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WARNING

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Creatures of the Night, Creatures of Delight

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Blue Murder

Emily Veinglory

Chapter One

"My blood dole didn't came again today"

"Well, any delivery service will have the occasional outage," said the tiny voice at the other end of the line.

"In the last ten days I have received no delivery on three days, the blood was congealed, stale or actually rotting on five, and on two occasions the vial arrived empty. I last tasted blood six days ago and the daily amount we receive is barely sufficient for subsistence when it does arrive. What do you suggest I do?"

There was really no point getting angry at people who had absolute life and death control over you and yet were utterly anonymous and unreachable in return.

"You are scheduled for a regular delivery of five fresh mils tomorrow evening."

"I don't find that terribly reassuring under the circumstances."

"I really don't know what to tell you, sir. Perhaps you should have thought about this before you became a vampire."

On the scale of smug if you put the average house cat at three and Shirley Temple accepting an Oscar is a five, then this woman was a seventy-two. If vampires really did have the psychic powers some paranoid zealots believed, the call centre girl's head would have exploded just about then.

Instead, the plastic phone receiver gave a dejected crack as it caved in. Bern placed it back on the body of the phone, and then slammed it down a few more time in order to jam its deformed form into place.

He stood with his eyes closed a moment contemplating his impending death and the carnage he would probably cause first when the bloodlust took over his mind.

"Excuse me. Can I get some attention here? I have a crime report to make. Somebody has stolen my bicycle."

Bern took one step forward and looked over the edge of the desk. The whole waiting room fell silent. He had to assume that meant the feral red flicking light was back in his eyes. Only the small, middle-aged man holding the two halves of a severed bike locked seem unimpressed.

A uniformed officer pushed past him, oblivious to the queue, waving an empty Tupperware dish. "Sniff this," the sweaty cop declared. "It's Jefferson, isn't it? That lousy pig has stolen my lunch, again!"

"Terry, I can't tell you that. You go talk to him." The case of the bologna burglar. Will someone explain to this clown that I'm a civilian

receptionist, not a significant other for one of the boys in the canine unit? Speaking of which....

The behind-desk area was little more than a small aisle with a reinforced door at each end and a bench containing some basic files, phones and CCTV monitors. That meant it was a rather narrow space to share with anyone. Given their disinclination to have even the most glancing of contact with 'monsters', most of the boys in blue actually took the other door and came up to the front of the desk if they needed to speak to him.

But not Kerry Carter. The delectable, subtly queer, and utterly impassive Kerry Carter who had been 'passing' as a normal ever since being transferred to Gnoxville. Kerry Carter the werewolf.

"I'm really sorry, Terry. I really have to dig up some cold files for Kerry here. You'll look after the desk for me, right?" Bern grabbed Kerry by the forearm and steered him back out the door before he even got it closed behind him. "Sorry," Bern said as they got out into the corridor. "I just had to get out of there, or they'll be surgically excising Terry's Tupperware from the far reaches of his large intestine. I'll let you go now..."

"I actually was looking for you, Bern." Kerry was a tall, broad man with a soft burred voice that sent shivers down Bern's spine even without that edge of werewolf musk that only a fellow monster would detect. "There's something I need you to look at—in the morgue."

"Oh no, not you, too?"

"This is a little bit more serious than a missing lunchbox."

Bern let Kerry lead him down the stairs to the morgue. At least a glimpse of dog-boy's butt would be some kind of compensation for being used as the station's smell-o-matic. "You're actually going to make me sniff a dead person." Shouldn't you be able to do that for yourself?

Kerry led the way through the heavy door to the chiller. The brightly lit space was empty; scents welled up of disinfectant, chemical and...blood.

"Old Doc decided he'd rather not know about this," Kerry said as he leaned over and pulled out one of the long, dented drawers. Folding back the plastic sheeting that served as a shroud he exposed a young man. His flesh was already gathered up in the pucker Y-shaped scar of the post mortem, but across his shoulder and neck the skin was torn open. The edges had dried and curled over like old apple peel and here and there punctures from teeth dotted the flesh. Bern's gaze flicked up from the body to Kerry.

"Just tell me what you smell," Kerry said—closing off any possible conversation.

The stench of rot and harsh cleaner made bile rise in Bern's throat. In the back of his mind he still wondered if he could get Kerry to turn his back long enough for him to lick the exposed, dried up edges of the wound for any sustenance he could get. That thought disgusted him more then anything.

Bracing one hand on the cabinets, Bern leaned forward, closed his eyes, and breathed in deeply through both his nose and mouth, drawing air in over his palate. The layers lifted like a wine, drawing him into the centre. Bleach, virus-cide, sweat, a touch of jasmine probably the after effect of some woman's cheap perfume, some rancid fat suggestive of French fries and a dozen other fading fragrances each more tawdry than the last.

"I don't know what you think I should be able to smell," Bern said awkwardly.

"If this was done by a wolf..."

"So it's the dog that didn't stink in the night-time," Bern snapped.
"What's the point?"

Kerry stepped around the end of the drawer and reached out to grasp Bern's forearm. That slight touch hit him like a wave of sparks, paralyzing Bern's breath. He pushed back roughly, desperate to shut it off. The whole room seemed to spin drunkenly and Bern's teeth ached in their sockets, starting to burst loose with a small spray of black blood that dotted across Kerry's uniform shirtfront.

"Jesus, Bernie. Get control of yourself." Kerry's broad, strong hands pinned him back against the white wall.

Bern squeezed his eyes shut again, gritting his jagged teeth together. He felt his whole body shaking with the pent up desire for sustenance. He pressed his hands back against the wall and tried to force his panting breath, his staccato heartbeats, to slow down but with little success.

Kerry's warm solid body pressed against him, holding him, hemming him in. Gradually the pounding, panicky urgency subsided, back to the usual passive, stretched out hunger that tortured him day to day. But even then he was in no hurry to move. The sweet warmth of a muscular body against him was so comforting, even when it meant so little—Kerry probably just meant to stop him from going on some sort of rampage. But he shifted, embarrassed at the response which had moved from his aching teeth to his aching groin.

Bern leaned his head back against the wall with a sigh. "Blood dole's been bad the last five days," he said weakly "Not so good before that, either."

He just stood, passively, not rejecting Kerry's touch but not inviting it either—keeping his eyes firmly closed. He started at a slight touch on his face, his eyelids springing open.

Kerry's face was so close his breath was palpable across Bern's face and lips. "So do what the other registered vamps do. Just get a little on the side."

"And get caught and arrested—and put in jail where the dole is even more tampered with—take the chance of passing the curse on to even more people or get caught up in the blood trade and the thugs that run it..." His words trailed off as Kerry's dry finger tips traced down Bern's cheek. "I don't have the option of *passing*," Bern ended bitterly.

"So you do know about me. Well, you could hardly miss it, I suppose."

Kerry had a sort of strong-jawed masculine face but his other features were rounded, his eyes small and blue, his shaggy hair never properly brushed. He was almost the image of the big, strong policeman but he still stank of wolf. "I didn't mean to do it. I've been registered as otherkin since my mother decided it was for the best. But somewhere in the transfer my social security number got typed in wrong. The flag got lost off the file. And I thought, what they hell, why do they need to know?"

"Because it's the law?"

"The great impartial law, where quasi-humans get limited rights. If they knew there was a werewolf in this town, they would already have me locked up for *that*." He nodded vaguely towards the body. "That's why I wanted to know. If it was another wolf, a made-wolf."

"Made', you mean you're not..."

Kerry shook his head. He stepped away suddenly and without him there the air suddenly felt ten times as cold.

"I'm a born-wolf," Kerry said. "I only change on the moon, my bite has no contagion, my people...my people know how to control themselves."

And in their human forms they don't have much in the way of preternatural powers....

Kerry spoke with the disdain of a proud lineage for the occult copydogs who had brought their kind into abject disrepute. Born-wolves didn't have the same kind of strength or sensitivity but they were known to be immune to a vampire's bite. Suddenly a crush that seemed so safely and totally unrequitable, was equally terrifyingly, no such thing.

"Nothing I say about this body can be used as evidence," Bern said hesitantly.

"I know that, Bern. But tell me if it was a wolf. I think you'd be able to tell."

"Maybe, probably. The body hasn't been cleaned too much; there are other smells on it. If it was a wolf of any kind I ought to be able to tell."

Kerry nodded. "Good, that helps. I don't mean to drag you into this." He went to the great metal door and held it open, waiting for Bern. But Bern felt pinioned to the ground by his own confused libido. Just because dog-boy

was immune to the bite didn't mean he had any interest in a short, scruffy, monster with everything from his temper to his complexion ruined by too little blood—most of it spoiled or tainted along the way.

If it wasn't the blood-tainting bigots out to get rid of monsters it was the underground otherkin who rejected human governance and persecuted any who accepted that yoke. *Hell, this is hardly the time to be thinking it all over*.

"And thanks," Kerry added, breaking into his thought. "For not saying anything, you know."

With a deep breath, Bern swayed to his feet and drove himself with sheer willpower to walk out of the chiller as if everything was normal. "It's nothing," he said.

Chapter Two

It was a long shift full of pointless chores. Purses lost, bicycles stolen, complaints made and filed with very little chance they would ever be investigated. Major crime generally came into the call centre and petty crime generally got reported during the day.

The desk was a feature even of a small police station and it was expected to be open twenty-four hours. A place to put some minimum wage civilian flunky—filling a role more as evidence of affirmative action than actual action. In some stations that meant black, Asian, women, disabled; in others vampire, werewolf, elf or some less common kind of otherkin. And if hiring monsters kept the bothersome small time complainants away, all the better.

Gnoxville had less than fifty thousand residents and only a dozen or so otherkin. Nevertheless they all lived within a few blocks on the seeder side of downtown. Ghettoized by low pay and gathered together by the simple expedience of prejudice. Once a landlord let a monster into his flats pretty much nobody else would live there but more of the same.

His was the top left unit in a set of eight shoebox flats on two floors. His door had been glass once but broken and replaced with plywood and a few nails. The interior followed a theme of original seventies decor worn hard and mended by amateurs and not house proud amateurs at that.

Bern dropped down on the sofa with a sigh and picked up the TV remote. He flicked through the channels without even really focusing his eyes on the screen. A timid tap on the door spurred him to vigilance. It wasn't exactly going to be the neighborhood watch and as his shift finished while it was still dark...

And he'd left the door unlocked.

Kerry peered in. "Hey, Bern," he said in that warm boy-next-door voice. "Sorry to drop in on you like this..."

Bern flopped back down on the sofa, lying full out and letting his arm trail off onto the floor. "I don't mean to be ungracious," he said with a yawn. "But it's late and you and I don't really have a lot to say to each other."

Kerry closed the door behind him as he stepped inside. He turned the lock in a gesture that made Bern think of that chewed up body. Who better to know how to kill without leaving telltale evidence than a werewolf policeman? Those born-wolves weren't as scary in a rumble but they knew some top shelf voodoo—everyone knew that—and they did just about anything for their families, even cover up for them.

Kerry had gotten off a bit earlier—time enough to change into clean cut casual wear and shave to his usual baby smoothness. It was a sight that knocked pretty much all the suspicious thoughts out of Bern's head. He felt grimy, stubbled, and ugly just looking at Kerry in his off duty clothes.

"I've seen you watching me," Kerry said. He came and actually *knelt* by the side of the sofa. "I felt you against me down in the chiller."

"You know I haven't vacuumed that floor in...ever actually. I don't own a vacuum cleaner."

"Do you have to brush everything off, Bern? Are you determined to let the Office starve you into acting just like they all think a monster should?"

The Office of Otherkin Affairs, that was. A Quango whose incompetence was only matched in scope by its malevolence, so that it was hard to know when one stopped and the other started.

"So do me a favor," Bern said. "When I run amok, shoot me. You must have some silver bullets to hand."

Kerry settled one of those wide, capable-looking hands on Bern's abdomen. "There are easier ways. I have plenty of blood, immunity to the bite, and wouldn't mind finding someone who won't freak out at a little growling in the, well, moment, you know."

"Oh."

Bern lay dumbly still. Now that he was offered the very thing he wanted he still baulked. Just dumb fear, embarrassment or...

"What did you discover about that body?"

Kerry's hand slid lower, easing under Bern's shirt and over his bare and flinching skin. "Plain clothes are investigating."

Now that sounded rather like a deflection.

"But I thought you..."

"A uniform on a murder? No, I took an interest for obvious reasons. We don't need to be talking about that right now."

His fingers curled around Bern's side and beneath his body, drawing him up with ease. They went together into the bedroom where Bern's plain single bed lay waiting. Kerry stripped off his clothes without preamble. And that was the kind of distraction no sane man could ignore.

Kerry had a body that tapered from broad but rounded shoulders to narrow hips where an entirely satisfactory cock hung, already rising in interest. Bern was drawn to him like some, slightly envious, orbiting moon. A scent rose from Kerry's body, not the slight animal musk that was usual but something altogether stronger—a rich sweet spice that took hold of Bern's senses like the most intoxicating of spirits.

Bern stood close enough to clearly feel the warmth of that body, muscled but not to some exhibitionist extreme...and deliberately stripped off his own clothing. Kerry waited, watching patiently with a slight, quizzical smile. Reaching out Bern marveled at Kerry's skin, like softest suede.

Tracing down, he lingered over every slight contour and before reaching his ultimate goal he knelt suddenly. It was time to remove that smug expression from his face.

With his blood low the taste was rather strong but the smell of blood through tender skin swamped any hesitation. He took cock deep and smooth into his throat and was rewarded with the gasp, Kerry's whole body swayed and Bern pulled back only to complete the conquest. He propelled Kerry back onto the bed, onto his back. Letting spit build in his mouth he bent to redouble his efforts.

The cock was wide enough to stretch his mouth. He worked its length tight and slow, pushing his hands up under Kerry's buttocks. The smell of blood flooded his mind and his teeth begin to spring loose. Bern pulled back but Kerry reached down to him, holding the back of his head. He dare not move, the sharp tines of eye teeth slid from their sockets and the extended points brushed Kerry's cock.

Kerry urged him on and tentatively Bern slid his mouth down to the base. His teeth slid and finally punctured the skin delicately. The tang of blood filled his mouth and with a sharp pang special glands within his saliva ducts released their potent liquor. Kerry quivered beneath him and moaned. The salty, rounded flavor of sperm pushed past the last of his control.

He bit slightly deeper, drawing blood around the wilting cock shaft that still filled his throat. He felt every fiber of his body flush full with life. He pulled back, licking what he was pleased to see were only small punctures. He crawled up along Kerry's body, his own cock hard with stolen blood.

"You realize we have both just broken the law," Bern whispered.

"Blood other than the minimum required for sustenance, as provided by a certified agent is an illegal drug—class A."

"I begin to understand why," Kerry replied, dazed. "But it is not something I want to discuss right now."

"What is it you want, then?"

Kerry raised his legs up around Bern's body. "I want you to fuck me." Bern hesitated.

"Now," Kerry urged. "You know my kind is immune to any contagion or disease. You don't need anything other than what you've got with you."

Kerry spat into his hand and grasped Bern's stiff cock—drawing him forward. Kerry's muscular body curled up towards them and they met with an accord almost to perfect to be real. Bern felt his hard cock slid through Kerry's curled fingers and into his warm flesh. The sensation fired his blood. He thrust hard and deep and Kerry answered him eagerly.

Their bodies ground together, Kerry's fingers clawing, urging. It was unrestrained, unapologetic fucking like rutting animals. Bern's felt his panting breath tearing at his throat as he drove his cock hard and raw, deep and fast. He came with a triumphant scream and a sensation made his sight fog over and his whole body was awash with pins and needles intense enough to cause real pain.

As he collapsed forward Kerry caught him and they lay still locked together. Bern started to draw out but Kerry held him tight.

"Wait awhile."

Bern gingerly lay back over Kerry's body and he bore the weight easily.

Chapter Three

Some time in the night Kerry slipped away with a whispered excuse.

Bern let him go. Then he lay awake in the darkness wondering just how
things were going to be now. Hours shuffled by until it came time to find out.

The station was short staffed so he was back on for the dusk shift.

His skin was smoother, easier to shave, his hair glossier. The blood he had taken was enough that the jagged, nasty feeling he had almost gotten used to was blessedly gone. So was Kerry just going to ignore him at work, pretend like it was nothing? Maybe it was nothing. Someone who was passing was hardly going to set up house with a monster.

He got in and shoved his overcoat under the desk. Brenda picked up her purse and left him to it without as much as a nod. *Anthropocentric bitch*. She went to obvious lengths to avoid any contact with him even though they did the same job.

He poked his head out into the hallway. There was some kind of kafuffle going on. He ducked back and pulled out a stool and sat back. A half a bottle of cherry coke sat on the counter, still cold. Brenda's presumably. With a shrug he took a slug out of it. He could use the caffeine.

The next moment there was a dour man holding a cotton bud and a plastic test tube. "Otherkin Affairs spot check," he said in a bored voice. "You have been randomly chosen to—"

"I'm already a vampire, registered, card-carrying," Bern snapped.

"Aw shit," the man double checked the list and turned to call back to his assistant. "What's this guy doing on the list?"

Glancing down Bern saw a plastic tube labeled in block letters.

CARTER. Hell, did Kerry have a plan to cover the OOA boys sudden check?

In theory they could test any employee without prior warning to enforce the city's policy of not hiring unregistered otherkin. But these inspections really never occurred unless someone had a suspicion...

While the man was still conferring with his colleague over a crumpled print out Bern surreptitiously lifted the lid and spat into the tube. That sure as hell ought to upset their test. No way anyone could be two kinds of monster at once. He hoped it wasn't a mistake but it would mean the results should come back as an error and Kerry could decide whether to find a cheat or come clean.

The testing staff gathered their stuff up and headed off out the front door. The more Bern thought about it the more he didn't like it.

His delivery of blood came by messenger just before morning break when a girl from the call centre came over to cover for him long enough to juice up somewhere private.

For once the dose actually looked good. Maybe the freaks that normally screwed things up for him decided they didn't actually want a blood bath in a cop shop after all. Bern thought about looking for Kerry but as far as anyone here knew they were barely acquainted. If dogboy just wanted an anonymous fuckbuddy chumming it up at work might put an end to that—and Bern wasn't too proud to admit that if that was all that was on offer, he'd take it.

Then there was the fact that between the chewed up body and the sudden spot spit-check suggesting some otherkin was up to no good and drawing official attention. Given that he knew it wasn't him, that really only left Kerry.

So he put it off, ducking into the stationary storage room as usual to take his dose. He shut the door and even before he reached for the light he could smell that lupine musk.

"Hello, Kerry." He flicked on the light and turned. "Something you have to say to me?"

"Just this." Kerry stepped in close and kissed him, not too gentle but still tender. It was their first kiss, there was something a bit wrong about that.

Bern pulled back. "Did you know about the sampling?"

Kerry shook his head. "They never do that. It must be the torn up body that's got someone jumpy. There's not meant to be any wolves in this town. I tried to touch base with my kin but there's some kind of trouble. I've been out of touch, you know. Seems like the made-wolves have started to deliberately target our kind."

"Not my kind, Kemosabe."

"You know what I mean, the born-wolves. There's not so many of us."

"But you've got the money, the mojo; these new occult wolves shouldn't be a problem surely?"

Kerry sighed and leaned on the shelving. "Their breeding like rats, Bern. They can make a new one whenever there's time and a volunteer. They can change whenever they want, or not. We only change on the moon and we have to, it's our nature. Not man made wolves, more wolves disguised as men. But it's not going to matter when they test that sample. The normals don't take to the subtleties between kinds. They're going to think it was me."

"Yeah, well. I spat in the tube. That means it'll ring up twice and they'll have to retest. You got a way to rig it, with some warning?"

"Sure," he said. "We've got the mojo, like you said. But they'll be suspicious of me after that."

"Bad results happen. You'll just have to be careful."

Kerry leaned back and looked up to the ceiling. "It was never going to work in the long run," he said wearily. "You can register, or run. Passing, it never works in the end. And my three wolf days each month aren't something I can hide once they're looking. I put an end to this career the second I pretended I was a normal."

"And if you hadn't, would they have promoted you? Would have accepted you like they have?"

"No. And that's why I shouldn't have wanted their acceptance. That's why it was a poisoned chalice all along."

And that's when he saw, deep in Kerry's warm brown eyes, the desperation every monster bore. The burden of being the few, the feared, the tainted.

"There's always Canada," Bern said. Canada where no registration bill was ever passed. Our neighbors to the North behind the billion dollar wall built to keep the Canucks and all their free range freaks out of the star spangled land.

"Maybe we'll go there one day," Kerry said but he didn't even pretend to mean it. Their was defeat in his eyes, like he was already locked up in some otherkin detention facility getting the treatment a cop was likely to get and the short life that would probably result.

"You get that mojo sorted out, Kerry," Bern urged. "And get the hell out of my closet. The symbolism is getting too much for me."

He stuck his head out and checked. The copy room was empty. Then he pushed Kerry out. All the kindling resentment inside him faded away. "Don't treat me any different, okay. You can bluff this out...now go. Find out what the hell is behind that killing."

Chapter Four

Bern spent the early evening making his apartment borderline presentable. Then he realized Kerry couldn't be seen coming to this part of town now the powers that be were suspicious. Bern paced the dingy living room torn between wanting him to come and praying he wouldn't. Gods, a normal life, even the chance of a normal life. He wouldn't want to cost Kerry that chance.

So he sat there staring at the TV and flipping through the channels over and over. If he was some sort of hero he'd know who was wolfing some poor schmuck to death and who that schmuck was. But Bern had been a Communication Studies undergrad when a keg part gone very wrong had left him infected. After the acute phase passed he played it legal—most didn't, they slipped away into the otherkin subculture and disappeared into the grudgingly tolerated world of the illegal unregistered.

Every big city had them; strong, canny, harder workers often for less than minimum wage—also running every kind if black market, ho ring or skanky deal. The monsters, down and dirty like everyone thought they were meant to be.

Most people got infected because they ran with that sort of crowd—bought crack on the wrong street, ho-ed too long with monsters or even

initiated willingly into an otherkin gang. And a few poor bastards who were just in that wrong place for one crucial moment.

The front door swung open. Kerry slipped inside. It was full dark, Bern noted, and there weren't too many lights on this end of the block. Most of the monsters didn't need it and they took the bulbs out so often that eventually the city gave up. In an instant, Bern went from hoping Kerry wouldn't come at all, to resenting him doing it so furtively. He scowled and tried to push his conflicting feelings down inside. Where did the pointless tempest of emotions come from? And then a single suspicion gelled.

Kerry stepped into the room with a nervous glance at the uncurtained window.

"It occurs to me," Bern said, flicking the television to mute, "that if something like a wolf killed that man, I should have been able to smell something like a wolf upon him. Or failing that, something like a human. It would have required close contact."

Kerry ran his hands through his hair and sat gingerly on the couch. "Born-wolves are taught their whole lives to be subtle. It is one of the things that makes registration so painful for us. A wolf did kill that man but we have ways, occult ways, of removing any trace."

"But the wounds?"

"No one can heal the dead. All I could do was remove the evidence, hairs, fingerprints, smell. I have never performed the ritual myself. That is why I wanted some sort of confirmation that it had been effective."

"But if it was not you," Bern said coolly, "why did you cover for them?"

"Like I said, the police do not distinguish. If they know for sure it was wolfkin they will drag in everyone, search everywhere. Being wolf will be reason enough to lock away the first one they find."

"Which may just happen to be you."

"That is no doubt what the made-wolves want. Their feud, although I was not even aware of it, seems to be quite thorough. They may not even be

in town anymore. Even now, as I scramble to stamp out the fuse, the crude trap they set closes in on me."

"And if they are still in town?"

Kerry leaned in, shifting across so they sat side by side and reaching his arm over Bern's shoulders. After a moment's hesitation Bern leaned into that embrace, feeling a firm shoulder against the back of his head.

"They've killed almost all of my family," Kerry said quietly. "And nobody's even investigating the murders because officially, most of them never existed and those that did were just otherkin, just monsters—little more than a dog carcass found in the street."

It was easy to wonder why Kerry had ever trained to be a policeman, what kind of man he had been back then. Not so cynical, surely, to write off the lives of otherkin so easily. The long process by which his idealism had been beaten out of him was all too easy to imagine.

On the television a black and white movie continue to mime simple villainy and heroes destined to triumph. Kerry's hand toyed idly with Bern's hair.

"So, we actually do go to Canada," Bern said, his heart thudding.

"We've probably got enough money between us for a guide through the no man's land. They say otherkin get asylum, mostly."

"The dead man was my brother. The traces I removed were from him as well as those who killed him. They brought the body here from my mother's home."

"So, he's dead. And they are using him to draw you out and destroy you too. Are you so eager to let them succeed?"

"They'll come back eventually. To check. If I don't sense them, you will. I can..."

Bern pursed his lips, tensing. "Die with the rest of your kin." "You wouldn't understand."

"Because I'm part of the explosion. The mongrels that got caught up when the first otherkin came out into the open? Just some tainted normal not a real; what is it you call yourselves...the elder races?"

"I've never said such things to you."

"It's enough that you think them."

"I think them, but not about you."

They sat side buy side and watched the dumb show on the TV, stewing in their separate thoughts. Kerry's hand the only movement, stroked gently across Bern's hair where it was cut short by his cheek, then traced gently the whorls of his ear.

