tray.

Fortunately, she had vaulted ceilings.

"You're not gonna make me juggle it, are you?" He tossed her couch a foot in the air, caught it, tossed it again. "I don't think I have enough room."

"So you work out," she said through numb lips. "That doesn't mean you—you—you know."

"Get fuzzy and bark at the moon one night a month?"

"Well. . ."

"Look, I believed you're a hideously dangerous sorceress fated to destroy the world."

"Don't do me any favors," she snapped. "And put that thing down."

"Say it," he sang. He wasn't even out of breath!

"Just put it down, and we'll talk some more, okay?"

"Saaaaaaaay it..."

"Fine, fine! You're a werewolf, and I'm a demented sorceress. Now let go of my couch," she begged.

"Okay." He carefully put it back where he'd found it. "So, now what?"

"Well, I'm not going to destroy the world, I'll tell you that right now." She crossed her arms in front of her chest. It was easier to be brave-sound brave, anyway—when he was all the way across the room.

"Works for me. How about another kiss? No? Spoilsport."

"You're really weird," she informed him.

"That's what they tell me." He was weirdly cheerful. He was, in fact, the smilingest guy she'd ever known. Maybe he was mildly retarded.

" 'They' being . . . ?"

"My Pack."

"Your pack."

"Uppercase P."

"Mmm. Of werewolves, right?"

"Yup."

"Who sent you out here to stop me from destroying the world."

"Yup."

"But you're not going to kill me."

"Well..." He spread his hands apologetically. "I couldn't, first of all. I mean, really couldn't. I felt bad about it, but I was gonna do it, don't get me wrong."

But... I didn't. And in case no one's ever told you, an aneurysm hurts like a bastard."

"Thanks for the tip."

"So I figure, we team up, figure out who the real bad guys are, and save the world."

"But what if you're the real bad guy?"

"Well, I know it's not me. And you were pretty upset about something when you showed up. I'm betting you've met the real bad guys. So, I'll help you get 'em."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"Well. It'll help me both personally and professionally, see, because I've kinda wanted to be on my own, and I figure this is the chance to show what I can do. Just. . . don't blow up the planet in the meantime, okay? I'd never live it down. I mean—how totally embarrassing."

"Team up?" Why was the idea as exciting as it was frightening? "Like that, eh?"

He smiled at her and, oddly, the expression wasn't startling. Maybe because he wasn't showing so many teeth. "Like that. So, what do you say?"

"I say we're both nuts." She pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. "I can't believe I'm considering this. I can't believe I'm not calling the police. I can't believe ..."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Oh, that? Don't worry about that. I told you, I like you, too."

"Swell," she muttered.

12

"I wish you wouldn't do that."

"Sorry." He pulled back so his head was inside the car. "Can't help it. This place smells great."

"Look, it's weird enough that you stick your head out of the car like a big—well, you know. But do you have to do it while you're driving?"

"No," he sulked.

"Take a left at the light."

He did, and Monterey Bay General loomed before them. Sara stared at the brick building. It was completely perfect that they should show up here first. MB General had been her home forever. She'd learned there, worked there, fallen in love there, worked there, got dumped there, slept there, worked there, been forged there, worked there, found out she was an orphan there, grown up there. Found a father there.

Well, at least Derik hadn't tried to kill her. Again.

"I forgot," she said abruptly. "What's your last name?"

"Gardner."

"Oh." That sounded almost... normal. Safe and normal. "Okay. So, I guess you already know my name."

"Yup."

"Of course," she muttered. Stupid! He'd only told her the whole silly story, and more than once. Maybe she couldn't retain the facts because she couldn't swallow them. Frankly, she still wasn't sure if she was buying into this whole "you're doomed to destroy the world" thing, but at the very least, it was more interesting than hanging out in her mechanic's garage.

"You okay?" he asked. "You look like you're about to jump out of the car." He parked. "Which you totally shouldn't do. I mean, you guys are mega-fragile. I don't know how you walk around in those breakable bodies of yours."

"You kind of get in the habit of it, if you're born in one of those bodies."

"Poor thing." He shook his head.

"Never mind."

"Okay," she said nervously. "We're gonna go find Dr. Cummings. He's kind of like my mentor. He and my mom were good friends, and he took care of me after she—after she died. He knew a lot of stuff about my family that he would never talk about, and he—he's always been good in a crisis." More like completely unruffled, all the time. And hadn't he recovered awfully quickly from the morning attack? He'd been more annoyed than scared . . . not a typical reaction. Except from him. But it was enough to make her wonder. "Anyway, we'll find him and see what he has to say, and maybe figure out where to go from there. Okay? Is that okay?"

"You're the killer sorceress," he said easily. "I guess we'll go wherever you say."

"Knock that off, or no Milk Bones for you tonight."

He groaned, which caused several female heads to swivel in their direction.

Derik was slightly larger than life . . . hell, he was slightly larger than his T-shirt, which bulged and rippled in interesting directions. He was by far the largest man in the hospital lobby. Possibly in the hospital. Or the city. "Don't start with the dog jokes, okay?"

"That depends on you," she said smugly. "Now come on. Dr. Cummings is probably in his office."

"What's he look like?"

"Like an angry Colonel Sanders."

Derik snorted. "Does he have white hair and a white beard? And does he eat tons of Corn Nuts?"

She stared at him and almost didn't get into the elevator. Sheer momentum

carried her to his side. "Have you been following me?"

He looked at her curiously. "That's gonna make you mad? That's worse than trying to kill your "People have tried that before. I'm almost used to it. But I fucking hate being followed," she snapped. "It's sneaky and dishonest and nasty."

"Take it easy!" He threw his hands in the air. "Seriously, Sara, don't get mad, okay? Just calm down. I wasn't following you. I can smell this Dr. Cummings guy on you, that's all."

"That's all?" She stabbed the button for the fifth floor. Derik's slight panic was sort of amusing. It was nice to have the upper hand with someone so good-looking. And she knew, she just knew, he was one of Those Guys. Every woman in the lobby had been staring at him, and he hadn't even noticed. One of Those Guys never had a clue how great-looking they were. It was annoying. No, it was nice. No, it was annoying.

"He must have hugged you or grabbed you or something. There's a couple of white hairs on your left shoulder. I mean, you got a nose like mine, you don't have to follow anybody. So mellow out, okay?"

"Dr. Cummings knocked me down in the lobby," she admitted. "He was kind of pissed."

Derik frowned. "At you?"

"No, about the killers making us late for grand rounds."

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

"Huh. Yeah, we better go talk to this guy. Shit, maybe we can recruit him."

"I'm sure," she said dryly, walking the Gauntlet—what everyone called the fifth floor physicians' offices—while Derik fell into step beside her, "that he'd be thrilled."

She stopped outside Cummings's office and raised a hand to knock.

"That door says Dr. Michaels," Derik pointed out.

"Mmm. It's one of the many ways Dr. Cummings tries to ensure interns don't bug him."

She rapped twice.

"Go away, or I'll have you fired!"

"That's another one," she explained, and opened the door.

"Oh, wonderful, it's Dr. Nurse Gunn. Or is it Nurse Gunn, Doctor? Don't let the door crush your tiny head on the way out."

"This man here," Sara said, indicating Derik, who was openly fascinated by Dr. Cummings's fuzzy eyebrows, "tells me I'm Morgan Le Fay."

Dr. Cummings grunted and started pawing through the pile of last year's Lancet.

"And that he was sent to kill me so I wouldn't destroy the world."

Dr. Cummings found the issue he wanted and settled back in his chair. He grunted again, an invitation for Sara to keep speaking.

"And I was wondering," she continued, feeling foolish, "what you might have to

say about that."

"I'm surprised the boy's still alive," Dr. Cummings said, not looking up from the magazine. "And disappointed, I might add. I don't have anything to say beyond that, Your Highness."

She blinked. Thought that over. Started to speak. Changed her mind. Changed her mind again. Said: "Your Highness?"

"Well. You are the sister of a king. A centuries-dead king, but there you go."

"Oh, dude," Derik said, and flopped down into the nearest chair. "You're in major trouble, Cummings."

"You keep your hands to yourself, werewolf."

Sara's mouth fell open. Derik nearly fell out of the chair. "Dude! How'd you know? You are so wo* Pack."

"Do I look like I like my steak served tartare?" Cummings snapped. "It's all over you. Predators walk, stand, move, and run quite a bit differently from the rest of us. If you want to fool Homo sapiens, I'd advise not walking around sizing everyone up like you're wondering how they'd taste. And as for you, Your Highness," he said, swiveling toward Sara, "what are you doing with this—this riffraff? Fooled by his over-the-top handsomeness, I've no doubt. Strongly consider killing him, dear. Werewolves are nothing but trouble, and they do not make good husbands."

"That's not true!" Derik said hotly.

"Where's your father, lycanthrope?" Dr. Cummings asked with deceptive courtesy.

"He's . . . um . . . look, let's stay on-topic, shall we? And don't call me that. Cough up what you know, chum. Right now." He turned to Sara, who was desperately trying to follow the conversation. "But let's get back to this for a sec—we do too make good husbands. You know—once we find the right girl." Dr. Cummings made a sound. It was not a sound of encouragement.

"See, most of the guys I know really want a mate—a wife, I mean—and kids. They really do. But there aren't very many of us, and there's tons and tons of you guys, so lots of times they don't really think it through before they settle down, and, well, humans are different from Pack, it's nothing to be embarrassed about—"

"Derik." She was exasperated—who cared?—and amused at his distress. "Can we stay focused on this whole Your Highness thing? And you!" Dr. Cummings flinched as she shook a finger at him. "Start talking. Start with, 'I moved to Monterey Bay and knew your mother before you were born,' and end with, 'and then you and a werewolf came to my office.' Start now."

"Yeah!" Derik added.

"Don't raise your voice to me, pup." Cummings looked at Sara. "I moved to Monterey Bay because by my art I knew Morgan Le Fay was to be born there in seventy-two hours. I found you at this hospital and befriended your mother. I explained to your mother who you were, but she wouldn't believe me, and forbade me to tell you."

I kept you safe these many years and looked after you after your mother died. Now Arthur's Chosen is trying to kill you. It has nothing to do with saving the world. They just don't like you. Then you and a werewolf came to my office." He picked up his magazine again.

"Oh, dude." Derik rubbed his forehead. "You are so asking for a heart attack or for your lungs to pop or your eyeballs to explode or something. I mean, I don't even know her and that whole story pissed me right off."

"My mother?" Sara coughed and tried again. "My mother knew this?"

"No. You weren't listening, Dr. Gunn, a trait I've discussed with you before."

"Sorry," she muttered.

"Want me to pull his lungs out for you?" Derik asked brightly.

"Try it, lycanthrope."

"I told you not to call me that."

"You guys, cut it out!" she snapped. "Finish what you were saying, Doctor."

He sniffed. "Well. As earlier, I said your mother refused to believe the truth. And she did. She willfully would not let herself believe. She went to her grave thinking you were like every other kid. She was, in fact, determined you were like every other kid. No matter what she saw. No matter what you did." Dr. Cummings paused. "A nice woman," he said at last, "but not terribly bright."

"Do not talk about Sara's dam like that," Derik growled.

"It's a free country, whelp, and do I look like I'm worried about irritating someone who licks his testicles during a full moon?"

Derik's eyes bulged, and Sara choked back a laugh. She knew at once that the big blond stud was not used to humans in their fifties dishing out shit.

"Okay, okay," she said, holding her hands up. "Let's stay focused."

"I do not lick my—"

"So, Dr. Cummings, why you? Why have you been sticking so close?"

"To protect you from the occasional moron who wants to kill you because of who you are." He glanced meaningfully at Derik, whose hands were clenching and relaxing, clenching and relaxing. "Or, rather, who you were."

"And those guys this morning?"

"I told you. Arthur's Chosen."

A long silence and, when it appeared Dr. Cummings had nothing more to say, Sara said, exasperated, "And who are they?"

"Buncha losers, probably," Derik muttered. "Out to get you just because they can."

"And your purpose in our fair town was what, exactly?" Dr. Cummings asked sharply. "I'm sure I can guess. Your alpha gave you your marching orders, and off you went, without a question or a murmur. Typical Pack behavior."

"He did not! I mean, I decided to come on my own. Well, um, and what the hell do you know about it, Cummings?"

Dr. Cummings shrugged, and began rooting around for a pack of cigarettes.

Smoking was, of course, forbidden in the hospital. Only Dr. Cummings dared to

try. "I spent some time—years— in the company of a lady lycanthrope. She'd been banished from your Pack for some trivial reason, and was lonely."

"Where is she now?" Sara asked, interested in spite of herself. She'd never seen Dr. Cummings in the company of anyone but her mother. In fact, there were rumors that he was gay.

"A new Pack leader came to power, forgave her for her unbelievably minor transgression, and off she went, back to the Cape to live happily catching rabbits with her teeth."

"Who was it?" Derik asked. "I probably know her family."

"Never you mind. My point is, I wouldn't start pointing fingers at Arthur's Chosen, because your own reasons for being here aren't exactly beyond reproach."

"Uh-huh! I'm trying to save the world, pal. Grief from puffing human busybodies I so don't need."

"Arthur's Chosen," Sara said, again trying to bring them back on track. "What's their story?"

Cummings shrugged and lit a cigarette. "Rabid followers of the King Arthur legend. You know, of course, that Arthur was betrayed by his half sister, Morgan Le Fay, and it's ultimately why he fell in battle. Arthur's Chosen think that if they get rid of you, Arthur will finally return."

"So," Derik said, "they're cracked in the head."

"Well, yes. They're fanatics. A tough group to reason with."

"Just a minute," Sara said. "Morgan's supposed 'evil nature' is legend, not fact. In fact, a lot of people believe today that Morgan's wickedness was the invention of misogynist monks."

Both Dr. Cummings and Derik shrugged. Sara resisted the urge to throw up her hands. Men! God forbid they look at history in a woman-friendly fashion. Morgan Le Fay was probably a perfectly nice woman for her time. Strong-willed, sure. But wicked and evil and a dark sorceress? Feh.

"But how do they know Sara's Morgan?" "The same way I did. The stars, old books, legends, prophecies. How did you know?"

"One of my Pack members can see the future," Derik admitted. "She said if I didn't get my butt to Sara's address pronto, the world was gonna blow up, or whatever."

"Hmm. Charming. So, what are your plans?" Derik looked blank. Sara said,

"Plans?" "To eliminate the threat to your personal safety, to not destroy the world—the prophecies all agree on that, I'm sorry to say—you know. Your plans."

"Uh..."

"Great," Dr. Cummings grumped. "I swear, Sara, you get dumber every year."

"Watch it," Derik warned.

"And you, I suspect, were never the sharpest knife in the drawer."

"Dude, I am so going to make you eat your ears."

Dr. Gumming sighed. "Very well. Arthur's sect has its home base in Salem, Massachusetts. Go there. Smite your enemies. Have a hot fudge sundae. The end."

"Wait, wait, wait. If you knew all this was going to happen, why didn't you warn me? Why didn't you tell me about Arthur's Sect ten years ago?"

"Right. I see now that I have failed you. Because you certainly would have believed me and left at once for Salem."

"Might have," she mumbled.

"Don't you see, Sara? I had to wait until forces started moving in on you. It's the only way there would have been a chance of you believing me.

The sect would never have harmed you as an infant, because all the prophecies say you don't destroy the world until you're fully grown."

"Wait, wait," Derik protested. "So why not kill her when she was a baby? Save the world that way?"

"Because the sect can't use her if she's dead, stupid mongrel. And she's not so easy to kill, in case you forgot. Which wouldn't surprise me."

"But how do they use her to destroy the world? These Arthur guys?"

Dr. Cummings shrugged. "No one knows. Only that she is integral to the plot. Kill her as an infant, and who knows what will happen? Wait until she's fully-grown—very fully grown, Sara, time to lay off the bagels—and risk the world being destroyed. It's not an easy choice. Most of us decided to watch and wait. Now go away."

"It's not nice to kill old guys," Derik muttered under his breath. "It's not nice to kill old guys. It's not nice to—"

"All I could do was stick close, which I have, and now I'm done, and it's Miller time." Dr. Cummings clapped his hands sharply, making Sara and Derik jump. "Now go! Off to Salem. Good-bye."

Derik and Sara looked at each other, then shrugged in unison. "I'm game if you are," she said. "I don't want to walk into the hospital again and worry about Arthur's Chosen hurting bystanders."

"I'm going where you go."

"How touching," Dr. Cummings said. "I've approved your vacation request as of thirty seconds ago. I suggest you don't delay."

"Why?" Sara asked. "Is there something you're not telling us?"

"No, I'm just bored now. Good-bye."

"What a sweetheart," Derik muttered once they were on the other side of the door.

"Off to Massachusetts," Sara said, "dodging killers along the way, and with a werewolf bodyguard."

"Don't forget about the hot fudge sundaes."

"We can't go back to your place."

"Agreed. Besides, it would take about six hours of cleaning before the house was livable again. Thanks again, by the way."

Derik ignored her sarcasm. "And I sure can't show up at the mansion with you."

"Uh-huh. Err ... why is that, again?" "Because I was supposed to kill you, duh."

"Don't say duh to me," she ordered. "I get enough of that from Dr. Cummings."

"Yeah, cripes, what a grouch. Guy's not afraid of anything, is he?" Derik said this in a tone of grudging admiration. "But anyway, about you—

I can hardly walk through the front door and say, 'hey, guys, here's Morgan Le Fay, didn't feel like killing her, what's for lunch?'"

Sara frowned. "So you're saying you're going to get into trouble for this?"

Derik stretched, wiggling in the driver's seat, then pulled into a convenience store parking lot. "Maybe. Kind of. Okay, yes."

"Derik, you can't—I mean, I appreciate you giving up your sacred holy mission of premeditated murder and all, but don't your kind banish Pack members for, like, teeny tiny reasons? Never mind huge reasons like not fulfilling your mission?"

"We have a group mentality," he explained. "So if you do something that hurts the group, or may possibly hurt the group, it's bye-bye time."

"So you—you can't go back?" Sara tried not to sound as horrified as she felt.

She was lonely— well, alone—by circumstance. Her father had died the day she was born; her mother when she was a teenager. But Derik was deliberately giving up his family ... for her. It was touching. And cracked. "Not ever?"

He yawned, apparently unconcerned. "Well, I figure it's like this: Either you destroy the world, in which case, my alpha can't kick my ass, or you don't, in which case, my alpha will know I was right. Kind of a win/win for me."

"Except for the possible death of billions."

"Well, yeah. There's that."

"But you can never see your friends again?" Sara was having trouble letting this go. "Your family?"

"I was going to leave anyway. It was either that, or—anyway, I had to go."

"Well, thanks," she said doubtfully. "I— thanks. What are we doing here?"

"I'm starved."

"Again?"

"Hey, we don't all weigh a hundred pounds and have the metabolism of a fat monkey."

"Oh, very nice!" she snapped. "Well, as long as you're here, let me get my cash card, I'll grab some money."

His hand closed over hers, which was startling, to say the least. He was very warm. His hand dwarfed hers and, in the California sunlight, the hair on the back of his knuckles was reddish blond. She was fascinated to note that his index finger was exactly as long as his middle finger. "Nope."

She stared into his green, green eyes. "What, nope?"

