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The Beast Within

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Kelly Ethan

Dedication

I'd like to thank a few people. Firstly my editor Angie for seeing some sort of promise in the VERY rough draft I sent her. My hubby and son for putting up with grumpy mum when scenes didn't work. And lastly to the most wonderfully talented woman I have had the privilege to meet...my MOM, Alexis Fleming. Thanks for being a guiding light, a fantastic motivator and thanks for putting up with all the phone calls. YOU ROCK!

Prologue

He tasted the air, felt the pungent damp earth. The stench of moist human rolled over him. Beneath it all, he sensed the beat of the street. The life force of the inhabitants pulsed through him. It encouraged and fed his hunger.

They were nothing but empty and discarded pawns. Their only use was for hunting and devouring. The animal in him roared agreement and he shifted fully into the predator.

The beast sniffed, focused on the prey and the fear running through the body of his target. The terror oozed out of his food, his cattle's skin, with a thick, sweet perfume, inciting the predator, driving him on. There was no division between himself and the animal. They were one blood-hungry entity. Both human and beast lusted for the kill, the chase, and the blood.

Detecting his goal and compelled by the lust for spilled blood, he prowled forward, slithering from shadow to shadow. Like a wraith with an eternal thirst for his kill. His instincts told him the man was old and weak, no longer fit to be near or in the pack. The doomed one knew the beast's real name and names had power. He had to silence him.

The animal smiled, knowing what was to come.

His prey sensed danger and tried to flee to safety, but it was too late. The leap already taken connected squarely with the center of the soon-to-be-dead man's chest.

Claws dug in and little by little slipped through the skin. The force of the animal behind them dragged the razor sharp talons down. They sliced with ease, like a red hot poker sizzling through a block of ice as the old man howled for help. The exhilaration of first blood spilled built until

it bubbled out from the beast in frantic little giggles of insanity. The victim's screams were like opera to the killer's ears. Loud and strident at first, it led into a harmonic gurgle as the depth of the man's terror immobilized him.

Bloodlust and thirst soared again, only for a moment satisfied. The prey fell to the ground, weakened by the massive amounts of fluid running from its body. The savage predator's hunger exploded outwards, driven by the ever-spreading blood puddle.

The beast, in the frenzy of a feed, lowered his muzzle toward his quarry. He thirsted for the throat of his victim, a taste of the ambrosia this fool hoarded. A scream broke out from a woman in a parked car and a large object came toward him. *A car*, his fuzzy mind reminded him. *Danger*, an insistent voice whispered to him.

The animal broke off and stole back into the shadows like a specter in the night. A scalding beat of bitterness drummed at the thought of his missed feast.

Enough!

The man within the beast smiled. It was enough of a test of power until next time.

Chapter One

“Okay, I howl at the moon. What’s the problem?” Cassidy Quinn raised her eyebrows and grinned at Bethany, her receptionist and best friend. “Come on, it’s not like I’m an axe murderer or anything nasty. The folks in my family happen to change into howling, snarling, fur-covered eighty-pound wolves. What’s the biggie?”

“Sort of like PMS every month.”

“Except you wake snarling, moody and bloated, while in my family’s case, a normal guy’s likely to wake next to a shedding animal.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“All right, it’s not the normal routine for most people and my family is still in the minority, but we count. We vote. And it’s not like you can catch it through kissing germs.” Cassidy focused on her friend as she scowled back at her.

“I figured by now everyone knows lycanthropy is inherited, like a hereditary blood disease. I suppose there’s still folks around who are narrowed-minded about this type of thing.”

“My father’s right.” Cassidy bared her teeth in disgust. “A strong alpha male can cope with anything, not like that wimp of a lawyer last night.”

Okay, he’d looked trim and buff on the outside, but appearances were obviously deceptive. Look at her, born to a family of Weres and she couldn’t even change properly. Not to mention the fact she was over being patient. Twenty years over it. There had to be a reason why a twenty-eight year old couldn’t do what an eight-year-old cub could.

“What happened?”

“He almost wet his pants.” Cassidy grinned at her friend before she continued. “And ran out of the restaurant, leaving me the bill for a very expensive dinner.”

“Lordy, I wish I’d been a fly on the wall to see it.”

Cassidy wiggled her eyebrows. “All because he couldn’t keep his paws to himself, ha.”

“What did you do to the poor guy?”

“Nothing, all I did was to growl.” She chuckled at the disbelieving look on Bethany’s face. “Fine. I flashed my teeth and pinched him with my claws. It’s about all I can do anyway.”

Her friend could no longer contain herself. She covered her mouth with her palms, the laughter still audible. Cassidy frowned, not certain it was funny. Obviously taking note of her look, Bethany started to back out of the room. She mumbled an apology moments before closing the door.

Cassidy slumped deeper into her high-backed chair, the frown still etched on her face. Damn, she was getting tired of dates like last night. How much was a girl supposed to put up with before cracking?

“It’s not like I stripped naked and tried a change right there in the middle of the restaurant.” Cassidy tried to convince herself it was no big deal.

Besides, there was one big thing wrong with that scenario, she couldn’t change into a Were without a hell of a lot of pain. Actually, she couldn’t fully change at all, pain or not. Not something you want to advertise to your enemies or your clients, bad for business.

“Have you stopped sulking or are you up to the ranting and raving part?” Bethany opened the door and sidled inside, a pile of letters balanced on her right palm.

“Excuse me?”

“Peace, boss. I’m on your side.”

“I know, I know. I told him I was a Were. But it’s hip these days to be a monster so he hadn’t believed me.” It wasn’t her fault. Hopefully he’d have to pay some therapist a ton of money to get over it.

“Just because my family wants me married with a litter, is no reason to go and date any sort of scum. Especially a wimp lawyer.” Cassidy paused for a breath and tried to grab back her place of calm. There was no sense in losing her temper. Bethany wasn’t the one she should be mouthing off to.

“Okay, bitching done. I’m past the ranting and raving part and almost to the section where I bite you.”

“Nah, your bark’s worse than your bite. By the way, these letters need your paw print.”

Cassidy scowled. “Stop with the wolf jokes. I’ve enough of a complex about it as it is. Besides, we’re an old and mysterious race. We deserve respect.” She plastered a holier-than-thou expression on her face.

Even though they’d been around for centuries, Weres had only been out of the closet—so to speak—for fifty years. A health check had turned up some very interesting results they hadn’t been able to destroy or hide. Now it was equal opportunity for all.

“Ha, is this the sermon you sprouted to Octopus Sam, the lawyer?”

“Yeah, right about the time he was running for his life. At least I didn’t date a man who wanted to wear my underwear,” Cassidy retaliated. “Especially when I’d been wearing them that day.”

Bethany scowled and poked out her tongue. “What can I say? I have a talent.”

Cassidy pantomimed choking.

“All right. But for the most part, they don’t run screaming into the night.” Bethany spun on the spot and marched out.

“At least mine don’t sniff my panties,” Cassidy yelled to her friend’s retreating back.

They don’t get close enough. She made a face. Actually, her dating life was having a severe drought. Who had time anyway? Between the job and her family, she was lucky if there was time to scratch a flea or two.

Cassidy winced as a sharp twinge shot through her vertebrae. There had been too much sitting around, not enough action lately. She didn’t have the luxury of stretching her wolf in a run; she had to do it the old-fashioned way. Sweat at a gym or go for a jog. Cassidy sighed and started

to sort through the mail, but the more she tried to stay focused the more her mind kept wandering.

Maybe it was time to chill for a while. Her muscles were wound tighter than a spring. A run at the farm before her wolf tried to force a change might be a good idea. Having a complete stranger convulse in agony and partially growl in front of you was bound to freak people. Best if her wise woman mother could monitor her and keep her out of trouble.

After all this time, the family still couldn't work out why she could only partially change, nor could they find the cause of the pain. Pain only happened when there was a problem, like a curse, but Cassidy hadn't been cursed and everyone was baffled. In the written history of the clan, none had the same problem. But then wolves weren't known as great scholars either so there wasn't a huge amount of written history to research.

The phone rang in the outside office. Cassidy listened as Bethany's official welcome changed from efficient to warm. Whoever it was, it certainly wasn't the wimpy lawyer.

She picked up the phone carefully as if it were a snake ready to strike. Cassidy was getting a strange feeling about this call.

"Hello, Cassidy Quinn, private investigator to the strange and tormented. How can I help you?"

"Hey, lone wolf."

"Doc, hey, it's been too long, how are you?" Cassidy felt a wide grin stretching her mouth. It felt like forever since she'd heard from her college roommate after they'd left college.

"I'm sorry, Cassidy."

"It's okay, Maya, I'm glad to hear from you now." Cassidy bit back a chuckle as she pictured the last time they'd all seen each other, the leather, the high heels, the whips...

"I have an ulterior motive, Cassidy. I need you at the hospital. I need you to look at someone for me. It's important."

Cassidy jerked to attention. When Maya asked for help it meant there was something going on.

“I’ll be there in twenty, Maya. Don’t worry.”

Cassidy hung up, her sharp teeth nibbling at a jagged nail. Nothing ever happened the doc couldn’t handle. This wasn’t good, not good at all.

“Beth,” Cassidy bellowed as she quickly tidied herself and grabbed her bag.

“You rang, Master?” Bethany droned in a tone-perfect rendition of Lurch the butler from the *Addams Family* television show.

“Beth, I have to go out. Wipe all my appointments and reschedule them for me. I might not be back for the rest of the day.” Cassidy’s heels tapped out a staccato beat on the wood floor as she strode toward the door.

“What’s going on? Is Doc all right?”

“I don’t know, Beth, but whatever it is, Maya’s worried. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Hey, Cassidy? Be careful out there. You might be feisty, but I have a horrible feeling.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Cassidy murmured, and pulled her guard back up as she prepared to face whatever had Maya running scared.



Cassidy sped straight into an empty parking space and ignored the yell of outrage and the one-fingered salute from the man waiting for the space.

“You snooze, you lose,” Cassidy yelled as she increased her pace and strode toward the Emergency entrance at Memorial City Hospital. The hospital squatted on the corner block, ugly and grey. Years of pain and trauma had leached all energy and color from it until the building was a depressing, dirty shade. She crossed into Emergency, the sights and sounds of the hospital surrounded her, overloading her sensitive nose and ears.

The strong astringent odor of disinfectant suffocated her as it competed with the sweet, syrupy stench of death. Metallic coppery blood and fear filled her mouth and constant murmuring and crying spun into one continuous scream boring a hole into her brain. Cassidy’s other senses went into overdrive at the continual movement of the people

around. Her overworked mind noted fuzzily it was akin to a choreographed ballet. It made her queasy as she struggled to focus on the people around her.

“Cassidy?”

A voice made contact with her through all the bedlam and pain around. The sound traveled into her tranquil place of calm where she’d withdrawn to try and cope with the overload. She looked, dazed, at Maya and quickly reached for her hand.

“Get me out of here, Maya. Please.”

Maya took one look and tugged her toward a staff sitting room.

“Cassidy are you okay? What’s wrong? Are you sick?” Maya grabbed a bottle of water from a nurse’s station and shoved it at her.

Cassidy drank as if parched. Thank goodness for Maya. The noise had receded and she could cope with her beefed-up senses again. She focused on the doctor and took stock. Maya’s white coat had been fastened crookedly and her long, straight black hair had escaped its clips to droop in the back. Whatever had happened, Maya wasn’t her usual immaculate self and that was worrying.

“I’m fine, Maya. It was only an overload. I wasn’t prepared for all the noise. Give me a few minutes and I’ll be ready to go.”

Maya agreed and, in an involuntary gesture, took Cassidy’s pulse. “I’m sorry. I forgot about the range of your senses, but this was important.”

Cassidy finished the water before answering. “It’s okay. Can you tell me what’s going on?” She stood in a deliberate movement and stretched her senses mentally until she felt the people in the next room, testing her defenses. Cassidy tasted her friend’s unique fragrance of musk and Indian spices overlaid with antiseptic, blood and worry.

“Not yet. I want you to form your own conclusions before I tell you the background.”

Cassidy followed her white-coated friend down a grey corridor and through a set of doors which had *Isolation* stenciled across them.

Maya cast a quick look at her as they neared the solitary room. Cassidy inhaled deeply and sent her senses outwards in a cautious manner. A familiar yet elusive odor streamed back at her.

There was pain and misery in the room, as well as an intense feeling of dread from whoever was in there. She took a deep breath. "All right. Let's go." As she entered the room, Cassidy mentally reached toward the bandaged figure on the bed. The pungent, gagging odor of pain and terror that beat at her was overlaid with the sharp, metallic tang of blood. The impression of a shadowy figure pleased with its handiwork jumped out at her. Peering further into the room, all Cassidy made out was a crumpled form covered in bloodstained white gauze. The figure twitched and yelled at them.

"No, no, stay away. No closer. You stink. Can't you hear the pounding, too? It won't go away. Make it stop."

"Stay here, Maya." Cassidy inched toward the man and watched while he cringed back into the bed. She saw his wizened face, aged prematurely beyond his years, dirty brown hair liberally dashed with streaks of pure white. Shock and trauma had aged this man and encroached on his life. Cassidy angled toward him and sniffed.

Someone else's marker was on him. One unlike any other. It was not quite right, the tang of a predator, but twisted. Her stomach tightened with nerves as a feeling of distrust grew in her. She clenched her hands, joints protesting, her nails cutting into her palms before she forced herself to relax her taut fingers. Gaze narrowed, Cassidy inched closer and bent to pry open his shut eyelids. The figure screamed as he focused on her.

"For gods sake, Cassidy, be careful."

Cassidy crept backward and motioned for her to exit the room. They slipped down the hall and into a spare room. She closed the door, rested her forehead on it, and took a deep breath.

"Cassidy, what the hell is going on?"

"He was admitted with what looked to be deep lacerations to his chest, lower abdomen and his arms, right?" Cassidy turned and fully

faced Maya. “He’s had a large amount of blood loss and seems hyper-reactive to light and has super sensitive ears and nose.”

“Yes. Do you know what happened to him?” Maya clenched her fists.

“The patient seems to showing signs of becoming a *Were*. But it’s not possible. Not possible at all.” Cassidy slammed her fist into the door and cracked the wood. “Oops. Sorry, Maya.” She looked at her un-bruised hand, it did pay to be part wolf sometimes.

Maya waved Cassidy’s concern over the door away, a frown on her face while she puzzled the problem. “You’re saying he’s a lycanthrope.”

“That’s the thing.” Cassidy turned toward the window. “It’s not possible. To be a *Were*, you have to inherit it through birth.”

“Maybe he did?”

“He couldn’t have. In one born a *Were*, the symptoms he’s showing usually happen when the cub is around five to eight years old. They can’t change until after.” Cassidy shook her head, confused at the contradicting evidence.

“The sensitivity to light and heightened other senses are all overwhelming. Cubs are taught how to cope and control the senses. This wouldn’t be happening now if he’d been born a lycanthrope.” Cassidy turned and started pacing. “The only other way is to perform a ritual or be cursed.”

Maya focused on Cassidy. “Okay, it’s the other way, but which is it? A ritual or a curse?”

“When did he start showing signs?” Cassidy stopped pacing and stared at her friend.

“He was admitted yesterday and started to show signs this morning.”

“That’s why it’s not possible. The ritual has to take place on a full moon, which was yesterday. If he’d been turned, the patient would have shown signs when he was first admitted. Maybe the guy was attacked by someone who *had* taken part.”

Maya sighed. “Well, what if it’s a curse? What do I do with him?”

Cassidy snorted. “Trust me. Curses don’t run on a timetable and there are usually conditions associated with it.” She strode toward the door and spoke over her shoulder as she went. “Look, I don’t think he’ll

turn, but something weird is definitely going on. Isolate him and keep an eye out. It will take time for the symptoms to disappear.”

She grabbed the door handle and turned to look at Maya. “I’ll get back to you when I’ve worked out what the hell is going on. See you later.”

Cassidy marched out, gnawing away at the claw, which extended from her nail when she was angry or upset. *Why now?* Lycanthropes had only become accepted fifty years ago and mainly on the basis they weren’t contagious. If this became public knowledge, it could hurt them all.

They were tolerated now in society only because they’d had the foresight to place different members of the clans in strategic political, military and support services before they were outed by the random drug and medical tests.

Thank goddess they weren’t limited like the Weres in the old Hollywood movies. Natural born werewolves didn’t have to wait until a full moon to change. But they preferred the night, since it hid them better.

You couldn’t catch lycanthropy, but if you took part in a ritual or were cursed and something went wrong, technically you could infect. However, the symptoms were temporary. There’d been hardly any episodes because the books detailing the rituals had been hidden. The last thing they needed was a spate of pseudo-Were killers. The balance between human and freaks was dodgy at best. And she didn’t want to be the one to upset the apple cart.

As she pushed through the door, Cassidy slammed into a hard wall of flesh. Flesh which carried the aroma of a tangy male and rocked only slightly from the impact.

“Hey, sorry about bashing you.” Cassidy stared into the face of a man who looked liked he’d been hewn from rock by a blunt instrument.

Brown hair with flecks of silver, grey eyes and a full-lipped mouth caught her attention. *Whoopee*, this one wasn’t a wimpy lawyer. Built like a brick wall, he looked like a rogue lover from a romance novel. But his natural perfume was like heaven and hell all rolled into one. A

combination of the forest, sweat and gun oil. He smelled right and it made her think of settling down and having a family.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Talk about going off the deep end. Her mother would be glad to hear Cassidy was finally thinking about a man as a mate. However, she wasn't ready to go there yet. Especially not with a human man who didn't even know she was a freak.

"Maybe if you looked where you were going, you wouldn't have to apologize."

A velvety warm masculine voice rumbled at her from underneath her cheek and seemed to wrap around her like a cocoon. It took Cassidy a moment to realize the object of her lustful fantasy wasn't exactly rolling around gasping her name in erotic abandon. In fact, he wasn't even trying to be nice.

Cassidy sighed. "Oh well, another daydream bites the dust."

"Did you hit your head? Do I need to take you back to the ward, ma'am?"

The brick wall stepped back in confusion.

Cassidy reared back and stared in disgusted disbelief at this man who was implying she'd escaped from the loony ward. Besides, how old did he think she was? Weres aged more slowly than normal humans did, but she wasn't old enough to be called *ma'am*.

"No, I didn't hit my head. Did you say ma'am? Do I look like I'm sixty years old to you?" Cassidy snarled at him. The brick wall took a step back and held his hands high to placate her.

"Hey, look I'm sorry, my mother taught me to respect women. If you don't need any help, I have to get going."

Cassidy glared at him and tried to ignore the heat pulsing through her veins. She watched as he tried to inch around her toward the doors. When he'd almost reached them, Cassidy smiled. "Isn't it a shame when you have this wonderful image of a person and they spoil it by opening their mouth?"

The brick wall spun around with what sounded suspiciously liked a muffled curse. Cassidy made sure she'd already turned, and tried to waggle her behind in a sassy manner as she sauntered off. Cassidy swore

she felt the scrumptious man's gaze boring into her back. *Take that, you arrogant mountain of a man. Payback's a bitch isn't it?*

Chapter Two

Cassidy shoved through the hospital's swinging doors and breathed the essence of the outside world deep into her lungs. She loved Memorial City in the summer. Winter in Virginia wasn't as bad as some other places, but she loved the vibe and pace of summer. Most people tended to hide inside when winter came to town.

Smog, traffic fumes and the scent of the hot dog vendor on the corner hit her as she sniffed the day and sensed the moist air of what would soon be a wet night. She'd stayed longer than expected. The hospital had blindsided her from the moment of entry. First, the overload of her senses then the victim collapsed on the bed and next by the nasty, arrogant man in the corridor.

The intensity of her physical response to him had shocked her and the bloody man hadn't even noticed. Typical male blindness when it came to the opposite sex. Still, he made her think of the future. Weird, but hey, that was the wolf coming out. They could locate potential mates through smell, and sense if they were unsuitable to be a partner and a father. The wolf and the Were had to be careful when choosing a life-mate as they both bonded for life.

There was no such thing as a divorce in her culture. Which meant you wouldn't want to be stuck with someone incompatible. Cassidy snorted as she hopped into her car and drove toward work.

"Wouldn't Ma and Da get a kick out of this? How the mighty have fallen." Cassidy gunned the engine of her midnight blue SUV and pulled into traffic.

Parking in her usual spot, she slipped into the building, bounded the three flights of stairs and wasn't even breathless when she reached her office. *Ah, the delights of being a supernatural monster.*

Cassidy entered her office and sat with a sigh, aware that Bethany was watching her. She laid her head on the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

"Geez, Quinn, what's going on? You look like a truck hit you." Bethany grabbed a soda from the office refrigerator on the way to Cassidy and handed it to her.

"Yeah. It wasn't the best day and it was a mountain of rock that hit me."

"What?"

"Nothing, don't worry about it. Maya had me look at a victim of an attack. Unfortunately, I think it was a Were attack." She rubbed her neck, considering the problem.

"What are you going to do now? Will the guy at the hospital start chasing postmen?"

Cassidy giggled weakly. "Bethany, you're sick. And no, he's not going to start to bay at the moon. The side effects should wear off. I'll call Ma and get her to check her library, to be sure. Plus, she'll want all the details of—" Cassidy broke off and coughed before she finished the sentence.

Bethany narrowed her eyes and stared fixedly at Cassidy. "Details on what, *Cassidy*? What would your mother need details for?"

"It's nothing. I met someone who unsettled me at the hospital and I wanted to talk to my mother about it, okay?" But not here at the office where eavesdroppers could listen in, her home was a safer bet. Cassidy turned her face away, hoping her expression wasn't visible.

Bethany smiled, the lift of her eyebrows and the knowing look in her face telling Cassidy her secret wasn't going to be quiet for very long. She knew Bethany sensed there was something personal Cassidy didn't want to talk about.

“Sooo, Cassidy. Would you happen to have met someone at the hospital who wasn’t a wimpy lawyer?” Bethany sniggered behind her hand.

Cassidy screwed her face into a frown and gave the bare bones information. “Excuse me, but I met someone who thought that I was a crazy lady and implied I was old. I don’t think it’s the basis for an everlasting affair. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to call my mother.” Cassidy picked up the phone and swiveled to watch the setting sun as Bethany quietly backed out of the office.

She dialed her parents’ number and pictured what they’d be doing at the farm right now. Dinner would be about ready. Since it was family night, everyone would be there and the noise would be out of control.

The kitchen held the large dinner table, scored and gouged by countless claws and teeth, set for at least ten people. Pots and pans would be bubbling away and the room crowded with both fur and bare bodies. The house would overflow with her younger brother, her aunt and uncle as well as their two children.