"I'm not doing this," Bern said. "Not in secret. Not with someone who is just going to get themselves killed."

Kerry made no acknowledgement, no move at all. Bern closed his eyes, leaning his cheek against the rough fabric of Kerry's uniform shirt. He smelt the familiar lupine musk, and over it a different shade of scent. Ranker, sharper. The meaning sifted into his consciousness only gradually.

"They're here, Kerry."

"What? Who?"

"Wolves, another kind of wolves. They're here now, breath deep, I'm amazed you cannot smell them already."

Looking up, Bern saw Kerry's nostrils flare. Tensioned coiled together in his muscles as he caught the scent.

"Go out the back door," Kerry said.

"There is no back door."

"Then hide."

The front window exploded from a plain black rectangle to an incomprehensible montage of shards, flesh, and fine spraying blood. It seemed to happen quite slowly but total paralysis fixed Bern to the spot as Kerry swept forward to meet the attack of a creature halfway between wolf and man but combining only the worst features of each.

They tumbled together onto the floor as two more of the beast men entered, crashing through the door.

Bern finally got control of himself, scrambling over the back of the couch and looking around for some kind of weapon. In his whole life he'd never been in an honest-to-God fight but he had to do something.

His hand settled on the phonebook as pretty much the only thing lying nearby but one of them was already on him. There was barely time to lift it as some kind of shield as yellowed teeth flashed towards him. Cowardly instincts made him flinch, his eyes screwed closed. A heavy weight hit him and there was a sharp snapping sound.

After a moment the weight was lifted up. Bern scrambled back until he hit the wall and looking up he saw a dark silhouette, Kerry, tossing the beast aside—its head lolling upon a broken neck.

"That's why they have to keep making more of these wolves. They're stupid bastards. First one was pretty much dead once I got to him, lacerated by the window glass—watched too many damn movies."

Bern curled his legs up under him but didn't venture to try and stand. The couch blocked most of his view but there was no noise. *Did he kill them all?*

"You killed it."

"Her, I killed her."

"But...the law."

Kerry looked down at him; his expressionless face lost his handsome edge and suddenly seemed crooked and cruel. "The highest charge you can get for killing the quasi-human is manslaughter you know that, right."

Bern got on all fours and levered himself up using the back of the couch. "So you'll be turning yourself in, then."

It wasn't that he resented being saved but it was hard work keeping a legal existence and this could be the end of it, right here. He could see three slumped, ragged forms; one looked like little more than a big, shaggy mongrel dog and the others cracked and shrank—their human features fading away in death.

"Convenient thing about made-wolves," Kerry noted coolly. "The most normal law is likely to charge me with is animal cruelty. But on the whole I think I'll just dump them in the river and be done with it." He went to the door and peered out into the night, scenting the wind. "You want to come out here and tell me if there's more of them?"

Bern looked curled his fingers over the back of the couch and looked out into the suddenly hostile darkness. "I'd rather not."

Kerry turned back to him, and his expression softened—becoming more familiar. "I guess you never had much reason to deal with the occult."

"No, and I don't really want to start now. From what I see it involves a lot of dangerous power, death, crime, and feuding. I might be a second class kind of human but I'll settle for that rather than be something like them."

Kerry looked over at him for a long while. "I can see how you'd think that way, Bern. I wish I could show you that there's more. Great ancient traditions, honor, faith...beautiful things. But there's less and less of that each year as rough-made creatures like this tear us down, tear us apart."

Bern couldn't meet his eyes; he looked aside where the third body had completed its transformation, smoking slightly and emitting a smell like burnt hair and rotting meat. "If you don't want to live within the law. What are you doing this all for?"

Kerry didn't answer right away. He went through and stripped the sheet off the bed and then bundled the big wolf bodies into it. They must have each weighed as much as a man but he didn't seem to have any trouble.

"My family has endured for a thousand years," Kerry said. "They mean to last a lot longer than that and so they give us different tasks, some hide out, others are part of the underclass, a few are registered and as many as can manage it blend in and keep their natures hidden."

"Pass for normal. It wasn't an accident was it; someone arranged to have your records falsified. And I guess I was the only one who was likely to notice. So you needed me on your side." It all made rather too much sense. Why else would a buff cop like Kerry take such an interest in him of all people?

"I needed to know if it was you who told the made-wolves where to find me. And somehow it doesn't seem that you're the type."

Too callow, he meant, not some hooked-up, underworld thug like most monsters. The way he'd cowered his way through the fight must have made that clear enough. "Oh brilliant, so when did you plan on starting to tell me the truth. Ever?"

"Don't worry," Kerry said. "I'll look after this. We'll have time to sort things out between us. Real things, Bern. I'm not playing you." He stepped back and raised his hands. "I better deal with this first. I don't suppose you're neighbors will be calling the cops." And with that he heaved the straining bed sheet over his shoulder and walked out into the night.

Chapter Five

The next night the station was clogged up with Office of Otherkin Affairs. Kerry was loitering on the desk. "Stuck in the station until they get round to testing me again," he muttered. Leaning in he added, "I tested positive of vampire once and werewolf twice over, they tell me. How the hell did you manage that?"

"You got it covered?" Bern said, but he kept his distance as best he could.

He was running short on sleep but had thought things over pretty well, and one way or another it didn't seem like Kerry was entirely trustworthy. Even if he did pursue the relationship in some form it didn't seem like a good idea to go along with it. Combining sex and murder was bound to be a terrible idea, especially as it looked like the whole thing started up as part of some underhanded maneuver to test out Bern's loyalties.

Kerry followed him over to the other end of the front desk. "That spell I worked on my late brother will work on me a while, too. I'll test human for the next few days, I think. But I've got to wonder if it will be enough. Somebody is behind the sudden sweep—perhaps somebody who already knows about me and need only wait for tonight's full moon."

"Fine, well there's no need for you to be hanging around here. Go get some coffee or something." Kerry looked over the empty front area. "They know to find me here," he said.

"You're kind of crowding me."

"How about we meet up after work. I'd like to talk."

"I don't see the need for that."

"Perhaps you'll give me a chance to show you."

Bern didn't concede the point but he had a feeling Kerry thought silence was permission enough and he didn't stay to argue it out.

As he watched Kerry slip away it was on Bern's mind that Brenda was normally there when he came in. Brenda whose drink he'd cadged just before messing up Kerry's spit test which detected two sets of werewolf allelles.

It must have been her that was the second wolf. All it would take was a little 'flow back' in that coke bottle A quasi-human who might also know what Kerry really was. A made werewolf with the connections to hide what she was very thoroughly, on the surface at least—if she avoided the one man who might see through it.

And where was she now?

* * * * *

His shift ran over time, what with OOA calling up pretty much everyone for full testing. He got home after stopping at the hardware store. It was almost dawn when he tapped up some boards over the window and bridged over the gap that remained with cardboard. It was a pitiful enough attempt but he'd never been a handyman and the landlord wasn't one for doing anything. Just as well he hadn't been a vamp for long. The sun was uncomfortable but he looked pretty much his true age so he wasn't about to crumble to dust.

The TV kept blaring on in the background, mostly disregarded—his constant ward against loneliness. Maybe he'd need it more than usual today.

He was about to pull the door closed, it had to be thumped shut now with it's bent hinges and cracked frame when he saw a big white van pull up into the carpark and Kerry climb out. He looked up to the landing and gave a casual wave.

Bern toyed with the notion of slamming and locking the door but it wasn't going to hold up to another wolf bashing through it. Instead he waited, standing across the doorway.

Kerry trotted up the stair and came over. "Going to let me in?" "I'm not in a hurry to."

Kerry leaned his hand on the doorframe. He reached over in any easy proprietary way and curled his other arm up around Bern's body.

It was in his mind to push away but the touch still had that electric effect. Bern could smell Kerry's sweet blood, now so familiar to him, and he leaned up into the kiss as Kerry pushed him back into the apartment.

Kerry pressed him down onto the couch. Finally he pulled back. "I don't know what you've been thinking in that busy head of yours, Bern. But I was never with you for any reason except that I wanted to."

God, but Bern wanted to believe that. His cock and teeth both stirred with need.

He turned his head away but Kerry grasped his chin and turned it back. He tore down his shirt exposing his throat. "Anything I have is yours," he said.

"Would you buy me with blood?"

"It's not a bribe. I want you; I accept fully what you are. I think maybe you ought to do the same."

Kerry leaned forward and put his hand to the back of Bern's head, drawing him up. The warm skin pressed to his lips, thudding with Kerry's rapid pulse. The smell of wolf was gone and he rather missed it, the skin so thin, his teeth had pushed through even before he willed it. Blood swirled in

his mouth. Kerry cradled him as he gave himself to Bern, allowing him to feed fully, normally, for the first time he had ever known.

He gathered his strength and broke away, not knowing how much of Kerry's blood he had taken, how much it was safe to take.

"That's a start," Kerry said. "But I'll show you, you don't have to worry about me. I've got as much as any little new-fledge like you could take."

He peeled off Bern's shirt and unbuckled his trousers. "We're going to work this out, Bern. You and I."

There was so much strength in Bern now; the world seemed to sparkle, each sound and sensation sharp as pins. But he didn't want to use it, he didn't want to do anything more than this. As Kerry urged him, Bern postioned himself face down on the wide couch.

Stripped naked, Kerry pressed down and covered Bern with gentle dominance. Pushing into his body with slow, wet insistence--his wide cock straining Bern felt only a slight pain, then barely moving, they lay pressed together.

Warm pleasure spiraled out as if they were joined blood to blood into one creature. But through this sweet surrender the burr of the local channel newsreader invaded his consciousness.

"Units are reportedly surrounding the home of Kerry Carter, a local police deputy, reported discovered to be an unregistered werewolf. With a new moon scheduled to rise tonight and one murder victim already found bearing the marks of a wolf attack authorities say that it is imperative Carter be secured in custody as soon as possible...."

"Kerry, we've got to..."

Kerry just moaned and pushed up against him. The sliding sensation drowned and broke off his words and thoughts and Bern moaned. "No, Kerry, we do not have long... and how is the moon going to affect you with this spell of whatever it is."

"Goddamn," Kerry slurred as if drunk. "I didn't mean things to go this far tonight." He eased partly out, but his mouth trailed kisses down Bern's neck and then he bit down gently.

Bern shivered, clutching at the couch cushions, his own cock rock hard. "No, we have stop...."

Kerry pulled away and it hurt a lot more coming out than it had going in.

"Damn," Kerry exclaimed. "The spell makes me test human but I'll still change and soon, which could make this all a bit much for a newbie like you I think. Especially as the wolf will come back even stronger to compensate for having been pushed down so far. I'll not have control of it."

That cut through things in a chilling way. "So the cops are looking for you and pretty soon you'll be a wild wolf who doesn't even know who I am?"

"Bern, you do things to me-I lose my mind."

"How long, Kerry? How long before the change? "Moonrise is due in the day, less than an hour now."

Bern squirmed around, facing up but still all but pinned down. They kissed again, losing the proper urgency of their situation.

"Hell." Kerry pretty much fell of the couch. "I've got to go. I have a van rigged up in case of something like this. You've gotta lock me up in there. Drive it off into the woods somewhere and leave it. I'll be able to go three days in wolf form with food and water. I'll *live* anyway."

"Okay," Bern said. But inside he felt like half his body had been torn away. And foolish or not, now he knew what to do.

Epilogue

First off he did just what Kerry said. Drove the van up into the wood and left it there covered in torn down branches with Kerry huddled naked in a reinforced cage in the rear compartment.

Then he went back to the apartment. He would need some clothes and his debit card. As he ducked out though a hole in the back fence he saw two cars pulling in. One was full of some rough looking thugs with sour-faced Brenda in the front passenger seat and the other was a cop car with the lights turned off. He'd hoped the cops and wolves, enemies of long standing, would keep each other busy a while and it seemed to have turned out that way as he detected no pursuit as he slipped away

Every cent Bern had was wadded up in cash in the glove compartment as he drove. He'd found Kerry's passport in there under his real name. It was going to take some practice to call the man 'Steven' that was for sure. Growling and wild thuds echoed from the rear of the van. But Bern supposed Kerry...Steven...whatever, knew exactly what he was doing when he made that cage.

It would be three days before the beast let go of Kerry again and they would have time to talk properly and make plans. Three days for the moon to pass over and sink out of the sky again. Three days with one white van

amongst so many others on the highway and if he stopped only to sleep they'd be at the Canadian border by then.

Bern pulled out his registration card and tossed it out the car window, letting it flutter off to join all the rubbish along the curb. He let go of needing to be safe, needing to be accepted.

Letting his hands grip the steering wheel loose and easy, Bern smiled.

The End

Things That Go Bump in the Night

Lucynda Storey

Chapter One

Tyler Crocket leaned against the window frame, staring through the open window at the guesthouse across the yard. Summer Donaldson lived there and had given her notice, effective the first of November. For the past week he'd wracked his brain trying to figure out a way to make the sultry blonde stay. Nothing came to mind.

It wasn't just that he lusted after her. She had a body that begged a man to touch her. After eighteen months, he'd gotten used to the boners and the suddenly too tight jeans that rubbed him all the wrong ways. She was so much more than a hot bod. *Special* came to mind and that was a damn weak word.

She'd be hard to replace. Her expertise in running the kitchen with good food had pleased the ranch hands as much as a pay increase. There was economy in the kitchen, with little waste of food that satisfied him even more. She worked hard, smiled often, and made the men feel like the Bar C was home. And she did it all while masking her own pain.

Summer didn't complain. It wasn't her way, but he knew breaking up with Scot Johnson cut her deeply. Tyler had witnessed the whispers that stopped when either Scot or Summer entered the room. Knowing people were talking – he'd have busted a few chops if he'd been on the receiving end of those innuendoes. She however, maintained the façade of calm, never losing her temper, never breaking down into a pile of whimpering tears.

He never saw what Summer found attractive in Johnson, but he hadn't spoken up, hadn't acted on his own attraction when he first met her, and lived with the consequences. Fortunately, Johnson left for another ranch and the easy camaraderie returned to the long tables of the dining hall.

So, why hadn't he made a move on her since? Johnson's betrayal, that's what it was, occurred months ago when he'd been caught with a buxom twenty-something from town. A kiss might have been forgivable, but the rumor mill ground out the two had been caught bare butt naked in the sixtynine position.

Tyler squelched the rumors as soon as he heard them, but the damage had been done. She'd frozen up to any sexual interest faster than an artic cold front dropped the temperature of a mid-winter night. The signal she beamed was loud and clear. Stay away.

She was too hurt, too damaged. Besides, rebound relationships never worked and he wasn't about to be the man who put Summer back together only to be left in the dust holding his hat and heart in his hands.

He shook his head. Summer intended to leave and he couldn't stop her. So, instead, like a mooning adolescent, he stood at his window, staring at the quarters she'd vacate in less than a week. A light flared, drawing his attention. She'd entered her bedroom, kicked off her shoes, and sat in the wicker rocker near the window. A moment later, she put her feet up on a small table. Her heels rested near an open, face down book. She leaned forward and rubbed the top and arch of one foot, then the other.

If only he'd taken the chance with her when he'd had it, Tyler would be rubbing her feet, caressing her ankles, and letting his hands wander up the sexy legs he'd seen during the warmer months.

Already, the beginning of an erection rubbed against his briefs. It wouldn't be long before he'd have a raging hard-on without any relief but that delivered by his own hands. Damn it. Too many nights he'd spent jerking off when he could have been with Summer.

Time was slipping away. Maybe he couldn't win the fair maiden's heart, but he could taste her, please her, then bury himself deeply inside her welcoming body.

Right, he chided himself. And I've a Pegasus on this ranch, too.

Well do something about it, loser. You still have a few days left. Who knows what would happen if you marched your ass over there and talked to her off duty. As a man rather than her employer.

Fuck, he hated it when his brain was right. If he only had five days left, he needed to make the most of each one of them, starting right now.

He shifted on his feet, adjusted the bulge in his jeans, and then froze.

Across the way, Summer was out of the rocker, swaying to a beat only she could hear. Her shoulders rolled and a moment later her shirt slid down her back, the sleeves down her arms, and then the garment fell to the floor somewhere out of sight. The swaying of her hips preceded the dropping of her jeans.

His mouth went dry and he couldn't swallow. From where he stood, all he could see was Summer's ass, a deep red strap around her hips and disappearing into the cleft of her cheeks. Holy shit, if he'd known she wore a thong he would have taken her in one of the horse stalls months ago. All those times he'd seen those sweet curves, she'd been nearly naked beneath; reality far better than what his imagination had conjured and that mind of his had been pretty damn detailed.

He should move, he should really stop gawking, but his eyes refused to look another direction and his mouth hung open like he'd busted his jaw.

His gaze glued on the scene before him, he watched as Summer continued her seductive striptease. Only, something else was going on now.

Summer flopped across the end of her bed, feet dangling off one side, her head, neck and shoulders off the other. Reaching beneath the bed she dragged out a container, flipped off the lid and pulled out a long, green...dildo. *Holy fuck!*

She twisted until she was flat on her back, ran the toy over her breasts, and then stuck her hand beneath the scrap of material covering her pussy.

Tyler moaned even as his pulse shot off into the stratosphere. His hard cock demanded to be touched and he unzipped his jeans and freed his massive erection.

Fascinated, he watched as Summer pulled the thong down and played in what he was sure was a very wet nest of curls dampened by her sopping cunt. His hand tightened around his rod, rubbing the shaft, gliding over the cum slick head, and then returned to the root. If only he were being touched by Summer.

When she pushed the dildo into her heat and then arched her back in orgasm, Tyler came with her, shooting hot, thick globs of cum into his hand.

He didn't know if the sexy vixen was teasing him intentionally or not. All Tyler knew was that he had to have a taste of her before she left.

* * * * *

"Aaagh!" Summer moaned as she came around the dildo. Her rapid breathing quickly settled, like it always did when she she'd come with something other than a flesh and blood man to achieve orgasm.

If she didn't get Tyler in her bed soon, before the next full moonrise, she'd be fighting off the canines that'd sniff out her heat and try to force her to mate with them. Just because she was a werewolf did not mean she was available for every dog in the county to mount.

When she'd first ordered the "Orgasmatron" she'd used it to replace the feel of Scot fucking her senseless. God damn as shole bit her and turned her into one of his kind, with a nympho kick to boot. No way was she going back to him after catching him with his tongue down that slut's snatch and his cock shoved down her throat, no matter how badly she needed the real thing driving between her legs.

After long, lonely months, though, that two-timing bastard's face had faded from her memory.

Another man's image replaced him, a man who'd shown zero interest in her as a woman. The man she'd decided was strong enough to purge Scot's territorial markings from her skin.

To Tyler Crockett she was nothing more than a good employee; the one man she thought strong enough to handle her physical changes, sexual tastes, and alpha challenges.

Even tendering her resignation hadn't prompted him to notice her as anything more and time was running out. Well, tonight, he hadn't had a choice. She'd seen his profile in the window and decided to give him a little show. Make him aware that she was not just a woman, but a horny, I-need-a-good-fuck woman.

She half expected him to disappear from the window, run out of his house, and pound on her front door, demanding entrance that she would readily give. When he insisted on knowing what she was doing, she'd capitulate to his desires, fanning whatever flames she could find.

Alas, her scenario hadn't bore fruit. No one beat on the door, raced up the steps, and fucked her silly.

Only one option remained. Go to plan B.

Chapter Two

Summer couldn't help but stare as the object of her lust entered the dining hall. Tyler looked good. Yummy, in fact. Tight black jeans enclosed his taut ass and a form fitting black tee-shirt caressed his chest. A black Stetson and matching boots made him a vision in black. But what the hell was he all dressed up for?

Well, didn't matter. Plan B was about to go into full swing. If she couldn't get him interested in a midnight fuck, maybe she could make him think someone else was attracted. If he showed the least bit of jealousy, she'd take it as a sign he was paying attention.

If she couldn't draw him to her flame she'd have to move on to a new territory; find the alpha mate who could control her during the change.

She wore a clinging long-sleeved number with a v-neck revealing a hint of cleavage. Cleavage that deepened when she leaned over to speak to one of the cowboys at the table.

Didn't they say all was fair in love and war? Well, this was war! Summer wasn't so sure about the love part.

The cowboys of her acquaintance were fickle and Scot sure as hell didn't know the meaning of fidelity. But, there was something different about Tyler Crockett; she'd seen it the first day they met a year and a half ago.

No matter. Whatever she'd seen he hadn't acted on and then she'd gotten involved with Scot.

A tiny smile curved her lips. Scot had been an amazing lover. Too bad the rest of him had been so shitty.

She tapped Stu on the shoulder, and then spoke softly. "Could you help me bring out the coffee?" Every morning she had one of the cowboys help carry the giant urn to the end of the long row of tables.

"Ah, sure thing, Miss Summer."

Stu was the brawniest of the hands and the shyest. A blush crept into his cheeks, but he pushed away from the table and followed her back to the kitchen.

One of the things she'd done away with in her early days at the Bar C was cafeteria line serving. Placing big bowls of food on the table for family style meals just seemed more cozy and friendly.

It caused more work, but the payoff in the atmosphere of the dining hall was well worth the effort. When the debacle with Scot occurred she'd been more than happy to have the longer-lasting kitchen chores fill her time.

She pushed through the swinging doors and there he was, Tyler Crockett, bigger than life it seemed, glaring at her no less.

"I'll get that, Stu."

He snarled his command and the poor cowpoke nearly shook in his boots. She laid a hand on Stu's forearm. "It's okay. I didn't realize I had help already."

"Ahh, okay, boss, Miss Summer," he stammered before he beat a hasty exit back through the swinging doors.

Summer drew herself up to her full five foot four inches of height. She wasn't tall, but she used what she had. She narrowed her gaze at Mr. Big Boss. "What," she said in a clipped tone, "was that supposed to be about?"

He advanced on her, closing the space between them. "You. Leading the poor guy on."

Summer sputtered. "Wwwhat?"

"I don't know what game you're playing, but maybe it's a damn good thing you're leaving."

His gaze left her eyes and traveled south to rest on the cleavage she'd been so sure would cause trouble. Bingo. Jealousy. Score one for the Gipper. But, his words still stung. "How dare you—"

"No," Tyler growled. "How dare you flaunt yourself like some cheap whore. Teasing the men when they have to get out of here and do dangerous work. Their minds won't be on their jobs."

He advanced closer until she could see the tiny flecks of gold in his green eyes, feel the warm air of his breath. This *was* what she wanted, right? This man's attention?

Well, she suddenly had it by buckets. Now, was not the time to back down, not if she wanted Tyler in her bed. "And just what will their minds be on?"

"You."

"Yeah, right." She gave him her best glare. "I would have thought any of that sort of nonsense would have happened months ago."

"You weren't dressed like this months ago. Hell, even weeks ago. They're men, not eunuchs."

"You're immune."

"Am I?"

As quick as a rattler strike, Tyler's arm wrapped around her waist and he yanked her hard against his chest. His other hand cupped the back of her head and he kissed her.

The kiss was rough, possessive, and hard, stealing the breath from her lungs. God, it was just what she wanted from him. But not enough. If she were going to have this man the way she wanted, 'hard to get' was going to be the theme of the day.

With strength she was sure was super human, she shoved Tyler Crockett away from her lusting, burning mouth and slapped him as hard as she could.

The shock she saw in his eyes was quickly replaced with a cold, icy stare.

No backing down. This is just the first skirmish in a war I'll win. "I'll thank you to keep your hands to yourself, Mister Crockett." She picked up a pair of hot mitts, turned to the warming bins, and lifted a large platter of steaming pancakes from its depths. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have dangerous work to do."

She sauntered past Tyler, making sure to wiggle her butt. "Don't forget the coffee," she smirked as she headed out the doors.

* * * * *

Tyler paced his office like a caged mountain lion. All his good intentions of asking Summer to stay on longer fled like a tornado when he saw her in that tight, low-cut shirt and the jeans that hugged her backside like blue skin.

Hell, he'd even gotten dressed up, hoping to take her on some ranch errands, and then maybe into town later to buy supplies. All rational thought, though, disappeared when he saw her lean over and whisper to Stu, a seductive smile playing on her lips. He'd galloped the back way into the kitchen and was waiting for her when they came in.

He shook his head. Things went from bad to worse once Stu left.

He couldn't remember a time when he'd let irrational jealousy led by his cock make his decisions. His actions had not only been stupid but they could easily be construed as harassment, if Summer wanted to cause him that sort of trouble. "Idiot!" Last night he decided he needed to do something, but he didn't have a plan. Acting on instinct this morning had been all wrong. The palm print she'd left on his cheek had surely caused a bit of discussion among the hands. He deserved every whispered word, too.

So, okay, where did he go from here? A half-day wasted and time so valuable. He sat at his desk, opened the ledger and began to go over the ranch's expenditures. Maybe something would come to him if he followed routine.

He wiped the sweat from his brow. The day was already getting hot, unusual for this late in October. He stood and went to the window, praying something would come to him.

Mid-morning the answer winged him like a stray bullet. Apologize and ask her to the Saint Saturninus Festival that evening. If all went well, maybe he could take her to the Haunted House tomorrow night.

No, best not count those chickens too soon. Take it one day at a time—besides, he had to apologize first.

Tyler pushed away from his desk, stood, and grabbed his hat. At least he didn't smell like horses and cow shit. Most of the guys would be heading back by now too, wanting to get cleaned up.