"We're on the way to Salem, right? Chances are, there's gonna be some bad guys

on our tail. Right?"

"What, you're asking me? Ten hours ago my biggest problem was finding a pair of panty hose that didn't have a run in them."

"So, you can't leave a money trail," he continued patiently. "No cash cards, no credit cards. And if you make a big bank withdrawal, my Pack's gonna know you're alive. They'll assume I'm dead, and then there's gonna be real trouble."

"How would they even know—never mind, don't tell me. We can't go across the country with no money," she pointed out.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm working on that one."

"What a relief," she said, getting out of the car and following him up the sidewalk. "Seriously. You have no idea."

"Aw, stick a sock in it. You—watch it." He grabbed her elbow and pulled her out of the way just as a teenager came barreling through the door of the store. The kid stopped for a minute, utterly panicked, and they all heard the wail of sirens at the same time.

Well, probably not, Sara thought. Probably Derik heard them about a minute earlier. Aggravating man. And what happened when the moon rose? What then? Did she really believe he was going to turn into a wolf and run around peeing on fire hydrants?

"Shit!" the teen cried, and started to dart around them. Derik stepped in his way—

"Don't do that," Sara said sharply. "He might have a gun."

"He does have a gun," Derik replied, bored.

—and the teen suddenly thrust a paper bag at Sara, who tightened her grip around it purely by reflex.

They both watched the kid race out of the parking lot.

Sara opened the sack, which was bulging with twenties, tens, and fives. "Oh," she said. "Well. Um. I seem to have come into some untraceable cash for our trip."

Derik slapped the heel of his hand to his forehead, then shoved Sara back toward the car. "Let's get out of here before the cops come." He jumped into the convertible, fighting a grin. "You lucky bitch."

"So, we need another car."

"Okay," Sara said. They had left the Monterey city limits, and she had just finished counting the money. Eight hundred sixty-two dollars even. No change.

"Um, why?"

"Because my Pack rented this one for me. They can track it. We have to leave it and find something on our own."

"Okay."

"So, do it."

"Do what?"

"You know. Work your hocus-pocus and wish us up a car."

"It doesn't work like that."

"The hell it doesn't."

"I don't have conscious control over it," she explained, trying—and failing—to smooth her hair out of her face. Convertibles were sexy and cool in the movies, but in real life you couldn't see for all the hair flying around. And she dreaded trying to pull a brush through the mess when they parked. Not that she had a brush. But still. "Heck, until you showed up, I didn't think I could do anything special at all. Except bowl," she added thoughtfully. "I'm great at that."

"Yeah, I bet those pins just happen to fall over for you all the time.

Concentrate," he ordered. "We need ... an untraceable ... car."

"Stop . . . talking . . . like that."

He slapped the steering wheel with his palm. "Shit. Well, I guess I could steal one. . . except we'd have to do that at least every day or so."

"Why aren't we taking a plane? Isn't it a four-or five-day drive?"

"You want to show airport security your ID? Because I don't think that's, y'know, too cool. Which also lets out renting a car, and taking a train."

"Are there that many werewolves running around the country?"

"No. There's only about three hundred thousand of us, worldwide. But still. I think it's too important to take chances. I'd hate to fuck this up through bad luck, y'know? Not that you exactly have bad luck. But still. I'm not crazy about taking chances. Okay, I am, but not chances of this magnitude. Get it?"

"Hardly. And you can't ask any of your—um, your family—the Pack, or whatever you call it—for a car?"

"Well, I could, but I'd rather not take a chance on anything getting back to Michael—my alpha," he explained. "I'd risk spending a night or two with local Pack members, because my mission is top secret—"

"Excellent, Mr. Bond."

"Anyway, most of the Pack doesn't know what I'm up to. Just the East Coasters. So it's no big deal to show up on someone's doorstep and crash for the night. But to do that, and be in a situation where I'd have to borrow a car, and have you in. tow . . . that might get back to the wrong set of ears."

"So, what?"

"So, we need a car. We'll drive for a while, then crash."

Til tell you right now," Sara declared, "no more convertibles!"

"Aw, how come?" he whined. "How can you not like the wind in your face?"

She pointed to her head, which, thanks to mussed curls, was almost twice as large as usual. "Forget it, Derik. For-get-it."

"Aw, you look cute."

"And you're deranged, but we established that a couple hours earlier. No convertibles." "Well, I'm not driving a zillion miles—" "Three thousand, five

hundred," she said dryly.

"—locked up in a steel box, I can tell you that right now, Sare-Bear!"

"Ew, don't call me that. Sare-Bear? Ugh." " 'Cuz you look like a cute little bear with your hair all over the—"

"Stop talking. What? You're claustrophobic?" "No. I just don't like being shut up in a steel box for hours and hours a day." "So, you are claustrophobic." "No, it's just. . . that fake carpet... the upholstery ..." He shuddered. "It reeks, man. It totally reeks."

"You know what we need?" "For you not to destroy the world?" "Besides that. We need a truck. A nice big truck with four-wheel drive and a supercab." "What's a supercab?"

"It's a truck that seats two or three people in the front seat and a couple in the backseat. There's plenty of space to store our stuff, and if you start feeling like the upholstery is closing in on you, you can ride in the back while I drive. Your hair mussed in the breeze, your ears flopping behind you . . . it'll be great."

"Can you destroy the world right now?" he asked. "Because if I gotta put up with one more dog joke..."

"And if we don't get a motel room or don't want to stop for long, we can spread some sleeping bags out in the back and sack out there. We'd have to stop and use some of this cash to buy camping equipment, but that'd be easy enough."

He frowned at her. He blinked at her. At last he said, "That's kind of brilliant."

"Well," she said modestly, "I am a doctor."

"Okay, so. We try to steal a truck."

"And what are we going to do when we catch up with Arthur's Chosen?"

"Let's get there first," he said grimly, and she had no reply to that.

14

"This is insane," she commented.

"It is not. Now try to look like we're not stealing a car."

"But we are stealing a car."

"Will you cut that out? Look casual. Lean on the door."

"The one you're trying to open?"

Derik resisted the urge to strangle Sara. This was an interesting improvement over resisting the urge to kiss her. You'd think, since he'd saved her life—well, sort of, in that he hadn't tried to kill her again—and because he was helping her hunt down Arthur's Big Fat Losers, that she'd be a little grateful. Or at least nicer. But nooo. It was blah-blah-blah and bitch-bitch-bitch. Like

she could do any better than a full-grown werewolf! Okay, well, maybe she could.

But that was irrelevant. Wasn't it?

"It's just that this is an extremely insane idea," she was explaining, like he'd gone retarded.

He grabbed the door handle again and tried to smell her hair without her catching on. Roses and cotton—yum! And how cute did she look in the convertible with those red curls flying all over the place? Her nose was sunburned now, and he even liked the shade of pink.

She turned to give him a suspicious look, and he held his breath in mid-sniff.

Then, to distract her, he said, "Show me another place that has all the cars lined up, with their keys in the ignition." He spread his arms to indicate the Enterprise Car Rental lot. "Huh? Show me. That's all I ask."

"Show me another place that has less paperwork on any one of these cars. You don't think they do a head count or whatever—a grille count—before the last guy goes home for the day? They'll know it's gone in a cold minute."

"So we find another car rental place," he said, "and steal from there."

"Help you folks?"

They both spun, Derik swearing under his breath. Sure, the guy had snuck up on him from upwind, and sure, Sara was sort of distracting—she kind of jammed his radar, so to speak—but that was no excuse. No fucking excuse!

"We were just looking," Sara explained, after clearing her throat and trying a smile.

The fella who'd hailed them looked more nervous than they did—and more angry than Derik felt. His gray suit was rumpled, and his tie was flying over his shoulder in the breeze. His brown hair was wisping about, and his watery blue eyes were alternately starey and darting. Derik started to grab Sara's shoulder to pull her behind him when he got a whiff of burning silk—the smell of desperation.

"Uh-oh," he muttered.

"You folks need a car? I'll tell you what. You can have that truck right over there." He pointed to a shiny, brand-new, red pickup truck, complete with supercab and about fourteen antennas.

They looked at the truck, glowing at them almost like a mirage, or the Holy Grail—Derik expected to hear a choir of angels humming—then looked at the sales guy.

"I've had it with this place," he muttered. "Promote Jim Danielson over me? The guy comes in an hour late every day and leaves an hour early. And don't get me started on his lunch breaks. They're more like miniature leaves of absence. The guy's fucking the manager's daughter so he gets the promotion? Him?"

"We, uh, don't want you to get in any trouble," Sara said.

"And we don't want you to get any closer," Derik warned.

"No, look, it's okay, see?" The frustrated Enterprise employee grinned, which looked fairly ghastly. "You guys know how to drive a standard transmission,

right?"

"Driving a stick is so not the big problem in this scenario," Derik said.

"Shhh!" Sara's elbow jabbed him in the side. "Let him finish."

"It's no problem. I'll just fix it in the computer. Nobody will even know about it. Go on, take it. You can help me stick it to my boss." He stared off at the horizon for a moment, looking haunted. "I just—not today. I put up with it, and I put up with it, but for some reason, today I just—I can't do it. Not one more day. So go on."

"Stop looking so damn smug," Derik told Sara later, as they were leaving California behind.

"Can't help it," she replied.

"So, what are the chances of that happening?"

"About one in a zillion."

"That's what I thought. Nice truck, though."

"Great truck."

"You're looking smug again."

"Sorry."

15

"OKAYYY... we've got sleeping bags, a cooler, water, backpacks, flashlights, toilet paper, Purell, a first aid kit, dehydrated snacks, a couple of sharp knives, eating utensils, plates, cups, a grill, a frying pan, and a pot. Let's see, what am I forgetting?"

"The fact that I'm a werewolf," Derik muttered, so as not to be overheard.

"Oh, yeah. That. I didn't forget it, I'm just totally discounting it."

"Nice!"

"Quit it, now, you're making me lose track." She squinted at her list, pretending Derik wasn't heaving with indignation less than six inches away. Like Wal-Mart wasn't distracting enough . . . the camping section was bigger than Yosemite.

"Okay, so, we can hit the grocery story for hot dogs, bacon, bread, and—"

"Sara, we don't need all this junk." He fingered the sleeping bag and practically sniffed in disgust. "First off, we have a limited amount of money, so I'll tell you what you don't have to waste the bucks on."

"Oh, would you? That would be swell." She rolled her eyes.

"I can see in the dark, so don't bother with the flashlights. I sure as shit

don't need the Band-Aids in the first aid kit. And I'd rather eat my own shit than touch one of those dehydrated beef stews."

"You're so gross," she told him. "And you're forgetting about me. I can neither see in the dark, nor bring my bleating prey down by the neck at a dead run. And I like to be warm at night."

"Why don't you leave that to me?" he leered.

"Why don't you go fuck yourself?"

He deflated. "Aw, c'mon, Sara, it's my job to look out for you. You don't need all this junk."

"Mmmm." She crossed a few more items off the list. "Look, I appreciate that you've aborted the whole 'Kill Sara' plan, I really do. But if I'm going to travel across the country with a homicidal stranger—that's right, I said homicidal, don't puff up like a cobra and glare—then I'm going to take care of myself. Just like I've been doing all along. If you don't mind." And even if you do, Studboy.

"That was a good speech," he said admiringly.

"Oh, shut up. And grab that bug spray, will you?"

"Ech! You're not going to actually spray that on you, are you?"

"No, I'm going to use it to sweeten my coffee. Just grab it," she said, already exhausted. Long day. Long fucking day, and that was a fact.

"You need salt crystals and fresh ground pepper? And vanilla sticks?" Derik cried. "I thought we were roughing it!"

"We are, but there are some things I refuse to give up. I think I've been a pretty good sport up 'til now, don't you? I mean, you turned my whole life upside down, but I'm playing along. Look, think of it as bringing a little taste of home along with us on the road."

"I'm thinking of it as a big goddamned waste of money and space, how about that?"

"A person of limited imagination," she admitted, "and poor cooking skills might think of it like that."

He sniffed the jar that held the vanilla pods and tossed it into her cart. "FYI, sunshine, I am a great damned cook, and these things are a total waste on a camping trip. Not to mention, they're from Mexico, not Madagascar, so on top of everything else, you're getting screwed."

"Say that after you've tried my campfire cocoa."

"Sure I will. How much money do we have left, anyway?"

"Enough to get free range eggs," she said, plucking them out of the dairy section. "Be a good boy and scamper off to get some Asiago cheese, will you?"

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that," he said, folding his arms across his chest.

"You're just mad because we skipped the Milk Bones aisle."

"Sara, for the love of God... if you don't stop with the dog jokes, and I mean, stop with them right now ..." He followed her, practically wringing his hands, and she hid a smile. It was good to have the upper hand, however momentarily. Camping across country with a werewolf... now that was going to be an adventure.

16

"So you want to stop?"

"I don't mind stopping."

"I didn't ask if you'd mind. I asked—"

"Since I'm sitting right next to you," he said, trying not to snap, "I was sorta able to follow the conversation. Look, I can go all night. Drive," he added when she went red. "I can drive all night. If you want to, curl up in the back, go to sleep."

"Well, we bought all this camping equipment."

"You. You bought it all."

"Right. And it's"—she looked at her wrist— "eight-thirty. We could stop, maybe sleep for a few hours."

"And make some burgers?"

"What?" she cried. "We just dropped twenty bucks at McDonalds!"

"Oh, Big Macs," he scoffed. "They're more like an appetizer than an actual meal."

"Actually," she said frostily, "if memory serves, someone insisted we stop so he could get the toy in the Happy Meal."

"It's for my friend's kid," he tried not to whine. "Anyway, it's not my fault. That stuff doesn't fill you up. Half an hour later—"

"It's been twenty minutes."

"—and you're hungry again."

She smacked herself in the forehead, which looked painful, and left a red mark.

He resisted the urge to kiss it. "Okay, okay. So, we'll stop, eat, and sleep.

For a little while. We're out of California, anyway. I mean, we're making good time."

"Okay," he said, because really, he didn't know what else to say. She was

getting nervous, which was making him nervous. Which he couldn't stand. It's like she hadn't really thought about the fact that they'd be sleeping right next to each other in the back of a truck until just a couple of minutes ago. Which was extremely weird, because Sara was many things, and stupid wasn't one of them. Shit, it was the first thing that went through his mind when they were deciding which nylon bags to buy. "So, we'll stop."

She pointed. "There's a campground."

"Yeah, I see it."

Twenty minutes later, they had their one-night camping permit and had selected a teeny campsite that was roughly, given what he'd just paid, ten bucks a square foot.

He decided to kiss her again, break the ice. Well, that, and he wanted to kiss her again. But really, it was, like, a necessity. If she got any edgier, and thus bitchier, he just might try to kill her again, and another brain aneurysm he did not need.

So, they'd kiss, and maybe it'd lead to something and maybe not, but she seemed to expect something, and he was certainly more than willing to oblige.

Except.

Except, she hopped down from the truck, groped in one of the bags, and was now coating herself head to foot with noxious chemicals. He coughed and gagged and waved the air in front of his face, to no avail. The cloud was suffocating him!

"Enough, enough!"

"Do you see all the mosquitoes?" she cried. "We'll get eaten alive."

"Speak for yourself."

"Are you serious?" She walked over to him, and he backed up, terrified—she was a walking biohazard—but she grabbed his arm, forestalling his retreat. He was coughing so hard he missed her question.

"What?"

"It's true! You don't have a mark on you."

"Bugs don't like werewolves."

"Lucky bastard," she muttered.

"Listen, Sara ..." She was still holding on to him, which he kind of liked. He bent in. "You know, we're going to be spending a lot of... um . . . you know, time together . . . and . . . and . . . shit."

"What?" She was looking up into his eyes, and oh, she was just so pretty it was a damn crime, that's what it was, and ...

Shit.

His lungs exploded. Or, at least, that's what it felt like.

"You've got to lay off the bug spray," he gasped after about ten minutes of spasms.

"Well, what do you know about that," she said, and smiled for the first time in half an hour. "It's werewolf repellent."

He laughed in spite of himself. "Deep Woods Off: For those really pesky werewolves."

An hour later, he wasn't laughing. They'd eaten, doused their fire, said their good nights, crawled into their sleeping bags. Well, she did. He couldn't see how she could cocoon herself in a heavy bag when it was eighty degrees outside—humans were weird, or maybe it was just females of any species—but whatever. And now he was lying beside her in the back of the truck, slowly going insane. He'd dated humans before, so it wasn't like he'd never had this problem before. The communication thing. Because he had. But somehow, back then, with other women, it hadn't bothered him so much.

It bothered him now.

If Sara were a werewolf, she'd smell his intent and he'd smell hers, and they'd do it, or she'd say right out: Not interested, pal, take a hike, and they wouldn't do it. Period. The end. But Sara couldn't smell a thing, comparably speaking, and what was worse, she was pretending like she didn't know he was so horny he was ready to have sex with his rolled up sleeping bag. So it was this big—this big thing that they weren't talking about. What was that saying? It was the elephant in the room. A big, green, horny elephant.

He tried to think: What would Michael do? Jeannie had driven the poor guy nuts in the beginning . . . still did, sometimes. And a lot of the early problems were because she had trouble settling into the Pack. And Michael, as alpha, expected her to fall in line. And Jeannie, as a human who carried firearms, thought he should drop dead. So Michael had a lot of experience with the communication thing. He'd been forced to learn, poor bastard. What would he do? He'd talk to Sara, that's what he'd do.

"Sara," Derik whispered.

Nothing.

"Listen, Sara—" I really really like you, and you smell great, and I think your powers are really cool, if kind of terrifying, and oddly enough this makes you more appealing than any female I've ever known, and I definitely think we should fuck—oh, shit, I mean make love, you know, whatever—and then we can cuddle and I can get SOME FUCKING SLEEP.

"Sara?"

A light snore for an answer.

"Shit."

Saving the world was going to be harder than he thought.

17

"This werewolf thing," Sara said abruptly. She puffed a hank of hair out of her face and took a break from struggling with her sleeping bag. It was uncanny. You bought the thing in this nice little roll, and after you used it, you couldn't get it back into that nice little roll if someone stuck a gun in your ear.

Uncanny! "You know, the full moon's in a couple of days."

"Seventy-eight hours. Yeah, I know."

"So ... what then?"

"Sara, we could all be dead in seventy-eight hours."

"How many times do I have to tell you?" she snapped. "I'm not going to destroy the world."

And what's with you this morning, you big blond grump?"

He mumbled something. It sounded like "I know you are but what am I?" but even he wouldn't be that immature. And boy,, had he woken up on the wrong side of the truck this morning!

"I'm just curious about what would happen, is all," she said. "What if you lose control and bite me?"

"What if I do?" he grumped.

"Oh, very nice! Think I want to be worried about full moons and biting people and—and getting rabid and eating undercooked food and maybe getting Mad Werewolf Disease?"

He covered his face with his hands and squatted by the smoldering remains of their fire. "It's sooo early..."

"Seriously, Derik."

"I am being serious. It's too early for this shit." He took his hands down from his face. "Besides, it's not the flu, Sara. You can't catch it. I could give you a blood transfusion, and you wouldn't catch it. We're two different species."

"Oh. I didn't know that. So all the movies are wrong?"

"Totally, totally wrong." He scrubbed his face with his hands and yawned. "Don't waste your time watching them, unless it's for entertainment value. Also, we don't carry babies off in the moonlight, and I wouldn't eat a person on a bet."

