

# New Tricks



Joanne Smyth

Changeling Press

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ISBN: 978-1-59596-732-9  
Formats Available:  
HTML, Adobe PDF,  
MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:  
Changeling Press LLC  
PO Box 1046  
Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046  
[www.ChangelingPress.com](http://www.ChangelingPress.com)

Editor: Connie Alberts  
Cover Artist: Sahara Kelly

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Supernatural investigator Thomas(ina) Lafferty is on the case -- well, sort of. She's supposed to be on the hunt for the demon who stole her client's dog, but all she can think about is the handsome new employee at her local bookshop.

Charlie is sexy enough that Thomas can forgive his love of comic books, and even better, he's not put off by her pushy attitude. But Thomas has her suspicions about him. What does he know about the dognapping case and why on earth does he get so dominant around the time of a full moon? And can Thomas really resist sticking around to find out?

## Chapter One

So there I was, at the scene of the crime.

Well, *almost*. I would have been at the scene of the crime if I'd been standing around eighty feet to my immediate left in the narrow alleyway that served as a backdoor access point for the many speciality shops lining Hoover High Street. Unfortunately for my investigation, it was pouring buckets outside, and I'd left my raincoat at home. So there I was, eighty feet from the scene of the crime, leafing through a book called *Ghosts, Ghouls and Other Western Myths* in the non-fiction section of the Big Reader bookshop.

Big Reader is one of the biggest names in the book buying business, right up there with the likes of Borders and Barnes & Noble. Its shops are invariably huge and clean, its staff is invariably friendly and helpful, and it claims to be able to get its hands on *any* book you want within forty-eight hours (guaranteed). I'm not sure exactly why I don't like the place, but I guess it may have something to do with my brief flirtation with art school in my late teens, which left me with a lingering distrust of big corporations and "The Man."

The feeling, of course, is mutual. Big corporations -- or at least their staff -- tend to take one look at me in my over-sized combat boots and heavy jacket and immediately think shoplifter. It's a pity. If they looked a little closer before they started guiding me pointedly toward the exits, they'd notice that I don't have any tattoos, my hair is perfectly clean, and under the jacket I have on a perfectly respectable blouse and pants. The reason I wear the jacket and the combat boots is because I hate the cold, and frankly, when I run into town to pick up a book, I don't feel the urge to dress to impress. I've always been a tomboy at heart -- with a name like Thomas, can you blame me -- and honestly, I think they're lucky I dress at all.

Today, though, I was all dressed up. Before dropping into Big Reader I'd been to a meeting with my bank manager to see if I could wrangle a home loan out of him. The answer was a curt no. I was soaked to the skin, my eyeliner had run past my nose, and I'd exchanged my trendy pumps for my trusty boots again, but I still looked neat enough to avoid being strong-armed by Big Reader security.

After spending a good five minutes trying -- and failing -- to dry my trousers in front of the store's primary heating duct, I set off through the shop, past the gaudy-covered best sellers, the trestle tables covered with two-for-one deals, and the little pulpit surrounded by banners which they used for book launch reading. Settling into the Mysteries section of the store -- my favourite place -- I began thumbing through volumes of ghost stories, demonic possessions and UFO abductions.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

I turned around. The sad-faced guy doing the asking was obviously a store employee and not merely a concerned citizen. He had a nametag with "My name is Charlie" written on it. He was one of those classically nerdy guys -- scruffy brown hair, huge horn-rimmed glasses, skinny frame all but lost in a shirt too big for him, pants at least four inches too short. He was committing the ultimate fashion faux pas by wearing sandals *and* socks. And *brown* socks at that.

If there was any remaining hope in my mind that Charlie might actually be a cool guy who just happened to be having a bad clothes day, it was quickly snuffed out when my eye caught his tie. It was printed with tiny pictures of comic book heroes surrounded by flashy comic book words like *kazaam!* and *spluuuut!*

The thing was, he wasn't bad looking. The eyes behind the coke-bottle lenses were dark brown and tender, and his mouth was what you might call *kissably* full. His teeth were straight and white and he was tall enough for me to have to incline my head to talk to him. Even under all that voluminous cheap cotton I could tell that his shoulders were broad, in that "I don't work out but it looks like I might" way. And he had great skin, the kind of coffee-coloured skin that you want to lick to find out whether or not it tastes as yummy as it looks. I figured he'd probably brush up pretty

well if a strong-minded girl took him under her wing and taught him how to dress and how to brush his hair.

"I don't know, Charlie," I said, putting *Ghosts, Ghouls and Other Western Myths* back on the shelf. "You might be able to help. You know anything about monsters?"

His face brightened. I'd say something about the sun coming out from behind a cloud, but I don't want to sound clichéd, and it wasn't like that anyway. More like a light bulb coming out from behind a very tasteless, kitsch lampshade. "Monsters?" he asked. "Are you kidding? I love horror movies. What kind of monsters are you interested in?"

"Real ones," I replied, and before he had a chance to write me off as crazy, I quickly added, "I'm a supernatural investigator."

People usually have one of two reactions when they find out what I do for a living. Most people think I'm joking, and when they realise I'm not, they try and humour me. The rest of them think it's the coolest thing they've ever heard. It didn't take a lot of supernatural investigating skills to work out that Charlie would fall into the latter category -- let's just say the tie gave it away.

"Wow!" said Charlie. "You ever thought to hire a sidekick?"

Sure I did, every darn day. Coffee doesn't get brewed by itself, does it? Sadly, the reality was I barely had the funds to afford my *own* salary, never mind anyone else's. At any rate, I had a past history with sidekicks that hadn't left me excited to sign up a partner. "Not right now, thanks all the same," I said. "Look, Charlie, I'm actually here to investigate an event that happened just behind this shop. Really dangerous, exciting stuff. It involves a kidnapping by supernatural agencies."

I was bending the truth a little there. Well, more than a little. It wasn't a kidnapping so much as it was a *dog*-napping, and the case wasn't so much dangerous and exciting as it was about finding a missing Chihuahua. It wasn't the sort of case I'd normally take, but times were tough. I hadn't gotten any business for almost a month, and my electricity bills were due soon. Of course I wasn't going to tell cute-but-nerdy Charlie that, any more than I'd told people that my last job had been flipping burgers in

the local grease-hut. Back then, I'd told people I was a chef. Schooled in French cuisine, no less!

"Supernatural agencies? Like demons? I've heard myths about them carrying off children, and wizards stealing people to turn them into..." He trailed off, looking a little shamefaced. He'd probably figured out that he hadn't heard about wizards stealing people from a myth, but from a role playing game. "Sorry, I meant spirits stealing people," he corrected himself. "Especially those deeply involved in the occult. What kind of person were they?"

"A rich one." I was edging around the question. Technically, Ruffles the Chihuahua was rich, or at least his owner, Mrs. Avery, was. She'd spoiled Ruffles rotten with diamond dog collars, hand-crafted bowls and the choicest meats in town. He'd even had a four-bedroom doghouse with central heating and running water. On his birthday, and being a dog, he had seven a year, Mrs. Avery would fly with him to Paris so he could get beauty therapy at a special canine clinic.

Unfortunately, Ruffles deserved none of these things, because according to the reports from everyone except Mrs. Avery, the Chihuahua had been the most ill-tempered little ankle biter on the face of the planet. I had interviewed the old lady's staff in my office and some of Mrs. Avery's maids had shown me scars from where Ruffles had scratched them. One of the stable hands admitted that he still had tooth marks on his bottom after Ruffles had bitten him in a completely unprovoked attack. If Mrs. Avery hadn't been such a nice old lady, and hadn't offered to pay me so very well, I'd have suggested that it might be better for all concerned if the dog stayed dog-napped.

"Did they leave a ransom note?" Charlie asked. "How do you know it was a supernatural entity? It might have been common crooks -- or, you know, the mafia."

"I don't think the mafia would waste its time with Ruffles." I smirked.

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "Ruffles? What kind of person is called Ruffles?"

"A very rich and eccentric one?" I tried, but from the look in his eyes, I knew it was too late. Me and my big mouth. That was always my trouble. I'd tell these silly lies



-- never about anything really important, just a few tiny insignificant things that made my life sound a little less pathetic than it really was -- and then I'd forget I'd told them and get caught out. The lies usually left me looking like more of an idiot than I would have if I'd only told the truth. It was a stupid habit, but one I couldn't break.

"Sounds more like what you'd call your cat," said Charlie.

"Dog, actually," I admitted.

Charlie's lips tightened. "You're telling me a demon stole your dog? Look, lady, maybe I should go find someone who's more qualified to help you --"

"Qualified?"

"Qualified as in psychologically."

Oh great -- a run-in with the men in white coats would *really* improve my day. I grabbed his arm as he turned away. "I'm sorry," I said. "Yes, I lied about the dog. But it isn't my dog, and I'm not mad. Of course, that's not to say my client hasn't got the odd bat flying around her belfry. After all, she did tell me she'd seen her Chihuahua being stolen by a huge, shadowy demon."

"What?"

"My client said she tied up Ruffles in the alleyway outside Big Reader for a few minutes while she went to pay a bill in the post office. When she came back the dog was in the jaws of some hideous beast."

Charlie flinched.