Figuring they'd want to attend the festivities in town, he'd given them only a half-day's work. That should translate into less work for Summer, too. When he'd told the hands about the shortened hours for the day, he'd suggested they let her know if they'd be around for supper.

Ah, another thing he had a pretense for going to the kitchen and talking to her about. He rubbed his hands together, feeling better than he had in the past several hours. If he wanted to speak to her without broadcasting to the ranch, he'd have to hurry. Grinning, he walked out the door and into the heat.

The kitchen and dining hall were next to her guesthouse. A mere two minutes walk from his front door to...face his destiny? Could Summer be his fate, could she be *the one*?

Sweat broke out on his brow and his palms dampened. A burning sensation singed his stomach. You've gone through worse. Show some backbone.

He squared his shoulders and marched over to the kitchen, knocking once on the screen door before entering. "Summer?"

A muffled voice from somewhere in the kitchen called back, "Yes, Mr. Crockett."

"I need to speak with you." Did he sound desperate? He hoped not. He was a man after all, not some mouse.

"Just a minute."

Her voice sounded even further away. Tyler scanned the room trying to figure out where she was and why he couldn't see her.

He rounded the marble topped island where she chopped vegetables, just as she stood, a glistening carrot in her hand.

Holy shit was all he could think as he looked from her flushed face to the orange vegetable she held.

Chapter Three

Tyler had the strangest look on his face. His eyes were wide as if he was in shock and his lips moved but no words came out. Her brows furrowed and she asked tentatively, "Can I help you?"

A long second passed before strangled sounds came out of his mouth. "Wwwhat are you doing?"

She marched to the sink and turned the faucet on. Rushing water streamed from the spigot splashing her white halter top and she shouted over the noise. "Making carrot cake." Summer scrubbed the carrot that had squirted from her hands a minute ago, peeled it, then turned to the counter where the other carrots waited to be shredded. "Is there something I can help you with Mr. Crocket?"

The stunned look disappeared and was replaced by a flush rushing up his neck and into his cheeks. Hmmm. What was that about?

"Well, I...I was wondering, that is, if you don't already..."

Whatever he was trying to say sure was difficult. Given her performance last night and the scene this morning, Tyler could be trying to tell her just about anything.

"...well fuck it."

Oh, now there was a thought. Maybe he'd throw her down on the island and use that tongue of his for oral stimulation resulting in a screaming orgasm. Mmm. That had serious appeal.

Maybe, he'd push her up against the stainless steel fridge and shove her short cut-offs to her ankles...the possibilities were endless and equally tantalizing.

"Excuse me, Mr. Crockett. Did you want something?" Like letting me ride you hard and fast?

"Look, Summer, I apologize for the way I behaved this morning." She frowned.

Damn. She'd liked his behavior this morning. A man in charge who knew what he wanted and went for it.

"Okay. Is that all?" She kept her voice as flat and neutral as she could. If all he wanted was to say he was sorry for his behavior, he could flounder.

"Well, no."

He stared into her eyes and for a millisecond a flame of desire singed her stomach. Okay, he was starting to scramble out of the apology hole. She cocked her head and returned his gaze.

"I have to, well, that is I volunteered to man the kissing booth at the Saint Saturninus Festival and I was wondering if you maybe would like to come along with me."

Summer nodded and rolled her head. "To the kissing booth?"

"Yes. I mean, no to the kissing booth...yes to the Saturninus Festival."

The bewilderment in his green eyes delighted her. He was off his game, another indication that perhaps she'd made some headway. Why oh why, hadn't she thought of this whole jealousy thing before? "So you're asking me out...but not to the kissing booth?"

"Well, if you-"

"I've never been to the Saint Saturninus Festival. Isn't it just an attempt to cover Halloween?"

The blush faded from Tyler's face. "It's easy to think that I guess. I've been around it all my life and there is an element of Halloween to it, but it's also a great opportunity to raise money for some of the local charities."

"And the kissing booth goes to what?"

"Juvenile Diabetes."

Stilling the slight shaking of her hands, Summer resumed shredding the carrots, directing her words at her hands rather than Tyler. Refusing to meet his gaze would keep him from realizing how badly she wanted to scream her acceptance of his date offer. "J.D. is a great cause. Do you expect to raise much?"

He snorted; a self-deprecating sound she didn't like. "I'm an old cowboy. The young girls would rather kiss one of the hands than me."

Pfftt. They didn't know what they were missing. An experienced man had so much more to offer than an unschooled boy. A real man knew how to please a woman and didn't go off like a bottle rocket once he penetrated you. "Don't sell yourself short, Mr. Crockett. Not everyone is a giggly twenty-something attracted to a nice set of buns and firm biceps."

There let him mull that over a while. She snuck a glance from beneath her lashes hoping to catch another blush color his face and instead fought back a smile. Tyler Crockett was twisting and doing contortions to try and look at his finely shaped ass.

She went back to her work before he caught her smirking.

"So, is that a yes?"

Summer mixed the dry ingredients. "Yeah, I guess so."

"How long is it going to take to finish up that cake and fix dinner for the hands?"

She glanced at him, pleased to see a tinge of hope in his green depths. "There's only a half-dozen hands sticking around tonight. I talked Stu into

overseeing the outdoor grill." At the mention of wrangler's name she saw Tyler frown.

"Don't be getting all in a twist over Stu. He's a friend, nothing more." She shook her head. Jealousy sure was an irrational animal. "I can be ready inside two hours."

He gave her a curt nod and spun on his heels and out, the screen door bouncing shut in his wake.

* * * * *

They bounced and bumped their way off the ranch road and onto the county highway. Until they hit the blacktop, Summer regretted her choice of clothing, a flowing print skirt belted with a black fanny pack and a red peasant top. The skirt came down to her knees barely and she wore a pair of fairly new, strappy wedge sandals that accentuated her legs and were as uncomfortable as hell.

She wiggled in her seat and tried to pull her skirt down her thighs. No need in revealing her secrets too soon. If Tyler wanted to see what she wore beneath the skirt, he'd have to find out the old-fashioned way...necking.

They chit-chatted all the way into town. At First and Main a banner pronouncing the Saint Saturninus Festival crossed the street. Beneath, orange and white striped barricades blocked the road.

Tyler turned down First. "Keep an eye out for a parking spot?"

Easy request. Since Scot infected her, her vision had gotten better. In fact, she'd dumped the contacts months ago. "There!" She pointed down the street. "About halfway down the block on the right."

"Good eyes."

You have no idea, Cowboy.

He parallel parked the F350 with the ease of a Geo Metro, bounded out of the cab and was to her side of the vehicle in a flash. Normally, she'd open

the door herself, but this was one hell of a truck and Summer didn't mind the help down.

Especially since Tyler's hands were on her waist and wonderful jolts of desire shot through her skin where those strong fingers of his touched her.

"There," he said, setting her on her feet and releasing her.

Only, unused to the combination of the shoes and the truck's height, she wobbled. Toppled really. She fell forward positive kissing the pavement would have a personal meaning. *Oh shit. Grace in action*.

Then his muscular arms were around her, pulling her up against him, the evidence of his attraction to her jabbing her thigh. She took a shuddering breath, trying to calm the high intensity pounding of her heart even as she clutched his soft, black tee-shirt beneath her fingers.

"Be careful," he said.

"I'm sssorry," she started.

"Don't be."

How two words could drag on so long was beyond Summer. Then it didn't matter. Tyler leaned down, held her tighter, and gave her a kiss that curled her toes. Possessive, gentle, demanding, sensual, his kiss was so many things wrapped up in a tender insistence she didn't resist. Didn't want to. Sweet mother, I want him more than I realized.

A moment later, he broke off the kiss. "I don't know why, but today I can't keep from kissing you."

With the flat of her palm she pushed away from him. "Cowboy, if you kiss the gals at the booth like that, the word will get 'round and you'll bring in the most money for J.D."

In the dim light, she saw a ghost of a smile. Maybe they were getting somewhere. She pulled away from his hold for just a moment, wrapping her arm through his. Now that he'd instigated the touching, no way was she letting go.

Scents drifted on a slight breeze toward them. Her stomach rumbled in appreciation. "Barbeque?"

Tyler patted her hand. "Hungry?"

"Some, I guess." They walked toward the bobbling, hanging lights decorating the festival area. "But I want to smell it all, see everything before I stuff my face."

A deep laugh rumbled from Tyler. "Maybe you can check things out while I'm occupying the booth. Let me know what you find out and after I'm done we'll get something together."

Together. That word brought Summer hope. If she could show him they'd be great together, then maybe she had a chance of him sticking around once he discovered her "were" status. No matter what happened, he had to know before he shot his arrow into her creamy depths.

If he could handle her condition maybe he'd ask her to stay. If he rejected her outright then her decision to move on to more fertile grounds would be carried out with alacrity.

"Well, here we are."

There was a tinge of disappointment in Tyler's voice. Nice. "Cowboy, it won't be that long will it?"

"An hour."

She grinned. He sounded like a petulant child whose favorite toy had just been confiscated. She sniffed the air. "It will take me at least that long to detect where all the delectable aromas are coming from."

She inhaled deeply, this time smelling something other than food. Scot.

"Look, I should get going, so you can start serving your hard time."

He laughed, and then glanced at his watch. "I'll send the dogs out looking for you if I don't see you back here at quarter after."

She managed a small laugh, just barely. The top dog was already out, hunting for a female. She prayed Scot wouldn't pick up her scent and track her down to reclaim her as his alpha mate.

Living with a man who thought being alpha meant he could screw any woman, any time he pleased was not a future Summer wanted for herself. She needed another man's scent. The only way to remove Scot's territorial marking was to get Tyler Crockett to bed her down in every way imaginable.

The sooner, the better.

Chapter Four

Summer returned five minutes early. Early enough to show she valued Tyler's time, but not too early. No use appearing overeager. Hanging around would only reveal her interest.

Under the temporary lighting, the festival took on an otherworldly aura; the normally harsh lights looked as if they'd been wrapped in cotton batting, the chatter of the crowds muted and indistinct. Even their presence seemed nothing more than background color. The setting cocooned her, soft, gentle, and promising.

She smiled at Tyler, watching eager females wait their turns at getting him in a lip-lock. From the length of the line, she was sure her prediction of a great kissing cowboy had come true.

"Mooning after the boss?"

Lost in thought, she hadn't smelled Scot's approach. Damn. She had to be more careful. Thank God, Tyler was close-by...just in case she needed some help. She turned toward her nemesis. "That would be another incorrect assumption on your part, Scot."

"Another?"

"Yeah, the first was thinking I wouldn't mind you fucking your bimbo when we were going out." He smirked, then tipped the edge of his cowboy hat ever so slightly. "She wasn't as good a lay as you."

"Guess you should have thought of that before you made your choice."

A feral gleam entered his gaze and he stepped closer. "Well, I intend to change that. I want you back in my bed, as my rightful mate."

"Dream on."

"It's no dream. Face it, every time I came in that sweet, hot pussy of yours, my essence permeated your body, your skin, every slutty pore. You're marked and I smelled your lust, your excitement for me from halfway across the grounds."

"Another assumption." She took a deep breath, trying to control her temper. Her hands fisted at her side. Landing a roundhouse on his jaw would feel so good.

"I don't think so."

He was really pushing her buttons with his smug tone. "Scot, do you know the root word of *assumption*?"

"Assume?"

"Yeah."

"Do you know what it means?"

"Of course, I do. I'm not stupid."

She fought back a sarcastic laugh. She'd never been with him for his intelligence.

"Assume makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me'. And I'm not about to be your ass again. So get the hell away from me."

Anger flared in Scot's eyes, and then he leered at her. "I enjoyed fucking your ass and will fuck it again and again." He slapped her butt hard, his palm lingering on the burning cheek before she shifted away. "I'm *your* alpha, so you best be watching that college-educated mouth of yours."

His high-handed claim was just too much. No one was deciding her fate, especially Scot Johnson. She swung her arm back, ready to bitch slap some sense into him.

Mid arc her arm stopped, a large hand gripping her wrist. Tyler's sexy voice poured over her, soothing her ire as he lowered her tensed arm.

"Kitten, velvet those claws of yours."

He spun her around and pulled her into his arms. A sparkle lit his eyes and he winked at her. "After kissing all those fillies, I couldn't wait to get back to *your* special brand of affection."

With animal like possession, he took her mouth, plundering its depths. Who cared if Tyler was putting on an act with her to ward off Scot. The masterful kiss weakened her knees and confirmed her suspicions that Tyler Crockett was indeed the man to remove Johnson's stench. Suddenly it didn't matter that his kiss was a sham.

Scot moved behind Tyler and tapped him on the shoulder. "She's spoken for Crockett."

Tyler lifted his head from her mouth. "Is that so?"

In answer, Scot landed a right on Tyler's jaw. The sound shot through the night like the retort of a rifle, loud and sharp.

The impact spun Tyler around, forcing Summer out of his arms. A wild scream left her lips and she jumped on Scot's back, trying to keep him from landing another sucker punch.

She shouldn't have bothered.

Tyler returned with a blow somewhere on Scot's midsection, hard enough to jar Summer off Scot's back and land her bottom side down in the dirt. "Stop it, stop it," she screamed, scrambling to her feet in time to see Scot knock Tyler to the ground and jump on him.

No one listened. Dirt scattered, dust lifted, and they rolled, swinging fists.

A small crowd gathered watching the two men have at one another. "Not a fair fight," one man said. "The dude in black is way bigger."

"The other guy is at least fifteen years younger, in better shape," another male replied. "I'd still bet on the old guy, though, for his experience."

Summer whirled around looking for the speakers. Tyler could wallop Scot despite an age deficiency. How dare they talk about Tyler that way!

A black Stetson landed at her feet. Bending over, she quickly picked up Tyler's hat and griping it tightly, she slapped it against her thigh, keeping her gaze riveted on the two dueling men.

Scot and Tyler continued swinging and rolling. Fists slammed into each man's hard body, muffled thumps followed with grunts.

Dust drifted into the fluorescent beams of the temporary lights. Bodies twisted, spun, legs kicking gravel across the ground as each man tried to find some advantage. One minute Tyler was on top, the next Scot. "Stop it," she shrieked once more.

"Break it up," a deep voice bellowed. "Move aside!"

The crowd parted as if Moses split the Red Sea. The sheriff and one of his deputies entered the fray. Both law enforcement officers were huge and easily separated Scot and Tyler.

"Scot Johnson," the sheriff drawled. "Should have known I'd find the likes of you involved in a brawl."

Summer rushed to Tyler. Dust covered his torn black tee shirt. A small stream of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. She pulled a Kleenex from her pack and dabbed at the trickle. "My God, are you okay?"

Why couldn't Scot get it out of his head they were over? Bastard.

She knew why though. In the throes of passion, the night he'd bit her, Scot told her how she was his until he either gave her up or another alpha challenged for her. How his scent covered her until that time, as surely as if she'd just had sex with him.

Until another alpha sexually claimed every orifice, she'd be stuck with Scot's territorial marking, as if she were some fucking tree. Anger boiled through her. Given the way Scot announced his claim to her tonight, she needed to have sex with Tyler soon.

"I'm fine, Kitten." Tyler's voice remained strong, not breathless like she'd anticipated.

"Keep standing behind your woman, Crockett. I can take care of both of you." He lunged for Tyler.

"That's enough," the sheriff replied, wrenching Scot Johnson's arm behind his back.

"Hey," she whispered, handing Tyler his hat. "Let's get out of here."

"Are you done?" the sheriff roared. "Or am I gonna have to haul your pathetic patooties to the pokey?"

With his arm around Summer's shoulder, Tyler nodded. "As long as Johnson stays away from the lady, I'm done."

He led her toward the midway. They'd only gone a few steps when Scot Johnson snarled. "Fucking coward." The loud whisper carried Scot's challenge. "This isn't over yet, Crockett."

Behind her, Summer heard the sheriff. "That's it Johnson. You're coming with me to cool off that foul disposition of yours."

She grinned. For the next few hours, she was practically assured of Scot remaining in the sheriff's dull company.

Still, the Saint Saturninus Festival wasn't the best place to explain her predicament; but telling a man you had the hots for that you were a werewolf really didn't have a right place or time. She worried her lower lip, soothing it with a flick of her tongue. "He's right you know."

Tyler laughed. "Not likely. Right means he might know something." She stopped, forcing Tyler to a halt. "He does."

He frowned. "You're taking his side? Well, now, doesn't that beat all." "No. You have it wrong!"

"What then?"

She wasn't ready. As much as she lusted after Tyler's body, could she ever tell him the truth? Would she ever be ready?

"I don't feel comfortable talking about Johnson here.

Tyler glared. The look he favored her with would frost Florida oranges in mid-summer. "What sort of hold does he have on you?"

God, he handed her an opportunity to spill her guts. But rather than taking the honorable path, she looked away from him, ignored his angry question and chose the coward's road. "Do they have a haunted house here?"

Forcing more levity into her voice than she felt, she ploughed forward. "My family didn't celebrate Halloween. Thought the whole holiday invited spiteful spirits to prey upon innocent children. We didn't see Santa either."

He gave a subtle shake of his head. "You never sat on Santa's lap or had a Christmas picture taken with him?"

Summer widened her eyes in feigned gullibility and gently shook her head. She didn't tell Tyler the reason she'd never sat on the old guy's lap was because it creeped her out.

So did spooky things. Although, now that she knew what some of those things were, they didn't scare her as much as piss her off. But creeps like Scot headed her list above and beyond things that could jump out of dark corners and go bump in the night.

She must have said something right. The frost in his gaze thawed. "Can't do anything about you sitting on St. Nick's lap but I can do something about Halloween. We do have a haunted house and I'd be delighted to escort you through its terrors."

"Really?"

He put a muscular arm around her shoulder. Warmth suffused her skin where their flesh touched. A tremor of delight shook her body.

"Cold?"

Not really. You do this to me, Cowboy. "A little," she hedged.

His hold on her tightened and the thrill of being held by Tyler intensified.

They walked in unison. People on the midway, busy playing games nearly impossible to win but having fun none-the-less, blurred like Hollywood extras. Tyler plunked down some bills for tickets and guided her to the line for the haunted house.

No words passed between them. Words weren't needed. Each second of silence solidified the connection growing between them. Every beat of her heart, steady and strong, echoed the pure pleasure of being with this magnificent male.

"What they've done is crafted a specialty haunted house. You go through this line to get to the actual ride, but the line goes through some dark turns with terrifying surprises for the unprepared."

"Rrreally?" Nervousness shot through her, her palms dampened, and the first slivers of apprehension struck. The rhythm of her heart beat uncharacteristically fast. She didn't like surprises, didn't like things that jumped out at you from dark corners, didn't think Tyler would really take her to the haunted house. Maybe her *true confession* had been a mistake.

This is silly. You have excellent night vision. There's nothing here that can hurt you and not a thing that will take you by surprise."

She took several deep breaths. Concentrated on Tyler's arm around her, the way she perfectly fit against his side, the musky scent of his aftershave.

Nothing worked.

The unease didn't fade. Didn't vanish to the recesses of her mind. Didn't remove the prickly feeling crawling over her skin.

"Now don't you be scared, Summer. I'll be right here with you."

There was a smile in his voice, one that lit his eyes and accentuated the tiny crows' feet, the laugh lines at the corners.

"I guess I am a bit nervous." A lot nervous.

"After we go through the crafted challenges, we get in a gondola for an actual ride. We'll be carried up and down, around and around in the blackness where more surprises await."

They shuffled forward in the line. Tyler took her free hand in his and continued his preview of the event she definitely was having second thoughts about.

"When we get off the ride, we'll exit through a few more spooky sites to eventually be greeted by the long dead owner of the house who will gift us with a special reward for surviving his house tour."

"Wonderful. I get to meet a dead guy."

"I can honestly tell you I'm much better looking."

She snorted. Actually snorted at his joke to the point the noise wasn't that far removed from one of the ranch's piglets.

"Of course, you are, Tyler. Your skin isn't moldy, or filled with maggots. You have a dead guy beat by miles."

Tyler smiled and wiggled his eyebrows. "I know the dead guy. Went to high school with him. He might let me take you on a special tour; show you some of the more private areas of his home."

Laughter rolled from her lips. God, Tyler was a tease and more fun than she'd ever imagined.

"You mock me, madam," he said in a patently false European accent, handing over the requisite number of tickets, and holding open the door into darkness for her.

Chapter Five

Her unease didn't fade despite the fact Summer's exceptional night vision perceived every person assigned to carry out the haunted illusions. Had she normal vision, the tricks would have scared her or grossed her out at the least. The illusions, though, were creative and she appreciated the attempts made to frighten the haunted house patrons. The live head on the platter she considered the best of the bunch.

Not that it frightened her. She sensed the body beneath the table, saw the cuts in the wood, the metal bolts that enabled a person to stick their head through the tabletop. A truly clever device; just the sort of thing to give children nightmares for months.

So what was it then? Despite the warmth of Tyler's body close to her, the apprehension hadn't faded. She couldn't contain the shiver that raced through her.

"Slide closer, Kitten. When this ride starts, you'll get a little colder."

She stifled a laugh. *Kitten*. Figured he'd give her a moniker having nothing to do with her supernatural state. Still, kitten sounded a hell of a lot better than puppy which would have been at least species correct.

"Why?" She needed to keep talking before she let her nerves get the better of her self-control. Something was definitely wrong.

"The seat we're in spins around, while going up and down and traveling around in a circle. Generates a bit of wind and the air is cool."

At that, an attendant jogged through checking all the bolts on the doors and lowering the safety bars. Once he returned to his booth, the carnival ride, called 'The Spider', creaked to a start. Gradually, it built up speed and as Tyler predicted, the air circulating their basket was cold.

She snuggled closer inhaling deeply the pure masculinity surrounding Tyler. A touch of dust mingled with his cologne. His hand lifted to stroke her hair even as the machine whirled them around and sent her stomach into dizzying flips. Or was it the man next to her?

Along the dark walls, flashes of light illumined various depictions. During one of the revolutions, a wolf pack winked into view.

Fear coalesced into a hard ball in her stomach. The unease, the nervousness she'd been trying to tame had nothing at all to do with the haunted house as she'd reasoned. It had to do with Scot Johnson.

You could only be an alpha werewolf if you had a wolf pack to lead. Right?

Were the members of his pack waiting, ready to pounce on them at some unexpected moment? She had to be extremely vigilant in order to prevent Scot from ambushing them.

A high pitched screech pierced her eardrums, followed by a metallic banging. The ride slowed to a halt. Around them, lights lit up the interior of the house containing the carnival ride, effectively destroying in their harsh, bright light any spooky effects intended.

Their basket stopped at the apogee of The Spider's circular path. Tyler gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Nothing to worry about, Summer. They'll get us down."

Now what prompted that? "I'm not afraid of heights, Cowboy. Don't worry about me."

Suddenly, the emergency lights popped off, as if all the bulbs had blown simultaneously. Around them, Summer heard a couple of women scream and sharp gasps unchecked by other patrons. She held out a hand. If it hadn't been for her enhanced vision, seeing her fingers would have been nearly impossible.

"Damn, its dark."

"I'm not afraid of the dark, either."

He squeezed her shoulder again, this time his long fingers outlining the edge of her peasant blouse, trailing lightly up her neck. "Maybe you should be," he whispered in her ear.

Oh dear God. He was making a pass at her. Finally, realizing she was a woman, an available one at that, and here they were stuck at the top of some stupid ride, in the dark for who knew how long.

He turned her head and swept his lips over hers for a chaste kiss. It only stayed that way a moment. Tentatively, she let the tip of her tongue touch his mouth. He took it as the sign she'd intended. Her mouth opened to let Tyler into its warm confines.

Her heart beat in an erratic tempo, the rhythm coursing through her bloodstream to lodge in a longing throb between her legs. Tyler's hands tangled in her hair, holding her tightly to him. Each sweep of his tongue delved deeper, exploring her mouth as if searching for treasure.

She wrapped her tongue around his, answering his possession, pulling him deeper into her.

He pulled a hand away from her hair, let it rest above her knee before he started stroking her thigh, sliding his fingers higher until he was under her skirt and close to discovering the naked surprise she'd prepared for him.

Encouraging him, she trailed her hand over his spectacular pecs, playing with his nipple. God, she wanted him. Wanted to drink him, wanted him to screw her within an inch of her life, wanted him to make her come until she passed out.

She shifted in her seat just as his fingers grazed her bare ass. Oh dear lord, that hand caressing her was blistering hot and so close to her drenched pussy she could easily impale herself on his fingers.

She let her wandering hand descend to his belt, quickly unhooking it and then unfastening his jeans. Through his briefs, she caressed his burgeoning erection with the palm of her hand.

Frantic with need to be possessed, shock ran through her when he broke their kiss. "What? What is it," she gasped, trying to catch the breath he'd stolen from her.

"Are you sure this is what you want, Kitten?" The husky voice coming from his mouth left her no doubt as to what he wanted.

Carefully, she wiggled free of the restraining bar and lifted her hand to balance against the rear of the seat and straddled his legs, the gondola swaying with her movement. "Are your fingers as talented as your tongue?"

He leaned forward and nuzzled her neck before responding. "Ready to find out?"

She eased back a bit, and pulled the neck of her blouse down, then the cup of her bra. Lifting her breast, she offered it to him. "What do you think?"

A wild flare erupted in his eyes. "I think you want me to take you right here." He glanced around. "But, if you rode my cock the way I want you to, this boat would swing like crazy and everyone would know we were fucking."