Her da, her eldest brother Jace, and her uncle would have hunted for dinner. The only difference was they were on all fours and covered with fur instead of hunting with a gun.

“Quinn residence.”

Her mother’s husky voice, courtesy of a poacher who had lined a trap with silver wire, warmed her. Sarah Quinn had been running through the forest as a wolf and the wire had caught at throat level, slicing in to damage her voice box.

“Hey Ma, how are you?” Cassidy smiled as she thought of her mother standing next to the phone. She’d probably be naked except for an apron. Clothes were optional in the house and nudity didn’t bother the clan. Besides, you always had to replace them after a change because they were torn apart.

“Cassidy, my favorite daughter, how are you?”

Sarah’s pleasure at the sound of her daughter’s voice flowed around Cassidy. Loud noises in the background filtered through the telephone line.

“I’m fine, Ma, but I need some help from you. I found an attack victim and it looks like a ritual-turned Were almost gutted him. I need to know any info on the ritual and if the victim will turn. I know normally the symptoms are temporary, but I want it checked out. Could you look in the library for me?”

She pictured their library, filled floor to ceiling with esoteric texts on anything that went bump in the night. A paradise for any book-loving librarian.

There was silence on the other end of the phone, interrupted only by the sporadic sound of excited yipping and yapping of her family.

A mother’s concern laced Sarah’s reply. “Okay, baby, I will, but you look after yourself and I’ll call you at home later. You’ll tell me everything, okay?”

Cassidy smiled and her tension eased. “Yeah, I’ll be fine, Ma. Talk to you later at home.”

She stood and stretched. Almost time for a go at the change. If at first you don’t succeed, yada yada... The others had counseled patience, a full change would happen when both of them were ready, but she was sick of waiting. It had been twenty years now. The time for patience was over and she didn’t care if there was a reason, it was time to push it. Otherwise, what the hell was Cassidy? Some sort of changeling caught between two worlds.

Enough.

Shaking herself like a dog with an itch, Cassidy headed out.



Cassidy let herself into her apartment and sighed as the serenity of the room eased through her. She walked over to the French windows, pushed them open and breathed in the perfume of the park standing proudly across from her apartment.

She saw and heard the excited children in the playground. The basketball courts with the players doing battle were tucked into the corner of her vision and she imagined the sweaty bodies going toe-to-toe. The scent of freshly cut grass wafted over and urged her to roll around

and wallow in nature. It was perfect for a woman who needed to try to change into an animal occasionally.

Well, this woman had decided it was time for a shower. Cassidy entered the bathroom and shrugged off her clothes. She adjusted the temperature and climbed under the spray. Tension seeped out of her muscles, pummeled away by the power of the hot water.

Cassidy didn't know how long her body had been upright under the spray, but knew it was time to get out. The phone rang as she exited the shower. Wrapping a towel around herself, she grabbed a pen and paper and ran for the phone.

"Cassidy."

The tension in her mother's voice raised goose pimples on her naked body.

"Hey, Ma, what did you find?" She injected a calm casualness into her voice.

"The library actually had a lot of info on rituals to turn humans into Weres. The ritual needs a full moon and even then, many times it fails. However, if it succeeds, one of two things can happen. If the person approaches the ritual with a sponsor Were, or has the support of an adopted clan you get the normal garden variety Were. But it's very rare for a candidate to meet all the requirements of the sponsor."

Cassidy grunted her comprehension while her mother carried on.

"But if he enters into the ritual independently without a guide or has an agenda, you get a rogue Were. The Were's only lust will be for killing, especially those who get in the way of whatever plan he had before he turned."

Cassidy breathed out with a loud whoosh. "Well, not exactly what I wanted to hear."

Sarah cleared her throat. "Be very careful, Cassidy. If this new lycanthrope senses you, he or she may see you as a threat and try to take you out as well."

"Ma, I'll be fine. I promise to be careful. If I have any problems, I'll call Jace or you and Da. Don't worry too much." Cassidy combed her hand through her short hair, trying to tame the curls.

Sarah groaned. “All right, whatever you say. Oh, by the way, your attack victim won’t turn. His symptoms should be fading in the next few days.”

“Great, at least there’s some good news I can pass on to Maya.” Cassidy hesitated, not sure how to ask the next question.

“Ah, Ma, how did you know if Da was your true mate?”

“He smelled like the future. I saw marriage, the children, how much in love we would be. It was heaven, to be blunt. Why do you want to know? Have you met someone?” Sarah’s curiosity and excitement bled through to her daughter.

Cassidy backtracked as quickly as she could. “No, I was curious, no biggie.”

“Well if you did, feel free to talk to me about it, but I have to go now. The natives are getting restless and I don’t want any fur flying. I’ll talk to you later, pet.”

“Okay, see you later, Ma. Give my love to the family.”

Cassidy placed the phone back in its cradle and dropped her heavy body onto the bed. *Well, that info would give her something to stew about,* and she relaxed and drifted off to sleep.



His aroma hit her first, wreathed her in sensation, both sexual and emotional. A smile highlighted his face, like a spotlight in a play, and he held out his arms to her. His rich, earthy aroma of the forest and freshly turned ground mimicked their wooded surrounds. From behind him, she saw little faces and tiny hands extended toward her. A black cub gamboled at her feet and a feeling of intense love rushed over her.

She concentrated on her family, a sensation of dread permeated her senses. She could see the tendrils of evil and death, which crept around her, reaching out to her loved ones. Suddenly, a rabid, ghostly form of a wolf confronted them. Its red eyes glowed like a demon as it lunged forward. Her heart pounded when her mate leapt to meet the attacker. Cassidy screamed, the sound torn from her as fear curled deep in her gut.

What was it? It wasn't a normal Were. The stench was too rancid, full of the evil taint of corruption and defilement.

Another shriek built inside her. The clearing erupted with the rush of another wolf. This animal had a beautiful glossy brown and silver coat and placed himself in the line of attack.

Panic took hold. She huddled her family together, the urge to comfort the children strong as they began to cry and howl. This wasn't supposed to happen, she knew it.

The fighting increased in intensity and she sprang forward to add her challenge to her mate's against the interloper. A growl formed in her throat, but before she could give utterance to it, the ghostly evil wolf shimmered and disappeared...

Cassidy woke with her heart pounding so hard she thought it would leap out and do a bloody can-can on the bed. Struggling upright, her limbs trembled as a finger of leftover fear trailed down her spine.

Her chest heaved with each breath that fought for life. Rivulets of sweat and tears poured off her. Whatever the wolf was, it had noticed her and she felt a dread, a dark premonition of trouble to come.

Cassidy's mind swerved away from the feel of evil, which still held her in its grip, and concentrated on the other side of the dream. She'd had children, a husband. Where had that come from?

She recognized the man from the hospital as the man in her dream. But he wasn't a wolf and this dream man certainly had been. What was her brain trying to tell her? Whatever it was, she didn't want to have any part in it. *Besides, rock man would put me in the funny farm if he could read my mind. He'd lock me up and throw away the key.* Cassidy giggled as she snuggled back in the bed and tried to get some more sleep.

It was nothing, the power of suggestion. The dream rationalized to her satisfaction, she sank back into a disturbed sleep.

Chapter Three

A harsh, jagged scream broke the night's silence. Agony became vocal, torn from his throat out into the air. The night ground to a stop. The earth had frozen, held immobile, paralyzed by what was about to come forth.

Every living thing held its breath. The world waited for the rebirth of a dark demon, which would hunt, kill and taste. The slender form on the ground rippled like a watercolor of a tormented figure someone had taken a brush to.

Anguish contorted his face. His back arched at an unnatural angle, the curve cruel enough to break the body in two. The skin shifted and bulged out. A hideous entity not quite human writhed, waiting to emerge from its chrysalis and take on the planet.

Bones shifted and re-aligned into a new structure, streamlined and dangerous. Hair and skin receded, leaving behind a bloody, naked mess sprawled upon the land. Fur spread like wildfire along his body, as if nature, by design, had sped up for this very reason.

Transformation over, pain receded back into the recesses of his mind, to be forgotten until next time. The animal tested the endurance of his new shape. Inching forward in careful movements, the muscles recently abused answered his call in a lethargic manner.

Pointing his muzzle high into the night, the creature howled, senses soaring. His awareness extended through the thick soup of humanity. He searched for the next victim, the next step forward in his plan to eliminate all loose ends.

A stray odor intruded on the plan. A pungent, earthy odor, which intoxicated him and caused his senses to double in intensity. Alarm bells

peeled forth. *Danger*. He tasted the erotic tang of an imminent threat, a challenge he could not ignore.

The trail of another Were. Another predator in his territory nagged at him like a thorn in his side.

The other predator seemed unusual, not like himself. This one left a feminine aftertaste to the senses. His beast surged to the front. Wolf instincts snapped into place. The animal sent his mind forth in a surge of power to hunt for a possible mate. A wisp of a dream arrowed past his searching mind. The dream of a family, the females.

The creature roared in defiance. A howl filled with anger and pain, stirred the night. There would be no family except his. The beast entered her dream and tore at the other wolf until the she-wolf entered the fight.

The beast backed away. The time wasn't right.



Cassidy rolled over and groaned as she eyed the alarm clock.

"No. Not two hours late for work." She shoved her head underneath the covers. "Bethany is going to have a field day with this one. She will *not* let me live this down."

Pushing herself to an upright position, she glanced around the room. It looked like a nasty client of hers had done it over. Pillows on the floor, covers half-on, half-off, the bed. Her bedroom looked like there'd been a big time orgy here with lots of people. It was the most action her room had seen in a long time.

Her favorite orange toy puppy perched drunkenly atop her small television set in the corner of her room. The rest of the collection of fuzzy toy dogs lay strewn across the floor in a loose pattern of a target. Ominous sign for the future, her mother would have said.

The phone rang and broke the silence in the apartment. "Bethany," Cassidy mumbled, and raced for the phone. She wished she didn't have to answer it, but there'd be enough trouble with Bethany as it was. Cassidy grunted into the phone and held it at arm's length as her sensitive ears rang with her friend's voice.

“Where the hell are you? I have had to reschedule three appointments already.”

Cassidy tried to get a word in. “Ahh—”

“Are you sick or have you had a horrific injury which stops you from calling. Maybe your arms were cut off, hey?”

Cassidy knew Bethany was building to the finale and decided to preempt with a surgical strike. “I’m sorry.”

There was a pause on the other end of the phone.

“Well, you should be. Now get in here.”

Bethany slammed down the phone before Cassidy forced out a squeak. She dived for the shower at top speed. When someone can mess with all your files and has your bank account details, you don’t tangle with them. After a lightning-quick shower, she threw some clothes on and bolted to the garage. Cassidy hurled herself into the car and, piloting the SUV at a controlled fast pace, she managed to arrive at the office in time for lunch.

“I think it’s time for the boss to pay for lunch,” Cassidy mumbled as she slunk into the office like a misbehaving child.

“What did you do, drink all night? You look like something the dog dragged in.” Bethany glared at her.

Cassidy cowered like a submissive pup to a dominant Alpha female. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I will never do it again, wise one.”

“Get up, fool. I was worried when you didn’t come in or call or even answer your phone.”

Bethany used the concerned-friend face and Cassidy’s over-the-top demeanor vanished.

“I’m sorry, but I had these creepy dreams and I tossed and turned all night.”

Cassidy knew Bethany was studying her pale, exhausted face. She knew how she looked. The bathroom mirror didn’t lie. The healthy glow of otherness that proclaimed her a shape-shifter had dimmed slightly. Even her extra sparkle of magnetism, which normally drew people to her like moths to a flame, had faded in the wake of her tiredness.

Bethany’s aggressive stance crumbled. “Are you all right?”

Cassidy sat on the office couch. “I will be, but I think something was in my dreams last night. Certain elements of the dream felt wrong, nothing I can pin down, but it’s like I’ve been scented by another predator.”

Bethany collapsed behind her desk. “Do you think it was the Were who attacked the bookseller?”

Cassidy shook her head from side to side like a shaggy dog shaking off an annoying fly. “I don’t know, but all bets are off if it was, because he’d be a powerful Were to do that when newly changed. Not good, not good at all.”

Bethany took a deep breath and dumped a large pile of files into Cassidy’s lap. “Well, to take your mind off your dream, you can take care of all your open files now.”

“Nothing like an overdose of your normal, run of the mill, cheating husbands and stalkers to make you feel good.”

Bethany grinned at the comment as she sauntered back to her desk.

All these normal cases made a grim day look rosy, Cassidy thought as she skimmed through her files.



Cassidy raised her head from the file she’d been studying and gave a large, bone-cracking yawn. She felt the pass of the day tingle along her skin. All shape-shifters and most monsters were aware of the passage of time. Like an internal body clock operating on batteries.

“Bethany, have you got my clothing ready for tonight?”

Bethany stuck her head around the doorway and smiled. “Yes, boss, your hooker clothing is ready.” With that, she threw her a bag of clothing.

“Thanks a lot. By the way, take an early leave from work since you filled in for me this morning.”

Cassidy turned and looked out the window as dusk started to encroach on the day. It was time to dress as a hooker and catch a cheating husband in the act. Yippee. She stripped to her plain white cotton underwear and donned the clothes Bethany had provided. When

ready, she stared into the full-length mirror on the inside of the office's bathroom door.

This was Bethany's revenge for this morning. It had to be. All she saw were the long legs encased in thigh high boots with a square heel—for balance when kicking someone in the head—and black leather skirt that defined the word mini. Not to mention a red leather corset that looked like a second skin. Combined with her short black hair and five-foot-ten height, the impression was of a tall dominatrix who cracked a whip for a living.



Cassidy practiced bending as she got out of the car. Bending was doable, she'd just flash everyone if it happened.

From the outside, the bar looked as good as it was going to get stuck right here in Monster Alley. People had long since forgotten the original name of the street. Human animals as well as other kinds hung out in this part of town, hence the name of Monster Alley. This section of town had the highest crime rate in the whole of Memorial City.

Cassidy took note of the paint peeling off the front entrance of the plain brick building and what looked—and smelled—like dried blood adorning the front wall. The drone of various male and female voices intermingled with the canned music of the jukebox.

Cassidy sighed, pushed open the door, and let the rank, stale atmosphere wash over her as she slipped into character. After letting her eyes adjust to the smoky interior she made sure the unwashed legions of the bar noticed her as she sashayed toward the bartender.

Cigarette butts, peanut shells, spilled alcohol and broken bottles littered the counter and she swore someone had urinated somewhere nearby. Cassidy fought a shudder and concentrated on the bartender. A very blond, very hot guy, if you ignored the bloodshot eyes.

“What will it be, sweetheart?”

The bartender, who reeked of cop, walked over to her and leered at her breasts. She smiled and bent over, giving him a clear shot of her cleavage. At least, what cleavage the underwire of the corset gave her.

“Well, let me see,” she breathed huskily. “I think I’ll have a glass of orange juice since I don’t drink when I’m working, any more than you do.” Cassidy angled even closer and whispered into his ear. “Especially when we are both here on the job, you for the city and me for my investigation business.”

The bartender went still and eyed her in a contemplative way, using his brain instead of another organ. “You wouldn’t mind keeping that between us, would you?”

Cassidy’s sly smirk twisted the side of her mouth. “Don’t you mean us and the five other cops in the room?”

The bartender casually leaned over to make it look like he was propositioning her as he placed an orange juice in front of her. “Well, as long as your client isn’t part of our business, you’re safe.”

Cassidy smiled and raised her glass in a salute to his comment.

She scanned the room for her mark, the cheating husband some woman had actually thought worth marrying.

“Yeah right.” She snorted and almost choked on the orange juice as she saw another cop give her the once over. Geez, they were all the same.

“You all right?” The bartender was facing her again.

“I’m fine. I noticed one of your friends giving me the same eye you did. Did you learn that at school?”

The bartender grinned like a young boy. “Naah, we’re born knowing how to do it.”

Cassidy made certain the mark was in her peripheral vision as he flirted with the ladies at his table. The shadows grew longer as the night progressed and the rank, stale smoke stung her nostrils as she inhaled. She nursed her fifth orange juice and wondered if her back teeth had started floating when yet another man rocked on over to hit on her.

“How much will it cost me, lady?” The slurred voice sounded loud in her ears. Not to mention the reek of vomit and stale urine which drifted her way as he edged closer.

“Um, sweet pea, you couldn’t actually afford me, and if by any chance you could, I’m not on the job tonight. Take a hike.” Cassidy’s caustic drawl could have stripped paint.

The man stumbled away and called her some vile names Cassidy didn't even want to think about as he left. The cop turned to see if she needed help. She sighed with relief as her mark weaved his way outside with a lucky lady of the night.

Cassidy waited a few moments, and, with a nod to the bartender, followed the couple as they slipped into the dark. Blinking to adjust her sight, Cassidy caught a glimpse of the couple as they turned the corner. Her nose, still blocked with the stink of the smoke, didn't sense the unwashed fist, which came out of nowhere and knocked her sideways into an empty alleyway. Pain danced along her nerve endings like pins and needles as she fingered her tingling cheekbone.

"What the hell," Cassidy cursed.

"Well, hello there. Did ya think you were too good for us, did ya?" a voice rasped, just out of her reach.

A snicker, definitely male, alerted her the attacker wasn't alone. Cassidy flicked her gaze in a quick side-to-side motion and noticed two men who stood in the middle of the garbage-filled alley. One was the slime she'd knocked back earlier, the other she didn't recognize.

"Look, guys, sorry if I offended you, but you don't know what you're doing here." Cassidy offered the caution and shrugged when they continued to strut toward her.

Worry pooled in the bottom of her stomach, heavy and weighing her down. Her muscles tightened in her legs and fingers clenched into fists. Cassidy didn't want to hurt this scum. Her strength was greater than a normal human, even if it wasn't what a shape-shifter's would be. But she wouldn't let herself be beaten by these hoods.

One of the guys grabbed her breasts and shoved her against the wall, while the other thug backhanded her. Blazing heat rushed through her veins like a speeding car as all pretence of calm fled.

How dare they.

Who did they think they were?

"That's it, guys, you've had your warnings. I'm angry now." Cassidy let her anger bubble outwards like a raging forest fire as she grabbed the hand flying toward her face and twisted it.

A moan of pain rewarded her actions. She let go, ducked under the arms pinning her and shifted further into the alley. A surge of cocky adrenaline grabbed hold and her aggressive nature rose to the surface as she taunted the men.

“You think I’m such an easy mark? Come and get me, losers.”

The slime who’d been groping her corset-bound breasts lurched forward with his hands outstretched. The other man circled around behind her and tried to look for an opening. The first man ran at her and slammed his whole body weight against her in an attempt to push her down.

Cassidy’s smile was all teeth as she spun away at the last possible moment in a twist no human could duplicate.

She swung back as the second thug approached with a steel bar he had filched from a nearby garbage bin. Her chest pumped up and down, threatening to burst her bodice, as the thrill of the fight took over. A good fight was better than sex—almost.

“See how you cope with this, you ugly monster whore,” her assailant growled.

She knew the thought of a freak like her getting the better of him would stick in his throat and spur him on. Some humans would always consider her kind second best.

As the second man swung the bar, Cassidy ducked and chopped a fast hard kick at his right knee. She heard the bone snap and sensed the blood as the jagged ends punched past the skin. The thug’s resulting pig-like squeal was enough to make her teeth ache, the same as if someone ran their fingernails down a blackboard.

The unusual sound triggered a reaction from her wolf and it swam through her depths to reach the surface. Her bloodlust took hold, increasing in intensity. Cassidy’s top lip curled to expose her teeth. An unquenchable thirst had her licking her lips constantly, like a lizard testing the air.

A wave of intense passion rose warm and flush in her cheeks. It had been too long since her last aborted change. She might not be able to

change fully, but the wolf kept trying and it wasn't patient anymore. It wanted out.

The beast in her surged fully into control and wasn't about to go back without a fight. Cassidy gritted her teeth as she struggled for some semblance of command over her other half.

The exhilaration of the fight was addictive. She wanted to let her wolf out to play with these thugs, but knew there'd only be pain involved. Not to mention the fight between her and her wolf would ensure the men wouldn't survive. Once fully out, she didn't know if controlling her wolf was an option, even if the change did work. Bloodshed was a powerful aphrodisiac.

Tears sprung to her eyes as her mental fight for domination against the wolf continued. Gaining a hold over the other, she turned at the sound of a scuffling foot.

The second man sprung at Cassidy. She had spent too much time fighting her wolf and not enough paying attention to the other attacker. He clasped his arm around her throat to choke off her air supply. His unwashed odor of sweat and stale alcohol swirled around and threatened to overwhelm her. Air sucked out of her lungs as panic took hold of Cassidy. This was not happening.

Her hands grabbed at his arm, wrapped like a python around her throat, but adrenaline had hardened his arm to steel. She let the wolf out a fraction and released some of her precious control.

Her fingers, little by little, lengthened into sharp talons. Cassidy knew her eyes were blazing vivid amber instead of their normal deep brown as she slowly let her wolf out. The claws raked across his forearm and the thug let out a gurgle of pain and released her arm immediately. She sensed his dread at seeing his own blood and his fear of becoming like her.

"Please, like I would even consider adding you to my race. Now get out of here before I do something to you which will hinder having any future children."

Blood trickled down his arm as the man scurried backwards, mesmerized by the part-wolf, part-woman. The wolf in her howled in

triumph as she watched her attackers help drag each other away. The sweet tang of blood sang out siren-like to her, tempting her to taste, to touch. She resolutely ignored it and let her fight-induced high fade out.

Her chest rose and fell. The effort of restraining her beast had taken a heavy toll. The lure of the wolf was seductive. Some Weres had been known to stay in Were form and never change back, the temptation was that strong. Her problem was it was like taking a drug that never fully delivered what it promised.

She had the lust for the change, but something blocked her at the crucial moment when both halves should join. In her case, the wolf had never fully been let out and it would force an attempted change on her when she least wanted it.

The tang of another predator, this one male, hit her with the same force as a sledgehammer and she almost fell to her knees. Lifting her head, Cassidy tasted the air around her. Another animal was in the area. The Were's odor was unlike anything she knew, but in some way familiar.

In the distance, the sound of shattering glass and a muffled scream echoed. Cassidy bolted out of the alleyway, turned, and followed the sound of the scream. There was no sign of her attackers as she emerged onto the road where the bar stood. However, at the far end of the road, she vaguely saw two figures wrestling together on the ground. One a wolf, the other a man.

