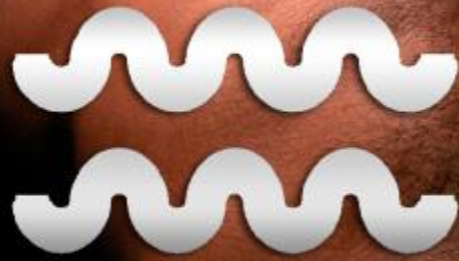


VENUS PRESS



Dog Wild

Melissa Glisan

Mystical Sign Series

Melissa Glisan

**MYSTICAL SIGNS: AQUARIUS
“DOG WILD”**

BY

MELISSA GLISAN



MYSTICAL SIGNS: AQUARIUS–“DOG WILD”

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DOG WILD

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ISBN: 1-59836-266-6

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Melissa Glisan

Dedication:

To man's best friend, in every wonderful four-footed shape and size.

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Prologue Dawning-The Birth

In the beginning there was darkness, and into the sude black of night came a sound; a pattering of water on stone. Within the womb of eternity sparks ignited. Twisting together and flowing apart, they flared and fell into the realms they would become. A lurching motion shook the shadowy damp bubble of potentialities, and Time was born. Under the advent of Time the pattering evolved into a mighty roar. Yet, even in the tumultuous fathoms, silence was found. There, in a place of warmth, a spark rested, waiting, tiny and almost unnoticed. Lazily, a diminutive tongue of flame licked outward from the dormant spark. The mote of sleepy light sipped the surrounding salty fluid and dreamed of tastes that weren't brackish, of sensations that weren't watery, of places permeated with shards of scent and sight.

To be sure, the other motes of light desired and dreamt of places and adventures, but those imaginings soared above and beyond the womb that cradled them. In the dim half-light, Mother Dark took comfort in the drowsy potential. Fitfully, the small flicker turned and in its infant way searched for its Father. *All in good time*, Mother Dark soothed her impatient Son. Rippled fingers of night eased the mewling child as it turned over; its glimmer piercing the veil of birth just a fleeting moment, to see the brilliance of the night sky. Father Light slept, but in his stead Brother and Sister Stars did watch over the expectant Mate of the Cosmos.

Startled, the small green spark flared nova bright, a hiccup from the depths that was felt even in the tempest above. *See them child*, whispered a voice of cold light, sending the pulsing infant light back to sleep. *See and know them. Honor them as they wish to be remembered*, said the voice as it wrapped the inquisitive mote of potential in layers of darkness and light.

But the Father didn't see what the Mother knew, that the chosen glint of light protected a sleeping twin. The shielding soul-seed had looked to the heavens with joy not

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with desire, and in its need to share waked a pulsing brown light. As Her time neared, she sang both lights to sleep.

As promised, in good time the Lords of the Forest were born.

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Chapter One The Wolf Lord

European Mountains 1000 BCE

*Son...*the word was carried in the wind, whistling past furred rabbit ears and scaled reptile ones, before finding the intended target and stirring him awake. From the shadowy depths of a cave tucked in verdant hills, stray sunlight caught sleepy eyes and burned emerald fire. Even in the murky welter of the cave he could see in perfect detail. Wild grasses in the distant fields where they grew, waved lazily in the cool winter sun. The setting sun burnished the stalks as seeds grabbed the wind and spiraled towards the darkening sky.

Across the small freshwater lake, his brother looked up from sipping the fine clear water, amused. Faunus had heard the voice but it didn't stir him in the same elemental way of his wolf brother. Only in the realm of the gods could a stag and a wolf share the same dam as they did. "Forest Father," that was the name the small group of humans had given Faunus when they ventured up the small hill at the heart of the mountain range. His coat was all the shades of brown of the forest; touched here and there with white and black representing the sun and shadows between the trees. Unlike harts and mortal deer, he never lost the antlered crown rising above his brow.

Lupercus loped out of his den, faultlessly shaking sleep from his pelt. His coloring was darkest night, stirred with veins of moonlight and storm laden clouds. Humans weren't as kind in their first meeting--screaming, throwing firebrands and cursing his shape. It wasn't until a curious wolf wandered close to the herd of bleating, smelly creatures the humans seemed so enamored of, that the two-legged race came to respect the Wolf Lord.

He picked up the wolf by the nape of his neck, hauled him home and warned him away from the food source of the humans. He spoke in grave terms and his words became Law: *Eat only when hungry, kill only to live, and avoid the race of two-legs.*

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In gratitude, the humans had presented Lupercus with a goat carcass. The wolves turned their noses up at the carrion, but ever diplomatic, Lupercus had carried the offering to the place of the birds.

That day the Father had called to them. His words were a warning to leave the man-herd alone. *“Have nothing to do with them, keep constant to the woods and the night sky.”* As commanded, Faunus stayed away, not so his wolfish twin. There was something about the two-legged beasts, a scent or manner that pulled at his psyche.

Son... the voice called again. Lupercus lifted his nose to the sky and opened his senses. There was an aroma of flowers tickling his nose, ones that only bloomed in the presence of the Sun gods, yet the moon’s flowers were present too. *Father!* He rejoiced. It had been many cycles since the voice sounded over their meadows and streams.

Spinning on his haunches, Lupercus sprang into motion, flowing across a saddle of ground and up the tallest hill, to a rocky promontory where he could view the stars. Reaching the spot, he settled and waited, tail tucked around his paws.

You have not done as I commanded. You have not kept clear of the humans. His voice echoed with the weight of thunder but held an exasperated twinge. *Lords of the Forest have no dominion in the world of man,* he reminded his son. *Being near them will only bring you pain.*

Lupercus wasn’t unintelligent; he kept his thoughts clear and his fascination for the man-herd hidden in his heart. Very recently, a man-she of the herd had caught his notice. She smelled of fresh pine boughs, sun-kissed flowers and a heady musk that made him dream of a mate.

Very soon Lupercus, I will set you a task. This announcement startled him, tilting his head he listened with perked ears. *This task requires you take the shape of man. All gods can do this, you are no different. Stand as they do, on your hind legs and imagine looking as they do.* Curiosity burned, sending his muzzle into twitching spasms. *Go ahead, try.* The voice gentled with laughter.

As bid, Lupercus rose on his hind legs and imagined the man-he of the herd, placing the same long pale limbs in place of his thick dark fur. An odd buzzing filled his ears and heat exploded along his bones, twisting and itching under his fur. When the terrible feeling stopped he opened his eyes and looked down. Instead of paws he had long brown fingers. Soft, black hair dotted his arms, legs and other areas. Having never seen a human without their odd coverings, he was surprised at the areas revealed.

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See...breathed his Father and a mist appeared before him, solidifying into a shining mirror revealing a dusky skinned man-he with his own bright green eyes. You will have the time of one moon rising to become accustomed to the ways of man; then your Brothers and Sisters in the Heavens will bear your naming.

Lupercus jerked, the stars bear *his* naming? “Father, I must object, the Bodies have their own names, we just need to speak them.”

Not for Us are these names, but for man. In time, we shall wane from their memory. Our roles completed, but the names are eternal.

“A contest you said, who will be my rival?” The wind paused as if the very cosmos held its breath. One heartbeat then two, the space of utter silence stretched and broke with a torrential gust.

A Grecian hero born of man and god--ask no more! As the aggressive squall of air receded, Lupercus pondered the words and the resulting violence. A child of god and man...so it was possible for him to mate with the man-she! The gusty air also reminded him that he needed to clothe himself as the humans. Grabbing a few older goatskins, he fashioned them around his middle as some of the animal herders had done. He was finishing when he heard voices.

Laughter trilled like a bubbling brook mere seconds before the soft golden brown head of his man-she appeared. The man-she was carried in the arms of a thin, smiling man-he with a curved staff. Lupercus could think of nothing beyond the man-she who fascinated him so.

It never occurred to him to hide or give the couple privacy. Wolves didn't recognize garlands of flowers as anything but food and hemp rope was something to sniff in puzzlement and abandon. Lupercus tracked the steps of the approaching couple, keeping them within striking distance. He sidestepped deftly, forgetting that man cannot sink as easily into the shadows as a night-hued wolf.

“Blessings of the day be with you stranger,” the male called out, lifting his hand in greeting. Lupercus sniffed the air and realized with shock that there was nothing to smell. What had happened to the color and tang to the air? Confused, he unsteadily stepped back and tripped.

Staring in awe, he noticed for the first time the brilliant jewel tone of the sky. Before it had been bright and shaded blue but never like this! *Man*, he conceded, may have been cheated in his powers of scent, but sight...he turned and marveled at all the

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colors in a blade of grass, the subtle tones in a small field flower.

Tracking upwards, his eyes met and caught those of the man-she. Without guile he frankly enjoyed the beauty of her form and face. As a wolf he had found her fascinating, beautiful and beguiling. As a man he found her stirring, intoxicating and desirous. His blood heated with the sudden urge to mate. Scared, she leapt back with all the grace of his stag-born brother. His heart thundered harder, desire meshing with the joy of the hunt, crouching to make chase, Lupercus forgot to retain his new human shape.

Laurentia recoiled from the hot lust she saw glowing in the feral man's eyes. Faustulus' strong arms surrounded her protectively as he threateningly pointed his curved shepherd's rod at the man who was growling and bristling on the ground. Were it not for seeing the transformation from man to wolf, she would have thought she was losing her mind. The eyes never changed, remained fixed, focused on her as the face thinned, elongated and sprouted teeth; the hunched body flowed like fog from the shape of man to that of wolf. Terror gripped her heart and she screamed. Ripping free of her newly hand-fast mate, she turned and ran blindly back down the rocky rise.

It had long been held as a blessing to consummate a joining on the highest peak overlooking their village, Fidenae. To see the stag, the priest said, was a guarantee of blessing on their union. No sooner had they passed the frolicking buck, his antlers low to the ground playfully challenging small ground squirrels for nuts, when they found the man in ragged dress.

"What curse is upon us?" Laurentia cried to Faustulus as he turned and attempted to shield her from harm. The canny creature was larger than any wolf she'd ever heard tale of. Within seconds it had sprung into action, passing them to lie in wait. With a jerky motion the wolf raised onto his hind legs and again the body wavered, seemed insubstantial then morphed into the smooth olive-toned features of a man.

"I am Lupercus, Wolf Lord of the Forest."

Rome 750 BCE

After years away nothing seemed more beautiful than the woods of the Palatine Hill. Lupercus smiled at the thought of anything being more beautiful than his chosen mate, the human beauty Laurentia. Every moment away from her shining eyes and lustrous hair was a torture born on his heart and soul. But he'd been commanded by the elder gods to represent his homeland, Roma, in a contest against the neighboring Greeks

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to name the stars.

A contest he failed.

Falling to his knees, Lupercus felt the spongy moss and the rich loam of the soil under his thickening nails. Yes, he longed to see his Laurentia, but he couldn't truly return to his fields and caves without taking his natural wolf-form and visiting his land, Quirinus. Just once he'd visited during his quest; when he'd been forced to hunt his own twin, Faunus. Shame crawled through his belly as he remembered his innocent, gamboling brother being driven by the crude barbaric Greek, Herakles. Silently he pledged in his heart that no child of his and Laurentia's love should ever be so base. In the end, Faunus had gone free, but he was changed, had refused to look at his twin as he fled for the safety of the deep North woods.

The air turned crisp and tangy. Lifting his furred muzzle, Lupercus tasted wood smoke on the air and something else, a scent that raised his hackles. Where he should have smelled soft she-wolf and home, there was an ammoniac odor.

Fear.

Sharp and pungent the acrid odor wafted from the foothills to his perch overlooking what should have been the small village of Fidenae, Roma's first colony. The size the settlement had sprawled into was staggering. He'd only been gone a mere handful of years! Now, as far as the eye could see were solid stone buildings. Once dirt lanes were paved and the waterways had been converted from pretty streams into smooth flowing aqueducts. In the center of it all was a cheering congregation calling...something. It took his mind a moment to register that this was Palatine Hill. His favorite grassy perch was gone, replaced with acres of marble edifices, at the center of which the burning smell emanated.

His ears twitched in curiosity despite the disgust wrinkling his snout. Lupercus loped through the woods, stopping to clean his burning nostrils in cypress boughs along the way. The mountain wasn't very big; the trip to the human settlement would normally have been accomplished in minutes. Shaking his head, Lupercus made to leave the wilds and step into man's world when a brother in fur stopped him.

"Wolf Lord," the smaller wolf dropped to his haunches and hung his head in a strangely human gesture of obeisance. Wolf speak was done through twitches, huffs and whines but the other managed to sound human, *too human*. Could it be, Lupercus worried, that his children had been harmed by their proximity to man? Then the scent of

the other registered.

Impossible! He reared back in shock. The wolf was no true wolf, but a man-wolf as was his Lupa, Laurentia. It took the blessing of an elder god for a mortal to change form.

Gingerly he inched forward, sniffing in the manner of wolves along the other's muzzle, ruff and body. The man scent was there but not. Confused he whined a query.

"No time, Wolf Lord." The other said, in dancing front paws and a fast turn before rolling and offering his throat; the ultimate sign of submission. Yipping in his panic, the other begged for help, for the salvation of his pup.

Lupercus' ruff bristled with anger. Who would dare harm one of his children? The accord with the shepherds had been reached in antiquity. Why had man turned against the wolves?

Racing into the town, his heart nearly stilled in his chest. Laurentia, his Lupa, she would never have allowed harm to fall to one of their family. Mentally he reached for her, seeking her warmth in the myriad hills and confusing welter of buildings and found nothing, just a void. A mournful howl erupted from the bowels of his soul as he raced across the rough stone streets.

He never saw the centurions standing back in shock at seeing a wolf the size of a small horse thundering along the streets. He never glimpsed the looks of fear on the faces as he rushed past, his cry echoing between the tall cold buildings. All he saw was the image of his love fading into nothingness while he was in foreign lands doing the bidding of the elder gods. Growling in pain and anger, Lupercus cleared a path to the center of activity.

In the middle of the gathering were a score of men wearing nothing but goat hides over their sexual organs. To their side stood a group of young women in long robes, holding trays of cakes and vessels of water. They were grouped around a long, flat stone steeped in blood. Beneath the edifice was a bed of coals, the source of the smoky stink in the hills. Head down, eyes watchful, he scanned the crowd until a pained whimper caught his attention and his muzzle pointed toward the sound. It was a wolf pup!

Shadows intruded on the tableau as humans shouted directions; warriors surrounded him with long, wooden pikes and short iron swords. Rage colored his sight red as he shifted from wolf to man, his ululation of battle never changing from wolf-speak as he stood, head and shoulders above the now silent crowd.

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"Has it been so long, humans," he spat the word out as if it were the foulest of epithets, "that you have forgotten of our accord?"

"My Lord God Lupercus," a frail, elderly voice shook with fear and sadness.

Tilting his head, Lupercus saw the man, Faustulus, and was awed at the change in his oldest human friend. "I told them, again and again. I told them, Lord that you'd not be pleased but they've never listened to me." Age spotted the man's thin, pale skin and what was left of his once vibrant brown hair was sparse and white with age.

"Faustulus, my friend," Lupercus reached down, gently pulling the elderly man to his feet. If his nose hadn't told him the man's identity, he would have never believed it. As it was, the scent was right, yet wrong. Perhaps the years had altered his scent. "What goes on here? Where is my Lupa, our Laurentia?" The last was a question that often hurt the wolf lord. Wolves mated for life and Laurentia had been hand-fastened to Faustulus when she met and fell in love with Lupercus. "Has it truly been so long, my brother-without-paws?"

Sobbing in grief and fear, Faustulus admitted, "I am not the man you knew, but his great-grandson." Astounded, Lupercus was robbed of speech and thought as he held the sobbing man. In shaking tones Faustulus told of how Lupa, Laurentia, suckled and raised the orphaned twins, Romulus and Remus, in the Wolf Lord's absence.

"She so longed for children, Dread Lord." Lupercus closed his eyes against the pain and accusation of those words. But the old human's tale of woe continued as Faustulus told of how the young twins founded the now sprawling Empire of Roma. Lupercus' lips twisted in sick humor; twins of man to replace the twin Lords of the Forest. Thus nature kept her balance as the gods' roles were completed. For a fleeting moment he remembered his father's words from long ago, that only the Stars would remain constant.

"It was then that the soldiers came and ignored the accord. They killed the wolves" The old man clutched at Lupercus' arms, urging understanding. "Instead of honoring the pact, priests were raised to placate you, the Wolf Lord Lupercus." He paused and swallowed water from a small bladder. "You were gone Dread Lord, no one felt the power of your protection, neither man nor wolf. Lupa, Laurentia, stood before them, but she fell beneath their scythes. Her blood was the first to stain that altar," his voice shook in pain. "Her fur sloughed off, and as a woman, she died," he covered his rheumy eyes against the falling tears.

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“Mourn her freely brother,” Lupercus whispered. He dared not raise his voice. He was a minor god, given dominion over his wolves, their fields, caves, trees and brooks. For the first time in his immortal life he raged inwardly at his inability to wreck retribution, as a god should. Throwing his head back, he called to the heavens, a piercing cry of pain and anger, with his demand for vengeance. The sound echoed through the streets, bouncing off the stone buildings, saturating Palatine Hill and vibrating into the very stars. Nothing answered his summons; not a single elder god.

Broken at the rejection, Lupercus fell to his knees. *Was this to be his punishment for not keeping to the forests? Stripped of mate, of land and brethren?*

So be it. Growling his rejection of man, his form wavered, ran in muddy hues until the giant wolf remained. He padded forward and the foolish mortals stepped back. Not in fear as they should, but with their flesh muzzles wrinkled in disgust and loathing. With a swipe of a powerful forepaw, he released the wounded pup from his wooden pen and delicately lifted the starving child by the nape of his neck.

This would be his last visit to the land he once was given dominion over. Roma was his home no longer. He walked slowly, letting all see the hate in his eyes. Some fell to their knees begging forgiveness, while others boldly returned his stare. In those eyes he saw the death of his kind, hatred and violence masking their fear, a fear he doubted they admitted even to themselves. Man, he noted, had become their own gods.

Once clear of the unnatural village of stone, Lupercus broke into a trot, aiming for his cavern. The farthest hill was still his. But upon arriving home he found his grotto changed. The man-wolf clan slunk fearfully in its depths

One crawled close on her belly, whimpering and whining in thankfulness. The pup was hers. He bent, lowering the young one to the clean swept floor as the sun began easing past the horizon. Rosy fingers pulled darker shades across the sky, painting the heavens in tones of sapphire blue. Normally he felt awed and comforted by the setting sun, but tonight the sight left him empty.

Scrabbling noises behind him called his mind away from the far-flung stars he had failed. On the bare stone floor, exhausted and malnourished were the man-wolf pack, returned to human form.

Their leader crawled forward, “My Lord, please do not forsake us.” He begged in Greek.

Greek! The language of Herakles, the demigod bastard who stripped him of

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everything, Lupercus felt rage explode in his head.

"Why should I do anything for you, Greek?" The words were more growled than spoken and the small huddled pack shook in fear.

"Please, Lord Apollo came to us demanding many sacrifices in hopes for a high place among the stars. One night he demanded we sacrifice a child. We couldn't do it, not even for Apollo." The sound of crying from somewhere in the back of the cavern reached Lupercus' ears.

"Instead," the leader continued the tale, "we searched the village and farmsteads and found a babe born dead." He bowed his head, staring at the palms of his hands as if blood still stained them. "As instructed, we offered the child, but Apollo knew the difference. We bore his wrath. The Sun God wished dominion in the night sky, for our refusal, he lost his bid."

In shock and revulsion, Lupercus sat on his haunches. Apollo was never to be named in the night sky. He was the Sun God! The very thought was anathema! "So," the shaking leader concluded the tale, "while Apollo reigns we are wolves, but by night when his gaze passes, we are released to be human. He said we acted as carrion eating dogs, and dogs we would be." He curled into a protective ball as Lupercus surged to his feet.

"Wolves are not dogs! Dogs are inferior, hand-licking cousins the elder gods made in our image for the amusement of humans." Lupercus assumed human form. It was easier to think as man in his two-legged shape. "There, Apollo made his mistake. In making you wolves, he placed you under my protection." His family was rent from him, so he would start anew and create a pack out of the mortals cursed to wear his fur.

"Before you are reborn of my pack, you must understand the balance." Turning to face the hopeful looks of the man-wolf pack, he could almost forget his failure. "We are the winter hunger made flesh, killers, yes, but only for food or for protection. My Lupa," he grimaced at the bitter taste in his mouth, "she was my balance, her heart held mercy." Striding to the mouth of the cave, Lupercus pointed to the night sky.

"We are all guided by the stars. There stands the Water Carrier, now called Aquarius," Overhead the stars sparkled diamond-bright against the velvet purple-black of the heavens. "My stars are dark," the pack watched in fascination as an area of the stellar pattern seemed to dim at his words, as if passed over by a shadow. "With my Lupa I felt love as her stars brightened my life." Shaking his head he turned to the waiting pack. "I will remain loyal to you, my people, so long as you remain loyal to me. The ties of pack,

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of this family will be enough until my Laurentia returns to me.”

Chapter Two The Puppy in the Window

Modern America, January 25, 2006

Brilliant sunlight flowed between white sheers as they drifted in a cool wind above the bed. Ashley turned and stretched languorously. Her body felt heavy and full, sated beyond words by the touch of the olive-skinned man at her back. Long, squared fingers reached around, cupping her breasts as his telltale erection lengthened between the soft globes of her buttocks. His beard roughened cheek forced her head to the side so his lips could find the skin of her neck.

He always managed to find the spot between neck and shoulder that made her knees turn to water and her core weep for joy at his mastery. She shivered in anticipation as his tongue traced the spot, licking delicately, prompting her legs to part and hook around his own in building hunger. Arching into his mouth and against the juncture of his hips, she murmured her need. Deep laughter tickled over her shoulder raising gooseflesh as his hands slid lower, opening her, fingers parting her damp folds.

Quivering on the edge of madness, Ashley moaned. The hot, silken tip of his cock slowly entered her sheath as he nibbled along her neck. A rough finger swirled once around her engorged clit. Her heart thundered in her chest. Slowly, her sex-glazed mind registered a loud chirping, keeping time with her galloping pulse. The strident sound morphed into shrill bleating then hissed.

"It's a beautiful day in Pennsylvania," loudly proclaimed the fog-horned depressing voice of the morning radio personality. With those dulcet tones, the incredibly erotic dream that had plagued Ashley Cooper from her teen years onward was again shattered. Every day, regardless of weather, calamity or other vile occurrence, the same deep, measured tones read a small piece on the day's historical significance with the weather, before signing-off with his oft-repeated line. This morning was no different.

Sexual frustration was never a good way to wake up, but it seemed to be her lot in

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life. The few times she had tried to ease the want by taking a lover, the experience had been a dismal disappointment. Heading for the kitchen, she repeated her longstanding pledge to remain true to the men of written romance, the live ones who were too like the radio announcer--incredible at first blush but downright dull as time wears on.

Ashley slipped her nose between the heavy brocaded curtains and eyed the lead gray skies in disgust. "Doesn't the sun ever shine in this state?" she grumbled, heading for the shower.

This time last year, she was happily traveling from one place to another as a flight attendant. It never mattered if the sun wasn't shining in Detroit once the plane arrived in beautiful West Palm Beach. But the post 9/11 world didn't like to fly as much. Now with gasoline prices steadily aiming for the heavens, the airplanes weren't. All of the major airlines were making drastic cutbacks, and she'd been one. Sighing at the inhumanity, Ashley stood under the hot water and let the heat soak into her sun-starved bones.

Not wanting to leave the allure of travel completely behind, she managed to secure a job with one of the bigger travel agencies serving the Pittsburgh International Airport. Sadly she reflected; the life of a travel agent was pretty much on par with a telemarketer. Gone were the days where people walked into an office to make arrangements. Instead, she sat on an ergonomically correct chair, wearing a headset that ruined her hair and waded through phone calls and impatience while staring blankly at a computer monitor. The pay wasn't bad, almost the same as her rate as a flight attendant, but the rest sucked. She did get a fifteen-percent discount on any junket she wanted, but as luck would have it, the factors that stole away her dream job were also the ones keeping her from taking advantage of her travel discount.