His finger slid up, then down the crack of her ass, until it rested against her slit. "But, much as I'd like that right now, I'll satisfy myself with touching you."

He slipped a finger into her heat. Summer shuddered and moaned at the sweet, intimate invasion. "Oh, yes. That feels so good."

Another finger, then a third filled her, pumping slowly in and out of her. His thumb rubbed her clit. "I'm bigger than this," he growled against her breast. "Will you take me later? Can you?" "Oh, yes," she moaned. She rode his fingers, clenching around the digits, forcing back the moans rising in her throat. He thrust deeper, she clamped around him harder. His thumb rubbed harder, more insistently until tension coiled tightly within her core. God yes, she'd take him, all of him, every single glorious inch, in any opening of her body he wanted.

"Come for me, Kitten. Come right now."

At his husky words, coupled with another deep thrust, Summer's orgasm burst upon her like jolts from a high voltage power line. Her ragged breathing caught in her lungs and she grasped the back of the car so tightly she thought her hand would surely bend the metal. Pleasure rolled through her, dissipating until her upper body finally collapsed against Tyler's shoulders.

He withdrew his fingers from her and held them to his nose. "You needed that, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess you could say that." Coherent thought was out of the question.

He traced her lips with her cum, then licked her juices from his fingers. "Mmm. Think I can have some of that later, once we get out of here?"

The thought of Tyler between her legs, tasting her essence was enough for another rush of moisture to her creamy pussy. Oh, yeah, he could eat her out, then she'd blow him, then he'd mount her and take her the way a man was meant to take a woman, spilling his seed deep into her.

The thought brought her up short. Tyler couldn't penetrate her until she explained the risk. He had to know who and what he was dealing with before he emptied himself into her. Sobered, she started to reply. "Tyler, there's nothing—"

The lights came back on in a blinding flash. Summer scrambled from his lap and hastily rearranged her clothing. From the corner of her eye, she watched Tyler re-zip his jeans. When he finished, he kissed her again. "We're almost out of here."

Summer swallowed the lump in her throat. Here she was with the hottest cowboy around, getting her wish, and she couldn't jump on his nice boner before she revealed the biggest secret of her life.

* * * * *

What the hell had come over Summer?

The answer eluded Tyler as he helped her into the truck cab for the ride back to the ranch, but he didn't regret the end result. Her musky scent covered his fingers, tantalizing him as he drove with her unspoken promise of more.

Suckling her breast in the gondola ignited a fucking forest fire of desire to see her naked, in all her glory, in his bed, for him alone. To watch his cock sink into her as she took in every inch of him made him hard all over again.

The ride operators had brought in a ladder. He was about to let Summer descend first until he remembered the bare skin beneath her short skirt. Nope. No one but Tyler Crocket was getting a view of her fine ass. Ever again if he could help it.

Now that he'd somehow, miraculously, broken through her icy armor, he wasn't about to let her slip away from him. She'd earned his respect for her work ethics long ago. Won his respect too, for the way she made the hands feel comfortable and at home. This crew had been the most stable, consistent, dedicated bunch he could remember. Summer had been a big part of it, he was fairly certain.

And now that he'd experienced just a part of her hot, willing body...well, a man just didn't give that up. Not without a fight.

A fight. Scot Johnson. Summer still hadn't revealed what Johnson had on her. Pictures? A video tape? What about him set Summer on edge?

"Summer, we need to talk."

"About what?"

There was a tint of fear in her voice. Did she think he was going to have a good time with her and let her slid out of his life once her notice expired?

"Tonight."

"Oh."

The hands in her lap curled into fists, as if she were steeling herself for something hard.

He couldn't do this driving. They'd have to find a place to pull over so they could talk properly, so he could hold her if necessary.

A short distance ahead was a wayside picnic area, complete with a small copse of trees planted by the department of transportation back in the Roosevelt era before the days of the Interstate system. They could talk here, in relative seclusion, and keep their fresh start going in the right direction.

Gravel crunched beneath the tires as he pulled onto the dirt road. The truck illumined a picnic table before he switched off the lights, then the engine.

"Come here."

Summer scooted closer and so did Tyler. Putting an arm around her shoulders, he broached the subject she'd delayed, turning her head toward him. "You were going to tell me about Johnson."

A shiver ran through her at the mention of that bastard's name. He tried to stay cool. Tried to keep the frustration from his voice. "Summer, what's going on with him?"

She looked at him and her eyes glistened with moisture. Tears? Over Scot Johnson?

"I thought you were over him, Summer. You're not?"

She snapped her gaze to meet his. "It's not like that at all Tyler. Scot..."

"Scot what?"

"He changed me. And not for the better necessarily."

Tyler's forehead furrowed. Riddles? He wanted straight-forward, not word games.

"Did he impregnate you? Did you have an abortion? Is that how he changed you?"

She snorted. "If only it were that simple. No, I've never been pregnant, with anyone's child."

"My God, Summer. Just tell me. What did Johnson do to you?" "He bit me."

What? Bit her? How the hell did that negatively impact someone's life? "I don't understand."

She sighed deeply. "Know much about wolves?"

"Wolves?" Now that was a random, rapid change of subject. "The typical stuff a rancher has to know, I guess. Not like I've studied them in any great depth."

"Ever hear of werewolves?"

"You mean like the Michael Landon, 'I Was a Teenage Werewolf' spook movie?"

She shook her head, the movement barely perceptible in the night.

This was not at all how he'd envisioned the conversation to go. He'd expected a simple frank discussion of Johnson, and then maybe, some heavy petting.

The kind that led to sex in a truck.

"No, Tyler, I mean like real werewolves."

Now this was just too weird. "There's no such thing, Summer. It's a Hollywood invention."

In response to his statement, she pulled down the shoulder of her blouse. "You couldn't see this in the dark." She reached up and turned on the dome light. "Look at this scar?"

Tyler nodded. There were several punctures, reminding him of the bite of some sort of dog.

"Scot Johnson did this. And when he did, he infected me."

"Infected you?"

Summer grasped his hands between hers and nodded. "Scot Johnson is an alpha werewolf."

"What? Have you lost your mind?"

"Tyler, I need you to believe me. Every single word is the gospel truth." She swallowed hard, but didn't break her gaze. "When he bit me and all the times we had sex afterwards, he marked me as his alpha mate."

"So what you're telling me is..."

"I'm a werewolf, too, and if you make love to me, you run the risk of being infected as well."

Chapter Six

"Do you have any idea how insane you sound?" Tyler couldn't stop the question from firing out of his mouth. This whole cockamamie story was certifiable. "If you didn't want to have sex with me you didn't have to make up this crazy story."

Tears spilled from Summer's eyes. Ah shit. He was frustrated, true, but he didn't mean to make her cry.

"That's just it, Tyler. I want to make love with you. I want to get all hot and sweaty in the sheets and see how many times we can make each other come." She sniffed. "I just couldn't do that; take that risk, without you knowing ahead of time."

Something clicked in Tyler's brain. Scot fighting over Summer, telling them this wasn't over. "What did you mean by the alpha comment?"

She sniffed again and Tyler opened the glove box and pulled out a Kleenex for her. She wiped her nose. "Wolves run in packs and there is an alpha male in charge of the whole group. In the wild, the alpha leads the pack to hunting grounds, eats the kill first, chooses the female he mates with. The only way to disagree with the alpha is to challenge him for pack leadership."

Bits and pieces of the conversation he'd overheard between Scot and Summer began to make sense. "Okay, let's say I believe this werewolf shit. What does that have to do with you and me?"

"Scot told me the virus is transferred via bodily fluids. I wasn't much of a biologist, but I'd have to think semen qualifies."

"Yeah, well so would swapping spit. Think about it. When did you really become a...a...werewolf? How long after your first intimate relations with Scot?"

The light of understanding lit Summer's eyes. "A couple months. Nothing happened to me until after he bit me."

"So, isn't it more logical to think that perhaps it was his bite that infected you as opposed to just any ol' body fluid? That this *virus* has to be injected into the bloodstream?"

"It does. God, Tyler, it does!" She threw her arms around his neck.

She rained passionate kisses on his face, lips, mouth, but he had to stop her. There were more questions to be answered. "Stop, Kitten. I heard him say something about a claim on you. What does that mean?"

"I haven't been with another man since Scot. So, in essence, I'm still marked as his regardless of the fact I haven't slept with him in months."

Her statement made an odd sort of sense. "So, despite your choice, he considers you his private property, some sort of sex object he can have at will?"

"And nothing can stop him," she whispered.

"Except a challenge to his leadership."

Her eyes widened and filled with fear. "Don't. You have no idea how strong he is in wolf form. I've seen him fight. He'll hurt you Tyler."

He gripped her arms, holding her away from him. "One more question. Why have you been trying to seduce me?"

Beneath the dome light, he saw the color leave her face. His words were icy daggers. "It wasn't about me, was it? It was about Johnson, about trying to break his hold over you."

She didn't answer and Tyler was glad. He didn't want to hear the truth from her lips, that he was some sort of salvation to her, a way to purge Johnson from her life. He was supposed to be tough, but the realization burned like a branding iron. All those nights jacking off, thinking of her as some sort of goddess.

Fury churned through him, at himself, at her. God he was an ass. Thinking maybe the two of them might be able to have a real relationship based on something more than lust. An ass and a fool. An intolerable combination.

He ripped open his jeans, pulled down his briefs and shoved both garments to his ankles. Gripping his cock he growled, "If this is what you want baby, take it. Use me to get his claws out of you." *And then get the fuck out of my life*.

"Tyler, it's not like that, not how you're making it."

The tears in her voice made her begging all the more pathetic. If all she wanted was a good fuck, he'd give it to her, enjoy it even. She just wouldn't have his heart and he wouldn't hope for any sort of a future.

"Summer," he said tersely, "it's apparent to me that you need me to fuck you. So get on with it. When you're done we'll both have what we want without regrets."

He said the words, but how come he felt as if he'd just jabbed a Bowie knife into his gut?

She pulled away from him. Understandable. The prospect of having sex under such ludicrous pretensions would be enough to stop anyone. He closed his eyes and placed a hand on his forehead, rubbing his temples. Fine place his fucking libido had taken them.

Warm air tickled his cock. He peered between his fingers and saw Summer's head over his lap. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Giving you what you gave me back in town." Her tongue licked up and around his shriveled prick.

Damn cock was a fucking traitor, hardening at her touch. She licked again and he hardened more. Fine, damn it! She could have his cock, any

way she wanted it. When he came it would be over and he'd help her pack and get out of his life.

Her hand fisted around the shaft, while her tongue kept busy licking and sucking at the head. Somehow she'd maneuvered herself onto her knees, her ass in the air and the tiny skirt slipping toward her waist. The scent of her pussy juices rushed back at him. And the little fucker between his legs grew harder still.

He wouldn't make this enjoyable, he wouldn't. Summer was using him that was all. So why did his hand drift to her shapely ass and caress it? Why did his fingers slid toward her pussy to test her readiness?

Because, as angry as he was, he still wanted to know her, intimately. The knowledge punctured the balloon of wounded pride he'd blown up once he discovered why she really wanted him. Did it matter? They were both getting what they wanted and her tongue, mouth, and hands sent erotic shivers through his body.

"Oh god," he groaned, giving in to the sensations she aroused. "That feels so good. Keep sucking me."

She did. Her little mouth worked wonders on his shaft. But, the steering wheel was in the way and he wanted her sucking him deep. "Just a minute, darlin'."

He pushed a switch and the seat moved backward, another lever lifted the steering column out of the way, and then he flipped a handle to tilt the seat, reclining as far as possible. As if understanding what he wanted, Summer changed angles and deep-throated him.

His balls drew up ready to spew into her hot mouth. "No," he gasped, pushing her away. He didn't want to come in her mouth, not this time. He wanted to be inside her.

He leaned over and fumbled with his dropped jeans before pulling his wallet from his rear pocket. Flipping it open he grasped the foil packet he'd tucked away. He tore it open and slipped it over his cock.

In those few seconds, she'd tossed her red blouse over her head and removed her bra. Man, she had beautiful tits and her nips were already in hard peaks. "I'm gonna fuck you if that's alright."

She nodded and positioned her knees on the seat next to his thighs, sinking onto the head of his penis. With a forceful thrust he entered her, every stiff inch surrounded by hot cream.

"Fuck, Tyler!" she gasped, the words ones of surprised delight.

He knew what she meant; they fit one another perfectly as if they were created for one another. Her body enclosed him in a tight grip. She lifted, then sank again onto his cock. He reached behind her, found her tiny pucker and teased it. Pleased with the fire he saw in her eyes, he leaned forward and drew her breast into his mouth, until the entire aureole was encased and he felt the nipple enlarging on his tongue.

He thrust up and she pumped down. Her pussy rhythmically grasped him as her orgasm ripped through her. His balls drew up and this time he was helpless to control the jism exploding through his cock.

Summer might not be his, but she sure as shit wouldn't be Johnson's either. There had to be a way to help her, to make her his, too.

She moved to get off him and he stopped her. He liked the feeling of being buried in her. Liked the idea he'd made her pussy weep for his possession. "Stay."

He wanted to say more but the words wouldn't come. Everything they'd said had been harsh and far from the peaceful evening he'd envisioned.

She was crazy. Werewolves didn't exist and she wasn't one.

An idea flashed through his mind. He'd marry her, protect her from Scot, and get her the help she needed. When she was strong again, he'd give her the choice to stay or leave.

His cock stirred within her. Reaching up he flicked off the dome light, and then turned in his seat until he could lay with his head near the door.

Summer swiveled with him and when he stroked her back from the nape of

her neck to her sweet ass, she relaxed. He shifted so she could feel his cock, ready to fire again.

"I'm sorry, Kitten. Sorry I didn't accept what you told me." I still don't believe you're a werewolf, but I promise I'll find help. I swear it.

Tears fell anew. "I wanted to make love to you from the first day I laid eyes on you. But you ignored me. I figured you weren't interested, then Scot came along. I should have waited." She sobbed. "If I had, he wouldn't have done this to me...to us."

"Shh, shh. We'll make it all turn out, just wait." They would. He'd find a way to put that bastard out of her life, find a way to keep her safe with him, find a way to show her he would take care of her.

He wiggled within her again. "This time I want to make you come my way."

He rolled her over onto the seat, slipping out of her to remove the condom. He kissed her lips, her check, her neck, working his way down to the hollow of her breasts until he had to change positions and kneel on the passenger seat. The scar on her shoulder snagged his attention and he traced it with a fingertip. "I won't let Scot hurt you, Kitten. Know that."

"I believe you, Tyler."

She moved sideways, placing her ankle on the top of the seat. Opened wide, all he had to do was lean down and partake of her offering. He did so.

He swirled his tongue around her engorged clit. He dipped a finger into her, trailing the juices to her back door. Back and forth he slid his finger, until the tight hole was lubricated. "Very munchable."

She moaned and held his head tight against her snatch. He went wild, licking, biting, sucking until she writhed beneath his onslaught. His finger entered her anus easily and he worked it in and out to the rhythm of his oral ministrations.

"Tyler!" she screamed.

"Marry me!" he yelled back.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god!"

"Is that a yes?" He pumped his finger in and out the tight hole and resumed his licking.

"Yes!" she screamed once more.

Around the finger in her ass, he felt the convulsions of her pussy.

Damn! He should have stashed some condoms in the truck.

Twenty hours later, they stood in front of a Justice of the Peace in Las Vegas, making their pledges. They'd stopped on the drive to have sex three more times, once in a changing room stall while they looked for more appropriate wedding attire.

Summer was insatiable. The thought made him smile. A nice hotel room for the night and they could truly make love, talk about what the future held, if anything.

* * * * *

White! He'd insisted she wear white. Summer shook her head. Pink or deep red would have been more to her liking and more appropriate. She was no virginal miss and after the long ride to Vegas, Tyler Crockett should have known so.

Something wild resided behind his eyes, as if he were doing his damnedest to claim her as his and erase Scot from her body. Tyler's efforts could only partially succeed. Scot had turned her into a werewolf and nothing would change that.

Tyler also insisted on the honeymoon suite at the Bellagio. "Never been married before," he said by way of explanation. "We aren't having a fancy wedding, but that doesn't mean we can't do the night up right."

He carried her over the threshold and marched her straight to the bedroom, placing her on the bed like a revered, priceless jewel. The tenderness he exhibited touched her deeply. He straddled her, his hands framing her face, his fingers tracing the column of her neck, lingering on the swell of her breast.

God, how could she look into his eyes and see his heart there knowing his actions were just the beginning of an ill-fated act of chivalry?

"You're beautiful, you know. Sexy, too."

She swallowed back the automatic retort she gave men who called her beautiful. Tyler was her husband now. He'd claimed her legally, and, if she were honest, he'd taken her heart, too.

Every time he spoke, shivers ran through her. Every time he kissed her, she reminded herself they had great sexual chemistry. Every time he stroked her skin she longed to forget the past and forge a future with him.

"Do you want babies?"

The question came out of left field. "Sure," she answered honestly, trying to ignore the way his hand snaked under the clinging sweater dress she wore. "But I don't know that I can now. I don't know if I should."

"I want to give you babies, Summer." He pushed the hem of the dress to her waist and gasped, fingering the thigh high hose and garter belt. "Lots of them. As many as you want."

Alarm spread through her. "You can't be serious, Tyler. We don't know what would happen to any child we created."

"If they're as beautiful, intelligent, and caring as you it won't matter."

She had to set him straight. The past two days turned her life upside down and she wasn't making sound decisions. Then his fingers stroked her sweet spot and he nuzzled her breast through the material, rubbing and sucking the tip of her nipple against the rough knit.

God, he knew how to touch her. She came with his name on her lips.

"My turn," he growled, a possessive gleam in his eyes. He pulled her to her feet and pulled the dress off her until she stood before him in a lacy white bra and the garter-topped stockings. "I do love the way you avoid panties." His trousers fell to the floor and he, too, had gone commando. His impressive erection jutted forth, demanding attention.

She crawled back onto the bed, staying on her hands and knees, thinking only how good it would feel to have him take her this way. Reaching beneath her, she spread her lips in invitation, watching as he covered his arousal with a condom. "Right here, Cowboy."

He bounced onto the bed behind her, gripping her waist, sliding his massive cock into her. He stretched and filled her channel before slowly pulling out and then pushing back in.

Summer matched his rhythm, letting him ride her at his pace. He increased speed, driving into her relentlessly. It felt so good the way he took her. Sure, confident, his hands stroking, grabbing, rubbing. Then his fingers were on her clit, teasing the hard pebble until waves of pleasure coursed through her body. "Harder, Cowboy, harder."

He obliged and then she was flying over a precipice, milking his cock, feeling his hot cum through the latex shoot deep inside her clutching walls.

Her arms gave way and she collapsed onto the bed, Tyler covering her with his large, hot body. "Am I hurting you?" he gasped.

Just shattering my heart, Cowboy. I know this isn't real; you're only trying to protect me from him.

"I have to be." He rolled over her, and then pulled her into the crook of his arm. "Kitten, I know you never planned on marrying me, but I intend to do all in my power to protect you until you're free from Scot's claim."

Bless him, he still didn't understand. All Tyler had done wouldn't matter if Scot wanted to fight for what he thought was his and Scot would challenge Tyler, she was sure of it.

"I'll make love to you every night, every hour if it will remove his alpha status. And when he's gone, you can have your life back on your own terms." The words barely registered as she stared at his skin. Summer couldn't speak as horror filled her. She'd changed Tyler's life irrevocably and no way would he ever find happiness in her arms again.

An ugly scab dotted Tyler's shoulder. He was infected, too.

Chapter Seven

Tears spilled in an uncontrolled flood from Summer's eyes. What the fuck had he said?

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nnnothing," she finally managed.

Like hell. When a woman said nothing, it meant something. He pulled her closer, tucked the blankets around them, and stroked her hair. She still smelled fresh from the quickie shower she'd taken at the truck stop shortly before their wedding, but a musky scent drifted to his nostrils, too. The unique smell of their union.

All he'd done was make love to her, talk about kids. Kids. "Ah, honey, I didn't mean to upset you with my talk about babies. If you don't think we should have them, we won't. I want you to be safe and happy is all."

God, it was so true. She'd gotten under his skin, even if she belonged in a padded room somewhere taking heavy duty psychotic medication.

"Don't you think," she hiccupped, "I know what you're doing? You can't protect me from the likes of Scot."

"The hell I can't," he exploded. "I married you, I've made love to you, I'll meet his challenge if that's what I have to do."

"You'd have me see you killed?" Sadness filled her eyes. "You'd rip my heart right out and stomp it into the mud. That's what you'd do to me if you fought him."

"Damnit, Summer. You come to me with this outrageous story and I'm acting on what you've shared."

"Yeah, fucking me was a real hardship. You got your jollies."

Her words slapped him, stung his heart. How could he explain, tell her he'd wanted her from the first day she drove onto the ranch to answer the ad he'd placed in the paper for a cook?

She pushed out of his arms and rolled away from him, stalking off toward the bathroom, her shapely ass swaying as she walked.

He shook his head. Maybe he'd fought it for eighteen months, but damn it, he was in love with Summer Donaldson and he'd do what he had to do to keep her in his life. Even face down the bastard who'd hurt her so badly she had to make up wild stories to keep Tyler at arms length.

He jumped from the bed, determined to explain his scattered thought process to the woman who set him off kilter so easily.

The shower pounded against the glass enclosure; steam rose, then condensed, rivulets ran down the side of the door and between the plush robes hanging outside, he glimpsed the woman within. His heart ached. Ached to take away her torment, ached to possess her again, ached to tell her he loved her.

She looked up at him when he opened the door and stepped in. Haunted. Sorrow filled her eyes along with a haunted, frightened look. "Wwwhat do you want now?"

Honest. Just be honest. He stepped closer and took her into his arms. "I want to hold you."

"Well, I don't want you to." She backed away.

Now was not the time to back down. He cornered her, bracing his arms on either side of her head. "Too fucking bad."

"Tyler," she managed, before weeping took over in earnest. He pulled her to his chest, wrapped her in his arms and let her cry. Naked, her vulnerability was blatant. He'd protect her, come hell or high water and from the sound of things, hell was coming first.

They stood in the shower until the water turned cold, quite a feat given their opulent surroundings. He turned off the stream and grabbed a thick terry robe from outside. "Here now, slip your arms into this." She didn't argue, just docilely followed his directions.

He donned a similar robe, then took her by the hand and led her to the sitting room of the suite. Stretching out with his back braced in a corner of the couch, he pulled her onto his lap, holding her against his chest. Her wet hair tickled his skin but he refrained from laughing. She was in his arms, where she belonged. Ruining the moment was not an option.

"Summer," he whispered against her hair. "I—"

She stretched up an arm and laid a finger against his lips. "Don't. Don't say anything. Just keep holding me like you care."

He pushed her back and stared into her eyes. "That's just it, Summer. I do care. A lot. I don't want him hurting you ever again. I love you."

She blinked and he watched her eyes grow round like a barn owl's. "Please, don't."

He inhaled deeply willing himself to stay calm. "Don't what? Admit the truth? I didn't think you'd want anything to do with an old cowboy like me. Younger men like Johnson...I thought they were more to your liking. It didn't stop me from wishing you were in my arms, from wanting to make love to you."

He kissed her. A brush of his lips against her forehead, her temple, and finally, her mouth. If not for the werewolf thing, they could be normal newlyweds celebrating the future ahead of them. But, they weren't normal. Far from it.

She ducked her head down, laying it against his chest. "Please, don't say anymore, Tyler."

Pretenses. They'd married with no true affection, no hope of a happy future together, just his promise to keep her safe. If what Summer said were true, it might even lead to a showdown with Scot Johnson.

A light bulb clicked on in his mind. "Summer," he whispered. "Look at me."

She did and everything he could hope for was in her eyes. Love.

Hadn't she said he'd stomp her heart in the mud if he fought Johnson?

Okay, so they'd done everything backwards. Got married, had sex, figured out they loved one another. At least, Tyler figured it out. She knew too, just hadn't admitted it out loud.

"Summer Donaldson Crockett, I love you."

She gasped and shook her head. She might not accept the truth, but she would listen to it. Tyler loved her, damn it, and he'd do what was needed to prove it to her.

He swung his legs off the couch and carried her to the bedroom. When he set her on her feet, she started to remove the robe.

Gently, he pulled the collar back together and cinched the belt. "I love you, got it? I want to sleep with you in my arms and wake up with you there for as long as you'll have me."

Panic flashed through her eyes, for only a moment, but he'd seen it. "We'll be fine. I promise."

"Tyler. I'm so sorry. I've dragged you into this whole mess. I never intended anything to go this far. I thought if you had sex with me, I could remove his alpha status."

She paced away from him, back toward the sitting area. He followed, reluctant to let her shoulder the responsibility for their current status alone. "I chose to marry you Summer. You didn't have to accept, but you did. In my mind, that means you care. Maybe more."

She turned and fixed a sad gaze on his face. "You've done more for me than I've ever had a right to expect. I do care for you."

He felt the smile spread across his face and he took her in his arms and swung her around. "That's the best news I've heard in a while."

"Please, oh god, please stop." She clung to his shoulders when he set her down. "It's not good news. I've ruined your life."

"Kitten, being with you is already better than what I'd imagined standing alone in my bedroom back at the ranch."