The man was an indistinct figure, concealed by the hulking form of a wolf with a coat the color of coal. The still evening closed on the pair as they battled.

The sharp tang of blood and gas formed a pungent fog in the night air above them as they fought in a bookstore doorway. Cassidy increased her pace until she was bounding at a superhuman rate. The closeness of the beast, the stench of blood and violence, in a blink of an eye triggered the change she hadn't wanted.

The power of the change ripped through every fiber of her body. The pain pushed into each cell and left lightning in its wake. Her body collapsed to the ground. Her bones compressed and partially emerged as

the form of a wolf. Claws, sharp fangs and fur ripped out of her skin with horrific speed. But her form stayed essentially human, a female's face and anatomy still obvious.

Her clothing and boots fell about her, shredded into small remnants. The wolf ripped free of her hard-won controls and instinct claimed her. The need to protect, a strong impulse, took over the wolf and Cassidy's thought process.

The other predator was a challenge to her dominance in her territory. The beast threatened the peace, it was up to her to defend and punish. The part-animal, part-human, known as Cassidy watched as the other dragged and released his prey further in the shop.

Then it turned and stood watching as she neared him. She caught a glimpse of a jagged lightening strip of silver color, which slashed his stomach like a roadmap of pain. Cassidy saw the equivalent of a wolf's grin cross his face, taunting her. The other wolf was pleased with his handiwork, she sensed it. He wanted her to howl in triumph and join him. Both the woman and wolf bared the fangs in defiance at the intended challenge to them.

The beast seemed to acknowledge her and melted into the shadows as the power around the shop built to a fever pitch. The very air cackled with energy. Without warning, the building exploded outwards in a sheet of flame.

A fiery inferno lit the night sky. Fire engulfed the shop as Cassidy fought for control. The wolf wanted to hunt this arrogant usurper, while the human wanted to try and save the other man. The human won—this time.

Cassidy, as a partial wolf, surged into the fiery store in an effort to find the other's loosed prey. Her senses failed as the acrid smoke doubled in size and visibility dropped. She stumbled against the inert body of a man and was forced to the floor by the hungry fingers of the blaze.

Smoke and flames gathered around the man, unwilling to let its victim be dragged to safety. Tendrils spilled down her throat and choked Cassidy's very breath. The part-wolf lowered her claws and grabbed the

victim by the back of the shirt, careful not to puncture the fallen figure's skin.

Inch by inch she heaved the man past the fire and its debris and onto the street. The howl of a siren drew near and broke the sound of the roar and crackle of the fire, which consumed the shop like a ravenous monster.

The victim, lifeless at her feet, didn't twitch as police vehicles screeched to a halt in front of her, the fire engines not far behind. The wolf receded to the background and took the partial change with it, leaving Cassidy in a quiver of exhaustion. She collapsed on the ground next to the man, her breath an echo that rattled through the cage of her chest.

A deep voice reverberated out of a loudspeaker.

"Freeze! Stay where you are."

Cassidy at a snail's pace, eased to her knees to show she was unarmed. Once again, *that* voice rang out. Weariness jabbed at her as she tried to follow their directions.

Her naked thighs quivered at the thought of standing and her hands shook as reaction set in. Parts of her body had been singed, but the injuries would heal quickly if she kept her reserves of energy strong. Otherwise it would take a hell of a lot longer.

"We said freeze and you won't be harmed."

Cassidy moaned aloud. "No, no, no. Not him, it can't be him." Sheer frustration spilled over as she fought the need to howl. Why on earth did it have to be *that* man who saw her naked and not looking her best? This was not the impression she wanted to make.

The fire illuminated Cassidy and the police officers who collected on the street. She saw the cops from the bar, and worst of all, she heard his voice.

The man from the hospital. He happened to be a cop and happened to be out here in front of her. Cassidy muttered aloud again. "Of course, it's Murphy's Law. What can go wrong, will go wrong."

Cassidy placed her hands behind her neck and wondered how much trouble a naked crazy lady standing over a blood-spattered man in front of a flame-riddled shop could get into.

Chapter Four

Cassidy squirmed on the icy seat in the interview room and adjusted her butt to a more comfortable position. “So this is how the other half lives, cold and frigid. They freeze the truth out of the criminals.”

The urge to glance at the two-way mirror as she talked to herself was overpowering. Mumbling to herself had become a habit, but it was only craziness if you answered yourself back, but it still looked crazy to anyone else. Adjusting the large padded jacket they had given her to cover her nakedness, she puzzled out the night’s events.

Her long, bare legs propelled her upright as Cassidy fought the nervous energy left over from the change. She made sure there was a death grip on the jacket; she didn’t want it to flap open. Especially when Detective Logan, her man from the hospital, waltzed in to question her. The last thing she needed was to expose herself to *him*. He hadn’t earned a full X-rated flash *yet*.

She couldn’t believe how the night had ended. It had started out as work, dressing as a hooker to catch the cheating husband. Then those idiot thugs in the alley had attacked. Next thing she knew, there was that scary-assed wolf at the store. Correct that—the exploding building, where she risked life and limb to save the owner. Of course, the night *would* end with her naked in front of cops and firemen.

“I will never be able to go to the police ball again.” Cassidy started to pace. Naturally, she would run into *him* when not a single piece of clothing covered her. “Peachy frigging keen,” Cassidy mumbled to herself.

“What would be peachy keen, Ms. Quinn? Is there some information you’d like to share with us?” Detective Patrick Logan strode in followed closely behind by a short, very curvy, blonde female detective.

“We can offer you some clothing and we’d like you to give us a statement while the incident is fresh in your mind. After you’ve changed of course.”

The woman detective walked around the table and offered a bundle of clothes to Cassidy. “Here you go, Ms. Quinn. I’m sorry about the clothing, but this was all I had in my locker. There’s a bit of a size difference between us, unfortunately this is as close as it gets. By the way, I’m Patrick’s partner, Shannon Morgan.”

Cassidy accepted the clothes with grace and dignity, but it was hard to do when you were afraid of flashing the room. The two cops directed Cassidy to the nearest bathroom. She marched inside into a stall and pulled on the clothes as quickly as she could. Cassidy breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, at least he didn’t make me get dressed in front of him. He’s already seen me naked so it doesn’t matter.”

“Are you alright in there, Ms. Quinn?” Logan’s partner yelled.

Cassidy emerged from the stall, looked at herself and sniffed in disgust. She heard a snicker and lifted her head to find Detective Shannon watching her.

“Well, a fashion plate, I’m not.” Cassidy laughed as they shared a glance at her predicament. She eyed herself in the mirror and took in the too-short pants that crawled halfway up her leg like pedal pushers. Not to mention the short-sleeved and loose shirt.

Morgan was a short, extremely well endowed woman. Unfortunately the fit of the detective’s clothes looked comical on Cassidy since she was tall and skinny, especially in the chest department.

Detective Logan should get a kick out of her appearance. If nothing else it might thaw him out. Cassidy marched back into the interrogation room, head held high as she dared him to comment.

Logan forbore to comment, but he couldn’t help smirking back at her. The picture she presented was ludicrous, but she still managed to make his testosterone rise...among other things. If only his resistant to her was as steadfast as his cock.

Watching her walk toward him he couldn’t help but think back to their hospital encounter. He’d received a shock when she had slammed

into his chest. His first impression had been of soft skin and sharply defined muscle, not someone who sat reading at home. This was a lady who worked hard at whatever she did.

Tall, too. Not as tall as his six-foot-two, but she'd certainly be at least five-ten. The woman exuded a kind of earthiness that was sexy as hell. She wasn't skinny, more muscle than anything else. He'd been so taken aback by the jolt of awareness, he'd acted like an asshole by being gruff. Her perfume, musky and warm, made him think of rolling around on the ground with her.

Of course, he'd had to antagonize her by implying she was old. That wasn't what he'd meant to do, but it had all come out wrong.

He was still trying to work out what the hell she meant by that last comment before she'd disappeared, twitching that sexy ass at him.

Logan changed mental gears and dropped the thought of Cassidy's contoured bottom and focused on the problem at hand...getting to the truth.

"Well, Ms. Quinn, please tell us what you were doing standing over a shredded and burnt body, while the victim's bookstore burned down?"

"Excuse me, officer, but I thought one was innocent until proven guilty?"

Logan scowled at her. "It's detective, Ms. Quinn. *Detective.*"

Cassidy smiled a sweet smile that always annoyed others. "Whatever you want to be called is fine with me." She saw Logan was getting irritated. Annoying people was a talent others considered a vice, but she was very good at it.

"Look Detective, I had nothing to do with the assault. I heard screams and came running to help."

The female cop inclined toward Cassidy encouragingly. "Alright, why were you naked and leaning over the victim in a hostile way?"

Cassidy slammed her palm onto the table, careful not to damage it. "I was naked because I'm a lycanthrope, a shape-shifter. Trust me. We happen to be hard on clothes. The reason I seemed be looming over him, is I was exhausted after dragging him out and I couldn't damn well move. The only way to get him away from the attacker was to change."

There was no force on this earth that would make her admit to these two, she was change challenged. And that the most she could manage was a part wolf/human hybrid. Cassidy tried to calm herself. She couldn't afford to lose her cool. Unfortunately, her temperament wasn't the placid kind. Wolves were aggressive by nature and sometimes her mouth opened when it shouldn't.

"Are you aware the marks on the victim's body are consistent with claw attacks? You've admitted you're a lycanthrope and were perched over the body. Doesn't that seem like a major coincidence to you?"

Detective Logan eased back into his chair and scrutinized her. She wondered if he'd recognized her from the hospital and fought an impulse to smile. Pissing him off was the last thing on her mind. But she bet he sure as heck didn't expect to see her naked this soon in the game. Truth was, he probably thought she was a homicidal killer.

Humor fled and, frustrated, she jutted her jaw forward. "Look, it wasn't me, in fact I'll bet it wasn't any legal Were registered in this state." Having to register was a pain, but at least they knew where and what you were. You were safe being registered as long as you weren't the one committing a crime. She inched back in her chair with a self-righteous expression on her face.

"If you were doing your jobs properly, your CSI would know the span of those claw and fang marks belonged to a male wolf, not female." She beamed a retaliatory smile in the direction of the male detective. *Ha, one point for me. Bring it on, bud!*

The female cop smiled at her. "Okay, if not a registered lycanthrope, who was it?"

Cassidy considered the cops' body language. The female hadn't looked too surprised when she'd mentioned a non-registered lycanthrope, they must have already checked. Considering the question carefully, Cassidy decided to let them have what she knew. "The animal may have been a wolf, but I think it was a different kind of lycanthrope."

"Why were you at the hospital the other day, Ms. Quinn?"

Cassidy's pulse jumped. He *had* recognized her from the hospital. *Had* noticed her. "I'm a private investigator and a friend called me,

wanted my opinion on a patient.” Cassidy pasted an earnest expression on her face. “Things aren’t always what they seem, Detectives. Trust me, I did not harm this victim or anyone else. I had no reason to.” She shook her head for emphasis. “There’s not much to add, but I can tell you if this attack was by a Were, he’s twisted somehow. I’ll bet he’s performed a ritual to become a shape-shifter. He may have been sane before, but definitely isn’t now.”

Logan’s partner spoke. “Thanks for all your help, but we need you to stick around, we may need to ask you some more questions.”

Cassidy wilted with tiredness. “I’ve answered all of your questions. Could I at least have my one phone call?” She watched in disbelief as Logan pasted on a sincere expression before answering her.

“Why, Ms. Quinn, you’re not under arrest. What gave you that impression? Of course you can call whoever you want.”

She gritted her teeth as she watched him leave the room.

His partner stood and made for the door before pausing and turning around to speak. “Ignore him. He doesn’t like surprises, and you’re not something he expected.”

Cassidy walked out of the interview room, toward the booking desk and grabbed the phone. The only person she actually considered calling was her older brother, Jace. Waking her mother at this time of the morning was not high on her to-do list. Drumming her fingers on the desk, she waited for Jace to answer. Cassidy heard the phone ring and the gruff voice that answered.

“Speak and it better be good.”

“Hey big brother.”

“What’s wrong now, Cassidy?” Jace growled into the phone.

“Why would you automatically think there’s something wrong?” she grumbled back.

A bark of laughter assaulted her ears.

“Because, darling sister, it’s three in the morning.”

Cassidy humphed in disgruntlement. “All right, I’m in the city police station answering some rather pointed questions about lycanthropes.

They want to keep me at this point to help with enquiries and I'd like some back-up here."

Dead silence met her statement for a moment. "If you can hold on for an hour I'll be there."

Jace hung up the phone without saying goodbye and Cassidy was left with nothing but dial tone. "Boy, I'm gonna get it now." She replaced the receiver carefully and waited for her brother to arrive.

On the dot of an hour later, she watched as Jace maneuvered through the obstacles of a busy police station. He dodged suspects and stopped to greet friends in the force. He was a small town cop now, but he'd been on a major metropolitan police force for seven years until a year ago when he'd almost been killed on the job. After that, he'd decided policing clan business and their local town was as far on the ladder of success as he wanted to go.

Jace paused right in front of her and considered her hunched-over form with a grim look. "Alright, let's hear the story."

Cassidy kicked a chair over to him, so he could sit.

"I was in a bar over in Monster Alley, working. I followed my client out into the street and lost him. Two strange men came up and while I was...umm...occupied, I heard a scream and the sound of breaking glass. I moved toward the scene, saw a man and a black wolf wrestling on the ground. The wolf dragged the other back into the store. The store caught fire, the wolf split and I went in, grabbed the man and dragged him out." She paused for a breath and carried on. "Of course, with my luck, I was forced to try a change."

Jace kept his gaze on her. "You're saying the assailant who killed the other guy was a Were?"

She sat straight. "Yeah, wolf. Wait a minute. The victim died?"

Jace nodded.

Cassidy sagged in defeat and cursed rhythmically. "Damn it. *Damn, damn, damn.*" Jace patted her shoulder in comfort as he stood and stretched. She knew he was trying to hide his worry with casualness. The

last thing Cassidy wanted was him protecting her; she would fight any suggestions of that nature tooth and nail.

“Who’s the interviewing officer?”

Cassidy contorted her face into a sneer. “Ah, Detective Patrick Logan. A man who seems to dislike me intensely.”

Jace started to laugh, great big belly laughs, which caused every female—and a few men—to turn to watch him.

“What’s so funny?” Cassidy asked in a huff.

All he did was laugh as he headed toward the detectives’ offices.

“Men.” She spat out the word. Her whole body vibrated in disgust.

Cassidy strode out of the holding and interview area. She could see off to the side, where her brother and Detective Logan were laughing. She stalked past the hilarious twosome in time to see her brother slap Logan on the back and motion with his hand for her to exit the station.

“What the hell?” she muttered as she prowled past, her disgust plain to both men. Cassidy marched through the doors and waited impatiently out in the parking lot by her brother’s car, her car keys clenched tightly in her hand. A nice young cop had given them back to her after he’d found them, along with her purse, on the road outside the burnt shop.

Jace’s hand reached around her and unlocked the car door. Cassidy climbed in and sat with a glare pasted to her face as she stared straight out the windshield. From the corner of her vision, she saw Jace still trying to bite back a smile as he concentrated on the road.

“Excuse me? Do you find it funny that I’ve been attacked, seen someone else assaulted and interrogated for hours in a police station?”

Jace let go of the grin he’d been trying to smother. “No, I find it funny one of my friends arrested you while you were naked. It’s a classic moment.”

Biting her lip in an effort to stifle any nasty comment she would regret later, Cassidy sizzled inside as she watched the road. *Big brothers they’re the pits.*

When they arrived back at her place, Cassidy sprinted upstairs to be the first in the shower. Jace had a habit of long showers and leaving no

hot water, so she made sure her shower was hot and long enough to annoy her brother. Taking her time drying, she shrugged into her fluffy, white, floor-length robe, before making her way to the kitchen for a snack.

Jace demanded an explanation from her as soon as she walked into the kitchen.

“What is going on? Not that you didn’t provide me with an interesting night and lots of ammunition for brotherly blackmail. But since you involved me I think I have a right to *know*.”

She sighed and made for the fridge and the rare roast beef inside. Reaching for the meat from last night’s dinner, she paused after grabbing it to reply, waving the handful around for emphasis. “You’re right, but it’s hard to know where to start.” Cassidy shoved her handful of meat into her mouth before watching her brother grab the rest from her plate. She sighed, “Brothers. Never leave food around. You won’t see it again.”

He grinned and flipped her the bird in a friendly, brotherly way.

“I got a call from my college friend, Maya. She had a patient that needed my expertise. It was a Were attack. Pretty savage.” She paused and marshaled her thoughts. “With the help of Ma, I managed to work out it was a ritual-turned Were who attacked him. Tonight was a fluke, an accident I stumbled onto.” She stood and tried to work the cricks out of her back.

“I told you, I was working at a bar in Monster Alley. I followed my mark outside and next minute, bam! I ran into some losers who wanted to take for free what they thought I was offering.”

Jace tossed a confused frown her way at the explanation.

She grinned and winked. “Don’t worry. I didn’t hurt them too much.” Satisfaction at the remembered incident still brought a warm glow to her insides.

He shoved out of his chair. “I’m not worried about them, fool. I’m worried about *you*.”

“Sorry. Look, I told you the story at the station, I don’t know anything else, but...” Cassidy paused in thought, unsure how to go on. “He knew me somehow, Jace. I don’t know how, but he did. It almost felt like an

acknowledgment, like he was saluting me or something stupid like that. He may possibly be the doer from my friend's case."

Jace's face became stone cold and closed. She knew worry would start to gnaw at him soon. Any minute now, he was about to make a statement she wouldn't like.

"Look, Cassidy, why don't I move in for a while, take a leave of absence. My deputy can handle the sheriff's office. I could run interference for you with Logan and catch up with him at the same time."

Her head started to shake before she even realized it. "No, I can cope with this myself. I'm not a little cub to be looked after anymore, even if I can't change all the way. Anyway, Ma is sure she's close to finding out the reason why I can't change. The burning question is how you know Detective Arrogant."

A grin flitted across Jace's face at her description of the handsome detective. There was no way in this lifetime Cassidy was letting her brother in on the fact she found his old friend very, very attractive. Otherwise, she would pay until he grew tired of the jokes, which would probably be never, if he had his way.

"What if I stick around for a couple of days, and hang out with Logan. I'll make sure you're okay and go home after. How about it Cassidy? If you agree, I'll tell you how I know Logan, quid pro quo?"

She considered, weighing up the brother annoyance factor, and decided she could risk it. "All right, I guess I can cope. But no ganging up on me with that *man*. Now dish the dirt if you value your life."

Cassidy crossed to the fridge and reached for more roast before getting comfortable in her chair to hear Jace's gossip.

"Once upon a time..."

"Jaaaace." Her tormented groan resounded through the kitchen.

"Okay, we both went to the Police Academy together and he was my roommate. We were out of touch for a while, but we actually play basketball together once a month now. Satisfied?" He eased back with a knowing smile.

She bit her lip. Damn, she was showing way too much interest for this to seem casual. Jace was sure to notice. He'd never let her forget it.

One thing was certain, if Cassidy managed to ignore Jace's teasing, the situation between her and Patrick Logan could become very interesting. A case of the rock meeting the hard place, given her own stubbornness. "How come I've never met him before if you were such good friends?"

"You were always away at camps, friends' places, college and stuff. You've heard me talk about him. It's not my fault you never paid attention until now." Jace smirked in a superior, big brother way. "By the way, don't walk around naked tomorrow. He's coming over to play hoops in the morning. Oh wait, it doesn't matter, Logan's already seen you naked, hasn't he?"

"That's it. I knew you couldn't wait to mention it. I've had enough. I'm going to bed. Don't worry about waking me in the morning. I'm planning on ignoring both of you, like you were a bad dream." Cassidy marched out, paying no heed to the peals of laughter echoing from the kitchen as she made for her bedroom.

She pushed through the door, shucked off her robe and crossed to the bed. Sleeping naked was the only way she could think of to thumb her nose at his comments. *You wait, I'll find a way to get back at you*, Cassidy fumed, easing her body into the bed and sleep.



Vague, amorphous figures grabbed at her as she ran past into the welcoming and comforting arms of her brother. Arms that protected with an enviable ease. Standing in the embrace of her brother, she sensed his dread.

A stench of wrongness permeated the surroundings. Polluted the very air she breathed. Evil had arrived and it wasn't happy with her, not at all. Both of them swiveled their bodies in unison, turning back and forth in search of the presence of those ever-watching eyes. Evil was close and it knew where they lived.

Chapter Five

The beast prowled through the night, stopping frequently to taste the air, muzzle uplifted. He was on a hunt, a search for another predator, the she-wolf. He scented the other beasts in the city, different kinds of animals.

None of those tasted of her. Except there it was, a whiff, a hint of her different aroma, overlaid with a trace of a deeper, more masculine tang. The animal pushed forward, following her path.

The man inside the beast knew where her lair was, where she lived. Clerical workers at the police station were easy to bribe for a name. The beast sensed her trail intermingled with another's.

Rage bit through him.

Inflamed him.

A red haze filled his sight as he came across a park with her distinctive trail dotted here and there.

So close to her. He tasted the feminine spice that was her marker. An apartment block faced the park. The animal scanned the building, searching for human heartbeats.

One of the mid-level units drew him closer, enticed him. The predator howled in masculine triumph, as what was lost now became found. The wolf twitched, jealousy and rage again gained a foothold inside. He sensed in the apartment a man lay slumbering, ignorant of the danger outside.

Thoughts of slaughter and death filled the beast's entire being, forcing him to action. Claws extended further from their flesh sheaths. Fangs glistened ivory in the early morning light. The man demanded

caution, his survival instincts stronger than the beast's jealous nature. He paused and concentrated on the usurper.

The other's aroma intermingled with that of the woman's. Similar, yet different, two sides of a coin, male and female. The man asleep in her den was of the same litter, her brother, not a potential mate. Although no man should be near it was more acceptable for him to be of her blood.

It was her right to claim safety and protection from a male in her clan. He was delighted there was no other sharing her bed, her life.

Not yet, he thought, pleased with his future mate. She was waiting for him to fill the empty place and he would, when it was time and she had been prepared. *Soon*, the beast rejoiced, *it would be soon*.

Cassidy jerked upright out of the light doze she'd finally fallen into after a night of disturbed sleep. Her dreams had been vague and nebulous and only served to wake her continuously throughout the night. Broken slumber exhausted her body even more than no rest at all.