At least Pittsburgh had a great nightlife, if she wanted to indulge. She grinned, massaging shampoo into her hair. Growing up in the quiet Ohio town of Cadmus, she had craved activity. Her odd dreams pushed Ashley to read and books fueled her imagination, inspiring her to travel. Arching under the warm spray, she smiled, thinking of warm fingers trickling over her breasts like her nightly naughty dreams of a decidedly foreign man. The day she graduated, she bought a bus ticket to Cincinnati; a brochure for flight attendant training clutched in her hand. Six months of classes had left her with a lot of bills. No sooner had she paid them off and started the language classes needed to be a hostess on an international flight; that the first round of pay cuts started. Grimly, she paid for the classes in the hopes that gaining her international wings would make it harder for

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her to be downsized. However, the transition to international never happened.

Feeling more depressed than ever, she turned off the water, opened the shower door and grabbed the thick terry towel and began drying off. At least being able to speak fluent Italian made her invaluable to the travel agency in the months after the death of the Pope--*as if she had that in mind when she chose the class.*

Digging through a drawer, she found her last pair of nylons. Summer couldn't come fast enough. She hoped to sunbathe on the roof instead of wasting money, buying hosiery for legs that no one ever got to see.

“I need a date,” she admitted to the room at large, “even a bad date has to be better than nothing...doesn't it?” The sound disturbed her pair of lovebirds, they chirped sleepily before sidling down. In a fit of romantic depression, Ashley bought the pair and named them Stephanie and Ranger, after the characters in her favorite novels. “I can't even pick a winning couple when I read,” she murmured to the snuggled pair as she refilled their food and water containers.

The sales clerk at the pet store said if the birds were given enough privacy they could lay eggs, so she had forked over the extra cash for a cage large enough to house a smallish looking birdhouse. So far nothing, but it didn't matter, they seemed happy enough with each other.

The beeper on the coffeepot sounded as she was putting the cover over the cage. “Getting to be time to go,” she told the drowsy birds as darkness enveloped them. “Maybe I should get a parrot for the living room so someone can finally answer.”

The clock over the sink indicated it was nearly seven. She had time for a fast cup before rushing off to catch the bus. Quickly, she filled a travel mug as she slurped down a scalding cup of coffee with her daily vitamin. *Yuck*, the hot liquid partly melted the tablet before she could swallow.

Still making a funky face about the taste, she locked her apartment door and turned; coming almost nose to nose with the hottest guy she'd ever imagined--straight out of her erotic dreams and there when she asked for him. Dusky skin, smooth aquiline nose and intense smoky, green eyes smiled at her from beneath dark brown brows. His hair was a shade off from black and curled pleasantly around his ears and above the collar of his silk shirt. Ashley was busy appreciating his firmly, chiseled lips when something raced around her legs and attacked her leather heel with needle-sharp teeth and snarling high-pitched growls.

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She hopped, swiveled her hips and nearly tripped over its leash, kicking out at the rat-like thing eating her shoe. It was the ugliest little fur-bearing creature she had ever seen and it was mauling her shoe.

“Please excuse Mars.” At her blank look he added, “The dog.”

He had a pleasant voice, a warm baritone with deeper bass rumblings. His voice set off a wave of heat in Ashley’s stomach. Her mind skittered back to the sleepy seconds before the alarm sounded and the laughter sliding over her skin. As he bent down to wrestle with the baby ball of razorblades, she fought the urge to reach out and touch his hair to see if it felt as soft as it looked. He looked up smiling and her brains scrambled. The flash of white teeth only served to show off his beautiful skin tone.

Dimples! That just wasn’t fair. Ashley’s mind sputtered to a halt again as she yearned to stroke and caress his face. Her eyes wandered then widened, taking in the rest of him; from wide shoulders to tapered waist—this was one hot muscled body kneeling at her feet. Almost as if he could read her mind, his smile grew warmer making his eyes dance with amusement

“What an unusual crea--I mean dog,” Ashley stumbled over her tongue. Her comment seemed to surprise him for a moment. Frantically her mind searched for something else to say. Calling it “unusual” was better than what she almost said about the beast, it looked like a furred cockroach. He stood slowly, laughing lightly, “Yes, Mars is very *unique*. I hope he did not damage your shoe?” The deep timbre crashed over her senses like a breaking tide.

Ashley looked down and nearly cursed aloud. There were small tears in the expensive leather. Choking back her dismay, she smiled and changed the subject.

“You must be my new neighbor. I’m Ashley Cooper, a pleasure to meet you.” Without thinking, she extended her hand and was nearly bitten for her efforts when the scraggly black mop exploded into a round of ferocious barks that echoed sharply in the small hallway. The sound made her grind her teeth. The thing was an assault on the senses. Not only was it unaccountably ugly, it ruined her shoe and was giving her a headache.

“Sorry, again I must apologize for my little one,” he smiled and she forgot she was mad as heat pooled in her lower belly. There was something about his voice that petted at her insides like an ermine glove. Ashley wanted an excuse to move closer, to make some kind of contact. Her hands itched to touch him. There was a scent in the air,

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wild and animalistic, making her pulse race and her nostrils flare. Seduced by his scent her eyes lidded and continued to examine his muscular frame. Her gaze was busy admiring the strength of his forearm as it cradled the seething rat-dog when she caught a glimpse of his watch. The bus!

"Damn! I am sorry but if I don't hurry I'll miss my bus. Welcome to Squirrel Hill," she smiled crookedly and made a dash for the stairs. There wasn't enough time to wait on the cranky elevator if she hoped to make the bus in time.

It wasn't until much later when she sat perched on the edge of her seat at work, that she realized he never once mentioned his name.

Lupercus petted the squirming dog, sending it into rapturous squeaks of joy. Contented, the dog perked his huge bat-like ears and let his tongue loll. He did indeed look like a furred cockroach. Lupercus chuckled, hopefully Mars himself would never find out.

Reading the minds of mortals was a gift of all the gods, yet Lupercus preferred not to use it—unless it was a matter of safety. But with the beautiful Ashley Cooper before him, he gave into temptation and immersed himself in her mind. It was a violation of his personal code but rules were made to be broken, he grinned.

The small dog's natural aggression had made it easy to stop the beautiful young woman as she left her apartment. He had moved in a week ago and managed to only catch sight of her as she raced for the street, juggling purse and coffee. She had lovely light brown hair that cascaded in ripples over her shoulders.

One morning he had gotten as far as the entrance to the street before she left. The sight of her astounded him. Sunlight haloed her form, making all the different colors in her hair shine like heaps of old coins. It had enflamed his blood. She bent her head as the light lined her hair in gold, the brassy sheen accented with threads of copper-fire that rippled into molten waves. The oval of her face tipped in rose as it lifted to the heat like a thirsty flower; bud shaped lips pursed in an airy kiss. Then the sun disappeared behind a cloud and his angel was hidden from the rest of the world. He was certain that others only saw the basic brown of her hair, her even regular features, not the fire that hid there.

Today he had waited in the hall for her to emerge then freed Mars. Following his instincts, the little dog had raced forward and defended his territory and master from the intruder. Sadly, his little protector also viciously attacked her shoe.

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Perhaps, he thought, he should have used Beaujolais, the dog his little “niece” had given him for his last “birthday” instead of Mars. But with the pretty woman carrying coffee, it seemed safer to employ the Terrier-Chihuahua mix. Beaujolais had an impeccable name but the manners of a half-starved pig. Tonight, he promised himself, walking Mars down the bustling streets to the park, tonight he would pick out a nice present to apologize for his pet and introduce Beaujolais.

He would invite himself into her apartment, her heart and her bed.

Chapter Three Ain't Nothin' But a Hound Dog

On the bus to work, Ashley snagged a discarded copy of the Post-Gazette and guiltily looked for her horoscope: *Today marks the beginning of an adventure in love. Take the plunge!* Ever since she could first read the newsprint, she had instinctively skipped to the page with the small capsules. Having been born just shy of Valentine's Day, February fifteenth, made her an Aquarius. She prided herself in being just what the stars promised—honest, patient and a lot of fun. Sure, the fun-loving girl sort of got buried under the career girl but she was still there, dry wit and all.

As a star-struck teen, she imagined that her perfect mate would be a fellow Aquarian; fighting for causes and loyal to the end. Then she had her first sweetheart, first turbulent break-up and decided that perhaps finding someone a bit different would be best. However, a part of her still mulishly hoped to find her dark half of the stars. Frank and forthright, she grinned at the two words used to describe Aquarians. Yeah, that may be, she sat straighter in her seat, but we can be romantics, too. I hope.

The bus rocked to a stop a block from the towering grey concrete hive that was her home away from home. Trying not to let the leaden skies and dreary exterior of the winter city scene get her down, Ashley smiled brightly at her coworkers both coming and going from the suites of Fantasy Travel.

Resigned to another day in her faded blue cubicle, she strapped on her headset, started the computer and began processing phone calls queued in the system. After the third phone call, her cheery smile started slipping. In a vain attempt to keep her spirits high, she paused between calls and allowed her mind to drift and savor the sexy male in her hallway. Uncannily, her mind had retained every detail, from the way his crisp curls broke over the collar of his shirt to the smooth expanse of skin exposed at his throat and arms where the buttons had been loose. His scent, pine with a hint of musk, drifted to her nostrils and without thinking she leaned toward the smell.

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Dreamily, her lips pursed as she sought the scent that was attached to the man from her morning encounter. Unfortunately, her lips found an all too real target. Recoiling as if she had kissed an electric fence, Ashley stared slack-jawed at the grinning figure of her boss perched on the edge of her counter. Her face flooded with color as her teeth clicked shut. She would never live this down.

Frank Horne was the owner of the agency and a terrible flirt. He spent his days teasing, kidding and well, flirting with every female in the office. It didn't matter if they were eighteen or eighty; every lady got the roaming eye and a glib come-on that was too bizarre to credit. It must work, she rued because he managed to have a different date every weekend.

"I am so sorry, sir," Ashley apologized, mortified over her behavior.

"Sorry for what? That wasn't enough sin to atone for, c'mon over and gimme some sugar." He wagged his fawn colored eyebrows suggestively. He was a good-looking man; some days Ashley wondered why she couldn't find him attractive. He had a slight but muscular build. Tall enough that she felt feminine standing at his shoulder even in pumps, yet slight enough women everywhere felt at ease. Frank was friendly, tanned and wealthy. He had classic good looks, from his melting brown eyes to his thick russet-gold hair, all accented by his simple sense of style. With all that, the only thing Ashley found alluring was that he obviously bought the same cologne as her mystery man from the hall. Even his playful sense of humor irritated more than charmed her.

Gritting her teeth, Ashley tried again, "I am sorry for the inappropriate contact sir, it was your cologne, it won't happen again."

"My cologne?" The look of raffish humor faltered and for a moment she wondered if she was finally seeing the real Frank Horne. His eyes went vague before closing on a pain that was too deep to be feigned. Shaking his head, he joked, "Have to tell that salesgirl to find something more exotic, but I must be on the right track to win a kiss from the prettiest girl in the office."

"Sir, I am a woman not a girl and just this morning, Simone was the prettiest." Yup, the playful stuff did indeed get old.

"Hmm...well, if you're such a woman you'll be equal to the task of covering for Ruth Ann." Ashley blinked in confusion, who the hell was Ruth Ann? "Our face-to-face sales agent," he grinned jauntily. "Poor Ruth came down with the flu and had to leave after sneezing in front of a customer." He looked irritated at the memory of the distraught

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customer then shook it off. “No matter! Such a lovely go-getter should be equal to the adventure.”

By lunchtime Ashley was ready to volunteer to be Ruth Ann’s devoted nurse. The agency had the brilliant notion to ply the local colleges with fliers promoting finding “true love” on any of a variety of packets for Valentine’s Day or even better; Spring Break. She had never viewed the long Easter holiday in capital letters before today and doubted she would ever make that mistake again.

It wouldn’t have been so bad if Frank hadn’t felt the need to personally check on his “newest face girl” after every customer graced her small office. After the third customer, she welcomed the distraction from the building urge to smite the geography-challenged.

“Come on doll-face, let’s get you a coffee,” had sadly become music to her ears. Now halfway through her lunch hour, she was regretting going to lunch with Frank and his small group of simpering personal assistants. He cracked a bad joke and they giggled. It was simply sickening.

As they were leaving the café, Frank waved the gaggle of cubicle geese off and held Ashley back a moment, “If you don’t mind my asking, who were you thinking of this morning?” He looked so lost and vulnerable that Ashley bit her lip and considered lying – something she absolutely hated under any circumstance.

“Please, tell me, I won’t be hurt.”

Taking a deep breath, Ashley let it all out in a rush; starting from leaving early while choking down a vitamin, to meeting the man of her dreams while being assaulted by a furred rodent masquerading as a dog.

“I had hoped, feared but never dreamed...” Frank muttered looking out the window of the café. “Maybe it was the news articles, it had to be.” Again sadness washed over his features and Ashley saw more than rakish good looks, but the man beneath and wished she could take away his pain.

“What news articles sir?”

His gaze shuttered and the party-boy came back online. “Never mind gorgeous, go on back to work. You’re doing wonderfully.”

Ashley left the restaurant but looking back saw her frivolous, fun-loving boss intently pouring over a stack of newspapers and unaccountably her heart ached.

At quitting time Ashley dragged herself home, hurting and miserable. If the day

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got any worse, she'd lose it. Maybe the day wouldn't have been so bad if so many of the customers hadn't been so damned stupid. There was nothing like a horny nineteen year old wanting a ticket to a place where she could legally get drunk and have wild sex with strange men. The last one was the worst. Hair dyed the color of pink cotton candy, she possessed about the same intellect as the spun sugar confection.

"I like, want to go where the action is, you know," she cracked gum and twirled a virulent pink tress around a thin finger. It was disheartening looking on the amply endowed chit. Underneath the multiple piercings and neon hair was a truly beautiful girl. Tall, willow-thin but stacked, her tiny waist accented with a blood-red leather half-corset. Her black, leather skirt rode low on her hips, showing off her flat, commercially tanned stomach and the ruby and emerald studded-rose piercing her navel. If the bit of candyfloss was bigger than a size four, Ashley would eat her own shoes.

Thinking about her shoes, she looked down at the small tears that had gotten larger as the day went on. It seemed that the longer she walked on the classy pumps, the wider the tears grew. Getting off the bus in front of her apartment building, she stared at the offending shoe. Something in her brain short-circuited and she threw her purse and travel-mug down, pulled the shoe off and hurled it into a small trash can chained to the light post. Taking a deep breath, she immediately felt better.

Face it, she told herself, you may not be a nubile sex kitten but you at least know that Daytona is a part of the United States. Her bare toes chilled on the cold concrete sidewalk as she picked up her belongings. She was one up on Punk Barbie.

Walking crookedly, she strode in the doors of her apartment building and pushed the button for the elevator. Ages later, the doors opened with a sickly wheeze. The building was only five stories high, most days she took the stairs to her third floor apartment. Being shoe impaired, she opted for an elevator ride. The doors stood open as if too tired to close. Irritated, Ashley hit the button marked three a second time hoping to speed it up. No such luck. Eventually the doors rattled closed.

After what felt like an eternity, Ashley smiled as the door opened to her floor. Turning, she backed out of the elevator and began digging in her purse for her keys. A baying howl straight from the sound set of a horror movie was her only warning. Off balance from her missing shoe, Ashley lurched left in time for ninety-pounds of smelly, wrinkled Basset hound to tackle her to the floor. Her breath was slammed into a wheeze as fat paws leaned on her ribcage, before she could call for help a huge dripping pink

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tongue started avidly bathing her face.

"Gak!" was all Ashley could manage as she tried to bat the dog off with her travel mug. The bright orange mug caught his attention and he woofed, leaping off her prone body. Seeing an opportunity for freedom, she lobbed the mug down the hall and rolled to her knees, digging in her purse for her apartment keys.

"I can do it, I can get home. I can get there before it gets back," she muttered as she scooted towards her door. It sounded like an elephant was rumbling down the hall as the dog scooped up her mug and raced back. Her key hit the lock as the behemoth charged between her and the door holding the drool coated cup with triumph.

"Oh, ew!" she picked the cup from between his mushy jaws, holding it between thumb and forefinger. She seriously never wanted to consider sucking her lips to this again. Sad eyes stared up hopefully out of a wrinkled face only a deranged lunatic could love.

"Why not?" Ashley sighed in defeat, tossing the plastic cup back down the hall. With a loud bay and all the grace of a charging rhino, the tri-colored hound romped after the cup. After the third throw, she found the ritual therapeutic. Her head still hurt, but the misery of her day ebbed watching the happy dog race back and forth in the hallway. She couldn't imagine being so joyful chasing down an empty coffee cup, but who was she to pick on the dog?

Panting heavily, the dog returned her mug and promptly began lolling against her. Burbling sounds of ecstasy welled up from his throat as he shoved his slobbery muzzle against her chest. In shock, Ashley looked down at the wreckage that was one of her favorite outfits and started giggling hysterically. Thrilled the dog woofed and began bouncing in a circle doing a doggy dance that resembled a pitching Brahma bull in the rodeo ring.

"Papa! Beaujolais made a new friend!" A small girl with bouncing, dark curls bounded down the hall and plunked down next to where Ashley was sprawled.

"Oh! Oh, dear, Miss I am so very sorry!" Ashley allowed the man who ran up to help her to her feet. He was pleasant enough, with dark hair and attractive Mediterranean features but the aberrant wave of arousal that swamped her system this morning wasn't there. *Well it wasn't the dog*, she thought, letting the rather masculine man try tugging her outfit straight without bending the rules of propriety. Meanwhile, his cherubic daughter hopped in a circle chanting "Boo! Boo! Boo!" as the hell-hound danced.

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Pushed beyond irritation, Ashley fluttered her hands in a shooing motion. “Back off buster, what the hell is going on? It’s like doggie hell week! This morning a rat-thing ruined my shoe then I come home to be trampled by the Hound of the Baskervilles.” Breathing heavily, Ashley leaned against her door and waited for the appalled man to find words. Instead, he dropped to his daughter’s side and began talking in fluent Italian. When she heard the word *stunata*, Ashley nearly lost it.

“I am not insane and I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t talk about me as if I weren’t here!” Two pairs of stunned brown eyes stared at her in shock. “Yes, I speak Italian,” she crossed her arms and tapped her unshod foot.

“*Perdono signorina*, I was not speaking of you, but of this beast. You see, my daughter Julia—say hello Julia,” respectfully the small girl curtsyed and offered up a rosy smile, “she brought this--this beast for my employer, *Signore* Dianus. Sadly, it seems he loves it.” The man turned and looked at the dog in exasperation.

“And you are?” Ashley didn’t feel she was a bitchy woman but she did think she was entitled to at least know the man’s identity.

“*Mi perdona*, I am Quint Campanella, personal assistant,” he gave a half-bow and formally extended his hand. Ashley looked down and almost snorted, but her normal good humor surfaced and she accepted his handshake.

“Ashley Cooper, travel agent,” getting into the spirit of things she even curtsyed. Only it made her slightly seasick, bobbling unevenly and her head gave a twinge.

“*Ha, lei ha male di testa?*” Julia was peeking gamely around her father’s legs, the hulking brute to her side, wagging his tail. Ashley knew the little girl spoke flawless English, but decided to humor her.

“*Si, mi duole la testa.*” Her head was hurting, a non-stop throb resonating in her skull. Even her eyes felt swollen and tired. Ashley rubbed forlornly at her temples; she hadn’t had headaches this severe since she was a child. A fragment of memory stirred, the headaches started about the same time as the odd dreams; only the early ones had been frightening, a man changing in and out of wolf form. Her parents had blamed both on her affection for late-night horror movies.

“*Un momento.*” The little girl begged, racing down the hall. Thankfully the dog followed. Within seconds she was racing back down the hall, sans dog, waving for Ashley to bend down. Sighing, she gave into the pain and the little girl’s desire to make it better. She didn’t have the heart to tell the child no, so she knelt and let delicate fingers

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smooth her brow. The girl's touch felt oily and cool. From a distance, Ashley heard the girl speaking but the words sounded funny as if they were muted by wind or rushing water. Serious small eyes stared intently at Ashley as she collected a section of hair and pulled it to the side, securing it with a small pin.

"*Lampeggia*," whispered Julia in Ashley's ear and the pain receded in marked stages. The heavy, swollen feeling drained away with the roaring, rushing sound, making it easier for her to stand on uneven legs.

Blinking in surprise, Ashley watched the youngster skip back to the safety of her apartment door. "How did she do that?" her fingers traced the bones of her face curiously.

"I am not sure *signorina*, it is her gift and she shares it as it pleases her." Quint pulled a business card from his wallet, "Have your suit laundered and send the bill to the address listed, it is the least I can do." The card had a light green cast and read, Lupine Enterprises Incorporated, with a New York address.

"Your employer, Lucas Dianus," Ashley paused, the words rolled oddly on her tongue, as if she said them before but in a different way. "I met the most interesting man this morning," Ashley flushed she couldn't believe she was asking what she was asking. "Would that have been your employer?"

With a flash of white teeth, Quint smiled enigmatically. "To make a beautiful woman blush as you do, it must have been."

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Chapter Four Dog Day Afternoon

Hanging his head, Lupercus stretched the corded muscles in his neck. The news reports had been only too real. Just as in days of old, farmers reacted in fear for their animals and families and struck out at what they believed was the problem. This time his children got caught in the crossfire.

Farms to the south of Pittsburgh had reported high numbers of coyotes killing deer, foxes and sheep. Accordingly, his adopted clan had moved into action, hoping to prevent serious backlash but the coyotes, driven by hunger, increasing numbers and smaller habitats fought back. In a fatalistic blow, a hunter's crosshairs settled on a larger, darker body than that of a coyote and a child was slain. Unlike his long dead Lupa, this child didn't change into human shape. A wolf was found "terrorizing" a farm.

During the Burning Times, Lupercus begged a boon from the last of the elder gods so his adopted children would stop changing shape when injured or killed. He hoped it would be enough to stop fueling the terrible werewolf tales. It had worked. Within a generation, his children no longer faced mass execution.

Now, as the world shrank even further under the domination of man, his blended race of man-wolves again faced the threat of death and from the same fear that had killed his Lupa. Understanding man's motivations did little to assuage the loss of his mate.

Memories of Laurentia had faded over the centuries to the remembered brush of fur, scent and soft, brown hair gleaming in the sun. Reaching for her through the ages, Lupercus was confronted instead with the newer recollections of the woman from the apartment building.

Seeing the trim, brown haired woman had been a revelation. For the first time in centuries he was aware of a woman as a potential mate. Her beauty made his heart ache, her scent stirred his loins and her gentle manner drew his wolfish urge to protect to the

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fore. But she was a woman of the modern world. Could she accept him fully?

The last time he had accidentally revealed his dual nature to a lover, the woman had to be installed in an asylum. Frowning, Lupercus concentrated but couldn't remember the woman's name, just her thick mane of bright red hair, which for a few hours reminded him of Laurentia's fire.

This new woman had been mere inches away but her presence had seared him like no other. Even Laurentia had innocently held his attention for many moons before his fascination turned to lust. Perhaps, he had spent too many years confined in the body of man. As the decades piled up, he found he spent less and less time in his birth shape of the wolf.

Staring over the snow-covered fields and stark woods he had just left, Lupercus wondered if he shouldn't accept that his role as Wolf Lord was over. Only scholars recognized his name as being one of the Roman gods, even his long-dead Lupa was better known among men.

He waited until reaching the plowed surface of the parking area before reassuming human form. His contact wasn't present but Lupercus had changed, not caring about displaying male nudity. Who would see after all, but trees and fields?

"Thanks so much for coming Lord," a soft female voice interrupted his ruminations. Holding his clothes was a smallish female with the most unusual eyes. Green at the heart with veins of blue, gold and purple—every color yet none. For a moment it irritated him that he hadn't detected her presence, but the mystery of her eyes kept him calm.

"Do I know you, human?" Standing naked in a parking lot wasn't his ideal for making friends, but the person who was supposed to meet him, Marc Silvestri, was missing. Centuries may have passed since the last true attempt on his life, but Lupercus couldn't afford to take chances. The last assassin had been a small, blonde woman with a guileless gaze and soft clean limbs that ended in blades tainted with wolf's bane.

"Marc is my brother-in-law, I'm Flora Daniels," she held her hand out as if to shake but he made no move towards her. Dropping her hand self-consciously, the dark haired woman shifted uncomfortably, "My sister Lora, Marc's wife, went into labor almost a month early, they're at the hospital." For the span of a minute, he watched the nervous dilation of her nostrils and pupils before accepting his clothes.