She parted his robe and her soft fingers traced his collarbone,—

"Ouch!" He winced. "Man, that's tender." He tipped his head to see the sensitive spot her fingers found. Marks in the form of an oval marked his shoulder. "Must have gotten them in the fight," he remarked.

Summer nodded her head. "Those are teeth marks. He bit you."

Tyler shrugged. He wasn't giving more credence to her belief that Johnson could turn either of them into a werewolf. "Come to bed. We need to rest."

* * * * *

"Fellas," Tyler called. "You may be wondering why Miss Summer is moving into the house." He motioned for her to stand next to him. "We're not shacking up, not leastwise the way you might think." He lifted her left hand. Warm, autumn sun glinted off the simple golden band. "Miss Summer is now Mrs. Crockett and our shacking is permanent."

The ranch hands whooped and hollered. Congratulations resounded off the barn walls and house. "Hey boss, are we gonna celebrate proper?"

"Well, now that you mention it, I thought we might have a reception of sorts on Saturday."

Summer gasped. The coming weekend would be the height of the full moon. Tyler would be in no condition to host a party. She had no idea what the change would be like for a man, but if the transmorphing was anything like hers, the last thing he'd want to do is celebrate.

"Tyler, darling," she sweetly intoned. "Don't you think that's a little too soon?"

"Nonsense, Kitten. We don't have a thing to hide and if we put it off the neighbors *will* talk."

He leaned over and kissed her. Another raucous cheer went up from the assembled cowboys. "Got to get busy, darlin'. Don't worry your head 'bout the party."

With a wink, he stepped off the porch and headed toward the barn.

* * * * *

Deep men's voices woke Summer late Friday night. Exhausted from party preparations she'd allowed herself the luxury of taking a little nap after dinner.

The sounds were hushed, as if the speakers were trying to stay quiet. She stood and looked for her husband to ask if he'd check and see what was going on when she realized Tyler wasn't there.

She ran to the window and glanced outside. The orange light of a fire in the pit and the muted light of a rising moon failed to reveal him. Several ranch hands were laying the iron racks for the pig roast. Burning oak permeated the air. Tyler, though, wasn't among the group making the roast ready for tomorrow's soirée.

Summer glanced at the sky again. Stars popped out in the sky, twinkled in the darkness as the moon began its ascent. *Oh, god. Where is he? The change...*

Summer's mind whirled. The first time you needed someone with you. Even Scot had been there for her during her initial transmorphing. She had to hurry, get to the small patch of trees beyond the barn where she could strip and change to wolf form without being seen.

She rushed out the front door, pausing briefly at the roasting pit. Anxiety knotted her stomach. "Any of you see Tyler?"

Stu smiled and tipped his hat. "Headed out north on Diablo. Said something about checking on a late dropping heifer."

Tyler was a good horseman but what would happen when the spirited Diablo discovered he carried a wolf on his back? The knot twisted tighter and nausea threatened. "Thanks, Stu."

Summer took off at a run for the corral. The last two nights the horses occupied the fenced area in lieu of the newly cleansed barn. She grabbed Glory's halter off the fence and searched for the paint. All Summer had to do was get Glory away from the hub of ranch activity and head north. With Tyler on horseback, changing so near the house was out of the question.

Like the devil chased her, Summer on Glory's back, raced away from the corral into the deepening night.

Glory's hooves pounded on the hard ground, eating up yard after yard of scrub covered prairie. Pain shot through Summer, gripping her innards in a vicious cramp. "Woah, girl."

She slipped off the horse and led her toward the faint sound of tumbling water. Scraggly brush dotted the sandy edges and she tethered Glory near enough the water the horse could drink.

Another spasm tore through Summer and an agonized groan left her mouth. She fell to the ground writhing, crawling away in an attempt to distance herself from the horse. No use sending it running. Glory would only head home riderless, and then the ranch hands would be out searching.

She inhaled deeply, trying to stay relaxed as the muscles and bones in her body shifted. Fighting only created tension which led to pulled muscles and more pain than necessary.

A moment later, Summer lifted her snout and sniffed. Her ears perked and she listened. Listened for the mournful howl of a man who didn't understand what he'd become.

She caught his scent and stepped out of her clothing to lope away leaving Glory white-eyed and wild. The horse would calm once Summer cleared the area. Following the creek bed, she ran, nose and ears high, seeking any sign of Tyler.

When the moon had risen above the horizon, she found him, curled in a heap, whimpering. His clothes were on the dirt nearby and she spotted his wedding band. She lay down next to him and licked his muzzle. *Relax, Tyler*. *It's the only way to get through the change*.

He lifted his canine head. Even as a wolf he was devastatingly handsome.

Summer? You're...you're...a wolf?

It's been what I've been trying to tell you, Einstein. Come on, you need to try and stand and figure out how to walk on four legs.

I'm not a werewolf.

She looked into his brown wolf eyes flecked with green, and then nudged him until he stood. *Slowly. We'll get you some water at the creek.* And then you'll see the truth.

How can I talk to you?

Telepathy mostly. If I howled or yipped, you'd understand that too.

She pushed behind his shoulder and he made a few staggering steps in the direction of the water. *Not bad. You'll catch on in no time.*

This isn't happening to me, he messaged. You're the one that's delusional, not me.

Something in his mental tone pushed her anger button. When are you going to believe me Tyler? You saw the mark on my shoulder, the bite on yours, and moments ago you were curled up on the ground in agony. She shoved him again with her snout, refusing to relent until he saw his reflection in the water.

He stared into the barely moving stream and she knew he tried to comprehend his new were status. He sat back on his haunches and shook his canine head. In the night, a wolf howled. Several bayed back.

Johnson?

She had to be honest. They had a lot to do before Tyler's attempt to challenge for pack leadership. Yes. And you're nowhere near ready to face him. Another howl rent the air. From the sound of it, he's not too happy I'm unavailable. You'll be getting the crash course, on the run.

Chapter Eight

Tyler woke in the antique four-poster bed he'd inherited from his grandparents. He rubbed his eyes. The hellish nightmare faded. Every muscle in his body ached, as if he'd been performing calisthenics for hours on end.

"God, what happened to me? I feel like I had a night on the town with none of the fun."

To his surprise, a sultry voice answered his rhetorical question from across the room. "You *were* out all night, Tyler. You've only slept four hours."

"Summer? I thought you'd be in the kitchen."

He twisted his head and glanced at the clock. "Shit it's eight. I should have been working hours ago. I've never been late to chores."

He started to push out of bed, then collapsed, another groan escaping his lips. "What's wrong with me?"

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "I'm so sorry, I should have been with you from the very beginning."

"Beginning of what?"

"Do you remember anything from last night?" The worry in her voice matched what he saw in her eyes.

"I dreamt I was running through the scrub." Hazy pieces filtered into his consciousness. "I fought a wolf." He let loose a chuckle. "Must have been all that werewolf stuff you've been telling me about."

She lifted his hand and kissed it. "Tyler, it wasn't a dream. Look."

Summer turned his hand until the palm faced him. "Those scratches are from your run-ins with ground cactus."

Thin scratches and small punctures dotted his hands. "I don't understand."

"You morphed last night. The wolf you fought with was me." She unbuttoned her blouse and let it slip down her shoulder. An ugly bruise colored her skin.

"I did that?" He shook his head in denial. "I'd never hurt you."

"I was trying to teach you...help you adjust to your new form."

"My new form..." He jack-knifed into a sitting position. "Owww." He rubbed the small of his back. "Where's Diablo?"

"He's okay, just a few scratches on his back from where you tried to hang on in the early stages. Stu found him outside the corral and tended him. He had a lot of questions; I answered the best I could."

"I must have taken a hell of a fall to hurt like this. Every muscle aches."

He watched her open a jar on the dresser and return to sit next to him on the bed.

"This liniment stinks, but it will help your muscles." With soothing, firm motions, she rubbed the cream into his skin. "Tyler, you didn't fall. The more you morph, the easier it will be on your body."

"Look, I fell. I didn't morph and I sure as hell didn't put that bruise on your shoulder."

Summer sighed. "You were there and still you refuse to believe what happened. You saw the evidence yourself when you looked at your reflection in the creek."

He gripped the bedclothes. No way could she know what he dreamt or what happened to him after his fall. Summer wasn't there. "What did you say?"

"I said you saw your wolf reflection last night in the water. Afterwards you sat back on your haunches and heard Scot's howl. I taught you some rudimentary things about fighting as a wolf. You caught on real well, as my shoulder proves."

Fury and sadness mingled in his chest. Johnson had done this to him, to her. She'd been telling the truth and he hadn't believed a single word. It was the only explanation for how she knew what had been in his head. Remorse filled him. "Kitten, I'm sorry. I really didn't believe this was possible."

"If it means anything, I had a hard time with it too." She kissed his temple. "Now, turn over. I'll work on your back. You need to let the ointment work and you need your rest. Tonight's another full moon and the party."

He groaned and turned over. How the hell were they going to explain turning into wolves? "The party. What's going to happen tonight?"

Her hands rubbed the ointment into his back. Damn, despite the stench and aches, the way she massaged his muscles actually helped ease the pain.

"I've been thinking about that. First thing is once we're done talking we need to sleep. We'll need every advantage we can have if Scot shows up."

"Johnson? Why would he show his face around here? If he knows we're married, then he can't make a scene and he can't make possessive claims."

"No, not in human form. But, based on his howls, he was mighty pissed last night when he couldn't find me. He'll show tonight in wolf form and claim me."

Great. Another thing to deal with. Wasn't the whole wolf thing enough? "Are you sure? About it all?"

The sigh he heard was exasperated. "Yes. Now, what I'm thinking is this..."

* * * * *

The smell of roasting pig drifted on the air, scented with oak coals. Picnic tables arrived from surrounding ranches and were soon filled with side dishes and hungry guests. Beer and wine flowed generously. All in all, it was a great reception, but it didn't stop Summer from worrying when Scot Johnson would make his appearance.

Someone clinked something against a cattle bell. "Kiss, kiss, kiss," rose from the throng.

Tyler managed to grasp her hand and spin her into his arms. He appeared quite recovered from his exertions the night before. Tilting his head, he slid his lips across hers for a small eternity, to the roar of the crowd.

When Summer finally managed to break off the kiss, her cheeks were thoroughly heated. "Scoundrel," she playfully whispered.

"Mrs. Crockett, you're entirely too delectable," Tyler returned with a smile. He nuzzled her ear. "I can't wait to have my way with you later tonight."

Delightful shivers ran through her, heating up a much more private part of her body. "Is that so, Cowboy?"

"You better believe it, ma'am," he drawled.

"Hey, you two lovebirds," a wrangler called. "Before you go off beyond the trees to do whatever it is you, ahem, do behind trees...how about we all get a chance to welcome the new bride to the ranch properly?" Tyler led her closer to the group of ranch employees waiting to personalize their congratulations. "Be gentle on her fellas, she still needs to make you breakfast."

The hands laughed and surrounded them. Stu, first in line, gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. "Be happy Miss Summer," he wished her.

The simple statement blanketed her in warmth. Despite her fondest hopes and deep seated fears, she'd found unexpected inner peace. There was ugliness yet to come, but with Tyler by her side, she was confident she'd see it through.

A group of ladies surrounded Tyler, no doubt congratulating him in similar manner. Summer accepted the well wishes of their guests. Long minutes passed. She adored the hands, really, but the need to be with Tyler consumed her.

The afternoon waned and it wouldn't be long before the moon rose; she'd be with him during the change tonight no matter what. Finally free, she started toward Tyler.

"Summer." The low voice froze her mid-stride.

Swallowing hard, she turned to face Scot Johnson. "I didn't think you'd have the balls to show up here."

"Do you think a piece of paper makes a difference? I'm your alpha mate and I'll be waiting for you tonight." He sniffed. "He hasn't had all of you yet. My scent isn't entirely obliterated."

The smile he gave lifted the tiny hairs on her skin in alarm. He stared at her chest a long while before tracing his forefinger down the side of her mouth. "I look forward to fucking you later, darlin'."

Frozen to the spot, all she could do was stare as he turned and stalked away, past the barn and into the early dusk.

Dusk! They had to get a move on if they didn't want their guests to see them turn into animals. She found Tyler still ensconced in a bevy of beautiful women. She smiled, concealing the ball of fear Scot's threat created in the pit of her stomach, and focused on remembering how many women waited for him in the kissing booth line.

Then she recalled the fight and Scot's insinuations. "Excuse me ladies." She sidled up to Tyler, purring. "But my husband promised me a special surprise..." she winked, "...upstairs."

A few women nodded knowingly and the younger ones grinned. "You go girlfriend, get some for me," said a woman she didn't recognize.

If only it were that simple. They needed to get to the creek and prepare for the change. The making love subterfuge would see them through the late evening hours until the hands ushered straggling guests to their vehicles.

In their bedroom, she slipped her wedding band off her finger, thankful she'd been able to recover both gold rings when the sun rose this morning. "Leave everything valuable here on the dresser," she whispered. "It's too easy to lose things out there."

Summer wanted to run. Run from Scot, run from Tyler, run from the situation she'd created at the Bar C, the danger she'd placed Tyler in. But she couldn't run. Tyler was too vulnerable. He didn't know enough about fighting as a wolf. She'd seen what Scot was capable of in wolf form.

If she left Tyler now, even in an attempt to lure Scot away, she knew, deep down, the damage to Tyler physically and emotionally would devastate him.

It wouldn't do her much good either. Running wasn't an option. His dedication to her while laudable was more. In Vegas, she'd seen it in his eyes, heard it in his confession. Tyler Crockett was truly in love with her.

To be honest, she just hadn't been bold enough to believe his confession was anything more than a heroic, selfless act to save her from Scot. She'd acknowledged neither her feelings or his.

She spun on her heels and into Tyler. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry," he uttered at the same time, surrounding her with his strong arms. "I was following through on your suggestion." He moved his arm and opened his hand. In the palm was his wedding ring. "I really don't want to take it off."

"I understand." A lump formed in her throat, but somehow she managed to squeak out her next words. "I feel the same."

"Do you," he queried softly.

She lifted her head and stared into his eyes. "Yes," she answered simply.

The answer seemed to satisfy him. He lightly kissed her. "What next?"

"Get down to the creek and follow it as far as we can before we morph."

* * * * *

They hadn't gone far. A couple of miles, three at the most. Summer insisted they strip and hide their clothes, another step to slow Johnson's pursuit, if the coward would actually show his face. Tyler doubted the man would be so brave.

Let's keep to the water, she telepathed.

He nodded his snout in agreement and trudged forward. Changing into a wolf hurt like a bitch but was easier this time. Adjusting to this alteration of his life would take some time to get used to and a hell of a lot more mental acceptance than he felt he had in him right now. It was too fucking weird.

Stop right there, Crockett. The gravelly voice vaguely sounded like Johnson.

Tyler glanced in the direction of the growl. Just ahead, a large wolf stood with several other canines behind him. Stay behind me, Summer. I'll handle him.

The wolf leapt from the top of the shallow creek gulch, preventing Tyler from moving forward. A feral growl rose from deep within, curling his upper lip back.

You have something that belongs to me, Crockett.

I don't have a thing that belongs to you, Johnson.

Johnson growled. She's mine. You know it.

She is not a thing. And Summer is married to me. Get the fuck out of here. You're not welcome in our lives or on my ranch.

I'm the alpha. I have rights you're violating.

You can't own a person.

Yeah, well, in case you haven't noticed Crockett, we aren't exactly people right now.

Low growls drifted from the top of the shallow canyon. Three large wolves stood like sentinels overseeing them. Tyler didn't know much about wolf protocol...would Johnson's gang descend and come to their leader's aid?

I noticed you bastard. Don't give people a choice in this werewolf business do you? Seems you don't care much for the concept of freedom at all.

In the wild, Crockett, there is only one law. Mine. And my word goes. Johnson snarled. Unless you want to challenge me for rule of the pack.

One on one? Finish what we started at the Festival?

Johnson nodded with his snout. *Unless you're too chicken and are going to hide behind your bitch again.*

Behind him, Summer growled. *I'll take you*, Tyler responded, *one on one...as long as your pack doesn't interfere*.

So you challenge me?

Yes.

Don't do this Tyler!

He hated hearing the begging in her voice, but if he didn't deal with Johnson right now, his shadow would taint every moment of their lives; they'd never have a chance to be happy. Summer needed this resolved once and for all.

Tyler turned to explain. I have to—

Summer yowled a warning, long, loud, intensely high.

Turning around, Tyler met Johnson's leap with the heavy side of his body and was knocked to the ground. Johnson's jaw snapped at Tyler's neck.

Regaining his feet, Tyler sought an opening. Johnson surged forward his teeth gleaming in the moonlight. With a snarl, Tyler avoided the attack and circled his adversary.

He kept focused on Johnson, waiting for an opportunity to capitalize on a mistake. Carefully, Tyler edged them further down the creek bed, toward an area where the arroyo edges weren't quite as high and where scrub pine and other plants grew between small boulders. Maybe he could gain some leverage over the more experienced wolf.

For a split second, Johnson turned his head and Tyler lunged forward. Fur flew along with unrestrained yelps of pain. Tyler's teeth sunk into Johnson's left shoulder. Blood seeped into his mouth and he quickly relinquished his hold. The other wolf limped away a few steps, blood trickling down his fur, his hate-filled eyes fixed on Tyler's.

This time, Johnson attacked. Tyler dropped his head slightly and swung upward, catching Johnson under his jaw. A sickening crack echoed in the shallow canyon.

The strike left Tyler dazed. He shook his head and tried to focus on Johnson, tried to clear the double image he saw of two wolves coming at him.

He leapt toward the right wolf and landed in a rolling heap on pebbledstudded sand, his weight driving the larger of small stones into his skin beneath the fur. Damn! He jumped to his feet in time to avoid a lunge from Johnson. Give up, Crockett. Johnson's voice was loud but slurred, as if he couldn't talk correctly. Had Tyler managed to dislocate Johnson's jaw?

Not a chance, Tyler answered. Too much was at stake to quit now.

With a snarl, Tyler jumped again, this time landing closer to the widening of the creek and the tools he hoped to use. The pack moved down the ridge, keeping their distance and watching the fight from above.

They circled one another again and each pass brought Tyler closer to the rocks. If he could get Johnson to follow him up and then—

Johnson jumped, his jaw clamping onto Tyler's front leg and breaking the bone just above his paw. Johnson released the limb quickly, howling in pain.

Tyler joined him.

Climbing the rocks would be damn difficult now, but he had to do it. If he could knock Johnson out...

He leapt to a fallen ponderosa pine. Long, sharp needles poked at him, but the thick fur kept them from embedding in his skin. Landing sent a wave of pain through his body and a subdued cry issued from his clenched jaw. Hopefully, there wouldn't be many more.

Johnson followed suit, a cry of pain coming from his mouth as well. They both had bad legs now.

Tyler scrambled up the next series of rocks until he was on the edge of the narrow canyon. At the top, he held his breath, waiting for his opportunity to pounce on Johnson.

He didn't wait long. As soon as Johnson got his rear legs onto the top of the arroyo, Tyler barreled into him. Together, Tyler and Johnson flew over the precipice.

Chapter Nine

Tyler woke with the sun streaming into his face, cold water soaking his feet. He ached liked he'd been hit with a cattle truck. Slowly, the events of the night came back to him. He sat up looking for Summer and the other wolves and gasped as a spasm of pain coursed through his body.

He saw her next to another man and heard her voice drift over the air. "He's got a couple broken ribs I think. A nasty shoulder cut, and his mouth doesn't look right to me."

A male voice he didn't recognize responded. "We'll get some pants on him and then get him some help."

"Is this over," Tyler called.

Summer hurried over to him, her eyes filled with emotion he couldn't define. "Good to see you awake handsome," she whispered. "Yeah, it's over. Everyone who saw the fight saw you beat Scot." She gave him a once over. "What do you say to letting me get some pants on you?"

He nodded and looked at his swollen arm. "I think it's broken."

"We have to be careful with it. You might have gotten a concussion, too. We couldn't do much but wait until all of us morphed back to human form."

Summer led him to a low wall of sand where a part of the arroyo collapsed. At the top was his truck. "How—

"Most of us have been back to *normal* long enough to start getting help. Our story is the two of you were out racing your horses to settle your dispute. Your horse threw you when it stepped into a hole...his threw him when he unexpectedly surprised a lone wolf...had to explain the bites somehow."

He let her help him into the truck. Every clump of dirt they drove over jostled his arm though Summer had done her best to immobilize it. Thank heavens the blacktop wasn't too far. Even the doctor in the emergency room commented on the good job done.

"Not the best way to start a marriage," he'd commented, giving Tyler some Vicodin along with a prescription for more of the same right before he went to work setting his arm. "Damn foolish."

What could he say? Fighting with Johnson hadn't been his idea and didn't do much for the honeymoon period newlyweds were supposed to have. "Won't find an argument there, doc."

He winced as the plaster wrap was applied, the pain throbbing through his arm. Hopefully, the analysesic would kick in, the sooner the better. But not before he took a look at Scot Johnson and had a few final words with him.

Heat engulfed his forearm quickly followed by intense cold. The plaster dried and Tyler's arm was put into a sling. His release papers sat on a rolling hospital cart. This ordeal was about over. He stood and a wave of dizziness crested over him.

"Do you have someone here that can drive you home?"

"Yeah, my wife."

My wife. He was married, to Summer, to a remarkable woman, a woman who'd done her best to right her life and keep him from succumbing to the unnatural affliction now possessing his body. Their disease had brought them together, nearly tore them physically apart. What did the future have in store?

"Mrs. Crockett," the doctor called. "Your husband could use some help."

Could he ever. He needed her to deal with this werewolf-ism, needed her to keep him grounded in reality, to help him maintain the ranch, but more than that he needed her to love him. But he couldn't force that from her, not when she hadn't told him what he could see was in her heart.

He'd made a promise to himself that once Scot Johnson had been dealt with he'd let her make her own decisions regarding her future.

"Yes, Doctor?"

Her sweet voice, full of concern, wrapped gentle tendrils around his heart. It would hurt to let her go, now that he had a small taste of what loving her was like.

"I'm releasing Mr. Crockett into your care as soon as you sign these papers. He has his prescription for pain meds and he'll need them for a day or two, which means he shouldn't be operating any mechanical equipment. His judgment isn't going to be one hundred percent while he's on them."

Tyler watched her sign the release papers. A smile tugged the corner of his mouth upward.

She'd signed them Summer Crockett.

* * * * *

"I don't want to leave town."

Tyler's slurred words concerned her. He needed to get home, recuperate in his own bed, go through another night of the change.

"We can't stay here, there's still one more night—"

"Find a hotel. I just want to sleep...not in that truck."

She stifled a smile. Other than this last drive they'd done a host of things in his truck and sleep hadn't been one of them. Maybe staying in a place with a Jacuzzi wouldn't be such a bad idea. Once Tyler went through the change a final time this month, his muscles would appreciate a bit of pampering.

"Good idea, Cowboy. We could both use some rest. I'll pull into the first decent place I see."

In the passenger seat, Tyler nodded.

After checking several hotels, The *Horseman's Holiday* was the first place that met her requirements. At the front desk she'd discovered a honeymoon suite housed a deep tub with Jacuzzi jets and a king-sized bed and she rented it on the spot. A bellhop volunteered to bring their bags up and Summer just smiled. "We won't be needing them."

The young man blushed three shades of red, nodded, then went back to his post at the end of the desk. With key in hand and an arm around Tyler's waist they were able to make it to the lush room.

Sitting Tyler on the bed, she stripped what she could of his clothes off him. "Your cast is going to be a problem during the change."

"What do you mean," he asked over a yawn.

"Your body mass changes shape. You could conceivably slide out of your cast."

"Won't happen, Kitten." He yawned again and stretched out. "Too tired to move."

With that he turned over and closed his eyes.

There was nothing Summer could do except prepare herself. Naked, she crawled onto the bed next to him where she could keep watch, hold him still if necessary.

* * * * *

They made it through the last night of the change for the month. A single shaft of bright light entered the room through the gap in the curtains, illumining Tyler's face. His jaw, clenched tight, revealed the pain he held in silence.

Summer sprung from the bed. "We didn't fill the script. I have some Tylenol if you want to try that."

"Yeah, that would help," he moaned.

"I'm all for staying here another day and letting you rest. I can get to a pharmacy and get your prescription filled."

"Good. I need to see Johnson before we go back to the ranch."

Tyler slept most of the day. It took a while to get his pain under control, but once he'd fallen deep asleep, Summer soaked in the tub, the bubbling streams of hot water pummeling her aching muscles.

What further could Tyler want with Scot? He'd wrested leadership status from Scot and would now reign as the pack's alpha.

After a forty-five minute soak where her fingers and toes shriveled and looked like prunes, she climbed into bed with Tyler. To her surprise, he was awake.

"How ya feeling, Cowboy?"

"I've been better."

She gave him a wan smile. "I can imagine. You should still be sleeping. It's the best thing for your body right now."

He shook his head. "You're the best thing for my body right now."

"Cowboy, that just isn't smart. You're not quite yourself with that Vicodin in your system."

"Stay with me tonight."

"I'm not going anywhere, Tyler." She kissed his forehead, his cheek, then brushed her lips across his. "Now go back to sleep."

* * * * *

Tyler insisted on calling the hospital to check on Scot Johnson, and then he insisted on visiting him once they checked out. Summer didn't get it. Why would he want anything to do ever again with Johnson? They pushed open the door to Scot's room shortly after a doctor and nurse left and two of his buddies entered. Scot looked up at them through a healing black and blue eye. "What do *you* want?"