Once again, it looked like a tornado had swept through the bedroom. Most of her blankets and sheets were on a pile on the floor. She'd also accidentally pierced her pillow with her nails and the stuffing had drifted all over the bed, creating a snow effect. Cassidy hunched over and placed her face in her hands. The dreams were getting worse, as if the animal from the other night was starting to haunt her, awake or asleep.

Pushing herself out of bed Cassidy grinned when she realized her nakedness. Nothing like proving your point when there was no one there to see it. Cassidy heard her brother moving around out in the living room. Jace had a disturbed night as well, he'd gotten out of bed a couple of times and paced the floor.

Dragging her running gear on, she made for the kitchen. Her brother had beaten her there and was guzzling a large mug of coffee already.

"Hey brother, how did you sleep?"

"Hunh." An unintelligible grunt was the only answer she received.

She took a closer look at Jace and noticed rings slightly shadowed underneath his eyes. "Are you all right? You look like a dog that's lost his bone."

“I didn’t get much sleep last night. I had some crappy dreams, kept me awake, okay?” Jace reached for the coffee pot for a refill.

Cassidy considered what he’d said carefully. “Um, you wouldn’t happen to have had a dream about protecting me from an evil thing watching us, would you?”

She watched Jace twitch as if she’d touched him with a cattle prod.

“I might have. Look, what’s going on here? How can we share the same dream?”

“I don’t know, but I have a feeling the animal from the other day has realized there’s another shape-shifter in his territory. I think he’s watching the apartment and we sensed it through our dreams.”

Her brain turned over the puzzle and she knew Jace was doing the same.

“Look, Cass, if that’s true, you need to get out of here, go somewhere he can’t get at you.”

Jace always worried away at a subject like a dog with a bone. Cassidy knew she was vulnerable, even if she refused to talk about it out loud. She smelled like a Were, but couldn’t change and that made her open to attacks and challenges. Her family had already tried to tell her she wouldn’t always be able to handle trouble with a quick mouth and a big gun. Cassidy grabbed her bottle of water in readiness for her run before turning around to face Jace. “No, you know how I feel about this. I’m staying, but I’ll be careful. Now can we drop this subject?”

Jace glanced at his watch and jumped. “Damn, Logan will be here in twenty minutes. I gotta get ready. We’ll drop the subject for the moment but it’s not over yet, little sister.”

Cassidy ignored him as she left the kitchen and let herself out. As soon as her feet hit the pavement she made straight for the park. Its lush green carpet called to her and stress from the night before drifted away.

The perfume of the freshly cut grass and the abundant red and yellow flowers dotted here and there infused her with a joy of the outdoors. Her primal, basic nature, reveled in the fact she was running loose and free. She felt her wolf grin, as they both enjoyed the freedom of

the jog. There was no way any animal, human or otherwise, would interfere with what this wolf wanted to do.

Cassidy's feet pounded the turf as she concentrated on her breathing and the exhilaration of burning lungs starved for oxygen. Time caught in a hiatus of pleasure, as everything flowed around her. She was there, but the world surged past, instead of her running through it.

Her body glowed with a pleasant tiredness when Cassidy rounded the outside of the park and made for the basketball courts. The boys should have started their game by now. It wasn't like she was checking on them. She only wanted to know if her brother was beating the pants off *that* man.

Ooh, there was a thought that had possibilities. *Shut up, Cassidy, you'll get yourself into trouble.* She grinned and crossed to the bleachers that faced the courts.

Her breath flew from her chest with an audible gasp, which left her trying to suck in available air.

"*Oh my.*" Her shocked gaze took in two male bodies glistening and gleaming with sweat in the morning air, their masculinity obvious as they blocked and weaved for the ball. Ropey muscles and sinews stretched and pulled as chests and arms heaved the ball into the air. Cassidy ignored her brother's form. She'd seen it before and besides, he wasn't as interesting as his friend.

Logan seemed the taller and more muscular of the two men. His chest was smooth with a smattering of silvery brown hair. Not like her brother who was a hairy wolf—pun intended—besides, he wasn't as spunky as Logan. Of course, this would not be admitted to anyone in the near future, especially not Logan or her brother Jace.

"Whoa there, Cassidy Quinn. You need to calm down a wee bit, before you start to swallow your drool and choke on it." She was behaving like a teenager. She was an adult and did not, absolutely did not, like this man in that way. Her body tightened in defiance of her orders, it wasn't listening to her brain. The body wanted what the body wanted. Cassidy tried to concentrate on the mechanics of the game as the action and the competition became fierce.

She watched as the two men, by a pre-arranged signal, stopped and squatted to rest. Her brother glanced over at her. Cassidy slunk down on the bleachers to make herself less noticeable, but Jace had already turned and was coming her way with Logan in tow.

Jace grinned at her as they neared her position on the bleachers. “How was the run?”

Cassidy ignored his comment. “Who’s winning?”

Logan smiled his superior male smile. “I am, by four points, Ms. Quinn.”

“Ms. Quinn? Who’s Ms. Quinn? Call her Cassidy. Ms. Quinn sounds like a maiden aunt.” Jace sniggered as he bent over and started to stretch to keep warm.

She tried to be gracious. “Call me Cassidy, since my brother has kindly invited you to.” She saw Logan fighting a grin as he agreed. A grin that absolutely devastated her system. *Wow*, he should market his smile as a heart starter. Her heart rate sped up and goose bumps raised themselves all over her body as she contemplated the man in front of her.

Her gaze drifted over his sleeveless shirt, to the thick muscled arms, which screamed hunk. She imagined those hard arms around her, touching, roaming her body. His flat washboard stomach grabbed her attention as his shirt rode higher when he stretched, to expose an arrow of brown hair trickling lower, leading her gaze lower. Cassidy’s mouth dried as she pictured what might await her there. Her body throbbed in places that hadn’t had a workout in a very long time and the fierce ache distracted her from the conversation.

“Fine, you can call me Logan. Rescued any men while naked yet?”

“What? Excuse me, can we drop this subject?” Shock at being dragged unceremoniously from her X-rated musings made her focus on the talk in front of her. Cassidy fumed while Jace and Logan belly-laughed together with such raucousness they scared a local flock of birds away.

“Ha, ha, you slay me. You’re both comedians of international renown. Now if you excuse me, I have work to do.” She stood with fists clenched

at the thought of these two bozos making fun of such a disturbing incident. Her gaze flitted to Logan's face and she watched as the cop flicked into being, like a light switch flipped on.

His voice seemed gruffer, similar to the night before. "I hope it has nothing to do with last night's case and you won't interfere in an active investigation again?"

Cassidy smiled angelically. "Why, that isn't any of your business, is it? Unless you care to take me into the precinct, cuffed and ready for an interview. In which case I would have my lawyer sue your ass so fast you wouldn't know what hit you."

She watched in disgust as Logan exchanged an exasperated male look with her brother.

"Well, in that case gentlemen, you won't mind if I go back home and take a shower. Wouldn't want to be late for my interview."

As Cassidy turned and marched off at a fast pace she heard a muffled explosion of sound from behind her. One of the boys had probably blown a gasket. A gleeful smile graced her face as she crossed the road and skipped into her block of apartments. Cassidy ignored the elevator and ran up the three flights of stairs into her apartment. Energy seemed to thrum inside her from the exchange of words in the park and she chose not to examine the reason why.

Chuckles continued to bubble out and escape as she walked toward the shower for a lightning quick dip under the water. Cassidy reflected on the conversation as she left the shower, edged into her clothes and out her front door in double quick time. Nothing like hitting back with a witty retort instead of discovering a come back when you've already crept home, wishing you'd said something cutting.

Still enjoying the moment, she jumped into her car and concentrated on the drive and what to say to the victim at the hospital.

Cassidy paused outside the door to the first victim's room, all mirth wiped from her as she contemplated what the poor man must have gone through to come out of this alive. The only survivor; the news didn't bode

well for any future attacks. She pushed open the door and glided in noiselessly, so as not to disturb anyone asleep.

Maya looked up from the bandaged figure she'd been leaning over in preparation for a consultation. "Cassidy, what can I do for you? Do you have any more information on the patient's condition?"

"Sorry I didn't get back to you, Maya, but things have been happening. Don't worry, he's not about to turn. In fact, you should have seen a reduction in symptoms a little while ago."

"Yes, last night, his senses decreased in sensitivity. Today, he's a completely normal human male, albeit with claw marks, which nearly eviscerated him. What else can I do for you, Cassidy?"

She breathed a sigh of relief at Maya's comment. Even though she knew nothing would have happened, it still didn't hurt to check to make sure.

"Look, Maya, I need to interview the patient, is it possible?"

Maya considered it and motioned her forward in agreement.

Cassidy stepped closer. The figure turned toward her at Maya's urging. The face was of an old man who had lived through a life of hardship and survived narrowly.

"Sir, my name is Cassidy Quinn. I'm a private detective. Is there any information you can give me about the beast that attacked you, anything at all?"

The injured man twitched, in denial of the facts then sagged in resignation. "I saw a greyish blur hit me out of nowhere." His whispery voice trembled with the effort of remembering.

Cassidy smiled her encouragement.

The man continued, shaky voice steadying while he gained strength and confidence. "I had finished locking the shop and I couldn't get back inside. The next thing I know it's got me on my back on the ground, about to rip my throat out." A look of terror rippled across his face. His hands clenched on the white sheet. "It was fast. How can you protect me from a monster that quick?"

Cassidy saw the man struggle with the pain and trauma of his memories as he continued on, spitting the words out like a speeding bullet.

“I thought I was dead, but someone disturbed it. I must have blacked out, because the next thing I know, someone is leaning over me in the hospital. I was sure I was dead.”

Sympathy made her change the direction of her questions. “What sort of work do you do, sir?”

The attack victim blinked with the suddenness of the change but followed gamely. “I collect and sell rare and old manuscripts, as well as ritual objects and information for other collectors and sellers. I’m the person the sellers contact to track the rare and hard to find.”

The pride in the man’s voice was obvious to both her and Maya. They watched as the man’s old persona reasserted itself over the tormented victim who lay upon the bed.

Cassidy’s internal antenna for trouble started to wave around as she connected the other victim. He had been a bookseller as well, but what else was linked?

“Have you sold any lycanthropy texts or any ritual texts on the subject lately?”

The man looked at her cagily and started to dissemble. “Well, I’m not sure. It’s been a pretty traumatic few days and I am an old...”

It was difficult to keep the disgust off her face and out of her voice as she tried to convince him to help her. “Look, I don’t care about the privacy of your clientele and I don’t even care if you broke any laws. I want to track the animal which attacked you so no one else will die.”

Fear showed on his face. “Die, someone died? Who died?”

She knew satisfaction at shaking the man would show in her eyes so she lifted her gaze and focused above him. “The second attack victim, another bookseller over in Monster Alley. Now will you tell me some names?”

Self-preservation warred with greed, but finally encouraged him to answer. “Yeah, I did, last week. I sold a rare handwritten text to three

people. Two were booksellers and one was a collector. The bookseller on Monster Alley was one of them.”

Cassidy tried to puzzle out the story, make sense of it in her mind. “You sold to two booksellers and a collector. Did you tell anyone else about the texts? Did you tell each of the buyers the other had bought the same text?”

The old man tried to bluster his way out of the corner she had painted him into. “*How dare you.* I sell only rare and singular texts. I would never contemplate selling multiple *copies*. I am offended by the very idea.” He huffed, puffed, and contrived to appear innocent.

Cassidy felt disgusted by the show. Any sympathy she had felt for the old man evaporated post haste. “Look, I don’t care what fraud you perpetrated. I care about the other people who might be targeted.”

The man scowled and gave in to the force of her argument. “I’m not a cheat, but it doesn’t hurt to have a few back-up copies lying around, in case of buyer demand. I have a few principles; I would never let the buyer know they have a copy or what they bought isn’t exactly one of a kind. Besides only one of the books was the original and I kind of left things out of the copies.”

Cassidy speared him an interrogative look that convinced him to spill the rest, as he hurried into speech again.

“Okay, I have a list at my shop in a book of rituals and spells for safekeeping. It has their names on it, everyone who bought the book on lycanthropic rituals.”

A cough from behind reminded her Maya waited for her to finish and leave. “What’s the name of the book and where is it in your shop? Also, are you sure you didn’t let anyone know about the other copies? It’s important, there had to be a way for the killer to track you.”

The old man considered her comment. “No one else knew, except for my assistant, but he wouldn’t have said anything. Besides, he left over a week ago and I would have fired him anyway for missing the previous week of work without calling me. He saved me the trouble.”

Her eyes narrowed at this possible loose end. The answer may help to connect the killer. “I want your assistant’s name and address, as well as the name of the *book* the list is in.”

He sighed and as a twinkle slowly appeared. “The book is called *Increase Your Staying Power Through The Basic Ritual*. Hey, we all need some help when we get older and the book is under my desk holding the leg steady.”

Cassidy snorted and motioned for him to carry on.

He did with a pain-tinged smile. “My good-for-nothing assistant’s address will be at the store in the employee file and his name is Edwin Archer. Don’t spread it around I’m helping you, otherwise I’ll never get any more customers in my shop again.”

Maya stepped in and placed her hand on Cassidy’s arm. “Look, I think it’s time you finished, Cassidy. The patient still needs time to rest.”

She agreed and, with a nod of thanks to the man, headed back out into the hallway. She turned as Maya exited the room. “Thanks for that, Maya. Will he be okay?”

“He’ll be fine, Cassidy. I think it helped to get his attack out in the open. Will you be able to find who is responsible?”

“The information helped, I’m sure it won’t be long before I find the culprit. By the way, do you have his shop’s address?” Cassidy pasted a smile on her face as she tried to convince Maya and herself everything would be all right.

“That’s what the detective said as well and yes, I do have the address. It’s three streets back from Monster Alley on the corner of Bolt and Murdoch, you can’t miss it apparently.”

Cassidy stared straight at Maya in consternation. “Detective? What Detective?”

“The detective who was here early this morning. Detective Logan, I think was his name.”

“Thanks again, Maya,” Cassidy replied with a strained smile. “I have to go, but I’ll talk to you soon to arrange a girls’ night out and to fill you in on what’s happening.” She watched as Maya returned to the victim’s room.

Damn that man, he must have the information as well. A watered down version at the very least, Cassidy thought as she turned around and motored back through the hospital. One step ahead of her, it was enough to make an angel swear! No matter, she would be the first to the shop, since he was still playing basketball with her brother. If she knew two competitive males, neither one would give in until they were both exhausted. That gave her some breathing space.

Space she desperately needed to hunt this killer before he could find and kill anyone else. She was betting the killer was on the list along with the other victims. Which meant there was also going to be at least one more attack on another seller.

“Time to get moving, Cassidy Quinn. Prove you’re the best. It’s time to hunt us some wolf.”

Chapter Six

Her bouquet filled his nostrils. Curled about him. Enticed, intoxicated and seduced him. The harsh, unforgiving slap of sunlight delayed, but did not stop him. His senses needed time to adjust and adapt to their new range. He hated the sun and preferred to travel freely during the dark, glorious night.

Nights were musty, damp and welcoming, like a mother or lover's arms, all encompassing. The shadows and the darkness were the beast's domain, the daylight belonged to the man. That's why together the man and the animal decided the man should hunt his prey in human form this time.

His upright body shifted forward, the movement awkward, but more predatory and graceful than it should be, than it had any right to be. The beast deep inside howled as he followed her trail into view.

The beast sent his lust-filled senses willowing in behind her as she entered the building. He had a name now and it was emblazoned throughout his body. A simple bribe had achieved what was needed, a name to match the face of his she-wolf. Finding her apartment had been no great feat. Following her to this shop had been an even easier task than the one before.

Perched like a squat demon within the watching man, the animal became a silent spectator invisible to prying eyes. If she decided to open her senses his presence would be felt, but she seemed unlikely to do that in the open.

He watched as she picked her way through the store like an agile, cautious animal in the territory of another predator. She jerked as if

reading his mind and tracked quickly back through the damaged shop, stopping at the doorway.

The animal inside of him sensed the rising temperature of her blood and her pulse accelerating to a faster tempo. A stray, familiar scent intruded on his musings. Red rage reared its head and demanded blood. He'd tasted that distinct aroma before, on her, in her dreams of a mate.

The vicinity of another male, a male other than himself, who could cause such a major change in her body, enraged him. His fury changed, became a vicious fiery passion, which threatened to consume his sanity—or what was left of it. The man forced the beast to recede, fighting what they thought of as a righteous anger. The man, the more willing to forgo blood for future vengeance. This grudge was not forgotten; it would be remembered and repaid in full.

Cassidy stood and stared at the run-down storefront. Someone with taste had spray-painted “dump” across one side of the building and refuse overflowed from the garbage bin to the sidewalk in front of the shop. The shop’s sign touting “Rare and Singular Books” hung lopsided and most of the letters had been blackened with grime until all that was visible to human eyes was “Sin”. The entrance to the bookstore was clear except for the body sleeping in the doorway and the door itself had been ripped away.

“So much for being a successful seller of rare and singular books. What a dump.” She maneuvered her way past the homeless man. The reek of stale urine and rotting food hit her as she progressed further into the stinking mess of the store.

“Obviously been a while since he had a cleaning crew in.” Cassidy screwed her face into a grimace of revolt. At least this store hadn’t burned like the one she had been caught in front of naked. The place had been torn apart by someone looking for a specific item. Maybe even the same list she was searching for as well. Bookshelves were upended, the stock strewn around and books had even been torn apart.

She tried to make sense of the mess, to gauge the direction where the desk was buried. Cassidy stepped into a storeroom doubling as a mini kitchen.

“Disgusting.” Her foot squished into something once a tomato, but now flat with green and blue fungus spots. All the food from the small fridge seemed to grace the floor and walls. Cassidy inched back as if the room was booby-trapped. The overwhelming stink of rotting garbage was even worse than her own cooking.

“I’m sooo not going in there. These are brand new heels.” She swiveled to the center of the front room to take her bearings. Her mind focused on the trashed room, she tried to visualize what it would’ve looked like if it had been clean.

“Now if I was a dirty, disgustingly messy shop owner, where would I put my desk and till?” She mused while nibbling on a fingernail.

“Probably in the corner. More room to brace things around me, make sure they wouldn’t topple.” She crossed to the far corner of the room. *“Bingo. Am I a genius or what?”*

She shoved a large pile of books and a small shelf out of the way and uncovered a grey desk, a filing cabinet and a till. Cassidy went for the filing cabinet and the assistant’s name first.

“Archer, Archer, aha, here it is, Edwin Archer, Thirty-two Wilmont. That’s around the corner from here.” She pulled the file out and flipped through it. “Nothing much else in here. Just the address. Can’t put it off any longer. It’s the book’s turn.” Cassidy shoved the file back in the cabinet and grimaced at the dust and other things on the floor. She was going to get very dirty.

With an expressive shudder, she crouched on the floor and tried not to touch anything. “Where is it? Damn it, I can’t see the bloody book.”

She pushed herself closer to the floor and peered under the upended desk. There was a pile of books under there. She pushed back the desk with ease and reached for the small pile of what looked to be dirty—as in men’s porn—books. Cassidy discarded all of them except one. “Eureka! We have a winner.”

Shaking her head in female disgust, she perused the lurid cover embossed with large phallic symbols. Symbols explicit enough she was embarrassed. This was not to be discussed with anyone, *ever*. She jiggled the book upside down until a sheet of paper floated to the grimy floor.

“About time. Now I get to blow this joint, as they say.” Cassidy turned and eased around the upturned desk as she threaded her way through the obstacle course of debris. She paused in the doorway as a strange premonition gripped her spine and held her, frozen like a statue.

It was out there. The beast. Watching her. She was sure of it. She could almost feel its hot breath on her cool cheek. Taste its dank, musky odor, like a coat packed away for a decade and forgotten.

Another presence plucked at the surface of her senses. Without conscious thought, she opened herself to it and was rewarded with a warm glow wrapped around her. Shaken out of the near trance that had captured her, Cassidy stared at the body stopped right in front of her.

“Should have known it was too good to be true.” Logan groaned under his breath. Figures. Cassidy staying out of his case was a fantasy that was doomed.

Cassidy licked her lips and cleared her throat before answering him. “What was too good to be true?”

Logan found himself tensing at the sheen of moisture left on her lips. A raft of hot skin on skin pictures slammed into his head. For a moment, he felt on shaky ground. Logan grasped at sanity, groping for his cover of professionalism. Any sign of interest from him would give Cassidy the upper hand and at the first sign of weakness, the Were in her would go for blood.

“The fact you weren’t in any trouble. The eternal hope you would be staying out of my case.” He paused a moment. “Quinn, are you all right? You look pale.” He grasped her by the shoulders, a frown creasing his brow.

She nodded in a weary manner. “Yeah, I’m fine. It seemed as if I felt something or someone watching me. It shook me. But I’m okay now, you can let me go.”

Logan searched her face to make sure she was truly fine. Suddenly, he focused on the grimy piece of paper she held. “Care to tell me what you’ve got in your hot sweaty little paws?”

Crap, she should have hid it. Cassidy gave up hiding the paper. “Would you believe my grocery list?” She watched, resigned, as he arched an eyebrow. “I didn’t think so. I interviewed the victim in the hospital and he gave me some information about who he sold the books to. This is the list of the people who bought the books on lycanthropic rituals.”

Sighing Cassidy scanned the names hurriedly before handing it over to Genghis Khan himself. He didn’t have to know she tended to remember everything that she read, did he now? She smiled sweetly at him as she calculated her next move, investigating the assistant’s apartment over on Wilmont.

“I don’t know you very well yet, Quinn, but I know that when anyone smiles like that, they’re planning on doing something I’m not going to like. You might as well include me on whatever you have planned because I’ll follow you anyway.”

She bit her lip at his perseverance, but capitulated. You had to know when to choose your battles and this was a minor one. “All right, I have the address of his assistant. The one who quit a week ago. Just before he would’ve been fired for not turning up for work. Curious?”

“I could be. Why don’t you take point and I’ll follow behind.” He turned to his car and glanced over his shoulder. “By the way, don’t think you can lose me. I’m a professional. Besides, it will be my pleasure to stick to you like glue.”

As soon as Logan’s back had turned, Cassidy poked out her tongue in retaliation and resolved to drive like a maniac to spite him.



Cassidy pulled into the driveway of a very old and weather-beaten apartment block. Her senses picked the sounds of many people crammed into a small place. Stale odors reeked of burnt onion and the sounds of screaming children bombarded her as she exited her car. She stood stock

still on the other side of her vehicle and stared at the crowded, housing commission building and tried to get hold of her senses.

“Are you okay? Quinn, can you hear me?”