I was obviously squeezing his arm too hard. I relaxed the pressure slightly, but not enough to let him get away without a struggle. With my other hand I dug out one of my business cards and held it up in front of his face.

**Thomas Lafferty**  
**Supernatural Investigator**  
**Ghosts \* Demons \* Angels \* Spirit Guides**  
**Vampires \* Shape-Shifters \* Elves**  
**Tarot readings available for competitive fee**

He didn't look as impressed by it as I'd hoped he would. "You're a fortune teller?"

"Only when business is bad. It's not my speciality."

"And your name is Thomas?"

"Short for Thomasina. Got three sisters. Georgina, Henrietta, Michaela. My mum always wanted a boy."

"Right."

"Right."

By this time our faces were barely inches apart, and our voices had dropped below a whisper. We were poised in that position people in the movies end up in moments before they kiss. Except we weren't going to kiss anytime soon. The whole thing reminded me of the way my parents fight. Mum and Dad don't believe in yelling when they argue. Civility, so they like to say, is the key to maintaining a healthy relationship. The winner of their fights is usually the person who manages to speak the softest, until the other person gets sick of whispering, "What? What? *What?*" and stomps off to vent outside.

Charlie's breath was hot against my cheek and smelled a lot like breath mints. I noticed -- now that we were truly eye-to-eye -- that his weren't completely brown, but ringed inside and out by a thin band of orange. I also noticed that the arm I held wasn't skinny as I'd expected it to be, but roped with wiry muscle. Maybe he actually did work out, and under this badly dressed geek façade was a hot-head jock dying to get back to the gym. I sincerely doubted it, though. The only arm workout guys like Charlie got was from twiddling buttons on their video game controllers. He was just naturally muscular.

The same way I was just naturally tenacious.

"So you're saying you didn't see anything unusual on the evening of the twelfth?" I asked. "No dark shapes floating about in the alley outside? No annoying, yappy dogs being chased by creatures of supreme evil?"

Charlie jerked out a thick book at the end of the shelf and pushed it into my hand. "If you're looking for monsters, why don't you check in here," he whispered. "Now let me go. I'm not paid enough to deal with people like you."

"Why are you whispering?" I whispered.

"Because we're in a bookshop," he whispered back.

"So? It's not a library!"

He shook me off and walked away, leaving me holding the book. I flipped it open to its title page, *A Beginner's Guide to Beasties*. Oh, very funny, Charlie. It was a kid's book. It was strange, I reflected, how quickly he'd gone from being very helpful to being very, well, unhelpful. It couldn't just be about the fact I'd lied, could it? Perhaps poor Charlie had had a close encounter of the Ruffles kind himself, and didn't take kindly to the idea that someone wanted to get that pesky Chihuahua back.

I was about to chase after him when I noticed the Big Reader security guards beginning to move ominously in my direction. Evidently I'd overstayed my Big Reader welcome. Shoving the book back on the shelf, I headed at a brisk pace for the shop's back alleyway exit. My plan was to hang out there and look for clues until the little Indian takeaway shop by the train station opened for its evening business, but it didn't quite work out that way.

Instead, I did a bad thing.

I followed Charlie home.

## Chapter Two

If I come off as a bit of a pushy person to you, it's because you've only seen me out of my element. You wouldn't be so quick to judge me if you saw me in the field. When you're staking vampires and cutting the heads off zombies, being pushy and annoying are practically survival skills. When you're a supernatural investigator, you've got to be ready to throw your weight around and demand answers from good guys and bad guys alike.

It's hard to turn off your natural impulse to fight with everyone you come across. I guess that's why I'm not a terribly good people person. And why I haven't had a date for months.

Before my job at the grease-hut, I was a professional sidekick. I'd worked for all kinds of people. Hoodlums, crime fighters, even bona fide paranormal investigators. I once did a stint working with a Lara Croft influenced, Tomb Raider type -- and let me tell you, that's the last time I'm ever going to help find priceless artifacts in India. I was in bed for a month afterward with a stomach bug that defied all Western antibiotics.

I got tired of being a sidekick fast. The pay wasn't too bad, but of course you never get medical insurance and a lot of the time it's less about kicking ass than fetching coffee. Most of your money goes into patching yourself up after a big fight. There's no real future in being a hired goon. That's why I decided to work in the grease-hut until I had enough saved to set up my own supernatural investigation agency.

Word got around fast and I initially did quite well for myself, balancing out the meagre pickings I got from the odd visit to a haunted house with what I made from fortune telling. But then the work dried up, as work always does. Before Mrs. Avery showed up with her odd request, I was almost tempted to go back into the sidekick

business -- or back to the grease-hut. I was grateful to the old lady. She'd really thrown me a lifeline.

It was a shame that I had next to no chance of finding her dog again. The sad fact was, despite Mrs. Avery's conviction, Ruffles' disappearance was unlikely to be a supernatural event. Personally, I'd pegged the stable hand with the sore bum as the most likely culprit. Unfortunately for my finances, unless I went through the motions of searching for a supernatural dog-napper, Mrs. Avery was unlikely to keep handing me cheques.

I stood in the alley behind Big Reader, crouched under the back exit's roof overhang, unwilling to brave the rain. Times like this a girl could do with a big, black jacket. Big Reader's exit was separated from the rest of the alley by a low red railing, which was where Mrs. Avery had allegedly tied up her pet. The railings and the overhang made for a pretty crummy shelter, but it was the best I could find. I wasn't sure whether to wait out the storm or give up investigating and make a run for the train station. As I was weighing up the pros and cons of the situation, a man opened the exit doors and strode out into the rain.

It took me a minute to realise it was Charlie. He'd changed out of his work clothes and the stupid glasses were gone. He was wearing a casual outfit, brown leather jacket and jeans. The clothes really *did* make the man, I mused, watching him go. Without his Big Reader uniform and the horrible tie, Charlie was a stud.

Then I did it. I started following him.

He hadn't seen me as he left the building. The doors opened out, and I'd been hidden in the corner behind them. It wasn't hard for me to tail him, dodging in and out of cars, ducking into the ingress of shop fronts. For once the rain was working to my advantage. Charlie never turned around, just strolled up the street with his thumbs casually curled under the loops of his waistband.

Why was I doing this? I wasn't sure myself. Embarrassingly, part of the reason I was chasing Charlie was because he'd been the first guy to pay me any real attention in ages. And one of the first guys who'd stood up to me. As for the other part of the

reason, I couldn't quite nail that down. I just had a feeling about him. I couldn't tell if it was a good feeling or a bad feeling, but I hoped for his sake it was the former.

Finally Charlie stopped at a Chinese restaurant, glanced at the menu by the door, and stepped inside. I waited outside for ten minutes, shuffling my feet in the cold, before following him.

The hostess looked me up and down, paying special attention to my big boots and my bedraggled, water-logged hair, and then grudgingly handed me a menu. "Good evening, ma'am. Would you like to sit in the non-smoking or smoking area?"

I craned over her shoulder to spot Charlie sitting with a pretty well-dressed blonde girl in a booth at the far end of the restaurant. I hoped she wasn't his date. "Could you put me there?" I pointed to the booth behind Charlie's.

As I dripped through the restaurant I could feel the eyes of the other patrons fix on me and hear their mutters of distaste. Luckily, though, Charlie didn't notice me. He and his blonde partner were deep in conversation as I slid into my booth.

"Listen, Susan, I don't want to keep doing this," Charlie was saying.

"Doing what?" the blonde, Susan, asked.

"Moving. I'm sick of it." He sighed. "Sometimes I think I just can't help getting myself into trouble. I'm so sorry to put you through the hassle every time."

So were they a couple? I couldn't tell. I had my fingers crossed that she was his solicitor or accountant. Although why someone would take their solicitor or accountant out for some Chinese was anyone's guess.

"You've only been here two months, Charles," Susan said. "You can't tell me you've managed to mess things up already. You told me you were being extra-careful."

"I am. I *was*. But you know what happened with the --"

"What happened with the dog? Look, I admit you over-reacted a bit -- a lot, really -- but it was just a dog, Charles. No one saw what happened."

I sat up straighter in my chair, my ears pricked. This was getting good. Susan had to be talking about the premature demise of Mrs. Avery's horrible pooch. I'd have

never guessed that mild-mannered Charlie was behind Ruffles' disappearance, but that did explain his sudden change of mood in the shop. He thought I'd come to get him.

"Apparently someone did see what happened," Charlie hissed. "This girl came around asking questions in the shop today. Called herself a supernatural investigator hired to look into a case of 'dog-napping'."

Susan made a little hissing noise between her teeth. "Maybe the owner saw you with her pet," she said, and I could sense the tension in her voice. "You can't have been very discreet about it. She saw you, and then she brought in this investigator girl --"

"Who hires a supernatural investigator, Susan? I'm telling you it was a Collector. I've got to get out of town."

"I don't know of any Collectors who are active at the moment."

"Susan, you don't know any of them are active until it's too late!"

They stopped talking as a waiter came to their table, but I could hear Charlie moving restlessly in his seat, eager to get away. Me? I was utterly confused by the conversation. I'd gotten lost around about the part where Charlie had brought up the "Collector." I had no idea if Mrs. Avery collected anything beyond the things that old ladies naturally do -- cats and dust -- but she certainly didn't warrant the fear Charlie seemed to hold for her. The woman was barely five feet high. I could have picked her up with one hand.