Yech."

"Yech?"

He shuddered, and she took offense. "What's wrong with eating a person? You should be so lucky! Not that I want you to."

"You taste terrible, that's what. All of you. The omnivore diet. . . blurgh." He actually gagged!

"Well, nobody's asking you to eat anybody."

"I'd make an exception," he grumbled.

"Very funny. Don't even think about eating me. And if we're two different species, how do you have children with humans? And speaking of blood transfusions, would one of those even take?"

"Yes, and yes. It doesn't happen all the time—cubs with a human—but it does

happen. I don't know why, I'm not a goddamned biologist." He groaned again and got up, then loped off toward the truck. "Are we ready? Let's go. Ready?"

"What's the rush? And why are you so scratchy this morning?"

"Couldn't sleep," he replied shortly, stomping on the clutch and starting the truck with a roar. "Went for a walk. All night."

"Well, excuuuse me, Mr. Insomniac—wait!" She ran to throw the last sleeping bag into the back of the truck. "Nobody told me werewolves were such rotten morning people!" She lunged, and just managed to pop the door open as he accelerated.

"Well, now you know," he said, shifting into second as she slammed her door.

"So, what's the plan, Grumpy McGee? Besides a second, possibly third, breakfast by ten o'clock?"

"Drive until we're tired. Stop again. Eat. Sleep. Drive more. Find Arthur's Chosen. Kick their asses. The end."

"A fine plan," she said.

"Except..."

"What?"

He yawned again, which was startling—his jaw stretched wider than she thought would be possible, and he showed a lot of teeth. "Well, I have to stay in touch with my people, or they'll start to worry about me. Maybe send someone else out here. So I thought tonight we'd stay at a safe house." This was a rather small lie. He didn't have to stay in the safe house; he could check in from the road. But the thought of having Sara in a warm bed . . . having Sara ...

"What? I didn't catch that."

"I said okay," she repeated. "I don't mind sleeping with a roof over my head. Don't yawn anymore."

"Huh? Never mind. And a shower. You should shower so you get all the bug spray—"

"Yes, fine, all right. So, we stay at a safe house."

"Well, the thing is, I'd have to explain you. Because if any other werewolf ever found out who you were, they'd try to kill you."

"A possibility to be avoided at all costs," she agreed. "So what do you suggest?"

"Pose as my future mate—my fiancée, I mean."

"Oh."

"I have to tell them something," he explained.

"Well. Okay. I guess. I'm against being killed, you know—I'm not totally irrational. We'll just have to hide the fact that we don't know each other very well."

"Um." He cleared his throat. "There's one other small problem."

"Small, huh?" She sighed as he slowed down and took the exit for Burger King. Like he hadn't just eaten a pound and a half of bacon! "I'll bet. Well, bring it on. The week I'm having, I can take it."

"The thing is, they'll know—my people will know—if we're not really, um, intimate."

Her mind processed this, then decided, the week she'd had, she could not take it. Probably she had misunderstood. "What?"

"Well, like I said, they'll know if we aren't, you know, sleeping together. So we have to if we're going to pull this off. Sleep together, I mean."

She turned in her seat to glare at him. He kept his eyes steadily on the road, she noticed. Coward. "You're telling me I have to fuck you in order to stay at the safe houses?"

"Yeah."

"Well, too damned bad," she snapped, ignoring the surge of heat to her cheeks.

"You'd rather have your neck broken at the safe house?" he snapped back.

"Yes, upon careful consideration, I think that would be preferable!"

"Oh, stop with the drama queen thing. It's just sex, that's all, just sex, sex, that all it is, and frankly, I'm kind of insulted that you'd rather be gutted than see me naked!"

"They're called standards, pal. And I can't help it if I'm one of the few who didn't tumble into bed within five minutes of first meeting you!"

"Standards!"

"Want me to find a dictionary, blondie?" "I want you to be a realist," he growled. "In other words, drop your pants and save your life."

"Anything sounds bad if you say it like that." "Forget it."

He pounded the steering wheel, which groaned alarmingly. "Damn it, Sara, you are the most hardheaded, stubborn, infuriating, annoying, stuck-up, curliest, annoying—"

"Curliest?"

"Aw, shut up. Fine, it's your head. We'll sleep out in the woods again, no touchie. And again. And again. Homo sapiens, man, fucking hothouse flowers, I swear to God."

"I am not," she said automatically, inwardly crushed. She'd sort of been looking forward to a shower. And a bed. She'd gone camping quite a bit as a girl, but now that she was in her late twenties, her idea of roughing it was a Super 8 and a hair dryer.

She cleared her throat and then asked timidly, "Can't—can't you just tell them that because I'm not a—a werewolf, you're still working on getting me into bed?"

He hesitated, then shook his head. "Our kind doesn't make a life-commitment without, uh—"

"Sampling the merchandise?"

"Uh, yeah. I mean, it's a totally natural thing to us. We don't have this whole Victorian attitude toward sex that you guys do. And the thing is, I wouldn't bring a casual date to a safe house."

"Oh."

He shrugged. "So, okay. We'll keep camping. I guess I shouldn't have sprung it on you like that, but I thought it'd be worse if I didn't say anything until we were at the house."

She actually shivered at the thought. "No, that's a good point. Well... what's a safe house like?"

"It's a house where a werewolf family lives and they take in guests a lot.

People on the run, or on a mission, or even making a go-see trip to the Cape to meet Michael and Lara."

"Lara being . . ."

"The next Pack leader."

"Oh. You don't run a patriarchic society?"

"I don't think so," he said doubtfully.

"Who's Lara again?"

"Michael's daughter."

"Ah! Dynastic, then. Never mind. So it wouldn't be ... weird ... if we just showed up at this place and asked to spend the night."

"No. It'd be normal."

"But we'd have to share a bed."

"Yup."

"Actually, we'd have to do it before we showed up at the safe house, right? So the other werewolves could tell we'd been intimate? Not that it's any of their damn business," she added in a mutter.

There was a long pause, and then Derik answered, sounding almost like he was strangling. "Yes, we'd have to do it before we showed up."

She drummed her fingers on the seat and watched the scenery go by. "Well. I'm really not that kind of girl."

"Oh, I know," he said earnestly.

"But you're kind of cute."

"Really?" He seemed pleased.

"In an overbearing, totally obnoxious sort of way," she explained, watching him deflate a bit. "And we are on a mission to save the world."

He didn't say anything, just pulled into the BK parking lot.

"We could talk about it, I guess. I mean ... I'd like a shower."

"And I'd like for you to have a shower."

"Bastard," she muttered.

18

They were still debating the merits of lovemaking—or not—when he pulled up to the Kwik N' Go. "Gotta use the phone," he explained.

"How?"

"Huh?"

"The phone," Sara said. She still reeked strongly of bug spray, but driving

around for hours with the windows open had alleviated some of the damage. At least he could think about kissing her without gagging—a crucial step. And the wind had tossed her curls around and around; she looked like an adorable red dandelion. "You can't use your cell phone, for obvious reasons. But how are you paying for a phone call to the Cape from beret You can't use your credit card." "Oh."

"And you can't call from the safe house?"

"They'd hear me anywhere in the house," he admitted.

"Oh. Creepy. I suppose calling collect is out of the question?"

"Only if you don't mind a bunch of werewolves tracking you down."

"Okay, well, let's try this." She hopped out of the truck and walked up to the pay phone on the sidewalk. "This works for me sometimes," she explained over her shoulder. "I used pay phones a lot before I got my cell, and it usually worked out."

She picked up the receiver, listened, then asked, "What's the number?"

He told her.

She tapped in the number, listened, then handed him the phone. "It's ringing."

He took the receiver from her, staring. It was ringing. "Won't it ask me for change, or—"

"Wyndham residence."

"Oh, hi, Moira. Listen—"

"Derik! Hey, where the hell are you? How's it going? Are you okay? Michael's been going out of his mind, here! Me, too," she added.

"Tracking her down has been a little harder than I thought," he said with a nervous glance at Sara. Thank God, thank God Moira wasn't anywhere near him. She'd smell a lie, and then kick his ass righteous. He'd deserve it, too. He couldn't remember ever lying before. It was a waste of time in the Pack. It made him feel like a real rat turd now. "But I'm closing in. Just wanted to let everyone know I'm okay. Got that? I'm okay, everything's fine right now. Tell Mike, okay?"

"Okay, honey. Things out here are fine, too. We're basically hanging around, waiting to get the word, you know? So you take care of yourself, okay?"

"Sure. Um, patch me through to Antonia?"

"Sure. She's had a migraine since you left," Moira warned, which made Derik cringe—Antonia was a bear when she was feeling fine—"so I'm not sure she'll be good company, to put it very, very mildly, but here she comes, so hold on to your fur." There was a click as he was put on hold._

"I guess this phone's screwed up," he said to Sara. "It's not asking for change or anything."

"Guess so," she replied, looking smug.

"You're scary," he said, and then, "Hello?"

"What are you doing? Owwww!" Antonia complained. "My head, goddamn it!"

"Well, don't yell if you've got a migraine," he said reasonably. "Listen,

Antonia—"

"You chimp, what the hell are you doing?"

"Saving the world," he replied shortly. "My own way. And don't call me that."

"But she's right there!"

"Duh. Listen, don't tell Mike, okay?"

"Aw, man, Derik, you're killing me," she complained. "You are fucking killing me!"

For a moment he actually thanked God that Antonia had a persecution complex. She was one of the few Pack members who would actually consider helping him deceive Michael. Moira, for example, would never, ever do it. She'd feel bad, she'd apologize the whole time she was kicking his ass and then dragging him by the scruff of the neck to take his medicine, but friendship was one thing, and Pack was Pack.

"Look, Antonia, I wouldn't let you twist in the wind on this. We've got a plan. I'm pretty sure it will work."

"Pretty sure? Owwww!"

"Look, I must be on the right track, or you would have ratted me out to Mike by now, right? I mean, your visions must be showing you that something's going right. Right?"

Sullen silence.

"Right," he repeated, on slightly surer ground. "So, listen, I'm okay, she's okay, and we're gonna get the bad guys and save the world. See, I think the bad guys will accidentally trick her into destroying the world, so if we take care of them, we take care of anybody else."

"And how the blue hell do you know that?"

"Well, I don't. Know it, exactly. You know, like you know two plus two makes four. But I feel it. I mean, I know Sara would never do something that bad on purpose. So the bad guys must do it, or trick her into doing it, or something."

"You're talking out your ass. And besides, you're not an alpha, Derik," Antonia pointed out through gritted teeth. "It's not your call. I mean ... you could run a Pack, but Michael's the boss of this Pack, and he told you what to do. And you're not doing it."

"Just... don't say anything yet, okay?"

"Derik..." This was more a howl than a groan.

"Antonia."

"You're fucking crazy, you know you're crazy, right?"

"Just do this one thing for me."

"Sure," she snapped. "The first favor he ever asks me in twenty-two years, and this is it!"

For a moment he was startled ... Antonia was so annoying, so bitchy, so harassed because of her visions, it was easy to forget she was still just a baby. She was barely voting age, and look what he was asking of her!

"Thanks," he said, because that was her way of saying yes. "I owe you one."

"You owe me twenty, you big, stupid, lumbering, asshole moronic—" He hung up on her. The conversation had gone as well as he could have hoped; no need to drag it out.

"Okay," he said, letting out a deep breath, "I bought us some time, anyway."

Sara smiled at him. It was the first smile of the day—they'd spent the afternoon screeching at each other in between bouts of fast food—and it knocked him out all over again, how gorgeous she was, how funny, how cute, how—"Yeah, sounds like you did. Thanks. What do you say we go find this safe house of yours?"

"Great," he said. "Showers all around."

"Enough rubbing in how bad I smell," she muttered, trailing him to the truck.

"I just meant that I could use a shower, too."

"Sure you did."

19

They had eaten (twice, in Derik's case), drunk cocoa, and roasted marshmallow after marsh-mallow. Sara knew if she gobbled one more soft white squishy candy she would explode. But she couldn't stop herself from eating them.

Quit stalling, she ordered herself.

Ugh, she answered herself.

"Okay," she said thickly, noticing Derik was watching her with amazement. "Let's do it before I lose my nerve."

"How romantic," he commented. He was crouched over the fire, balanced on the balls of his feet. "Are you all right? You look a little . . . bloated."

"Do me," she commanded, and stripped off her shirt. Her belly, bulging with marshmallows, pooched out over the waistband of her jeans. "You know you want to."

"Uh . . . right this minute? I wouldn't bet the farm. Maybe you should lie down."

"No, no, no. We're gonna do it. We have to do it, to save the world." She groaned and massaged her belly. "And to sleep in a warm bed tomorrow night. And to have a shower! Think of it, all that warm water . . . and soap, think of the soap!"

"I can't do this," he announced. "It's too much like taking advantage."

"You're right about that, but I'll be the one—hurp!—taking advantage. Now get over here." She painfully wiggled out of her jeans, then lay, gasping like a landed trout, beside the fire.

Derik, was trying not to laugh, and as a result his face had gone an alarming shade of apple-red. "I don't think you're up to this tonight," he gasped.

"Aw, shaddup, when I want you to think, I'll yank your leash."

"Now you're just being mean."
"Whatever works, pal. Now strip."
"Oh, it's like that? Strip?"
She reached out and cupped the warm bulge in his jeans. "Like you're not dying to."
"Well, that's true," he said, and quit arguing, and in a minute he was naked, and helping her out of her bra and panties—
"What's burning?"
"Your bra . . . sorry."
—and then they were rolling in the grass beside the truck, kissing and groping and moaning and for a minute Sara forgot about her grotesquely distended belly, and the mosquitoes munching on her legs.
And then he was easing inside her and that was fine—it was a little uncomfortable, because he was large and she wasn't ready, but it was all right, because she just wanted this over with, but oh, oh, she hadn't expected it to feel good, she hadn't expected . . . expected this.
He rocked against her, obligingly smacking the mosquitoes he saw on her, and then his rocking speeded up, and she wriggled in the grass to give him better access, and then he stiffened all over, the cords on his neck standing out like steel.
"Ooofta," she said when he collapsed over her.
"I swear," he mumbled into her neck. "I swear I'm usually much better at this."
"No, no, it's all right. Speed impresses me!"
"Sara, you're killing me."
She laughed, and stroked the back of his neck.

20

"HI, I'M—JON?"
Sara poked him in the side. "Your name's Derik," she whispered.
He ignored her—and embraced the red-haired man in the doorway so hard, the poor guy left his feet. "Jon, you son of a bitch! I thought that was your scent!"
"Never mind my mother," the other man replied, laughing. "Or my scent. And put me down. Derik, what the hell are you doing here?"
"It's a long story," he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at Sara. "This is my fiancée. We need a place to crash for the night. Okay?"
His old friend's face lit up like a moonrise. "Shit, yes, okay! Can you stay longer?"
Derik shook his head and trailed the shorter man into the house. Sara, after a doubtful look around, followed. "Got to get to the coast. Long story, which I

won't bore you with. What are you doing in Kansas?"

"Hi," Jon said, extending a hand for Sara to shake. "I'm Jon; Derik and I grew up together, and he's still got no manners at all. Welcome to my home."

"Thank you," she said, jerking her head to get her hair out of her eyes. She thought about trying to straighten the mess and immediately dismissed it as a lost cause.

Jon was a redhead, too, except his hair was a rich, deep auburn, cut brutally short, and his eyes were the green of old Coke bottles. He was a couple of inches shorter than Derik; in fact, exactly her height. It was disconcerting to say the least, being able to look him straight in the eyes. His pupils, she noted clinically, were enormous. She had to swallow against the sudden blockage in her throat. Were all werewolves so ... unsettling and charismatic? And green-eyed? "I'm Sara,"

she managed at last. "It's nice to be here. Nice to meet you, I mean." She noticed Jon trying not to wrinkle his nose, and sighed. "I'll let you two catch up. Meantime, can I use your shower?"

"So, what the hell?" Derik had polished off the last of his steak tartare, and was now rooting through Jon's fridge for a beer. "Last I heard, you got mated, Shannon was pregnant, and you were off to see the world. Now you're here? And where's the rest of the family?"

"Visiting Shannon's mother." Jon shuddered, "I decided to pass. I don't like talking to grumpy old women who are hairy when the moon isn't full. I'm sorry you couldn't see my cub, though."

"Heard you had a girl? Katie?"

"Mm-hmm. She's got my eyes and Shannon's brains, so that worked out nicely."

"Very nicely," he agreed, still rooting. "Listen, how come you left in the first place?" Ah! Hello, beer, my old friend, I've come to glug you once again. He twisted the bottle cap off—werewolves disdained bottle openers—and took a deep drink.

"Oh, yeah, that's the stuff. Oooh, baby. Anyway, how come you left? We all wondered."

"Well, you know how it is." Jon had been tipped back in his kitchen chair, now he brought it forward until all four legs were on the floor. "I mean, you're not there now," he pointed out. "You can love the Pack but not necessarily want to be with them every second. I needed a little space. The mansion, big as it was, felt crowded after I mated."

"I can relate. Mike and me almost got into a huge fight before Heft."

"Over what?"

"Over nothing."

"Come on, cough up."

"It was stupid."

"Did it have anything to do with you being an alpha now?" Jon asked quietly.

"What, did Moira put it in the newsletter?"

"No. You're different. You walk different, stand different. . . even smell a little different. I bet Michael knew before you did and just waited for you to figure it out."

"Well, we almost tore each other's heads off. I had to get the hell out of there before I did something really stupid. Even for me."

Jon pondered that one in silence, while Derik finished the beer. Finally, he said, "It's a dangerous business, I guess. Sometimes. You're lucky you didn't really fight. The last thing you need is to be running the Pack. Also," he added matter-of-factly, "Jeannie would have shot you in the face."

Derik shrugged.

"And now you're with that cute, curly haired redhead."

"Yeah."

"Human, huh? Well, congratulations."

"Thanks."

"You don't seem like a happy mate-to-be, you'll excuse me for pointing it out."

"We've been fighting a lot." Finally, an unvarnished truth! "She might be having second thoughts."

Jon shook his head. "She hasn't even had first thoughts. How long have you guys known each other?"

"Never mind."

"So, less than a week."

"Never mind, you nosy S.O.B."

"Swept her off her feet, huh?"

"Something like that," Derik said lamely.

"Uh-huh."

"Well, it was." He'd thought it would be bad, trying to fool a regular Pack member, but this was Jon. Practically his littermate! Of all the safe houses in all the world, why'd he have to walk into Jon's? "It's been kind of a stressful week."

"Mmm. You know what your mom always said."

"If you chew on my hardwood floors one more time, I'll break your neck?"

"The other thing."

"Yeah," he said sourly. "Stick to your own kind."

Jon spread his hands, but didn't say anything.

"SO!" Sara said brightly, bouncing into the living room, which was floor-to-ceiling windows on the entire west side. She'd thought Kansas was supposed to be flat and boring, but it had a kind of wild beauty about it—like a prairie rose. And the windows in this place! Werewolves must not like being unable to see out. Well, of course she already knew that from Mr. "Can't we please get a convertible?" "What should we do?"

Derik, the big dope, nearly fell out of his chair. "What? Now? What are you talking about?"