"Thank goodness for putting some clothes on! We may be in the middle of

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nowhere but small towns have the worst gossip. All it takes is one person to see you and my greenhouse would lose all its customers.” Grinning, she looked at him sideways through a fringe of sooty black hair. “Not that I didn’t appreciate the view, you understand.”

She had a flirty, playful air that reminded him almost too much of his brother, Faunus. “Ah, and here I thought you were glad not to be mauled,” he smiled, showing a lot of teeth.

Shrugging, Flora tucked her hands into her down-filled jacket, “Didn’t have to worry about that, you’ve already changed form once today.”

Lupercus stopped, stunned. She didn’t realize what it meant to be Wolf Lord. The young woman thought the title an honorific. His human-wolf kinder couldn’t change more than once a day but he could change at will. He wasn’t bound by the same rules.

“Maybe it is time that I retire.” He didn’t realize he had spoken out loud until the young woman laughed gaily and climbed into Marc’s truck. Pulling a sweatshirt over his head, Lupercus opened the door on the passenger side so he could sit to put on his boots.

“If I see it a thousand times, I’ll never get over how you guys have no reaction to the cold,” starting the truck, she held her hands over the defrosters.

“We have fur,” slightly put out, Lupercus thought he was stating the obvious.

“Not as a human you don’t,” she muttered, turning the heat up a notch. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to get to the hospital and prove that damned quack wrong.”

“Quack?” when had the conversation gone from wolves to ducks?

“Triplets run in our family and that damned dog-doc you guys insist on using kept telling Lora that she was only having one big baby. So, she’s been going to the family midwife for the last few months.”

“It wasn’t cheap to have Tomas attend both medical school and veterinary school, he isn’t just a ‘dog-doc.’ I don’t think it was wise not to continue seeing him,” he rebuked stiffly.

“When I planted a single nut to grow for the baby and three trees sprouted, I knew better. The damned fool wouldn’t listen, just kept telling me that he knew.” Lupercus wasn’t sure what was more astounding; that he was being driven by an augur or that one of his kind would prove false.

“Triplets you say; you are one?” She looked nothing like Marc’s wife, Lora, but the names were a give away.

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"Lora and Cora are identical I'm the odd one out." The words were jaunty but sadness shaded her eyes. Mutinously she thrust out her jaw, "Hope she has girls too."

He smiled and ignored the comment.

After the first generation of children was born to his new pack, it was discovered that only males were born with the curse. Men had defied the gods and men were afflicted, thus daughters had no worry of shape-changing or of bearing shape-changing children. For many years the pack fluctuated in size, swelling to almost one hundred. It wasn't until a modicum of true control over breeding came about that the pack diminished. Now, the pack worked to bear only female children. They wanted an end to the curse, not realizing that it would also mean an end to their needing a lord. Very soon, he knew the human-wolf clan would need him no longer.

Upon reaching the hospital, Lupercus was needed more than he wanted. After a day running through the woods, dismantling an unusual variety of cunning traps, he needed to find the pattern. Instead, he ended up supporting a very wobbly Marc as he greeted his new sons, all three of them. It seemed he would be needed for at least another generation and the thought warmed him. The triumphantly grinning aunt had to be kept away from the very distressed doctor. Tomas kept apologizing for his error. When Lupercus pulled him gently aside to talk about the augur, Tomas should have kept his mouth shut.

"How do you know they are identical? The tests haven't even come back yet!"

It was the final straw. Lupercus growled, imagining the arrogant pup's throat under his jaws. Half shifting, between wolf and man, he delicately nosed each of the babes before pinning the whey-faced doctor with a glance. Working his jaw to loosen his rage, he forced himself to return to man shape.

"They are identical because I say they are identical," he advanced on the trembling form in the white coat, "they are identical because the augur foretold their arrival: *three trees from a single seed*. Next time do more than a damned blood test." He hated scanning the thoughts of his children but Tomas risked the lives of four people when he arrogantly refused to do more than routine blood and urine tests. Something else bubbled to the surface of the other's mind.

"You didn't do any of the regular pregnancy tests to be sure the babes were safely forming, did you?" *No*, he thought in disgust, *young Tomas had relied on his wolf senses dulled in his man's body and left it at that*. "Did they educate the brains out of you or

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didn't you have enough to begin with?"

"Easy," a small hand gripped his upper arm, "no harm was done, the boys are fine and Lora is fine." Her face was grave, this time she knew better what she risked by touching the Wolf Lord. "You need to be calm and we need to talk, the traps were all on our family's property. Someone knows your secret."

Hours later Lupercus winced as he drove into the city. The bright lights hurt his eyes and fatigue dragged heavily at him. Making matters worse, a small annoying device hummed happily in his front pocket. Cellular phones were the bane of his existence. For three thousand years people managed to do things without asking him about every nattering little detail. Then this was created. Fishing the small, black device from his pocket, he almost pitched it out the window. Seeing Quint's number he reconsidered, that one would just buy his Lord another of the damned things.

"What?" he snarled into the phone.

"And a beauteous eventide to you as well, Dread Lord," he sounded chirpy; on birds it worked, on his chief financial officer it was grating.

"You called to wish me a good evening?"

"No sir, I called to remind you that a very special young woman is currently soaking away the troubles of her evening in a lonely room down the hall. I believe she is using a lemongrass remedy. She met Beaujolais."

Suddenly the night seemed different. The bright headlights weren't lasers stabbing his eyes but merely stars dotting the landscape. "You don't say," even his voice relaxed. He had almost forgotten about the guerilla assault he'd planned. *A bath*, his mind slipped into thoughts of slick skin and damp musky woman and that lead him into too many ideas for safe driving. "How bad was the damage?"

"Perhaps a bruise or two, mostly hair and drool, you know your beast," Quint chuckled as Beaujolais burred happily in the background.

"Excellent! I have a plan or two, but first, I need you and Julia back in New York."

Chapter Five Doggone it!

Lemongrass and peppermint perfumed the bathroom air as Ashley rested her tired head on a rolled towel. She didn't often indulge in long, hot baths but after the day she had, she knew she deserved it. Her ruined suit hung forlornly on a hanger at the back of the door. She didn't want to look at it or anything else that reminded her of the day.

She also didn't often indulge in wine, but the night seemed to demand a glass or three of her favorite muscatel. The cool, sweet liquid slid down her throat and bubbled happily in her stomach, sending warmth through her veins like liquid fire. It was the perfect compliment to the steaming bath.

Perspiration condensed on her brow and using a damp rag she soothed her face, taking care not to bump the pin Julia had placed in her hair. When she undressed earlier, she hadn't paid attention and it had loosened kick starting the pain, pushing it back into place had helped but twinges still nudged here and there as she relaxed.

Inevitably, the misty air conjured images of the man she met that morning, Lucas Dianus. The name was unusual, yet suited him. Looking at him had been like walking fully clothed into a dream. She slowly waded through each remembered moment, recalling how his long fingers stroked the dog's fur, the heat of his verdant gaze, the dark, crisp curls that shone with health even under the sickly fluorescent lights in the hall.

Half asleep, the remembrances meshed with her recurring dreams. The black furred dog melted into his arm, the pelt flowing up his arm and across as his shape wavered and became that of a dog.... No, a huge wolf with intent eyes fixed on her face. Ashley wasn't sure why, but the metamorphoses didn't scare or upset her. Sleepily she sipped wine, the scent of forests and damp fur teased her nose as she imagined the large wolf pacing through her apartment. It was almost as if the same thing had happened in some dim memory and now surfaced; impossible but so familiar.

As the steamy air slowly cleared, so did the more fantastical imaginings. Ashley

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closed her eyes and gave in to her needs, invoking her dream lover to come stroke her neck and back with his strong, clever hands.

Nothing happened.

Lines of concentration lined her brow as she sought the vestiges of her early morning vision. Clearly she felt the hot, humid air surround her skin, drew it into her lungs, noting a taste of sandalwood in the air. Her dream-self appreciated the delicate rise and fall of the sheers in the breeze as her legs slid restively along the sleek silk bedding. The sheets were cool to her touch but there was no warming male presence burning along her back.

Whimpering, Ashley implored the ceiling tiles above, “Just this once, couldn’t you let me dream while I’m awake enough to appreciate it?” The only response she got was a distant buzzing noise accompanied by excited snippets of birdsong.

“The doorbell wasn’t what I was wanting,” she grumped, rising from the tub and wrapping a towel around her middle before slipping into a frivolous silky robe. “Be there in a sec!” she called, sliding into her Birkenstocks. Sleepy and warm from wine and bath, Ashley felt like she was drifting along the edges of a waking dream. Grimacing before her hand hit the doorknob, she forced herself to pick up a ‘girl’s best friend’—her Taser. Can’t have a dream turn into a nightmare, she giggled looking through the peephole. For her efforts all she saw was hallway. Maybe it was an accident, someone ringing the wrong door? Not unheard of but unlikely *Too many horror movies in my past*, Ashley thought as she leaned against the door, fixated on the notion of an intruder following one of the elderly tenants in so he could run rampant in the building.

The strident tones of the buzzer sent her away from the door with a startled shriek. She’d looked and no one had been there. Slowly, she rocked her weight from one foot to the other, pushing her chicken-hearted body closer to the door an inch at a time. Wide-eyed, she forced herself to look through the peephole again. But she couldn’t make herself look, as her eye cleared the portal it slammed shut. Her brain was a jumbled mass of fear as Ashley attempted to bully her eye into opening. “On the count of three,” she whispered for false courage. “One, two, three,” she looked and reeled backwards with a squeal as a huge green eye blinked back at her.

“Miss Cooper?” His deep baritone was amused even through the insulating door. “I am sorry for the lateness of my visit, but my assistant called me about the incident with Beaujolais.” He paused expectantly but Ashley stood stock-still.

MYSTICAL SIGNS: AQUARIUS—"DOG WILD"

Why couldn't she ever get a break? Nearly run the guy over this morning before kicking his small dog. Then come home to being a human trampoline for the big one. Now she stood sopping wet and totally unglamorous in her towel and robe, while the hottest guy breathing waited to see if she'd bruised more than her pride under his floppy hound. Facing reality, Ashley's shoulders sagged as she slid the door open, clearing the security chain.

Stepping back, she waved him into her living area and nearly jabbed the poor man with the exposed ends of her Taser. Moving faster than a body had a right to in the hour just before midnight, he managed to evade the electrified ends and lightly gripped her wrist.

"I hope that is not intended for me?" he smiled and her brains leaked out of her ears. Shaking her head, Ashley was mortified to feel her hasty bath-bun shake loose, tangling her hair around her shoulders and back. *Just wonderful*, she thought, blowing an exasperated puff of air through her wispy bangs.

In for a dime in for a dollar, may as well totally scare the guy off, she berated herself, dropping the weapon into his other hand before heading for an overstuffed chair. At least her birds were happily singing to one another and being excellent hosts.

Hosts! Surging to her feet, Ashley intended to ask if her visitor needed refreshment or anything but lost the will to speak as utter humiliation pooled at her feet. The sodden towel forgot to defy gravity and stay in place. He stood by the door with his back turned, taking off his shoes. Hoping against hope that he didn't see or hear the towel fall, she nudged it under the chair with a foot and strove for nonchalance.

"Can I get you a drink or anything?" Raging hormones nearly prompted her to offer 'coffee, tea or me' she hoped the adrenaline bursts in the last fifteen minutes were enough to keep insane comments in check.

"I brought my own coffee," he lifted a large take-out container from the corner Starbucks for her to see. "I hope that I haven't offended you."

"No, not at all," she smiled, but it felt stiff and crooked as she sat down. Bringing his own coffee just saved her the indignity of trying to make it for him without burning down the apartment.

His eyes never left hers as he navigated the room and sat in the center of the couch, across from her chair. "My apologies for disturbing your bath, it must have been wonderful." Ashley was slightly disconcerted to see him sniffing the air as he spoke.

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“This morning I didn’t introduce myself, I am Lupercus Dianus, owner and CEO of Lupine Enterprises Inc., a private environment improvement firm.”

The name struck a bell in some remote, fathomless corner of her mind. “Lupercus,” the slight odd feeling she experienced mouthing his name earlier fell away. “Lupercus, not Lucas,” she stated.

As if she had asked a question, he nodded, “Yes, it is an odd name. One most people, not just Americans, have problems with, normally I use the shortened form.”

The name conjured up pictures of dark wolves coursing through the night with bright, steely eyes, predators with near human intellect. Somehow he wore the name easily, as if he were the only one born to truly wear it. For a moment Ashley was certain she saw both man and wolf occupying the same space. Closing her eyes, she shook her head lightly to clear her vision. Aquarians were supposed to have some psychic talents, unfortunately all she had ever experienced had been odd aberrant, wine influenced moments like this one.

“What did you see just now?” his voice was low and pulled at her in ways she longed for and resented. His gaze was potent, holding her enthralled.

“You’ll think it was stupid,” she mumbled. But his eyes were convincing pools that reminded her of late summer leaves and golden sunshine. “I saw you and a wolf occupying the same space on the couch. There, you happy? I’m just tired. My eyes played tricks on me.” Suddenly restless, Ashley stood and moved to the birdcage, tipping in a few sunflower seeds as a treat for the sweetly singing birds. He never moved, simply sat there, staring with that inscrutable gaze.

Dropping back to her perch in the chair, Ashley decided to return his gaze but found her eyes wandering over the angled planes of his high, sharp cheekbones, the hollows beneath where a faint shadow of beard hovered, to the firm round point of his chin. Simple male perfection, her heart fluttered.

Height was a sore point for Ashley, being five feet seven inches had placed her on eye level with too many men. Wearing pumps or heels she was any man’s equal, but that morning in her heels she’d looked eye to eye with the mysterious man across the room and felt dwarfed. There was something, a feeling or aura that made him appear larger than life, as if he was the only real thing in the room and she gravitated towards touching him to prove her own permanence.

“I don’t think that was stupid at all,” he said, interrupting her inner musings.

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"Come here," he beckoned, his low voice pulling her as much as any other part of him. In a trance, Ashley rose from her chair and moved to sit on the coffee table in front of her visitor. There was a magnetism pouring off of him that tantalized and teased her senses, daring her hands to reach out and caress his sharp and smooth planes. "Water is your sign, your element; your stars are guided by water. It is natural for you to seek solace in its embrace and for that immersion to boost your natural gifts."

As if drugged, Ashley nodded and leaned forward. Water was her sign and her weakness. "I was born on February thirteenth," she volunteered in a sleepy tone, blue-grey eyes melting. His eyes brightened perceptively then darkened with heat.

"My day," he whispered in graveled tones that raised gooseflesh on her arms and shoulders. Shuddering lightly at the reaction, Ashley was bemused to find herself nearly in the man's lap. It was so out of character for her to throw herself at anyone. But he resonated with the dark lover of her dreams.

Of their own volition, her lips started speaking, telling this darkly seductive male of the dreams that plagued her life. How werewolves prowled her nightmares until she was old enough to put the fear away. The way the dreams twisted and changed tone when she learned the things men and women did together out of love. How her nights became shadowed in tension trying to see the face of her dream lover as he touched and caressed her then virgin skin; ever in the dark, just out of sight or behind her, his warm silky skin and crisp curling hairs burning along her back.

"All that I remember clearly is his voice and his touch. That's why I wanted to travel, see the world. I wanted to see if I could find him."

"Have you found him?" Without seeming to move, he slid forward, his knees almost brushing hers. Ashley could feel the warmth of his tanned fingers from where they rested on his thighs. Lust rose and made her head spin crazily. All she wanted was to feel those hands on her body.

"Ashley Cooper," he pulled her attention higher, back to his eyes, "I asked you, have you found this man?"

Without thinking, she answered, "No, I think he found me."

Those were the words Lupercus had been waiting to hear. Hungrily he reached forward and pulled the knotted robe, sliding Ashley from the table to straddle his lap. She had no idea how alluring her simple beauty was. When her hair had escaped, flowing over her shoulders in a tumult of tangles, he had wanted to bury both fists in the tresses

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and lift them to his nose. She smelled of summer-kissed fields and the musky heart of desire. Feather light, her fingers traced the bones of his face as if watching for the wolf to appear from under the man.

Wanting to be petted, he dipped his head under her hands and stilled as her fingers dragged along his scalp, sliding through his hair, gripping and releasing at the different lengths from crown to nape and back again. The need to have her hands touching him grew to a physical pain. Tugging his shirt free, Lupercus pulled the stiff linen lapels apart, scattering buttons on the floor. So much for Quint's obsession with pandering to fashion, he dropped the rent garment in disdain. Freed of the fabric, he nosed her chin up to taste the sweet skin of her throat, forcing her hands to clutch his shoulders for balance.

Ashley's touch was like a smooth liquid flowing over his knotted muscles, her fingers burned, sending up waves of vibrations under the surface of his skin. As his tongue dipped into the hollow of her throat, feeling the racing pulse there, he luxuriated in the spasms racking her body, luring her closer to his heat. Her scent wrapped around his mind as he traced her collarbone with his tongue and teeth; nibbling and tasting the smooth expanse of her shoulder. The real objective was to nudge the sleek material off without her noticing and retreating behind the stolid practicality he sensed lurking in her mind.

Dreams were the doorway he walked through with relish. Watching her soft, coral tipped lips move, forming around the words framing her tale had been distracting to the point of pain as his cock tightened in his pants. His innocent storyteller had fueled his fires with images of naked breasts brushing against his chest and her tousled locks dragging over his thighs. Never had he wanted another woman with the same soul subsuming force he did this proud American woman.

Delicately, the sateen fabric slipped closer to the edge of her shoulder as he found a small spot where the muscle rounded towards the slim slope of her back. His tongue circled the spot, tasting mint and soft female as her hands slid around his waist smoothing the base of his spine. She wriggled on his lap, trying to move closer as he caught the scent of her desire and dropped the veil of civility. Biting down, he suckled the spot as he dipped in the delta of her spread thighs to trail his fingers against the feathered fur of her mound. Her nostrils flared and her heartbeat trip-hammered under this coaxing fingers.

Ashley's head dropped to his shoulder; impatiently she rubbed her face against his hot, sleek skin. Every wet lick and toothy drag across her skin erupted in her center. Her

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womb clenched as the muscles of her stomach twitched and jumped, making her writhe on his lap, seeking a way to put out this heat that burned insatiable in her blood. Cool air stirred against her belly a second before the onslaught of his hands. A part of her brain screamed against his touch, that he was unknown; a danger but another force rose within, quashing the fears with primal need.

She clawed his back, wanting, needing something elusive. With every heartbeat her mind told her to be patient that he was the one—but she was done waiting. Heaving her hips closer to his questing fingers, she moaned, as the thick digits obliged her want and slipped between her lower lips, gliding around the pearl of her clit as they sought entrance to her dripping sheath. His wide hand cupped her entrance and she wept to be filled, but teasingly his palm flattened against her damp skin.

"In me, fill me please," she begged, nipping his earlobe. One finger tauntingly traced her raised clit as another dipped and thrust, barely breaching her hungry center. Nearly in tears, she begged again and again, "Fill me."

The moment a salted tear rolled from the corner of her eye and splashed against his neck, she felt the change in his slow tease. Her ears heard his zipper fall, but all her body recognized was that he had stopped touching her. Crying out, Ashley grasped at his shoulders, desperately pulling him close again. His arm slid behind the robe and levered her backwards, bowing her over onto the table as the tip of his cock seated in her vagina. He was soft and hard where her hand reached between them, milking his velvety length, begging him to finish the promise of a decade of dreams.

"Say my name," he commanded in the darkness. "Know your lover. Name him. Name me." He rocked his hips, pushing his cock in a bare inch then pulling it back out. She tried to brace her feet on the couch to force him deeper, but he widened his stance, making it impossible for her feet to find purchase.

"Say my name, Ashley," this time a strained plea replaced the barked command and she responded.

"Lupercus, you are Lupercus," she intoned to his burning green gaze. Needing more contact, she turned her head, her eyes alighting on his thick wrist next to her head. Instinct drove her to lick the skin of his inner arm before biting down, and marking him as hers as he surged forward, impaling her on his cock. Ashley felt more than filled, she felt complete. Burning hunger built and her hips lifted, twisted and bucked under his possession. "Lupercus please," she begged. At the sound of her voice, he rolled his hips

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and thrust again and again. From the soles of her feet to the nape of her neck, she burned with feeling, an intensity dragging along nerve endings, robbing her of breath.

With blinding intensity her core tightened, swallowing his length deep and holding him, wringing his thickness slicked with her body's own desire. Crying out at the blaze of colors and feelings coursing through her body, Ashley hooked her legs around the man plumbing her depths and rode the waves of pleasure thrumming through her body. Dimly, she heard him call out as he thrust harder and faster. Sweat coated the surface of his back, making it hard for her to hold him as he poured into her sheath, locked in spasm with aftershocks.

It took almost too much energy to breathe, she marveled as Lupercus stilled. Her inner muscles still held him tightly even as she felt his length soften. Blinking at the ceiling, Ashley's mind started to rise through the layers of sexual satiation in dismay, cooling her ardor. He tensed and lifted her in his arms, keeping them joined as he walked the short distance to her small bedroom.

The sensation of his cock rubbing her inner walls as he walked blanked her mind and made her choke as need overwhelmed her senses. She felt every slide and bump inside as he twisted and lowered them to the bed. He placed a fat pillow under her hips and sat back on bent, spread knees, hands holding her tight at the juncture between hip and thigh. Ashley lay open before his hungry gaze; his eyes locked at the spot where their bodies were still joined. She made a moue of protest which he ignored until she tried to squirm from beneath him.

"You feel shame for your desire." His voice seemed to fill the room. "Man and woman were made for this, there is no dishonor in mating." His hands softened on her hips and stroked the skin of her belly, along her sides, easing the tense muscles of her thighs causing them to relax and open wide. Licking his fingers, he parted the hairs at her delta and slid his fingers between the slightly swollen fleshes of her labia. The small brushing gesture sent skittering bolts of reaction through Ashley's legs and lower back. Reflexively her legs moved, wrapping around his taut buttocks. He smiled in the darkness, a glint of green hunger and too white teeth as he grasped her ankles in his hands. Slowly, the pads of his thumbs stoked the delicate flesh under each anklebone making her moan.

When had she ever lost such control of her mind and body? Sex had always been awkward, bestial with grunts and wet sounds as her body moved but she remained

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unmoved. His every touch inflamed a part of her that she never knew existed.

"I can teach your body to love me, your mind is your own," he pushed her legs wide and back, setting her thighs against her upper arms. Gently, he urged her to hold her legs wide and open, the heat of his gaze made her sheath hiccup greedily. His cock stirred inside, thickening, but at the angle she was splayed, she couldn't move to rock his growing length inside her weeping sheath.

Lupercus pulled her hips tight against him, so that the flushed pearl of her desire was lost amid his curling hairs. He felt the tight-fisting muscles of her core and smiled looking to her breasts. They were white globes of proud flesh tipped in dusky rose. His fingers brushed around the perfect orbs, stroking the peaked nipples until they hardened as tight as the muscles sucking at his cock. "Don't let go," he commanded when her shaking hands eased on her spread thighs. Roughly, his fingers pinched the erect nipples, rolling and tugging, her stomach tightened and fluttered, sending tongues of desire curling through his erect rod, lifting his balls. He wanted nothing more than to turn her over and ride his mate as she arched back into him, but it was too soon, she wouldn't accept him in that way, not yet.

He watched as her chest rose and fell unsteadily, her mouth opened, issuing ragged cries. Curious, he slid two fingers between her lush, parted lips. At first she stilled then her eyes closed to grey-limned slits as she suckled greedily, drawing his fingers deep into her hot, wet mouth. Pulling them free, he watched as she flushed with desire. Her cheeks pinked, mirroring the color spreading across her breasts. "I will bring you pleasure," he promised, sliding his fingers wet from her mouth around her budded clit, "Will you bring me pleasure or pain?"

The pleasure built to the point of pain, Ashley tried to close her legs to stop the slippery caresses but it only intensified the feeling, clamping his fingers in place. "Lupercus please," she begged but his deep voice only frustrated her as he asked, "Please what?" Pressure built and screamed along her nerve endings. All she could do was keen at the feeling ripping her apart as her nails bit into the backs of her thighs. His fingers stopped and she sobbed in relief and misery, she had to have more even if it killed her. Hands gripped her hips and he began stroking in and out, a rolling, flexing motion. Sensitized, she felt every veined inch slipping in and out, bumping the top of her womb and rubbing fire along a path of torrid heat she never knew existed.