After Charlie and Susan ordered, the waiter came to my booth. I asked for a chicken chow mein, then sat back to eavesdrop some more. By this time, Susan had managed to convince Charlie of his paranoia, and they were now making idle small talk. I was very pleased to hear Charlie ask how Susan's husband was doing, and equally as pleased when she responded with a question about Charlie's search for Miss Right.

Charlie groaned at that. "I doubt any woman would have me," he said. "Not with me being what I am."

A Big Reader employee? A nerd? A clumsy dresser? I wondered. None of the above was a deal breaker. Although I suppose many women are more discriminating in their choice of a life partner than I was.

"I'm sure you'll find someone, Charles," said Susan. "At least once we manage to settle you down somewhere for good. By the way, you must tell me, what was the name of the supernatural investigator who was asking you questions? If she works in the city I'm bound to know her, or know of her."

"Thomas something. No, wait. Thomas Lafferty."

Susan laughed. "Lafferty? Oh, Charles, you've nothing to worry about. That girl is strictly small-time. I'm surprised she's still in business, to be honest. Not exactly the brightest spark."

I bristled.

"She seemed pretty bright to me," Charlie replied. "She knew it was me right from the beginning. She managed to lure me over somehow, acted really friendly, got completely under my guard..."

"I think you give Lafferty too much credit," said Susan, who I liked less and less as the conversation progressed.

"I'm worried. I don't think I'll go to work tomorrow. First the dog and now Thomas..."

"Charles, please."

"You don't understand what it's like," Charlie snapped, suddenly exploding. "You have your nice neat ordered little life. At the end of the day you can forget everything and go back to playing happy families. You don't know what it's like for people like *us*."

"Charles." Her tone grew colder. "I'd hardly call you *people*."

"That was completely uncalled for." Charlie got to his feet. "I can't talk to you, Susan. I can't even --" He stopped. I desperately wanted to turn around to see his expression, but it would only give me away. Finally he said, "I'm going. Don't expect



me to contact you anytime soon. You've made it perfectly clear where I stand. I'd get more sympathy from a rock."

"You're over-reacting again," Susan replied, but Charlie was already pounding for the door, almost knocking over the waiter returning with their meals.

In a flash I was out of my seat too. I was about to charge out after Charlie when the waitress in the red dress stopped me. "Your order is ready," she said pointedly, one hand out. "If you want it take out, we can do that..."

I thought quickly. "My girlfriend back there is going to organise all our meals as take out. See the blonde woman, the pretty one in the suit? It's her treat tonight." That'd teach Susan to make fun of me! I continued, "Her name's Susan, she'll explain everything. See, I've just remembered that I've forgotten something very important back home..."

Feigning impatience, I jogged from foot to foot, and the waitress, taking pity on me, shooed me off into the Hoover City night.

## Chapter Three

The streets of Hoover City were almost empty at this time of the evening. The smartest citizens were already at home watching television, or tucking into high-priced dinners at local restaurants. Only a few brave youths were out and about, most of them skulking around the off-licences in the hope that some fool drunk might take pity on their ID-less status and bring them out a beer. By now the rain had eased off and the street lamps were on, giving the roads an eerie shine. The silvery edge of a full moon glimmered on the horizon, almost completely hidden by the hills.

Easy to spot in his brown jacket, Charlie jogged ahead of me. If the confrontation with Susan had shaken him at all, it didn't show in his graceful strides. Despite being pretty fit myself, I was having trouble matching his pace. He was a natural runner, one of those people just built for speed. I was amazed again at how many different sides I'd seen of this guy in one night. The nerdy Big Reader employee, the cool guy in leather, the neurotic paranoid, and now -- perhaps my favourite -- the athlete.

After five minutes of jogging, Charlie turned down a side street, veering away from the main roads and into the more suburban downtown districts of the city. I followed at a more discreet distance now, keeping him in sight but never getting close enough for him to hear my footfalls. Many twists and turns later, Charlie stopped outside an ugly brick house and fiddled in his pocket for the keys. I ducked behind a rubbish bin to watch.

He opened the door and then turned to stare directly at me. "Thomas?" he called. "You can come in if you like."

*What?* Shaking, I got to my feet. He'd known I was following the whole time? I couldn't believe it. I hadn't made a sound, I'd kept out of sight, I'd dodged and weaved right through the city. I'd used all the best tricks I knew to tail a guy...

"Don't take it personally," said Charlie, as if reading my thoughts. "I've had a lot of experience knowing when I'm being followed. I'm impressed you managed to make it this far, though. Most people give up when I pick up the pace. Who are your goons?"

"My goons?" I blinked. "I don't have any goons."

"Of course you don't." Charlie rolled his eyes and ushered me inside.

The house turned out to be less of a house than an apartment. Charlie lived on the bottom floor in a one-bedroom flat that was amusingly reminiscent of my dorm at college. Unpacked boxes were stacked up against the walls, and also stood in for chairs and a coffee table. His television, perched on another box, was still partially enclosed in bubble wrap. Clothes lay crumpled on the floor. Charlie kicked them out of the way as he went.

"Haven't had a chance to move in properly yet," he apologised. "I'd offer you tea, but I don't have a teapot. Can't afford wine either. Please make yourself comfortable on a box. It's the best I can do."

I sat. The box wasn't comfortable in the slightest, but I didn't feel I had any right to make an issue of it. "I'm sorry about stalking you --" I began, but Charlie cut me off.

"No, I should be sorry. I've probably come across as very heartless but I'm really not. That poor woman and her dog. I didn't mean to kill it, but it -- well, dogs are a problem for me. Or rather, dogs have a problem *with* me. It's an instinctual thing. I'm sure you understand, given your profession."

I didn't, but I nodded anyway. While lying might not have worked for me in the past, there wasn't any real harm in pretending I knew more than I did. Something else was bothering me though. "If you knew I was in the restaurant, why did you let me hear you admit to it?"

"Why shouldn't I? I knew you knew already."

"What? Oh, oh, yeah, I did. Right."

"Lucky for both of us, Susan -- she's my sponsor -- seems to think that you aren't a danger," he said. "I suppose this was just a case of me being in the wrong place at the wrong time and meeting the wrong dog. Anyway, please tell your client, your

unfortunate old lady, that I'll do anything to make amends. Buy a new dog, cut her grass once a week, do her shopping. Er, there's no chance she'll sue, is there?" he added, biting his lower lip. "I try to avoid going to court as much as possible..."

I shook my head. "Mrs. Avery is a sweetheart. She's not the litigious type. I'm sure she'll be happy with whatever amends you can afford."

"Thank goodness." Charlie rubbed his hands together distractedly and took a look at his watch. "Well, I'm glad that's all cleared up. Now I don't want to push you out of the house, but you understand time is rather limited for me given my condition -- especially tonight."

"Oh yes, tonight," I said, trying to sound as knowledgeable as possible.

"So it was nice meeting you, Thomas."

"Yes, nice meeting you too."

Charlie bit his lip. "I guess that was meant as a cue to, you know... for your own good, I'm not trying to be rude... but I'm not exactly a great entertainer during..."

"Oh," I said. It was hard to disguise my disappointment. I figured we'd been getting on quite well this time around, even if I didn't understand half of what he said.

"Well, goodbye then."

"Goodbye."

He was so *cute* though, standing there amongst his cardboard boxes and discarded clothes, with his ruffled curly hair, his lovely lickable skin and his unusual eyes. Over the years, I'd let way too many men slip through my fingers because I hadn't had the guts to make the first move, and they'd been too intimidated by me to try their luck. I refused to make that mistake with Charlie. If I was able to accost the guy and then follow him home without fear, asking him out couldn't be too hard, could it?

Unsteadily I got to my feet, turned to a three-quarter profile like girls in the movies did, bent one knee, fluffed my damp hair, rested a hand on my hip and stuck out my chest in a manner I hoped looked less awkward than it felt. My skills at seduction were pretty rusty. I pitched my voice at a sultry drawl and purred, "Is there a chance I could see you again, Charlie?"

Charlie blinked. "Er, what? Oh, I suppose you'll have to, depending on what your client needs from me."

"No. No! What I mean is, can I see you again," I tried, using alternate emphasis this time. "Like, in a non-business setting."

"Not sure I follow." He looked confused.

How could he be so dumb? I realised that if I was going to make any headway with the guy, I'd have to *show* him what I meant. I gripped him by his shirt front and dragged him into a clinch so tight not even the toughest wrestling referee would have been able to separate us. Before he could protest I covered his lips with mine and *sucked* all the doubt out of him. After that, it was easy. Our tongues fought for supremacy as I ripped open his shirt and he yanked off my blouse. His hands roamed my body, eventually gripping my ass hard and squeezing. I almost laughed at that. I didn't think little Charlie had it in him.

Under his shirt Charlie had a great build. Not too muscular, but definitely not scrawny and I loved the creamy chocolate colour of his skin. His pecs were well defined and his broad shoulders tapered nicely into a shiny sextet of muscle at his waist. He was a bit hairier than I usually liked, especially on his chest, but it wasn't thick hair, just a light covering of fluff-like fur that felt soft to the touch. I figured I could live with a little extra hair.