She heard the concern in Logan’s voice, pulled herself together, and tightened her control on her wolf and her senses. There was no way she wanted to appear weak in front of this man, no way at all.

“I’m fine. This place stinks of stuff I would rather not concentrate on at the moment. It was a bit of a shock to the old senses, that’s all.” Cassidy strode forward, posture perfect in an effort not to show strain. She heard Logan mutter a swear word under his breath as they entered the run-down building.

“Why wouldn’t the elevator be working? It’s my luck to be cursed at the moment, I’m sure of it.” Cassidy grumbled as they walked past the cordoned off elevator with its out of order sign to the flight of grimy stairs shooting upwards.

“Do you always whine like this?”

She tossed her short hair in an arrogant snub as she took the lead and slowed to a lazy amble. It was petty, but he brought out the worst in her. Cassidy wasn’t turning around either. He’d have an insolent smirk from ear to ear that would drive her crazy. Ignorance *was* bliss.

“Here you go, this is his level.” Her teeth gripped her lip as she cautiously moved the stairway door aside, worried the one hinge that remained would break. Walking into the corridor she counted the doors. “Thirteen, fourteen, here we go number fifteen.”

Logan pushed her gently back. “If you’d let me go first, I’ll make sure there’s no one else lurking around inside.” His knuckles made a hollow rapping noise as he offered a vocal identification. “Police, we need to talk to the owner of this apartment. Hello? Hello, stand back from the door, please. We are coming in.”

Cassidy’s indignation at being shunted aside simmered. She knew he was a cop and had to be the first in, but it still hurt her ego to be on the sidelines.

Taking a deep breath to calm down she reached around Logan, placed her hand on the doorknob and squeezed. A popping sound

accompanied the squeeze, as she lifted her hand, the door squeaked open and the handle fell to the floor. Cassidy sashayed past him into the silent room.

“Not one for patience, are you?” Logan followed her into the room and grinned. “You must have been hell in high heels when you were a teenager.”

The tension lightened considerably as Cassidy wafted a smile over her shoulder. “You don’t know the half of it, bud.”

She tried to concentrate on the room and not on Logan. *Enough*, she ordered herself silently, *focus on the room, not the man*.

The nature of the room slowly asserted itself as Cassidy finally focused on the job at hand. “What a dump. He wasn’t exactly particular about the pigsty he lived in, was he?” Cassidy pitched forward as her foot caught on a pile of dirty plates.

Logan lunged and grabbed her as she was about to connect with the rubbish-laden floor. “Don’t insult pigs, they aren’t this dirty. Are you all right?”

She shoved herself away from him. “Yeah I’m fine. Let’s keep looking for anything that might help us.” Her skin tingled from Logan’s touch. Her mantra she kept repeating to herself silently thundered through her brain. If you don’t want to settle down, don’t touch the men who tempt you, even if they do put the flame in the fire. *No touch!*

She noticed Logan squatted on the living room floor, fascinated by something on the floor. Her mantra flew back down the stairs they’d scaled. *Oh. My. Check out those muscles in his butt and talk about tight glutes*. Cassidy felt her heart speed and the muscles in her thighs—and elsewhere—clench in reaction to the tidal wave of hot heat that swept through her. Her silence had gone on too long, but she couldn’t help it.

“Are you staring at my butt, Quinn? I could arrange for a closer look if you want?”

Cassidy gulped down the saliva that had gathered in her mouth. She was sure a humiliating blush of red had swallowed her face whole, but at least she hadn’t dripped saliva down his back. Now that would have been

embarrassing. This man brought out the worst in her. No doubt about it, she needed a distraction.

“You wish Logan. You wish.” Such a lame comeback, but all her frizzed out brain could think of at the moment. Cassidy glanced over to the dining room table and stared at the rotted remains of numerous takeaway dinners. “Well, he hasn’t been here for a while; these dinners are almost decomposed mush.” She prowled around the one room hovel and sniffed, hoping for a hint of something. The other predator’s taint hit her straight away. He’d been here all right, but not for a while.

“Your super-hound nose find anything, Quinn?”

“That’s wolf, thank you very much, I’m not a hound dog. However, in answer to your question, yes, my nose did find something. The beast’s been here, but not lately. There’s no blood though, if the assistant was killed, it wasn’t in this room.”

As Logan made for the bedside tables, she turned back to the dining table. Most people tend to pile things on the dinner table, she told herself. Cassidy gingerly lifted some of the wrappers from the takeout and poked at the papers underneath. A familiar looking slip caught her eye.

“Hey Logan, over here.”

“What did you find?”

“A deposit slip from First National and attached to it a receipt for an interstate airline ticket.”

Logan reached over and swiped the paperwork. “Looks like he came into some nice money, about twenty thousand dollars worth.”

“I don’t think our boy is missing, Logan. I think he’s skipped town after selling some information. What do you think?”

Logan agreed. “I’ll still contact the airlines with a description, but I’m betting your right.”

Revulsion covered Cassidy’s face as she tried to shake off a mold-covered piece of bun sticking to her fingers. “This man should be shot anyway for his housekeeping alone.”

Logan stared at her and, keeping his face straight, managed a snappy comeback. “If that’s an admission to a future crime, Quinn, I’ll keep you in mind if his body appears.”

“Did you crack a funny, Logan? I’m truly amazed my presence has worked a quick miracle. I’m proud of you.”

“I’m going back to the station to contact the airlines. Are you coming?”

“Thanks, but no thanks, Logan. I don’t think we’re made for a partnership. Plus, I’m going home for a shower and a delousing in case I caught anything.”

Logan turned and watched as she gracefully picked her way through the booby-trapped course of trash. There was something to be said for the predatory elegance all shape-shifters seemed to have. Grace under fire, his mother would say.

It was grace all right, grace of a predator out for the hunt. The problem was, with the grace Cassidy had a heavy dose of stubbornness. A hard headedness that may lead to bloodshed—and probably not hers.

Didn’t they say the woman was the more deadly of the species?

Chapter Seven

Time inched its way through the hours of darkness. The beast hated the end of the night, but with each day it brought him closer to her, his soon-to-be mate. Even if she had no conscious knowledge of their connection, her intuition would soon tell her their shared destiny was about to hit home.

The man shared the same dark lust and obsession for the woman, as the predator did for the she-wolf. Delays and the need for constant caution chafed at man and wolf. The desire to be one with her surged through him like a tidal wave. Beat away at the shores of his body.

Once again, the man counseled wariness. The other was too close to the law. Too many people watched her now. The nature of the predator had made her wary of others. Her instinct was strong, he must play a careful hand to outwit her. This attraction and the game she played unwittingly were akin to a chess match. To manipulate pawns in a series of moves had always been a hobby for him as a man. Now as a beast he was the Grandmaster. It didn't matter to him whether the pawns were plastic or flesh and blood. The outcomes were the same. Him winning, and her, the prize.



A shaft of sunlight hit a long bare leg covered in bath foam. Lilac bath bubbles reflected a kaleidoscope of colors. Easing back into the bath Cassidy radiated contentment. Steam rose in spirals and filled the room in a misty haze, like a fairy wonderland.

She was glad to wash off the grime from the lowlife's apartment. Who knew what she could have caught from the flea-infested rat hole? Cassidy leaned forward to switch on the radio and turned the dial to a channel of slow blues and jazz.

"Ahhhh. I'm never moving from this spot. Everyone can go hang for the next half an hour."

She let the steamy, hot water and aromatic bath salts work through her knotted muscles and tense brain. As the calming effects acted on her body, she switched her brain into detective mode and tried to puzzle out what was going on.

Obviously the killer had paid the assistant, Archer, for information about books on lycanthropic rituals. The killer must have also had contact with the original victim. Because the beast had known enough to go to the assistant afterwards, to find out who had other copies of the title.

The assistant had probably been paid off before the killer had completed the ritual. Lucky man, since the attacks and murders had started after the conversion. The beast obviously wanted to eliminate those on the list. Take out the competition. Odds were the killer's name was on the list, along with the other victims', with the exception of the old guy who'd sold the book originally.

There'd been three names on it and one of those was already dead. That left two names to be dealt with. Bethany had already given her the other addresses. At least it was a starting point. She would have to take it easy and not alert the murderer, if she found him.

Cassidy's musings were interrupted by the discordant clash of loud rock music that suddenly pumped through her apartment. The noise disturbed the deliberate serenity she'd tried to introduce.

"What the..."

Cassidy jerked and the abrupt movement sent water sloshing over the tub. The resultant wave surged back toward her, threatening to swamp her. She took in a mouthful of bubbles and hot water and nearly choked.

“That’s it! My brother has to go. I’ve had enough.” She gave up on the soak and stood, water cascading off her body. Cassidy gritted her teeth, grabbing a towel for a quick rub down before dressing and storming out.

Men. Brothers. Why on earth would anyone want to put themselves through the misery of living with one? It was time for big brother to make for home. Her sanity and their sibling relationship couldn’t stand another twenty-four hours of this. How in the heck did she survive adolescence with him in their home?

The living room was empty so she checked the kitchen. Shock kept her immobile in the doorway as she watched her brother cook himself some lunch. Almost every pot and pan in her kitchen had multiplied and was dirty with use.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Jace’s tuneless hum to his rock music stopped abruptly. “Oh, Cass, you’re home. I didn’t hear you come in.” He turned around and the pancake batter caked on his spatula dripped onto the floor.

“Oh my God. Look at the mess. Did you have to use every available pot and pan?” She threw her hands into the air in defeat and made for the sink to start washing the dishes.

“You don’t have to worry about anything. I’m a good cook and I’ll clean afterwards. Here, taste this.”

Jace turned to the stove, grabbed something and thrust a fork with a small amount of food in her face.

She opened her mouth in resignation, certain she would have to lie about how good it tasted. Her eyes lit as he shoved the fork in.

“Actually, it’s pretty good. What is it?”

He grinned with pride. “It’s a rare roast beef omelet and I have roast beef pancakes as well. If you want them?”

Shrugging, she tried for casual interest. But her nonchalant attitude was ruined as her stomach let out a lion’s roar of agreement. “Yeah, I’m hungry. But I’ll only eat as long as you clean every little scrap of food off the pans and put them away. Deal?”

As Jace agreed, she reached for a spare plate and started to shovel food on to it.

“Whoa, how hungry are you?”

Cassidy made a face at him and reached for a pancake. “It’s not my fault I’m one of those animals who can eat everything in sight and never put on weight. Besides, I had a run and that interview. I haven’t had a chance to eat yet.”

“How’d it go? Did you get any worthwhile information?”

Cassidy considered how much of an information dump she could afford to give him. “Hmm, enough to go on. I’m sure your close friend, Detective Pain-in-the-Ass, will tell all.”

Jace stared quizzically at her. “What’s the problem you have with Logan?”

Cassidy stood and placed her plate in the sink. “It’s not like I have a problem. He’s always there, in my face. Interfering in my case.” Cassidy turned around and crossed her arms over her chest in a defensive position. She didn’t want to tell her bother the real reason. Logan made her skin tighten and her blood pump.

“He’s trying to do his job and keep you out of trouble. Besides you probably antagonized him with your aggressive, bust his chops, attitude.”

“Ha, yeah right. I’m not the one antagonizing. Now, if you will excuse me, I have another potential witness to browbeat.” As Cassidy made for her room she yelled a threat over her shoulder. “You better have this all cleaned before I get home or I’ll tell Ma you feel lonely. The next thing you know, she’ll be over at your place arranging a blind date for you.”

Before he could throw something at her she fled back to her room.



She looked from the address on the slip of paper and peered at the road sign. “Fifty-two Whitehaven. Well this is Whitehaven.” Her car crept along the very expensive, house-lined road. Correction, down the gate lined road. No houses in sight, only very rich people in their security conscious homes. Whoever this dealer was, he certainly had money.

“Here we go. Fifty-two Whitehaven Road.” She peered over her car hood at the gilded security gate, with a speaker, buzzer and a video

camera attached to the side. Cassidy leaned over. "Excuse me? My name is Cassidy Quinn I'd like to speak to..." she consulted the list of names for confirmation, "...a Mr. Kyle Chandler. Could you please buzz me in?"

The speaker crackled to life and a flat monotonous voice blared out. "Go straight in, Ms. Quinn. You will be met at the top of the drive, for a security check."

"Geez, talk about paranoid. Security, check my..." Shrugging, she put the car into gear and took off up the driveway.

A large man in a black suit flagged her over and Cassidy pulled to a stop. "Talk about a palace," she couldn't help mumbling to herself while staring at the white elephant in front of her. The white columns, which surrounded the front entrance, made the house look like the outside of a temple.

The only spot of color on the entire outside was a red climbing rose, which snaked high on one side of the mansion. From the outside it looked sterile, as if the person inside would tolerate no life or love near him. Wide curtainless windows stared back at her, empty, devoid of emotion. Hopefully the inside was better, otherwise, in her humble opinion, the owner had wasted a lot of money on a boast of wealth. She drew her attention back to the black-suited goon in front of her as he waved to her again.

"You're fine to park there, Ms. Quinn. If you could step out of the car and face me, please?"

The man stepped forward and raised a small, mobile metal detector. He skimmed both her front and back, ascertaining she had only one small piece attached to her ankle.

"If you will excuse me, madam, I must have that weapon. You are welcome to retrieve this when you leave the property."

Cassidy handed over the weapon without a quibble. She was a shape-shifter, and a lot stronger than any normal male. As for the beast, if Cassidy *had* found him, it was doubtful he'd soil his own lair with a kill. She had more experience than anyone evading Weres. She'd been doing it for years with her siblings. When you're part of a rough and tumble family of Weres and not as strong as they are, you develop other talents.

Like dodging and hiding. Anyway, she could always try and overpower whoever dragged her outside. All bases covered, maybe.

The man led her inside the large palatial mansion and motioned for her to wait in the library.

She stared around her, curious as to the nature of the man who lived here. Beautiful, multihued, original paintings and sculptures stared back at her. A complete contrast to the passionless man she had first envisioned. Color was actually spread elegantly throughout the library. Cassidy angled toward the window and focused on a small sculpture that graced the windowsill. A woman, naked, back arched in the throes of strong passion stared back at her. She traced the woman's throat, bared, vulnerable to attack, but still powerfully mesmerizing.

"You're an art lover?"

Cassidy started at the sound of the man's melodic voice, surprised she hadn't heard his steps with her sensitive hearing. She'd paid too much attention on the art and not enough on her surroundings.

"Sorry if I startled you. I'm Kyle Chandler, but please call me Kyle. You have good taste; it's a one of a kind statue made for the last Tsar of Russia. The statue is carved out of amber. It can be very responsive to the touch. See how smooth the woman's body is? She's been held in quite a few caressing hands in her time." He reached around Cassidy and ran his finger slowly along the figure's spine.

With an effort, Cassidy managed to tell her hands to stop touching the statue. Turning, she faced the man with the hypnotic voice. "Um, sorry. I'm not an art lover, but it's beautiful, I couldn't help it."

"No, Ms. Quinn. I'm pleased. Art is supposed to evoke a feeling, whether good or bad. Now, how can I help you?"

"I'm here investigating a case that seems to involve you."

"Involve me? I'm intrigued. Go on."

Cassidy's nervousness increased as she fully focused on the man in front of her. Talk about Greek god! Tall, blond and charming, he could be aged anywhere between thirty-five and forty-five. Very hard to judge, but he exuded an air of confidence which only came with age and experience.

“Two men have been attacked and one of them has died. They were both rare booksellers, one had just sold a text on lycanthropic rituals, while the other had only recently come into possession of it.”

Kyle crossed to the side of the room, tugged on a bell pull. “Attacked and killed, how?” He turned as one of his staff entered the room. “Coffee, Ms. Quinn?” At her nod, he gestured to the quietly efficient server hovering like a shadow on the edges. “Sorry. Please do go on.”

“Both men were attacked by an animal, a shape-shifter. Their shops were either destroyed or tossed over.”

“I thought there was a covenant all lycanthropes lived by, like a witch. Something like, let it harm none?”

“There is a covenant most shape-shifters live by. They have to, to protect themselves and those they share soil with. We try to not purposely harm anyone with our family gifts, as long as our territories aren’t threatened.”

The server entered and offered Cassidy a black coffee with all the trimmings on the side. “Thank you.” She smiled at the older man who served her.

“Now, Ms. Quinn, you mentioned we? Are you a lycanthrope as well?”

“I am.”

“If the attacker is a Were, why did this person break the covenant? How does this involve me?”

Cassidy placed her coffee on the small antique table in front of her, careful not to knock anything over. Goddess knows the old adage, you broke it, you bought it, would probably bankrupt her here.

“The person who attacked is not part of the covenant. He converted himself to a Were after a ritual. This concerns you, as your name was on a list I obtained from a bookseller who sold you and two others the same text on lycanthropic rituals.”

“Well, that crafty old man. He wasn’t exactly a seller of singular texts.” Kyle leaned back and chuckled.

Confusion swept through her. Shouldn’t this man be angry? “Umm, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but why aren’t you mad?”

He laughed again. "I consider myself an expert so to be cheated by a sleazy bookseller is amusing. There's not much these days which makes me laugh, but that's one of them. Besides, I assume he was one of the men attacked. Which means he's been justly punished. He wasn't the man killed, was he?"

"No, he's had a lucky escape so far. Unfortunately you or the other name on the list may be at risk from the predator."

"Are you assuming the animal is after the books or is killing those of us who have the books? Maybe the killer is trying to cover his tracks and his name is actually on the list?"

"Something like that. Have you seen anything suspicious which might indicate the beast has been sniffing around, so to speak?" Cassidy watched closely, to see if this contained man let anything slip through his mask.

"Yes, the last two nights running we've heard a wolf. Every morning after we've found a dead carcass of a small animal left on the ground. Should I engage more security staff? Is he after me?"

"I don't know, but it's safe to assume you could be in danger, maybe it's not such a bad idea? If you don't mind me asking, why did you buy a text on lycanthropic rituals?"

His husky laughter in answer to her question ignited her nerve endings. *This is a very intriguing man.*

"Forgive me. I come by it naturally. My father was a Professor of Antiquities and my mother taught folklore and magic at one of the large colleges. They started collecting books, paintings and sculptures on anything magical and mythical, including shape-shifters."

Cassidy tried to concentrate on what Chandler told her, but it was too hard. He was incredibly handsome, not to mention charismatic. Talk about weird. She must be in heat. First Logan, now this man. Maybe she needed to go out and get some. The only good thing was now this man had crossed paths with her, he might be able to help get her mind away from Logan.

"I have a pretty extensive collection. Would you like to view some of it now?"

Without conscious thought, she replied, “Is this equivalent to come and see my etchings?” She felt a red heat flash into her cheeks and ducked in mortification. The sound of his rich, untamed laughter swelled and burst like a big bubble, causing her to shiver in awareness.

“Thank you for the compliment, but alas, I don’t actually own any dirty etchings. I can offer you some very suggestive sculptures. Would you be interested?”

Cassidy mumbled under her breath, “Very, but that’s another story.” She stood and smiled to cover her embarrassment and her sexual awareness of him. “I don’t know about the sculptures, but I’d be interested in what you have on Weres. So your parents collected art, do you or your siblings contribute as well?”

“I add in favorite pieces now and then. As for siblings I had an older sister, but I haven’t seen her in awhile.” Kyle motioned her to precede him. “If you’d move into the entrance way, I’ll show you my collection.”

She stared in awe at the riches surrounding her. Beautifully woven tapestries hung in blazing splendor on every wall. The subject matter ranged from the hunt and kill, to mating and loving. All connected to mythical beings such as unicorns, elves, gods and goddesses, vampires, lycanthropes and even a phoenix.

“Oh my, this is beautiful.”

“See? You are an art lover. You certainly have a taste for the antiques.”

Cassidy prowled through the room and gravitated to those items depicting her culture. She paused in front of a sculpture that showed a shape-shifter in mid-change. A cat this time, not a wolf. Shivers of awe and appreciation trailed down her spine.

“Over here, Cassidy. If you don’t mind me calling you Cassidy? There’s an item I would like to show you.” He placed his hand on her back and directed her to the back of the room.

She felt the tingles cascade again. This time related to the hand placed in the small of her back. She stepped forward, away from the

hand and glanced up. Cassidy focused on the tapestry in front of her and a gasp escaped her.

The figure of a half-man, half-wolf lay at the bottom on the tapestry. She saw the torment and terror on the face of the part animal as a shining figure with a finger outstretched stood over him. In the background, menacing hooded figures stood watching, next to glistening gold bowls of food. Food had been upturned and the contents dumped. The colors of the hanging still retained the impact of shock and horror on the unwary. Even after hundreds of years.

“The wall hanging is very powerful, but I’m not sure what the matter refers to?”

Awe of the tapestry and the talent used to create it shocked her speechless. She felt her mouth drying and flicked her lips with her tongue. Gathering her emotions together, she inhaled deeply. “The supposed origins of the shape-shifters aren’t widely known, there are differing theories. But this hanging depicts the beginning, or at least what some historians tell us is the beginning. The god Jupiter cursed King Lyacer into a half-man, half-wolf beast, a lycanthrope. The king was cursed for serving human flesh in a feast to the god. An insult punishable by death. Instead, Jupiter chose a punishment, which would not only affect the king, but every one of his descendents. Eternally.”

“What an amazing story. Do you think it’s true?”

“I don’t know, but here we all are and it’s as good a story as any. By the way, your collection is amazing, but why isn’t it on loan to a museum? I’m sure there’s plenty who would pay for it.”

“I’m selfish. I want the collection all to myself and the privileged few who are admitted to view it. The museum gets the whole set when I die, anyway. I want to enjoy the pieces now. Wouldn’t you?”

The siren lure of the collection still held her and she inclined her head in agreement with him.

“Actually, Cassidy there’s a question I would like to ask you, since we are on the topic. Would you go to the museum’s fundraiser with me? The museum’s Mad Monday ball is an entertaining night I’d like to share.

Short notice, I know, since it's tomorrow night. But I could show you their collection and you could protect me from the big bad beast?"

Cassidy spun around and found him flush against her body. She stared into his eyes, and felt the pull of a dark attraction, purely lust and nothing else. "Umm, okay, I probably have a dress somewhere. Are you sure you want me to go with you? You hardly know me."

"I wanted to ask the instant you touched my amber sculpture. Besides, I'd like to know more about you. If it's a yes, I can pick you up at seven?"

"No, it's okay, I'd rather meet you there." Cassidy tried to inject a little sense into her brain and mouth. She'd only met this man and even a Were had to be careful. "Just to be on the safe side." She eased back from him and cut the eye contact, unnerved by the closeness he wanted to foster. With a shaky sigh, she strolled back to the entranceway of the long room that housed his collection.