Watching his face, hungry and intent, Ashley felt her mind shatter as her vision

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misted. She heaved as her release rolled through her system hard and fast in undulating waves. He never slowed, forcing the throbbing waves of pleasure to spike again and again until she begged for him to stop, but he didn't. Ashley felt her muscles fist one last time, before she spiraled into a midnight sea, threaded with sparkling points of light.

Shuddering, Lupercus dropped the tight control he held on his desire and swept his mate close as his cock spilled deep into her womb. Her last jerking motions had been too much. He had never lain with a woman so taken by her own release as to plunge into blissful unconsciousness. He had hoped she would go on all fours and demand his tongue in her sheath as a prelude to his cock. So many yearnings twisted through his gut that he almost woke her to try them all. But he respected her need to sleep, to dream of what they'd done. Perhaps, he hoped, brushing her sweat-damped hair from her soft, flushed cheek, she would awaken with ideas of her own.

Chapter Six In the Dog House

Brilliant sunlight filtered through white curtains, Ashley stretched, the air felt warm and inviting along her skin. Her body felt full, sated. The male presence at her back wakened, grasping her sleep warmed skin in large strong hands. A lightly furred leg slipped between her own, parting her legs as teeth nipped at her shoulder. Shivers racked her body as the tip of his tongue laved the spot until her juices damped the curls at the delta of her thighs. Hands lifted her waist and positioned her opening above the tip of his engorged cock, spreading her sore nether lips. Fingers pulled her labia wide, exposing her female flesh to the air. The scent of sex pervaded the room as one forefinger rubbed the erect nub of her clit.

Soft whimpers trickled up from her throat as she rested her head against his shoulder. He smelled of pine and musky man as his thick rod slid home, raising gooseflesh as her abraded inner surfaces fisted hungrily around his pumping cock. With a low moan, Ashley felt her body sway as he thrust harder and faster, the sound of flesh slapping increasing the raw eroticism of the moment. Gasping and calling for more, she tightened around him and collapsed as her orgasm ripped through her center, making motes of light dance behind her tightly clenched eyes. With a final thrust she felt the warm liquid of his cum spurting over her mound as he pulled out. Panting, she nearly screamed at the feel of his sticky sex sliding over her throbbing clit pushing her body into another violent wave of aftershocks.

Almost in time with her sputtering pulse came a strident beeping. Groaning, Ashley opened her eyes and cursed the alarm clock for interrupting the best dream ever. Reaching for the offending device, she nearly swallowed her tongue when a powerful male arm reached it first.

Oh my GOD! Her mind gibbered. It hadn't been a dream. She really did all those things with that guy, that Lupercus man from down the hall. *I don't know anything about*

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him! Her brains froze as she remembered they had totally unprotected sex. Disease, pregnancy and other horrors crashed through her brain like cymbals in a grade school holiday special.

With energy born of terror, she leapt from the bed and dashed into the bathroom locking the door.

“Ashley,” his voice sounded aggravated but amused, “come out of there, you are being silly.”

“Hah!” Ashley’s mind suddenly cleared. “I got you there buster. This is probably the most intelligent thing I’ve done in the last fifteen hours. What did you do, slip me a roofie?” she accused.

“*Per l’amore di Dio!* You were not drugged, “*Ti do la mia parola.*” Now he was growling on the other side of the door. He was a big man and Ashley felt fear race through her system. “I would not hurt you in any way, ever. I would sooner cause harm to myself.”

“Prove it,” she challenged, clutching a towel around her body. In the next room, she heard rustling then silence. Backing away from the door, she sat on the toilet, her mind a whirling mass of confusion. Her heart knew this man, her body knew this man, and how could it be that she didn’t know this man?

Shattering dry wall and flying wood splinters sent her reeling against the bathtub. Lupercus stood there gloriously naked holding the bathroom door by the handle. Her eyes bulged. He’d ripped the entire door free.

“My security deposit!” Ashley clapped a hand to her mouth. She couldn’t believe she’d just said something so incredibly stupid. In the doorway, Lupercus shook his head, he tossed something at her feet and waited. Stupidly, she looked at the black plastic object before it registered. It was her Taser.

“Well, *tesoro*, either defend yourself or not.” He stood stoically. For a moment she felt foolish then she scooped up the plastic device and scooted past his wide shouldered form in the doorway. “*Grazie*, we’ll go to your work together. I have need of a personal travel coordinator for the next few weeks. I will inquire if your employer is amenable to this.”

Ashley turned and gaped at him. Of all the nerve! “And what makes you think I want this position?” He smiled, dropping the door to lean against the sink. Her hands twitched on the towel, they wanted to wander over and appreciate every coarse and sleek

MYSTICAL SIGNS: AQUARIUS—"DOG WILD"

inch of his hide.

"You took to the skies to find me, and now you would have me believe that you would not take to the road with me?" Ashley wasn't sure what was more annoying; the deep-seated tingle that told her he was right or the smug look on his face.

An hour later, Ashley was dressed in her favorite "bad day" suit and sitting in the front seat of a very expensive luxury class SUV. The soft, thick silk ensemble in shades of gray that made her eyes glow as blue as the morning sky, had been a huge expense. But after touching the material, she hadn't been able to stop petting the soft folds, so she bought it. The only time the valued garment found its way out of the closet was when she felt the need for comfort or added confidence. And today was just that day.

The morning passed in a whirlwind of bizarre happenings. Lupercus had walked naked down the hall to his apartment and emerged a few short minutes later wearing a dark expensive suit, trailed by Quint. The other man was using a small recording device to catch rapidly fired orders as he smiled and winked at Ashley.

Lupercus had refused to leave the apartment until she had dressed and readied herself for work. Once in the hall, she'd nearly lost it watching his taut butt as he walked down the hall. Here she was, drooling over a virtual stranger that she had shagged rotten half the night when she should go back inside her apartment and call in sick.

Before the thought fully formed, Beaujolais and Mars flanked her. Mars sat at attention, simply staring up at her with liquid black eyes that gleamed like polished buttons. With his ears perked he looked almost cute, she decided trying a half-step back. The backwards movement caused the small bundle of wiry, black hair to growl threateningly. It was laughable to be afraid of something that would be flattened by a bag of sugar, but Ashley had no desire to ruin another pair of shoes, let alone her favorite outfit.

Beaujolais, on the other hand, seemed content to yawn massively and sink into a snoring pile of wrinkled fur at her feet. Cannily, he had managed to insinuate the majority of his bulk over the toes of her shoes, anchoring her feet to the floor.

Lupercus walked up making weird growling sounds and the dogs happily turned and made for the open apartment door. "They like you," he smiled and her heart did a curious flip.

"Beaujolais I can believe, but the other one? No, he just likes chewing on me." Ashley pulled back when he reached to take her arm. Enough touching had gone on last

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night to last her a lifetime, she needed some space to think. He held his hands up in abeyance, giving into her wishes.

Now, looking through the tinted glass of the SUV at the street Fantasy Travel operated from, Ashley felt a small mean spurt of joy. There was nowhere to park the huge, gleaming SUV. Without pause, Lupercus maneuvered the large vehicle down a side street and to a small private parking lot manned by an unsavory looking attendant. Ashley was stunned, she hadn't known that there was parking available in the alley and she'd worked at Fantasy Travel for a little over a year now. She looked at the blinking map on the dash with respect. If only life was so easy, plug in a destination and have a series of instructions guide you to your goal.

The door opened and a warm hand offered to help her from the butter-soft leather seat. Carefully she released the seatbelt and slid to the pavement ignoring his hand. She sensed he was fast losing patience with her refusal to touch him, but that was too damned bad. She wasn't the type to just hop in bed with strangers and change her whole life around to accommodate someone because they gave her the hottest night of her life. Just the memory of the last orgasm made her toes curl and her womb shiver in hunger for a repeat performance.

Soft laughter stirred the hairs at the base of her neck. Without thinking, she had put her hair up in a businesslike bun. Self-consciously scanning the door mirror brought her to an abrupt halt. Horror slammed through her stomach as her fingertips found the reddened skin left from last night's caresses. Even if she had let her hair down, the love bites would have stood out for everyone to see.

"Allow me," his voice brushed against her ear as his strong hands carefully placed a silky, blue scarf around her neck. As he fastened the neckerchief, his fingers skimmed the skin left exposed by her blouse. The shivers racing down her spine had more to do with the heat of his touch than the cold morning air. Plucking the material, he moved to face her, green eyes intent on covering the evidence of their torrid night. A square-tipped finger touched the abraded skin and she flushed in sudden desire, remembering the feel of his teeth and rough beard stubble. No hurry, no shame, Ashley realized as she watched him work. Satisfied, he caressed her suit jacket, settling it back into place.

"The first time I truly noticed color in the world, I was lying on my back in a shepherd's field. Above me, the sky exploded into this pure brilliance that felt like hope. It wasn't something to see but something to feel in the heart." The back of his hand

MYSTICAL SIGNS: AQUARIUS—"DOG WILD"

brushed the side of her breast, just over the mentioned organ. Stepping closer, he smiled, dark wicked lights dancing in his eyes. "I like this thing around your neck," Lupercus breathed against her ear. Ashley's body felt heavy, drugged as she turned, hoping to evade the potency of his presence.

Entering the front door of the agency, he added, "It would make a good collar to hold you under me." The words unfurled a picture deep in her mind, of her, kneeling on a bed of soft moss as he bit delicately at the base of her neck, his cock sliding along the cleft of her mound. The picture faded, leaving her shivering with hunger that melted through her resolve not to touch him. She tilted her hips backwards, finding the evidence of his arousal. Ashley felt the heat of him through her skirt and nearly gave in to the raw drive to rub against him in willing abandon in front of her coworkers.

Good God! What was wrong with her? She was acting like an animal in heat! Blurting an apology, she fled for the ladies room at the far end of the hall. Not even the distance and closed doors separating them lessened the feelings he raised with a few short words and a causal touch.

"Girl, if I had a man like that panting after me, I'd bark like a dog all night long," twanged from behind her. A smallish, dirty-blond head popped into the mirror almost at Ashley's elbow.

"Do I know you?" she tried to keep the words civil but failed.

"Fay Lachesis," the diminutive woman answered, her pixie-like face avidly awaiting a reaction. Ashley turned and looked directly at the other woman in confusion. Fay acted as if Ashley should know exactly who she was. No one at the firm had such an accent, not that Ashley hadn't heard the speech pattern, it was prevalent in the areas surrounding Pittsburgh to the south. "Patch" was the name a local had dubbed the patois.

"Guess it doesn't matter," laughing hazel eyes twinkled from under a thick shock of bangs. "This should be all you really need." Fay slapped a copy of the newspaper in Ashley's hand. "Read the horoscope, you know you want to," she sang mockingly as she sauntered to the door and exited.

Ashley bit her lower lip and stared at the newspaper. It had been carefully folded to the section with the small star charts. How did Fay know about her secret obsession? By the time she arrived at work the newspaper had passed from her hands to at least a half dozen others on the bus. Of their own volition, her eyes slid to the words on the page: *Nothing will be as it seems, act on your instincts. Listen to what others have to say.*

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What the hell? How do you trust your instincts *and* listen to what others have to say? Her instincts weren't even clear, or were they? Whenever she stopped thinking, she found herself gravitating back to Lupercus, physically and emotionally. The only opinion expressed had been Fay's rather earthy advice. Grinning at herself, Ashley chucked the paper in the trash. She'd asked for something to spice up her life, well she had it, why not give it a chance?

Walking towards the door, she decided on one last qualifier—so long as Frank Horne agreed, she needed to have a job to return to if this blew up.

Chapter Seven Dogged Does It

"How can I help you sir?" The expression on the young woman's face was polite, her voice low pitched and pleasant. She matched the décor of the small antechamber her post-modern desk was hunkering in. Underfoot, the black, grey and white cut-pile carpet cushioned all sound in sleek geometric swoops and lines. Standing back a bit, Lupercus stared at the floor...the pattern seemed almost too familiar.

"Sir?" dark brown eyes went from warm welcome to aloof. Smiling, Lupercus read her apprehension in the lines of her body.

"I'm not going to attack you," he smiled, "I was just admiring the carpet."

"Oh," the bisque oval of her face flushed a soft apricot, "Mr. Horne designed the pattern himself. He said it reminded him of why he took such an interest in travel." At ease, the secretary took in his expensive suit and tact. Pressing a button on her desk, she spoke into what looked like a rose made out of precious metals.

"Mr. Horne, there is a client wishing an interview." Instead of a reply, the door to the office behind the woman's desk slid half-open. "Well, that is odd," she frowned, looking at the doorway. An odd fragrance teased the air, Lupercus shook his head...*it couldn't be, could it?* When she stood to usher him in, Lupercus diverted her attention. He needed *all* of his senses to be sure, and she couldn't be a witness.

"Perhaps something to drink?" he suggested, guiding her away from the open door. Flustered, the woman turned, nearly mowing over Ashley. The women exchanged low words and Ashley frowned oddly, giving him a curious look before stalking after the secretary. He shrugged, doubtless he would hear about what he did wrong later. Ashley seemed to like complaining. And moaning and demanding and hiding in bathrooms, he grinned looking at the cracked door.

Based on the secretary's reaction, it wasn't normal for this man to hide in his office. Lupercus looked at the door the women had exited, no one. The bones in his face

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trembled and shifted slightly as his nose and ears distorted, making the cavities larger, the shell of his ears wider. He stopped the transformation to wolf when scent patterns rose and carried an inkling of what was on the other side of the door. It was impossible; he smelled woodlands and game with a hint of fear. With a shake, his face resumed its even human lines.

“Come in brother,” the voice coming from within was amused but tense. Stunned, Lupercus pushed the door open and walked inside. He felt waves of fire and ice flooding his system. For so many years, he had searched for his twin to explain, to beg forgiveness. Through the forests of Europe he had searched out the legends of incredible stags, until giving up and coming to America. Could it have been so simple? Bearings still reeling, suspicion bloomed. Closing the door quickly, he dropped to all fours and let the wolf emerge; needing all the senses he had been born with. A faint line, a filament of baby-fine light wavered in the room connecting the brothers, another trailed outside of the room. It was enough.

“Lachesis,” he cursed, returning to human shape. The man who was Faunus sat quietly behind a large wood desk, watching with open amusement.

“Do you often change shape while clothed, brother?” He smiled, as Lupercus struggled to right his clothes as he stood. He glared at Faunus; it was just like him to tease. He always had an innate grace that shamed his wolfish twin.

“I’ve searched for you,” he offered lamely, staring at Faunus. There were so many things in his heart he wanted to share, his soul felt weighted by the need to atone for the betrayal those long centuries ago. “Faunus, my brother...” he stopped when his twin raised a hand in warning.

“Your mate returns,” a small half-smile twisted his lips. “The things I could tell her about you,” his voice lost the veneer of politeness.

“Mr. Horne,” Ashley walked in and held out her hand, “I see you’ve met Lupercus. Has he talked to you about his plans?” Frank took her hand in his, smiled and turned the color of bad cheese.

“Frank?” Ashley patted his hand, reaching for his pulse.

Instead of acknowledging her ministrations, he turned and asked, “Lupercus?” The man in question put his hands in his pockets and shrugged, “I thought perhaps that honesty was the best policy.”

“You were honest enough the last time too.” Frank’s voice turned bitter as he

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slumped in his chair.

Ashley was at a loss. Frank and Lupercus obviously knew each other, yet Lupercus hadn't shown any indication of knowing her employer on the ride over.

"Samantha, my tea," Frank grimaced wanly at his secretary. "Thank you dear. Please go when you're done. Be sure to close the door behind you." The dark head bent and placed two steaming mugs on the gleaming desktop before retreating.

"How honest has he been with you Ashley?" Frank's eyes held a quiet strength that pinned her in place. A mélange of images flittered across her mind, and the whispered words shared last night surfaced, *I will bring you pleasure. Will you bring me pleasure or pain?* As if he read her mind, Frank sent Lupercus a scathing look. "Not honest enough by half."

"Mr. Horne," Lupercus grated between clenched teeth, "I would like to secure the services of your employee. I find myself in need of a personal travel coordinator."

Ashley watched him closely; he seemed on the edge of blowing up. He hadn't looked nearly so angry when she held the Taser and considered giving him a jolt for good measure.

"The places you will be going are fairly rural. It should be simple enough to arrange for hotels." Leaning back, Frank picked up a small acorn shaped paperweight and soothed it between his fingers.

"Normally, yes, but I am traveling with my pets. They will also require care and lodging." Ashley's jaw dropped. No freaking way was she signing on to be a glorified dog-walker to Frick and Frack! Yeah, the sex had been incredible, sure the man was hot enough to melt ice and wealthy to boot, but she had some dignity. Opening her mouth to give Lupercus a piece of her mind, she found herself goggling at her employer instead.

"I see no problem," Frank fairly purred with pleasure, "on one condition." The way he was looking at her made her mouth close with a loud click. It was as if he knew exactly why the dark, sexy man in the office really wanted her along and it had nothing to do with walking the four-footed menaces. "I accompany you."

"What?" Ashley and Lupercus cried simultaneously.

"Yes," he surged to his feet, "what better way to catch up with my oldest friend and be sure that my agency is well represented? Lupine Enterprises would be an excellent customer for Fantasy Travel." Moving around the desk, he embraced Ashley's shoulder like a carefree older brother. "What do you say Gorgeous?"

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Ashley bit her tongue and smiled sickly at Frank Horne, regretting her decision to be guided by his opinion. Forty-five minutes later, she was actively cursing her stupidity. While Lupercus and Frank “ironed out the details” of the trip, she was sent back to the apartment by cab to walk the hounds of hell in preparation for the long trip ahead. Long, being more than an hour and Beaujolais, as Lupercus explained, got car sick if he didn’t get air before car rides.

So as not to ruin her suit, Ashley quickly changed into jeans and a t-shirt when she returned home. When her fingers settled on the scarf at her throat she balked, it smelled of him and in a way comforted her. Pulling a silky tail free, she admired the cloth as it shimmered under the lights. She always loved laying on her back staring into the sky as a child; the different shades of blue fascinated her. One of her favorite pastimes had been to float on her back in the pool, surrounded by azure water and staring into blue skies. Shaking her head at the fanciful memory, Ashley toed on a pair of loafers and fingered the key Lupercus had handed her for his apartment.

Walking down the hall, she looked furtively up and down before putting key to lock. She felt like an intruder. She hoped no one noticed how she and Lupercus had become chummy so fast. The door swung open and up popped two heads from a beige couch. One was attached to a happily wagging tail, the other bristled and began barking, sharp staccato blasts of sound.

“Let’s be friends,” Ashley tried talking, soothingly to the small dog. He had such an abrasive personality, she hadn’t noticed just how little he really was. The menace disappeared as fast as water in the desert once she found his red retractable lease in the hall closet. Standing on two legs, he yipped and howled dancing in a circle.

“Aha! So that’s your soft spot, walkies,” she baby-talked to the flopping mop-dog. His little button eyes gleamed from beneath shaggy brows as she snapped the leash to his collar. When Beaujolais pushed forward for Ashley to attach his collar, Mars snapped at the larger dog, driving him back to the couch.

“You want to go alone, eh?” she grinned at the fussy little dog. Tail wagging, the little beast answered by prancing to the elevator and waiting patiently. Once released on the first floor, he strained constantly to go farther faster. There was a small park a few blocks away and Ashley happily made for it, smiling at passersby. Mars, however, had his own agenda, which included piddling on every object in his path, including, much to her horror, an elderly man waiting for a bus. Red faced, she dragged the happy dog along

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the sidewalk. Reaching backstreets with less traffic, she released a pent-up sigh of relief and let Mars set the pace. By the time they reached the small park, she had learned that the small animal could be charming and drew many hands wanting to pet him, but each was greeted with a growl, snarl or sharp bark. No one was allowed to touch him. *He must be lonely*, she thought on the way home.

Beujolais was quite a different story. His thick tail thumped the floor heavily as she put away Mars' leash and dug out his thick black one. He sat at perfect attention until the metal clasp clicked on the ring of his harness. With a bloodcurdling bay, he lunged for the door, setting Ashley off-balance and careening as she reached for the knob, slamming the door closed behind them.

Using his impressive nose, Beaujolais managed to follow the exact route Mars had taken but at ten times the speed. His knobbed hound's head snapped up at things she couldn't fathom and he ran in circles around her, seeking different scents and sights along the way. The first time, he almost tied her up in the leash, the second, she tripped and landed on the cold sidewalk, by the third time she was a pro at the dash and spin and rotated the leash handle around her middle like a Hula-Hoop.

Walking through the door to the apartment, she nearly sobbed in relief. Ashley couldn't recall ever feeling so tired as after that whirlwind walk, dodging pedestrians and cars and managing to stay on her feet. Her reflection in the hall mirror was enough to make her swear off reflective surfaces. Between a sleepless night and the dogs, she was wrung out.

“What do you think Mars; would your master be upset if I took a nap on his bed?” Mollified, the beetle-eyed dog panted happily, tongue lolling as he smiled up at her. “Nope, I don't think he'd mind either.” She yawned, heading down the hall separating three bedrooms. This apartment was much larger than her one-bedroom unit. The room on the right was empty as was the one on the left. “Must have been Julia and Quint's rooms, they sure left fast.” Opening the last door, Ashley stood blinking tiredly yet nonplussed. The room was as dark as a cave. Double curtains on the windows kept out all light. Flipping the switch, Ashley peered upwards and noticed the ceiling light had been removed.

Mars and Beaujolais stopped at the doorway whining. “Not allowed in here, eh boys?” she grinned at her furry sentinels. They weren't so bad, just extreme. Reaching the bed, Ashley felt the air leave her lungs in a whoosh as her hands brushed the fur of the

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coverlet; it was a carefully stitched mosaic of hides.

While a part of her mourned the loss of life, another part eagerly wanted to rub her body all over the sleek pelts. Quickly, she toed off her shoes, shrugged out of her soiled jeans and pulled her t-shirt over her head. The room was so warm it felt natural to stand nearly naked in the darkness, brushing her hands along the lustrous hides.

This was so out of character, she grinned at the thought. She never jumped into bed with a stranger, let alone stripped naked in a man's apartment before meeting Lupercus. He just seemed so right. She yawned and stretched out on the bed, snuggling into the thick warm pelts, even the pillows were covered in fur she marveled as her eyes drowsed closed.

Lupercus watched Ashley sleep. Arriving home, he had a moment of uncertainty when he didn't see his loyal friends. Looking around the corner to the hall, he'd found them curled into furry balls outside of his bedroom door, on guard. The notion of her in his lair had his blood pounding and his pants tightening. Seeing her willowy body sprawled on his bed had his blood pressure howling in his ears.

Damn Faunus for making him promise not to touch Ashley unless she asked for his attentions! She asked just that morning, perhaps not with words but still, her body had begged before her mind and mouth could think the words. Eyes enigmatic, he loosened his pants and let the rich fabric pool at his ankles. Stepping to the side, he slowly unbuttoned his shirt, eyes devouring the pale form before him inch by inch. Her beautiful feet were encased in lace topped ankle socks; the lean line of her leg hooked and flowed upward to a creamy expanse of thigh, ending in the cotton-clad juncture at her thighs. She lay on her stomach, cuddling a furred pillow. As he discarded the last of his clothes, Ashley restlessly rubbed her cheek against the pillow.

He couldn't help himself. Lupercus dropped to all fours as he crawled onto the bed, nose lightly rubbing the satiny skin of her leg as he inhaled her scent. He wanted to rip off her underwear and bury his tongue in her sheath. He needed to taste her deepest secret, but forced himself to wait. Hands to either side of her hips, he bent his head and caressed her seam with his nose, reveling in the tart, musky smell of her sleepy arousal.

"Do you dream of me, *tesoro*?" Lupercus whispered against her lower back as his lips skimmed her spine. Sleepily, she arched into the gentle caress. "Never did I let myself even dream that you should exist." Quick fingers twisted the tight elastic of her bra out of the way. Using small circular motions, his fingers eased the reddened flesh

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where the garment marked her delicate skin. Lightly, he brushed the side of her breast with the back of his fingers, not trusting the sensitive fingertips to stop at the light stroking that kept her locked in dreams.