"It's only nine o'clock, calm down," she said. "Do you guys want to watch a movie? Play a game?"

"A game?" Jon asked. He was a yummy one, all right, with that build and that hair and those green, green eyes. No Derik, of course, but who was? He was a watcher, though, while Derik was a doer. She could tell. . . Jon didn't say much, but his eyes were always calculating, judging, weighing. She pitied the house burglar who tried to crack this place. "What kind of game?"

"I don't know . . . this is your house. Whatcha got?"

"The only games we have are Candyland and Chutes and Ladders," Jon admitted.

"Oh, you have a little girl, that's right—I saw the pictures in the hall. She's adorable." Adorable, with about six hundred too many teeth. A truly frightening smile for a four-year-old. "Really darling."

"Thank you. Shouldn't you guys—um—aren't you tired? Don't you want to go to bed?"

"No," Sara said, at the exact moment Derik said, "Yes."

"Uh-huh," Jon said, narrowing his eyes at Sara. "Tell me again why you guys are—"

"Deck of cards?" she said hurriedly. "You've got to have one of those lying around."

"Right!" Derik said heartily. "I could really go for a—a game of—vim—"

"Cards!" Sara said brightly.

Jon sighed and got up. "I think I can find one around here somewhere. Be right back."

Once he left, Derik muttered, "Very smooth."

"Shh! I thought you said he could hear everything."

"He can. When are we going to bed?"

"When you stop being an asshole." She glanced at her watch. "Shouldn't take more than a few years."

"Very f—"

"Here we are," Jon said with fake heartiness.

"This isn't such a great idea," Derik said.

"Horny bastard," Sara muttered.

"Well, yeah, but besides that."

"Don't be such a spoilsport." Jon sat down on the end of the couch and pulled the coffee table closer to them. Though the tension was thick enough to swim

through, he ignored it and, ever the polite host, handed the cards to Sara. "One or two games, big deal."

Sara was blinking in confusion. "What are you guys talking about?"

"Sare-Bear, we've sort of—"

"Got to stop calling me that."

"—got the advantage. I mean, you can't bluff us. We'll know it. Your body language gives it away, even your smell changes."

"Gross," she commented.

"We'll always know when you have a good hand or a bad hand. It's not really fair. Now checkers ... we could play checkers ..."

"That's okay," she said. "Cards will pass the time. Consider me warned."

"Seriously," Jon said, shifting uncomfortably on his end of the couch. "It's like playing cards when we can see your cards, but you can't see ours. Not very sporting."

"Oh, hush up and deal. It'll be fun. What are we playing for? Got any quarters?"

"Oh, boy," Derik said half an hour later.

Sara, stacking her quarters, didn't look up.

"Let me get this straight, no pun intended," Jon said. "In ten hands, you've been dealt a full house, queens over jacks, a straight, a straight flush, four aces, another straight flush, another full house, aces over kings, and another four of a kind. Aces again."

"What can I say? Lady luck likes me."

"Uh-huh."

"Told you it'd be fun."

"Uh-huh. Derik, can I talk to you a minute?"

"No," Derik said.

"Now."

"That's what I said, now. You just misheard. Back in a minute, Sara."

"You, uh, want me to come with?" she said, nervously watching Jon grab Derik by the shoulder and haul him away.

"No! Don't go near him. I mean, I'll be fine. I mean—"

Then they were in the hall, and then they were in the office with the door closed.

"Okay," Jon said.

"Now, Jon—"

"What the hell are you up to?"

"Shh! Sara will hear."

"She couldn't hear if I left the door open, and you know it, What's going on?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

Jon glared, and Derik didn't drop his gaze. Finally, Jon dropped his and said to

the floor, "For the record, you're both full of shit. You're not engaged, you barely know each other. You're hiding something huge, and there's something weird about your lady friend. Really weird. I can't put my finger on it... can't even get my nose around it... but it's making me really nervous." He rubbed the back of his neck, frowning.

"Like I said. You wouldn't believe it." Derik could feel his heart rate—which had been trip-hammering at about one-eighty—slow down once Jon quit challenging him. Maybe this wouldn't be ugly. Maybe—

Jon dragged his gaze up. "Derik, you're my friend, we grew up together. So I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, here. And I don't want to fight, and I don't want to call Michael."

"Well, shit, Jon, I don't want to fight either."

"Uh-huh. But you better get your thumb out and do whatever the fuck it is you're supposed to do. I have a family."

Derik nodded. "I know, Jon. Mike has one, too, and it's like my own family. You're like my own family. You think I'd screw around if it meant hurting you, or someone important to you? I'd never do that. I'd kill myself before I'd do that."

"Finally," Jon commented, "a truth."

"Look, I'm not sure what's going to happen myself yet, but I've got it covered." I think.

"Maybe I can help. Can you tell me about it?"

"Not really. It's hard to explain, but Sara and me—we make a good team. She can—you wouldn't believe it. But we're gonna do the right thing. She'll see to it, and I'll see to it. I swear it on my life, man. Not your family's, or Mike's, or Lara's life ... my own life."

There was a long, tense, moment, and then Jon relaxed. "All right, Der. We've known each other too long not to trust each other when it gets down to the wire. Do you need help? I can come with you if—"

"No!" Christ, no. He didn't want Jon anywhere near Arthur's Chosen when it went down. Bad enough he and Sara were going to be there. "No, you stay here. Take care of your family. I'll come back and tell you all about it, when we're done."

"Swear."

"Swear."

Jon nibbled his lower lip, cut his eyes away for a moment, then finally said, "All right, then."

Derik staggered down the hallway. He'd gotten away with it! Jon knew—it had been stupid to even try to fool him—but the sensible bastard was letting it ride. It wasn't the first time Derik had thanked God for Jon's basic levelheadedness. Werewolves really did have it better . . . Jon knew Derik was good for his word,

and thus the unpleasantness of a fight to the death was avoided. Good deal!

Even better, he and Sara didn't have to have sex, which sucked for him but was nice for her, so that was—

He tapped on the door and walked into the guest room, just in time to see Sara drop her robe and slip between the covers. He got a tantalizing flash of cream-colored skin and streaming red curls, and then she was snuggled beneath the quilt.

"There you are," she whispered. "Close the door."

He did.

"Come over here."

He did.

"Well, come on."

"Uh?"

"Let's get this over with." Then she blushed to her hairline. "Sorry, I didn't mean it to sound like that. But let's do this before your friend gets any more suspicious. I was really worried about you when he whisked you away."

He was trying not to rock back on the heels; he couldn't get the smell of roses out of his nose. Not that he wanted to. Except he better. Yeah. Because if he didn't—"Uh • • • we ... uh ..."

She threw the quilt back, and he could see her bare leg, bent at the knee, the pale joint inviting kisses, inviting—

"Come on" she said impatiently. "Before I lose my nerve, or your friend gets any nutty ideas."

"Okay," he said, and was out of his clothes in about six seconds. He ignored the twinges—okay, the big giant pokes—of conscience. It wasn't as hard as he thought it would be.

Her knee . . . that's what did it. It was as erotic to him as if she'd dropped the sheet and shown him her tits. And her smell. Her wonderful sweet smell. She was like—like dessert.

You'll pay for this one later, his inner voice, the one that sounded annoyingly like Michael, informed him. Oh, boy, will you pay.

He didn't doubt it. And he couldn't help it. He was about to dance with possibly the most dangerous woman in the world ...

... and he couldn't wait.

I'm about to do it with a werewolf. A werewolf. Again! Sara kept saying it in her head, and it kept not working. This was weirder than the time she did it with the UPS guy. That had been like a bad porn movie come to life: "Got a

package for you, ma'am." "Ooooooh, a package! Bring it over here, stud." And then, natch, she never heard from him again. It was like he'd changed routes or something. Probably he had. But anyway, this had that beat by a country mile. A werewolf. A werewolf!

Telling herself this was all part of saving the world didn't work, either. Truth was, Derik was magically delicious, and she meant to have another piece of him. The fact that they had to do it was icing on the cake. A big, blond, yummy cake. A big, muscle-y, preternaturally strong, sexy, fabulous cake. A—
Whoa.

He'd stripped in about half a second, and she barely had a glimpse of his ridiculously perfect body—washboard abs, long, long legs, flat stomach, bulging biceps, and a fairly fabulous dick, which jutted up like some sort of orgasm-seeking divining rod—before he was on her.

"Oh my God," he said, and then his mouth was on hers, he was tearing the quilt away, his tongue was in her mouth, and then he was nibbling her throat and breathing deeply, as if he couldn't get enough of the way she smelled. "Oh, Jesus."

"Are you going to talk through this whole thing? Because I'm trying to think of England, here."

"Sara, for the love of God, please shut up."

"Make me."

Then he was trailing kisses down her throat, her collarbone, her breasts. He played with her nipples until they were stiff and hard, and now she was doing a few "oh my Gods" herself. She squirmed beneath him, trying to give him better access, and gripped his shoulders, which were rigid with strain.

Now he was kissing her stomach, and now her mons, kissing and taking big gulps of air, and, weirdly, he was shuddering like he had a fever. Then he was coming up to her again, grabbing her thighs and slinging her legs over his shoulders.

"Sorry," he panted, and then she could feel his cock between her legs, urgent and heartless, and then he was shoving himself inside her.

She shrieked in surprise, then yelled again when he nipped the side of her neck.

"Sorry," he groaned again.

And here was the weird part. The weird, sick part. It hurt, sure. It was tight as hell. It had been a while for her—last night barely counted, that was for damn sure. And she was certainly accustomed to more than forty seconds of foreplay.

But she loved it, too. She loved that he was taking her, that he was so overcome by her they weren't playing nice. He needed to fuck her, and so he was.

And she needed to be fucked, and so she was.

He buried his face in her hair and gripped her thighs harder. The bed rocked and squeaked. She felt the change in him as his orgasm approached; his muscles, already rigid with strain, seemed to get even harder for a second, and then he was shaking over her, and then he was done, and couldn't look at her.

"Well," she said, after wailing twenty seconds.

"I swear," he said, still not looking at her. "I swear I don't usually suck so much in bed. I'm aware you've heard that before."

She laughed; she couldn't help it. "It's all right. You seemed, um, like you needed to do it."

"Oh, I needed to do it. And in about ten minutes, I'm gonna need to do it again."

"Gee," she said dryly, ignoring the bolt of excitement that it brought to her belly, "I can hardly wait."

"Nice try," he said, slipping out of her and kissing her deeply, deeply. He sucked on her tongue for a long minute, then added, "But I can tell you like the idea."

"Insufferable bastard," she muttered into his mouth.

"God, you smell so good. Anybody ever tell you? I mean, seriously good." He stretched, and the bed creaked. "They should bottle you."

"I can safely say no one has ever suggested bottling me. So, uh, do you think Jon heard?"

He hesitated. "Well, yeah."

"Okay. I mean, creepy, and I'll be freaking out about this tomorrow, but at least you won't get in trouble."

Another odd hesitation. "Right."

"Breakfast should be fun," she muttered. "But at least that's done, right? So, good."

He didn't answer, just rolled over and kissed her again, then licked her nipples for what seemed like a delightful eternity. He cupped her left breast and brushed his thumb over her nipple again and again, while licking and kissing the other one, and then he would switch, until she was groaning and writhing beneath him.

He went lower, nuzzling between her legs, then separating her folds with his tongue, darting and licking, and then his tongue was inside her and she nearly hit the ceiling.

He settled between her thighs and over her clit and licked steadily for what seemed like an hour, until she was clawing at the bed sheets and whimpering like a maddened animal. Her orgasm hit her like a freight train, and he backed off, then was immediately on her again, spreading her apart with his hands and stroking her with his tongue and even, very very gently, biting her.

When he came up to her again she was more than ready; she wrapped her legs against his waist and was thrusting up at him before he was even seated all the way within her.

"Oh, Christ," he managed, and propped himself up on his hands, and they went at each other for another eternity. She could come again if she tightened her thighs around him as he thrust, and did, and he groaned like he could feel it, feel her coming around him, and after a while she was begging him, begging him

to come, and he was nibbling the sweet spot behind her ear and ignoring her, and they were so slick with sweat they were sliding against each other, and finally she bit him on the ear, hard, and that was it, that was what he needed, and then they were done, and it took her about ten minutes to get her breath back.

When she did, she said, "This doesn't mean we're married or anything, right?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"What?"

"I said, no."

"Oh. Okay. That was—" The best in my life. Probably the best in anybody's life.

Good work, old chap! "That was really great."

"I knew it'd be really great," he said softly, and picked up her hand, and kissed her palm.

"Mmm. Conceited much?"

"Sara. Can I ask you something?"

"Mmm."

"What happened to your mom?"

She squinted at him, trying to see his face in the dark. "Why would you ask me that?"

"I don't know ... something Dr. Cummings said. Actually, the way you reacted to something he said. It got me wondering."

"Well, she was killed in a stupid accident. And it was her own fault—she wasn't watching where she was going. Plus she was jaywalking."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It's against the law for a reason, you know."

"Yeah, okay. Well, I'm sorry," he said again.

"Thanks. What about your folks?"

"They died helping Michael's dad take over the Pack."

"Oh. Well, um, my mom got run over by a garbage truck." Pause. "It's not funny, Derik."

"I'm not laughing."

"You big liar."

"I'm really sorry," he said, sounding truly sincere. "It was just. . . unexpected."

"The really weird thing was, the city paid. I mean, I didn't sue or anything, they just gave me a big check. Just in time," she added glumly, "for me to pay for the first couple years of college."

"Oh."

"Yeah, it was like living in 'The Monkey's Paw.' Gee, I wish I could afford to go to college . . . whoops, my mom's dead, and the city's paying for school." .

There was a long pause. "That's creepy."

"Tell me about it," she said, and sighed.

Later, Sara dozed off, her small hand nestled on his chest. Derik was wide awake, ignoring the clamoring of his conscience.
Oh my God, that was so so good.
Oh my God, I'm such an asshole.
But it was so good!
And you'll pay for it, ass face. What the hell are you going to tell her? And when? Jerk.
So so good. Like, once in a lifetime good. And her poor mom! I'm glad she told me. Imagine living with—
Stay focused. Jerk.
And oh Jesus, her smell, and the feel of her, the way she held on and whimpered and squirmed, the way—
The way you were a jerk. The way you didn't tell her she didn't have to. The way you didn't want another sleepless night.
Well, look at it this way, he thought. Maybe she'll destroy the world, and I'll never have to tell her tonight was completely unnecessary.
Nice, his inner voice—Michael's voice—said snidely. Maybe billions will die so you don't have to face the music. You're sick, dude.

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Derik rolled over and saw Sara sitting on the edge of the bed. "Didja blow up the world yet?" He mumbled, scrubbing his face with his palm.
"Stop asking me that. And the answer is no." She took a sip of her coffee and grinned at him. "So you have to get up,"
"Aw, man..."
"It's ten o'clock in the morning! I'm pretty sure the good guys don't laze away in bed, giving the bad guys plenty of time to plan."
"Ummm . . . can I have a sip of your coffee?"
"Touch my cup and die. Jon's got a whole pot out in the kitchen. Besides, I put a ton of sugar in mine, and you don't like that."
He yawned. "How'd you know that?"
"I pay attention, numb nuts. Rise and shine."
"Ummm . . . c'mere."
She scooted out of his reach. "None of that, now. It's time to go." She smiled at him again. He supposed that in the movies the sun would be shining on her and she'd seem all godlike and bright to him, but this was real life, and so she only looked really really good. She was wearing a scoop-necked T-shirt that

tantalized him with her cleavage, and when she smiled, her eyes lit up and looked like the deep end of a pool on a hot day. "Play your cards right, though, and maybe we'll stop early for the day."

"It's a date," he said, and bounded out of bed.

She nearly spilled her coffee. "Jesus! A little warning before you do that."

"Wait until I've had my coffee. Then you'll see something." He yawned again and scratched his ass, then remembered someone he wanted to impress was in the room, and stopped. "Sleep good?"

"After you wore me out last night? I'm sort of surprised I didn't slip into a coma around two A.M."

"Awww," he said, and twined one of her red curls around his finger. "That's so sweet." He let go, and it bounced into her eye.

"Ow!"

"Oh, shit! Sorry."

"As a tender moment," she informed him, "that left a lot to be desired. Go take a shower."

"Come with me," he wheedled.

"Forget it," she said. "Better hurry, or all the coffee will be gone."

They were finishing breakfast when Jon snapped his fingers, said, "Forgot," got up, left, came back. "Picked this up for you when I went out," he said, and slid a glossy magazine across the table.

"Oh, dude! Thanks! I've been waiting for this one." To her complete and total amazement, Derik started thumbing through the current issue of Fine Cooking. "I don't even know why I subscribe to this thing, it's really hard to wait for it to show up in the mail. I always end up buying it on the stands, too. Oh, well, I can always sell the extra ones on eBay."

"What just happened?" she asked.

"If you're going to be with Derik," Jon said, "you must also be obsessed with cooking."

"What? Seriously?" She looked at the big, strapping blond across from her. "Big homemak-ing fan, are you?"

"No," Jon said as Derik became absorbed in an article on cilantro, "but he's a big cooking fan."

"I only get it for the articles," Derik said defensively.

"Didn't you notice the shirt?" Jon added, referring to Derik's black shirt with white lettering: FREE MARTHA.

"I could hardly miss it," she said, "but I thought it was some werewolf thing."

Jon snorted. "To our everlasting relief, it's not."

"Okay, this is the weirdest thing to happen to me this week," Sara said.

Derik slapped the magazine closed. "I can't concentrate with you two jabbering

like apes."

"Hey, hey!" Jon protested. "Watch the language."

"Sorry. Sara, are you ready to hit it?"

She blinked. "Sure, I guess. Are you'?"

"I'll cook for you sometime. Then you won't give me shit."

"You've been letting me slave over a hot campfire all this time?"

"I need my kitchen tools to do a really good job," he explained.

"Great. Hey, I love to cook, too. At last, something in common! Not that, as an engaged couple, we don't have tons in common," she added hastily, realizing her slip. "Because we totally, totally do. Have tons in common, I mean. Tons."

"That's quite a hole you're digging with your mouth," Derik observed.

"It's true," Jon supplied, rescuing her. "Derik's an amazing cook. His tomato-less pizza will make you cry like a tiny girl. Don't get me started on his butterscotch cookies."

Sara said nothing. For the life of her, she couldn't think of a thing. Not that she was some sort of reverse chauvinist, all "men shouldn't be in the kitchen because they're too big and strong," but it was hard to picture Derik in a KISS THE COOK apron.

The three of them stood around the table, Derik cradling his magazine, and there was a long, awkward moment, followed by Jon clearing his throat.

"Well, good luck, you guys."

"Thanks for letting us stay over," Sara said, giving him a hug. "And for the, um, reading material."

"Sure, Sara, anytime." Jon was looking at Derik. "Sure you don't want an extra pair of hands?"

"We've got it covered," Derik replied. "And by 'got it covered' I of course mean, we're pulling it out of our asses as we go along."

"But don't worry," Sara added.

"Right. Don't do that."

"At least stay through the full moon," Jon coaxed. "Rest up, figure out the rest of your plan."

"We gotta hit it, Jon. It'll be fine. We'll be in a state park somewhere when She comes up."

"Don't forget your promise," Jon said.

"We'll be back," Derik said.