"I have to be going now. I've got a date I have to find a dress for." She tossed a teasing smile at him as he eased in behind her.

Cassidy made sure she sauntered down the marble staircase, toward the entranceway. She grinned, there was something satisfying about making a guy's eyes glaze over.

Chapter Eight

Cassidy breezed through the door of her office the next morning and greeted Bethany. “Hello, hello. How are you? Weekend good? Mine was very, very interesting.”

Bethany glared at her. “It’s Monday, why are you happy? Did you get some? If so I need details, *now*.”

She laughed. “No, I did not get any, but I do have a date for tonight. You’ll have to help me shop. I’m going to the Museum Ball tonight, *wahoo*.” Cassidy spun around on the spot and laughed as she saw Bethany smirk at her.

“Whatever you say boss. Does it mean we have the day off to choose a dress? I mean, a day off, after you see the man who’s in your office.” Bethany indicated the closed door, which generally meant a client was inside.

Cassidy sighed at the thought of coping with another slimy customer while she was in such a good mood and strode into her office. Her first impression as she made a beeline for the man in the chair was one of slovenly untidiness. The large man had an out of place cherubic, fat face, which glowed with a sweaty flush.

His bald head glistened in the artificial light of the office and his brown eyes glinted maliciously, like he was enjoying a cheap shot at someone else’s expense. An inexpensive grey suit hugged his massive girth, with the buttons almost popping open and sweat patches adorning the underarms of his jacket.

“Hello, I’m Ms. Quinn. What can I help you with?” She eased behind her desk, sat back in her chair. Focusing on the man in front of her she let her impressions flow.

“It’s not what you can do for me, but what I can do for you, love.” The grimy man gave her a suggestive wink.

“I have no idea what you are talking about, but I doubt if you could do anything for me.” Cassidy ignored what the dirty man—in appearance and nature—was implying.

“Look, sweetheart. I heard you were looking for me for some reason. I’m a bookseller of certain particular tastes, if you know what I mean? Are you interested?” He winked at her again.

“You have got to be kidding. You’re a bookseller of lycanthropic rituals?”

“Ya mean werewolves and stuff? Na, I supply men who want to have a read and a bit of a slap and tickle at the same time.”

“Porn? You sell pornography? Why would you buy a book on rituals of a shape-shifter?” A very confused Cassidy stared at the man.

The man’s chubby, red face grew still. “Why would you want to know that for? You the cops?”

“Get real, do I look like a cop? I’m better paid for one, and two, I don’t have someone else looking over my shoulder at everything I do. Now back to the subject of shape-shifters. There’ve been some attacks on the men who bought the text. I need to find the attacker and I want to know any information you have.” She watched as confidence seeped back into the seated man.

“Sweet pea, thanks for the worry, but I’m fine. No one is gonna mess with this ole boy, trust me. I have a secret weapon that means nobody will go head-to-head with me.” He grinned, exposing a row of dirty teeth. “Anyway, I suppose I should thank you for letting me know. I hadn’t heard about the attacks and I like to keep informed.”

The fat, seedy-looking man suddenly exuded a quiet menace which chilled. Cassidy gave him the once-over again and noticed for the first time, although he was fat, he was tall and solid as well. A canny intelligence burned in his eyes and she decided to open her senses to try and gauge him.

Immediately, an aura of blackness and death hit her, threatening to overwhelm her. Cassidy broke the connection and slumped back in her

chair, watching his every move. She may have found the animal she was looking for.

“What sort of weapon are we talking about, sir? By the way, why would you need a text on those certain rituals?”

His dark aura snapped off and disappeared, like a broken current had been grounded. “Well missy, it’s none of your business. But I have some good friends who will take care of me. As for the book, I thought it would have some dirty pictures of human and animals going for it.”

Disgusted with the dangerous filth who sat in front of her, she gritted her teeth together to stop from growling at him. “You’re telling me you never meant to read the book, only look at the pictures? At least it’s a turn around from buying a dirty magazine for the articles and not the pictures.”

Cassidy toyed with a pencil as she rested her weight on her elbows on the desk. “You think that you can protect yourself against a super strong animal who has attacked two people and killed one already?”

“Listen, hon. I’ve got friends in high places, who if they know what’s good for them will help me out. Ain’t no one gonna toss and burn my shop out, let me tell you. I—”

He went deathly silent, as if he had let too much information out of the bag.

“Well, well. I thought you hadn’t heard about the attacks yet? Seems to me, sweetheart, you know a little more about this than you’re telling?” Cassidy reached for the phone. “Why don’t we see if the *Fed’s* are interested in you?”

“Now, hold on there. I’m sure I could help you out in some way.” Sweat speckled the man’s bald head.

“Tell me how you knew about the looting and burning and where you were when the attacks happened?”

“Okay, I knew because one of my friends rang me after he saw the store on Monster Alley explode. He was one of the, umm gentlemen, who wanted to talk to you in the alley, outside the bar. As for an alibi, check the reservations at Bettino’s, the Italian restaurant. I was there with some friends until eleven when we retired to their hotel.”

She watched as he brushed off the sweat with his hand and wiped it on the chair. *Note to self, get the cleaners to fumigate the chair later.* “All right, I believe you, now get out of here. I don’t want to see you again.”

As he pried himself out of the tight-fitting chair, the fat gentleman’s double chins quivered. “Allrighty, sweet pea. I’ll check ya some time soon. Pop in if you want some light reading matter.”

“I’d get some good bodyguards or check in with those friends if I was you. You never know what might happen.”

The fat man ignored her and shifted past Bethany.

Cassidy shuddered as the revolting man disappeared, but she considered what he’d said. On the outside, he didn’t feel like the beast who’d been stalking her. But who knew how his personality changed when his body went through the conversion. There was still something dark that seemed to swirl around him. The beast hadn’t bothered him; otherwise he would’ve been worried.

“Hey, boss lady. Can we go shopping now?”

Her musings were interrupted by Bethany’s excited babbling. Cassidy grinned and put the problem out of her mind for the moment and concentrated on making herself look fantastic.



“How about this dress? Does my butt look big in it?” Bethany smoothed the dress over her well-rounded hips and turned around to query Cassidy.

“Beth, trust me, you look great. Can we find a dress for me now?”

Her plaintive request made Bethany laugh. “Okay, sorry about sidetracking us. Hey, you never told me who was taking you to the ball. The hunky cop, maybe?”

Cassidy snorted in disbelief. “I don’t think so. The man who is taking me is the guy I went to interview yesterday. Kyle Chandler.”

“You let a guy you’re interviewing, who is either attacking and killing people or is going to be attacked and killed himself, take you to a ball? Honey, what have I... Hang on, Kyle Chandler? The man, who donates millions of dollars a year to all those charities? The man who is on all the

best dressed lists and magazines around? Whoa, we need to get you a knock-out dress.” Bethany stripped off the dress double time and threw her own clothes back on.

She shoved Cassidy at the shop assistant. “Quick, get her a dress that will knock everyone’s eyes out. She’s going to the Museum ball with Kyle Chandler.”

Cassidy sat back and watched as the assistant became electrified and dashed here and there, grabbing gowns to fit her.

Bethany grabbed the top three and shoved them at Cassidy. “Quick, pop these ones on. Give me a call when you’re zipped.”

Cassidy stepped into the changing room and slipped on the uppermost dress. The sight that met her made her want to gag in disgust. The dress was cut to her naval and highlighted the fact she didn’t have much on top. Quickly unzipping and slipping into the next one, Cassidy bit back a giggle. This time she looked like a sallow tangerine, orange was definitely not her color. Her eyes lingered on her reflection in the glass. Short, black hair tumbled and curled around her face. Tall muscled body and plain brown eyes. She didn’t look old enough to drink, let alone track a killer.

“Cass, hurry. Do you have the dress on yet?”

“I tried two on and I’m about to slit my wrists before walking out there, no offense to the designer. I’ll try the other one on now.” Yanking the offending dress off she zipped herself into the last outfit from the pile and stared transfixed at her reflection. The dress was a halter neck, black satin number gathered at one hip, with sparkling stones. Cassidy stepped out into the shop and looked at her friend.

“Wowie, that’s the one. With your hair and makeup done, you’re going to look like a million dollars.” Bethany grinned like an idiot and extended her hand, palm up. “Now fork over the credit card and we can take this baby home.”

Cassidy handed over her credit card and tried not to wince at the tag hanging off the dress. She twirled around like she was dancing and smiled dreamily as she thought about the reaction Logan would— *Hang*

on there champ, she told herself, try Kyle, remember him, your date?
Disgusted with herself she headed into the cubicle to change.

Come on Cinderella, it's time to go to the ball and let somebody else take your mind off Prince Not-So Charming.



Jealous, rabid with the surge of emotion, the man prowled outside. A shadowy thief who cased the building for a future crime. The predator kept to the shadows as people arrived at the brightly lit building. He heard the multitude of heartbeats. Sensed their blood pumping. The animal knew his mate would be here. That she had arranged to meet a man here. He knew everything about her, he could find any information out about her and all it took was a focused will. The beast could even sense the man she had come to meet.

Rage threatened to take his conscious mind hostage at the picture of her with another mate. The beast forced his thoughts from the path of madness and concentrated on her distinctive aroma, which was becoming stronger.

He focused on a shape in the darkness, illuminated by a passing car's headlights. She was here; her unique marker filled his nostrils and gathered around him. The beast drew further back into the shadows as he noticed she skittishly glanced around, looking for something or someone.

Good, let her be aware some dark monster was out here. Let her wonder and worry as to what his next step was. As long as she was anxious, her mind was still on him and no other.

Soon there would be no shadows or human obstacles between them. She would be wholly his.

Chapter Nine

Cassidy stared at the delicate, gold-embossed watch gracing her wrist, a loan from Bethany—scratch that—pressed on her from Bethany, who assured her it completed the package. She checked her watch again. Bethany had taken so much time dressing her, playing with the makeup and driving her to the museum, she was now late.

There wasn't much to be done with her hair since it was short, but the wavy, nineteen twenties look Beth had produced suited the dress and Cassidy down to the ground. She wished it hadn't taken so long. Cassidy took a quick look around her, unsettled for some reason. A vague feeling of unease tickled at the base of her spine.

Her worry area, her mother called it. She tended to feel the tingles when she couldn't see anything outwardly wrong. A nebulous feeling, that something or someone wasn't quite right, was out of place. She shook off her disquiet and slipped from the shadows to the light in front of the Museum steps and glanced around for her date. The museum looked amazing with the light show going on over the top of the building for those who couldn't attend. The columns around the building reminded her of Kyle's mansion; they had the same austere design.

Speaking of Kyle, she couldn't find any sign of him at all, but the sense of being watched seemed to increase. Feelings of awkwardness and imminent danger increased tenfold and she shifted nervously on the spot in her stilettos. Hopefully Kyle hadn't given up on her and he was only late himself.

"My God, Cassidy, you are simply breathtaking in that outfit."

A voice out of nowhere seemed to grab her and wrap around her with husky warmth. She turned and smiled into Kyle Chandler's eyes, her

unease disappearing as she peered slightly down at him. Being five-ten and wearing stilettos may have been a mistake. “Why, thank you, kind sir, you don’t look too bad yourself. Sorry I was late, have you been here long?”

“I walked up at the same time you did, luckily. Come on, we should probably try and brave the crowd inside.”

Cassidy grabbed the arm Kyle offered and they moved forward into the glittering fray. Pausing as they entered the museum Cassidy stared in awe at the throng of beautiful, dancing couples spinning around the floor. “Well, they certainly pack it to the roof, don’t they?”

Kyle laughed. “The more people in the room, the more chances there are on getting a donation. Sorry, that sounded cynical, but it’s true. Would you like to dance?”

She smiled at him and they twirled off into the mass of heaving humanity doubling as dancers.

Cassidy felt his heartbeat and smelled the musky odor that hung around him, not an unpleasant aroma, only different. Other scents tried to compete with his as the push of perfumed bodies swirled around her. She’d shut her special senses completely off tonight, knowing she would be bombarded by the crowd. Due to the press of the crowd, their bodies seemed to drift against each other and float away again. A cat and mouse game, where no one was the winner or loser.

“Any luck in finding the thing that attacked my colleagues?”

Jarred out of her pleasant reverie by his un-loverlike question, Cassidy marshaled her thoughts “Umm, no. No luck since I spoke to you. Although, I did interview the last name on my list. I don’t know if he’s the one, but there’s something strange about him. I’m not quite sure what, but I’ll find out.” Cassidy felt uneasy at the question. He seemed very intent on her answer. Mind you his life was at risk, she would probably feel the same way. Kyle spun her around and Cassidy lost her balance, as he pulled her flush against him.

“Sorry, it’s packed in here. Would you like to grab some refreshments instead?”

Cassidy agreed, but for a moment, she could've sworn he'd deliberately pulled her off balance as a way to change topic. She shrugged, probably her imagination. They threaded their way to the outside edge of the dance floor. Thank goodness, it was less packed here near the edge of the dance floor and the bar.

"Mademoiselle, what would be your libation for the night?"

"Lemonade would be fine, thank you."

"Please, you're not on duty tonight. What about a glass of white wine or extremely expensive champagne?"

"No thanks, I don't drink alcohol a lot. I'm more comfortable with lemonade."

"Would you like to sit out on the terrace and sip your terrifyingly decadent lemonade?"

Cassidy smiled in amusement at his comment. "I would love to, lead the way." Cassidy followed Kyle as he pushed his way through the tribe of people gathered around the bar.

Cassidy glided outside with an ease that was completely faked. She felt awkward around this man. Yes, he was attractive and charming and there seemed to be a spark between them. There was no common ground, other than the fact he collected lycanthropic art works and she was a lycanthrope. That was all. "Umm, it's a bit cold out here, don't you think? Maybe we should step back inside after all?"

He sat on an old stone bench perched in the darkened corner of the terrace. "I thought shape-shifters didn't feel hot and cold as intensely as humans did? I'm not cold and I'm your plain garden-variety man."

She shrugged, walked over to him and perched on the absolute end of the bench. "I don't know, maybe I'm coming down with something and that's why I feel cold."

"Well, maybe if I place my arm around you like this, and if you lean into me, you might feel warmer."

Kyle lowered his arm to her shoulders, gripped firmly and pulled her into the crook of his shoulder and chest. Cassidy wondered why she wasn't feeling anything more than she was. This was frustrating. She still

couldn't wipe Logan from her brain and actually felt disloyal and mean for using this charming man to blot out the other.

"Kyle, I'd love to have a dance again, could we go back inside? I'm not interested in having the lemonade anymore." Cassidy casually pulled herself away, stood and placed the lemonade on the bench behind her.

For a moment Cassidy caught an intense look of irritation across Kyle's face. But he controlled his facial features and, with a charming smile, motioned for her to precede him.

The music from the ballroom greeted them as they entered the room again. Cassidy sighed from relief at the change in venue. She wanted to pull Logan from her brain synapses and Kyle could help her do that. She just didn't want to compromise herself in the process. Cassidy spun around and smiled winningly at him. "Would you care to have this dance, sir?"

"It would be my pleasure." He gently took her hand and led her to the crowded dance floor.

The music swirled around them as they twirled around the floor and tried to avoid the other couples who were having the same problem with space as they were.

Another laughing couple collided with them and Cassidy went flying, only to bang against a familiar, hard chest.

She glanced up, inwardly telling herself, *No way, it couldn't be, could it?*

Logan smiled at the bundle of disgusted woman he held in his arms. "You'll have to get a frequent flyer card, the amount of time you spend in the air."

"What are you doing here? Are you following me? Because if that's a yes, you are going to cop it big time, pun intended."

"Whoa there, tinkerbelle. I was invited because I did the security planning for the museum's latest project and they wanted to reward me. Why don't you calm down? By the way, I think your date is feeling left out."

Logan let her go and got out of Cassidy's way. Bloody good thing too, or she might have been tempted to use her stiletto's on his body. He

contemplated all the nasty things she could do to him, not to mention a few not-so-nasty things. His pants tightened until it felt like blood-flow was constricted. Distracting himself, Logan looked at Cassidy just as she glanced back over her shoulder. Her date wasn't a happy camper, banked jealousy looked like it bubbled behind his eyes and Logan could almost see the steam blow out through the other man's ears.

"Kyle Chandler, I'd like you to meet an old friend of the family, Patrick Logan."

Kyle inclined his head distantly. "Yes we've already met, he interviewed me after you left yesterday."

Logan offered a cool greeting. "Chandler, been bitten by anything lately?"

"Why no Logan, I haven't, although that will hopefully change later on tonight." He smiled meaningfully at Cassidy and gave her a wink.

Cassidy watched Logan scowl and squirmed, uneasy. She didn't want any bloodshed on the dance floor otherwise she'd never be able to live it down if anyone heard about it.

"Back to yer corners, boyos, the bell has rung. This is not the time for a bit of biff." The husky voice with a heavy Scottish burr eased over the tension and dampened it.

Cassidy glanced behind Logan and spotted a small woman with flaming red hair, spliced with silver strands, peering at them.

Logan spun around. "Sorry, I didn't introduce you. Ma, this is Kyle Chandler and this is Cassidy Quinn, the sister of an old friend of mine. You've met her brother, Jace. Everyone, this is my mother, Molly."

"Oh, yes I remember now. That lovely man is yer brother? Well, I see now, there is some family resemblance, nice to meet you."

Cassidy smiled a greeting and chose not to examine her feelings of relief at his date being his mother.

"Now, it's all sorted out, why don't you take my son out for a dance while I converse with this sinfully handsome man you have here?" Molly smiled and shooed the two of them off, while wistfully gazing into Kyle's annoyed face.

Kyle's manners came into play and he offered his arm to the sprightly lady.

Logan maneuvered Cassidy onto the dance floor and grasped her gently in his arms. She tried not to think about the feel of his rock hard body next to hers. A body that seemed to be getting harder every minute. She tried to dislodge the distracting thought and concentrate on what he was saying, not those luscious lips.

"You didn't need the list, did you? You memorized it before I even took it off you. What's it going to take to try to get you to back off?"

"Do you think anything you do will work? Besides I'm involved now, I had a visit from a name on the list. He seemed dodgy, something about him sparked off my spider sense."

"Cassidy, I thought you were a werewolf not a spider."

She blew a breath out in a huffy fashion. "Excuse me? Do you have a sense of humor? Spider sense, Spiderman, you know—the movie? Man, you need to get a life."

He gave a smirk. "Having a fun time with your date?"

Cassidy raised her head, narrowly missing Logan's chin. "Excuse me? What business is it of yours?"

"You're right, none of my business, but watch yourself, he's out of your league."

"League? Out of my league? You pompous twit, like I care what you think. Now if you will excuse me, I think I've had enough of dancing with a moron." She wrenched herself away from the lovely feel of his warm body and stormed off toward their partners. Her fists clenched and she tried not to imagine what sinking her fist into his thick skull would feel like.

If Kyle saw the comedy unfolding between them, he would know there was nothing to worry about with the detective. She felt like she was about to blow a gasket. Definitely *not* a serious concern.

Smiling as she reached Kyle, she tried to damp down her anger at Logan. "I have to go to the powder room. And honestly I'm tired, would you mind if we called it a night?"

“Of course, if you’re tired, I’d be happy to escort you home,” Kyle agreed without protest.

She turned toward the ladies’ powder room, the headache mentioned suddenly a reality, not a fiction.

Cassidy practiced a gracious smile as she headed back to the others. “I’m ready, do you mind if we leave now?” She turned to the others. “Nice meeting you, Molly. Logan, always interesting. Hopefully I won’t be seeing you any time soon.”

Kyle motioned for her to precede him, making a dismissive motion to Logan while gracing Molly with a sweet smile of goodbye as they passed them.

“Thanks Kyle, there was one too many people in the room for me.”

“Trust me, it’s not a problem, Cassidy. We can do this another time, somewhere more quiet maybe.”

Cassidy winced at the implication. She wasn’t too sure how she felt about going on a date again. First things first, bed for the next eight hours was her only priority.



The usurper was here, the beast knew it, could see him. Smelled the longing exuding from the other’s pores when the man neared her. His familiar blind rage filled his mind and grew till it became an immense demon consuming all in its path. Both man and animal’s grasp on sanity receded and left behind in its wake, were blood, death, kill and pain, lots of pain.

Unseeing humans whirled in front of the animal hidden in the shadows of the stairs. She couldn’t see him like this, he would not have it. His mate would run screaming into the night, her predatory courage fled in the wake of his demon fury.

The thought grabbed his anger and flushed it from his veins, left him weak with relief at the close call. The man and beast watched, as she danced past in the arms of the cop, neither one talking to the other.

He calmed himself down. There was no need to worry, he would take out the detective at the appropriate time and it wasn’t yet. Whatever

action taken, it had to be carefully managed so his erstwhile mate would not connect the dots. The female's sense of danger and her reasoning powers were extremely fine-tuned and sensitive.

The man smiled in anticipation. It was half the attraction, playing with something that could burn your fingers. His mother always told him if you played with fire, it would come back and burn you, no matter what you did.

Shame about the fire that killed her and his father, an awful tragedy. Shows how right she was about the fire though, didn't it?

(((

"Well, here we are. This is my place, thanks again for bringing me home early. I know this wasn't what you had in mind when you asked me out." Cassidy turned to face him in the front seat of the silver Mercedes.

"Please, stop apologizing, a date's a date no matter how it ends. Besides, you can make amends some other way, like another date, maybe dancing?"

He leaned forward, romantic intent written plainly across his face. Cassidy eased further back into the door, she'd initially been attracted to him, but she couldn't get Logan out of her blood. It wasn't fair to lead the poor man on when all she could think about was another man. "Look, Kyle, I don't..."

"Cassidy, I know Logan is getting between us somehow, but how do you know I'm not the one until you spend some time with me. No strings attached. Come on, at the very least, we could be friends and how are you going to know until you try?"

His encouraging smile lit the whole front of the car and Cassidy raised her hands in defeat. "All right, all right, let's try it as friends for the moment, okay?"

He got out of the car and turned to help her, but Cassidy quickly shoved the door open herself.

"Sorry, Kyle, but if we're going to be friends, I need to tell you I'm pretty independent."

Kyle shrugged and hopped back in his side of the car. "Sorry, my parents were big on polite manners. It's a hard habit to quit."

She walked around the car to his window. "I'm sorry I haven't been the best date have I? You said were, does that mean your parents have passed away?"