She still wore the scarf. Lupercus nearly growled in hunger as his hands measured her neck and shoulders where the flimsy material pooled. It gave him an idea. Using his teeth, he lightly nipped a small hole in Ashley's irritating panties and gently pulled at the thin cotton until it hung around the tops of her thighs. Kneeling between her thighs, he drizzled oil down Ashley's spine, making her shift and shiver. Dipping his fingers in the oil, he lightly massaged the muscles of her back, starting at her shoulders and working lower. It maddened his senses, smelling her arousal as it grew, yet not being able to do anything without her spoken words. Part of him hoped she would wake, the other wanted the exquisite torture to last forever. Reaching the cleft of her ass, he spread more oil as his thumbs slid under to her nether lips and caught evidence of her arousal, spreading her cream lower to the reddening flesh of her labia and slick clit.

Slipping through the layers of sleep, Ashley surfaced, feeling utterly relaxed with an inner tension that made her want to writhe against the covers. Shifting, the tickling hairs caressed her aroused breasts only serving to spike the heat building in her core higher. A part of her mind registered the slippery caresses over her hips and buttocks. To her sleep-fogged mind, his presence was natural, expected, almost anticipated.

"Lupercus?" she asked sleepily, turning onto her back.

"Yes my love," he kissed the inside of a warm thigh and felt the muscles under his cheek jump in anticipation.

"What're you doing?" she was so sexy with her tousled hair and slumberous voice. Sultry, that was the human word for the feeling he experienced looking at the dewed opening he wished to taste.

"Wanting to taste you," he licked his lips, wanting to move those few inches closer but bound by oath not to.

"Taste me?" she was awaking more and he felt his heart sink

Her eyes caught sight of her torn panties; the rest of her mind woke. She knew she was wet with wanting him. She could feel her inner muscles weeping for his thickness, but she balked at giving him the leave he begged. It was so erotic, the way his tongue traced his lips as his smoky green eyes slid over her parted folds. Never had another man wanted to touch her in this way, she'd wondered at the feel of it from listening to friends

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but never imagined the look of awe and want crossing a man's face at the sight of her exposed sex.

"Shall I show you?" he asked, sliding his hands under her thighs, lifting her hips slightly and spreading the darker folds limned in glistening moisture. He felt rather than saw Ashley nod her head. "You must tell me what you want," he begged hoarsely. More than he needed his next breath, he wanted her to rain pleasure into his mouth as her cries filled the dark room

"Taste me," the thin words nearly robbed him of the ability to move. Sliding forward on his belly, he parted her nether lips with the tip of his tongue tasting the tang of woman that was as universal as it was individual. Under his hands, he felt her quiver and contract at the light caress and he smiled, a feral triumph twisting in his gut. Eagerly, he swirled his tongue around the bud of her desire and dipped it lightly into her sheath. The taste of her was like nothing else exploding across his tongue, sweet yet tart, a tang that begged to be repeated. Impatiently he lapped at her clit, wanting her as insane in want as he was, before spearing his tongue deep in her core, sipping the soft rain of liquid she wept, as his mouth worked her flesh.

Her soft cries of frustration built and tumbled out, as his tongue slid and darted between her fold before teasing the bud of her clit with an electric caress then dipping deep inside her sheath.

As if sensing her impatience, Lupercus focused on sliding his tongue against her cleft and over the swollen flesh at her clit. Moaning she felt her inner muscles tighten on nothingness and wept for needing him deep inside.

"In me, please Lupercus," she begged.

He lifted himself from her and growled, "Roll over."

Ashley obeyed and Lupercus positioned her on hand and knees.

Dimly, her mind resurrected the imagined scene from the morning of her on hands and knees begging to be filled by his taunting cock as it caressed her throbbing slit. Dropping her shoulders to the bed, she reached under and behind and felt the crisp hairs of his legs as he moved into position behind her. Impatiently, her hands traveled over his skin, rubbing, seeking the soft skin of his cock and balls. Success! Her right hand found his pulsing length and she stroked it from base to tip as the palm of her left hand held the weight of his sac. Milking his length, she felt a warm spurt of liquid splash against her inner thigh.

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Growling, Lupercus tugged at the scarf still around her neck, bringing her back to all fours. His legs nudged hers wider. Arching her back deeply, she angled her hips back, hoping to feel his thick length at her opening. Instead, he slid two fingers inside, rubbing the walls of her vagina as if seeking something. It was what she wanted but not enough. Impatiently, Ashley rode his fingers.

"I want you in me," she demanded, but her command was greeted with a low, dark laugh that raised gooseflesh on her back. She felt the scarf tighten on her neck as she tried to lower her head and angle her hips closer to his.

"Patience," he whispered along her shoulders, leaning over her. His fingers, slick from her sheath found her mound and slid between the damp curls, circling her clit as the head of his cock found her opening. Shaking from the spikes of liquid-need knifing through her body as his fingers worked her clit, Ashley wanted to be filled. Begging incoherently, she grasped the headboard to brace herself as his teeth found the spot on the back of her neck above her shoulders.

She didn't even recognize the sounds coming out of her mouth as she begged with guttural moans for what she needed. The twisting, tightening muscles of her vagina dragged at the tip of his cock as he slowly pushed in. A thin cry ripped from her throat as she felt her body ripple in orgasm at the small movement. His fingers still moved ruthlessly, holding the folds apart as one finger rubbed again and again over the raised cusp of flesh. Slowly, he pushed in. Ashley felt each inch gained as reaction burned up from her core to the turgid tips of her breasts.

His teeth bit down hard on her neck, but Ashley didn't care. Her arms braced against the headboard, allowing her to thrust back and forth, forcing a faster rhythm. The fingers of Lupercus free hand found her breasts, kneading and cupping the swaying flesh as she rolled and pinched the nipples. Orgasm ripped through her, low and deep, the feeling was so intense that she let go of her handholds and rubbed her breasts into his hands as she fought for a grip on the sheets. It felt like dying but she never wanted it to end as she saw lights dancing in the dark from the force of her inner convulsions. The crisp hairs of his chest tickled her back until sweat damped his skin and turned the rough caress slick and sensual. Ashley moaned wetly into the bedding as she felt her body's screaming reaction to his nearing release. His cock swelled and hammered in and out until her body tightened so hard she stopped panting and rode the feeling of being ripped in two by the intense pleasure as his hot milk spurted against her womb.

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Collapsing to the bed, Ashley drew air into her lungs and blinked her eyes trying to clear the searing lights from the lids as he rolled to his side and pulled her close, spooning along her back. Ardor spent, the once warm air seemed to cool and she shivered. Lupercus flipped the thick furred covering over them and gently smoothed the hair from her brow.

Her head pillowed on his muscular upper arm, Ashley felt a mixture of deep satiation and guilt. She didn't have a hot bath and a bottle of wine to blame for tonight, only her own body's hunger.

"Is it so bad Ashley, loving me?" He sounded so bereft that she wanted to reassure him, but couldn't. He may have seen and felt their joining to have been loving, but all she felt was lust. Carnality wasn't enough to base a relationship on, was it?

Her heartbeat slowed to match his and she drifted to sleep feeling loved and wretched for not being able to offer the same feeling in return.

Curled around his mate, Lupercus felt her heart breaking as she tried and failed to understand what she felt and it brought tears to his eyes. Perhaps his brother was right, he should take time. Humans, it seemed, didn't love as instantly as wolves.

Chapter Eight Let Sleeping Dogs Lie

“What an idiot!” Ashley slammed the drawer closed as she turned, slapping another layer of clothes in her suitcase. Great sex and a long nap were normally things she dreamed about, but when dreams turn into reality? “After all the promises I made myself, I did it again!” she raged, glaring at her shoe rack.

“Follow your instincts,’ well, I’ve got the instincts of an alley cat,” sighing, she rubbed her forehead. There was so much to do, too much it seemed. She hadn’t realized that Lupercus wanted to leave immediately on his rural mountain tour. It didn’t help that she woke in his bed, sore from another round of mind-blowing sex.

Dumping shoes into a small plastic bag, Ashley looked in the mirror and grimaced. Her face was too pale and her hair was a rat’s nest of snarls. Scooping up her necessary toiletries, she quickly fitted them in an overnight bag before getting to work straightening out the mass of hair.

Trilling birdsong intruded as she fought with the last snarled tress. Dragging her bags into the living room, Ashley walked over and peeked into the huge cage. Ranger was sitting on top of the house, singing as if it was the best day ever, his little feathered chest was plumped as he preened and warbled. Leaning in, she spotted Stephanie sitting on a small nest inside the wooden birdhouse.

“Oh my,” she whispered, “do you have an egg in there?” Her fingers itched to reach in, poke around and find out, but she couldn’t bring herself to upset her birds. *Babies!* What to do? If there was an egg, she couldn’t just drag the birds around from hotel to hotel in the small cage she’d brought them home in. An idea struck sending Ashley to the building directory and the phone. Ten minutes later she had her neighbor’s excited promise to care for her darling birds. The elderly lady had never seen lovebirds lay eggs and was just as excited over the new addition to the apartment.

The excitement made Ashley forget all about being mad and leaving. When

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Lupercus' knock sounded at the door, she dragged him over to the cage. "Look," she beamed as proudly as any potential parent, "they have an egg."

Lupercus stroked the side of the metal cage and smiled at the pleased papa-bird. Ashley crowded in as mama left her perch to dip her small beak in the water bowl. There it was, an oval the size of a man's thumbnail nestled in the fibers. Awe and something more made her hold her breath until the egg was covered from view again.

"In my youth there was a hill with a rocky point, I would go there and sit for hours watching the birds pinwheel in the sky. One time, a small songbird fell and his parents sat to either side encouraging him to hop up and try again. I've missed the birds, thank you Ashley for sharing them." Turning, he gave her an enigmatic look, "I only hope that you are as happy when you carry our child."

With those words Ashley's world lurched to the left and fell to her shoes. Not once had they used one bit of prevention. It had been so long since she had a date Ashley had stopped taking the pill.

"Is it truly so horrible, the idea that you may be carrying my child?" he looked stricken.

"You just don't understand," she sighed. "I know nothing about you." When he made to speak, she pulled a disgusted face, "Aside from the fact that you are good looking, Italian, rich and a few other things."

"For most that would be enough," quietly he distanced himself, collecting her luggage. At the door he turned, "We will be waiting in the car." The door closed with a quiet snick and Ashley felt her face burn.

"I'm not most, I'm me. I need to know more, much, much more," she held her elbows and hugged herself, watching the cage one last time.

Stowing the bags, Lupercus slung himself into the driver's seat and scowled at the LED lights on the dash. "How do you tell someone what you really are?"

"Me? You are asking me for advice?" From his perch in the rear seat, Frank looked stunned.

"Yes, you," Lupercus hated the defeated sound in his voice. "Please, move up to the front, Ashley wishes nothing to do with me tonight. She would be happier with the dogs." Frank had cheerfully sat between the growling pair in the back seat. Both dogs had carriers with belts holding them safely restrained. It seemed that both knew his dual nature and reacted.

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"This little one doesn't really like anyone," he grinned playfully, poking the soft mesh of the elevated carrier. Being a small dog, Mars' carrier was on a foam block so he could see the passing scenery.

"That's why I named him Mars," Lupercus grinned at his twin, as Frank slid into the front passenger seat.

"No way!" the look of astonishment was sincere. "He'd kill you if he found out."

Snorting, Lupercus turned the key and the powerful motor purred to life. "He could try. At this point I'd welcome his wrath." Looking at the concrete ceiling of the parking garage, he almost wished he could see through walls to be certain that his mate hadn't changed her mind.

"Give her time. She doesn't know anything about you." Frank rebuked his brother.

"It took so little for Laurentia to love me," Lupercus griped. Within a day Laurentia had forsaken her human mate for him.

Faunus watched his brother closely, "I never wanted to say anything, but how do you know Laurentia ever loved you?" Lupercus turned and bared his teeth menacingly but Faunus kept talking. "She watched you turn from man to wolf and back again. Man was still young then, they accepted gods walking the Earth without question. She was scared of upsetting you by refusing the honor of being your mate. In time, yes, she did come to love you, but not as you loved her.

"You asked for my advice? Be yourself and share with her your secrets—all of them. Don't spring the god card and throw your weight around. Ashley isn't Laurentia reborn even if she has dreamed of you." Lupercus pinned Faunus with a grim look. "We are twins, I can still read your mind and through you, hers. The Fates took up your cause when none of the elder gods would. Don't fuck this up." Frank faced forward putting on his seatbelt He lowered the sunshade and began fussing with his thick red-brown hair. "And quit calling me Faunus."

"But that is who you are!" Lupercus protested.

"No," his brother primped, easing a stray hair down, "that is who I was before you became the Dianus."

Guilt crawled through Lupercus' belly as he remembered watching the barbarian drive his brother to the scared oak grove of Diana. There, the human had tried to kill Faunus, but Lupercus stopped him. Changing into wolf form, he had kept Herakles from

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murdering his twin. In the end the goddess relented and ordered the stag saved. It then became Lupercus' duty to drive Faunus out of the grove. Without questioning, he had turned on his twin, driving the stag from Diana's wood.

"She still honored you for your beauty far above me for my loyalty," he whispered, the pain crushing his heart still as fresh as it was those three thousand years ago.

"Think brother," Frank slanted him a bitter look, "the gods ignored your rank. You were their equal. You willingly became their lapdog, and for what? To name the stars for human history. You and I are children of the Water Carrier, we swam together in her womb. Look to your Mother, to the stars that birthed us, that is where your mate and her memories flow from."

Across the concrete lot, elevator doors opened and Ashley stepped through, looking nervous and uncomfortable. The fluorescent lights haloed her trim form and soft brown hair, Lupercus felt his heart lurch. Perhaps his twin was right, love required trust and trust required time and honesty.

"How am I to explain you?" He looked at his brother in irritation.

"I, brother dear, don't need explaining. I've signed her paycheck for the last sixteen months." Faunus smirked as he undid his seatbelt and opened the rear passenger door.

Chapter Nine Beware of Dog

Ashley watched as Frank jumped out of the SUV and held the rear passenger door open. He at least seemed happy enough to go adventuring. Behind the wheel, Lupercus looked lost in thought.

Sliding into her seat, Ashley fumbled her belt in place and looked at her seatmates. Mars looked excited with his wagging tail and tongue lolling doggy smile, Beaujolais looked as pensive as a hound could. Leaning forward, she spied copious amounts of newsprint on the floor in case he got carsick. Quickly, she dug around in her purse and pulled out an electronic device. She loved the freedom technology brought and the PDA was her best friend.

Lupercus cursed and clawed at a pocket dragging out a small black cell phone. He looked at the display and growled out something in a foreign tongue. Frank laughed and replied in the same guttural dialect. Sitting in the backseat, Ashley felt very much as if she's crash-landed on another planet.

"If you don't mind my asking, where are we headed?" Lupercus didn't appear to have heard her instead he still looked at the buzzing phone. Reaching a decision, he pushed a button and the window ghosted into the door as his hand made to whip the offending device outside the car.

"Wait! I'll answer your phone," she grabbed at his hand. How could the CEO of a huge multi-million dollar corporation function if he hated technology so badly? "Hello, you've reached Mr. Dianus' phone, how may I help you?" she intoned after flipping the device open. Using the stylus, she jotted a quick note with the caller's concern and identity, promised a return call and closed the slim unit.

"Some answers please?" she requested as the vehicle maneuvered the busy night streets heading for the Parkway West.

"I have many stops to do tonight, my apologies, *tesoro*," his dark gaze met hers in

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the rearview mirror. “At the stops if you would please, allow the dogs some air so as not to be ill.” The sting of being relegated to dog walker was eased by the endearment.

“You do much business at night?” it seemed odd that he would have business calls after nine at night.

“It can be said that most of my business is related to night creatures.” He evaded both the question and her gaze as Frank chuckled lightly from the front seat, making another guttural remark that earned a very wolfish growl from Lupercus.

“Mr. Horne, sir,” she began politely, “how is it that you know Mr. Dianus so well?” The sudden stillness in the front set off her inner radar. This time Lupercus laughed; a very satisfied male sound.

“Look at your employer, *tesoro*, I think the expression is ‘like a deer caught in headlamps’?”

“Headlights,” she absently corrected, waiting patiently for an explanation. When none seemed forthcoming she glared at the man’s back. “*Rispondimi, Lupercus.*”

“Yes, *inamorata*, you do need to know. We are brothers.” The admission started a spate of arguing in the same odd language as before. Ashley didn’t fool herself for one minute as to her linguistic ability—not a word sounded in anyway familiar. Both men had to have known each other before going into business.

“College! You mean you are fraternity brothers?” Ashley blurted the thought, the arguing was upsetting.

“Fraternity means brothers, brothers are brothers,” Lupercus dismissed with a wave of his hand. He shuffled in a small, leather-covered folio under his hip and drew out a piece of paper. “This is where we must be going in the next week. Days will be spent at the farm in Northern West Virginia, listed at the number three. Rooms are needed there.” Ashley accepted the paper and keyed the town into her PDA and felt her spirits plunk into her shoes.

“Ummm...there doesn’t appear to be anything near McClellan.”

“That, *tesoro mio*, is why I’ve retained your services.”

The night was spent navigating snowy roads from interstates to one-lane farm trails. At some of the strangest places Lupercus would leave the car and disappear into the woods. The fastest stop lasted a handful of minutes, the rest averaged close to an hour. Once stopped for a longer stretch, Ashley opened the doors and took each of the dogs for a quick jaunt. In the storage area of the SUV, she found booties for both dogs as

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well as travel containers of food. Her desperate hope that Frank would lend a hand with the walking was dashed after he fell asleep just before midnight and didn't stir no matter the terrain.

By dawn her eyes were gritty with the need to sleep but she had managed to find a bed and breakfast in McClellan willing to take in one nocturnal CEO, a crabby vegan, two dogs and an exhausted dog-walker. Tiredly, Ashley related the information to Lupercus as he piloted the pre-dawn roads.

"What environmental concerns does your company deal with in the middle of the night," she was worn out and felt irritable.

"As the name says, lupine matters. We are concerned with wolves."

She pondered the statement in confusion, "But Pennsylvania doesn't have wolves?"

"It used to. There are some who believe that the wolves have returned, *cara mia*. Now the area has many coyotes. They are of no relation to the wolves, but where there is rumor, we go and seek. Should wolves be found they must be protected." Pulling to the side of the road, he popped the latch on his seatbelt and stretched. Fatigue lined his face and shadowed his eyes as he turned to look at her.

"Eight days ago there was a drive to rid an area on the Pennsylvania and West Virginia border of troublesome coyotes. In this hunt, a grey wolf was killed." Idly his hand brushed against the carriers holding the sleeping canines before finding its way to the swell of her calf. "Grey wolves are an endangered species. The loss of even one is dangerous for the continuation of the species." The tired muscles in her leg jumped at the light caress and she yearned for more. Ashley was tired of fighting the mutual attraction, but there was more going on that she needed to know before she could face losing her heart completely to this enigmatic man.

"An illegal pet?" she asked, her mind miles away from wolves, dogs and other creatures. The only thing her imagination latched onto was the sinful decadence of his lithe fingers caressing her leg.

"That was suggested, yes," he admitted. "The area is known to have produced wolf crosses, but most are of red wolf strain. Grey wolves are found in the Midwest, the red wolf is as close as Tennessee. But those are experimental, reintroduced and rare." His eyes looked haunted. "So few are left," he mourned.

Ashley's heart contracted, for the first time since meeting Lupercus it had little to

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do with out of control hormones but with shared pain. He dearly loved the wolves and it showed.

Silently, he lifted her calf and slipped the heavy shoe off, massaging the bottom of her foot. Suddenly it didn't seem so bad, walking dogs at weird hours of the night. Warm fingers cradled her heel as his thumbs rubbed the slightly swollen instep. The pressure turned electric as his fingers swept the side of the arch to caress the soft skin of her ankle.

"What was your family like?" The question blindsided Ashley, she'd been lost to the sensation of his hands; imagining the same touch feathering outward to the rest of her body.

"Family," she sighed. "I was the only child, a menopause baby, really," she considered. Even in her earliest memories her mom and dad had been inseparable, "My parents love each other very much," she smiled. There had been so many times as a child where her parents had gotten so caught up in each other and their activities that they had forgotten their daughter. "They love me very much, but I think they are so used to loving each other that I threw them for a bit of a surprise."

"So, that is why you didn't think twice about leaving home and finding your own mate." He'd moved sometime during the moments when her eyes sagged closed enjoying his touch. Sitting on the center console, Lupercus tucked the exposed foot under his coat and picked up the other. With a twist of his wrist the other shoe landed on the floor.

"Maybe," she admitted, "I never really thought of it in those terms before. I knew I wanted to see the places I'd read about, dreamed about, but it never seemed real." A small frown crossed her brow as she remembered standing next to a fountain replicated from an ancient Italian palazzo and feeling an inner chord strike, "It was like coming home, yet it wasn't." She found herself explaining.

In the darkness of the car, Ashley could have sworn his eyes glowed green, scant seconds before the flickering lights of a passing car illuminated the cab. Funny, she told herself, only animal's eyes reflect light that way.

"You search for love that you have always dreamed of, yes?" He asked, hands sliding under her loose pant legs to tease the delicate flesh behind her knee. "Yet, you do not believe in knowing your love at first glance." The dim dash lights haloed his dark head, giving him a very wolfish looking mane. Ashley let her imagination run wild, as his hands drew warm licks of heat to pool low in her belly.

"I'd like to," she admitted in a sad tone. "But the one time I thought I found that

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special man looking at me from across the room, it was a mistake." Ashley slid down in the seat as he pulled his hands free but continued the soothing ministrations over the cloth of her pants.

"*Cara mia*, it is easy to mistake infatuation with love. Once, I thought I had found my true love." Her eyes widened, she couldn't imagine any woman not falling in love with such a sexy man. She was just, well, a tall brunette, not bad to look at but nothing remarkable. He exuded power and grace like no one else. *Tall, dark and handsome, my own dark knight for my own personal fairy tale*, she smiled as her mind rambled in the shadows.

"This is very true. She had a look of joy that made me want to run and bring her flowers." He tucked Ashley's other foot beneath his coat lapel and sat still, urging her to meet his gaze. "But after we came together, I never saw that look of joy again."

Lupercus was more than a wealthy, good-looking man. Honor was evident in his every action. Not once had he treated her like an easy lay, but handled her like priceless china. The idea of another woman made her stomach twist. "Then she didn't love you," Ashley felt insanely jealous of a woman she'd never met.

"That's what I told him," Frank's sleepy and aggravated tones issued from the front seat. "But would he listen to me? Oh, no," he drew out the last syllable in an annoying way that made Lupercus growl.

Ashley smiled, they argued just like real siblings.

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Chapter Ten Lonely is the Wolf

“Welcome back Dread Lord,” the smiling face of a pretty, petite woman framed with shaggy black hair met them at the door of Daniel’s Choice Bed and Breakfast. Ashley may have been exhausted but the warm welcome in the other woman’s eyes snapped her to life.

“Dread Lord?” she asked, inwardly she cringed at the harpy tone but it rankled that this attractive female seemed to know Lupercus intimately enough to tease him. Ashley was disheveled and tired, in other words, in no mood to meet competition. “Did someone forget to tell me something or what?”

Her world tilted as she went from glaring to being picked up and spun crazily in Lupercus’ arms. His lips captured hers in a rush that left her senses spinning. “You are jealous of nothing, *tesoro*. I told you, you hold my heart, no other.” Brilliant emerald lights sparkled in his eyes as he rubbed his nose against hers. The casual caress made her hungry body and soul for a bed and a distinct lack of clothes between them.

“Sir,” the young woman tried to interrupt.

“Not now,” he said in a low voice, “which room is ours?” Ashley loved and hated the feeling his words sent sizzling through her insides. A welter of voices must have given him the answer needed because the lights spun crazily again as he carried her though a neat foyer and up a narrow wooden staircase. Her world dipped as he shouldered through a door on the right, settling her on the bed.

Ashley looked around in bemusement. It was just before dawn and the sun was shedding a watery, pink light through the room, revealing pale yellow walls and a number of homemade quilts, decorating white wicker chairs. *It was a lovely room*, she thought as her hands petted the knobby texture of the crocheted spread gracing the bed beneath her.

Gently, he pushed her to lie back against the soft pillows. Standing beside her prone form, she watched him tauntingly as he started to undress. In shock Ashley realized

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that Lupercus never held anything back while making love to her. Not once had he worked her flesh and watched - he'd given as much as he'd taken, perhaps more.