I started pulling at his pants but Charlie brought me to a halt with a hand on my bra. On the surface that looked like a pretty daring move, but I think he'd intended to bring me to a halt with his hand on my chest. Unfortunately for him, my breasts were right out there now and it was hard for him to avoid them.

"Thomas, do you really think we should be doing this?" he gasped. "It's kind of fast, and I hardly know you, and this isn't the night for it..."

I undid the buckle on his belt, unzipped his fly, and slid my hand down inside the denim and cotton. His cock was firm, hard and definitely on the large side. He winced as I squeezed his balls. I liked the shape of them in my hand, their exciting warmth.

"You're too rough," he complained, as I started to pull at his cock.

"Quit complaining and take off your shoes," I snapped, bending to unlace my big boots. "Do you have a bed or just more cardboard boxes?"

"I have a bed."

"Then take me to it!"

Charlie frowned at me. Evidently he wasn't used to taking orders. I stood with my hands on my hips and tried to out-glare him, but Charlie was having none of it. He grabbed me around my waist and picked me up as if I weighed nothing at all. I made a half-hearted attempt to get away, pushing at his shoulders. Charlie just threw me over his shoulder, as if I were a cheesy B-movie heroine getting kidnapped by a moustache-twirling villain.

"Women," he muttered gruffly, and then spanked me lightly on my backside. I was in shock. Spanking? No guy had ever done that to me before. No guy had dared to do it! The fight went out of me. I hung limply over Charlie's shoulder as he carried me into his bedroom.

Mercifully the bedroom was less cluttered than his lounge room. Light streamed in through an open window. Outside the sky had grown darker, and the moon was almost out from behind the hills. The sight would have been romantic -- full moon, starry sky -- if it hadn't been for the fact that the apartment directly overlooked a car park. The only furniture in Charlie's bedroom was the bed and a chest of drawers, but at least everything was packed away. Charlie's bed was a plain double, and his blankets were covered in prints of comic book heroes. Too cute.

Charlie tossed me onto the bed. I was amazed again by how strong he was. I do weight training five times a week, so I'm hardly the lightest girl in the world. I watched the muscles in his shoulders flex as he bent over to unfasten his shoes. It may sound crazy, but I could have sworn that he was looking stronger and stronger by the second.

"Hey, Charlie?"

"Take off your trousers," he told me.

I don't like taking orders any more than the next ex-sidekick, but something about the way Charlie spoke made the idea of obeying him seem exciting. I wriggled out of my trousers and tossed them off the bed. Lying there in nothing but my panties and bra, I felt vulnerable. I remembered that I really didn't know anything about this guy, except that he worked in a bookshop and had killed a Chihuahua. Hardly a glowing recommendation of his character.

Charlie climbed onto the bed with me. He loomed over me in the dim light, a wicked smile playing on his lips. Before I could say a word, he'd hooked a hand under my arm and flipped me over onto my face. I yelped involuntarily. His hands rubbed my shoulders and began to slowly make their way down my back to my bra straps. For a geeky guy, Charlie sure knew how to undo a bra in a hurry. Then his hands were on my breasts, rubbing them in circles. My puckered nipples ached to the touch, but it was a good ache.

I was just getting used to the sensations when he stopped and gripped my hips. He yanked me back until my legs hung over the bed, my knees on the floor. So Charlie liked it doggy-style? I hadn't expected that, but then Charlie had been constantly surprising me from the beginning. I felt his lips on my back, kissing down my spine. He paused when he came to my panties, running his tongue along the waistband.

I shivered despite myself. "Quit teasing me," I hissed. "I'm so damned ready for you."

"I'll be ready for *you* in my own sweet time," Charlie replied coolly. He slipped my panties to one side and ran a finger lightly over my labia. What a pussy tease. I bucked my hips toward him, but he held me still with one hand. The other kept toying with me, tickling my thighs, petting my sex, until I felt like I was going to burst.

"Geez, Charlie, you're killing me," I groaned. "Can't you see how wet I am?"

"I can see it." He pulled down my panties with one hand and blew a cool stream of air against my pussy. "Pretty wet there."

I shivered. "Charlie, don't do this to me."

His finger worked a mite deeper, parting the lips and working in slow strokes toward my clit. By this stage my juices were literally dripping down my leg and into his hand. Every time I began to feel that telltale tingle in my sex that told me I was seconds away from coming, Charlie pulled away. The nerve of the guy! I was going to kill him when this was over.

"How do you feel, Thomas?"

"I feel like I want to break your nose," I snarled. "This isn't sex, you're torturing me here."

He laughed. "Maybe you deserve it?"

Well, maybe I did after stalking him and tormenting him, but this wasn't fair payback at all! I opened my mouth to curse him for being such an opportunist prick, but his hand returned to my clit and I completely forgot what I was going to say. Now two fingers rubbed my clit in fluid circles while his thumb entered my pussy. I squeezed around it eagerly, trying to draw it as deep as possible within me.

"Come on, Charlie, let me have you. I want you," I said, shamed by the pleading tone in my voice. "Please?"

I must have sounded repentant to Charlie, because he relaxed his grip on my hips sufficiently to give me leeway to fuck myself on his hand. And boy, did I! I rode his thumb like a proper cowgirl, thrusting myself onto him again and again. Each time his forefinger grazed my swollen clit I nearly let out a "yahoo!" of pleasure. It wasn't as fulfilling as riding his cock, but I was ready to take what I was given at this point. I was on the verge of coming for what seemed like the nth time when Charlie pulled his hand away again.

"Charlie, no!"

He gripped my thighs masterfully and spread them. "Not used to being with a guy who doesn't sit back and take your shit?" he asked. "Hate to break it to you, Thomas, but contrary to popular belief, I'm *not* the submissive type."

It was hard to sound sarcastic while horny, but I did my best. "Gee, really? I couldn't have guessed."



That was the wrong thing to say. In one brisk move he'd flipped me over again. Grinning, he trailed two fingers along my thigh and across the lips of my sex, his touch as light as a breeze. Then, much to my annoyance, his fingers continued upward and began to trace a spiral pattern along my left breast. The guy was incorrigible. What a tease! He leaned over me, and automatically, I wrapped my legs around his waist.

"I'll squeeze you to death between my thighs if I have to," I hissed. "Just letting you know..."

In response he bit down on the other breast, and the sharp spike of pain made me catch my breath. I figured it was a warning bite -- his way of saying, "Let me do things in my own time." The rough of his tongue slid across my sore nipple, first soothing it, then circling the tight, trembling bud at its peak. Looking down, I saw he was watching me even as he toyed with me, his orange and brown eyes gleaming in the darkness.

Even in the dim light, he was handsome, his profile sharp and almost feral-looking beneath his thick curly hair. Running a hand along his side, I marvelled silently at the tightness of his body. His wasn't a gym junkie's body. It was that of an athlete, economical as a marathon runner's, but solid too, without being bulky. He might have been a tease, but I figured his sexiness made up for it.

"Charlie?"

"What?"

His golden skin shimmered in the moonlight as he massaged my breasts. Tweaking my nipples first between finger and thumb, he moved closer again to flick his tongue back and forth across them. A low, pleased growl rumbled from his throat.

"Charlie, I just want to say that, um, maybe... Look, maybe I won't squeeze you to death. Even if you are..."

The pleading note was back in my voice and I hated myself for it. Luckily it didn't seem like Charlie was listening. Nails as sharp as claws grazed down the curves of my body from shoulder to hip. Bowing his tousled head, he began to kiss his way

lower. One kiss, another kiss, another kiss, each one as light as a butterfly's touch and each one a small step closer to soothing the ache of my pussy.

I closed my eyes in giddy anticipation. Within seconds his hot, eager breath trembled across my pussy. His tongue lapped at my spilled juices, tasting them, as though he was savouring them. Then his tongue parted me, sliding between the already soaked pussy lips and diving in to stroke the hottest, wettest part of me. I hardly had time to moan before he began to rub my clit, toying with it the casual way he'd toyed with my nipples. The same way he was toying with me, like a wild cat or dog taunting its prey.

It was good -- great -- wonderful -- but I wanted more. I needed him inside me now. I wanted his cock pressed against my pussy, not his tongue. It was the only thing that would satisfy me. "I want..." Even as I spoke, I remembered how unlikely it was that he'd ever give me what I wanted. "Charlie, dammit, please..."

But in reply, I got nothing save a growl, followed by what might have been a snigger. Using his fingers, Charlie parted my pussy lips and darted his tongue inside me. A sudden sensation of ecstasy swept over me, a prelude to orgasm, and I pushed myself hard -- probably too hard -- into his face. Rather than pulling back, he started fucking me vigorously with his tongue. I bucked as he twisted that lovely muscle against my pulsing walls, his free hand squeezing my buttocks and holding my thrashing pelvis to his face.

Then he pulled his head back and sucked my throbbing clit into his mouth, playing his tongue across the nerves. My back arched and I ground shamelessly against his face as he lapped at my streaming juices. Every nerve in my body was rushing toward an orgasm I couldn't let him give me, not now, while I was so completely at his mercy.

I opened my mouth to beg him to stop, when he let me go and moved away. A gust of chilly air breezed across my sprawled body. Confused, I raised myself onto my elbows. What in the hell was he playing at now?

"Charlie?"