"Have been for a while, car accident, a long time ago, a couple of years after my older sister disappeared. But I'm doing okay now. Anyway, it's time for Cinderella to go home. I'll give you a call tomorrow and you can make up the date, okay? See you later."

Cassidy waved goodbye and watched as his car sped off. She was a complete idiot, but she certainly couldn't say she didn't do anything in halves. Talk about rejecting the most eligible man around. Bethany was going to kill her.

Her musings were interrupted by a rough, slurred voice.

"Well, well, well. Lookee at what we have here boys. We got us some fresh private detective meat. What are we gonna do about it?"

Cassidy spun around, hands at the ready for anything. The cheating husband from Monster Alley was standing right in front of her with two friends and one was the guy she had beat up in the Alley. "Excuse me, don't you learn anything? I whipped you then and I'll do it now."

A discordant, jagged laugh from behind her rumbled in her ear. Before she could move and turn on the assailant behind her, two fat sausage arms grabbed her around the chest and arms. Cassidy's adrenaline shot sky high as she contemplated whether to act human or rip these baboons' arms off.

A nearby animal growl snarled through the tension, breaking her concentration. An intense feeling of hatred and rage hit her and the corruption of death seemed to coagulate around the gloating thugs. The beast had followed her, or at the very least had been waiting for her. "Umm, if I was you, I'd let me go. Because trust me, there is something far worse than me out there, hunting you."

A sharp giggle met her ears. A tall wiry man with a frenetic drug glaze to his eyes stepped forward. "Honey, we ain't the ones who should be

worrying. If I was you I'd be wondering what my face was gonna look like after we've all had our turn."

A ghostly figure hovered at the edges of the streetlight, almost insubstantial except for the evil, menacing rumble gaining in pitch.

"Look, you should listen to me and that growl, the spate of attacks around town by a wolf? Well, I think the thing growling is the animal behind the attacks. Maybe you should back off?" These morons didn't even know she was trying to help them. Maybe she should let the beast... *Nahh*, she couldn't do that to anyone, even these idiots.

The cheating husband strutted to Cassidy and ran his fingers around the top of her bodice. "Why I didn't know ya cared, otherwise I would have arranged a one-on-one someplace romantic and stuff."

Cassidy smiled into his now smirking face. "Oh no, I don't care in the slightest. I thought the blood would be too hard to get off the pavement and the building. I didn't want my super to hurt his back, that's all."

The men laughed and the cheating husband grinned at his friends. "Honey, there ain't nothing here, the one who's gonna hurt is you."

"Actually buddy, if you take a look over there to the right hand side, you're going to see something which will change your mind."

The men casually glanced over to the side, not sure if she was bluffing or not.

Cassidy mused aloud. "Actually, I wonder how the super *is* going to get the blood and gore out, not to mention my drycleaner. Damn, I guess that means I won't be able to return this dress for a refund."

Chapter Ten

Rage coated the air. The beast tasted the thickened aroma of his jealousy as if it had congealed around him. Tension grew at the realization she was in trouble.

No one was allowed to touch her, no one but him. His pace increased as he slipped from shadow to shadow. The imperative need to protect the female thundered through his entire being.

Controlling him

Dictating his actions

He sensed the men, sensed their lust for torture and suffering first. Her pain radiated out toward him—the approaching avenger. A wolfish smile of glee appeared. Blood, his favorite drink of choice, was about to be spilled. Hopefully, it was a good year.

The predator focused on the thug who held her, his she-wolf. How dare this miscreant's arms touch any particle of her? Anticipation heightened his mood as the wolf crept closer. He paused on the edge of the light, took stock of the situation. The only person to pay attention to him was his mate.

The beast's first slice took out the tendons at the back of the leg. Blood sprayed from the artery as his victim collapsed in heap, screaming and clutching his limb in agony. Hunger made the predator salivate as he ferociously sank his fangs into his food, his cattle. Blood and tissue coursed down his throat and he gulped his nectar without any remorse for the slaughter. His other half was in danger and he must protect her.

His she-wolf stood, ripped at her dress and launched herself at the three remaining soon-to-be-dead men. He watched as her flying kick

broke the pack into different directions. The smallest man to the left bolted quickly, abandoning any pretence at fighting back.

The predator took off with a massive leap, which sent him into raking distance of the fleeing human. His talons bit deep into his target's back, snagging on bone as the struggling figure was caught immobile, unable to flee any further. The beast casually retracted his claws and watched as the man flopped to the ground like a stranded fish.

Dismissing the dying man, he turned toward the final two. His other half had removed one of the men, knocked him unconscious, and had turned to take out the man who had spoken first. He sat back and watched her in action as she grabbed the thug and flipped him over her shoulder to the ground. As his head hit the ground, the action knocked the human out.

He slithered back into the shadows as she turned to guard against any movement from him. Their gazes connected and they took the measure of each other.

Not yet, the message in his eyes spoke to her, *but soon*.

Cassidy's musings on the ability of blood to be cleaned off items was interrupted by a greyish blur rocketing behind her. A shrill scream assaulted her eardrums. The arms anchoring her dragged her down as the owner of the scream fell in a sobbing heap.

The wailing thug curled himself into a fetal position. Cassidy, quick as a flash, rolled away and came into a crouch. Not easy when you're wearing an evening dress and heels. She kicked off the shoes and ripped at her dress to free her movements.

Stomach knotted at the thought of the beast's shredded victim, she forced her mind away from the man. Cassidy couldn't do anything for him now. The best she could manage was to get the others out of the picture. Hopefully, the killer would stop when he saw she had them under control. Cassidy didn't want any blood on her hands, figuratively speaking. She didn't want to owe any favors to the animal hunting her.

Her face set in scowling concentration mode, she stood and launched a flying kick at the nearest of her three assailants. Fear hardened her

muscles. Her kick connected with the man in the center and scattered the group. One of the males broke left in an effort to evade her.

The man she'd kicked remained quiet on the ground, probably out for the count. The last of the remaining attackers faced her, obviously scared, but dumb enough to want to take her on. He raised his knife and ran at her full tilt. Cassidy smiled and waited calmly for the man to reach her. As his body was about to hit, she ducked, grabbing him and flipping him over her shoulder.

He hit the ground with a satisfying thump and remained supine on the floor, knocked out. She turned, ready to face any attackers—or the beast—whichever came at her first. All the men were down and the beast seemed to have melted back into the shadows again. She strained to see into the dark recesses in search of the predator that attacked those men and helped her out.

Without any conscious volition, her gaze drifted toward the thickest shadows. She had the impression he was looking at her. Though she couldn't penetrate the darkness, they were staring straight at each other. Cassidy eased back, bit by bit until her spine lay against the building.

The beast may have arrived at an opportune time, but he was still a killer and she could never forget that. Besides, it had all been under control. She hadn't needed any help, man or beast. Relief helped relax her muscles. As all the adrenaline fled her, it suddenly felt as if her body had turned to jelly.

"Are you alright lady? Do you need me to call the cops?"

A voice came from above her. She looked to see the first floor neighbor all but hanging out the window.

"If you could, that would be great." She slowly slid her body along the wall until her rump hit the ground. Aches and pains she didn't realize she had started to burn all at once.

Boy, was Jace going to have a field day! He'd only left this evening for home. There was no way she was going to tell him, in case he decided to turn around and come back. He could find out on his own, much safer that way.

The jarring peel of sirens in the distance grew louder and louder as the police sped closer. Now all she needed for this night to round out would be Logan to be here as well.

The first cop out wasn't Logan, but his partner, Shannon. *Oh well, it could have been much worse*, she reasoned with herself.

"Well, Ms. Quinn, we always seem to find you around bodies, don't we? At least this time you aren't naked, or not quite. Umm, you seem to have a body part hanging out."

Cassidy glanced at her chest and saw a small rosy nipple peeking out of the top, there for everyone to say hello to. She tucked the breast back in. "Whoops, well I suppose I should be grateful there's not more showing."

"Ms. Quinn, seriously, do you need an ambulance? Are you hurt at all?"

The detective squatted next to Cassidy. "I'm fine, Detective, but I think one of those men might be dead. The beast got to a couple of them. The ones I kicked are probably fine, just out of it."

Shannon stood and was about to radio for an ambulance when another siren could be heard. "Here they come now. We'll get you checked out as well, for safety."

The detective waved the paramedics over and stood to one side as they checked Cassidy over.

"What's the verdict, guys? Will she be okay to interview?"

The ambulance attendant turned and shrugged. "Yeah, a few bruises, but she'll be fine. The others, on a quick glance, seem worse. All the same, keep the questions short in case there's shock."

"What the hell happened here, Ms. Quinn?"

Cassidy concentrated on the paramedics as they worked on the others. "One of the guys is part of a case I had been working on, cheating husband. I guess the wife decided to tell him what she had asked me to do. I'd also had a tussle with one of the others at Monster Alley the other night." She twitched her shoulders painfully, wincing as a muscle cramped. Raising one hand, Cassidy tried to rub the aches away. "I

figure he decided it was payback time. Unfortunately, the shape-shifter must have been following me and attacked them.”

“You’re telling me the claw marks weren’t you? They belonged to the animal doing the attacks?”

The paramedic grabbed the detective’s attention and motioned her over while Cassidy sat wearily watching.

Shannon returned and crouched in front of her again. “What you said seems to be supported by the medics. Two men with claw marks of a large animal, larger than you anyway. One man died and the two you laid out are fine, but have concussions. The other guy who was marked by the beast is in a stable condition.”

Cassidy blew a long breath out in relief. No matter the provocation, she tried to never use her extra strength against humans. “Okay, where do we go from here? Are you going to charge me?”

The cop shook her head. “I wouldn’t think so, judging from the evidence. The men are rambling about a wolf and how it wasn’t their idea to attack you, etcetera. I guess you can go home and get some sleep. We will need you to make a statement later at your convenience.”

“Thanks.” Cassidy pushed herself upright with the help of the wall, her aches and pains more insistent now she’d stopped moving. “Luckily enough, I’m only upstairs. It’s definitely time for bed. Do you have to mention any of this to Logan?”

His partner grinned. “Sorry, he’ll probably see the incident report, you won’t be able to hide this.”

“Hunnh.” Cassidy’s mumble of disgust was unintelligible. She coaxed her stiffening body forward, past the detective and into the doorway where most of her neighbors congregated.

“Must have been a hell of a date,” Shannon called out, “considering the state of the ball gown.”

Cassidy turned and stared at her, but didn’t say a word. With a shrug, Shannon marshaled her troops and readied them for the clean up.

Out of the corner of her eye, Cassidy spotted a black Chevy driving slowly past. “Tourist.”

She spat at the thought of someone taking enjoyment over the death and pain of others. Cassidy had almost dismissed the car when she saw the man in the back lean forward and peer at the carnage.

The man from her office.

The dodgy porno bookseller.

She may have found out who the beast was. He was certainly a man who seemed to be in all the interesting places.

Pushing past her well-meaning neighbors Cassidy thought longingly of her comfy bed as she eased into the lift. She reached into her bodice where her house key had been pinned the entire time. Thank the goddess for advice of mothers. Otherwise, the key would have been lost a lot earlier.

She double-bolted the front door behind her and stripped off as she made for the bed. A shower would probably help the aches, but Cassidy couldn't rustle any sort of energy except for the need to hit the sheets.

Cassidy heaved her body onto the bed and collapsed on top, spread-eagle naked, already asleep before she hit the pillow.

The harsh ringing dragged her out of the warm, safe cocoon she'd wrapped herself in.

"Hmmm." Cassidy's hand swiped at the alarm clock. "I'm awake already." The sound continued. She shook the cobwebs from her foggy brain and lunged for the phone.

"Speak, make it good."

"Wowie, Ms. Cassidy, must have been a good date if you're this grumpy in the morning."

"Actually, I was attacked outside my apartment by four men." Cassidy heaved her pained body upright in the bed. "Three are in hospital, one is dead, by the beast, not me. And by the way, the date wasn't hot. I went home early." She held the phone away from her ear as Bethany screeched.

"What do you mean you went home early?"

“Oh, that’s right. Concentrate on the fact the date finished early, not on the small detail four armed men tried to rape and kill me. Good focusing skills, Bethany.”

“Well, I assumed since you are at home talking to me, you’re probably fine. Alright, alright, I’m sorry, *are you okay?*”

She yanked the covers over and tucked them around her before answering her friend. “Aches and pains, but at least I’m not dead. I’m more worried about the fact all four men, plus the animal I’ve been hunting, were waiting for me when I got home. Talk about a welcoming party.”

“I take it you’re not coming in today?”

“Yeah, I think I’ll take a sick day. Work the morning, Beth, and take the afternoon off. Before you ask, the date was fine. I don’t seem to be as attracted as I was before. Typical, find a perfect man and now I’m not interested. But we *have* decided to be friends. Does that count?”

“No, it doesn’t count, but will have to do I guess. Darn it, Cass, I wish you’d get it on with the cop. It would solve all your problems.” She gave an exaggerated sigh that filtered through the line. “Anyway, I’ll let you get back to sleep. Ring, if you need anything. See ya.”

Cassidy shoved the phone back on the hook, pushed it back under the bed and snuggled back into her cocoon. If she wasn’t at work, she was definitely going back to sleep.

The jangling bell of the phone suddenly rang out again. With a curse, she reached over the bed, grabbed it again and spoke while hanging upside down.

“What.”

“Cassidy? I heard about the attack. Are you okay? Do you need me to come over?”

Kyle’s soothing tone of sympathy flowed through the line. Which was very nice, but she wanted *to go to sleep*.

“I’m fine. Ahh, a bystander came and helped out, all I’ve got are a few bruises.”

“Thank God, I was worried when I heard. Do you know what they wanted?”

“They were connected to a case. For that matter how did you find out?”

“I heard on the radio about someone being killed by the beast. The reporter said something about a private investigator going to their rescue. It didn’t take much to work out it had to be you.”

“Hmmp, so much for keeping it quiet. By the way, I might have worked out who the beast is, you won’t have to worry for too long.”

“Who is it?”

Cassidy tucked the phone more securely to her ear. “Another bookseller. I thought he was suspicious when I saw him at my office and last night he was driving past here. All very circumstantial, but it gives me another piece to the puzzle.”

“Wonderful, but I wasn’t worried with you on the case. This is probably the wrong time, but would you like to go to the new jazz club and listen to some music? Not a date, only friends, all very laid back.”

She got the feeling Kyle was using his sexy, soothing voice deliberately to try and convince her to say yes. “I don’t know, I—”

“Come on, it will probably do you some good to get out of the apartment. How about it?”

He’d cut her off mid-word before she could get her famous knock-back line out. She sighed. What the heck “Yes, all right, if you leave me alone *now*. I need to go to sleep. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Seven, I’ll see you then.”

With a groan, she flung herself back upright, the receiver still in her hand. The last thing she wanted to do was head out tonight, but he was a hard person to say no to. At least it was as friends. The phone started ringing again. “Why can’t people leave me alone?” Grumbling, she pressed the hand-piece to her ear. “Quinn, what do you want?”

“Well, Quinn, can I never leave you alone?”

Logan’s gruff malt-whisky voice flowed over her like honey. “Don’t tell me, you’re arresting me for assault aren’t you?”

“No, miss smarty pants, I’m not. I wanted to see how you pulled up this morning.”

“Stiff and sore, but I would be much better if everyone would let me sleep.”

“Sorry. Are you free, late tonight, to go over the case, it’s pretty important.”

This time the bell pealed out from the front of the apartment. Cassidy broke in. “Hang on, Logan that’s the doorbell. Can you hold?” She dumped the phone before he could answer, grabbed her robe and limped toward the door.

Easing it open a few inches, she peered through the crack at the baby-faced delivery boy. “Yeah?”

“Ms. Quinn? Ms. Cassidy Quinn?”

“Yep, that’s me.”

“Delivery for you, miss. You’ll have to stand back, they’re heavy.”

The boy brought in huge arrangements of flowers that stood almost three feet high in their beautiful blue and silver glazed ceramic pots.

“There are five more of these, ma’am. Where would you like them?”

“Umm, anywhere will do. Who sent them?”

“That would be on the card. Could you sign here, please?”

Cassidy signed the paper he shoved at her. She grabbed for a card on one of the pots as he closed the door behind him.

Cassidy, hope you’re better soon. See you tonight, love Kyle.

Talk about overkill. She would have to have a talk with him and this time make it plain she wasn’t interested in him that way.

She suddenly remembered Logan was on the line in the bedroom and hobbled into her room, grabbing the phone. “Sorry. There was a delivery boy with some get-well flowers for me. Actually, five bundles of flowers.”

“Ahh, must be from our Mr. Chandler. He seems to be the overdoing type.” His derision for the other man was plain.

“I suppose you would have slapped me on the back and said, ‘how you going, love?’”

Logan laughed. “Probably. Now what about tonight?”

“I’m sorry, Kyle got there first and he’s taking me to some new jazz club.”

“That will be Maggie’s. The owner is an ex-cop. You should be safe there, Shannon and I will both be there tonight as well, helping out. If we don’t catch up I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Now get some sleep, you need it.”

Disgusted frustration colored her response. “What do you think I’ve been trying to do, but no, all you idiots want to speak to me?”

Talk about it never raining, but pouring. First Kyle, now Logan. Only Cassidy wished it was Logan, not Kyle, she was going out with tonight. *Never mind*, she told herself, *you’re not interested in Logan, remember?*

Fat chance! Her sub-conscious would never listen. She didn’t pay attention to anyone else, why would her mind pay attention to its owner?

Chapter Eleven

The unique bouquet of her filled his being, intoxicated him like a drug. He'd been close enough to taste. A luscious dessert he'd become addicted to.

Those others, with their dirty, foul stink, would have no part of her. The call to war, to defend his mate, rang in his blood, spurring him on to show himself to his cattle, his meat. Their terror invigorated him, strengthened him and made him lust for more.

She was indebted to him, although no doubt his mate would have extricated herself. There was a bond now that hadn't been there before. He'd tied her to him through blood and he would tighten those ties until she was bound so tight they wouldn't be able to tell one from the other.

The battle roar had sung through his blood, as addictive as his mate's siren call. He wasn't lured by the call of conflict enough to brave the human's world. There were more of them. Sheer numbers could overpower him, but one on one, he was the master and soon they would all realize it. Soon she would know it and worship him always.



Cassidy groaned as she pulled her bruised body out of the shower and roughly dried herself off. The last thing her abused self felt like was a crowded jazz club, with smoke, drinking and sweat-drenched bodies. Not to mention the fact that after only one date she'd realized that Kyle was more into her than the other way round. The friend speech was always painful, but he was way too eager for his intentions to be platonic.

He was a handsome, charismatic man, who initially had sparked with her, but the momentary flash of lust had faded. Logan's draw was too strong. She didn't want any substitutes, but Cassidy wasn't sure she could cope with the real thing. This whole mess required more thought. Glancing over her wardrobe she decided to hit him with the real her. Cassidy dragged out her favorite pair of old faded jeans, a man's black dress shirt—her brother's—and a pair of chunky motorcycle boots. No makeup and her hair slicked back from her face, she looked dangerous and ready for anything.

As the doorbell rang, she gave herself a casual glance in the mirror. Her appearance didn't worry her at the best of times and as long as she was comfortable that's all that mattered.

She opened the door and slid through, slamming it shut behind her.

It was darn hard to keep her face straight as he did a double take at her attire.

"Umm, this opening is a big deal. Do you want to put some makeup on, or maybe change your clothes?" He carefully took hold of her arm and tried to steer her back toward the door of her apartment.

"I don't think so, I'm comfortable. Besides, last night was a complete aberration for me. This is how I normally dress."

Kyle adjusted the red tie on his blue Armani suit. "Could we please talk about what you're wearing? People will be looking at me and I have to represent my various business ventures, not to mention my charities."

"Kyle, I'm comfortable and happy, isn't that what matters?" Cassidy spoke over her shoulder as she headed downstairs.

"Wouldn't you have preferred the elevator instead of the stairs?"

Cassidy turned to look at Kyle as she reached the car. There he was huffing and puffing as he reached the bottom step, poor man.

"Would you like me to drive Kyle?" Kyle threw her the keys as soon as he neared the car and collapsed into the driver's seat the moment she'd opened the door. She flashed him a quick glance. His face looked like a thundercloud, his brow pulled and his lips pursed in obvious disapproval. Whoops, maybe being herself wasn't quite what this guy wanted. But after only one date what did he expect?

Smoke already flowed through the dark, warm atmosphere of the club. People waited patiently outside in the line for entry. A lone saxophone wailed in the background in time to an Ella Fitzgerald look-alike crooning on stage, haloed by a single focused light. The atmosphere was intimate, the tables crowded close together and the lighting dim. Posters of great jazz and blues singers adorned walls made to look like the inside of a cellar.

Cassidy prowled toward a table in the middle of the darkened, crowded room.

“Ahh, they have a table in an alcove waiting for us.”

“No thanks, I prefer to be in the middle of the action. Right here’s fine for me.” She plunked down at the table and motioned to the people behind the bar to send someone over to take a drink order.

Kyle coughed in reaction to the smoke curling about him as he slid around to Cassidy’s side of the table. “It doesn’t matter,” he sighed. “We can sit wherever you want. Here we go. The lady would like lemonade and I’ll have a scotch and dry, thank you.”

A small band took the place of the singer and saxophone. Cassidy eased back and smiled when the music increased in volume.

He cleared his throat and broke into speech. “Um, did you confirm whether or not the man you saw in the Chevy was the beast you’ve been hunting?”

“It’s probably not a good idea to discuss an active case here, or anywhere, since you may be involved as a future victim. Leave all the worry to me. I’ll make sure you’re okay. Now why don’t you listen to the music?”

The crowd jostled for position around the stage and dance floor to watch the musicians play. A good-looking young man—well, boy—turned and watched her. He dropped a wink and motioned for her to come and dance with him.

“Do you know that man from somewhere?”

Cassidy focused her gaze on the way Kyle's hands clenched into fists on the white tablecloth. "Nope, but he seems nice." She took a deep swallow of her drink.

With the glass pressed against her cheek for coolness, Cassidy considered her next move with Kyle. She hadn't planned on doing the friend talk for at least another hour, but she wanted to be up front. She placed the glass carefully on the table and bent forward.

"Look, Kyle, we need to talk."

"Would you like to go somewhere quieter?" He placed his hand atop of hers.

"No, we're fine where we are. Kyle, you seem like a nice guy, but I'm not interested in you that way." Before he could say anything, she slipped her hand out from under his and held it up to forestall him. "Yes, I know at the beginning I did seem attracted to you. But whatever was there, at least on my part, just isn't strong enough for a relationship. Truth be told, my life is too complicated at the moment."