Fumbling, her hands reached to undo the buttons on her jacket but he stopped her with a shushing sound. Golden fingers clasped hers; raising them to his soft, yet firm lips kissing the tips. "You are on the edge of loving me, *cara*. Allow me these hours then I will tell you what has been withheld."

Reality smacked Ashley in the face. "You don't think I'll be able to love you when I know whatever this secret is?" Her eyes searched his face looking for a hint or clue to what could be so hideous as to make him unworthy of love.

"For an eternity, *tesoro*, the thought of you swam in my blood like fire." Stepping back he slid off the rest of his clothes. The wan sunlight caressed his skin and Ashley was awed. He looked like black veined marble in the half-light and shadows. *Perfection*, she thought, her hand lifting to a muscled thigh.

He bend his head, bringing his mouth inches from hers, "No, *cara*, I wish to unwrap you like a present." His breath heated the air, breathing heat across her lips a scant second before sucking her full lower lip.

Before Ashley, he sought nothing more than release between a woman's legs. Ashley was different, special. When he saw Ashley, he didn't just see eyes the color of the storm-tossed sky, he saw his salvation. Too many years his heart bled as he watched his chosen people love and bear children. Yes, he'd been welcome in their homes, bounced babes on his knees, but there was always a feeling of fear and caution lurking in the air. No matter his sacrifices and love for the human-wolf pack he'd adopted, they still knew him as a god, still feared his power.

One time, that was all he dared ask the stars to give him, just one moment locked within her body to feel the full weight of her love and acceptance. That was all he wanted. Afterwards, when the fear rode her, he could at least remember these stolen hours. Unbidden, tears rose to his eyes, the salted drops splashed to her cheeks. From a distance, he felt her small delicate hands ghost across his shoulders to grip the muscles of his back. Impatiently, he deepened the kiss, swallowing a gasping moan bubbling up from her throat.

Urgently, his fingers freed the buttons of her coat then dipped to the hem of her shirt. He couldn't seem to get the confining layers off fast enough. Shaking violently with need, he nearly howled as a cool hand encircled his cock.

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“Get your attention?” she grinned, ducking her head to lick the skin along his throat. Concentrating on the layers of material, he tried to ignore the waves of pleasure that ripple through his body. “Mmm...so soft,” she nuzzled his neck as he unzipped her pants, exposing the lean planes of her alabaster stomach. Her skin gleamed like fresh cream. Hungrily, he bent his head and licked a circle around her belly button, dipping his tongue to tease the small spot. Convulsively her hand tightened, fisting and milking his hard length.

Lifting her with an arm around her waist, he freed her legs from the pants, leaving her wearing nothing but lacy bra and panties. He scented her perfume on the air and licked his lips. Never would he have enough of the taste of her wild and begging on his tongue. He laid her on the bed and bent to the juncture of her thighs and pulled them roughly apart then rubbed his nose across her pulsing mound, licking the damp material and eliciting a soft moan from her lips.

Ashley nearly forgot she was holding the silken length of his erection as he positioned her legs, rubbing his face hungrily against her mound. He fit perfectly in her hand, fat at the base making her feel small as she stroked the velvet flesh; her thumb rubbing the underside of his shaft, to engulf his whole member. Her stomach clenched and bucked as he teased her through her panties, licking the lace wet with her cream. His hands held her legs wide apart as he teased the small bud of her arousal through the slick fabric.

Arching and tossing her head wanting more, Ashley’s fever-bright gaze saw how he’d brought her closer to the musky organ bobbing in her hand. Wriggling, she moved under him, letting her head slide down the edge of the mattress as her tongue found the soft flesh of his sac. The pendulous skin wrinkled and tightened up as she suckled the smooth skin on the underside of his testicles. Jerking, he pulled back and Ashley crowed with victory. Her hand reached up and pulled the tumescent head of his cock to her mouth. She lapped at the blood-darkened skin, loving the taste of his milk coating the soft head. With a soft sucking sound, she slid him into her mouth, holding tight to his trim hips. The feel of his sleek skin under her hands was almost as sweet as the taste of him sliding down her throat. When he made to push deeper than she could take him, she grazed his cock lightly with her teeth in warning and slid her hands around to cup his buttocks. Fitfully, she suckled him as her fingers kneaded his firm ass. She felt him shudder and heave trying to hold back.

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There was a tug and a ripping sound and then her wet core was exposed to the cooler air. Ashley's mouth stilled as she felt his thick fingers sliding through her folds, holding her nether lips open. The wet probe of his tongue licked at the salted skin, chasing the creamy moisture that pooled out from her sheath. Slowly, he flicked the nub of her clit with his tongue, sparking currents through her form making her writhe and buck as her mouth worked him. Desperately, she laved him with her tongue and teeth trying to make him as wild for her as she was for him. The feeling of his fingers slowly sliding in and out of her sheath as his mouth settled to lick and suckle her sensitized flesh was more than she could stand. She whimpered around his cock as she tried to hang on, but failed, as her body rippled with pleasure.

Ashley felt her body hovering on the edge of collapse when he pulled back. Rough hands picked her up and cuddled her back against his furred chest. Lupercus turned them on the bed so that he lay against the pillows. With quick gestures, he made her straddle his hips, facing away from him. In the corner of the room was a tall mirror; Ashley saw herself, legs spread, skin flushed, hair wild as she rose to accept his cock deep within. His hands gripped her buttocks and pitched her forward, deepening the penetration of his rod so that it brushed the top of her womb.

Behind her, Lupercus sat up, capturing her gaze in the mirror, willing her to watch the burning green of his gaze as he lifted a hand to his lips and licked a digit before dropping it wet to part her folds and caress the slick flesh. Her inner muscles rippled and sagged unable to keep her jerking hips still.

Giving in to the burning heat within her she cried out, holding his gaze in the reflective pane as the thickness of his cock stretched her, rubbing the inner surfaces; the muscles of her stomach twisted low, holding him tight against her womb as she gripped his knees and rode him. Her world shrank to the sensation of his fingers, the swell of his cock and his voice growling encouragement in an unknown language. Arching up and bowing forward, her release slammed through her, making her legs tighten convulsively as light filled her vision.

Without letting her stop, Lupercus rose to his knees and forced her body into wave after wave of aftershocks that robbed Ashley of the ability to breathe. She begged under him as he bore her down into the rough fabric of the bedcover, abrading her nipples. She's never felt anything like it before, the brush of his chest hair against her back, her legs stretched to the point of burning pain as her sheath convulsed again and

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again in pleasure. Deep inside, she felt her body tighten impossibly one last time, gripping and milking his deep thrusting shaft as he poured his seed against her womb.

Gasping, Lupercus nearly collapsed on Ashley's splayed body. Every time they coupled the feeling was intense, but never could he imagine the intensity of the last wave of pleasure. Smiling, he tried to pull out of her body but found he couldn't. Her sheath gripped him and wouldn't let go. Instead he rose, lifting her body to lie back against the pillows as he twitched the coverlet to shield their bodies from sight.

Kissing the amber crown of her head, he mourned. He had asked for this gift of her, to hold against the terror he knew would come. It was time to tell her the truth of his existence, but he couldn't do it. His arms banded around her slim form protectively, wanting nothing more than to stop time at this moment and hold it forever in the palm of eternity.

Ashley felt his breath against her ear, felt the telltale hitch to his breathing that meant he was upset. *It must be the secret*, she thought. Comfortingly, she turned her head and kissed the smooth plane of his shoulder. In return he feathered kisses along her neck, making her body spasm reflexively, freeing his softening member.

"You don't have to tell me," she surprised herself with the words. "It doesn't matter." His body stilled a second before he turned her in his arms and nearly crushed her to his chest.

"There are things you must know," his hand at her back nervously caressed her.

"Things that will change the way I see and think of you." It wasn't a question but he responded with a nod. "Do you even know how I see you?"

The question took him by surprise. Gently, he shifted Ashley in his arms so he could watch her face. He couldn't stand the separation and hooked a leg around hers, holding her close.

"How then, do you see me?" the question made his insides quake in fear and longing. Calm grey eyes weighed and measured as a slim finger tucked a stray hair behind his ear.

"When I first met you, I thought you too good to be true. You seemed to walk right out of my dreams and into my hallway." Full lips gave a half-smile as she tried to evade his gaze, tucking up under his neck. He'd waited too long to hold and see this perfect woman, his other half; he needed to see her eyes. With his hand he lifted her face to his.

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Sighing, Ashley gave in and smiled.

"You are a good employer," she continued, "those who work for you feel comfortable enough to tease me about you." A light blush stained her cheeks and Lupercus wondered what was said in his absence.

"Blue is your favorite color because it reminds you of the first time you really looked into the sky. So many never look up and never see anything other than clouds or sun. Not what is there but what can make their day good or bad. You never seem to think about yourself, others always come first." He stopped the flow of words with a finger to her lips.

"There, *tesoro mio*, I must correct you. Every time I see your beauty I think only of my own need to be with you."

"Uh huh," she grinned, "that is why you replaced my damaged shoe, bought me a scarf and stood bare-ass naked in my bathroom handing me a weapon." She wriggled and a slim leg brushed his sac, stirring his libido. "If all you wanted was me in bed, you would have left that night while I was sleeping. But you didn't," the spark of laughter dimmed, "you stayed. Men after just sex don't stay. They don't take their one-night-stand to work or consider their feelings enough to cover love bites with a beautiful gift and shared memory."

Ashley paused and carefully considered her next words. "You didn't make me feel silly about my birds laying an egg. In fact, you gave me time to see them cared for. If all you wanted was sex, you would have been impatient and demanding."

"Ah, but I am a patient hunter, *mio piccolo agnello*." She snorted at his low grumbling growl.

"Let me guess, you're the Big Bad Wolf to my little lamb-self?" This time he flinched violently. "Lupercus," she ran her hands up his ribcage and over his arms seeking to sooth him, "what's wrong, what did I say?"

Without answering, he slid from the bed and stood in the warm morning light, hair tousled from her fingers, but otherwise magnificently bare. She knew he was trying to be serious, but her mind kept looking at the sleek muscle lines, the way shadows outlined every sinful inch of male perfection. Her tongue wanted to trace his body from throat to ankle and back again.

"Have you ever heard of the Roman god of the wolves?"

Okay, she wondered what brought on the sudden need to talk about mythology

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but decided to play along. *The view wasn't particularly hard on the eyes*, she smiled. Mind more on him than his words, she shook her head to the negative.

“What about the Lupa? Have you heard of her?” He paced along the side of the bed and Ashley had to physically stop herself from reaching out and touching the satiny skin passing by. Lupa, the word echoed in her head, stirring a memory.

“Wait! I think I know this, she was supposed to be a wolf that raised, what’s their names,” she squinted her eyes in thought, “the twins, Romulus and Remus.”

“Very good, *tesoro*,” he smiled and stepped back. The sun haloed his dark golden skin to a burnished sheen. *Like a bronzed statue of a god*, she thought with a soft smile. “She was no wolf, the Lupa, she was a human woman, the chosen mate of a god, the god of wolves; Lupercus.” He stopped and waited.

Ashley felt her brow wrinkle in confusion. What did this have to do with anything? For a moment she wondered if he was mentally unbalanced, delusions of being godlike because he was named after an obscure god.

“No, Ashley Cooper,” he gazed at her with haunted eyes, “I do not suffer delusions of godhood, I suffer the realities of it.” He knelt and Ashley pulled the coverlet up to her throat trying to make sense of what she heard as her eyes tried to make her brain understand what she was seeing. His form refracted the sunlight, making the outline of his body appear hazy and indistinct. The softened edges began to swirl, flow and dance into shadows and lines. Muscles twitched, elongated and disappeared under the cover of hair.

Kneeling beside the bed was no man, but a wolf.

“Holy shit,” she breathed, sitting straight up. Almost afraid to look away, she scrubbed her fists against her eyes and looked again. Still a wolf. A very large wolf. A wolf with eyes the color of a blade of grass. “Lupercus?” she was almost afraid to breathe.

“Oh, my God!” Infuriatingly, the wolf tilted his head. “No, not you,” she waved her hand in self-disgust. “But,” forgetting her nakedness, she dove out of bed to look into the bright morning sky, “there isn’t a full moon.” She felt seriously off balance looking at the large, black and grey wolf as he settled onto the floor.

“You didn’t say werewolf though, did you,” she mused, “you said Roman wolf god.” Her face felt funny, like it had been sunburned and frozen at the same time. In a daze, she slapped herself hard.

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"Okay, we aren't asleep. Drugged?" she asked the silent furred figure, as it put its nose between its front paws. Dropping to all fours, she crawled up to the huge beast and examined it closely. She'd heard of drug trips that made people hallucinate but never a sustained delusion or one so detailed. Tentatively, she reached out a hand; trying to keep her fingers from shaking as she felt the fur of his ruff. It felt nothing like the rough, wire hair of Mars or the soft velvety folds of Beaujolais. Mind screaming, she plunked down on her butt next to the wolf and simply petted him, giggling drunkenly.

"When I thought about petting you, this was so not what I had in mind." His fur felt like his hair; thick, luxuriant and full. As a wolf he even smelled as he did as a man; an aroma of distant pine and warm musk. "I feel like Alice but instead of a white rabbit I get a black wolf."

Her skin prickled and tingled and her eyes felt fuzzy as she watched him change again, back to man. It was nothing like the special effect guys splashed across movie screens, it was like superimposing one picture over another in a gradual bleed. She blinked owlishly before reaching out and brushing his arm.

"You are not afraid of me?" his voice was tight with emotion. All she could do was shake her head and blink. "How can you not be afraid?" Ashley caught his face between her hands and marveled at the sharp planes and hollows. The same features that were so attractive as a man were equally striking in the wolf.

"Oh, I am afraid all right, afraid that I've lost my mind. But you, no, I don't fear you. The morning you ripped my bathroom door off its hinges I knew you could hurt me, but inside," she rubbed a spot above the valley of her breasts. "Inside I knew you wouldn't use that against me." She felt so lost inside her body and mind. How did she know that morning that he would never hurt her? The damned dreams, it all came back to those damned dreams.

"I think I need something to eat," she decided. Maybe food would help settle her churning stomach and chase the fuzzies away from her brain. Ashley shook her head; it felt funny, like it was layered in thick pads of cotton. In a daze, she slipped her discarded clothes back on and wandered towards the door.

Ashley almost walked into the doorframe as she stumbled out of the room and away from him.

Lupercus collapsed on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He'd been ready for screams, tears and terror, but nothing had prepared him for a stunned acceptance and for

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Ashley to embrace insanity.

For a split second after the change when she had simply looked at him in bemusement, he thought perhaps she had been ready, was fully able to understand what he was. Then reality hit. *What was her obsession with drugs?* He mused staring at the decorative whirls of plaster on the ceiling. Shaking his head, he sat up. The wolf howled for him to drag her off until she accepted him as her mate, the man mourned.

A knock at the door broke through his thoughts, making his heart thunder in hope. A dark head peeked in and his chest felt as if it was pierced by a long barb.

“Lupercus?” it was Flora, staring intently at the carpet underfoot.

He sighed and stood up, suddenly very tired, “I’ve no clothes on, if you wish we can talk later.”

“No Lord, this can’t wait.”

Chapter Eleven Barking Mad

Ashley stumbled down the stairs and followed her nose to the rear dining room. The room was full of lacy doilies and frothy curtains that captured the sunlight and diffused it painlessly through the room, allowing the food in silver salvers to stand out in prominence. On autopilot, she filled her plate with heaps of food. Dimly she registered that it smelled great but her stomach felt like it was located in a foreign country. Turning towards the table, her eyes passed over a folded lump of paper. Ashley almost did a double take as her eyes tracked back to the creased newspaper.

Setting the plate down forgotten on a sideboard, she grabbed the paper and a cup of coffee. Inside twisting, she forced herself to slowly pace through the thin pages of the small local periodical so as not to miss the horoscope section. On the next to last page, opposite the comics, there it was...the words she had gone from an almost guilty obsession to an all encompassing passion. Her heart skipped a beat as her eyes scanned the headings but didn't see either the name or sign for Aquarius. "Get a grip," she told herself as she clenched her eyes closed and took a few deep breaths. Opening her eyes, she felt chagrined to see the reason there wasn't a heading—the first horoscope listed was for the current sign, her sign. Greedily, her eyes followed the words, hoping for a hidden meaning to puzzle over.

Instead she found herself giggling hysterically as Lupercus, Frank and the dark haired woman walked into the room. *You are capable of managing difficult situations so don't look to others—find the way to achieve your goals.* What the hell was that supposed to mean? Looking at Lupercus, her heart twisted painfully. Did she love him or simply lust after him, and did she really want that after what she just saw. Did she even see it? Looking at him, she noticed mannerisms that weren't quite human; the way he moved and held himself was almost alien. Initially she had put it down to his being foreign, but now? Now she watched carefully as he seemed to almost talk to himself with small tics,

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shifting glances and twitches of his ears and nose that humans didn't normally use, unless reacting to an external stimuli.

Smack! Her world tilted and righted. Ashley blinked in confusion at the motion and sharp sting on her cheek. "What the hell was that for?" she demanded, rubbing her face lightly.

"You were mumbling like a nut-job." Amazingly varied eyes bored into her. They were brilliant jewel toned, green with thick striations of every color imaginable radiating outwards from the center.

"Like the center of a flower surrounded by leaves." Ashley didn't realize she'd spoken aloud until Frank's laughter echoed in her ears.

"I think you need to hit her again," he grinned at the bristling woman of the beautiful eyes.

"Ignore that one," full soft lips pulled into a thin line, "my name is Flora Daniels, this is my sister's home and business. She's usually the one who takes care of guests but she just gave birth so..." she opened her arms in a gesture of frustrated welcome. Lupercus moved to stand behind Flora.

"Perhaps you've suffered enough of a shock today Ashley. Instead of staying for this meeting, take Mars and Beaujolais for a walk." His eyes were shuttered and brackets of exhaustion framed his mouth and eyes. A part of Ashley felt gratitude, another kicked her sharply in the gut. He could no more help being whatever it was that he was, than she could help the feeling of being on a foreign planet.

"No, I may as well get the full effect," she tried for a smile and failed. Rubbing her cheeks, Ashley couldn't understand why her face felt so rubbery and thick.

Flora didn't seem so assured, "Do you think this wise, Dread Lord? Marc and the rest..." a brusque hand motion cut off the complaint before it was fully formed. Ashley was astounded. The woman didn't argue or even give him a nasty glance, just backed down with something akin to an uneasy fear in her eyes.

A laden plate thumped on the table in front of her. Looking up in askance, Ashley met Frank's soft, brown eyes. "Your plate right? Eat. You'll need it if you're going to be tramping around in the snow all day."

Snow? Her stomach dropped to her shoes like a big, lead weight. What did she volunteer for now?

Staring wistfully at her plate, Ashley was almost relieved when a large group of

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men arrived. They prowled the room, sniffing the air and looking nervous. Then it hit her, "Are all of them like you?" After the words blurted out she winced at the bluntness of her query.

"They are like me, yet they are different, *cara mia*." Lupercus didn't seem to feel compelled to explain so Ashley bit her tongue, hard. Finally the milling crowd sat uncomfortably in the different chairs.

"Send her away, Lord," the growl came from a man with oddly streaked hair that seemed more wolf than man.

"She is my mate." Lupercus' voice sounded almost bored but the tension level rocketed up in the small room. The red and black streaked head swiveled and preternatural iced eyes studied her as his lip twitched, showing a bit of tooth, a very large conical, inhuman tooth.

"Lupercus," she hated the quaver of fear in her voice, "I thought you said you were the only one who could partially change?"

"I am. However," he pinned the short-coupled man with the odd features with a quelling glance, "Red Silvestri prefers to remain in wolf shape. It was not the form he was born to, but every time we force him to return to man, a little less of him comes home."

Ashley felt a jolt of paralyzing fear followed by a sudden wash of shame. Something obviously happened to the man to make him turn wholeheartedly from the life he had known for the woods. Red's anger beat against her senses like birds' wings. Slightly puzzled at her heightened psychic senses, Ashley strove to follow the conversion that started flowing.

"We need to do something Lord, the coyotes are savaging livestock all over, yet every time a farmer picks up a gun a wolf is shot."

"A wolf? Are these wolves full-blooded?" Ashley felt the weight of the room on her shoulders. She ignored the feeling and focused on what the slight man with dishwater blond hair was saying.

"They aren't full-blooded, no, and thankfully unlike the first kill, they haven't been of the Blood."

"The Blood?"

"Lord," Red growled menacingly, "she should not be here."

Lupercus sat back in his chair, looking like a tired but bored businessman in his

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camel colored suit and starched white linen shirt, tapping a slim gold pen against his lips. Lips that had moved across her skin, dragging heated whips of lightning through her body and soul.

“Red, I won’t speak to you again on this matter. Once more,” those brilliant green eyes went empty, “and we’ll settle this outside. Since you are so full of energy, explain the Blood to my mate.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to object to all this mate talk. She never agreed to dating let alone mating but the ill feeling in the room stopped her.

“We are all Sons of Delphi, cursed by Apollo to walk in day as wolf and man by night. Lupercus took us in, changed the curse to be a blessing We can choose now after puberty to be man or wolf for so long as we wish, but we can only change shape once per day.” Ashley felt her brow wrinkle.

“But, isn’t Apollo also known as the Wolf-God?” deep growls around the table made her flinch but she sat waiting an answer.

“He laid this claim after turning one of our brothers to bronze for begging his pregnant wife be spared. Now his living soul is bound inside a statue guarding his shrine,” Red spat on the rug. Dimly, Ashley noticed that Flora flinched and twitched at the wet globule decorating the rug.

“You said he begged for his pregnant wife to be spared? But aren’t only sons afflicted?” Her trip down the rabbit hole was turning into a logistical nightmare.

“Women were affected until the Wolf Lord took pity,” the growling tones softened, showing deference.

“I see,” she said, even though she really didn’t.

“No you don’t,” Lupercus sounded almost amused, “I was given a task and I failed. But one of the gods I met agreed to help my human-wolf pack. She freed the women from the curse but they all have odd talents from her touch.”

A sudden light sparked, “Like Julia’s being able to cure headaches.” Okay, things were starting to make sense. As if talking to werewolves in a twenty-first century world could ever possibly make sense. Shaking her head, Ashley resigned herself to going insane. Looking around the room, she concluded that at the least she’d have company.

Two hours later she wasn’t so sure. Frank and Lupercus had outfitted her with a puffy down-filled jacket that had sweat pooling into the waist of her jeans. But it didn’t

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really matter as she stared at the grim leaden sky, wearing two layers of jeans assured she'd stay dry. It was the final indignity of putting the ridiculous harness over her shoulders that caused her to want to cry.

At first blush, it looked like one of those rigs moms used to hold infants snuggled to their chest. Only this held Mars, facing outward. His immense ears were up and she felt the steady thump of his tail on her stomach. It wouldn't be so terribly bad, she reflected if Mars didn't react like a flesh imprisoned extra from the Alien movies whenever people moved too close or attempted to touch him.

Snarling and snapping with flecks of foam flying from his mouth, Ashley wanted to crawl in a hole and disappear. Only that was out of the question because Beaujolais would get upset over the barking and start circling her at top speed, looking for the threat—that he could never seem to find. The men found it hilarious and kept trying to touch the damned rodent dog. When the one named Marc tried one last time to fondle the black dog's ears, Ashley snapped.

“If you do that one more time, I'll bite you myself,” the leashed fury in her voice managed to stall the entire congregation for a gawk session. Beaujolais chose that moment to go on guard by doing his impression of a furry hula-hoop. Hands passed the leash around and around until the heavy hound forgot what it was doing, but her stormy gaze never left Marc's.

She felt rather than saw Lupercus close in behind her, as a rage heavier than any bout of PMS gripped her, Ashley felt rivulets of sweat trickling through her hair as a reddish haze settled over her eyes. “Walking this dog,” she ground out, “is like having a seizure on roller skates.” Oh ho! Her eyes darted from one man to the next looking for a twinkling eye, a half grin or a swallowed snicker for her to pounce on

“Come,” Lupercus barked from behind her. Ashley almost turned as her lip fought against a primal snarl. Red walked forward and took Beaujolais' leash. Another man stepped close and popped the plastic releases, dragging the small dog's harness over his beefy arm.