A second later I was lying face down on the bed again, his hands gripping my hips. A sudden heat touched my buttocks. He was resting his cock between them. I tensed, my fingers twisting his blanket. I wished that I could see his face, but it was impossible in my position. I could barely even see the rising moon anymore -- the sole window was steamed up, most likely by my frantic, futile breaths.

"You shouldn't be here," he said, rocking against my buttocks. There was a note of worry in his voice. "Wrong time, wrong place."

"But here I am," I snarled, almost ready to start banging my head off the bed. "What do you want from me, Charlie? What else do you want from me? Just fucking --" *Just fucking do it* was what I was about to say, but I couldn't finish the sentence.

The final words were forced out of me with the shock of his penetration. My whole pussy spasmed around his length as he slid it home, well-lubricated by the copious juices I'd spilled. Twinges of pain rippled from my pussy as my channel stretched to accommodate his considerable girth.

I'd slept with a fair few men before, but I'd never felt so incredibly *full* as I did with Charlie inside me. Revelling in the sensation, I buried my head in the blankets and panted. *Damn you, Charlie*, I wanted to say. *Damn you for doing this to me, for making this so damn good...* although of course, my pride wouldn't let me.

His fingers dug into my waist as he drew away. His nails seemed sharper, pointier, almost claw-like... but of course, I couldn't really think about it now.

In fact I'd hardly time to draw breath before he'd plunged back into me, each thrust seeming to push deeper and deeper inside me. Clutching handfuls of the blankets, I arched into him, feeling a hunger I'd never known before. *Who was this guy, really? No four-eyed bookshop nerd could possibly fuck like this, right?*

As his tempo increased, he grew rougher, his hands clawing my back. Suddenly his breath rasped against my nape, intense and animalistic. He nuzzled and licked my neck, purring dark, wordless things into my ear and then paused, his cock trembling inside me.

I clenched the walls of my pussy around him, willing him to go on, but he remained still, panting heavily. "Charlie?" I moaned. "Why are you... oh, God, are you taunting me aga --"

Charlie interrupted me with an inhuman growl, the kind that would make a girl's blood run cold if it wasn't already running hot and steamy. His sharp nails clawed into my shoulder blades as he slammed suddenly into me, his cock hitting a perfect bullseye on that raw, aching spot inside of me. Instantly the tingle in my sex started to spread to my legs, my stomach, and with every new stroke, the feeling deepened, intensified.

It was like I was breaking apart; a great heat was exploding outward from the centre of my sex in waves. I gulped air like a drowning woman as my body thrashed in the grip of my very first multiple orgasm. As my convulsions slowed I felt him come, quieter than I'd expected -- just a growl and it was over.

He pulled out. He crawled onto the bed beside me. He kissed my neck.

I lay there for what felt like hours, staring at the stars outside the steamed-up window. The full moon was climbing toward its astral zenith just as surely as I'd climbed toward my orgasmic one. Finally I rolled over to look at him. His brown and orange eyes gleamed luminously like topaz stones.

"I shouldn't have done that. Not so close to the change," he said, in a hoarse voice. "If we'd gone on any longer... God, I'm sorry if I hurt you. I don't have much self-control when it comes to..."

"It's okay," I said.

"It just makes me so horny. I can't stop myself. I become a real animal."

"It's okay," I said again. "I liked it."

His expression was incredulous. "You... liked it."

"Sure I did," I told him, planting a kiss on his nose. "Just don't expect me to play the willing submissive all the time, kiddo."

Charlie's mouth quirked into a grin. "Way I remember it, you weren't exactly willing."

“Don’t remind me, Charlie-boy, or I might have to punish you for your liberties.” I brought one hand down hard on his buttocks with a loud *smack*. “You’re just lucky I’m too exhausted to beat you up right now.”

We fell asleep in each other’s arms, his body curving effortlessly against mine as if it belonged there.

## Chapter Four

I was awakened by a wolf's howl.

Hoover City's downtown isn't far from a forest. Drive a mile east and you'll hit a national wildlife park teeming with wolves, as well as bears, deer, rabbits, and foxes. Hearing a wolf's howl isn't so unusual here. What was unusual about this wolf's howl was it appeared to be coming from the bathroom.

I rolled over to see if Charlie had been awakened too, but he was gone. Weird -- I figured guys only did a runner on you if you both went back to your place. I checked my watch. It was six o'clock. Perhaps Charlie had just had an insatiable hunger for a burger and run out to the local twenty-four-hour joint. I'd done plenty of early-morning burger runs myself. Although admittedly, not while there was someone in my bed. At least not without getting their order first.

"Charlie?" I called tentatively, sitting up.

There was no reply save a low growl.

I slid out of bed, pulled on my panties, and tip-toed to the living room. Pausing there to slip on one of Charlie's discarded T-shirts, I heard the click of claws against tiles. It definitely wasn't my imagination. There *was* a wolf in Charlie's bathroom. Quickly I looked about for a weapon, but the only thing vaguely baseball-bat-shaped at hand was an old rolled up newspaper. Okay, wolves weren't as easy to discipline as naughty puppies, but they were the same basic doggy animal, right? I hoped so.

With the newspaper held at the ready, I crept to the bathroom door. It was open a chink. Just enough for me to peer in and see what had to be the biggest wolf in recorded history. It was a wonder it had managed to get through the bathroom door. The damn thing looked like it was half-wolf and half-bear. Paws the size of my big,

black boots skittered on the slippery tiles. As I watched, the beast's great muzzle nudged at the cold water tap until it turned then lapped sloppily at the trickle.

A wolf that could turn on taps. That was new. I'd heard that you could teach an old dog new tricks, but who'd have the guts to try house training a wolf? I leaned in closer to get a better look. I must have made a sound because the wolf's head snapped around instinctively. For a second we stared straight into each other's eyes. Then I slammed the door and pressed myself against it, gasping at what I'd just seen.

The wolf had brown and orange eyes. Just like Charlie.

*Oh, you have got to be kidding...*

The things he'd said started to make sense. Why he was worried about the time - tonight was a full moon. Why Ruffles had attacked him. Why he had a special supernatural-savvy *sponsor* to look after him. Why he'd never questioned my profession. Why he'd been an animal in the bedroom.

"You're a freaking werewolf?" I yelled. "You could have told me!"

Charlie the Wolf's claws scrabbled vainly at the door handle, but I held it firm. On the evolutionary ladder, opposable thumbs won every time.

"Don't you even think about walking out of here, mister," I said. "I'm keeping you in the bathroom. I'm not risking having a crazed man-eater on the loose."

He let out a tiny doggy whine.

"I figure you'll change back in a half-hour, when the sun rises," I said. "I'm going to go out to get a coffee. See you when you're human again."

Sticking the newspaper between the handle and the bathroom door effectively wedged it tight -- no wolf was going to get out of there unless it learned to operate a screwdriver. While Charlie howled unhappily in his bath, I got dressed and went out for an early breakfast. A local diner had a special going on bagels. I grabbed two plus a decaf and was back in time for sunrise.

I found Charlie still in the bathroom, naked, curled-up, but definitely human shaped.

"I thought you knew," he mumbled, reaching for a towel to wrap around his waist.

"Susan's right about one thing. I'm about as smart as I look, Charlie." I tossed him his bagel and took a bite out of mine. "So you change every full moon, huh?"

"Like clockwork." Charlie sighed. "I do it at other times, too. When I'm scared. It's kind of a reflex."

"That's different. I've never heard of a werewolf who could turn at will."

"It's not at will. Like I said, I have to be really worked up to change."

"Which is what happened with Ruffles?"

"That stupid dog just leapt at me. It knew what I was right away. You'd think he'd been trained to hunt werewolves. I saw its teeth going for my crotch and... well, when I got back to myself, there wasn't any sign of the dog save a broken, diamond-studded collar lying in the gutter. I didn't run over him, I didn't accidentally step on him, I actually *ate* your Mrs. Avery's dog."

*A bad end for a bad mutt*, I thought, but didn't say it.

"Look, Thomas, if you're going to walk out on me, just do it," Charlie muttered, and rolled his eyes. "It's not as if it hasn't happened before. I'll give you some money to placate Mrs. Avery, and we can forget this whole sordid mess ever happened."

I leaned against the doorway and downed the last dregs of my now lukewarm decaf. It's rare to find a man who looks as good in the morning as he does the night before, but I could have sworn that Charlie looked even more handsome now. His skin simply glowed in the harsh light like amber, and his curls were cutely awry. And those eyes! His tone might have been dismissive, but an intense passion still glimmered in the orange rings about his iris. He didn't really want to let me go.

I played it cool. "I reckon I'll give you a break this time. I feel sorry for you. I heard Susan say last night that you were looking for Miss Right. Wouldn't want to break your heart too soon."

"Small mercies," said Charlie, but he did smile at that.



While he staggered off into the bedroom to put on some clothes, I settled down on a plastic box in the living room and sneakily watched him dress through the slightly-ajar door. I loved the way his long limbs moved, the way he arched his back when he yawned. You could really see the animal in him, purring there beneath the surface. Maybe that was what had attracted me to him originally. Even in his nerdy Big Reader get-up, I must have subconsciously sensed his wolf-like nature.

*Well, I've always been attracted to broody, dangerous, wild guys...*

"Your goons are still outside," Charlie said as he came back in, pulling a loose brown sweater over his bare chest. "I hope they haven't been waiting for you all night."