Summer wasn't sure who he was directing the question to but she didn't get a chance to answer.

"I want you to acknowledge that you lost, Johnson. That you no longer have a *claim* on Summer. That you'll never set foot on the Bar C again, that you'll head north...to Wyoming."

A sneer erupted on Scot's face. For a moment, Summer thought he would continue his claim, promise another confrontation. He took a deep breath and moaned. The fight left Scot's face. "Fuck," he gasped as he griped the sheets of the hospital bed, his knuckles turning white. "Yeah, I'm outta here as soon as they let me go."

"Take whoever wants to go with you, too. But know this, Johnson," Tyler advanced closer, a deadly glare in his eyes. "I don't want to hear about a new pack starting there. *People* have choices. *You* aren't God; *you* don't infect someone for the hell of it because you can. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah," Scot mumbled. "Get the fuck out of my room."

Tyler turned toward the visitors in the room. "You two," Tyler commanded. "You heard the man; you're witnesses to his," he took a deep breath, "his surrender. "If he breaks his word and shows back up in our pack territory he'll pay the ultimate price."

The two men nodded vigorously, the taller of the two staring at Tyler with a slack jaw, as if he'd been shocked that Tyler would show in Scot's room. Would they stay with Scot, or submit to the new pack leadership?

Summer placed her arm around Tyler and led him from the room and to the truck.

She drove back to the ranch during the late afternoon. The trip, outside of the low volume of the radio, had been completed in silence. Every time she glanced at Tyler, his eyes had been closed. At first, she thought he slept, but as they neared the ranch she saw grimaces of pain etch his face.

Why did he keep his silence? Between the pain and the final showdown with Scot, he surely could have said something. Just after sunset she broke the unnatural stillness. "We're almost home."

Home. Now there was a concept. A few weeks ago she'd given her notice, ready to move on in order to escape the life foisted on her by Scot.

Tyler still kept to himself. She winced on his behalf for every bump they hit on the dirt road leading to the ranch house. How many more times would she drive this road?

He'd fulfilled his promise to protect her. Now that Tyler had rid her of Scot, would he get rid of her, too?

She pulled in front of the house, her stomach clenched. She should go. His life was complicated enough without keeping her in the mix.

What would be her fate with this man? Without him?

She reached over to unbuckle the seatbelt and he stopped her with his good arm. "No. Before we go back in, we have something to resolve between us."

A lump of fear formed in her throat. "Look, the doc said the medicine—"

"I'm not impaired. This has nothing to do with my injury. It has to do with you. With a promise I made."

"I see," she whispered, unable to look Tyler in the eyes.

"I don't think you do. I promised I'd keep you safe from Johnson when I married you. I also made a promise to myself...that I'd let you go once I took care of him."

"I'll pack my things," she sniffed, fighting back her tears. Leaving Tyler sliced her heart. In a short time, they'd been through a lot. But a promise was a promise and he'd kept his.

"Is that what you want, Summer?"

Her gaze snapped to his face. Unshed tears glistened in his eyes.

"I don't understand. You want me to stay?"

"Hell, Summer, I meant it when I said I loved you. That wasn't a yarn to make you feel good about having sex with me or a tall tale to make you stay."

"But what about your promise?"

"I promised myself you'd have a choice in leaving or staying. You're free from Scot, but I don't want you obligated to stay with me because of it. I'll grant you a divorce if that's what you want, if that's what will make you happy."

She sidled closer to him. "What I want is you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, Tyler Crockett. I love you." She ran her hand along his thigh.
"Every glorious inch. I love your old-fashioned chivalry, the way you insisted on making sure there was an understanding between you and Scot, the way you run the ranch, the way you get out there and work next to the cowpokes."

Her hand drifted higher and caressed his groin.

"Is that all you love?" he gasped.

Beneath her palm, she felt him swell. "I love the way you protected me, the way you touch my body, the way you make love to me."

She eased the zipper of his jeans down. "I love the way you respond to me." She reached into his briefs and gripped his growing erection.

Tyler's moan of pleasure set her heart beating quickly. There were so many things to love about him. She could spend hours delineating the traits that attracted her to him. But doing so would get in the way of her showing him her love. "I love how you taste."

She withdrew his length. Each firm stroke brought another grunt. "Am I hurting you," she teased.

"You will if you don't stay here, with me, as my wife."

"I promise, Cowboy, I'll do my best to never hurt you."

With that, she wrapped her lips around his cock and pulled him deeply into her mouth.

The End

Walk Through Fire

Laura Baumbach

The night air was crisp, filled with the scent of pumpkin and chimney smoke. Hundreds of old trees dotted the cemetery grounds, their gnarled branches clinging to the last of the crinkled orange and red leaves that gave them voice when the wind swirled through their rustling tips. Dim and forlorn, a quarter moon hung low in the treetops, looking as if a single tear had been sliced in the black starless sky surrounding it. Off in the distance, a dog howled and two more answered it, a melancholy sound.

Caleb Archer slowly walked down the long, cobblestone path that led from the main cemetery lane to the area housing the oldest and largest crypts in this very large, very old graveyard. He knew every stone and crack in the path. His footsteps carried him on his familiar, dark journey without hesitation. For the last one hundred and fifty-seven years, every All Hallows Eve, he traveled this path.

He didn't think about the chill in the night air, the heavy foreboding shadows hanging in the sky, or the dozens of masked and costumed children running past him. They were on their way to frighten each other and terrorize the town on this one night of legal mischief and mayhem, better know as trick or treat night, Halloween night, in these modern times.

Caleb was from a time before trick or treating. From a time when a man's profession became his name. Before a time of childish games and sugary gifts. Even before the time when this night was recognized as the eve to honor the dead that had departed from this world. He supposed if he thought about it, it was actually a night to honor him. He was dead, after all. All vampires were dead, soul-less. Just not their bodies, minds or, in his case, their hearts.

The groups of children tapered off and the last of the brazen huddles of white-sheeted ghosts and black-hatted witches raced away into the night, soaring past Caleb with a round of adolescent giggles and one high-pitched shriek of delighted terror.

A few feet away, a small girl, maybe six years old, dressed in a simple long smock with a ring of dried spring flowers in her pale brown hair lingered on the path, alone but unafraid. She seemed to shimmer in the moonlight, her pale skin nearly translucent. Her soft, doe-eyed gaze seemed to call to Caleb's long lost soul.

"Hello, Sarah Beth."

She smiled and Caleb smiled back, then nodded, prompting the child to come near and take his hand. She gazed up into his face, a sad expression on her unformed, sweet, childish face and they shared a moment of silent understanding before Caleb sighed, squared his broad shoulders and looked away.

And just like that, tall, towering, dark vampire and tiny wisp of a ghostly girl walked on, as they did every year, hand in hand, up the crumbling pathway.

Her slippered feet made no sound on the stone walkway. She was nothing more than a puff of fog to the humans that had raced by earlier, but the dead can see the dead and she was Caleb's yearly companion on this night.

Caleb's boots slipped stealthily through the leaf-strewn path without disturbing a single one. As they walked, more swirls of mist surrounded them on their journey, all eventually solidifying to pale, translucent forms of the human beings they had been once, long ago. Caleb ignored them all, save the girl, her chubby fingers grasped loosely in his own.

Looking up as they silently climbed, Caleb's gaze latched onto a massive marble crypt sitting on the crest of a hill. It was in the oldest, darkest section of the cemetery, surrounded by ancient trees and old-fashioned, spiked iron fencing. The tomb itself was a pale smear against the night, its once white marble structure, aged and cracked, marked by time, elements, and human hands. The pillars were towering posts carved with ancient symbols Caleb knew the meaning of and wished he didn't, along with the painted markings from more recent, less skilled hands. The paint looked like graffiti at first, but Caleb recognized the unholy crest and the smell of the human blood it had been written in.

He pushed through the heavy, iron gate and entered the crypt, lighting ancient but still usable torches that hung on the walls. He moved deeper into the silent crypt, suddenly assaulted with the decaying odors of mildew, feces, burnt flesh, and sulfur. The faint scent of his rich, distinctive blood still hung on the stagnant air.

Caleb released the girl's hand and she reluctantly drifted away to stand in one corner beside a broken statue of a gargoyle, one who had failed in his job of keeping away the evil spirits from this once sacred place.

Five stone coffins were laid out in the center of the massive chamber. Three were broken and their seals removed, the bodies vandalized, their spirits part of the mists that had joined Caleb on his walk and that now hovered around the edges of the cold, dank room.

Placing the black duffel bag he had been carrying on a raised section of the floor, Caleb pushed it carefully out of the way, close to a still sealed coffin directly in front of an altar carved into the wall of the tomb.

Caleb rose and faced the altar. Where once had been the figure of an angel that now lay shattered on the floor, there sat the cracked, skinless skull of a woman, its jaw broken and the eye sockets still bearing the scorch marks where the eyes had been burned out decades ago.

Caleb knew her.

He knew her briefly in life and he knew her now in death. All dead things knew each other. Her spirit haunted this place along with the others, bound to her place of destruction until her debt in life was paid.

She had been Shaddal, beautiful seductress, spinner of lies, destroyer of love, and servant to Astaroth, Duke of Hell. She had been Astaroth's consort as well, indebted to the demon for six thousand years of tribute and service in exchange for power over men, and eternal youth and beauty.

But she had not been granted immortality.

When Caleb killed her, drained her of all of her blood, energy, youth and power, she became nothing but a hollow shell that ignited in his outraged hands. In the end, her firm, ripe, young body became nothing more than a pile of ash and the broken, scorched skull now on display in the shallow altar.

That had been one hundred and fifty-seven years ago, but Caleb still heard her screams echo off the walls in this place, remembered the sight of her eyes burning, and her flesh melting away to dust.

Astaroth appeared just as Shaddal had died, summoned by her earlier chants. He was too late to change her fate, accepting her death by one of his own creations, a vampire, to be binding.

He was accepting, but was also a vengeful demon. Shaddal had been his favorite.

So tonight, like every other Halloween night since her demise, Caleb came to make payment on the price of Shaddal's death.

His gaze flickered briefly to the little girl, still uncomfortable with her witnessing his payment, even after all these years. She gave him a solemn nod and he returned it. Then, for the first time in one hundred and fifty-seven years, a feeling of calm and strength he knew didn't belong to him filled his mind and body. He stared at her, marveling at the offered gift of comfort. His soul was long gone, but her tiny presence warmed him all the same.

Broad shouldered and muscular, with a vampire's speed and strength, Caleb still paused before accepting his fate once again. His own actions had brought him to this place and he had a debt to pay. Standing in front of the altar, Caleb pulled a knife from his jacket pocket. It was small and old, the blade honed down to a tiny sliver of metal by centuries of being sharpened and used, a small piece left over from a life Caleb had almost forgotten. He hefted it thoughtfully in his hand for a moment, and then swiftly slit his right wrist with it.

As the blood flowed off the end of his fingers, he drew a V over a blackened circle on the floor before him, then drew another one, this time inverted over the first. In the center of the enclosed shape, he drew the mark of the eye of the devil, then let the wound seal. It disappeared in seconds, leaving his skin unmarked. He knew there would soon be plenty of unhealed marks upon his flesh and none of them would heal this quickly.

Digging a handful of ashes out of his other jacket pocket, Caleb sprinkled them over the still-wet blood and began a harsh, guttural chant he memorized the first night he heard Shaddal say it in this very tomb. The night she had summoned her master with a stolen gift in hand. The night she had died by Caleb's hand.

She should never have tried to gift her master with what belonged to Caleb.

As he finished the chant for the third time, the ash ignited in a flash of blinding light and acrid smoke. A clap of thunder shook the stone foundation and a broken pillar split and fell behind him. Caleb didn't bother to run and look because before him stood the hulking form of Astaroth, Duke of Hell, treasurer of the underworld, keeper of check and balances. The demon Caleb owed the debt to.

Astaroth stood eight feet tall. His massive body was covered in plates of molten stone. The edges of his rock-like muscles glowed a fiery orange and wisps of smoke curled from between his joints. His face resembled a disfigured bull and his red eyes wept streams of blood to mark trails down the uneven planes of his massive snout. Fangs protruded from between his lips and razor like claws replaced his fingers. He smelled of death and fire, brimstone and ash. His voice rolled through the room like thunder, scattering the more timid of the ghostly specters to the rafters of the tomb.

A mournful wail filled the air. Though he knew it was meant as support for him, it nevertheless raised the hair on Caleb's arms.

Without looking, Caleb knew the little girl was still there. Unnatural warmth flushed his cold, vampire limbs and Caleb smiled. He could do this again. And again and again, for as long as he needed. The dead know the dead. She reminded him that love was the only thing left once your own mortality was gone. And Caleb did this for love.

"You have come again, Vampire." Astaroth's voice mocked him, pity and contempt dripping like sap from an axed tree trunk. "I'm surprised you have not wearied of this yet."

"Not likely to."

Unperturbed, Caleb stood his ground, unflinching as Astaroth came forth and slowly strolled around him as he talked. The heat from the demon's body was intense and the air around him shimmered from it. "Your devotion is admirable. Valuable even, if one valued those kind of traits in a demon."

"You're the demon. I'm just a vampire."

"A vampire in love so it seems."

"You finally figured that out. Only took you one hundred and fiftyseven years, to do it in." Caleb gave the demon a tight, mirthless smile. "And they say demons are dumb."

"Insolent parasite!" Astaroth's voice trembled with rage and fire billowed from his mouth and licked at his blackened lips. He leaned in close to Caleb's face, forcing the vampire to turn his head in order to avoid being seared by the heat of Astaroth's vile breath.

"You have returned here for almost two centuries in the hopes of vanquishing my champions and winning the release of your lover." He snorted and sulfur-laden fumes choked the air.

Astaroth brushed Caleb's arm as he continued to walk around the vampire. Caleb casually patted out the flames the light touch left behind on the soft leather jacket.

Stopping behind Caleb, Astaroth breathed down the vampire's neck, singeing the fine hairs that grew there as he gleefully growled in Caleb's ear. "And each year you crawl away, beaten, broken, bloody and empty-handed. Who would you say is the unintelligent one, Caleb?"

Acting bored and disinterested, Caleb sighed and pointedly glanced over his shoulder at Astaroth. He stared the demon in the eye and quietly challenged him. "Bring on this year's devil spawn and we'll find out."

Holding Caleb's gaze, Astaroth narrowed his eyes then glanced critically over Caleb. The demon turned away from Caleb's unwavering stare, giving a dismissing snort. "I sealed the other vampire away in retribution for your pointlessly killing Shaddal and taking away her life debt of 6000 years of service to me."

"It wasn't pointless." Caleb found he could snarl as well as the demon could. "She died because she took something that didn't belong to her. She shouldn't have tried to give you give Drew as a sacrificial offering. He wasn't hers to take or to give away. To anyone."

Caleb swallowed hard at the memory of Drew's face. The last time Caleb saw him, his body was contorted in pain, and his handsome face twisted in disbelief, as he was sucked out of this very crypt and into the black void of Hell Astaroth had just stepped out of. Drew had been a beautiful young man. Caleb wondered what he looked like now after nearly two centuries of Astaroth's company. But it didn't matter; it wasn't Drew's face that Caleb loved. "He belonged to me."

Smirking, Astaroth laughed, a harsh, bitter sound full of revulsion and mocking disgust. "And apparently, your heart and common sense belonged to him."

He was seething inside, but Caleb just slowly rolled his eyes at the demon's wide grin and sighed. "I'm tired of all this chit chat, Astaroth. You're beginning to bore me."

He felt a small stab of triumph in his gut when Astaroth's malicious grin twisted into a snarl. "Bring on your newest champion. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I get Drew back."

"But will you want him? You already talk of him in the past tense. He's been sealed away all of this time, locked in a world of total silence, no one to feed from, no blood at all. No air, no sound, not the slightest touch from another being. For one hundred and fifty-seven years. How sane do you think he is by now? Are you sure he's worth fighting for anymore, Caleb?"

"I'll always want him back, Astaroth. He gave me something you never got from Shaddal. In all the six thousand years she was indebted to you as your consort she still never loved you. Worshiped you, pandered to you, obeyed you, yes, but love you? Neither of you even knew the meaning of the word let alone how it felt. You couldn't. Because love is pure joy and beauty and you'd destroy it the moment you touched it. You're not worthy of it."

"Insolent jackal!" Astaroth waved his hand and the floor turned to a carpet of glowing embers. Smoke and steam billowed up from the thousands of hot, amber coals and the air shimmered with the intense heat.

"You're just cranky because you know I'm right." Caleb jumped to stand on a step just out of the sizzling embers, then shrugged out of his long leather jacket, tossing it to land on the overturned gargoyle Sara Beth still stood serenely in front of. He flexed his broad shoulders and rolled his head on his neck, sparing a reassuring wink for the child.

Sara Beth nodded, but remained unmoving, a silent, grim witness to the coming devastating test of Caleb's endurance.

Dressed in loose fitting jeans, a plain black T-shirt and sturdy, steel-toed boots, he prepared for battle. He had yet to defeat one of Astaroth's demon champions, no matter how hard he fought. They were more powerful and stronger. But each year he returned and faced them again and again. The desperate need to rescue Drew from his prison in Hell grew.

Astaroth leapt upon the top of the lone, sealed, stone coffin in the center of room and stood atop it. It was where he always watched the coming battle from, center stage, smack in the middle of the action from which he could taunt and mock both Caleb and his own champion as they battled to the death.

So far, it had always been to Caleb's death.

No matter that Caleb was already dead. As long as he wasn't beheaded or staked through the heart with wood, he could be made to go through the agony of fatal injuries time and again, without actually ending his existence. One of the many 'benefits' of being a vampire, one of the undead.

Comfortably ensconced on his usual perch, Astaroth braced his molten body in a wide stance and clapped his smoldering palms together three times.

"We shall see just how bored you are with this demon, vampire."

"Bring it on, Duke. I have some trick or treating to do tonight." Caleb pulled the T-shirt from his torso and flung it off to one side, uncaring if the embers claimed it or not. He slipped off his shoes and socks knowing from experience they provided no protection from the coals. They would just melt to his flesh and hinder him during the battle. He couldn't afford anything

that slowed his movements if he was to eventually defeat one of Astaroth's champions and win Drew's freedom from Hell.

It had taken almost two centuries of trying, but he was discovering how to get and keep the upper hand in these battles. Through trial and error, Caleb had found that all of Astaroth's mighty demons had one common flaw. While they possessed great strength, they were short on quick thinking and slow on their feet. If he could stay moving, he lasted a lot longer, slowly wearing them down.

Heavy boots melted to his feet didn't help. He preferred the pain. Besides, it was only right he suffered some of what Drew suffered.

There came a clap of thunder and out of the embers on the floor rose a demon unlike any Caleb had faced before. It had eyes of glowing green attached to ends of six inch long, snake-like tentacles, all seven of them. Caleb could tell by the way it swiveled each eye that the creature could adjust his vision to encompass the whole room at once. It crouched low to the ground; its thick, hulking body bent and twisted, its back, head, and upper arms covered in sharp, crusted spines.

Between the spiny crusts, green slime oozed from open sores over its entire body. Caleb could see tiny, pin-sized worms crawling in the pus as it dripped from its flesh and splattered onto the embers. The foul wetness hissed as it struck the glowing coals, releasing a stench into the stagnant air of the crypt that made even Caleb blink back the tears that stung his eyes from it.

Repulsed, Caleb muttered, "Well, aren't you just a blind date's dream?"

The beast hissed and advanced, arms reaching for Caleb before he was even in grabbing distance.

Barefoot, clad only in his jeans, Caleb stepped down into the area of battle, the soles of his feet blistering on the hot embers littering the tomb floor. The smell of burning flesh battled with the creature's stench and Caleb blocked them both from his mind.

There was only one thought, one focus, one desire for Caleb. This was his once-a-year chance to free Drew from the hell he had thrust his lover into. And if Drew had gone crazy from isolation and starvation, then Caleb would free him from that hell, as well. He had to win this time; Drew didn't have much time left.

Caleb wasn't sure how much longer he could live with the fact that he continually failed to rescue his once playful, loving mate. Even after one hundred and fifty-seven years, Caleb still failed to win this yearly battle for Drew. First it had been about Drew's freedom, now it was about Drew's very existence and sanity. Caleb had to win this fight, this night, this time.

Both of their lives depended on it. His own faith in himself was faltering and without it, he knew this would be his last night on earth if he should fail again.

Drawing on all his ancient powers, Caleb called forth the change and by the time the creature was upon him, he was vampyre. Suddenly transformed and formidable, he was full of ancient strength, channeling power from a thousand victims' life forces he had consumed, summoning all the magic and mystic spells he had taken the pains to learn over these last hundred years when he realized his own strength would not be enough to defeat a hell-spawned demon.

Eyes glowing a fierce yellow, fangs extended and eager, Caleb jumped into the fray, meeting his opponent head on.

The battle waged around the tomb, on every surface, whether it be broken coffins, upturned urns, shattered statues, or beds of sizzling, hot coals. Both Caleb and the demon suffered burnt flesh, bruised bodies and near-fatal injuries. The battle raged for hours, with Caleb taking the brunt of the blows. Each time he felt his strength waning, deserting him, he thought of Drew's horrified, beautiful face and he called on one of his new skills, fortifying his already awesome muscle and speed with mystical chants or

spells of magic. But after a time, it became obvious even these powers would not be enough to defeat the demon creature.

Caleb was doomed to fail one more time.

He faulted and the creature took him down. He used his massive weight to pin a bleeding, broken Caleb to the floor, landing at the unmoving feet of Sara Beth. Inside, he was shattered and bleeding, his need to feed and repair paramount. He glanced up at her, a weak smile on his face for her unflinching, silent support, given freely one more year despite his defeat.

Sara Beth stood very still, gaze never leaving Caleb's face, her small, pale hand still resting lightly on the head of the fallen guardian gargoyle. Her presence touched Caleb even now, comforting and calming him.

Even the gargoyle seemed to take on her pale ghostly glow, the curve of his cracked ears and the length of his long tail, all faintly luminescent blue in the flickering light from the torches.

Unlike the other tortured spirits that roamed the room moaning and screeching their displeasure during the entire battle, Sara Beth hadn't moved since entering the tomb. Caleb regretted knowing such an innocent had been witness to the evil Astaroth and his minions embodied. One more debt owed to the dead.

His skin blistered and blackened, Caleb had no more energy left to resist. The last of his strength bubbled up and he used it to twist the panting creature's head sideways away from his own face. The foul odor from its breath was worse than from his body.

Laughing, Astaroth leaned down to stare into Caleb's eyes, a smirk on his snout and a mocking tone to his triumphant words. "You have failed once again, *vampire*. What good has 'love' done you? Only darkness holds the power of life and death. You'd do well to remember that for next year."

Astaroth glanced down between his feet at the sealed coffin he stood on. "But by then your lover might be completely insane and I'll have another unbeatable champion to add to my collection. Imagine how much devastation an insane vampire could bring upon the human race before they found a way to stop him."

Shaking his head solemnly, Caleb vowed, "I won't let you do that to him." Caleb grimaced in pain, and shifted beneath the crushing weight of the monster on his chest. The smell of his blood and flesh was becoming overpowering, blotting out the scent of everything else. "I'll kill Drew myself before I'll let you have him."

Jumping to the ground, Astaroth casually leaned against the stone coffin he had been standing on. "You may get the chance to do just that, *if* you ever manage to beat one of my demons, that is. I'd say better luck next time, but I don't think your little lover has a next time coming to him."

The Duke of Hell's hooded gaze slid sideways and Astaroth patted the coffin's stone lid. "Can't you hear him? He's growing more and more restless with each passing month." He rubbed a fiery palm over the stone slab until a section of its surface bubbled and pitted. "I doubt he has any fingertips left after trying to pry off this seal over the last a century and a half, don't you agree?"

Caleb's gaze darted to the coffin and his heart plunged to his charred toes. Had Drew really been inside that stone prison all this time? Alone and deserted, day after lonely day, laying only a few feet from Caleb each Halloween night? The unwitting centerpiece in each gruesome battle to win his freedom back? Did Drew know Caleb had failed each year? Did he even know Caleb was trying to free him?

Their bond had been strong, but Caleb hadn't felt Drew near in all that time. Not even once. It stood to reason Drew hadn't been able to feel Caleb either. He'd been denied even that piece of cold comfort, left to think he had been abandoned, left to rot in a stone prison for all of eternity.

The soft scratching noise of mice in the debris around them reached his vampire ears and he imagined it was Drew digging his raw fingers into the

stone lid. He fought against the demon's hold, but he didn't have the strength to throw him off.

"Finish him, for now. I grow weary of his pathetic struggles." Astaroth spit at Caleb, the wetness like acid, leaving a deep burn on Caleb's shoulder. "They are both mine for another year."

A massive fist punched his lower abdomen and Caleb heard and felt his pelvis crack and hip shatter. The agony the attack produced was nothing compared to the pain in his chest.

Shame rose up like bile and Caleb teetered on the edge of self-destruction. Defeated, he glanced up in apology to Sara Beth, once again disturbed by her innocent gaze. But this time, as their eyes met, Sara Beth's gaze held something more. There was a small, knowing smile on her tiny pale lips.