Ashley felt wildly out of control. Quickly, Lupercus stripped off her hat, gloves and thick downy coat. Something about her made the men's eyes widen and they stepped back. She didn't know why but the reaction made her madder than hell. She wanted to grind her teeth but it felt like there were too many for her mouth to close. Bent at her side, Lupercus apologized and twisted his hands ripping the denim along the outside seams.

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Cooler air caressed her head, sank into the hollows of her neck and shoulders as the wind buffeted her legs and torso. Clenching her fingers, she noticed something felt wrong, her hands felt swollen, fingers thick and unresponsive.

“Come,” he barked again and this time something primitive lifted its head and stared through her eyes as she turned to seek him.

All day he could smell something was different about Ashley, but he couldn't put his finger on the cause. She couldn't be changing. His heart refused the evidence of his senses. It was impossible. For her to be changing meant one thing—that she accepted him as her mate of her own free will. That she begged an elder god for the conversion. But she was Christian, didn't believe in the elder gods. Then he saw her eyes and nearly cried. For some reason the beast rose within, but she was out of control. Ashley was fighting the change, rejecting him. He had to find a way to diffuse her energy without allowing her body to fully change into the wolf. If she changed, it would be with her forever. There would be no going back even if she rejected him as her mate. He didn't allow himself time to ponder why she was changing, instead he grabbed her by the arm and propelled her towards the woods. The men knew to go ahead.

They stepped into the trees and walked towards a small clearing where the snow was packed and pristine. Without warning, he reached forward and grasped the hem of her sweater and shirt, lifting them abruptly over her head. Spinning, her mouth opened but he grabbed her hips and heaved upwards. Stunned, she reactively lifted her hands and grasped the tree branch overhead, suspending her above the ground. Before letting go could enter her mind, he knelt and pulled her boots free and tugged jeans and socks off of her lithe body. Her skin should have turned to gooseflesh, mottled, purpled—something, he searched her features in desperation. Ashley couldn't be that close to changing without conversion, but she was.

The rough bark under her hands was a revelation. The sharp ridges and whirls had textures that flowed across her palms, itching like hidden energy flowing into her veins. Ashley felt the tree, knew its name and purpose, the passage of time and the impressions that had passed beneath its branches.

By the time she thought to take note of the arctic air blasting across her naked body, Lupercus had placed her legs on his bared shoulders. His skin was so hot it burned even under her super-heated body. Reflexively her knees widened, calves tightening bringing his face closer to her mound. The heat coursing through her veins centered there,

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thrumming with a physical palpitation as her sex pulsed. His nose rubbed the spots on her thighs where her musky dampness imprinted, the tease made her body quake in need. The smell of sex flooded her nostrils, pushing her to heave closer. He pulled back, making her hips lift placing her nether lips scant inches from his mouth.

"What do you want Ashley?" the tantalizing brush of breath across her swollen skin made her writhe.

What *did* she want? Frustration caused her to cry out, biting her lower lip. She wanted his mouth on her, his cock inside her, hands possessing her...but was that all she wanted? The burning in her blood intensified and her core wept, coating her opening and lips. Ashley moaned; all she ever wanted was love, love that was just for her, a mate that would love her as her parents loved one another, but with enough room in his heart for children.

"Love...children," she panted. His tongue rasped the inside of a thigh and she gripped the bough tighter.

"Children, you want them right now?" his voice continued to tease as his hands moved to cup her buttocks, kneading the pliant flesh with his strong fingers. Air hiccupped in her chest as her lungs painfully reminded her to inhale.

"Soon," she gasped out, "I want love now." With the admission a weight seemed to lift off of her chest and center lower, intensifying the burn.

"I love you, do you accept my love?"

The human part of her brain screamed that it was impossible to really love so fast, but another part roared through her mind, showing her snippets of memories, foods, faces, pets, places and more that she had loved from first sight. Sobbing, she nodded, the mane of her hair falling into her eyes.

"Will you be my mate?"

The idea terrified as it exhilarated her. To be with the man who made her complete was nothing to fear, but what of the wolf and his pack? The skin along her spine tightened as he turned his head and licked the flesh on either side of her core. Her body spasmed and without thinking she answered from the bottom of her heart.

"Yes." With that one small word he buried his face in the nest of curls and thrust deep with his tongue making her cry out as frissons of pleasure echoed through her blood. "Need--need more--fast!" she begged. His tongue slid between her folds, circling the nub of her clit as she tried to lever closer. A finger slid in and she gasped, her pulse thundered

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in her ears as an ache built low and mean. Wildly she lifted her hips, rocking against his lapping tongue and stabbing finger, needing more.

Lupercus lifted his head and she howled a protest. "Let go," he demanded, hands bracketing her ribs. Releasing her hold on the branch, her hands clutched at his arms as he turned and carried her to the edge of the field. Thick ropes of ice hung from a small willow tree at the opening. Pushing her down on all fours in the snow, she dimly heard the tinkling snap of ice as he widened her stance. His firm hand pushed her lower back into a deep arch forcing the tips of her aching nipples to brush against the snow. The cold wasn't painful, but heady, chill bites soothing and rioting through her senses as the passion hardened areolas dipped and rocked in the crystalline blanket they shared.

Watching the almost hypnotic sway of her breasts as they trailed in the snow, Ashley saw steam rising from her body where it nestled in the chill white blanket. Hungrily she pushed her hips back as she watched him drop to his knees behind her. The muscles of her sheath clenched and spasmed, anticipating his thick length. Instead she felt a finger of ice tracing her seam from wet blushing mound to puckered pink anus. Slowly he traced designs on her buttocks and hips, always circling back to follow the lines of her labia, between her curls. The first time the icicle rubbed against her clit she clenched her stomach and drew away from the chill caress. He held it there and slid another small piece into the soft, pink rosette of her ass. It slipped in and the muscles drew up tight, aching as her hips bucked. His hand reached out and grasped her hair, forcing her back down. As the ice melted, she felt it racing through her body like quicksilver and shivered in anticipation of feeling the foreign delight again.

Sensing her need, he dipped the icicle in his mouth then slowly traced the blushing skin of her mound. Fingers brushed the virgin skin of her ass, dipping to spread her open. Ashley arched, rubbing her breasts against the snow, loving the rough feel. It was like a cold tongue laving the skin, making it tighter than a hot mouth ever had. Ice finger and warm hands alternated at her opening, sliding in and kneading the tight inner walls. Desperately her core tightened around the sliver of ice, drawing cool trails of water deep inside to tickle her womb. Suddenly the ice probe was pushed deep as his tongue licked and drank the fluid limning her lower lips. An explosive orgasm ripped through her body as the rippled icicle thrust in and out, in time with his lapping tongue. Her clit ached and she raised trembling fingers to soothe the hungry skin, only to have him roughly push her hand away. Growling, he cast aside the icicle and held her hips tight in

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his hands. Poised on bent legs, he thrust deep and hard, forcing the muscles fisted with cold to accept his searing length.

Ashley felt the head, thick and swollen as it pushed in deep. The burning heat rose in her blood and she moaned, grabbing handfuls of snow trying to get her balance to push back, make him go faster, but he didn't move. Buried hilt deep he slowly, tauntingly pulled out, letting the chill air kiss her womb before sliding back inside.

"Faster, harder," she begged to no avail, the strokes came quicker but not fast enough to extinguish the inferno building low in her belly. Her hand crept back to her mound, hoping to end the torture but he brushed it aside, as his own fingers slipped between her nether lips and massaged the erect flesh of her clit.

Ashley howled as her body lost control. Legs sprawled in the snow, hips pounding back against his, her core rippled and spasmed again and again as his fingers strummed a tattoo on her clit. Darkness and brilliant shards of light danced behind her eyelids as her core fisted his thickness, hard; milking him. A deep tingle was her only warning as a tide of energy flowed through her veins scalding her inner walls and seized violently around his spurting rod. She felt the hot liquid coating her womb and shivered again as aftershocks suckled his cock greedily, wanting every last drop.

Her lungs bellowed taking in air. Spots danced in front of her eyes as she shook her head and looked around, befuddled. The sound of her teeth chattering snapped her to attention. Ashley found herself unutterably mortified at her behavior with Lupercus in front of his extended family. She wrapped her arms around her body and tried to stagger upright but her legs didn't want to work right. Looking down, she saw soft, downy fur, brindled in bands of brown and black, gracing her not so human legs before her mind short-circuited and she collapsed into the midnight furred arms of her wolf-man lover.

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Chapter Twelve Alpha Beta Blues

Evening sun streaked the ceiling of the room crimson and gold as Ashley's eyes opened. Her head ached and her teeth felt funny, as if she'd been punched in the mouth and had been knocked loose. Rubbing her jaw, she remembered the steaming hot sex in the snow and resulting furry legs. In a panic, she whipped the covers back and breathed a sigh of relief when all she saw were her own, too pale legs.

"If it makes you feel any better, he was just as scared," Flora's warm, amused voice startled her. The other woman was curled in one of the white wicker chairs at her bedside. "Not in three thousand years has one of the females of the pack gone even a little bit furry."

"Yay me!" Ashley cheered sarcastically as she hid under the covers, hands covering her face. "Flora, if I ask you a question, will you answer me honestly?" The blanket twitched back revealing a laughing hazel eye.

"Honest is all I know," Flora grinned. "What's the question?"

"Have I totally lost it?" Ashley struggled upright and cuddled a pillow to her chest. "I've only ever had sex with two other guys. I never even fantasized about having wild, naked animal sex in the woods," she offered pathetically.

"Well, I wouldn't know if you've lost anything, I didn't know you before today. But if you are asking if it is unusual to act so sexually open with someone you obviously love, then no, you haven't lost anything." She grinned impishly, "Except for your inhibitions."

"I screwed him silly in front of all those other guys," Ashley wailed, muffling the confession in the pillow.

"No, you didn't do that at all. They hot-footed out of there and were far gone before anything happened." Ashley pinned Flora with a gimlet eye but Flora just laid her hand on her chest, swearing truth. "If it makes you feel better," Flora smoothed Ashley's

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hair, "my sister had the same problem."

So, I'm not the only one! Ashley's mind latched onto the possibility like a drowning man with a float.

"Would you tell me?"

"Not much to tell, I'm afraid." Flora smiled ruefully and scratched at her head, fluffing her bangs. "Lora and Marc were just out of high school when they met at a county fair. She was one of those annoying do-gooder types. You know, never dated, got all good grades, butter wouldn't melt in her mouth." Her face puckered into a moue of disgust, making Ashley laugh.

"They crossed paths on the midway and Lora was like a hound after a rabbit. Not sure if it was his smell," Ashley blushed, remembering how she followed Lupercus' scent into an accidental kiss with Frank. "Maybe it was just how cute she thought he was, but no matter. She cornered him in some dark arena at the fair and jumped him."

"Jumped him?" Ashley was astonished. "You aren't serious?"

Flora laughed and got up, collecting a change of clothes from a suitcase.

"Very serious, she deflowered herself on a very willing young man in the practice ring at the back of the draft horse barn." Grinning like a sinner, her eyes misted as she recalled the day, "It wouldn't have been so bad if either of them bothered to look around and see that folks were actually sitting around the stands, getting ready for the next show."

"Wow," Ashley breathed. Suddenly having sex in the same vicinity as a bunch of guys that were obviously told not to pay any attention didn't seem quite so embarrassing. "What happened?"

"What naturally happens in the country, silly, they got married the next weekend." She walked over to the door and moved into the hall, "I thought it was the dumbest thing ever, but they've been together now for eight years and never once had a fight." Quietly the door slipped closed and Ashley stared at the clothes in her lap.

Other women lived with wolfy men, she could learn to deal with it too. She totally didn't want to get fanged and furry, but if it happened...well it seemed a lot of other people were able to deal with it, why not her? Quickly, she dressed and headed down the stairs and towards the dining room. If she was going to embrace her new life, she was going to do it with everything she had.

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Nothing would have thrilled him more than to be upstairs in bed, curled around his mate, however, there was too much to do. Sitting on the tables of the dining room were a variety of human-made traps and snares that had been placed in the woods of the Daniels and Silvestri farms. There was a faint trace of scent on the materials that taunted him with its eerily familiar tang. A few juvenile half-breed and illegal full-blooded wolves had been found on various local farms. His men were working to find out where the farmers had purchased the wolf pups—but being outsiders meant everyone clammed up tight.

The one person willing to talk to anyone was stark raving mad and thus couldn't be trusted. Vanner Stang sat across the table in dirt-caked denim, his long, thin face and grizzled cheeks faded to nothingness when you looked into his eyes. They were dead things of violent neon blue. He had been found living in a ramshackle collection of timbers and rusted metal siding, sitting on a concrete block, making dinner in a tin can over a small fire. He smelled wrong, more like an animal than a man. In too many ways he reminded Lupercus of Red. Then his stories of running with the coyotes started and the dim hope everyone held faded into disappointment.

"Excuse me, I didn't realize you were working," Ashley stood in the doorway, wearing one of her feminine business suits. Her appearance brightened up his night in ways he couldn't begin to fathom. But he couldn't let a human see any weakness, so he simply nodded and turned his back. His ears caught the soft choked cry of pain as she turned towards a sideboard and made a cup of coffee. Lupercus hated giving his beloved mixed signals but he'd hidden so long, he couldn't stop now that he had a vulnerability, he had to protect her. Later he would take her aside and explain, make things right. Right now he had to join his men on a hunt.

"Miss Cooper?" she looked up, soft gray eyes damp with pain and his heart contracted. "This is Vanner Stang, he has vital information on the coyote and wolf problems, please get his statement and see that he is rewarded with dinner and a ride home." He turned and abruptly bowed to the old man and then excused himself.

Walking outside into the cool night, he took a deep breath and felt muscles he hadn't realized existed loosen.

"A bit hard on her there weren't you, brother mine?" Frank stood in the semi-darkened flower garden blending in with the brown tones and shadows.

"Now I'm your brother," Lupercus seethed, "It's really none of your business."

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Faunus "Frank" reached out and gripped Lupercus' shoulder. He turned stunned. His brother had never been confrontational and always preferred not to touch the man-wolf.

"Think on this," Faunus' sensual lips twisted viciously, "it could be she reacted to my scent confusing it with yours, dear *brother*. Many men look the same when the lights are off." Faunus turned and walked back into the Bed and Breakfast, leaving his twin with the sick feeling that strength wasn't just a wolf's mien.

"Vanner Stang," Ashley smiled sitting down with a pad and pen in hand, "what an unusual name."

"Its family," he offered, staring at her without blinking. There was something unsettling about the thin aged man. He looked to be on the south side of sixty, yet his face was unlined but for the skin around his eyes. Gnarled hands rested on the tabletop, nails crusted and ragged. But his eyes were compelling, gaslight bright and hypnotic.

"Mr. Dianus said you had information?" she prompted, the man did nothing but sit still and silent, staring with those odd eyes.

"Yer like me, yeh ain't a part of this world or the other," he never dropped his gaze as he reached for her coffee and swallowed loudly. When he made to set the cup back in front of her, she stopped him. "I gots no diseases woman, that man a'yers an' I got that much in common. But you an' me, we gots more, yer like me. Seein' stuff, feelin's and seein's. Sometimes more." He took another long drink of her coffee.

Ashley felt odd, as if her head was suddenly too large and a funny ringing sound hummed mosquito-like in her ear.

"I'm sorry Mr. Stang, do you hear something?" Ashley wanted to be away from the man, he was unnerving but mostly because on some level she recognized he was telling the truth.

"Ah yup, I hear 'skeeters, jes', like them other nights when the coyotes come fer the calves at the Means' farm. Listen a'me," a clawed hand, twisted by arthritis gripped hers tightly. "Them wolf-men a'yers are too close to this, they cain't see what they's getting' into. As men they's no good, as wolves they's too close to the scapegoat, they cain't see the danger. The hunter-lady, she's lookin' fer your mate, the alpha, using the beta to get him too."

"I don't understand, how can what I am hearing, seeing and feeling be related?" Ashley had that 'Alice took the wrong pill' feeling creeping over her again.

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“Come wit’ me an’ see,” he urged, draining the last of her coffee and moving for the door.

Using touches and small gestures, Vanner quickly taught Ashley how to maneuver through the woods. It was impossible to walk making no noise, but some noises were so natural as to not register on the conscious. His property was a two-acre wide swath opening into a jigsaw shaped piece that separated three farms: the Daniels, the Silvestris “which used to belong to Strang’s when times were good,” and a “funny lady” from the north by the name of Laura Faust.

Vanner stopped and tapped his ear. Ashley closed her eyes and listened, then it hit her, the odd, high-pitched humming sound was gone. “They’s comin’, the ki’yotes.” It had taken a few times of hearing the accented word before Ashley caught on to ‘coyotes.’ True to his word, a small group of painfully thin coyotes darted through the trees. Ashley forced herself not to move as the thin animals slipped in and out of the shadows. They were known to be wily predators.

In the car on the ride over, Vanner had explained that the coyotes had been acting out of the norm for their species. They weren’t eating small game, no one lost any pets and the remains had been savaged in ways contrary to hunting patterns.

“Normally they never goes after big game, calves maybe a sheep or goat, nuthin’ bigger and then all they do is kill and worry at it, cartin’ off the innards for the babes and choice hanks for the rest. They don’ leave nuthin’ these uns been leaving too much.”

“Why didn’t,” Ashley swallowed down the urge to say ‘my mate,’ “Mr. Dianus listen to you?” Everything this man said made sense. It was weird and creepy but if you accept that men can turn into wolves, how can you not accept that a fellow rancher was manipulating coyotes to lure in the man-wolf pack for whatever reason.

“I tol’ him how some nights I run with the ki-yotes, he sniffed me over and said tha’ wasn’ possible.” The older man shrugged. “I got a feel fer animals, dogs and the like, maybe is in the blood or such, but my pa had it too.”

Ashley had a funny feeling that the “gifted” female children that disappeared into obscurity may have had more of a psychic impact than anyone suspected

Standing among the trees listening to odd warbling hisses and shrieks or sound humming in her ears, Ashley was a believer of Vanner Stang. The coyotes stopped chasing a rabbit and moved sluggishly, shaking their heads towards a dense copse. Ashley made to follow but was brought up by Vanner. He pointed to a conglomeration of

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twigs and twine, then bent and dismantled the small trap. It was armed with a weird looking needle, like one of the ones she'd seen when she went for her annual flu shots. When the needle was inserted, the medication would flow without needing a person to depress a hypodermic plunger. Deftly she opened her purse and slid the nasty thing inside.

Ahead, Vanner walked side by side with the oldest coyote, it was grizzled and filthy as it limped along on three legs. She'd always thought that coyotes were bigger but these were small creatures no bigger than sixty or seventy pounds. Beyond the copse something rustled and Ashley stopped. Vanner was too busy milling with the pack to notice so she stepped behind a tree. An odd sound reached her ears. Peering around the tree, she saw the effect on the coyotes and Vanner, where they had been moving slowly, sluggishly against their wills, they now began running toward the copse.

The scent that caught them wafted towards Ashley, there was something about it that seemed compelling, almost sexual but with a rank undertone that spoiled the effect. *It must not have been too spoiled* she thought as larger shapes moved stealthily through the trees. The man-wolf pack had come looking for the disturbance. Or did they come for something else? One, then another slunk through the forest, ghosts on paws. Ear swivels, muzzle twitches and other small mannerisms and the wolves "talked", spreading out.

A red and cream-colored wolf passed by without acknowledging her. *He should have seen me, smelled me or something*, Ashley thought. Snapping sounds and thuds made her eyes scan the darkness. "Let me see," she begged the night sky. A star twinkled and she blinked looking back to the woods. She focused all her will, staring intently, finally she saw a small corona of light around each of the wolves. Moving stealthily, Ashley watched the ground and was rewarded with an odd sight; what looked like a small briar bush, was really a snare trap armed with a needle pulsing with a brackish color. Repeating Vanner's actions, she dismantled the trap and collected the vial. Looking at the wolves, Ashley noted that none appeared to be in danger, just sleeping peacefully.

Where was Lupercus?

In the field beyond the copse, Lupercus slunk on his belly. The night air was permeated with Ashley's scent and the taint of death. How she had gotten there made no sense, he'd left her safe at the Daniel's spread with the insane old squatter. Movement stirred at the tree line and he dropped between stray clumps of winter wheat. His mind went numb as he watched Vanner Stang walk out of the woods in company with the

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small pack of coyotes. A black clad figure stepped forward and dumped a steaming bucket on the ground. The smell of Ashley intensified and he fought the urge to leap up and run forward. The figure in black made a barking, growling noise almost like wolf speak, but not quite.

Another figure emerged, this one out of the copse. He was cut up from the briars but Lupercus had no problem identifying the traitorous male, the pack beta, Dr. Tomas SaoBria. Tomas staggered up and tossed a pile of rags on the stinking pile of offal that smelled disturbingly like his mate. Bad feelings churned in his belly. When Ashley's legs and upper back had sprouted a fine line of brindled fur before she passed out, Lupercus had panicked and sent for the doctor. Had the young fool done something to endanger her? The dark robed figure barked another order and Tomas staggered over to a cart half-hidden behind a small hillock, a limp pale hand flopped from the end and Lupercus crawled slowly forward, no longer able to play the game of wait-and-see.

For three thousand years, he had only half hoped at finding a mate to replace Laurentia, now that he had Ashley, he realized how she was truly the only one for him. Father Light had been correct in warning him away from the man-tribe. There had been nothing there for him, only his arrogance had kept him from seeing.

Closer he crawled and the smell only intensified. The reek of bile and blood mingled with the sweet musk of his darling Ashley. In the moonlight, a mane of lifeless brown hair danced on the soft night breeze. His heart stopped and ripped into pieces. Howling in pain and rage, he charged forward baying death for the pair in the field.

Coyotes scattered like chickens facing a fox but Tomas and the other merely turned and faced the onslaught. Lupercus stretched out, trying to reach them faster, but the dark clad figure turned an abrupt arc, casting handfuls of flowers on the ground, making a circle. Wolf bane! He skidded to a stop; it didn't work on the man-wolf pack, but they were mortal. The towering, hooded purple blossoms had been planted by the elder goddess Hecate to bind the immortal canines. He couldn't cross the barrier as man or wolf.

Ignoring the cringing beta, he stepped lightly around the circle, his heart in shreds, watching for a sign of weakness in his adversary. Black leather covered every part of his body including the face. A mask was fitted over his head with filmy black gauze at the mouth and eyes. The Long black pelt forming the back of the cape was too familiar. Lifting his nose, he sniffed the air and stared at the pelt again. It couldn't be! How could

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Tomas be alive and standing before him if his pelt formed the coat of the person in front of him?

"Ave Dread Lord!" the voice addressed him in sonorous Latin, but the stunning thing was the pitch, he'd expected a man but got a woman.

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Chapter Thirteen Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

From behind a fallen elm tree, Ashley watched two people she didn't know dump a stinking pile of bloody refuse. At first she thought it was pretty decent of them to feed the coyotes then she saw what was in the dump cart. Once more her senses registered a familiar smell under that of the offal, but couldn't place it until Lupercus broke across the field baying as if his heart had broken. *He thinks it's me*, she thought, stunned

Even at a distance she could see the difference, but the corpse's face was pointing at her in the darkness, not at Lupercus. That poor woman, her mind jabbered in shock. Small details leapt up at her, the rips and tears in her flesh, bite marks too big to be the small-bodied coyotes...*wolves*, she thought, numbly. As a wolf Lupercus didn't see color properly, he'd never notice the differences in the damaged stranger; all he'd see was wolf bite marks while his nose smelled a dead mate in the cart. His pack lay defenseless in the snow, drugged. In his rage he'd act first, think later. Ashley took a deep breath and moved to step out then saw Vanner crouched in the cove shaking his head, no.

"Ave Dread Lord!" the words carried to her ears as clearly as if she had been standing next to them. "I have saved you from your enemies; your children the wolves. Unfortunately, your mate was not so lucky." The female roughly pushed Tomas out of the odd circle she had cast. "This is the one that drugged her and took her to the pack, where she was gang-raped, defiled and ripped to pieces. They do not wish you to have a Lupa, they wish you to serve their line as a slave, forever."

Lupa? Ashley remembered when Lupercus asked her if she knew the name. So it wasn't really a name but a title...that meant that he really had another mate once. Jealousy ate at her insides and her heart thundered in her ears, making it hard to hear.

"Just as the cowards surrendered Lupa in trade for their safety all those years ago, so again did they sacrifice your mate."