"Goons?" I rolled my eyes. "I told you last night, I don't have any goons. It doesn't say Thomas Lafferty & Co. on my business cards, does it? I'm a strictly one-woman operation."

Charlie stared at me for a long moment. "There were two guys dressed in black following you last night," he said. "You're telling me they had nothing to --"

"What guys? There were guys? How do you know there were guys?"

"I'm a werewolf," said Charlie, making for the front door. "Trust me. If I could hear you following me, I could sure as heck hear them, too."

His hand had barely touched the doorknob before the bell rang shrilly. I jumped. A low, animal-like growl escaped Charlie's lips as he yanked the door open. Obviously he was the kind of guy who took intrusions on his personal life pretty seriously -- my own intrusion excepted, of course. I felt sorry for whoever was behind the door. Suddenly coming face to face with tall, bristling Charlie, with his sharp white teeth and penetrating glare, would surely scare the pants off anyone.

"What the hell do you want?" he snarled.

I was standing in the wrong position to see who was outside. All I could see was the span of the door and Charlie glowering down at them, his arms folded across his chest. But whoever it was didn't sound scared in the least when they replied, "We'd like you both to come with us."

It was a man's voice. He sounded faintly European or perhaps Russian. I'd never been good with accents.

"Not likely. In fact, I'd like you to leave us alone," Charlie snapped back. "You followed us all night, and if you don't leave now I'll call the poli --"

"We'd like you and Ms. Lafferty to come with us," the man repeated.

Charlie shot me a "what the heck" look, but I was just as confused as he was. How did some random European guys know my name? I tiptoed to the window and pushed back the curtain an inch. From this vantage I could see both men clearly in profile. Charlie had described them as goons, but they looked pretty smart to me, more like the businessmen I often saw knocking back lattes in Hoover City's café district. Their pin-striped suits were well cut, their hair short and spiked like the models in men's style magazines.

"You know them?" Charlie asked.

I let the curtain fall and shrugged. "Never seen them before in my life."

"No," said one of the men outside, before Charlie could force the door closed, "but you know our employer, Ms. Lafferty."

Their employer? Then it twigged for me. "Everything's fine, Charlie," I said, stepping in. "These guys work for Mrs. Avery."

Charlie didn't look too keen on letting me take over. "Everything's fine? So what, you're okay with your employer having you followed?"

"Not particularly, but I guess she wanted to make sure her money was being invested wisely. There are a lot of supernatural con artists out there, you know. This wouldn't be the first time someone went out of their way to make sure I was doing my job." Nudging Charlie out of the way with my hip, I turned my full attention on the two magazine male models. "You don't have to worry, lads," I told them. "I've got everything covered. You tell old Avery that I'll explain the situation to her at our next appointment."

"Why not explain it to her now?" said the man on the right. He gestured behind him to a large black Mercedes parked at the corner of the street. Its smooth lines and

glossy paint job looked completely out of place in this dingy downtown district. A loose sheet of newspaper flapped weakly beneath the Merc's front wheel. "We've come to escort you both to Mrs. Avery's house for an emergency meeting."

"I'm not dressed for it --"

"I'm sure Mrs. Avery won't mind."

I was about to splutter out another excuse when Charlie said, over my head, "We'll come."

"We will?"

"Sure we will. I need to get something off my chest, remember?" He wrapped his arm around my waist and ushered me out. "Now's as good a time as any other."

## Chapter Five

The only time I'd met Mrs. Avery, she'd visited me in my cramped office in Hoover Central. I knew she was rich, but had no idea how rich. I just knew that when I named a price, she'd offered to double it to ensure "extra-special service," and then handed me the amount in *cash*. The money was just pocket change to her.

So I figured that the woman's pad would be pretty posh -- the best money could buy, and then doubled -- but I wasn't really prepared for what I saw. We'd been driving for about ten minutes when the Merc took an abrupt right turn off the main road and down a gravel pathway.

Beside me I heard Charlie intake a sharp breath of surprise. I didn't blame him. The transition was weird. One minute we'd been humming along a city arterial, and the next we were driving through a wide, green field dotted with crumbling brick walls and archways. Topiary trees cut into strange shapes -- dragons and lions -- lined the driveway.

Halfway up the driveway, the house loomed into view, three stories of gothic-inspired architecture. Its pointed rooftops and ornate window frames made it look almost surreal, like the plasterboard cutouts they used on television. It could have been the set of a B-grade horror movie.

I think both Charlie and I were in shock, because we let ourselves be led through the huge wooden double doors and into the house without the slightest protest. The closest I had come to Mrs. Avery's home before now was the smell of century-old varnish and dust her staff had tracked into my office during interviews. The hall we entered was as huge as a ballroom and dominated by a twisting staircase on the right. The wallpaper was a deep red and covered in pictures of golden cherubs. A stained-

glass window above, depicting a battle scene between St. George and the famous dragon, let in multi-hued afternoon sunbeams.

A huge oil painting of Mrs. Avery hung on the far wall. It wasn't a recent picture -- perhaps ten years old. Although to be fair, Mrs. Avery had aged well. In the painting, Mrs. Avery sat in a large, velvet armchair, wearing a white jacket and skirt with a delicate, laced bodice beneath. Her legs, clad in seamed stockings, were crossed neatly at the ankle. One of her hands rested on the arm of the chair, the other on the head of what I guessed was a family heirloom -- an exquisitely detailed statue of a dragon, complete with glimmering green scales and flashing yellow eyes.

"If you'll walk through here," said one of the male models, indicating a small, almost unnoticeable doorway. "Mrs. Avery will see you soon."

"Eh, thanks," I said, feeling guilty. It was a shame I had to bring the woman bad news.

Charlie and I had barely set foot in the adjoining room when the door clicked closed behind us. For a second I thought I heard the sound of a lock turning, but figured it was just my imagination. Despite my usual bravado, this place was creeping me out, and the new room wasn't much of an improvement on the hall. It was an old-fashioned sitting room with wide velvet couches and opulent, antique furnishings. The only light came from candles positioned along the walls at regular intervals.

"Rich as Croesus, but still can't afford electricity? That's eccentricity for you," I said.

My lupine man of the moment didn't even crack a smile. In fact, he hadn't said a word since we'd entered the house.

"You're mighty quiet, wolf-boy," I joked, nudging him. "What's up?"

"We're in big trouble, Thomas."

Smiling, I patted his arm. "I told you Mrs. Avery's a nice old lady. I'm sure she'll accept your apology."

Charlie shook his head. "No, no, she's not a nice old lady."

"What do you mean? You've never met her."

"No, I haven't, but I saw her picture in the hall. Look, let me explain something to you about your client Mrs. Avery. She's what we -- and by we I mean all us supernatural kind -- refer to as *Collectors*. They're like those big-game hunters who line their walls with stuffed animal heads. Except these guys, they don't shoot wildlife, they shoot supernaturals. Genuine werewolves are a rarity, and my head would be a fantastic addition to any Collector's wall."

"Mrs. Avery is a nice old lady! She's rich, she's eccentric, but that doesn't make her a Collector."

His face was grim. "I've seen her before. My sponsor Susan keeps track of all the Collectors that have been caught around the world. All supernatural sponsors have to. I'm telling you, Thomas, that woman isn't who she says she is."

"That's ridiculous and you know it."

"Remember when I said that when Ruffles went for me, it was like he knew immediately what I was? Well, what if that's what he was *trained* to do? What if Mrs. Avery taught that dog how to pick up the scent of supernaturals like me, so she could hunt them down? Of course things went very wrong when I transformed and killed Ruffles. Mrs. Avery knew then taking me down in my werewolf form would be almost impossible. So she decided to find someone to lure me in, to take me to her..." He trailed off, his eyes widening. "Thomas...?"

I spun around and glared at him. "You can't possibly think that *I'm* part of this insane plot!"

But the words didn't sound convincing, even to me. I'd always wondered why Mrs. Avery had chosen a supernatural investigator to find her dog. No matter what she thought she'd seen in the alley, a normal old lady would have gone straight to the police. But not Mrs. Avery. And she'd known -- she had to have known -- that I was the only supernatural investigator in Hoover City who was so broke they'd take on a simple missing dog case...

Charlie must have seen the doubt creeping across my face. "You don't know?"

"No. No. It can't be possible," I moaned.

"I *knew* it."

"But it wasn't me," I said, grasping at his shirt front. "It really wasn't me. Charlie. You've got to believe me. I never wanted to put you in this position. I really thought I was doing the right thing..."

His arms were already around me. "It's okay, Thomas," he whispered. "I believe you."

"You do?" I was shocked rather than relieved. "But... but it all makes sense. You're right. It does look like I was part of --"

Charlie pressed a finger to my lips. "Thomas, I *want* to believe you."

The feel of his skin against mine made me shiver. I couldn't help myself. I let my tongue dart out and wet the tip of his finger. Charlie smiled, a thin, brave smile, and drew me closer. We kissed tenderly. Held in his strong arms, my lips against his, our hearts beating in sync, I could almost forget I'd been tricked by a mad old lady who wanted to kill my boyfriend. *Almost*.

"Charlie," I whispered. "We've got to get out of here!"

But it was too late. Our clinch had cost us precious moments. Before we had time to run, Mrs. Avery entered the room.