A slight movement of her fingers drew Caleb's gaze to her hand on the gargoyle, then inspiration filled his mind and his gaze traveled to the guardian's long, tipped, stone tail. The tail glowed, a bluish white, a weapon powered by an incorruptible source, the innocence and goodness of a child's love and devotion.

With all the speed and strength he could muster, Caleb snapped off the gargoyle's tail and shoved the short stone spear through the chest of the champion demon pinning him bodily to the smoking ember floor. The crunch of bone and cartilage was masked by the scream of agony. The creature roared in shock and instantly crumbled to ash before his cry had finished echoing off the crypt walls. The wails of the trapped spirits nearly deafened Caleb, as they sang his triumph to the night.

Stunned, Astaroth bellowed out his outrage and shock, but he called forth no new demons to take over where his last creature had failed.

Unable to move, needing blood and rest, Caleb lay crumpled at Sara Beth's ghostly feet, exhausted and spent, but not so weakened he didn't demand his reward. Panting between gasps of immense pain, Caleb clutched at his too-slow healing wounds. "Release Drew, Astaroth. Your champion is vanquished and your hold on both of us is absolved. The debt is paid."

Snorting his contempt, Astaroth stomped around the room to glower menacingly over Caleb's prostrate body. "Bold talk for a broken vampire that can't even stand up to accept his prize."

Caleb turned the full effect of his yellow-eyes on his tormentor and hissed from between grinding teeth and extended fangs, "Release him. Or does the Duke of Hell have no honor?"

Astaroth snorted again, pounding his massive fist on Drew's prison's lid. The room shook with the sound of his roar of displeasure. The ghosts huddled closer together and increased their wails. He let loose a deep breath on the coffin lid, belching white-hot flames. The stone melted away in a stream of molten lava, trails of liquid white marble splashing down into the fading embers.

The coals under Caleb's body died out and the floor returned to cold marble. The chill against his burnt flesh almost make Caleb sigh out loud, but a scrambling sound from within the open coffin grabbed his full attention.

The demon growled and then spit his words at Caleb, mocking ridicule in every syllable. "He will devour you, drain you of what little blood your broken body has left, and then the morning sun will claim him. I'll be rid of you both despite your victory." He spit at Caleb again and Caleb ducked to avoid losing an eye this time. "He's all yours, vampire. Enjoy having him back for the few minutes he lets you live."

Lightning crackled through the room, blinding Caleb, the thunderous clap of its energy deafening him for a moment. When he opened his eyes, Astaroth was gone and a specter more horrible than Astaroth could ever be stood before him.

Naked, emaciated, withered, and nearly unrecognizable, the creature that crawled out of the stone coffin bore little resemblance to the beautiful lover Caleb had lost. Starved to the point of madness, isolated and confined for over fifteen decades, Andrew Wright had been reduced to a mindless animal, a vampire gone mad, a beautiful mind and body wasted away to skin and bones.

Any hope Caleb had that Drew retained some spark of his original personality died the second Drew sniffed the air, focusing on Caleb's bleeding wounds.

Drew's wildly flashing yellow eyes registered excitement and he growled, bared his fangs, and jumped on top of the only thing in the room he could feed from, burying his fangs to the roots in Caleb's exposed chest.

Snarling and hissing, Drew worked his way up Caleb's chest by pulling himself up with his fangs, hands, twisted into useless claws, leaving a trail of gaping, bloody wounds up the archer's naked torso. When he reached Caleb's neck, he knocked Caleb's head to one side with his own and tore into Caleb's willingly offered neck. Drew latched on tight and began feeding, wild and sloppy with need, draining his depleted lover's remaining blood from his beaten body.

And Caleb let him.

He wrapped his arms around Drew and held on tighter than he knew was good for either of them. The feel of holding Drew in his arms again was undiminished by the contorted, tortured shell of the being Drew had been turned into. Caleb pressed his lover's mouth harder against his neck and sobbed, tormented by the tremors that shook Drew's slender body. He ran his hands over Drew's back and arms, the feel of the once satin skin now like dry parchment paper under Caleb's palms.

Agony at the true loss of his lover overwhelmed him and Caleb's cries welled up and out of his chest, his agony and pain of one hundred fifty-seven years finally given a voice. He clutched this wild feral thing Drew had become to him, tears streaming down his own contorted face, and he began rocking them back and forth, searching desperately for some shred of comfort for both of them.

Drew made a few muffled animal sounds and tore deeper into Caleb's flesh. Caleb tenderly kissed the wild strands of pale blond hair matted to Drew's cheek and neck, petting them down into place. He savored the feel of his lover in his arms for a moment longer, then his tears dried.

Realization that he had finally freed Drew from his prison and released him into a new hell of insanity, spurred Caleb to summon his waning strength and accept one final challenge to their centuries-long love. One arm still clinging tightly to Drew as he fed, Caleb used his free arm to drag both of them to the base of the coffin and his duffel bag.

Hoping for the best, Caleb had filled the bag with modern clothes for Drew, as well as blood bags to replenish himself after battle. Expecting the worse, he had packed two wooden stakes. Dragging the bag near, he fumbled through the pockets one-handed, then withdrew both long, slender stakes. They were made from smooth white ash, sharp and rubbed to a satiny finish to minimize the pain on insertion.

Biting back the tears once more, Caleb pulled one stake close and placed it between their bodies, pausing only long enough to lay his head on Drew's and place a tender, chaste kiss in his pale, brittle hair. He nuzzled Drew's ear and hoarsely whispered into it, knowing his lover wouldn't understand, but needing to say the words one last time himself. "I love you, Drew. Always love you, with my last breath."

Caleb summoned his ebbing strength and plunged the stake upward toward Drew's heart.

At least he had intended to.

Before the tip pierced Drew's flesh, Caleb's arm froze in place. He tried again, but again the stake would not penetrate Drew's chest. Confused and uncertain of what was happening, Caleb looked up to find Sara Beth staring back at him.

Freed from Astaroth's curse on their resting-place, the other ghosts had disappeared to find peace after the battle's end, but sweet Sara Beth had remained behind.

She smiled at Caleb and shook her head. Unsure what she meant, Caleb withdrew the stake and she nodded. Confused but listening, Caleb lowered it to the crypt floor and hugged Drew with both arms, gaze still locked on Sara Beth's, seeking direction.

The girl gently waved her chubby hand through the air and the duffel bag opened, spilling out bags of blood on the floor within Caleb's reach.

Uncomprehending, Caleb looked from Sara Beth to the bags and back again. "It won't help."

Tears broke through his tightly held control, making tiny rivers down his dirty, blood-smeared face. "He...he's gone."

He held on with both hands to the feeding, wild animal in his arms. "He's not Drew anymore. I can't leave him like this and I don't have much time left before he drains me."

She moved several bags of blood closer to them.

Shaking his head, Caleb picked up one and hefted it. "He's an animal now. He'll want warm blood, my blood, not bagged. And it won't change anything, he's gone mad. I took too long to win the battle. Blood won't bring him back." Caleb wiped his tears in Drew's hair. His voice hardened. "Not the part of him that counts."

Moving closer to them on soundless feet, Sara Beth bent down and touched Drew's head with both of her stubby hands.

Caleb felt Drew shudder and gasp, then the ravenous, mindless feeding gentled and slowed. The soft, pale blue/white light that always surrounded the little girl traveled out her fingertips and encircled Drew until his entire body glowed. Caleb felt the other vampire's skin tingle in his grasp.

Sara Beth released them. Giving Caleb a small serene smile, she pointed to the blood and nodded again. This time Caleb understood her message. Already he could feel the difference in Drew, feel his body filling out, his skin becoming soft and supple again, his hair turning silky under his chin.

More importantly, Caleb could tell Drew's feeding had changed, becoming more of a lover's embrace than a death grip from a crazed animal. Sara Beth had restored Drew to him.

Caleb suddenly knew she was one of the failed gargoyles that had been charged with guarding this tomb. She was rewarding him for freeing its spirits, for doing the job the gargoyles had failed.

Tears in his eyes and his lover tight in his grasp, Caleb looked at her, an expression of near worship in his eyes. "Thank you."

Anything more would have been just useless words. Sara Beth knew his heart for the last century and a half. He didn't need to explain it. He buried his face in Drew's neck again and inhaled the scent of his lover, unchanged after all this time. When he looked back up, they were alone.

Cradling a more restful Drew to his chest, Caleb began to feed, allowing his lover to drain his fill from Caleb's body while Caleb replaced it with the tasteless, but nourishing blood from the duffel. Already he felt his body healing. By morning, Caleb's near-fatal wounds would be healed completely and his shattered bones perfectly mended.

Drew was sated, sleeping in his arms, face beautiful again, if still somewhat drawn. This last century had taken its toll on both of them.

Sleep would not come to Caleb, his heart too full and his mind too anxious, fearful that if he closed his eyes, he would awaken and find it had all been a dream. The weight of Drew's body, now lean and supple as it was supposed to be, anchored Caleb to the reality that their nightmare was over. It had been a harsh debt to pay for Shaddal's attempt at kidnapping and treachery.

The centuries to come would find them even more reclusive than they had been. Distance from both humans and demons would suit them both.

Caleb planned on spending at least the next century and a half making love to Drew and showing him just how much he was missed.

Drew stirred and raised a drowsy head up off Caleb's chest and stared at him. His gaze darted over every line and feature of Caleb's face. He licked his lips twice to moisten them enough to talk without them cracking and then no sound came out of his open mouth. Disbelief and hope flashed in his sable eyes as fear made his limbs tremble in Caleb's tight embrace.

Caleb rubbed a hand over Drew's bare back and smiled, fighting back his own tears when twin rivers spilled from Drew's eyes as sudden comprehension dawned.

"Hey. Wondered when you were going to wake up." If Caleb had had a heartbeat, he knew it would be pounding in his chest waiting for Drew's reply. "I've been waiting for what seemed like forever."

Drew suddenly grabbed Caleb's hand and bit into his wrist, tasting the rich blood that flowed from the vicious tear. He licked at the flow, eyes locked on Caleb's the entire time. His body twisted around Caleb's half-nude form plastering his skin to Caleb's flesh. Lips still attached to Caleb's wrist, Drew leaned forward and buried his nose in Caleb's neck, inhaling his scent.

Abruptly, Drew let go of the wrist and licked the dry sweat and blood off Caleb's skin. It wasn't until then that he sighed and threw him arms around Caleb's neck, crushing the vampire to him. Drew crawled more completely into Caleb's lap, tucking his legs around Caleb's hips and tried to press himself under his skin. He stayed that way so long, Caleb feared for Drew's sanity again.

"It's you. It's really you. Not just some phantom dream come to torment me. I can taste you and smell you and feel you this time. You're really here." Caleb could barely hear Drew mumbling into his chest, but he understood as the other vampire's fingers dug into his shoulders taking a tighter hold on him.

"And you're free, peach. No more hell, no more prison." The sound of the pet name Caleb had christened Drew with their first night together brought a fresh round of tears to both of them. The sound of roughly gasped sobs echoed off the barren walls of the tomb.

Brushing his hands over the long, smooth curve of Drew's back and buttocks, Caleb soothed and calmed his lover. For long minutes, Caleb kneaded Drew's flesh, rubbing his sides and squeezing the firm curve of his spread ass. He loved the feel of Drew's backside, the firm globes reminding him of a freshly picked peach, and hence, the centuries-old term of endearment he had used earlier that had undone them both.

Drew's sobs soon faded away and his distress was replaced with growing arousal. The need to reaffirm their bond rose up in each of them, a ritual of vampire lust that couldn't be denied any longer. Arousal shoved aside all other emotions.

Caleb pulled Drew off from around his neck, breaking the strangling embrace. They exchanged a brief, lustful stare, and then Caleb yanked Drew into a scorching kiss filled with all the desperate need and aching desire he'd held inside since Drew had been taken from him. Caleb was trembling by the time he released Drew's lips.

He allowed Drew to draw back only a scant inch before he grabbed Drew's face and pulled him back for several short, intense, ravishing kisses that flamed both of their desires to a ravenous level.

Drew whimpered and whispered against Caleb's lips, "Still love me?"

Panting, chests heaving, Caleb twisted free once again and held Drew's head far enough away that he could look into his lover's eyes, a sight he thought he might never see again only a short time ago. Words seemed useless efforts for what he wanted to say, but he summed it up in one phrase he knew Drew would understand the import of for a vampire.

Voice halting, filled with love and a tenderness that went beyond words, Caleb stared into Drew's eyes. "I walked through fire to get you back."

All the doubt and uncertainty seemed to vanish from Drew's face and his body. He dove back in and kissed Caleb like he was never going to get the opportunity again, devouring him. He licked, bit and sucked at Caleb, drinking the trickles of blood his fangs drew, an urgent unstoppable need.

Words were suddenly too cumbersome to use, too inadequate to express their emotions. They fell into old mating habits and went at each other. Wild, passionate lovers with the strength and endurance of their vampire beast let lose.

Caleb managed to release his swollen erection with one hand while holding Drew to him with the other. He could feel Drew's full cock nudging his abdomen, the beads of cum streaking over the ripple of muscles as he twisted and heaved to open his jeans without throwing Drew off his lap.

Slicing open the palm of his hand with his fang, Caleb stroked his cock with the resulting blood, lubricating himself with several swift passes. He grabbed Drew's hips and helped the other vampire raise up on his knees, then slammed Drew down onto his shaft, penetrating his lover's ass in one deep thrust.

Drew groaned and fell forward over Caleb's chest, his hips grinding down harder onto the shaft. He latched onto one swollen nub on Caleb's chest and suckled and bit, lapping the blood from the sweaty chest, moaning as he did so. His hands explored every inch of Caleb's skin he could reach, teasing and rubbing, reacquainting himself with his lover.

Stroking into his lover with every snap and thrust of his hips, Caleb wrapped his still moist hand around Drew's cock and stroked him in time to the manic rhythm of their frenzied coupling. It was hard, and dirty, and fierce, full of decades of unfulfilled want, desire, and love. It was short and sweaty and sweet beyond description.

With the final act of sharing their blood during an explosive mutual climax, they reaffirmed their life bond together. Exhausted, they lay in each

others' arms, fangs slowly, reluctantly withdrawn, hearts finally on the mend together with their bodies.

Caleb had almost forgotten how sweet Drew's blood tasted, how rich and sinfully sensual it felt rolling over his tongue and sliding down his throat. It healed him in ways nothing else could. Holding his lover close to him, he tucked Drew's head under his chin and spoke to the room so he could maintain his control this time.

"I've missed you so much."

Drew paused before answering, pressing himself deeper into Caleb's embrace. His voice sounded frail and unsure to Caleb, like he was making a confession he didn't want to give voice to. "I thought you'd come for me so many times. I thought about it, dreamt about it, then hallucinated about it. I thought I'd go mad with wanting you and not having you beside me. I couldn't sleep, not without you."

One hand petted the soft blond hair on Drew's head, savoring the feeling of the silky, familiar strands of gold. Drew was Caleb's sunshine in a world of constant darkness. "I'm so sorry Drew. I wanted to be with you. I tried to be with you, year after year. I fought Astaroth's champions, but I couldn't defeat them until now." He took a deep breath and confessed, "And even then I needed help."

"Help?" Drew stirred restlessly on Caleb's chest, but didn't raise his head.

"A ghost of a little girl showed me the way." Caleb searched the room, but found no sign of Sara Beth. "I think her spirit used to guard this place.

Once Shaddal desecrated it, her spirit watched over its souls until I freed you and them from Astaroth's hold."

He glanced at the shattered, carved altar in the wall, seeing the dirt outline of where a cross had once stood against the battered marble back. "I think she was an angel."

Drew's arms and held on to them. Eyes troubled, Drew frowned at Caleb. "I dreamed about a little girl while I was in that box. She would come to me when I would get wild. Trying to claw my way out through stone and such. She glowed, so I could kind of see her. She'd lie beside me and touch my cheek or rub my forehead and eventually, it would pass. She kept me sane, gave me someone to talk to. I thought she was just a dream."

"She was our guardian angel."

"Can't, Caleb." Even though his words dismissed the idea, his voice held a note of hope. "Angels don't help vampires."

"Maybe they do if the vampires lift a curse off a sacred place like consecrated ground. This used to be a chapel. That's why Shaddal picked this crypt, to defile it in Astaroth's name."

Drew seemed to think about it, then asked, "Think she'll come back? The little girl, I mean? I'd like to thank her."

Caleb glanced at the gargoyle that Sara Beth always stood by. It still sat in the corner of the room near the coffin where it always had been, but now Caleb noticed that it no longer tilted to one side and the debris and cobwebs had been brushed away. If he looked hard enough, he was sure there was a pale blue light glowing on its rough stone surface that hadn't been there before.

Brushing his jeans off, Caleb stood up and smiled at the silent, stone guardian before pulling Drew to his feet. "I think she knows we how we feel."

"But, an angel helped us, Caleb? Why?"

"Maybe she knew how much we loved each other." Caleb pulled Drew into an embrace and kissed the tip of his nose. "Maybe love really does conquer all."

Unsatisfied with just a chaste kiss, Drew captured Caleb's mouth and kissed him deeply, using tongue, lips, and fangs to make his point. Passions

rose again. "Let's leave. We've got a bit of time to make up for, lover. Do we have a home to go back to?"

Caleb pulled out of Drew's arms and bent to pull clothing out of the duffel bag. He tossed jeans and a shirt at Drew, then zippered his jeans and pulled on his own discarded shirt, jacket, socks and shoes while Drew dressed in the strange new clothes.

"We do have a home." Caleb kicked the empty bag aside, covering the two discarded stakes with its canvas corpse. "But first we have something else to do."

"What's more important than going home?"

"There's still a little bit of Halloween night left, Drew." Caleb grabbed Drew's hand and pulled him to his side, heading for the gate out of the crypt. As they passed the gargoyle, Caleb tenderly patted its head. Odd warmth filled his hand at the touch.

Caleb smiled at his lover and tugged Drew closer. "Let's go and celebrate the dead."

The End

Devilish Good Time

J.M. Snyder

It's the weekend before Halloween but no one comes to these fraternity keg parties in costume and I sure as hell didn't dress up. The whole thing just isn't my scene. I'm leaning against the wall out of the flow of traffic and thinking this party's a bust when I see Bobby Montague through the crowd. He's my height but muscular, on the crew team, and probably the sexiest guy I've seen on campus since I enrolled at Rutgers two years ago. There's something golden about him, an aura that makes him seem perfect, and seeing him reminds me that I'm not. I take a swig of lukewarm beer from the bottle in my hand and give myself two more minutes before I head back to the dorm and my essay on *Blade Runner* that's due Monday.

And then Bobby backs into me.

It's accidental, I think, but I slosh beer down the front of my shirt and I'm sure he felt my budding erection through both our jeans. He turns around

and wipes he wipes at my shirt with a damp napkin, all smiles. "Hey man! I'm so sorry. Didn't see you there—"

"It's okay." It's the most I've ever said to a guy as hot as Bobby and I'm sure I'll lie awake for hours tonight, kicking myself for not adding something more. *I love you*, perhaps, or *fuck me*. I'm not picky.

So it surprises me when Bobby glances at my face and does a double take. Guys like me don't usually get that second look. "Weren't you in Fuchs's film class last semester?"

The fact is that I'm in *every* film class because it's my major and Fuchs is head of the department. But yeah, I took an intro course last term and Bobby sat three rows over, two seats up. I spent most of the lectures staring at the back of his short blonde hair. Searching for my name, he tries, "Is it Jake?"

"Jacob." I barely weigh one twenty and look five years younger than I really am, thanks to the mop of unruly black curls that covers the top of my head. I don't look like a *Jake*. Because he's smiling at me and because I can't think of anything else to say, I try, "You're Bobby."

He nods, still smiling, and I wonder if he's drunk. The intense way he's staring at me makes me want to do something; a card trick or maybe a handstand, something to break that smile into laughter and keep him amused.

This close he's intoxicating. The strong scent of Obsession emanates from him like pheromones and I shift from one foot to the next feeling awkward and gawkish. He makes me horny, have I said this? Whenever someone passes us by, he steps closer to me, pressing his arm against mine and nudging my knee with his, until my dick is hard and aching in my jeans.

Revised game plan—forget the essay and jerk off tonight. The mere fact that Bobby remembered my name, or some derivative thereof, is good for a few wet dreams, at least.

I swallow down what's left of my beer and wonder how much longer I have in the spotlight of Bobby's gaze before he drifts away. I can't think of anything to talk about—what's his major? What class were we in again? *Oh God*—but Bobby comes through. "Are you in her class this semester, too?" I nod, and his grin turns wicked. "What's the theme this time?"

From his leer, I know that he knows and he just wants me to say it out loud so he can get a kick out of it. I consider not answering, but Bobby's got a way about him that gets him what he wants, so in a low voice, I mutter, "Gay film."

With a laugh, Bobby claps me on the shoulder and my skin burns beneath his touch. "You're a braver man than me," he says, which can be taken in so many different ways. His hand still rests on my arm, as if he's forgotten he left it there. "You watch anything porno in there yet? Or is it mostly just artsy crap?"

I hesitate, because I can't think about porn with Bobby two feet away, I won't, and in that moment he moves closer as someone brushes by. Through our shirts, I feel one hard nipple rub against my upper arm. The fact that this is the highlight of my evening underlines just how much this party isn't for me. Though I hate to do it, I step away and begin, "Look, I really should go—"

From somewhere down the crowded hallway a girl's voice rings out. "Bobby!" He half-turns, fingers tightening around my arm, and raises his beer bottle in greeting as she emerges in front of us.

I hate her already. Long hair, blonde of course, straight and wispy with curled bangs. Big eyes ringed with too much makeup. A grin like a crocodile. Each finger is tipped in blood-red polish that shines when she motions with her hands. As she reaches us, she breaks into breathless giggles. "Ohmigod, Bobby! Have you seen Ryan? He's around here somewhere..."

She raises up on her toes, which isn't much higher than her height in the heels she has on, and makes a show of looking over the crowd. "We're so out of here. I thought this was supposed to be a *party*, you know? Who invited

all these *freshmen*? There he is—Ryan! *Ryan*!" She shouts again and waves frantically, as if anyone could possibly miss her.

Turns out Ryan plays basketball—he towers over the three of us and makes me feel that much more insignificant. I am out of my league here. As the girl nuzzles her boyfriend, I think I could get away if only Bobby would let go of my arm.

But he's moved closer. I can't believe this is happening, he's practically up on me and I stare at my shoes, trying not to breathe in case this is all a dream. I don't belong here, in the midst of all these pretty people. Coming to this party was a huge mistake. In another minute or so, Bobby will realize the same thing and let go of my arm, or I'll wake up in a pool of my own cum and hate myself for even thinking up this scenario. Any second now, really...

With a squeal, the girl cries, "Oh! Silly me. Who's your friend, Bobby?"

I want to disappear. Have the wall open behind me like in the old horror films, just drop me back into a secret lab somewhere, far away from the three sets of bright eyes that suddenly pin me down. Somehow, incredibly, I find my voice. "I'm Jacob. We're not really—"

"He's a film major," Bobby interrupts. The girl oohs, impressed. "Jake, this is Ryan, my roommate? And his girlfriend Amber." I sort of wave with the hand holding the beer bottle and give them both a tight-lipped smile. "We were in Fuchs's class last year."

Amber moves closer, as if about to confide a secret, and speaks loud enough for the whole house to hear. "Oh, she's such a dyke."

I give her a withering look—I hate girls like her. "She's the faculty advisor for the Gay/Lesbian Student Union," I say. Bobby snickers beside me, but whether it's because I said the word *gay* again or because I'm standing up to Amber, I don't know. "Of *course* she's a dyke."

"Well," Amber says, her tone wounded. She can't seem to think of anything else to add, because she turns away from me and pouts at Ryan. "Let's get out of here. This party is *so* dead."

The way Ryan glances at Bobby makes me think maybe they all came together. With a shrug, Bobby looks at me and says, "I'm game. Jake—"

This has gone on long enough. "I should go, too," I say, finally finding the courage to extract my arm from Bobby's grip. "Really. I have an essay on the queer subtext of *Blade Runner* that isn't writing itself." I force a grin and what I hope comes off as a jaunty wave. "See you guys around."

To my surprise, it's Amber who tells me, "Wait. You come, too." To Bobby, she pleads, "Bring him along, Bob. It's no fun driving with just the three of us."

I could write an essay on the subtext beneath *her* words—two couples. She and Ryan are leaving the party to be alone but they brought Bobby here so they have to take him along, too, and they can't get frisky if he's the odd man out.

So bring a friend along, is that what they're thinking? Or is she better at reading queer subtext than I am? Does she know something about Bobby that I've only dreamed about? *Look at us*, I want to shout. I'm the ninety-eight-pound weakling and he's SuperJock. Guys like him don't get with guys like me. It's as simple as that.

Guys like him bounce through life from party to party and guys like me write depressing poems about why we don't get laid. But he's nice, he's the one who came up to me, and I'm sure he's trying to find some graceful way to tell Amber, 'Are you out of your fucking MIND?,' when he turns his sunshine smile onto me and asks, "Well? You want to come?"

Oh my God. In more ways than one.

* * * * *

Bobby climbs into the back of Ryan's car and I stop short of following him because there is no real back seat. It's one of those sporty cars that rides low to the ground and isn't built for passengers. A dozen excuses flit through my mind, reasons why I can't get into the car—because I don't fit tops the list. But before I can protest, Amber gives me a shove from behind and I find myself sprawled across Bobby's lap, his hands suddenly all over me. "Sorry," I mumble as I try to sit up, but his arm drapes over my shoulders to keep me at his side. Amber flops into the front seat, crushing my knees. To no one in particular, I say, "I feel squished."