"We're like terminators that way," Sara added brightly.

they were snuggling beside the campfire, and when Sara looked up into his face, she noticed his eyes glowed back yellow-green. It was startling, yet comforting. "You know, the thing about Jon," she began.

"Oh, good, I was hoping you were going to talk about another guy."

She ignored that. "He seemed like a regular person, you know? I mean, to look at him, you wouldn't think, 'Thar's a werewolf, git the gun, Paw.'"

"Christ, I hope not. And I guess it makes sense. There's not very many of us. And there's tons of you. So I guess we blend in pretty good."

"I mean, I see you all the time, and I forget about it a lot, unless you do something to remind me. Like this morning. I blinked, and you were on the other side of the room; It freaked me out."

"I can't help it"—he sighed—"if I've evolved as a genetically superior being."

"Oh, shut the hell up. Listen, what's the real reason you're avoiding your family? The Pack?"

"Huh?"

"Well, you just seem awfully concerned that they'll catch up with us, but not just because they'll try to ice me. So what's up with that?"

"It's . . . kind of complicated."

"Derik..."

"Well.. . you know what an alpha is, right? Like the boss of a group? And our Pack has an alpha. It's Michael. Which is totally fine. But sometimes . . . sometimes alphas aren't born, they're made. And I don't know how it happened, but in the last couple of weeks I've wanted . . . wanted things I don't deserve. At least I think I don't deserve them. And I left before things could get... well, you know."

"Oh."

"I can't go home again. So," he added, forcing cheer, "it's just as well that this whole save-the-world thing came up, you know?"

"Well, what I don't get is—"

"Can we change the subject?"

"Uh . . . sure. So, what's the plan for tomorrow night?"

"Before or after we have hot, wild monkey sex?"

"Can we have a serious talk, here? Like for thirty seconds? Is that too much for you?"

"I can't help it if I'd rather picture you naked than talk about our feelings, or whatever."

"I'm not even talking about our feelings, you half-wit!" She saw that he was delighted he'd teased her into yelling. "Very funny. Are you gonna answer the question?"

"Well. We'll have to make sure we're pulled over by the time the sun goes down, that's all. I'll Change, you'll sleep, I'll probably bring down a couple of rabbits and then curl up next to the fire, blah-blah."

"Blah blah} This is the most surreal conversation I've ever had," she announced,

"and it's been quite a week for me, in case you hadn't noticed. You'll curl up next to the fire? Like a good boy? Should we pull over and get you some Milk Bones?"

"You know," he grumped, "some people would be a little nervous about spending the night in the woods with a werewolf."

"Some people cheat on their taxes. It's a weird world." She slipped her hand under his shirt. His pro-Martha Stewart shirt. Best not to go that route, if she wanted to maintain her horniness. "So, uh, you got any plans for the rest of the evening?"

"Well, I was thinking about jumping your bones and then taking a nap."

"Excellent! Oh, wait a minute, I'm not that easy." Heck, two nights ago she'd been fervently . . . well, a little bit... opposed to making love with a perfect stranger. Although Derik was far from perfect. "What the hell." She sighed as he bent and nibbled on her throat. "Yes, I am. By the way, I'm on the Pill. And I assume you're disease-free, being a genetically superior irritating being and all."

"The Pill?" He paused in mid-nibble. "Oh. Okay. That's good."

It didn't sound like he thought it was good. In fact, it sounded like he thought it was the opposite of good. "What, you wanted me to get pregnant?" she joked.

"No, no."

Weird. Because he sounded . . . disappointed? Maybe it was. a cultural thing. She'd figure it out later.

She slapped a mosquito and kissed him back, delighting in the feel of his hard stomach beneath her fingers, the way his taut muscles rippled under—

"Ouch, damn it!"

"What? What?"

"I'm getting eaten alive, here."

"Yeah, I know," he murmured into her ear. "And if you give me another minute, I'll—"

"I meant by bugs, idiot."

"Oh."

"Where's the Off?"

"Poison in a can? No. No, Sara. Please," he begged as she got up in search of relief. "Don't put that stuff all over you. Please!"

"Derik," she said, exasperated. "I'm going to be one big mosquito bite tomorrow. I'm sorry you don't like the smell, but—"

"Let's go in the truck," he suggested.

She paused and slapped another flying vampire. "Good idea."

In another minute, they were groping and moaning on the front seat.

"Oh, God..."

"Urn..."

"Oh, that's nice . . . here . . . move over here."

"Ah... oooh."

"Yeah, like that... oh, God."

"Ooooh, baby."

"That's-ow!"

"What?"

"The gearshift is sticking into my neck . . . there. Um. Okay, that's better. Move your hand an inch to the . . . yeah. Oooh."

"Mmm."

"Ow!"

"What?"

"Your foot is caught in my shirt."

"Sorry..."

"That's better . . . yeah ... um ... here, raise up ... a little more."

"Oh, Christ."

"Yeah."

"Do not stop."

"Well, I don't—ow!"

He sighed. "What?"

"What, what? My head is on the floor mat, and you're confused?" She puffed hair out of her eyes, but due to her upside-down position, it just flopped back.

"It's a mystery why I'm protesting?"

"Sorry. How's that?"

"Derik, this isn't working."

"What are you talking about?" He was panting, disheveled, bottomless. She would have laughed if she hadn't been so uncomfortable. "It's fine."

"What are you, high? You are, aren't you? And you aren't even sharing the good drugs."

"You're the one with a prescription pad. Besides, you're just not giving it a chance."

"Your foot was in my shirt. And now I have Raisinettes in my hair."

He burst out laughing. "Okay, okay. You win. Go put the fucking poison on."

"Forget it. Let's just bag it for tonight."

"Aw, man..." He indicated his dick, which was happy to see her. "I'm kind of in an awkward situation, here."

"So? Your erection will go away." She grinned. "You know, eventually."

"Aw, Sara . . . you're killing me. I mean, sincerely killing me. I think your luck is going to make my balls blow up."

"Yeah, yeah, cry me a river." She paused. He really did look pathetic. "Maybe I could help you out."

"Please?" he begged.

She wriggled and squirmed around and finally found herself in a position that didn't make her want to scream with pain. She gripped him by the root, pumped up and down, then bent and licked the pearly drop off his tip.

"Oh my God," Derik gasped, his hips thrusting toward her. "Oh, Christ, do not

stop."

She licked and pumped and licked some more, and then his hand was on the back of her neck and she had a sense of his crushing power, power held in fierce check, heard him moan, "Don't stop . . . don't. . . don't..." Then he was pulsing into her mouth.

"Yech!" she said a minute later, while he lay gasping and limp as a noodle—all over. "What have you been eating?"

He rolled his eyes until he was looking at-her. "Can't you just let me bask in the moment, here?" he sighed.

"Go jump in the lake," she replied. "Literally."

25

Sara kept looking at him out of the corner of her eye, but she did it once too often, because finally Derik said, exasperated, "What?"

"Sorry."

"I can tell you that when I Change, you'll definitely notice. How 'bout that? So stop sneaking looks at me; it's creeping me right the hell out."

"Give me a break," she said, slightly defensively. "It's been a weird week. I can't help being a little nervous."

"Well, don't be. I'd never hurt you."

"No, just kill me."

"Yeah, but it wouldn't have hurt," he said easily.

She could actually feel her eyes bulge in her head as her blood pressure zoomed.

"Oh my God, you're serious!" He just looked at her.

"Okay, well, you can go run off in the woods now," she said. "I'm pissed again."

"In a few minutes." The sky was a gorgeous blaze of pinks and reds—a truly staggering sunset. And she was too annoyed and freaked out to appreciate it.

"You okay?"

"Sure. Sure I am." She sneaked a glance at her wristwatch. It had been a long day—she'd spent it staring out the window, at the moon. Last night—heck, the night at Jon's—seemed a thousand years ago.

"Look, you're all set here, right? Just stay with the truck. I'll probably stick close, anyway. Stop looking at your watch, it's making me nuts."

"Sorry," she said, and like a bad dream, her gaze snuck to her watch again. "So, is it, like, Farmer's Almanac sunset that you change? Or actual full dark? Because it's a full moon right now, you know."

"I know," he said, and did his voice sound ... thick? She snuck another glance at him and noted he was staring dreamily at the sky. "Sunset to sunrise. That's when we run with Her."

"Oookay. I'll be cringing in my sleeping bag if you need me." She started toward the truck, and quick as thought, he had her by the arm, gently restraining her. His nails, she noticed with a detachment that was almost like being drugged, were quite long, and curving under.

Sure, it was like being drugged. She was scared, and her brain was trying to help her deal with that fear by going into analyze overload.

Oh, for God's sake, Sara! This was Derik, and bad first impressions aside, he'd chew off his left hand before hurting her.

That was true, and she felt better, even if the sight of those nails—claws, really—was a bit upsetting. "What? What is it?"

"Stay with the truck," he said again, and it wasn't her imagination; he was speaking with difficulty.

"Okay," she said. "You told me that already, but okay."

Then he was kissing her, almost devouring her, his tongue was in her mouth, and he'd picked her up off her feet, his arms were tight around her back. And he seemed—bigger? Was that possible? Or maybe he just seemed more there, because he was so close to his change.

His mouth moved to her throat... and then he abruptly pulled back.

"Well," she said, almost panted. "That was... urn, interesting. Could you let go of my arm now?"

He did, and was rapidly shedding his clothes, in fact, the only time she saw him undress quicker was when they were about to have sex that first time. Was it only the day before yesterday?

"Easy," she said as the button fly on his Levis went flying. She could hear something—was he grinding his teeth?

No; he was Changing. If she had blinked she would have missed it. He fell to his hands and knees, and his blonde hair grew out, and his fingernails were digging into the dirt of the campsite, and then an enormous wolf was looking up at her, a wolf with fur the exact color of Derik's hair, a wolf with green eyes like lamps in the dark.

The wolf leaned forward, and she bent to it—to him—and he nuzzled her, a quick snuffly kiss, and then she heard the growl ripping out of him and turned so quickly she nearly lost her balance.

There was a smaller wolf at the edge of their camp, hesitating as if sensing the borders of their territory. This one was coal black, with the yellow-gold eyes of a calico cat. And quite small, really very small; Derik quit growling and loped over, and it was shocking how much bigger he was than the other one. They sniffed each other, and she noticed Derik was at ease with his enormous size, and was trying to put the other one at ease, too. The other one was almost timid, backing off but not running away.

Then she realized: The other one was female. And they were ... they were going off together! Without so much as a backward look, that fuzzy slut went and nabbed her would-be assassin/ boyfriend/fake fiance.

"Well, shit," she said, and kicked one of the truck's tires.

Derik bounded up to their campsite the next morning, lured by the smell of frying bacon. He was so relaxed, and in such a good mood, it took him a while to realize something was wrong.

He supposed he should have expected it. She was human, even if she was an extraordinary one. And he did turn into a wolf in front of her. That was probably pretty weird for her. He'd thought about going off into the woods a good half hour before the sun set to spare her the admittedly odd sight, and in the end he'd shit-canned the idea. Because this was who he was, and if she didn't like it, tough.

But it was more than that: He wanted her to see. See all of him, and not be afraid.

"What's wrong?" he finally asked, deciding to grab the bull by the horns.

"Nothing."

"Oh. Are you, uh, mad about something?"

"No," she lied.

"Oh." Honest to God, he had no idea what to do now. She was lying, and he knew she was lying, and she probably knew he knew she was lying. So what the fuck?

"So, uh, everything go okay last night?"

"Fine."

"That's good." Tell her she was lying? Ignore the fact that she was lying? Tell her but at the same time forgive her for lying? Tell a lie himself?

What? "Are you mad because I didn't bring back a rabbit? I thought about it, but to be honest, skinning and cleaning one would be a pretty messy job, and I didn't think-you—"

"I really don't care, Derik."

"Oh."

"So," she grumped, poking the fire.

"So, what?" He stretched, feeling pleasantly pooped. "Is there any bacon left?"

"You know damned well there is," she snapped. "Where's what's-her-fur?"

"Huh?" He sat up, puzzled. She wasn't kidding around. Not at all. She was pissed. She smelled exactly like the campfire. "What? Did you wake up with a spider on you? What is it?"

"That hair-covered-whore you took off with last night, as if you don't remember. That's what."

"Hair-covered . . . oh, you mean Mandy?"

"Mandy," she sneered.

"She's not a hair-covered-whore," he said defensively. "She owns her own accounting firm. And she's not here. She went home."

She shook the spatula at him, and he dodged drops of hot grease. "Look, all I

want is the truth. Just tell me the truth, okay? I promise I won't get mad."

"But you're already mad," he said, wondering if he could crawl underneath the fire. The truth was, he was sort of morbidly curious ... what would her powers do to him if she was just mad, but not defending her life? Maybe just give him dandruff, or a sprained ankle. "Really, really mad."

"Oh, shut up. Did you guys do it out there in the woods?"

"Do—oh. Oh!" He laughed out of relief, then dodged as she jabbed the spatula at him. "Sara, for crying out loud. Mandy's got a mate. We just paired up to hunt. Remember: Way more of you guys than us. It's really rare to just run into one of us in the woods. So we teamed up. She was on her own, because it was his turn to stay home with the cubs."

"Hmm." She was staring at him with narrowed eyes, but he could tell she felt better.

"I can't believe this! You've been stewing about this all morning?" He was trying to stop laughing; it wasn't likely to make her less mad.

"The most powerful sorceress in the world is jealous of an accountant?"

"M'not jealous," she muttered. "Just wanted to know, is all."

"Well, now you do. And thanks for the vote of confidence, by the way. Yes, we werewolves are so slutty we do it with anything on four legs."

"I didn't mean it quite like that," she mumbled.

"Yeah, sure you didn't."

"Well, I'm sorry," she grumped.

"Besides, I'd never go off with another female now. I'd—" He'd shut his mouth with a snap.

"You'd what?"

"I'd get some of that bacon, like, pronto. I'm starving!"

"And the Universe," Sara said dryly, "realigns itself."

"Seriously," he said after a long moment. "That was really dumb."

"Oh, shut up," she said, but he knew she wasn't mad anymore. Even if she hadn't smelled like roses again, she fixed a whole 'nother pound of bacon, just for him.

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They were in St. Louis, and to tell the truth, Sara was getting pretty damned sick of the truck. And sick of sleeping outside. And sick of the smell of campfire, how it clung to her hair and clothes and skin. And really, really sick of bacon. Derik, it appeared, could eat it with every meal. She could not. But none of that mattered, none of it was important, because, as sick as she was

of the whole thing, she didn't want it to end. She wanted to stay like this with Derik—in this adventure limbo—forever.

Because the world would end, or it wouldn't, and either way Derik would be out of her life.

Unacceptable.

That's nice, she told herself. Put off saving the world so you can get boned a few more times. Very nice.

"Over halfway there," Derik said.

"Uh-huh."

Right. Because werewolf lovers come along all the time. Why shouldn't I want to hang on to some happiness?

She coughed. "Listen, is there a plan for when we get there? How do we find these guys, anyway? And then what do we do, once we find them?"

"I figured your luck would help us out with finding them. Shit, you'll probably trip and fall on the leader and accidentally give him a fatal concussion. As for the rest of it... I can take care of the rest of it."

"You have no idea what the plan is, do you?"

"Never mind," he said primly, which made her laugh.

"It's okay," she said. "We've got some time to work on it, thank God,"

"Mmm. Listen, this Morgan Le Fay business . . . maybe if Arthur's Idiots find out you're a good enough gal, they'll stop trying to kill you. I mean, we've only got Dr. Cummings's word for it that they're the bad guys."

"That and what I saw with my own eyes at the hospital," she pointed out.

"Oh, right. Well, like I said, maybe once they find out you're not bad, they'll forget about the whole thing."

"And maybe," she added brightly, "I'll get caught up on my laundry this week. But probably not."

"Seriously. Morgan's whole deal was that she was wicked, bad, blah-blah, but you're not like that."

"Morgan's whole deal, as you so annoyingly put it, is that Merlin set her up, screwed over her family, splintered her family, and then took off after he did all that damage."

"Oh." He paused. "Really?"

"Listen, without his interference, she could have been Arthur's greatest champion. She really could have. But she's been totally screwed over, not just by real life but by history, too. Men write the history books," she added neutrally. "So naturally their take on it was that Morgan was this wicked terrible evil witch who destroyed Arthur because she could. But that's not true at all. She was set up to destroy him. And then she did. But if things had been different,. . ."

"Oh."

"If she'd had a normal family life ... a normal upbringing . . . who knows?"

"Huh."

"This is the part where you say, 'I never thought about it like that.'"

"Well, I never did."

"Exactly. Men. I mean, I'm not mad about it or anything, because you can't help thinking with your dicks all the time—"

"As long as you're not mad."

"Stop the truck!" she shouted suddenly, and Derik stood on the brakes. Sara was half-strangled by her seat belt, but finally fought free of it and opened her door. She reached back, grabbed the large duffel bag they were using as a communal suitcase, and said, "Come on."

"Come on, what?"

"Trust me."

She ran toward the . . . Amtrak station, Derik belatedly noticed. He ran after her. "A train?" he called. "You want to take a train? Why didn't you say so when we first started seeing trains?"

"I dunno. I'm sick of that truck," she explained, entering the busy station.

"And I'll bet you a million dollars we can find a train that goes to Boston. We can ride instead of driving."

"One of us has been riding instead of driving."

"That's because you're a wheel hog. You wouldn't let me drive after that one time."

"You can't drive a stick."

"I can, too!"

"So we were stalling all the time, why again? And what are we doing looking for a train?"

"I don't know," she said, "but I think it's going to be all right."

"When we don't have a ticket? What am I saying. The ticket guy won't notice us, or will pretend like we have tickets, because his wife left him this morning, or Amtrak's entire computer system will crash, and they'll be too distracted to worry about two strangers on a train."

"Exactly."

"So, this is like instinct?"

"Exactly."

He was following her past the ticket windows. "Okay."

She turned to look at him over her shoulder. "Really okay?"

"Sure. I'm a huge believer in instinct. Besides"—he smiled at her—"you haven't steered us wrong yet."

"You know, I could get used to this," Derik said, climbing into the sleeping

berth beside Sara, who was propped up on one elbow, looking out the window. "No ticket, no money? No problem!"

"I was wondering if it would work," she said, not looking around. "I'm sick of my power—my whatever-it-is—being passive, you know? I wanted to see if I could make it work."

"And you did."

"I think I did.. ."

"And say, hon, can you see anything out there?"

"I can't," she said, looking over her shoulder and smiling at him. It was ridiculous what a gorgeous smile she had. "Come here and narrate."

He curled up behind her and peeked over the top of her head, out the window.

"Well. . . that's a farm . . . and that's another farm . . . oh, there's a herd of cows, sound asleep . . . mmm . . . cows ..."

"Don't start, you just ate."

"What, 'just'? Half an hour ago. Oh, now look here, the land's thinning out, probably because ... yep, there's a river ... you can see those lights, right? Probably a town right on the river. Where the hell are we?"

"Somewhere in the Midwest."

"Well," he said, nuzzling the back of her neck, "that narrows it down."

"Off my case, hose head, I'm not a walking atlas. You know, this time tomorrow, we could be getting stomped by Arthur's Chosen."

"What a cheerful thought. Thanks for the subject change."

"It could all be over in just another day or two," she said, sounding weirdly neutral. "Just think."