I remembered her as a typical old lady: a little bent over, with thick glasses and a wide, kindly smile. Last time I'd seen her, she'd been wearing a light pink cardigan and a simple beige dress with a ring of rose patterns at the bottom. In fact, I reflected now, she'd been *too* typical, too perfect to be real. The Mrs. Avery who stepped into the room now wasn't bent over at all, and she'd ditched the thick glasses for a pair of stylish sunshades. Her smile was outlined in hard, red lipstick. The pink cardigan and beige dress were both gone, replaced by a kind of vinyl bodysuit that I'd never seen outside of badly made metal band music videos.

One look at her and I knew, without a doubt, Charlie was right. I'd been had.

"It's nice to see you again, Thomasina," said Mrs. Avery. Her voice was the same, at least. "How lovely of you to have brought a friend."

"You lied to me," I spluttered. "You tricked me. Why?"

"You really aren't that clever, are you? Why do you think I tricked you? Because it was the only way for me to get my hands on him." She nodded toward Charlie, who cowered instinctively behind me. I wanted to slap him for that. Some big bad werewolf he was!

"But how did you know I'd bring him here?"

Mrs. Avery smiled. "I didn't. That's why I sent a car to pick you up. All I needed you to do was to lure him into a false sense of security. I couldn't catch him in his wolf form, but as a human... why, he's a pushover."

Pushover wasn't the word for it. With Charlie in the state he was in, there wasn't much chance of us escaping. I bet that Mrs. Avery had more goons upstairs, besides the two who had escorted us to the mansion. Maybe a whole army of them. It seemed like she could probably afford it, along with the rest of her house staff. *Snap out of it, Charlie*, I thought desperately. *Our lives depend on it!*

"Did you send Ruffles after him because you knew Charlie would kill him?" I asked, trying to buy time while I thought of a plan.

"Gracious no." She looked horrified by the thought. "Ruffles was my trained supernatural hunt dog. He was worth millions. I wouldn't have lost him, not if I could help it... but at least now his death hasn't been in vain."

"So, um, I've never really understood the Collecting business. What exactly do you do with the, um, things you collect?"

Mrs. Avery laughed, a very cheerful and pretty laugh incongruous with her tight vinyl clothing and severe makeup. I didn't blame myself for being tricked by her. She was an expert actress. She lifted a candle from its wall holster and held it above her head. As the circle of light widened, I saw the heads of strange animals hanging on the walls close to the ceiling. They were like the heads of wildlife shot by big game hunters, stuffed and mounted on huge wooden plaques. Except these weren't lions and tigers but incredible creatures. Unicorns, dragons, nymphs, goblins, minotaurs, vampires...



"My many times great grand uncle killed the first of these," said Mrs. Avery in a reverent tone. "His name was St. George. He left our family a legacy. We are all Collectors, bound to hunt and kill supernaturals."

Behind me Charlie was shaking. I guess for him, meeting Mrs. Avery was like a kid meeting the boogeyman -- people like her were his nightmares in the flesh. Hopefully he'd soon be so scared, he'd transform, and we'd stand a chance of making it out alive. But how could I get him scared enough *now*?

"Are you ready, Charlie?" Mrs. Avery asked, setting down the candle on the edge of the sofa. She walked to the back of the room and opened a cabinet door inset in the wall frame. Many weapons glistened within, from an antique blunderbuss to a curved Japanese sword. Mrs. Avery selected a wide gun from its case and turned to face us, the muzzle trained on Charlie, who was peeping over my shoulder.

I knew in that second what I had to do. "Yeah, Charlie," I said. "Are you ready? There's no way out. You aren't going to be able to get past both me and Mrs. Avery."

"Thomas?" Charlie gasped. "You said you..."

"I lied, Charlie. As if I'd ever want to be with a freak of nature like you. Mrs. Avery is my employer and I brought her what she wanted."

Mrs. Avery appeared to approve of my switch in loyalties. "I knew you'd see reason, Thomasina," she said. "Now stand aside."

A loud wolf's roar came from behind me. Charlie had changed! It was just as I'd planned. I knew the only thing that would scare Charlie into transforming was the thought of losing me. Mrs. Avery flinched, her finger tightening on the rifle. On reflex, I ducked and kicked out, sending the candle she'd left on the sofa flying. All that antique furniture was so old it might as well have been tinder wood. The sofa immediately caught fire, flames licking up the edge of its lacework backing.

Mrs. Avery shrieked and shot wildly at me. The bullet passed several inches from my head and buried itself into the wall behind me, sending another candle tumbling to the ground, setting the carpet alight. As I'd expected, there were no fire sprinklers ready to put it out. *Too eccentric for electricity... and fire alarms.* Mrs. Avery let

out a howl of rage that was cut short as a bundle of muscle, fur and teeth knocked her to the ground. Charlie wasn't a match for his fears in human form, but as a wolf it was a different matter.

I didn't wait around, lifting an antique iron lamp stand from its place and slamming it against the locked door. The brass knob fell off immediately and the door swung wide. The two male models from the Merc were waiting outside, and leapt into action the moment I burst into the hall. One stepped forward menacingly, brandishing a sword. The other hung back, requesting backup through a microphone hidden in his lapel.

"Charlie!" I yelled. "Quick!"

He was at my side in an instant, this huge, tawny wolf with those beautiful brown-and-orange eyes. A protective growl rumbled from his throat. I felt so safe with him beside me. The male models looked doubtful, and the one with the sword took a few steps back. An unarmed girl they could deal with, but they weren't ready to tussle with a werewolf.

"Let's go while the going's good," I hissed.

We sprinted for the door, Charlie measuring his long, loping strides to mine. No one made a move to stop us. Perhaps by now, they were too worried about the streamers of smoke coming from the room we'd vacated. Soon we were dashing through the grounds in between those stylishly cut topiary trees. It was only when we'd made it out of the gates and back to the main road that I paused to catch my breath. Charlie nuzzled against the back of my legs affectionately as I wheezed.

Between breaths I caught his furry head in my hands and rubbed our noses together. His warm, sticky tongue flashed out and ran along my cheek. I laughed.

"Looks like we made it, Charlie," I said. "I hope you didn't really believe me when I said I'd set you up."

Charlie howled in a sad way.

"Don't be silly. I'd *never* do that to you." I kissed the top of his head. "You mean too much to me now."

## Chapter Six

That night Charlie -- now in human form again -- and I toasted our successful escape with a bottle of bubbly. We'd heard on the six o'clock news that the Avery mansion had burned to the ground, and I was certain it would be the last we'd ever hear from its two-faced owner. And good riddance to her. There were a lot of supernaturals in Hoover City who'd sleep better in their beds knowing she was dead.

We'd gone to my place this time to celebrate the victory. I admit that my one-bedroom apartment in East Hoover isn't exactly the Ritz, but it was a damn sight better than Charlie's hovel. For one thing it was clean. For another, the bathroom didn't smell like wet dog.

Relaxing on the couch, I downed my second glass of champagne and let my head fall to rest against Charlie's chest. The whirlwind series of events that had passed were finally taking their toll on me. I might have gone to sleep right there and then, secure and warm in the company of my new boyfriend, if Charlie hadn't run his hand briefly across my breasts. The merest brush of his hand was enough to tweak my nipples to hardness.

"Charlie...?" I murmured, rising to look at him.

"Thomas?"

He was wonderfully handsome in the light, with his curly hair like a halo, and his bright, loving smile. *Where has this guy been all my life?* I wondered as I moved in to kiss his warm lips.

"Thomas," he said again, as we parted. His hand settled on my thigh and caressed it, his thumb sliding under the hem of the loose shirt I wore. "You're... amazing."

I felt my cheeks flush, the first time I could remember blushing since grade school. I ducked my head to hide my smile. Gently, almost shyly, he began to unfasten the buttons of my shirt, starting from the bottom. His tenderness was so different from the way he'd behaved the night before. While I loved the dominant cool of his attitude last night and the wild animal sex we'd shared, I also loved the fact that he could be sweet too.

Pulling off his own shirt, he slid from the couch onto the floor. I wanted to follow him, but he held me still with one hand against my stomach, negotiating the tricky fastenings of my pants with the other. I rose up slightly so he could pull them off with ease. My body prickled with pleasure as he ran his tongue across the faint pink impressions the seams of my pants had made on my skin. For a second or two he rested his head on my lap, inhaling deeply as if drinking in my particular scent.

"I think I love you," he said, "and at the same time. I barely know you."

"You know me," I reassured him, running my fingers through his loose curls. "You and I, we're more alike than different."

"How do you mean?"

I laughed. "We're loners, we're fighters, we're short-tempered and let's face it, neither of us is terribly good with people. And we like getting our own way more than anything. Maybe the reason we have this... I guess you'd call it a connection... is because we see a lot of ourselves in each other. So much for the old saying that opposites attract, huh?"

"Rubbish," Charlie agreed with a grin, squeezing the inside of my thigh so firmly it made me shiver. Then he parted my legs and leaned in to kiss the soft skin there.

"So you see, we were pretty much destined to... ah..." The sensation of his hot breath against me, so close to my pussy, made me lose track of the conversation. I sank back onto the couch, a quiet moan escaping me. His tongue tickled across my labia then dove between them, running a slick line through their shallow channel toward my clit. Little sparks of pleasure spun through me as his tongue strummed against it, then swirled around its peak in slow, sensual circles.