In my ear, Bobby laughs. I look at him but he's so close, we almost kiss, so I turn away. Each of his breaths tickles down the collar of my shirt to warm the back of my neck. *Please*, I think, not sure what it is I want to happen but *please*, *oh please*, *oh please*. He laughs again, pulls his arm off me, and suddenly it feels like the car has expanded into an SUV, there's so much space between us. Trying to sound nonchalant, I ask, "Are we headed back to campus?"

Up front, Amber shakes her head as Ryan starts the car. "We're going for a little drive," she says...or rather, that's all I hear before the engine turns over and music blares through the speakers behind me. Heavy bass pounds where my heart used to beat. I can taste the rhythm in the back of my mouth, feel it in my teeth. It throbs through me like blood in my veins.

We tear out of the driveway at breakneck speed, each bump in the road reverberating through my spine, and I'm just about to ask if they could turn down the stereo when Bobby's hand drifts to my leg. I stare at the tan fingers splayed against my jeans, just inches from my crotch, and can't remember how to speak.

Ryan takes the curves fast. With each turn, Bobby and I slide together until I'm practically in his lap. His hand inches further up my thigh. By the time we reach the expressway, he's barely touching the tip of my cock. I try to shift my legs a bit so he's not so close, but Amber's seat keeps me from getting comfortable in any other position. Almost absently, Bobby moves his thumb in time with the music and taps my dick every third beat. He has to

feel it, hard as it is, damn. I close my eyes and pray for the strength to keep from creaming myself.

We stay on the expressway for an indeterminable amount of time. The night whirls past in a streak of lights. The music settles like a dull headache somewhere behind my eyes. In my ear, Bobby breathes, "Come over here," and pulls me close. He wraps his arms around my waist, his elbow now in my lap, the weight gloriously heavy over the bulge at my crotch. Placing his chin on my shoulder, he grins at me and has to shout over the stereo. "You've got the bluest eyes."

Because I don't know how to respond to that, I don't. For a moment we stare at each other, noses almost touching, his breath hot on my cheek. Then he turns towards the front and hollers, "Amber! Turn that shit down. I can't hit on him if he can't hear me!"

And I'm back to wanting to disappear. Just sink into the seat completely, let it swallow me whole and spit me out onto the street as the car zooms away. The music lowers a notch or two, nothing noticeable, and Amber turns around to grin at us. Her arm is stretched between the front seats, her hand presumably in Ryan's lap doing much the same thing that Bobby's now doing to me. I shift a little and Bobby rests his head on my shoulder as if to keep me still. This whole ride is beyond surreal.

We take an exit off the expressway and end up on back roads somewhere. I wonder if there's a plan or Ryan's just letting the car decide. Soon we leave the flash of the highway and find ourselves tearing down a one lane stretch of road with tall evergreens that line each side. The road meanders through the woods, the car chasing after it, leading us farther away from the tiny piece of New Jersey that I know and deeper into wild backwoods I'd rather not visit. Through the windshield, I watch a green road sign loom up out of the dark night and streak towards us like a ghost. *Pine Barrens*.

"Where are we?" I've lived here for the two years, attending Rutgers in Camden, and all I know of the Pine Barrens is that it covers most of the lower part of the state. "Where the hell are we going, anyway?"

Bobby shrugs and settles closer to me. "Just relax," he tells me, as if I can turn this tension between us on and off like a switch. "Enjoy the ride."

Is he serious? I stare at him for a moment, trying to read the thoughts behind those dark eyes, but his elusive grin keeps me guessing. My mind whispers, *At least try*. Tentatively I reach out and touch his knee. He eases back in the seat, spreading his legs out in front of him, and when he doesn't laugh or scare me away, my hand drifts down along the seam of his inner thigh.

All of a sudden it has a mind of its own, my fingers curious to see if Bobby's half as hard as I am. I brush over his dick and through his jeans it feels impossibly huge, thick like the muscles in his arms and fully erect. He lifts his hips up to press into my palm and I curve my hand around the outline of his cock through his jeans. With a low growl in the back of his throat, he purrs against my neck, "That's it."

I rub down his length. I can't believe I'm doing this—getting freaky with a guy I crushed on last semester. Can this be happening? Bobby moans into my collar and then kisses my neck, his lips hot and damp. His hand is back in my lap again, blatant this time, his fingers fumbling at my zipper like they want in. He finds the pull and tugs it down. I feel his trim nails scrape across the front of my briefs; I'm sure the moment he touches me skin-on-skin I'll shoot all over the place. He's seconds from my cock and so persistent when the music cuts off completely and Amber turns around in the front seat to grin at us. "We're in the Barrens," she says.

Bobby covers my open fly with his hand and sighs. "Amber, we're sort of busy here."

"Ryan's driving," she says, as if we don't know, "and since I can't do anything until he pulls over, I'm going to make damn sure that you two don't

do anything, either." Widening her eyes, she lowers her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "You know who's out here, don't you?"

My blood is singing in my ears. Bobby's rubbing small circles into the front of my briefs, I've got him in hand jeans or not, and I'm not even sure where *I* am at the moment...does she honestly expect an answer? Apparently she does, because she slaps Bobby's hand away from my crotch and whines, "Come on, stop it! Listen to me!"

Into my neck, Bobby mumbles, "You stop it." His hand returns to my open fly. "Tell your boy-toy to pull over already. Some of us don't have balls of steel, you know. I can't hold it all night."

She frowns at him and turns her attention to me. "You've heard of the Jersey Devil, right? What's your name again?"

"Jacob," I sigh. I'm surprised how steady my voice sounds, when every other part of me is quivering with anticipation. "Jersey Devils, hockey team, right? Didn't they win the Stanley Cup last year?"

"No," she says, then shrugs. "I don't know, maybe. But I'm not talking about them. I'm talking about *the* Jersey Devil. Living, breathing spawn from hell? Lives in the Pine Barrens? Don't tell me you haven't heard the stories."

Despite her interruption, my interest is piqued. "Wait a minute," I say, trying to think around Bobby's hand down the front of my pants. "Wasn't there a movie about it or something? I heard the *Blair Witch Project* sort of copied the idea."

Amber waves her hand, dismissive. "Oh I don't know about that. I can't *stand* horror films. But…" She turns around fully in the seat, savoring what she's about to tell. "Okay, it's like this. There's a lady, right? Back in the day. And she has like fifteen kids—"

Ryan's voice comes from the shadows in the driver's seat. "Twelve."

"Twelve," Amber says, "whatever. Anyway, she gets pregnant *again* and she's all sick of this shit, right? I mean, after twelve kids, you know? Oh, yeah, it's twelve, because that would make this next one thirteen and that's

how it goes. So she's just tired of having kids and she's got so many already, so she curses the last one to the devil."

Beside me, Bobby snuggles closer and scoffs. "I don't believe you buy that shit. It isn't real, Amber. Can't we just get back to what we were doing?" He humps my leg so she'll catch his drift.

But Amber's already started the story, and she's not about to stop just because we're horny. "Listen," she says. "We're going to pull over soon, you can get off then. Just listen to me." Then she falls silent, waiting for us to pay attention. Beneath her stern gaze Bobby rolls his eyes and crosses his legs, catching my hand between them. Amber picks up right where she left off. "So she has this kid, right? And damned if it wasn't a devil child, because she cursed it and all. It practically rips out of her womb and flies straight up the chimney and into the woods." Lowering her voice, she leans closer and confides, "And now? Since that day, there's been so many who have seen something in the Pine Barrens. Dead animals just torn apart, and strange footprints, and people are always disappearing. Shrieks in the woods late at night that no living creature could possibly make. My grandfather? Said one time he was out hunting and he saw the Jersey Devil rise up out of the bushes right in front of him. He put like fifty bullets into it and it didn't even budge."

Frowning slightly, I ask, "Did your grandfather hunt with semiautomatic weapons? Because I can't imagine any kind of rifle that holds fifty bullets."

Bobby snorts with laughter. "I don't know what kind of gun it was!" Amber cries. "You're not listening to my story."

"I heard your story," I tell her. "There's a devil in these woods that's somehow lived for hundreds of years without getting caught, even though everyone in New Jersey has seen him or heard him or knows someone who knows someone who has and even though they named their state hockey team after him. I think he was on an *X-Files* episode once too, right?"

Amber's full lips pull into an ugly pout—do straight guys actually *fall* for that? "Let me guess. You tell us all this and when we finally pull over, you two will just happen to head off into the woods for a little privacy, but really you'll just wait until Bobby and I—" My mind numbs at the thought of just what it is he wants to do to me, and I sure don't want to tell *her*, so I gloss over it with, "You get my drift. Once things get hot and heavy, you two jump on the car and scare the shit out of us so you can tease us all the way back to campus. That's how it works, right?"

For a moment, I think she's going to cry because I've called her out. Beside me Bobby can't breathe for laughing and I even see the sliver of a grin on the side of Ryan's face, though he turns away when Amber glares at him.

"Fine," she says. She tugs at the emergency brake, just enough to throw us all forward, and announces, "Pull over, Ryan. Right here."

"Amber—"

She's pissed. "Right here."

No one speaks as the car glides to the shoulder of the road and coasts to a stop. Amber pulls up the brake, opens her door, and folds her seat up so we can get out of the back. "I was *going* to be nice," she tells us, "and let you two have the car, but not now. Come on, move it."

I climb out, sure this is where they leave me and drive off laughing—I *knew* it was too good to be true—but Bobby keeps a hand on my waist and clambers out after me. He must be thinking the same thing, because he leans back into the car and threatens Ryan. "If you two leave us stranded out here, man—"

"Oh please." Amber shoves Bobby aside and flops back into the front seat. Poking at his crotch, she says, "Just go take care of *that* and give me like a half hour to take care of *this*." She points to Ryan's lap, where his jeans are open and his boxers unsnapped. In the car's harsh overhead light, his uncut dick juts from his crotch at the same angle as the emergency brake. Amber sees me looking and smirks. "Don't worry, Bobby," she calls out in a

catty voice. "I think the Jersey Devil only goes after virgins, so you should be safe."

"Oh, hey," Bobby retorts, "you too."

She nods at me and adds, "Your friend won't be so lucky, so you might want to do him quick."

Without answering, Bobby slams the car door shut. Then he takes my hand and pulls me along after him into the woods. It has to be close to midnight by now and the woods around us are eerily silent. I tell myself that Amber's full of shit, which she is, and that story she fed us was just talk, that's all. The scariest thing out here is probably nothing more than a bobcat or brown bear...

Yeah, and that's a comforting thought.

I focus on my dick instead—it's still throbbing and Bobby's hand is warm in mine. Dry leaves and brittle grass crunch under our feet as we drift among the trees. My fly's still open and there's a chill breeze to remind me that it's the end of October. When I glance over my shoulder at the car, Bobby tugs my hand and says, "They aren't going anywhere. Come on."

We go a little farther, kicking through the bushes down a slight incline that's littered with soda cans and broken beer bottles. I toy with the front of my jeans, unsure if I should zip up or what, and I'm just about to ask Bobby if he knows where he's going when he stops in front of a large, dead tree.

Turning around, he leans back against the trunk, legs splayed, and reels me in between them. His arms lock around my waist and for the first time all night, our erections crush together through our clothing. Bobby kisses the hollow of my throat as his hands ease beneath the waistband of my jeans to smooth over my ass. Only the thin fabric of my briefs separates us.

He trails tiny kisses up my neck and around my jaw until finally, finally, our lips meet. His mouth is hot on mine, his breath alcoholic as his tongue slips into me. My hands bunch uselessly in the front of his shirt. I'm

not sure where to put them or what I'm supposed to do—when I talked myself into going to that damn party this evening, I never imagined I'd end up here.

Behind me, the heavy thump of bass starts to pound into the night. I pull back, surprised, but Bobby promises, "They won't leave. Ryan always fucks with the music on because Amber's so loud."

True enough, the car doesn't start, and I relax as I give into Bobby's insistent kisses. Around us, wind rustles through the pines with a sad sound. My lips begin to tingle beneath Bobby's mouth. I feel giddy and more drunk now than earlier when I had the beer. Hard fingers knead my buttocks, their grip uncompromising as they pull me closer to rub my cock against Bobby's swollen crotch. Breaking away for a moment, Bobby calls me *Jake* in his breathy voice and I don't bother to correct him. "Are you really a virgin?" he wants to know.

I try to think of something to say that doesn't sound like *no* and isn't an outright lie, but nothing comes to mind. So I just shrug and that seems to be the right answer, because Bobby nudges my nose with his and murmurs, "It's okay. I'll go slow."

Then his hands trail around my waist and unsnap the front of my jeans. In the shadowy moonlight that streaks through the trees, my briefs are so white that they seem to glow with a light of their own. I watch his hands as they spread my zipper as wide as it'll go. Then he strums across the front of my briefs, fondling the erection that's crammed uncomfortably into the confines of my underwear. The sensation makes my knees weak and I lean forward to rest my forehead on Bobby's shoulder, my eyes shut tight against the lust that fans my blood.

The scent of his Obsession envelops us. I dare to kiss his neck, a tiny peck really, that's all I can muster before he eases my briefs down below my balls and takes my dick between his hands. "Nice," he says as he rubs up my length. I struggle to hold back the orgasm that threatens to rip through me at his touch.

With quick, practiced moves, Bobby keeps me in one hand while he unzips his pants and lets his own erection poke from the fly of his boxers. Then he touches the heads of our cocks together gently, as if in greeting. I come a little bit, I can't help it, I've never been this close to anyone before, and he laughs at the white spurt. Bobby rubs it onto his dick and then squeezes my length as if he wants more.

My hands are still in the way—I place them on the tree behind him, the bark rough against my palms, and as Bobby strokes me, I thrust into his hands. My breath comes in short, quick gasps that sound funny in the still night. Raising his hand to my face, Bobby holds out two fingers and tells me, "Open."

I open my mouth and he sticks his fingers inside. They're salty from my own juice and smell like sex. He lets me suck on them for a few seconds before he extracts them and uses my saliva to wet his dick. Then he lines it up alongside mine and encircles both of us with his hands. I thrust against him, overeager, the feel of his cock beside mine like velvet-sheathed steel. This time I don't hold back, I *can't*, and after a few strokes, I come in a hot rush into the thick, kinked hair of Bobby's crotch.

He laughs and lets me go, but before I can step back, one arm wraps around my waist to keep me close. "You're quick," he says with another laugh. Between us his hand moves along his dick, stopping now and then to finger his balls or smear my juice along his length. I watch him, fascinated by his slow, steady strokes. I squat down for a closer look and Bobby asks, "You want to blow me?"

"I've never really—"

He lets go of his dick and places his damp hand on my head, his fingers in my curls. "Try it," he says. Tentatively I take his cock in one hand and guide it to my mouth. The tip is more pliant between my lips than I ever dreamed it would be. I suck on it, rim my tongue around the head, lick around and around as more of him eases between my lips.

Somewhere above me, Bobby moans in pleasure. The hand on my head presses against me as I take him in, deep inside. Just when I think he's gone too far, I'm going to choke, he fists his hand in my hair and tugs me back. His length slips from my mouth and I stick my tongue out to follow it, licking the wet head before taking him in again.

Between us we find a steady rhythm, my tongue swirling down his length, my cheeks sucking at his cock. I'm surprised at how natural this seems to be. The musk of Bobby's scent fills my senses and I massage his dick with my lips, eager to make him come. Just the feel of him in my mouth makes me hard again. I feel him tremble within me, almost there, when he places his hand on my forehead to stop me and I let him slip free. "What—"

"Shh," Bobby says, silencing me. I glance up at the intense look on his face and realize he's listening to something. I rock back on my heels, unsure, and I'm just about to say something else when I hear it—slow footsteps circling behind us through the leaves. For a moment, my heart leaps in my chest, but when I look at Bobby, he's more angry than scared. "That bitch," he mutters. Then, raising his voice, he calls out, "Amber! You slut!"

The footsteps stop. With lazy motions, Bobby strokes himself, more to keep his erection up than to get off. We listen to the faint music from Ryan's car but it's the only sound—even the wind seems to have died. After a full, breathless minute, I whisper, "Do you really think it's her?"

Bobby calls her name again. It strikes me that she's not exactly what I'd call stealthy—I'm surprised she hasn't broken out into giggles by now, or rushed out at us shrieking our names. Or Bobby's, at least...she probably doesn't remember mine.

Another minute passes, and I want to ask if I can finish what I was doing when the footsteps start again. Quick this time, they seem to crash through the undergrowth at a run, now on my left, now behind the tree Bobby's leaning against, now on my right and behind me and back again in a wide, stumbling arc.

Whatever's out there is moving a *hell* of a lot faster than I would've thought possible for Amber in her heels and tight mini-skirt. It circles around us twice before Bobby laughs uneasily. "It's just a deer or something," he says as I stand.

"You're kidding, right?" I try to peer into the darkness around us but I can't see a thing. "Deer don't do that."

"If it's spooked," Bobby starts. When I shake my head, an angry note creeps into his voice. "How the fuck do you know? You're not an expert."

As the footsteps hem us in, I wonder if whatever it is moving out there in the night is closing the circle it's making, coming closer and closer to us with each pass. I turn with the sound, desperate to see something, to believe this is a joke, it *has* to be.

But then I see the car at the top of the ridge, I see the windows fogged with body heat, I see two shadows moving inside, two, *two*, and suddenly I'm all too aware of the fact that I'm standing here in the woods with my dick hanging out. "Bobby," I say, trying to keep my voice calm.

It must work—he sounds relieved. "Yeah?"

"They're still in the car."

"What?" His hand grips my shoulder and I jump. Before I can repeat myself—they're in the car, Ryan and Amber are in the fucking *car* so that means whatever's closing in on us isn't them and I may not work for Animal Planet but I'm thinking it sure isn't a *deer*, either—a high scream pierces the air. It seems to come from all around us, in every direction at once, unlike anything I've ever heard in my life.

I look at Bobby staring at me with wide, frightened eyes and without another word, we bolt. Up the ridge, tucking ourselves back into our jeans, yanking up zippers full of fabric and skin and hair, stumbling over each other in our haste. Too late, it occurs to me that we might run smack into whatever it is running around us, but then we're falling through the underbrush, clawing the gravel along the shoulder of the road, scrambling for the car.

Bobby reaches it before I do and flings the door wide to throw himself in. I dive in after him, pulling the door shut, and land in his lap in the front seat, facing him, the same position as Amber sitting on Ryan's lap in the driver's seat.

At our sudden appearance, she shrieks and scrambles to cover her exposed breasts. "Bobby!" she cries, but that's as far as she gets before something heavy thuds against the hood of the car. "What the hell—"

"Go!" Bobby yells. He twists the key in the ignition switch and the car roars to life. There's a jumble of limbs as Ryan peels away from the shoulder—Amber and I wind up in the back seat, twined together like lovers, and as she's pushing me off of her, trying to pull her shirt closed, whatever's on the hood thumps down onto the trunk of the car.

I get a glimpse of something huge before Amber shrieks in my ear and pulls me to her chest in fear. Her breasts are soft and pillowy against my cheeks, and wet with what I sincerely hope is only Ryan's saliva and not something more. One hard nipple pokes into my ear as her nails claw my neck. Over the music, I hear metal squealing as we streak away into the night.

* * * * *

By the time we stop at Wawa twenty minutes later, Amber's shirt is buttoned again and her skirt smoothed down. Her panties are on the floor by my feet, a fact that I'm trying to ignore. In the front seat, Ryan's zipped up but his hair is tousled and there's a used—but empty—condom curled into a napkin that's shoved in one cup holder. In front of me, Bobby stares into the side view mirror back the way we've come. Whenever our eyes meet, he gives me a quick, humorless grin before resuming his vigil.

In Wawa's parking lot, Ryan steers around the gas pumps and pulls into one of the spots in front of the store. Is it just me, or does he specifically

park beneath one of the brightest lights in the lot? With something like relief, the car doors open and the four of us tumble out. When I stand, my knees buckle and drop me into the front seat. Taking my hand, Bobby pulls me back to my feet. "You alright?" he wants to know.

I'm not sure. "What *was* that back there?" I ask, as if he might have found out somehow. But he shakes his head and shrugs, then drapes an arm around my shoulders in an intimate gesture that reminds me how well the rest of the evening had gone until...

Trying to sound nonchalant, I laugh and say, "Maybe it was one of the fraternities, you know? Just some guys goofing off."

"Maybe." Bobby sounds unconvinced. I let him lead me into the store, after Ryan and Amber.

The place is deserted at this hour—what time is it? One bored employee watches us from behind the cash register, but she doesn't say hello and we don't bother, either. Ryan heads for the deli and Bobby drifts away from me to follow his roommate. As they start talking in low voices, I try not to feel dismissed.

Instead, I head for the coffee counter, where Amber's pouring herself a tall cup. Leaning beside her, I watch her stir too much sugar into the java. In a soft voice I don't expect from her, she tells me, "He really likes you, you know."

Startled, I ask, "Who, Bobby?"

"No, Ryan." She throws me a sardonic look. "Of *course* Bobby, you fool. He saw you at the party like the second we got there. He was really surprised—said you didn't look like the partying type." She gives me a onceover that tells me that she thinks the same thing.

He likes me. As my mind tries to wrap around the thought, I admit, "I'm not really. Some guys on my floor sort of talked me into it. He really likes me?"

Amber laughs. "Listen, my sorority is doing this costume thing next Friday night. Like a party, I guess, but it's on campus so there's no alcohol, and you *have* to dress up or you don't get in. You want me to tell Bobby to bring you along?"

I glance over at the deli counter, where Bobby and Ryan are puzzling over what to order. Here in the bright halogen light, Bobby looks golden and unattainable. I wonder if Amber's just playing around, telling me what she thinks will get my hopes up just to laugh when I find out the truth. But what about earlier in the car, between us? Or in the woods...what was *that* all about?

As if he hears me thinking about him, Bobby turns and grins. There's a small damp spot on the front pocket of his jeans which must be from me. "Come on," Amber pleads. "What do you say?"

"I guess so." Bobby gives me a little wave and I laugh. With a pat on Ryan's shoulder, he heads my way. "Sure. Why not? Next Friday?"

Amber nods, and then I feel a delicious weight as Bobby leans against my back. "Is she bothering you?" he teases. To Amber, he says, "I saw your boobies."

Quickly she looks down, as if she might have left her shirt undone. "Yeah well, I've seen yours, too, and I ain't impressed." She takes a sip of the coffee and grimaces before adding more sugar. "Oh hey, thanks for interrupting us back there, by the way. How'd you do it? Throw something on the hood before getting in? If you scratched his paint, Ryan's going to kill you."

"It wasn't us!" Bobby cries. He snakes an arm around my waist, his fingers brushing across my crotch before hooking into one of my belt loops. "Tell her, Jake. Something interrupted *us*, Amber. Chased us out of the woods and into the car. We barely got away with our lives."

The pissy set of Amber's mouth says she doesn't believe him. "Uh-huh. You know I made all that shit up about the Jersey Devil, right?"

I can't resist. With a grin, I ask, "And what, you named the hockey team, too? Do you get royalties for that? Retain some kind of copyright or get a cut of the licensing, I hope?"

She slaps my arm as Bobby laughs. Before she can answer, he pulls me away from the counter. Loudly, so she can hear, he says, "She's a sore loser. You getting something?"

I shake my head and follow him outside. The car doors are locked, but I lean against the side of the car and Bobby leans against me. We're pressed together again, our faces inches apart, and whenever I move my head, Bobby's face is there in front of mine. His hands rub up and down my sides. Mine are on his shoulders because once again, I don't know where they go. "Jake," he breathes.

"Jacob," I correct, only half joking.

He grins. This close, I'm drunk on him all over again. "Jacob," he sighs. He sticks out his chin to touch mine, and I can feel the sharp points of hair growing back already where he shaved. His voice is low between us. "Hey, listen. Ryan's staying with Amber tonight so I was thinking maybe if you didn't *have* to get back right away, you could..." He trails off and looks at me expectantly. When I don't answer, he shrugs. "I mean, if you *want* to, maybe you can sort of come over to our place for a while?"

Is he serious? I look into his eyes and I *think* he is, I *want* him to be, but does he really want me to spend the night? Is that what he's asking here? A frown crosses his face, and he shrugs again. "I don't know. I just thought maybe..."

I finally find my voice. "Sure," I say, so eagerly that it makes him laugh and I duck my head, embarrassed. "I mean, if *you* want me too—"

"I asked you, didn't I?" He grins, and for a moment I think he's going to kiss me, here in the parking lot—sure, there's no one around, but it's in the open, it's in the *light*—when someone shrieks behind us. It's Amber—I'd

recognize that scream anywhere. As I turn in Bobby's arms, he gasps. "Oh my God. Look."

I follow his gaze to the back of Ryan's car. There the paint has been scraped off in ten long, ragged lines that start at the window and disappear off the hood. Softly, Bobby tells Amber, "We didn't do this."

I like that he said we.

"What happened?" Ryan asks, fingering one of the lines. None of us can answer. They look like claw marks, as if something had tried desperately to hold onto the back of the car as we sped away.

I hope whatever Bobby has planned for us later tonight is enough to get the sight of those jagged lines out of my head and back into the Barrens where they belong.

The End

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