"Yeah. All done. And either the world ends, or we go back to our lives."

"Yeah," she said.

"Um . . . Sara . . . this is going to sound dumb ... and slightly retarded ..."

"Thanks for letting me brace myself."

"... but I'm actually having a great time with you. I—I sort of don't want it to end."

"You asshole," she said, and he was startled to see she was crying.

"What? Jeez, don't do that. I freak out when you do that. Actually, it's the first time I've seen you do that, and I'm definitely freaking out."

"Shut up," she sobbed. "You talk too much."

"Sara, what's wrong? Besides, um, everything."

"That about sums it up," she said, wiping her eyes. "Everything. I don't want it to end, either. I'd rather stay on this train forever than fight and mess up and maybe die, or maybe the world dies, or maybe you die."

"It'll be all right," he said with a total lack of conviction.

"You're a terrible liar. Really. The worst I've ever seen."

"What can I say, we're not bred for it. Not like you guys. You guys are total experts," he said, trying to cheer her up. "Homo sapiens is the most deceitful, rapacious species the planet has ever—"

"Shut up. And have you—have you thought about—I mean, what if you're wrong?"

He snuggled closer to her in the berth. "I have no fucking idea what you're talking about, darling girl."

"Maybe you should kill me tonight," she said quietly, and he nearly fell off the bunk. "Save the world."

"Bullshit!"

"Don't yell, I'm right here."

"You're not evil, Sara. Not even a little bit evil. So how can you destroy the world?"

"What if it's not a conscious act?"

"What if it is?"

"Quit that," she snapped. "We'll get nowhere like this."

"Exactly. So drop it, all right? I didn't go through all this crap to kill you now. Besides," he pointed out, "I probably couldn't, remember? I mean, really couldn't. In addition to feeling just awful about it and not being able to make myself try again."

"Oh. That's true," she said, cheering up. "Your heart would probably explode if you tried."

"Yeah, so quit crying, okay?"

"Shut the hell up and kiss me. Dumb ass."

He did, and she kissed him back, fiercely, almost desperately, and he smelled her fear and anxiety, and soothed her as best he could with his mouth and hands. And after a while, her anxiety gave way to lust, which kindled his own. They shed their clothes and slid against each other, whispering, nibbling, teasing, sighing, and toward the end, he closed his eyes and breathed her perfume, and they rocked together as the train rolled through the Midwest.

"If i tell you something," he said just as she was drifting off, "you have to promise not to get mad."

"Could you sound more like a big girl? What? What is it?"

"You have to promise not to get mad."

"Whenever somebody says that, it's code for, 'you're gonna get mad as hell, so watch out'."

"Yeah, well, you have to promise you won't get mad."

"No."

"No?"

"That's right."

"Shit. Sara, I've got to tell you this. I mean, it's been, like, haunting me."

"So tell me."

"But I don't want you to get mad," he whined.

"Tough."

"Gripes." He took a deep breath; the berth was so tiny she could feel his chest heave. "Okay. We didn't have to have sex at Jon's. Or the night before, in the woods."

"We didn't have to what what at where?"

"We didn't have to have sex. He knew you weren't really my fiancée."

"And you kept this little tidbit to yourself, because . . . ?"

"Well, because I wanted to get laid," he said reasonably. Then, "Owww!"

"What? I didn't lay a finger on you."

"Oww, damn it, Sara!"

"You jerk! You creep! You ass! Oh, fuck!" When she thought of the way she threw herself at him. . . dropping the robe and pulling the quilt back like a big old slut. .. telling herself they were Doing It for a good cause ... she was furious with embarrassment.

And what did it say about him, that he just boned her and never told her the truth? Other than the fact that he was a lying, sneaking, opportunistic—

"Owwwww!" —bastard.

"What are you whining about?" she snapped. "I haven't even gotten started. You son of a bitch! You piece of shit! You—"

"Ow, my fucking sac!" He was cradling his groin and rocking back and forth, as much as their crowded berth would allow. "Sara, will you stop it?"

"Stop what?"

"Calm down," he begged. "For the sake of our unborn children."

"I told you, I'm not doing anything." But was she? She was certainly angry enough to picture a groin-related disaster. Possibly more than one.

Though his yelps of pain were doing wonders for her temper. "Quit complaining."

"Ow, ugh, ow! Oh, man." He moaned piteously. "I think my testicles just imploded."

"Serves you right," she snapped.

"I'm serious, Sara. This is the worst pain I've ever known."

"Good."

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? Really, really, really, really sorry. I was sorry before you blew up my balls."

"I did not—"

"It's just, I couldn't have this hanging over us anymore. Especially not after what you said, about how tomorrow might be the big day, you know?"

"So?" she sulked.

"So, I wanted to tell you."

"So, you did."

"Yeah, but you promised not to get mad."

"I did not."

"Okay, well, you got your revenge, right?" He gingerly felt himself. "Oh, boy. I think I'm out of the Sexual Olympics for a while, Sare-Bear."

"Serves you right," she said again, and flopped over on her side, as far away

from him as she could get, which wasn't very far. "Asshole."

"Aw, c'mon," he coaxed. "I said I was sorry. It's not my fault I wanted to fuck you so bad I was willing to—"

"You're not helping your case," she said grumpily, but when he snuggled contritely behind her, she let him.

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"Ah, boston, the sweet smell of—Sara, What the hell!"

She had tripped, and he was too close on her heels, and went sprawling down the steps and over her. She hit the platform with a thump that made him wince and bit her tongue, hard.

"Oww!" she cried unnecessarily. "I mit my mongue!"

Derik rolled over, quick as a cat. "You what your what?"

"My mongue! I mit it!" She rolled it out, crossing her eyes in an attempt to look at it. "Ith it mleeding?"

"No," he said, pulling her to her feet and ignoring the curious stares of their fellow passengers.

"You nint even look!"

"Sara, if you were bleeding, I'd know it. Now what's the problem?"

"The mroblem ith that I nipped over my own two eet an—ow!"

She'd said "ow" because he had grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and hauled her back up onto the train, brutally shoving passengers out of his way and ducking behind the window.

"What? What's wrong? Is it Arthur's Chosen? They're waiting for us, aren't they?" She clawed frantically in her pocket, came up with a Kleenex, dabbed her tongue, checked for blood, then readdressed the situation at hand. "It's them, isn't it? Funny how imminent death totally took my mind off my sore tongue. Which still hurts like hell, FYI. It's the Chosen, isn't it?"

"Worse," he said grimly, peeking out the window. "It's my Pack leader and his wife."

"Really? More werewolves? Oh, that's so cool. And terrifying. Where?"

"Get down, idiot."

"Idiot? How'd you like another broken testicle?"

He was ignoring her, peeking out the window. "They're downwind ... thank God. But how in the hell did they know we'd be here at this particular train station at this particular ... Anto-nia."

"I don't think so," Sara said, looking up at him from the floor. "From what you told me, it sounded like she was keeping your secret."

"How else can you explain it?"

"Well. There's me. I mean, my power."

"Maybe." He peeked out the window again. "Is it possible? Would your luck have brought them here? But how come? If Mike sees you, he'll try to kill you, and Jeannie will back him up. I mean, Mike's a toughie, but Jeannie's insane, especially when she's knocked up. So why would your luck put you in that position?"

"Are you actually having a conversation with me?" she asked. "Or thinking out loud?"

"It just doesn't make sense," he continued. "The whole point is that we're trying to avoid my Pack. So what would bring them here now, right before we're about to go after the bad guys? Why are they here?"

"Why don't you ask them?" Sara replied. Then she waved, looking past him. "Hi there."

"Don't kill her!" he screeched before he even turned all the way around.

"It's nice to see you, too, Derik," Michael said, yellow eyes glinting in amusement. And . . . something else. Surprise? No. Shock. They were both shocked, and covering.

"Uh..."

"This is the part where he says, 'I can explain'," Sara said helpfully.

"I sure as shit hope so," Jeannie said. She was looking bodaciously gorgeous as usual, with that shoulder-length mess of sun-colored curls, freckled nose, and flinty gaze. Terrifying and beautiful, the perfect mate for his alpha. Right now she was nervously chewing on her lower lip. "Start talking, or I start shooting."

Sara was slowly getting to her feet. "Did you guys hear all that? You know, what he was babbling while you were walking up to us? Because I'm kind of curious, too. Not that it's not nice to meet you. Because it is, I'm sure. But what brings you here?"

Jeannie and Michael looked at each other, then looked at Sara. "We had to drop off a friend. She doesn't fly. Then I saw you, so we came over."

"That makes perfect sense," Sara said. Derik was amazed; she wasn't scared at all. Meanwhile, his adrenal gland had dumped what felt like about six gallons of fight-or-flight into his system. "I can't imagine werewolves like to fly. Stuck in an iron tube hurtling through space. I mean, it freaks me out to think of it, and I'm not claustrophobic. I don't think."

"Just. . . everybody stay calm," Derik said.

"We are calm," Michael pointed out.

"Everybody relax, and I can explain everything."

"Derik, we're fine," Sara said.

"Just, nobody panic."

"What's the matter with you?" Jeannie asked. "You're all twitchy and sweaty. You're usually much more laid back."

"Well. You're armed, which makes me kind of nervous. And, uh, I didn't—we

didn't—expect to see you here. Today, I mean. At the train station."

"We didn't expect to see you, either," Jeannie said. "And with a friend." Blond eyebrows wiggled suggestively.

Michael stepped close and sniffed Sara. "A good friend," he said.

"Quit that," Sara said, throwing up an elbow. "It creeps me right the hell out."

Jeannie cleared her throat. "Please note how I restrained myself from smelling your butt."

"For which I will be forever grateful," Sara giggled. "Seriously, cut it out."

She shoved Michael back, gently enough. "If you want to know something, just ask me."

"Are you Morgan Le Fay?"

"Well, urn, yes."

"But she's not evil," Derik said quickly.

"She doesn't smell evil," Michael agreed. He added, "Evil usually smells a little more clove-like. But what I really want to know—"

"I want to know why I haven't gotten a hug," Jeannie said, spreading her arms wide. Relieved, Derik stepped close for the embrace, and then Jeannie's face shot over to the left and the entire side of his face was numb.

"Ow!"

"That's for putting my kids and husband in danger while you concentrated on getting laid," she snapped, tapping the butt of her Clock.

"Yeah," Michael said, a familiar look on his face—amusement and disconcertedness. Jeannie had, literally, beaten him to the punch. "What she said."

"Hey, working on saving the world here, okay?" he snapped back, rubbing his sore cheek.

"That's why I didn't shoot you."

"And what 'kids'? There's just Lara, because you're, like, five minutes pregnant."

"Seven weeks."

"Congratulations," Sara said. "Don't touch him again."

Jeannie didn't even glance at her. At least she had taken her hand off her gun and buttoned her jacket back up, which was always a good sign. "But Derik, I swear to God, if you put my family in jeopardy ever again because you've got a personal agenda..."

"Ow!"

"Yeah," Michael added, pointing to Derik's face. "Um, there'll be plenty more where that came from."

"Don't touch him again."

"Or what, Red?" Jeannie asked, supremely unimpressed.

"Or I'll make you eat that Ann Taylor knock-off."

Jeannie gasped. "It's not a knockoff!"

"Regardless. Stop smacking him around. If anybody gets to hit him, I do."

"Knock it off. This doesn't have anything to do with you, Red, so pipe down and shut the hell up."

"How about instead I kick your ass up and down the railroad car?"

"I don't know about you," Michael said to Derik, "but I'm experiencing a fantastic degree of sexual arousal."

"I'm too nervous to get hard," Derik muttered back. "Besides, I had kind of a bad night." Then, louder: "Now, ladies, ladies ..."

"I mean, talk about nerve," Sara was saying. "Sneaking up on us—"

"We walked up to you at five o'clock in the afternoon in broad daylight—"

"And being all annoying and threatening, and all we're doing is trying to save your ass, and everyone else's ass, and we get attitude for it—"

"He's chasing his dick instead of getting down to business! My kids are supposed to come before his sex life. And—and—"

"You never mind about his sex life."

"I will when it's putting my family in danger."

"Well then," Sara snapped back, "you'd better shoot me."

Jeannie blinked.

Derik said, "Don't shoot her."

"I'm waaaiting," Sara sang, folding her arms across her chest.

"Don't shoot her," Michael ordered.

"Aw, can't I? She's so mouthy, it'd be a pure pleasure."

"Look who's talking," Michael muttered, giving his wife a squeeze.

"It won't work, anyway," Derik said. "Don't you think I tried to ice her? It's sort of all tied up in this mess we're in."

"I'm sure I could pull it off," Jeannie announced.

"Try it, you dyed blond homicidal gun-toting weirdo."

"I do not dye my hair!"

"Please stop," Derik begged.

"Stop," Michael said, not begging, and Jeannie and Sara both closed their mouths.

"Thank you," Derik said, relieved.

Michael was frowning. "Derik, you think we're here for a reason? For real?

Because we thought we were here dropping a friend off because—because of something else."

"Getting to shoot someone," Jeannie added, "would just be icing on the cake."

Sara crossed her eyes at her and stuck out her tongue. Jeannie started tapping the butt of her gun again.

"Why don't we go get a drink, get off this train?" Derik suggested, jabbing Sara in the ribs at the same moment Michael jabbed Jeannie. "Talk about it?"

"Oh, going off and having a drink is your solution for everything," Jeannie snapped.

"It makes a pleasant change from me killing you, and my wife shooting your friend," Michael said.

"We could do that later," Sara suggested. "If you get, you know, bored." .
Jeannie's forehead smoothed out, and she laughed, taken by surprise. Michael just shook his head, smiling.

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"So you've got money."

"Yeah."

"Okay, and you can take our car, we'll grab a rental for the trip back."

"Thanks."

"All right then. Good luck."

"Mike, what's bugging you? It's not me blowing you off."

"No?"

Derik looked over at Jeannie and Sara, who were standing in the doorway of the restaurant, pretending to be polite to each other. Well, it wasn't surprising.

In his experience, strong-willed women usually didn't get along. And hardly anybody got along with Jeannie. It was the alpha thing—somebody needed to be in charge. It made her perfect for the Pack, but low on girlfriends. "No. I guess it's pretty bad. L guess you'd better tell me."

Michael hesitated, then plunged. "We were really shocked to see you. Because Antonia ... Antonia is very upset."

"Upset like screaming foul names upset? Upset like—"

Mike didn't crack a smile. "She said it was too late. She was lying down all morning and then she came to us and said it was too late. That it couldn't be fixed."

"Oh. Well. .. oh."

"Yeah."

"But., .oh."

"Yeah. So we were all hanging around the mansion waiting for the world to end—"

"I bet that was fun."

"—and Rosie finally said she couldn't take it anymore, that if the world was going to end, she might as well head home for it, so we ran her up here to the train station. It was actually a relief to have something to do."

Derik didn't know what to say. It couldn't be over. They hadn't even tried to get the bad guys yet. How could it be over? But Antonia was never wrong. And now here was his friend, talking about the end of the world like it was a normal everyday thing.

"So," Michael continued, "I'm glad we didn't spend what might be our last day fighting."

"Me, too."

"Good luck," he added with a total lack of conviction.

"Mike," Derik said, then fell silent for a moment. Then, "It'll be all right."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

His friend shrugged. Derik still couldn't get over the weirdness of it all. They should be fighting. That's what an alpha did when a Pack member didn't do what he was told—kicked some ass. They should be fighting, and Jeannie should be doing what she did best, which was overreact when her family was in danger, and there should be a brawl right here on Milk Street.

Hell, when you got right down to it, Derik should have listened to his leader in the first place.

And he didn't really believe it was done, did he? That it was too late? It couldn't be fixed?

"Look," Mike was saying—uh oh, he'd better start paying attention—"you're doing fine so far with all the, uh, ignoring my orders and hooking up with the most dangerous woman on earth—"

"Thanks."

"—but I've just got one piece of advice for you."

"I'm waiting breathlessly, oh, wonderful Pack leader whose lightest utterance gives my life meaning."

"For Christ's sake," Michael muttered. "How does she put up with you? Anyway.

The advice is this: Stay focused."

"Stay focused."

"Yeah."

"Okay."

"I'm serious. Keep your eye on the ball."

"It's good that you used a cliché," Derik replied, "or I might not have understood your meaning."

"Just keep it in mind," his friend said, super-mysteriously, which was annoying, but hey, at least they weren't fighting to the death, so that was all right.

"They seemed nice," sara commented. For a couple of killer werewolf psychos."

"Hey, hey."

"He did sic you on me, Derik." "Yeah, but he didn't know you then." "What a relief," she said mockingly. "Now I feel so much better. But at least now we know why they were here."

Derik looked at her, which was unnerving, because his pupils were unusually large; the rings of his irises were just thin hoops of green. In fact, ever since Michael and Jeannie had left, he'd been twitchy as hell. Which was making her twitchy as hell. "I know why they were here," he said. "I didn't know you knew."

"It's obvious. Now we have money, and a car, and you're not worried about the Pack sniffing up our backtrail. We can focus on the matter at hand, right?"

"Right," Derik said. "Focus. That's good advice. Actually, the reason they were here was—oh my God!"

"What?" She jerked back and looked around wildly. "What's wrong? It's the bad guys for real this time, isn't it? Get 'em!"

"It's Rachel Ray! Look!" '

Sara looked. They had been walking past the New England Aquarium and Legal Sea Foods, and she saw the cameras, the techs, the vans, the wires, and the lights; all evidence of a television show being taped. And in the distance, just disappearing into Legal's, a perfect brunette bob ...

"Oh my God!" Derik was rhapsodizing. "I can't believe it! Look! They must be doing a show on Boston, or seafood. Or seafood restaurants in Boston." He gripped her arms and shook her like a maraca. "Do you realize Rachel Ray is in that building less than a hundred feet away?"

"This is so completely the opposite of staying focused," she informed him. Incredibly, he was straightening his hair, which was so short it really never got mussed ... not even after sex! Which was quite a trick. "Do I look okay?"

"You look very pretty, Mabel."

"God, I wish I had my cookbooks with me! I'd have her sign Thirty Minute Meals Two." He looked around wildly, as if expecting the book to pop out of nowhere.

"Shit! Oh, wait... I know! She can sign my shirt." He tugged his T-shirt out of his jeans and smoothed it.

"If you take off the shirt, she can sign your nipple."

He shot her a withering look. "This is serious business, Sara."

It was getting downright impossible not to burst out laughing. "It is?"

"Look..." He was holding her fingers, completely unaware that his grip was crushing. Annoying enhanced werewolf strength ... arrgghh! "I have to do this. I mean, I have to. I've been watching her show ever since she started on the Food Network. Both her shows... Thirty Minute Meals and Forty Dollars a Day. She's just the greatest. And I have to find out. This is my chance!"

Sara was having a little trouble following the conversation, which she didn't beat herself up for, because it was pretty bizarre. "Your chance for what?"

"To find out if she's Pack. I mean, she must be.

No ordinary human could be cute and charming and a great cook and do two shows for one network."

"It's a persuasive argument," she admitted.

"But I don't know for sure. If I get close enough to smell her, I'll know."

"How can you not know?"

"What, there's a humongous list of werewolves, and I memorized it?"

"I guess not," she said. "But doesn't Michael know?"