No, this is wrong! The original Lupa was killed by the enemies of Rome for

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fostering the twins, or had she? History had a way of being rewritten to suit the victors. Ashley's stomach lurched and heaved with sudden nausea.

"The traitors are in the woods Wolf Lord, watching and laughing at you." Lupercus stood as still as a statue as his nose lifted and sampled the night air. "Think!" the woman's voice screamed, making both wolf and man flinch. "If they were with you, wouldn't they have rushed up to support you in this, your hour of need?"

Why couldn't Lupercus hear the gloating tone of her voice? It was so obvious he was being manipulated. Ashley couldn't wait any longer, Lupercus' ruff stood up as he bared his teeth advancing on the quivering man before him. The weird flowery circle was protecting the bitch from him, but not from Ashley.

Slowly, she stalked through the snow, placing her feet beside the lumps under the snow to keep hidden branches from snapping and giving away her position. Just before the field was a stout branch propped against an old fence post. Her eyes flicked up to watch Lupercus as he danced around the cowering man as he begged for mercy and forgiveness. Wolves weren't vicious animals by nature but Lupercus wasn't simply an animal, he was man and god and all of him was wracked with pain. There was an old spool of fallen barbed wire next to the branch, Ashley lunged forward and the moonlight shone for a split-second on her hair, haloing her head before her hand closed on the makeshift weapon.

In the field, Lupercus saw and almost stopped his assault on Tomas. Dropping his muzzle parallel with the ground, he played with the man; remembering the times when as a silent studious youth Tomas had looked yearningly at the rough and tumble Silvestri brothers. Cunning and intellect had been what allowed Tomas to rise through the ranks in the local pack, second only to Red. In the entire man-wolf family, Red was second only to Quint, if he had forsaken his kin there would be no place on earth for Tomas to hide, ever. He feinted forward and ripped the sleeve of Tomas shirt, just above an existing wound, making fresh blood fly without harming the man.

Step by step, Ashley slowly crept up on the gloating woman. The leather-clad bitch had turned to watch the battle, relishing each ripping sound with a happy laugh and a clap of her glove-clad hands. Ashley waited for the woman to crow and clap one last time before she crossed the line of dried purple flowers and swung with every ounce of strength. The sound of the branch hitting the woman's head made a hollow sound, like dropping a cantaloupe on the kitchen floor. She turned and stared at Ashley through the

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holes in her mask before falling like a felled tree.

“Vanner!” Ashley screamed, kicking the dried flowers away from the fallen body. The old man loped up, the old coyote at his side. “Don’t let her move!” she ordered, racing to Lupercus as he wavered from wolf to man, catching her hurtling body in his arms. She sobbed in reaction at all that had happened and over what she’d done. The woman was evil but Ashley shook all over, regretting hurting anyone.

Slowly the rest of the pack started emerging, stumbling groggily through the trees. The wolves all surrounded Tomas, growling viciously.

“Why are they so mad at this man?” Ashley stepped in front of him, trying to put herself between every pack member and the stumbling Tomas.

“He’s been working against us!” Marc Silvestri changed shape and advanced on the man. “Is this why you endangered my wife and sons?” Lupercus pulled Marc back.

“Let him explain, she wears his wolf pelt, yet he isn’t dead. It may be related.” Lupercus looked at the shivering man, blue from exposure. “It certainly explains why your other senses and protections aren’t working.”

A slim wolf with beautiful shining silver fur trotted over to the woman and tugged the pelt- cape free, dragging it to Tomas.

Lupercus relented, “He had to have been under her spell to be stripped of his hide and not be dead. Can any of you say that you could withstand the pain and loss of self any better?” The only one who growled in dissent was a towering red wolf.

At Tomas’ side, Ashley huffed, “You would say that Red Silvestri, but he isn’t the pack alpha, you are.” Lupercus was stunned again. She had obviously understood the antiquated Latin the woman had spoken and now she understood his wolves.

Not wanting to linger in a field with a fresh corpse, Lupercus gave orders for the disposal of the unknown young woman’s remains before shepherding Ashley and Tomas to where the dead woman’s car waited.

Flora opened the door as the dark SUV pulled up. “What happened? Lora just fell over in the middle of the kitchen an hour ago. Frank is with her now. She’s coming to but...” her voice trailed off as she saw the body draped over Lupercus shoulder. “Who is that and are they dead?” she raced around the tired group shutting doors and covering windows.

Frank ambled into the front sitting room as they were about to begin peeling the

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leather clothes away. His hiss of anger stopped everyone in their tracks. Stalking forward, he gently stroked the leather, crooning in the same strange language he had spoken with Lupercus on the drive to McClellan.

Lupercus was tired to his very soul, scooping his nosy mate into his arms he collapsed into an overstuffed chair. He had thought she was gone and here she was wriggling like a curious puppy in his lap.

“I almost lost you, *cara mia*,” he whispered against the nape of her neck, kissing the sensitive flesh there. Shivers of reaction made the fine hairs stand up and the familiar scent of her arousal went straight to his groin.

She turned and looked at him, sadness in her eyes. “No, you didn’t almost lose me, you almost lost yourself.” Out of nowhere she pulled her small designer purse, inside nestled safely between thick feminine products were odd shaped needle-tipped darts.

“Don’t touch!” she smacked his fingers good-naturedly. “The traps in the woods tonight had this funny aura to them, like muddy water, and this time they were all loaded with these darts. I don’t know what is in them but only the wolves didn’t see the traps and only the wolves fell when hit with them.”

The same mournful dirge kept repeating as Frank slowly peeled pieces of leather from the hateful woman’s body. Eyes widened in shock around the room as the inside of the hides showed not the normal tan but a shining gold.

“He really is your brother, isn’t he?” in shock, Ashley stared at the man she thought she knew. “He’s not a wolf, he’s...” her voice trailed off as her eyes widened taking in the picture that superimposed. Lupercus laid a finger against her lips. She looked to him in askance.

“Faunus secrets are his own to reveal, *tesoro*. Leave him that.” Looking into the deep pools of green, Ashley felt herself falling as he pulled her close and kissed her mouth. Another collective gasp interrupted the very nice warm feeling building in Ashley’s blood.

Thin, dusty hair trailed outward from a slightly olive-toned face. The woman had square features that weren’t unattractive, but in her current state looked almost mannish. “She wanted you to think she was a man, didn’t she?” No one answered Ashley’s question. “Who is she?”

Flora collapsed to the floor and clasped her knees to her chest, “Laura Faust.”

Lupercus reacted violently, jumping to his feet and stalking over to the

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unconscious woman. He sniffed the air above her and frowned then leaned in and breathed in deeply next to her skin.

“I knew she smelled familiar! She is of Faustulus’ line.” The information didn’t settle the Wolf Lord, he paced, scowling at the woman and the floor. The room went still, Ashley looked at Flora who shrugged; it was a mystery to them both.

“Lupercus, who is Faustulus?” he turned and looked through her then shook his head.

“Ancient history,” he muttered.

“It must not be so ancient if she tried to kill you over it,” Ashley offered trying to be rational.

“Faustulus would not kill me!” he turned and snarled in her face. He had moved so fast that Ashley was afraid to breathe. “He was a loving man, a forgiving one! For three thousand years, none of his line spoke against me. It must be something else.” He leaned in close, eyes feral as his hands gripped the arms of the chair, pinning her against the cushions.

“You struck her down. I’ll have that debt to carry now as well.” Ashley didn’t reply, she couldn’t, her heart was breaking. “Lupa Laurentia was his to wed but he gave her to me, understanding our love.” Her eyes ached with the need to fill. The memory of people thousands of years in the past still meant so much more to him than the supposed mate he had chosen, seduced to his side.

Aren’t I the fool for loving him? Her mind spun in a hundred directions at once, fear crawled along her spine as his anger flowed over her in a torrent of knife points. Every instinct screamed for her to flee, but another whispered not to run from a predator and that was what Lupercus was in his heart. She loved the man, the wolf and the god, but he still loved his first mate above all. He didn’t love her at all.

He thrust himself away, disgust evident on his handsome face and Ashley took the opportunity to run from the room in tears. She headed for the stairs taking them two at a time, blurred vision made her bark her shin before she reached the landing. Throwing open the door, she quickly tossed all of her clothes into her cases and made for the stairs again. Her chest burned and her throat ached as her eyes streamed the tears her body wanted to vent. She couldn’t control her tears but she’d be damned to give him the satisfaction of seeing her breakdown.

Frank turned and looked at his brother in disbelief. He’d hoped, foolishly it

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seemed that Lupercus would find joy in his mate.

"You've got to be the biggest fool walking this earth. No wonder the elder gods have faded and you still live, the Stars needed the comic relief." Respectfully he folded and laid aside the golden hides of the harts of Diana and went in search of Ashley. Maybe he could shock his idiot twin into seeing what he was throwing away.

He walked around the corner and caught Ashley and her bags, head-on. "Easy," he soothed, pulling the bags from her hands. Her whole body shook violently as he pulled her close, offering her what little comfort he could provide. "You kissed me once, could you do it again?" Her eyes were wild with pain and emotional overload.

"Sure, why the hell not?" she sniffled, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him the way she wished Lupercus would kiss her one last time. Frank was warm and sweet, his mouth firm and skilled but she wasn't moved. If anything, her heart faltered and fell a little farther. Pulling back, she looked into the sad eyes of her former annoying boss and gave him a watery smile.

Turning, she grabbed her bags and looked up into the glacial eyes of her love. Her heart was shattered; she had no more pain to give him. Ashley picked up her suitcases and walked into the night.

Lupercus wanted to do nothing more than rip his brother's head off. Not only was the randy bastard right, but he kissed Ashley.

"Ahem," Flora's tones dropped about ten degrees as she announced, "the Faust woman is awake."

Laura Faust looked almost translucent against the pale gold couch. Lupercus had to physically restrain himself from begging the woman's forgiveness. She had acted against him, his people. He was no longer the one in the wrong.

"Why? After all these thousands of years, has the line of Faustulus moved against me?" He sank into the chair where he had watched his mate's heartbreak, rubbing his face in his hands.

Thin lips sneered, bringing two round spots of brilliant red color high on her flat cheeks. "You took Laurentia away. Every generation we have to produce two children, a male named Faustulus and a female named Laurentia. Ellis Island saw to it that nonsense was nipped, my grandfather was renamed John Faust. That was enough for the men, but not for the women. My mother named me Laura and my father beat her mercilessly every

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time she called my name,” washed out brown eyes flashed fire as she sat straighter.

“All I ever heard growing up was ‘honor the Wolf Lord as he honored our family,’” she mimicked in saccharine tones. “What honor did you do them? You stole the man’s wife, made her your whore!”

“I stole nothing,” Lupercus waved a dismissive hand. “She came of her own free will and Faustulus agreed.” Guilt still lurked in the corners of his mind. “But that has nothing to do with your attempt to make me murder my men.”

“Everyone knows they’re your children from that adulterous whore, Laurentia.”

“What?” he stared in shock, this was a first for him and gauging the looks of the others in the room, they’d not heard it before either.

“You heard me,” she smirked, “whore’s get, all of them. That is the reason the women of my family have studied in secret, grandmother to granddaughter, as you shepherd your blood so do we.” Those were the last words the woman volunteered. She kicked back on the couch and turned into a deaf mute.

Questions as to where she obtained hides from Diana’s harts, how to restore Tomas’ pelt and where the serum in the darts came from all went unanswered as Laura sat staring into space.

Lights flooded the room as Red and the sheriff pulled into the drive. Moving quickly, Frank grabbed the leather outfit and carried it up the stairs to his room where he remained. The sheriff collected statements and evidence. Lupercus felt swamped with remorse when he handed over one of the darts--not for withholding evidence--but because Ashley had been so upset that she’d left without her purse. All of her money and identification were in it. She should have returned.

“Has anyone seen Ashley?” his blood did a slow burn remembering the scorching kiss he had interrupted between his mate and his brother. Maybe it wasn’t as contrived as it appeared; a sly doubt crept into his hindbrain. But he had earned it; being as harsh as he had been with her.

“Maybe we should go look for her?” he suggested.

“What’s this ‘we’ crapola, buster? You French or something?” the blank look on his face seemed to irritate Flora more than his request for help in looking for Ashley. “She isn’t going to freeze, you’ve proof enough of that from this afternoon. Ashley can take care of herself, she doesn’t need your tender loving care tonight,” she turned on a heel and stomped out of the room. Marc sidled in close, “Lord, a word to the wise, Flora

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is *not* the one to piss off. Who do you think grows the wolf's bane? It's just *one* of her poisonous plants." Lupercus gave him a disgusted look, "Just thought you should know."

Moving to the door, he walked out into the drive and opened his senses but couldn't find the smallest trace of his mate. It was as if the heavens had opened up and carried her off. Looking up at the cold stars, he wondered perhaps if they hadn't.

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Chapter Fourteen Taming the Wolf Lord

Ashley walked out of the house sniffing and feeling as if the weight of the world was crushing her. She followed the thin lines of lights along the Daniels drive to the main road and stood at the crossroads in indecision. Looking up at the sky, she saw the star that had winked so merrily at her earlier. Now it seemed to shine down in a pure blue white radiance, offering a balm that eased the hurt a bit. Not a cloud in the sky, the night was silent as moonbeams chased shadow over gleaming drifts of snow. Distantly, she heard a sound, a sad howling that tugged at her abraded heart and drew her across the street and beyond a dense clump of brush.

Why not? She figured setting off into the night as the pools of manmade light fell behind like a bad memory. A road opened before her, narrow and rutted, never having seen asphalt. Ashley stopped a moment. Hadn't the roads passing in front of the Daniel's property been paved? The sad wail got a little louder and was joined by yips and small barks.

I could never leave any animal in distress, she hurried towards the sound. The road rose sharply then dipped between towering banks before opening. Standing at the top of the hill she almost reconsidered, but the keening cries of the dog beckoned her forward. To either side of the road stood snow covered cornfields as far as the eye could see. In the dark she couldn't make out the hillocks and dales that had to lead to woodlands, yet she could distinctly see the thin line of towering trees that stood immediately along the road, keeping it in deepest night.

Her arms hurt for lugging her cases. Stopping, Ashley decided to rest a moment and gauge how far she'd come. A quick look at her watch showed she'd been gone for close to an hour. *So much for being loved and cherished,* she sneered at the naiveté that landed her on a back road to nowhere in West Virginia. No, she grinned, it had to go somewhere, even if it dead-ended in a farmer's field, it went to a destination, but what

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about her own journey’s end? Giggling, she thought of poems about roads and sidewalks and journeys that ended at their beginning as the sad song of the mother dog called her inexorably onward.

The road turned again and dropped fast and steep towards a creek. Looking at the swirling waters that nearly crossed the now muddy road, Ashley distantly wondered if werewolves could cross running water, before her horror movie mania kicked in—that legend applied to vampires. Nodding sagely, she walked through the ankle deep mud keeping an eye on the blacker than night waters on either side of the lane. Just past the stream was a faint tracing of a road to the right. The sound seemed to echo all around her head and she lost her focus.

Aquarians are supposed to be psychic, she chided herself. The sign of the water carrier. Looking back at the burbling blackness, she shrugged. Setting her bags down, Ashley moved to the bank of the stream and placed her hand in the water, almost immediately it went numb from the considerable cold. To distract her mind she looked up and focused on the stars. It was her lucky day, the same constellation was bright and clear. She studied it, tracing the lines and sweeping whirls as her hand felt the current sweep past, numbing her wrist.

The yipping and whining kept time with the fast-paced twinkle of the brightest stars in the odd constellation. Making a promise to one day learn just which stars she admired this ill-fated night, Ashley rose and left her bags along the road, hunting the sounds of distress. There were faint depressions in the snow and she followed them as they plodded to the top of a field and down towards a small building. Even in the moonlight it looked pathetic, squatting in the field. The tin roof was a mass of rust and holes that the barking had echoed through. If it weren’t for the serious state of disrepair, she would never have heard their call.

Ashley looked up again and silently thanked the stars for being patient and showing her the way, before duck walking down the icy slope. Standing in front of the double doors, she blinked in astonishment. Heavy ropes of chain and locks meshed the doors together. Slowly, she walked around the building looking for an entrance, finding at last a small window opening opposite the doors. Jumping, she caught the ledge and pulled herself up, huffing and puffing. “Man, am I out of shape.” She puffed her bangs out of her face as she looked down into the building.

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Lupercus found himself sitting at the end of the drive, staring at the stars that birthed him. The lights of the Water Carrier were bright in the heavens, eclipsing the dark stars that shaped his life.

“Yes, I made a mess of things tonight,” he told the cold blue lights staring accusingly down at him. “Can you not give me a chance to make this right?” But the night remained calm, cold and serenely quiet. He could hear the others milling about on the porch, too afraid to go home to their families, not knowing what happened to Ashley or what may lie in wait, compliments of Laura Faust.

The sheriff called to report that they had the dead woman’s identity. She’d stopped at a local diner and had the misfortune of physically resembling Ashley. Everyone remembered seeing Laura chatting with the woman and offering her directions to another town. The Faust property was sitting quiet, guarded by the county’s lone auxiliary officer sitting in a cold patrol car. When the dawn and state troopers came, so would a warrant to sift through the home for answers. Red had managed to make sure his people would be on hand when the time came, but he didn’t look happy about it. Something to do with a bull-headed book freak.

It didn’t matter, the more his mind tried to focus on thoughts and events, the more it turned into a sieve; passing sand until he returned to those minutes in the sitting room when he’d loomed over the soft terrified form of his mate. Three thousand years of guilt was going to be hard to erase, but if what Laura said was true, he needed to be able to see the female of the line as sworn blood enemies.

My son...the voice didn’t ride the wind but vibrated in the snow and ice at his feet. I held you in my womb, kept you safe from harm and this is how you repay my gift? The gentle waves lapping at his ankles made his bones ache. Yes, your stars are dark, but without the dark, the light cannot shine. You exist to be with her and nothing more. It is your children I wish to see born.

“How do I find her?” he looked around but saw no prints, he sniffed the air but caught no scent of her.

Foolish child, you are more than man and wolf or have you forgotten? Feeling foolish, he closed his eyes and allowed the veil of mortality to drop. Opening his eyes again, he saw not the paved road but beyond, to a frozen country lane and a set of determined foot prints. Closing his mind to the strain, he reached, dragging his man-wolf pack to the roadway.

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"How the hell did this get here?" Marc toed the ground in disbelief. "There hasn't been a road here since the 1920's."

"Time isn't linear." The words were surprising enough, but coming from Red's mouth made everyone look at him twice. "Damned book freak told me once," he shrugged and moved down the road.

Marc tugged at Lupercus shirtsleeve, "If you don't mind my asking, how we got here?"

"My Mother showed me the way."

"And Ashley?"

"Now, *that* is a good question." Lupercus stared into the night. They walked keeping close together, not wanting to become separated and lost. But Lupercus was already lost. If time truly wasn't linear, then the gods could have taken pity on him and showed him the way back to save his Lupa.

She didn't love you, she wasn't the one. The gentle rebuke was a good answer; but the thrumming voice had an irritated edge that made him feel slightly bruised all over.

"Dread Lord this way!" they raced up to where Ashley had left her bags before heading along an abandoned access road. "Do you hear that?" Marc had his head tilted, "like puppies crying." The men raced ahead and saw the building, out front stood Ashley cuddling a wolf pup.

"I-I can't get them out," her throat sounded funny, hoarse. She'd been crying and he kicked himself. She buried her nose in the small pup's fur and looked to the chained door, ignoring Lupercus.

She'd wanted his help, but now that he was here the pain welled up inside, deep and unending. The pup she cradled in her arms was the last surviving pup of a long dead dam. The others had tried letting the small male suckle, but the competition was fierce.

The sound of chains rattling made her look up. Lupercus grabbed the metal and pulled and it came apart easily in his hands. The men stepped up and opened the doors, quickly averted their faces from the smell and sight inside.

"I think this is where all the wolves that were killed came from," she offered as the grim faced men draped weakened females over their shoulders and collected pups into their arms.

"That all of 'em?" Red asked, when the last one out nodded he closed the door and headed towards home.

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“I didn’t think you were going to come after me,” she told Lupercus coolly as they walked back to the Daniels farmstead. “That’s why I picked up the smallest pup, so you’d have a reason to come.”

“I followed you into a pocket in time, *cara mia*, it was not so easy.”

“Oh please, like heap big muckety-muck god of the forest couldn’t figure out how to follow me. And what are you talking about ‘a pocket in time’? I just walked out the door and down the road.” She refused to look at anyone who came up with such a lame excuse to cover a simple, ‘I was too busy doing things that were important before getting around to you.’

Lupercus read the surface of her mind and winced. The pain in her heart was palpable, radiating outward making her head hurt. But the thoughts; inwardly he cringed that she was right.

“I’ve always put others first—the elder gods, the stars and my man-wolf pack. I know I haven’t been acting like a proper mate.” He swallowed thickly, remembering how Marc always put his wife first; it was why he was always the last to show for meetings and the first to leave.

“I am going to retire.” The chorus of male laughter scattered his groveling. Scowling at the backs of the men walking before him, he added, “I mean it, I really am this time.”

“You can’t quit being what you were born to be.” Ashley’s soft voice smoothed over the irritation.

“No, but I can quit Lupine Enterprises, leave the affairs of man to man.” He looked at her, noting the too pale face, how sadness darkened the skin under her eyes. “Spend my hours begging forgiveness,” he suggested. She still refused to look at him but he felt her awareness of him return. “Would two or three months somewhere without snow be a good spot for groveling?”

Ashley considered his proposition then answered, “No.” She heard his swift intake of breath and kept her thoughts placid, refusing to show a reaction.

“The first day I saw you, my heart took fire. You looked into the sky with love as the sun kissed your cheeks and all I was jealous that you offered your lips so innocently to the air, when I was so hungry for their taste. In your eyes I see the color of hope. Please, Ashley, I have done wrong by you, will you give me the chance to make it right?” She stopped and stared into the purple black sky.

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"But what about Laura Faust?"

"The human police have her in custody for murder," he walked up behind her and made to reach for her shoulders but withdrew when he saw her flinch.

"The golden hides she wore, what about those?"

Moving to Ashley's side, he tried to peer into her face but she closed her eyes and rubbed the wolf pup's head with her nose. He closed his eyes and prodded his mourning twin. "That is a matter my brother wishes to address, perhaps with Flora's aid as it was her flowers the Faust woman stole to bind me."

"What about the threat to your man-wolf pack from the rest of the women of the Faust line? Their learning is still a mystery for you to uncover," her voice was dull and tired. He tried to crowd closer to offer warmth but she stepped to the side.

Frantically he cast about for an answer, a deep grumbling in the distance reached his ears. "Red Silvestri says he and another will solve the problem." Before she could pose another question, he dropped to his knees in the snow beside the road. "Let us go away from this place, find a forest to run in and be free. Somewhere I can love you as my heart aches to do."

Ashley opened her eyes and considered the misery in his eyes. Nonchalantly she looked at her watch, only forty minutes had passed since he stumbled up to her at the shed, his heart in his eyes. Not too long for an immortal. She measured her words, "My birds have an egg and can't be moved. Your dogs need walkies and they distinctly don't like just anyone." She hid her smile in the tangled ruff of the pup in her arms. "And this little guy is going to need a nice quiet place to get big and strong. He's asked to be my guardian."

Stopping in the road, he watched as the others crossed over the invisible barrier and traveled back to the farm. Without a word Ashley stopped beside him, waiting.

"Do you mean to stay with me?" he asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Yes. After all, you are going to need a very long time to beg my forgiveness." She stepped close, "And the begging better be good." Touching his lips with a finger, she growled, "And if I ever hear the name Laurentia again, I'll sic Mars on you."

Overjoyed, he bent to kiss her but the small bundle in her arms objected with a low growl. "I think I like my little guardian," she smiled, "perhaps when he thinks you've groveled properly then we'll talk again. In the snow, with icicles."

Lupercus laughed and followed her home, thanking the stars above.

Melissa Glisan

About the Author

Clutching a bowl of popcorn, wide-eyed and fixated on Chiller Theater and Terminal Stare at the age of five, Melissa knew that horror and cleavage were inexplicably bound, today she lives it. When she isn't pecking at the keyboard she enjoys maintaining the family graveyard, swamp hikes and lurking in the hills of Southern Pennsylvania.
<http://www.melissaglisan.20m.com/>