"Oh, God," I moaned, louder this time, and my fingers entwined themselves deeper in his brown hair. I couldn't believe that I was already so wet, so horny, so *awake*, when only seconds before I'd been seriously thinking about taking a nap. Charlie had an electric effect on me every time. He just knew, intuitively, how to turn me on. "You bastard, Charlie, why do you do this to me..."

Charlie took this as encouragement. Taking a breath, he drove his tongue inside my pussy, hot, wet, forceful -- and for a half-second, I thought I might orgasm right there and then. He slid in and out a few times while my walls trembled and clenched around him. Eager for more, I lifted my hips up from the couch and coaxed his face down into me. It wasn't so much an invitation to take me further as a demand to come on, fuck the hell out of me.

My urgency couldn't help but make Charlie laugh. "Geez, Thomas, give a man a chance to breathe, why don't you?" he grinned, pulling away. I was too busy to think up a witty answer. I'd bent down to unfasten his jeans. His cock sprang out the second I pulled the zipper, falling neatly into my palm. Licking me out had sure made my werewolf boyfriend horny. He was hard as a rock, the veins raised and pumped with blood. Considering how obviously he wanted me, I was amazed he had the self-control not to just jump me on the spot like he had the night before. Making sure his eyes were fixed on me, I kissed each of my fingers and then started to stroke his length, paying special attention to the plush and gently bobbing head.

"You really want me?" I whispered against his neck.

He nodded impatiently. I smiled wickedly. The tables sure had turned since last night. This time I was the one in control. I was doing the teasing. Yeah, it was definitely payback time, and I could tell he knew it too. I began stroking him lightly, using only a few fingers at a time, pausing now and then to rub his balls. The expression on his handsome face was truly priceless -- teeth clenched, eyes wide -- and his whole body shook as he tried desperately to resist his impulses.

"Thomas, come onnnn..."

I cupped my free hand to my ear. "Sorry? What was that?"

"Come on and... I just want... I know I deserve it but..."

I should have kept teasing, but I liked him too much. Damn my weakness for men who've saved my life! "You're lucky I'm not as cruel as *some people* I could mention," I told him, wrapping my hand tighter around his cock.

"I'm sorry..."

"We're alike in that respect too," I added, with a wink. "Neither of us is the submissive type."

He didn't reply. Instead he ran his fingers lightly up the side of my chest, sending a goosebump chill through me. I shuddered as he grasped my breasts from beneath, a little more roughly than I was used to. Perhaps the "beast" in him was rising again. Well, if it was, I wasn't going to stand in its way. I relaxed into his touch, the soft brush of his thumbs across my button-hard nipples contrasting with the forceful way he squeezed my breasts, massaging them in circles. Gentle and rough -- the combination was electric, and my pussy tingled in welcome response.

I arched my back toward him and he leaned in to lightly brush his lips over mine, softly kissing me across my cheek and the side of my head. A low, growling *mmhm* purred from deep in his throat. Acting playful now, he nibbled at my ear, and I barely stifled a giggle as he licked its lobe. Then his tongue trekked lower along the line of my jaw.

Our lips met again. His tasted of champagne, bitter and sweet at the same time. We kissed tenderly, in small licks and nudges, nuzzling like wolves do with their pack mates. I nibbled at his top lip and flickered my tongue between his lips, tempting him. As I took a breath he plunged his tongue into my mouth, swirling it past my teeth to press my own tongue into surrender. A quiet moan escaped me as his tongue rolled across mine in a slow, sensual caress.

I was all but lost in the moment when, still cradled in my palm, his balls tensed. I felt the skin twitch and remembered suddenly what it was I'd been up to. His waiting cock bounced against the inner skin of my wrist, like an insistent pet demanding attention.

"Sorry, did I distract you?" Charlie's laugh made my ears and cheeks burn with embarrassment.

"You're awful!"

"No, I'm just far too good."

And far too smug for my liking... With a growl, I pushed him back onto the carpet. It didn't stop him laughing, but at least it gave me the upper hand. I leapt off the couch, landing between his legs -- more agile than any wolf, were or otherwise. Before he could protest, I leaned down and ran my tongue lightly along the underside of his cock. The laughter came to a very abrupt stop, and he took in a sharp breath, almost choking with surprise.

Softly moving my hands up and down at the base of his shaft, I continued to lick toward the head of his cock in long, deliberate strokes. Running my fingers over his balls, I took the very tip of his cock into my mouth and sucked on it lightly, enjoying the warm, salty taste of his pre-come. With just the head in my mouth, I flicked my tongue back and forth inside my mouth, stimulating the sensitive skin.

At this point Charlie gave up all pretences and just moaned -- or howled. I grinned up at him, lips still wrapped around his lush cock.

I hungrily took his shaft into my mouth. Feeling his cock throb against my tongue made my pussy respond in kind, and I found myself grinding my pussy against my heel -- a poor substitute for the cock in my hands. But my pleasure would have to wait. Holding Charlie by the hips, I swallowed him, my lips enveloping his huge cock as far down as I could get, and then all the way up again.

"Thomas...!" A gasp escaped Charlie, and his whole body quaked with restraint. Despite myself, I was impressed -- in the same position, I doubted I'd have lasted more than a few seconds. Of course, that just made me more eager to test his self-control. No man can resist a good blow-job, right?

With my head bobbing between his legs, I took him into my mouth again and again and again, each time revelling in the slick, warm sensation of his most tender parts sliding over my tongue. I pumped him, milked him, increasing the speed each

time. My fingers nestled against his balls, teasing them with soft caresses. But I wouldn't let him come. Every time I felt his body begin to contract, and saw the muscles of his stomach tighten, I let him go.

Obviously unable to help himself, Charlie began thrusting in time with my motions, breathing heavily and pushing his cock to the back of my throat. I wasn't used to taking anything that large -- that deep. For a moment, I thought I'd choke, but then my throat began to expand to accommodate him. So deep. It felt strangely right. I took him slowly, inch by inch, until my nose brushed his stomach.

"Thomas -- Thomas, I think I'm going to..."

I withdrew quickly. "Not yet," I managed to say. "Wait for me."

Charlie sat up, grunting with the effort, his brow painted with sweat. From the look on his face, I knew he wasn't planning to tease me again in the near future. "Come here, lover," he said.

I threw my arms around his shoulders. "Any time."

And with that, I lowered myself onto his lap. His skyward straining cock met my pussy, and impaled me on its shaft. He was big, bigger than I remembered from the last time we'd made love, but I was wet enough by now to take him. Sliding onto him felt obscurely like coming home. We were so *right* for each other. His heat radiated through me; his size made me almost whimper with excitement. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed his nose, his cheeks, his chest. He ran his nails down my back, hard, the sharpness of the pain contrasting with the pleasure now spreading its warm, wet tendrils through my body.

We rocked together. That slight motion alone was enough to intensify the sensations in my pussy to an almost-unbearable level. I gripped Charlie tightly, so tightly I wondered if I was hurting him. Although if I was, he never showed it. His nails bit into the skin of my buttocks and back while his teeth nipped at my neck and shoulders. Tiny, tender bites, the kind a werewolf would give to its den mate out in the wild.

"You're amazing," he said again, his breath husky.



“Thank you.”

He settled his hands on my hips and then thrust into me. My pussy convulsed around him. I stifled my cries by burying my face in his shoulder. Our bodies were so close we might have been one. His cock was deep inside me and our hips were almost touching. With each thrust, with each slow withdrawal, his nails bit into my skin like the claws of a wolf. A lush mix of pain and pleasure. As the speed and intensity of his strokes increased, all I could do was weakly match his actions, my mind swimming as each movement, however slight, stimulated my inner walls.

Beads of sweat stood out on his coffee-coloured skin, making the ropey muscles of his arms glisten. I looked at his face, into those strange eyes of his. The orange rings around his irises shone with an unreal, supernatural light. He wasn't a beast now, just a man, but that made him no less of a lover. I pressed my lips to his and breathed him in. His raw and somehow animalistic smell mixed now with the scent of my own juices.

My orgasm was coming. I knew those telltale signs. The heat, the trembling, the sense of something amazing, something *explosive*, building in my lower belly. My pussy was drenched, and each plunge past my wet lips drove me closer to the edge.

Before I'd wanted to revel in the feelings, to make it go on and on; now I just wanted to come. I needed it, I wanted it. With my insides almost overflowing with excitement, I pulled myself up to the very tip of his cock before spearing myself on it once more. Faster and faster I began bouncing on his hard member, my arms wrapped around his neck, my face pressed to his cheek. As I came, I pressed my mouth to his and kissed him passionately.

For a moment, it felt as if I was melting into him, as if our entire bodies had become one. I couldn't tell where he ended and I began.

When we drew apart I realised that he had come at the same time I had.

“Incredible,” he muttered as he held me, stroking my hair. “That was just incredible...”

And for the first time, I found myself agreeing with him.

## **Joanne Smyth**

Joanne Smyth is a twenty-something currently living in Australia with her fiancé. She also writes in the speculative fiction genre. Currently, she works as an editor and technical writer, but has previously been a tabloid journalist, a Christian book marketer, and a publicist for a bondage club.