"He won't tell me. I've been after him for years, trying to figure it out, and he won't tell me! Bastard. How do I look?"

"I already told you."

"Okay, well, I'm gonna go do this now." He took a few deep, steadying breaths.

"I have to do this."

"I understand." She gestured toward the bright lights. "Go to her."

"Great!" He bent, kissed her, loped off.

Sara watched him go, beyond amused. He was like a kid with a crush. A big, scary kid. She hoped Rachel would be nice to him.

Minutes later, he returned, looking so disappointed she knew at once he hadn't had a chance to meet his idol. "There were too many people around," he said glumly. "I mean, I could have gotten past them without too much—but I didn't want to scare her or make her think I was a stalker or something."

"Maybe next time. Did you find out if she's a werewolf?"

"No. I could smell a Pack member, but I couldn't get close enough to sort it out from the rest... it could be a techie, could be her assistant, could be the guy who owns Legal's, for all I know." His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "But it's gotta be her. It must be her."

"Well, you tried."

"Yeah." He looked at her, a serious look. Uh-oh. "Sara, I just wanted to say I really appreciate your support."

"If by 'support' you mean 'mocking you behind your back', then yes, I am chock-full of support."

"No, really, Sara. And I just wanted to say—I mean, to tell you, that maybe when this is all done, we can, you know, hit the road again, maybe try to run into Rachel again."

What an unbelievably weird idea. "Okay. I mean, that'd be nice. I'd like to do that." As she said the words out loud, she realized it was true. "When this is all done."

He took her hands again, more gently this time, she was relieved to note. "I'm just saying, there's nobody I'd rather follow the Thirty Minute Meals show with than you."

"That's ... so sweet." She bit her lip so she wouldn't laugh. Then, to her total shock—and his, too, she'd bet—she burst into tears.

"Oh, good," he said, hugging her. "Because this is exactly the reaction I was hoping for."

"I'm sorry," she sobbed. "It's just that I want this to be over—over in a good way—so we can do dumb stuff like stalk Rachel Ray. Together."

"Dumb?" Then, "I love you, Sara."

"I love you, too."

He cradled her in his arms. His big, strong arms. She resisted the urge to melt.

"Oh, Derik. How the hell did we get ourselves into this?"

"Who cares? I love you, and we'll fix it. I loved you," he added nostalgically,

"from the moment I tried to kill you."

"It took a little longer for me," she confessed.

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Sara had suggested, in a ploy to divert them from their mission and cheer Derik up, that they stop by Wordsworth and pick up a new cookbook. Derik agreed at once.

"Is it totally lame that we're putting off going to Salem?"

"No."

"Well, good." She paused, then walked into the bookstore as he held the door for her. "Why isn't it lame, again?"

"We don't even know where we're supposed to go once we get to Salem," he pointed out reasonably. "Maybe if we keep hanging out, your power will kick in, or the bad guys will make a move, or something."

"Uh-huh. Is it just me, or has quite a bit of this world-saving trip entailed waiting around for something to happen?"

"It's just you," he said, and trotted toward the cooking section.

"Like hell," she muttered. She had no desire to add to her cookbook collection, but maybe she could check the New Fiction section and see if Feehan had a...

Oh. Oh!

After a couple of minutes, she was sitting on the floor in the History section, looking up King Arthur. Which was really kind of silly, after all, she had done lots of papers in school on King Arthur and Morgan Le Fay,, so it was unlikely there would be a book here with information she didn't have on—

Arthur's Chosen. Also referred to as Arthur's Sect, Arthur's Guild, and Morgan's Bane. A mysterious sect founded in the year of King Arthur's death, Arthur's Chosen believes Arthur will return one day, but only with the help of his half sister, Morgan Le Fay...

Well. That was lucky. She'd just sit here and find out all about the bad guys, thank you very much.

Sara became absorbed.

ONE HOUR LATER...

IDIOT. FUCKING IDIOT!

"You know better," he said out loud, startling the clerk standing a few feet away. He shot her an apologetic grin and followed Sara's scent out the door.

Well, isn't this what you were waiting for? Something to happen?

"Shut up," he said—damn it, he was talking out loud again!

Bad move, bad guys. He could find Sara's backtrail in a snowstorm; he could certainly track her to Salem. And if they harmed one hair . . . one half of one hair ... if they touched her . . . breathed on her . . . thought about her...

He noticed people jumping out of his way and supposed he should calm down—he was scaring perfect strangers and really shouldn't growl in public—but he was too fucking annoyed.

They weren't in Salem. They hadn't even left town. Tracking them—Sara—down had been totally super easy. He supposed he should have been suspicious, but he was too relieved.

He stomped over to the building—an abandoned warehouse near Logan Airport, of course, naturally, it was the sort of thing that all bad guys hung out in, and clearly these bad guys had been watching all the right movies—and was just about to rip the door off its hinges when his cell phone rang.

This was startling, as it hadn't rung since he left the Cape. In fact, most of the time he'd forgotten it was on his hip. He let it charge overnight and clipped it to his belt in the morning and never gave it a thought, just like he never gave pulling on Jockeys a thought. Everybody knew what he was supposedly working on, and no one wanted to bother him. Not to mention, werewolves weren't big on calling each other up and asking about the weather.

So who was calling him? And why now, when he was about to go all Search and Rescue?

He sneezed—the stench of hydrocarbons in the area was really vomit-inducing—and flipped the phone open. Before he could even say hello, Antonia was screeching in his ear.

"Don't do it! Derik, don't go in that building!"

"When this is over," he told her, more than a little rattled, "we have to sit down and talk about how scary you are. You and Sara would get along great, by the way."

"Turn around. Walk away. Leave now. Now!"

"I can't. Sara's in there. I have to go—"

"Shut the fuck up! Derik, if you go in that building, you'll die. I saw it.

You'll—" Antonia's voice broke, and he nearly dropped the phone. Antonia? Worked up into tears over his ugly ass? "You'll die. Don't go in, Derik. Don't."

"I appreciate the warning," he said. "But I have to. If I don't see you again—"

"Don't!"

"—thanks for all your help."

"You numb fuck! Men! I told Michael it couldn't be taken back, and what does he do?

Goes to Boston for a day trip! You guys would think I was, like, wrong

occasionally."

"We know you're not wrong," he explained. "But that doesn't mean we're going to lie down and wait for the world to end."

An inarticulate screech was her only answer.

"And thanks for trying to save me. I don't suppose you saw what'll happen to Sara?"

"Ape! Chimp! Gorilla!"

"Now you're just being mean," he said, and closed the phone.

Nuts, he thought. I forgot to ask her how I die. Well, I suppose I'll find out in a few minutes.

He was weirdly sanguine about it, and after a moment's thought he knew why. He could face dying, if Sara was all right. He could even face the end of the world, if Sara was all right. But he couldn't stay out in this smelly parking lot and play it safe while the redhead was in trouble.

So, he would go in. And die, because Antonia was never wrong. But maybe Sara would come out of it okay. And maybe not.

It was worth trying, anyway.

He kicked the door off its hinges, belatedly realizing it hadn't been locked.

"D'oh!" he said, then picked the door up and sheepishly set it against the wall.

"Hello-o?" he called. "You guys better come get me! Quit whatever you're doing to what's-her-name and come on over here. Let's dance."

"Let's dance?" a thrillingly familiar voice said. "That's really bad, Derik."

"Sara!" He avoided three of Arthur's Losers—the cranberry-colored robes were a dead giveaway, why did they do that?—and ran to her. "Oh, man, thank God you're all right!" He hugged her, lifting her off her feet. Then he shook her. "And what the hell did you think you were doing, going off with the bad guys?" Then he hugged her again. "I don't know what I would have done if something had happened to you, oh, baby, baby." Then he shook her. "Kicked some ass, that's what I would have done! And what is your problem? I tell you to stay put, and you leave? Have you never watched a horror movie in your life?" Then he hugged her again. "Oh, Sara, Sara ... you sweet, sweet dumb ass."

"Will you stop?" She extricated herself with difficulty and puffed a curl out of her face. "I'm gonna throw up if you don't quit that. And I had to go with them."

"What, had to?"

"They said—they said they had snipers. Trained on your head. And I didn't know if it was the truth or a lie. It seemed a little farfetched. But I know they use guns, because of that time in the hospital—God, was it only earlier this week? I wonder if my car's fixed yet."

"Could you stay focused, please?"

"I am. Anyway, I couldn't take a chance. I didn't think you—even you—could survive a head shot. They said if I went with them they wouldn't kill you. So, I went."

"Dumb ass."

"In retrospect, yeah." She lowered her voice, which was stupid, because the Chosen were right there, hearing every word. "They needed my blood." She showed him the inside of her elbow, which had a drop of dried blood on it. "And they didn't even disinfect the needle site. Bastards."

"Your blood? They needed your blood?" That didn't sound good. That didn't sound remotely good. "Like, for to do magic? Like a spell?"

"I've missed their last few meetings," Sara said dryly, "so I don't know exactly what they need it for."

He put his arm around her, protectively, then turned and glared at the Robed Weirdos. "What's up, fellas? What'd you need her blood for?"

The shortest Arthur's Chosen blinked. "Who are you?"

Derik was almost crushed. These guys clearly had access to powerful magicks, at least one of them could see the future, and they had no fucking idea who he was! How totally embarrassing.

"I'm this one's mate, so there," he snapped, squeezing so protectively that Sara yelped. "Oh. Sorry, babe."

"Mate, huh?" Sara muttered back. "Aw. I didn't know you cared."

Weirdly, the robed fellas were bowing. He could smell quite a few more and looked up ... there were at least a dozen on the catwalk, and even more in the back where he couldn't see. They were all bowing.

"Why are you doing that?" Sara asked, and he was so puffed up with pride—she didn't sound afraid at all, though he knew perfectly well she was—that he almost squeezed her again. "I don't think you should do that. Do you think they should do that, Derik?"

"Definitely not."

"You are our sworn enemy," they all said in unison. Then the one who had spoken first added, "But you are also the 'daughter of a king, and the sister of a king."

"Urn ... I'm the daughter of an ad exec, and the sister of nobody," Sara said.

"But, thanks anyway."

"In this incarnation," one robed fella said.

"And I'm not going to destroy the world," she added, "and you can't make me!"

"Darned right you're not," another of the Chosen said. "Why do you think we're here?"

"To, urn, kill me?"

"To try," Derik added silkily, in his turn.

"We knew you were coming. Did you think we weren't ready? We've had years to arm ourselves with formidable magicks."

"Whoa, whoa." Sara made the time-out sign with her hands. "The only reason I'm here is because your Chosen Ones showed up at my hospital! My mentor told me all about you and sent us to Massachusetts. If you hadn't tried to kill me, I'd still be in California."

"I'm such a loser," Derik muttered in her ear. "Because that actually depressed the shit out of me. We'd never have met!"

"Stop thinking with your dick," she hissed back.

"Your mentor is a traitor to our cause and will be killed on sight... as soon as we attend to this other business."

Sara gaped. "Dr. Cummings was one of you?"

"Used to be one of us. Then we discovered he was a foul traitor."

"He was only using us to get information for one of his doctorates," another one explained. "He didn't care about our cause."

"Yeah, that sounds about right," Sara agreed. "He's really aggravating that way."

"Nice of him to warn us, though," Derik said.

"Extremely nice." Then Sara added, "Besides, I can't do magic. I don't know any spells, or anything. I'm a nurse, for God's sake!"

"Then, as a nurse," one of them said from the catwalk, "you know that sometimes it's necessary to hurt a patient to heal another one."

"Uh . . . we're talking theoretically here, right?"

"Your blood will bring back His Majesty, King Arthur. Without your interference, woman"—he spat that word out like someone else would have said "child molester"—"he will be the greatest of all of us. He will raise Britain to heights only dreamed of. He will... not! Be! Dead!"

"Oh, boy," Derik muttered. "Someone forgot their meds today."

"Probably more than one day," Sara said. Then, louder: "You mean you're not going to make me destroy the world? You're going to use my blood to—I dunno—clone or resurrect a new Arthur?"

"Well, sure," another robed one said, one not quite so frothy at the mouth.

"What'd you think we were going to do?"

"But Sara doesn't do magic," Derik said. "In case you guys weren't listening the first time."

"That's a relief," the mellower one said. "It makes this all so much easier."

A few of the robed fellows in the corner, who had been bustling busily about during their conversation, now revealed the small lab table where they'd been working. Evil-smelling smoke was pouring from various beakers. It's color exactly matched the cranberry of their robes!

"They don't know about your luck," Derik whispered. "How can they not know?"

"Shit, Derik, I didn't know until a few days ago. But how are they going to make Arthur just appear? Even if they cloned him, somehow, he'd have to grow. He wouldn't just appear—"

"We can hear you, you know," one of them said. "I mean, you're only standing ten feet away."

"Aw, shut up," Derik said.

"Arthur—the dead king Arthur—can't just appear," Sara was reasoning out loud.

"It doesn't make sense. Unless—"

"Dosed a nosefta kerienba!"

"—unless they know some sort of magic spell," she finished, and sighed. "Magic. Gripes! I'm from California, and I still don't believe it. Oh, yuck! Look. They're splashing my blood all over the table. Gross! And I don't see a single biohazard sign, thank you very much."

"Uh,, if you don't need any more of her blood—"

"Yes, yes, you're free to go," one of them said, without looking up.

Derik and Sara looked at each other.

"Seriously?" Sara finally asked.

"Yes, yes. Go."

"Go as in leave? Or go as in wait quietly in the corner for you to come over and kill us with an axe?"

"This makes no sense," Derik said. "You tried to blow her brains out at the hospital, but now she can leave?"

"We just needed some blood to complete the spell," Surprisingly Reasonable Robed Guy explained. "It was the last thing. We've spent years collecting the other ingredients. And she /£ a foul sorceress. We didn't want to take any chances."

"Which, since she accidentally killed all the bad guys, wasn't the worst plan, I suppose," Derik said grudgingly.

Surprisingly Reasonable Robed Guy shrugged. "That was mostly Bob's plan."

"So we're leaving?" Sara blurted. "We can just go?"

No answer. The robed ones all took turns muttering chants and moving things around on the lab table. Sara pointed to the pentagram outlined in what looked like green chalk, which she had just noticed.

"I have to admit," Derik admitted, "I didn't really see this coming."

"What do we do?" Sara asked, gripping his hand. "Do we leave? We can't just leave. Can we?"

"I... guess not."

"We didn't travel all the way across the country so they could snatch a few cc's of my blood and then kick us out. We're the good guys. We're supposed to save the world from them!"

"Hey, Sara, I'm with you, okay? What do you suggest?" .

"We stop them from the spell they're working on!"

"I don't know if messing with them when they're in the middle of performing black magic is the best idea . . ."

"True, but I don't think anything good can come from trying to raise the dead. It's, like, a philosophy of mine."

"Even if it is King Arthur who, you gotta admit, would be kind of cool to talk to. Okay.

You stay here. On second thought, you come with me. Maybe if they try to stab me, you can give them a brain-bleed or something." He gripped her hand, then loosened his grip when she yelped again, and started forward. "Hey! You guys! In the robes! Stop what you're doing!"

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"Modesa noeka birienza doseda nosefta kerienba modesa noeka—"

"That's totally the opposite of stop what you're doing," Derik said, and Sara almost laughed. What a day. What a week! Nothing was turning out the way she had expected. Was that a good thing, or a bad thing?

A bubble, poison green and clear as glass, rose from the table, enveloping the chanters as it grew. With every spoken word, it got bigger. There was no pain when it enveloped her and Derik, and no smell. Suddenly, the world was green, and the bubble was still growing.

Derik rushed forward, tossing robed fellows like red checker pieces, and as she hurried to help him, the lab table fell over. The screams of the Chosen Ones almost drowned out the glass breaking.

The world was still clear green—it was like being trapped inside a mucous, bubble—but now an ominous humming had started. Sara clapped her hands over her ears—the sound was so low it made her teeth hurt—but the sound went on, and she realized it was going on inside her head.

"We did not finish! We did not finish!"

"Let me guess," she said, taking her hands down—what was the point? "That's bad."

"The moGhurn! The moGhurn!"

Derik was standing, brushing glass and blood off his T-shirt. "What the hell is a moGhurn? And where are all of you guys going?" "There was something in the bubble with them. It was so sudden . . . one minute there was breaking glass and pandemonium and yelling, and the next she felt so heavy she had trouble breathing. The air had gotten heavier, or—it sounded dumb, but—her spirit had gotten heavier. Something had appeared, had been conjured up out of blood and despair and desperate hope, something the sect was trying to run from, but they were all trapped in the green bubble together.

The moGhurn looked like a devil crossed with an elm tree. It had a face, of sorts, and eyes and arms, and was terrible, all terrible—she could think of nothing good to describe it. It swept up members of the sect in its—arms?—branches?—and dashed them to the ground, or pulled their limbs off like her mother used to pull the leg off a chicken, and for a funny thing, it made much the same sound, the sound of gristle tearing and parting from meat, and then she bent, and stared at the green floor, and worked hard on not throwing up.

In the panic she had been separated from Derik, but now the dead gaze of the moGhurn fell on her, and it moved toward her with the rapid, inhuman speed of a

snake. She backed up as far as the bubble would let her and she saw she saw ...

She saw the sect killed, all of them, heaps of robes everywhere. She saw Derik, dead. She saw the moGhurn reach for her, and then the bubble burst in a feat of amazing and unlikely luck—and tie moGhurn, delighted to be free, forgot about her and moved out into the world.

The moGhurn killed everyone in the Boston area, from the oldest man in the Chelsea nursing home, to the infant girl who was born forty minutes ago. This took the demon about two and a half hours. In a day, it had finished with Massachusetts; in a week, the Eastern seaboard. The more it destroyed, the stronger it grew—no magical green bubble to keep it in check any longer— and in a month, North America was gone.

Except for her. Lucky, lucky Sara, spared by the moGhurn, who was distracted at exactly the right moment.

And in another thirty days, she was alone. She was alone in the world. She had not meant to, but everyone was dead all the same, and the moGhurn was still hungry ... this time, Morgan Le Fay had triumphed, and her reward was a dead world.

Sara blinked, and the bubble was back. There were still bad guys running around in robes— though quite a few of them were dead. Derik was punching the bubble, trying to get out. Everything was green.

She groped, saw what she wanted, leaped for it. An empty hypo amid the broken glass and blood. She pressed the plunger, then pulled it back. Right in the heart. Instant embolism. No more luck. MoGhurn stays put. Good-bye, cruel world. Oh, Derik, and you'll never know how brave I was.

Do embolisms hurt?

No time like the present to find out. She slammed the needle forward, gritting her teeth, and then—

"Ow!"

Derik's hand, protectively across her chest. Goddamn it! That spooky werewolf speed could be a real pain in the ass sometimes.

"Derik, you idiot!" she shouted. "I have to!"

He jerked the needle out of the back of his hand, then tossed it. "Like hell!"

he shouted back. "Bad, bad, bad, bad plan. Bad Sara! No suicides today, please.

If this fucking weird green circle thing ever breaks, you run like hell, Sara."

He kissed her hard, then thrust her back. "Run!"

She wanted to scream after him but didn't have the breath—it had been knocked out of her by what she was seeing. Derik was running right for the moGhurn, knocking Chosen Ones out of the way like bowling pins.

"We're supposed to be scared of a mutated oak tree?" he shouted, then leaped for the demon, who caught him and shook him like a doll.

Shook him like a doll?

Her Derik?

Her Derik?

"Get your tree limbs off him!" she roared, stomping toward the demon. "You piece of shit! You overgrown nightmare from a Tim Burton movie! You leafy motherfucker! Let him go or I will kill you, I swear it, I swear it!"

She stomped through broken beakers, barely feeling the glass slice through her sneaker, her sock, her foot. "Right now! Not tomorrow now, not an hour from now, now, now!"

It towered over her, and Derik was dangling, limp, from its awful grip. She was afraid, but on top of the fear was anger—true, dark anger, that anyone, anything should treat her love like that. The moGhurn tossed Derik aside like an empty milk carton, and she saw red. Literally, saw red. It was reaching for her and she knew she was no match for it, knew it would kill her—but that was okay because it looked like Derik was dead, too, so who cared?—and she did the only thing she could as it bent toward her: She kicked it.

It screamed—horrid, awful, terrible noise— and staggered away from her. This was gratifying, if startling. It screamed, and screamed and shook, and knocked over Robed Ones, and ran around like an evil leafy tornado, and fell over, and twitched like it was being chopped down by a chainsaw, and then it shrank down into itself and disappeared.

Then the bubble popped, and she realized her foot hurt like hell, was, in fact, bleeding pretty good.

"Who cares?" she muttered, racing over to Derik, who was lying in the corner all crumpled and banged up. She skidded to her knees beside him, hesitated, I could... I could... I could hurt him more by moving him and then turned him over. He came into her arms with a loose, boneless feel that scared her worse than the tree demon had.

"Derik," she said softly, and cried at his dear, battered face, the way his head was tipped too far back in her arms—broken neck at the axis for sure, maybe the atlas as well—and the blood, all the blood. His eyes were open, but he wasn't seeing her. She groped for a pulse, found nothing. Nothing. "Oh, Derik, you big 'dumb ass .. . you weren't supposed to die. Me, okay, and the rest of the world—a faint possibility. But not you. Never you."

He's only clinically dead, you dumb ass! What, you've got no training? Get to work!

But his neck ... his neck was . . .

Get to work!

Right. She set him down on the cement floor and started a closed chest massage. One and two and three and four. One and two and three and four. Oh, don't be dead. Don't. One and two and three and four. Oh, don't you dare leave me. Don't you dare. Like I could settle for an ordinary guy after this. Don't. And one and two and three—

"Sara ..."

"Now I'm alone," she panted. And two and three and four. "Alone with a zillion

people in the world, and where the hell am I going to find someone else like you?"

"Sara..."

"What?" she wept. She stopped pumping and pulled him back onto her lap. "What, idiot?"

"Where's the bad guy?" The whites of his eyes were blood red, and blood was even leaking from his left eye like dark tears.

"I kicked him and he died," she sobbed.

"Way to make . . . make a guy feel... useful," he gasped, and coughed, and now there was more blood, oh, God, like there wasn't enough before.

"Does it hurt?" she cried. Probably not, she realized clinically; shock would keep much of the pain at bay.

"It's pretty fucking excruciating," he admitted.

"It is? Oh my God, Derik, I'm so sorry, let me go pull some robes off these dead idiots, you must be freezing."

"I just want a drink," he groaned. "Possibly ten. Help me up."

She almost burst into fresh tears—he had no idea how badly he was hurt. How he had minutes, at the most, to live. How he had already died, and she'd only brought him back through luck and some brute skill. The damage she could see was bad enough—she couldn't imagine what had happened internally. - Crushed liver. Collapsed lungs—it was a wonder he had the breath to talk at all. Oh, Derik.

"Just—just lie still and the ambulance will come."

"Sara, it stinks in here, I've had a bad day, and I'd really like to get off this disgusting floor," he snapped. "Help me up."

"Just lie still, Derik," she soothed.

He rotated his neck on his shoulders, irritably, like a man trying to work out a kink. She heard the crackling sound of air popping free of bones, and then he coughed again, wiped the blood off his chin with a grimace, and sat up in her arms. His left eye was still bloodshot. The right was entirely clear.

"What a dump," he said in disgust, looking around the chaos of dead bodies, scorched robes, broken glass, upended tables. "What a day! Let's get the hell out of here. Stop it, that tickles."

She was feeling him all over. "Oh my God. Oh my God! So quick, it was so quick!"

"Yeah, well, superior life form, baby. I told you this already." He rubbed the eye that was still bloody, and when he quit she saw that it was now clear.

"Doesn't hurt that the full moon's not that far behind me. And I think you had something to do with it, too."

"Me?" she gasped, feeling him.

"Yeah, I wouldn't be able to heal this fast normally. I think your power—your sorcery—I dunno, wrapped me up in a magical envelope, or whatever."

"Really? Let's consider this caref—"

"Later. Gripes, I'm sore. What a day."

"Shut the hell up." She put her thumbs on his lower lids and pulled them down.

The sclera of both eyes were a perfectly healthy pink. "I can't believe it, I can't believe it! It was so fast!"

"Like I said. I think I've got you to thank for that. I mean, I'm a fast healer, but that was extra special. Maybe your power sort of wrapped me up, like a lucky hug. Or something." He grinned. "I'd hug you, but first I need a new shirt. And possibly new underpants—that tree demon thingy was scary."

"What about Arthur's Chosen?" she asked, almost whispered. She'd never been in a room full of dead bodies before—not since nursing school.

"What about 'em? They're all dead. Luckily, the demon killed them all, and then you fucked him up before he could do anything else."

"You're right," she said after a minute. "I am scary."

"Scarier than taxes, babe."

He took her hand and led her from the warehouse she'd honestly thought was to become her tomb.

32

"I guess the question, 'Will they be surprised to see us?' has been answered," Sara commented as they pulled up to Wyndham Manor. A huge banner reading GOOD WORK SAVING THE WORLD was strung across the front entryway.

They got out of the car, just as a dizzying parade of people poured out of the doors of the house—mansion, really. Sara found herself picked up and hugged by Michael and several other ridiculously good-looking men she'd never met before.

Jeannie was kissing and hugging Derik, and a petite, stunning blonde was climbing all over him like a monkey, laughing and saying over and over again, "You did it! I can't believe you did it!"

Then intros: Michael and Jeannie (whom she already knew), and their daughter, Lara, who had her father's odd yellow brown eyes and her mother's aggressiveness, and the petite blonde was Moira, and oh, several others that she lost track of, but she didn't mind, because even though they were all strangers, it was exactly like coming home.

"So you told them we were coming, huh?" Derik asked.

Antonia, who was just as ridiculously breath taking as the rest of them, shrugged. "Don't get pissy. It's what I do."

"Thanks for all your help," Sara said.

Antonia grunted. Sara had never known that someone who looked like a swimsuit model could be so sullen.

"So, what's next for you two?" Jeannie asked, picking up the pitcher of lemonade, pouring herself a glass, then promptly draining it off. They were sitting in a gorgeous sunroom, the remains of a glorious lunch laid out before them. "And why did I do that?" she griped aloud. "Like I don't have to pee often enough. Pregnancy," she finished in a mutter.

"You're glowing," Michael said automatically.

"That's because of all the puking," she retorted.

"So?" Michael prompted. "You guys? What's next?"

"Um ..." Sara said, because she didn't have a clue.

"Well, we're getting married in a couple of days, and Mike's going to give us an RV for a wedding present, and then we're going to drive around the country looking for Rachel Ray."

"That's the lamest marriage proposal ever," Sara commented, while Antonia actually cracked a smile.

"Yeah, but you're gonna go along with it." When she didn't say anything, he dropped the cocky pose. "Right, Sara? Sara? Right? You're gonna be my mate, right? Sara?"

"Oh, Christ, tell him yes," Antonia said, rolling her great dark eyes. "Before I pick up this fork and jam it into my ear, just so I don't have to listen to any more of that."

"Actually, it's a refreshing change," Michael commented, biting the chicken leg in half and sucking out the marrow in one slurp. Sara managed to conceal her shudder. "Keep him on the hook, Sara."

"Never mind," she told them, and then said to Derik, "It would have been nice to have been asked, jerk. But it sounds like a fine plan."

"Congratulations," Antonia said, bored. Then she leaned forward and speared Derik with her gaze. "And before I forget, numb nuts, who told you to go to her house and kill her?"

"Huh? I mean, you did."

"No, I told you to take care of her. As in, look out for her, so she could destroy the moGhurn when it manifested."

"What? Wait just a goddamned minute! You never told me to look out for her. You told me—

"Well, I knew you wouldn't be able to ice her, but I wanted you to stay close anyway," Antonia explained. "The world was saved because you were fated to love her, not because you were fated to kill her. Not to mention, you were fated to die ,. . but not for too long. Dumb ass."

"Now wait one minute." Derik was as furious as Sara had ever seen him. She clutched at his sleeve, trying to get him to sit down, but he towered over Antonia and ignored Sara's tugging. "You sent me there to—"

"Take care of her—do I have to get out the hand puppets? Look, Derik, I couldn't tell you the whole thing. We probably wouldn't be sitting here right now if you'd known what I'd known. Not that you could ever be bright enough to know what I know—"

"Goddamn it, Antonia!"

"Oh, take a chill pill. Everything that happened this week, you guys had to do. It all led to the big showdown. High noon in Boston, so to speak."

"I still don't get it," Sara confessed. "The bad guys—Arthur's Chosen—made the demon-thingy on purpose? No?"

"No, it was an accident. You screwed up the spell. They were trying to bring Arthur back, remember? With your blood. But the spell screwed up—which anybody who watches Charmed will tell you—and then they were in over their heads. I mean, that's the trouble with screwing around with black magic. You make one slip, and suddenly there's a world-devouring demon in your warehouse."

"Which Sara got rid of," Derik said, calming down. "You guys shoulda seen it." Sara laughed, which calmed Derik down even further. "I was so scared, I didn't know what to do. I think I kicked it—the whole thing's kind of a blur. I guess my blood did away with it? Because my blood conjured it up?"

"Do I look like I'm wearing a pointy Merlin hat?" Derik griped. "Track down your mentor, Dr. Cummings. Ask him. He can probably explain the whole thing."

"And this whole 'everything is for a reason' bushwah ... you mean my car conking out was part of the big plan, too?"

"The universe is a mysterious place," Antonia said, popping the last cherry tomato into her mouth.

Derik sat down. "Fucking miracle it all turned out all right," he muttered.

"Miracle."

"Oh," Sara said, leaning forward and kissing him on the cheek. "My specialty."

"At least the alpha thing is taken care of," Moira said. "Thank God."

"What alpha thing?" Sara asked.

"It doesn't matter now," Derik said, visibly uncomfortable.

"What?" Michael said. "It's fine, Derik. Shit, I'm not one to argue fate." He glanced fondly at his wife. "Not anymore."

"What are you guys talking about?" Sara asked.

"Derik's an alpha, too, which usually means trouble for us," Moira explained, "because our Pack already has an alpha."

"I don't suppose he can, like, try to win the next alpha election, or whatever ..."

"It doesn't exactly work like that," Antonia said dryly.

"But part of the problem of being alpha is the overwhelming urge to prove it... men," Moira added, shaking her head.

Sara decided she would like the tiny blonde, if the woman wasn't so damned cute. Thank God she was married!

"Anyway, not only does Derik not have to prove anything," Moira went on, "he's aligned himself with a mate who is quite possibly the most powerful being on the planet."

"Oh, now, well," Sara said self-deprecatingly.

"Know anybody else who can get rid of a demon by kicking it?" Antonia asked rudely.

"Kicking it," Jeannie said, shaking her head. Then, "Excuse me. I gotta pee."

"Anyway," Moira continued, frowning at Antonia, who sneered back, "it sounds like you guys aren't even going to be around that much. So the problem has, essentially, been solved. Both internally—feeling alpha and feeling the need to prove it—and externally, because you'll be traveling."

"Oh," Sara said. It all sounded like a lot of werewolf bullshit to her. She'd have Derik go over it with her later. Probably. "Well, that's good."

"Real good," Michael said, "because I would have broken out all his teeth, and then I really would have gone to work on him. And I would have hated to do that."

"Dude, what have you been sniffing? You were so toast if I decided to bring the smack-down. I would have spanked you!"

"And then I would have snapped your spine."

"You're high! You are on serious uppers, dude! You gotta know I would have totally ..."

"God, I'm bored," Antonia mumbled. "At least when we thought the world was gonna end, it was interesting around here."

"Maybe you can go off and have an adventure of your own," Sara suggested.

"Yeah, yeah..."

"So," Sara said to Jeannie, who had just returned and was working on her third glass of lemonade, "how are you feeling?"

"Oh, fine. I haven't started craving raw meat yet—thank heavens."

"Are you thinking about names?"

Jeannie set down her glass and shook her blonde hair out of her face. "Well, you know, Sara," she said seriously, "we really haven't been lately. Because of—because we weren't sure what was going to happen."

"Oh. Sure, I get it."

"But I guess now we have to get back to it."

And I think, just for the record, that Sara is a lovely name."

"Oh, vomit," Antonia said, which was just as well, because Sara was too choked up to say anything.

"HI, AND WELCOME TO 'FORTY DOLLARS A DAY.' I'M Rachel Ray, and I'm here today at the annual San Antonio rattlesnake festival with Derik Gardner, who has taken first prize with his wonderful dish, Rattlesnake en croûte. I know, I know, it sounds kind of yerrrgggh, but you gotta try it. Derik has come out of nowhere and unseated last year's champion with his awesome dish. Derik, congratulations!"

"Thanks, Rachel."

"Your dish is delicious. I mean, yum! Who would have thought something made out of snake could look so delicious? I mean, look at that, so crispy and golden and just... gorgeous! And it's very tender. It really doesn't taste like chicken at all. So, Derik, do you catch the rattlesnakes yourself?" "Yes, I do, Rachel."

"That's amazing... do you use a net, or a trap?"

"Something like that, Rachel."

"And this is your wife? Sara?"

"Yeah, hi."

"Do you help Derik catch the rattlesnakes?"

"God, no. The whole thing just creeps me out. I stay in the RV, while he does that."

"Well, it looks like you get to partake in the fruits of his labor, then ..."

"Yes, lucky me."

"... and is it true you two travel around the country going to cooking shows and the like?"

"Yes, that's true, Rachel."

"Well, that's certainly working out well for you so far, at least from where I'm standing."

"Thank you, Rachel."

"You're right about that one, Rachel."

"Oh, whoa now! I guess you would call that the newlywed effect. . . and congratulations, by the way."

"Thanks, Rachel."

"Yeah," Derik said, beaming. "Thanks."

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"Okay, guys, let's set up here... Charley, you okay here? You got light?"

Her cameraman looked up. "It's shitty out here. Should be better inside."

"We won't film out here ... So, you're sure this is okay?"

The representative, who was smooth and sweat-less, like an egg, clasped his hands together and nodded slowly. Even his suit seemed to be free of threads or seams. "People need to see that it's not a bunch of chain-smoking losers who are afraid to go outside. There's doctors. There's lawyers. There's"—he stared at her with pale blue eyes—"anchor-women."

"Right, right. And we'll put all that across." She turned away from the AA rep, muttering under her

breath. "Fuckin' slow news days ... okay! Let's get in there, Chuckles."

Charley knew his stuff. With the new equipment, setup was not only a breeze, it was relatively quick and quiet. Interestingly, none of the room's inhabitants looked at them directly. There was a lot of coffee drinking and low chatting, a lot of nibbling on cheese and crackers, a lot of quiet milling and sideways glances. They looked, the newswoman thought to herself, exactly like the man said. Respectable, settled. Sober. She was amazed they'd agreed to the cameras. Wasn't the second A supposed to be for Anonymous?

"Okay, everyone," the rep said, standing in the front of the room. "Let's get settled and get started. You all remember Channel 9 is here tonight, to help raise awareness . . . someone watching tonight might see we're not all villains in trench coats and maybe will come down."

"I left my trench coat in my other pants," someone called in a low voice, and the room rustled with restrained laughter.

"Anyway, I'll start, and then we've got a new person here tonight..."

Someone the reporter couldn't see protested in a low voice, and was ignored—or wasn't heard—by the rep. "I'm James," he said, "and I've been sober for six years, eight months, and nine days."

There was a pause as he stepped down, then a rustle, a muffled "Oof! Stupid steps" and then a young woman in her mid-twenties was standing behind the small podium. She squinted out at the audience for a moment, as if the fluorescent lighting hurt her eyes, and then said in a completely mesmerizing voice, "Well, hi. I'm Betsy. I haven't had a drink in three days and four hours."

"Get on her!" the reporter hissed.

"I'm tight," Charley replied, dazzled.

The woman was tall—her head was just below the No Smoking On These Premises

sign—which put her at about six feet. She was dressed in a cherry red suit, with the kind of suit jacket that buttoned up to her chin and needed no under blouse. The richly colored clothing superbly set off the delicate paleness of her skin and made her green eyes seem huge and dark, like leaves in the middle of the forest. Her hair was golden blond, shoulder length, and wavy, with red and gold highlights that framed her face. Her cheekbones were sharp planes in an interesting, even arresting face.

Her teeth were very white and flashed while she spoke.

"Okay, um, like I said, I'm Betsy. And I thought I'd come here... I mean, I saw on the Web that. .. Anyway, I thought maybe you guys would have some tricks or something I could use to stop drinking."

Dead silence. The reporter noticed the audience was as rapt as Charley was. What presence! What clothes! What... were those Bruno Maglis? The reporter edged closer. They were! What did this woman do for a living? She herself had paid almost three hundred bucks for the pair in her closet.

"It's just.. . always there. I wake up, and it's all I think about. I go to bed, I'm still thinking about it."

Everyone was nodding. Even Charley was nodding, making the camera wobble.

"It just. .. takes over. Totally takes over your life. You start to plan events around how you can drink. Like, if I have breakfast here with my friend, I can hit an alley afterward there, while she's going uptown. Or, if I blow another friend off for supper, I can reschedule on him and get my fix instead."

Everyone was nodding harder. A few of the men appeared to have tears in their eyes! Charley, thankfully, had stopped nodding, but was getting in on the woman as tightly as he could.

"Get the suit in the shot," the reporter whispered.

"I'm not used to this," the woman continued. "I mean, I'm used to wanting things, but not like this. I mean, gross."

A ripple of laughter.

"I've tried to stop, but I just made myself sick. And I've talked to some of my friends about it, but they think I should just suck it up. Ha ha. And my new friends don't see that as a problem at all." More nods all around. "So here I am. Nobody special. Just someone with a problem. A big problem. And ... I thought maybe coming here and talking about it would help. That's all." Silence, so she added, "That's really all."

Spontaneous, almost savage, applause. The reporter had Charley pan back, getting the crowd's reaction. She wasn't sure the rep would let all their faces be shown on the ten o'clock news, but she wanted the film in the can, just in case.

She wanted Charley to get the woman walking to the back of the room, but when he panned back, she was gone.

The reporter and her cameraman looked for the gorgeous stranger for ten minutes, with zero luck.

Gone.

Shit.

Derik's Bane - MaryJanice Davidson

Derik's a werewolf with alpha issues--and a body to die for. Sara is the personification of unspeakable evil--and smells like roses. Now if they could just stop drooling over each other long enough to save the world ...