His fingers clenched around his glass so hard she thought it would break.

"You're not interested in a relationship? I know we've only just met, but if I happened to be a cop, would you date me? Or if I was a young brash, virile boy who winked at every set of breasts he saw, would you date me then?"

His voice lifted with every word and was loud enough their neighbors started to turn toward their table. Cassidy was amazed at the change from nice guy to jealous lover. "I'm sorry, Kyle, I am. I know it looks like I led you on, but we've only had one date. I'm trying to be honest."

He gave a harsh laugh. "I guess I had higher expectations than you did. Next time I'll be more careful who I pick to date."

"I don't think it's a good idea if we hang out, even as friends. I'll contact you if there is any more movement on the case." Cassidy stood and gazed at him.

"Things didn't turn out the way you wanted, Kyle. But there's nothing I can do about the way I feel."

He inclined his head distantly at her. "I'm sure you're right, Ms. Quinn. If there's any information I can give you to help you with your case, please contact me. Don't worry about having to leave. I've found I don't actually like this place. I think I'll move on to my club."

He stood, vaguely looked in the direction of the waitress and threw his money on the table before walking briskly away.

The waitress grabbed the money and smiled at Cassidy. "Don't worry, you were better without him. Anyone could see he's all gloss and no substance. Stick to the meaty ones. There's a seat at the bar near the boss, no hassling allowed."

"Thanks, I think I'll take it."

The waitress walked with her to the bar. "Hey boss, this lady kicked a loser to the curb. How's about a draft, on the house?"

Cassidy eased onto the comfortable bar stool. "Actually, could we make it a ginger ale, neat?"

The bartender grinned and placed a tall, frosted glass of ginger ale and a plate of small appetizers in front of her.

"Bad night? Hopefully, it doesn't put you off my club?"

She twisted her lips in a wry smile. "He was more serious than I was." She shoved some olives into her mouth and took a long sip of her drink to banish the sourness of the conversation from her mouth.

"Look, shake it off. If it's the way you feel, you've done the right thing. Count it down to experience and enjoy the music." The bartender topped off her drink and turned to serve the next patron.

He was right. She *had* done the best thing possible. In the long run, he would probably thank her... maybe.

"Cassidy, fancy seeing you here."

The voice in her ear dragged her away from her somber thoughts. Detective Shannon Morgan reached over the bar and snagged two bottles of beer, grinning her thanks to the bartender.

"Umm, I know cops often get free perks, but aren't you supposed to pay for that?"

Shannon smirked. "Ahh, but I have a contact. He happens to be an ex-cop and my old partner before he retired to run this *flea bag joint*."

A fleeting smile graced Cassidy's lips as Shannon yelled at the bartender.

"What's the matter, Quinn? You look down in the dumps."

Shannon had to have two attempts to hop onto the barstool and Cassidy grinned into her drink again. "Had to tell someone I wasn't interested."

"Ahh, the rich wimp Logan hated."

She perked up slightly. "He told you he hated him?"

"Naah. It was the way he said it, I could tell. Anyway, take it from someone who knows, rich isn't everything. It spoiled my parents, they couldn't stand for my brother and I to be anything but perfect. Besides, smile, there's plenty of men here tonight. *I* might even meet one. By the way, Logan's here. He's filling in as security for tonight."

Cassidy choked on the olive she'd popped into her mouth and coughed as a tipsy Shannon slapped her on the back.

"Umm, thanks Shannon. I'll say hello to him later."

"Say hello to whom later?"

Logan's husky voice wrapped around her heartstrings and tugged. Her internal arguments over not settling down were sounding weaker and weaker.

"You, of course. Now if you will excuse me, I have a man to fry."

Shannon jumped off the stool and nearly toppled over before Logan grabbed her and set her on her feet. Cassidy smiled in bemusement at the pair. "Isn't that fish to fry?"

Logan laughed. "With Shannon, you never know. She's letting her hair down, since she has tomorrow off."

"Aren't you supposed to be working?"

"Yes, but this is a break. Saw your date hopping into his very nice Mercedes out the front. He didn't seem very happy. In fact, he looked downright nasty. I thought I was going to have to intervene when he almost hit another customer who bumped into him." Logan dipped his head so Cassidy couldn't see the look on his face. He'd felt better after seeing Kyle storm off on Cassidy, a perfect end to the date as far as he

was concerned. His friend placed a bottle of water in front of him and gave Logan the thumbs-up.

She looked at him, her eyes widened and jaw slackened. “Kyle did? Wow, I didn’t think anything ruffled his feathers. As to why, it’s none of your business, but I suppose Shannon will spill it anyway. I decided I wasn’t interested. Besides, he’s connected to the case and if he happens to be a victim, I need to be clear-headed.”

Logan grabbed his bottle and took a long swig. “Thirsty work. I wasn’t going to tell you this, but since you’re not seeing him, it doesn’t matter. I’m looking into his background. There’s something not right.”

“Excuse me, you’re doing a background on one of my dates, are you a loony? He seems like a nice guy. There’s nothing wrong except you can’t handle competition.” Cassidy pushed off the stool and shoved it back to point a finger in Logan’s face. “Trust me, he’s fine. If I was you, I’d be looking at the idiot bookseller in the black Chevy, who happened to be driving past at the right time.”

Logan watched in awe as this very striking and vibrant woman turned, threaded her way through the crowd and strode for the door. He might have to get her angry again. That old cliché seemed to fit her. She was beautiful when she was mad.

Cassidy’s black hair haloed her face making her look like a slightly psychotic, renaissance model. You could swear sparks were arcing out from around her. But it was a good point about the bookseller driving past at the same time. There was no such thing as coincidences. Maybe he should look into him, too.

Still angry when she let herself into her apartment, Cassidy vented her rage by throwing a fat pillow from the couch to the floor and imagining Logan’s face as it ground beneath her foot. The gall of the man, who did he think he was? Because she was mildly interested in him did not give him the right to... Cassidy ran out of steam and plunked herself onto the pillow free couch.

Actually, it was pretty funny when she thought about it. She bet he’d never had a potential love interest abuse him, then storm off before he

could say two words in reply. The look on his face afterwards would have been priceless. Stifling a giggle at the thought, Cassidy relaxed back into the couch.

All of her aches and pains suddenly throbbed and pulsed. Her body, unable to keep the tiredness at a distance anymore, skipped a beat as all chaotic thoughts stuttered away and sleep took hold...

Blood oozed down the walls. Gore and body parts littered the floor. The harsh, rotting stench of decomposing bodies swirled through her nasal cavities until it thickened in the back of her throat. She tripped and her hands sank through a rotted carcass, through someone's empty chest cavity. Her muted scream rebounded off the blood-spattered walls. She was in an enclosed room, no door or windows, only spare body parts.

Terror gripped her throat and paralyzed the vocal cords. Logan's visage lay face up. One accusing eye stared straight at her, the other lost, the glistening empty socket mocking her. She glanced at herself, naked except for blood spatters. Her hand held a wickedly curved knife, a ritual blade for sacrifice. Her stomach contracted wildly in an effort to rid itself of its contents. Nausea rose, bile lingering heavily in the back of her throat, its taste acidic as it filled her mouth. Cassidy fought to control her rolling belly as her terror billowed out through her open mouth.

Once again her scream tried to exit, to no avail. No, she wouldn't have done this. She couldn't have caused this, could she?

Cassidy flung the knife far away and searched for a way out. There had to be one. Her frantic hunt had taken her to the far corner of the room. In front of her, as if by magic, an opening appeared.

Her legs carried her through and into the corridor without conscious thought. A fevered glance along the hallway showed locked doors and an unhealthy fog forming on the floor. Her body slowed as she squinted to make out the vague figure at the end of the hallway. What was it? A man...a woman?

Her brain refused to give her legs the command to move forward. It was him, the beast. She made out the outline of an animal, looming, lurking. She even saw his gore-splattered fur.

He wanted her to take the final step toward him. She could almost understand what he was thinking. He wanted her to believe they were alike, they were one entity. They were mated, mated for life. She was his eternally, no matter what.

Final understanding raced through her body, her mind. She reared backward in denial and disgust, rejecting his thinking and him. Most of all, she rejected him.

The wolf took a flying leap with claws extended and tried to rake her from head to toe. She stepped sideways and he glanced off her shoulder. He tried again. This time the beast slashed at her face and sliced her throat.

She fell to the floor. Her blood spurted out in a jagged, pumping cadence. The predator prowled back toward her. His muzzle lowered and his tongue drank of the blood that pumped to the floor.

Chapter Twelve

Cassidy shoved herself against the back of her couch. A scream trembled on her lips, threatening to erupt. Her body shook as she fought for an even breath. The black shroud of a faint descended on her and she fought it back with stiff resolve.

If she looked in the mirror, she knew what would be there. A pale, clammy face, dilated pupils and black circles under the eyes. In other words, shock. Cassidy hugged herself and huddled back under the covers. The nightmare had been the worst of all the dreams so far. She remembered Logan's sightless face and the knife, and shuddered. He was attacking her friends now. First Logan in the dream—who knew who would be next.

The beast had taken his gloves off. Somehow he'd slipped into her dreams. This wasn't normal Were abilities, whoever the wolf was he had to have had those talents before he'd completed the ritual. Now he was in her dreams. He'd changed his mind about her. There'd be no more coming to her aid. This time the target would be her. She had rejected him in the dream and somehow he had known. He had a link to her and her dreams. He knew her attraction for Logan and had obviously watched her.

"Bethany."

Cassidy grabbed the phone from beside the couch and dialed the number as fast as she could, cursing her clumsy fingers. Breathing sped to the point she thought her heart would leap through her chest.

"Whatz up."

Bethany's slurred, sleep-laden voice grumbled through the phone's line at her. Cassidy sagged in relief.

“It’s me. Forget about work today. You have an immediate one week’s holiday, starting from the time I drive you to my parents’ place.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Be quiet and listen,” Cassidy snapped at her. “I need you to go on vacation and you need to leave yesterday.” She changed her tack and softened her voice. “Please, do this for me. I need you out of the firing zone. I need to know you’re safe, for my peace of mind. Trust me, no one would be brave or stupid enough to take on all the clan in their territory.”

“Damn it, Cass, you’re scaring me. What the heck is going on?”

Cassidy sighed. “The big bad has finally hit town and it’s coming after me and my friends.”

“Are you going to be all right? Should I ring Jace?”

“No, I don’t want anyone else involved. Logan and his partner can handle themselves, but I won’t draw in anyone else. Get dressed. Don’t worry about packing, there are clothes at home. It’s not like anyone wears them anyway. You should have a ball.”

Bethany gave a slightly hysterical laugh. “Cool, what do I tell your parents?”

Cassidy thought about the question for a few seconds. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll tell ma something when we get down there. Alright?”

She paused for a moment. “Be careful, okay, Beth? I’d like to keep you. I’ll get dressed and come and get you.”

“Keep me like an old chew toy, because you don’t want to break in a new one. Naah, it’s okay, I know what you meant and ditto for you. See you later.”

Cassidy listened to the dial tone as Bethany disconnected. She hoped her friend would be out of town before anything happened.

Before she could move, the phone rang again. She slowly put it to her ear and answered, “Quinn.”

Dead silence met her name, except for deep breathing on the other side, then a few seconds later, the engaged tone.

“Must have been a wrong number.”

She eased out of her bed toward her wardrobe. Out of the corner of her eye, something red caught her attention. She turned and focused on the couch, on the streaks of dried blood that coated it.

“What the hell?”

She grabbed the cushion from the couch and inhaled. The blood was hers.

“How could...”

She leapt for her mirror. Streaks of blood had dried in long striations down her face. Her fingers traced long slashes that ran like train tracks over the left-hand side.

It can't have been her. She looked at the non-existent nails on her hands. And besides, there was no stain underneath her nails. God, she'd thought it had been a dream, but maybe...

Logan, she had to call Logan at the precinct, make sure he was unhurt.

Once again she grabbed the phone, frantically punching in the numbers. Before the desk sergeant could even state the precinct, she asked for Logan. “Detective Patrick Logan, please. It's urgent.” She curled the cord of the phone tight around her hand as she waited for him.

“Logan here, what's up?”

As she heard his wonderful voice, relief gushed through her. “It's Quinn, I wanted to see if you were alright?”

“I'm fine. What's going on, Cassidy?”

She tried to explain the dream. “Let's say I had a wake up call and wanted to check on you. Actually, I think somehow I pissed off this beast and now he's coming after me and my friends. You and Shannon watch your backs.”

“How did you piss it off, Quinn? What have you done?”

Logan's exasperation was very obvious, even through the phone lines. “I don't know, but I had a nightmare about this beast, in which I basically told him to piss off. Next thing I know, I have scratches all over my face. Trust me, I didn't do it. I don't have any nails that size.”

Dead silence met her strange statement and she wondered whether he would label her a wacko.

“Okay, between knowing you and living with Jace in college, I realize there are more things in heaven and earth, as they say. Your family might be a bit strange, but they aren’t liars or storytellers. I believe you. What’s next?”

Cassidy heaved a sigh of relief at his trust and a little part of her heart started to thaw out.

“Thanks. I’m driving Bethany, my secretary, to my parents’ farm so she should be fine. Only a fool would go looking for trouble there. I’m going to work from home today and see what I can dig up about the fat bookseller I interviewed in my office. I still think it’s a bit strange he’s around when I get attacked out the front of my building.”

“Okay, I’ll follow some leads of my own and hook back up with you, alright? When are you heading for the farm? I can drive with you.”

“Look, Logan I don’t need babysitting.”

“Hey, it’s not you I’m keeping an eye on. I’m protecting Bethany from your gnarly mood. I’ll be at your place in twenty and meanwhile I’ll tell Shannon to take care, all right? See you soon.”

Cassidy dropped the phone and stared into space. She had a feeling whatever was going to happen would hit very fast and soon. She had to be prepared, mentally and physically. It was time to go to work.

The crime scene photos stood out, violent and bloody. The pictures could have been eyes the way their impact followed her as she paced around the room. Logan had very kindly couriered the photos and statements over to her last night. They shed a very nasty light on other shape-shifters.

Some Weres went out of their way to seem different and more superior to a normal human, but she had always tried to fit in. Maybe it was time to break the habit.

It might take an animal to catch one. She had to let go of the human, stop denying the lycanthrope and start to fight as her nature demanded. After all this time, she had to accept herself for what she was—a wolf and a human, two melded into one. Even if they were change-challenged.

She stared at the crime scene photos again and this time let go the barriers that constrained her wolf. The wolf swam to the surface of Cassidy's consciousness and her animal intelligence shone through her eyes. The wolf acknowledged her temporary acceptance of their dual nature and reveled in their doubled power, even if they were limited by not changing.

The animal sensed the difference in the attacks. The first one had been hesitant, but had escalated as if the beast had needed to find his feet. He'd been learning, becoming crafty and subtle instead of a sledgehammer. Cassidy agreed with the wolf. It was as if the beast found it harder to ignore the blood, harder to stop himself from killing. The hunger had become a fever in his veins he couldn't quench.

The phone rang again, disturbing her and her wolf. The animal shrank back into the depths of Cassidy, but maintained a watchful presence. She fixed her stare on the phone like it was a deadly snake about to strike. Whoever was on the end of the phone was definitely not a friend. Her spider senses were tingling, as Bethany would say.

She lifted the receiver, but remained silent. All that could be heard was deep, even breathing, steady, like someone asleep. Whoever this was, they wanted her running scared. Wanted her to know they were out there watching her. No matter what, she wasn't scared and she wouldn't let anyone else get hurt because of her.

"Whoever you are, here's a head's up, the only warning you'll get from me. I know who you are. I know you've been in my office and you know where I live. Guess what? Ditto, I know the same details about you and I've been a shape-shifter a lot longer than you have. I know the nature of the beast more than you ever could. Watch your back. I'm coming for you."

She listened for a moment and heard his breathing speed up until the person on the other side hyperventilated. His rage beat down the line, red hot. Cassidy lowered the phone and grinned. *There's nothing like pissing off someone so much they make a mistake. And he will, then I've got him.*

A loud knock on the door interrupted her musings and nearly had her choking on her saliva. She eased slowly from the chair and prowled forward. Once again opening her senses, but all she could tell was the person on the other side was a woman. If Bethany had ignored her phone call, she was firing her sorry ass...

Cassidy opened the door to see Shannon, Logan's partner, standing there with more folders and a very dark pair of sunglasses still covering her eyes. She smiled and motioned Shannon in.

"Why Detective Morgan, do you have a hangover?"

"This is your fault, you know. If you hadn't called the red alert, I'd still have the day off. Asleep, maybe cuddled to something a little less hairy than my cat."

Cassidy giggled as Shannon collapsed on the couch and her tension immediately lightened as her mind was forcibly yanked away from her problems. "I could try a change and you could cuddle me, but I'm liable to scratch. Fleas, you know."

"Excuse me, I said less hairy, not more hairy with sharper teeth. Anyway, here you go, more statements from witnesses, victims, coroners, etcetera. Enjoy."

"Gee, thanks for all your help. Did you have a good time last night?"

"Why, yes I think I did, thanks. It was worth all the pain today. Met somebody, rich, handsome and wants to settle down. He actually listened to me talk until the early hours. How's that? Have you ever heard of a man who listened instead of talking about himself? I think I'm in love." Shannon took off her glasses to show extremely bloodshot eyes and her smile exploded out of nowhere.

Cassidy rolled her eyes. "That's excellent. It's about time somebody had some luck. All I get are men who are too nice and animals who scratch me in my sleep." She pointed to her cheek.

"Yeah, I heard about that. I guess you won't be sleeping for awhile."

"Not until I catch this bastard, but at least as a Were, I can go longer without sleep than a normal man could. Not that it's any comfort to me." She shrugged. "Anyway, thanks for the files. I'll send them back when I'm done."

Shannon stood with a sigh and plunked her glasses back on. “No worries, there’s no rush. If you need any other help, call me. See you later for a debriefing on what you find.” She ambled to the door and gave a wave as she exited.

Cassidy grinned, grateful for the light relief in the form of Shannon. She crossed to the window and watched as Shannon hopped into the plain unmarked cop car. Her interest sharpened as a black Chevy drove slowly past. She saw a face drift in the cop’s direction, but couldn’t make out who the driver was.

Dread uncurled in her stomach. The driver, whoever he was, seemed interested in Shannon and the building. She had an impression of darkness as she opened her senses, but the car was like a black void and didn’t give her any hints as to the driver. In her bones though, Cassidy knew it belonged to him, the beast. It had to be the fat bookseller. Everything fit.

Another problem occurred to Cassidy. The beast now knew Shannon was a connection and even though the car was unmarked, it fairly shouted cop.

She’d protected Bethany, but what about Shannon?



Utter black rage overwhelmed him. Like a tornado, it swept through his surroundings, captured him and spun him around and around. The whirlwind dumped him on the ground, alone, stripped of her presence. Desolation clawed at him. Her rejection had become a festering wound he must pick at continually.

He had shown her all they could be. Had revealed to her their unstoppable nature if combined. They were monsters and nothing could have stood in their way.

Except she did not want him.

She had abandoned the beast, and now the man desired no part of her. The two within the animal would become one, but first she would pay.

The Beast Within

He would take from her those she cared about—the cop, her secretary and friend, and finally, her.

If she wouldn't have him, no one would have her. He would make her pay, but only after she'd suffered pain and terror.

Lots of terror.

Chapter Thirteen

Cassidy tried to concentrate on the road instead of Logan as they sped down the highway. Damn the man anyway, why did he have to come along? It's not like her friend needed his protection. She'd probably end up saving him, too, and besides, her mother was going to love seeing the two of them together. She would sniff out Cassidy's interest a mile away.

Speaking of sniff, Cassidy shifted in her seat and tried not to look like she was inhaling. Bethany had yelled shotgun, which meant Cassidy was left riding in the back like the pet dog. The upside was she could concentrate on Logan without him noticing. His aroma swirled around her. Hot and spicy, drawing her innermost fantasies to the surface, only to spill out and roll over her.

She closed her eyes and imagined the feel of his hot breath. In a heartbeat, the fantasy engulfed her. She shivered as his kisses peppered her throat. His teeth snapped onto the back of her neck in the dominant/submissive pose of an alpha male and his mate. In an effort to dislodge his grip, she rocked her hips forward and back. Finding an opening, Cassidy flipped him onto his back and rose above him, her need for control uppermost.

The feelings inside of her gained momentum and she gave into the passion, lowered her mouth to his solid chest. A growl tore from her as reason and logic disappeared. She nipped at his skin, bathed the love bite with the tip of her tongue and soothed a path downward toward his groin. Sinking into his lust and his body, she was driven wild by his groans and growls.

Logan dragged her into his arms. She knew he needed her warmth as much as she wanted his. Their explosive need spiraled out of her control as he ravished her mouth with a long, wet kiss that drove her crazy. Dampness pooled between her thighs. Electricity throbbed throughout her body. She straddled him and rocked their hips together slowly, taking him in, inch by inch. Her inner flesh spasmed as frantic need devoured her. The pulsing began deep inside and washed over her in heavy, seductive waves.

“Ahh, Cassidy. Are you okay?”

She heard Logan’s voice as if from far away. *Okay?* She was having the most intense orgasm ever. Of course she was all right!

“Umm, you’re growling a lot back there, Cassidy. Can you sense something?”

This time Bethany’s voice intruded on her sexy thoughts. *Whoa.* Bethany’s voice? When did this turn into a threesome? Cassidy shook herself out of her stupor and came back to reality. Bethany was staring at her with a wide grin on her face.

“Hey boss, so who needs men? You sound like you’re having a hot erotic dream back there. About time. I’d begun to think you batted for the other side,” Bethany teased, bursting into laughter.

“No, I’m fine. I was thinking of the beast and let my anger take control. Umm, the turn off is the next right. Take the dirt road ‘til you hit the gates and I’ll buzz us in.”

Cassidy sank back into the seat in humiliation. She’d come, literally, very close to embarrassing herself. Logan would have strutted around like a proud rooster and Bethany would have died laughing. Not to mention her mother, who would have picked out the pattern for her china and chosen a wedding dress on the spot, if any of them knew what she’d been thinking.

This was not good at all. How on earth could she let herself get carried away on a thought? She swore it had been real, not fake. Goddess, if this was a dream what would it be like for real?

As they pulled to a stop at the gate, Cassidy tried to throw the fantasy out of her brain. She used the buzzer on her key ring to let the

others know they were here. A few seconds later, the gate swung open. Her mother was going to sniff out her lust, but she was discreet and the others weren't as sensitive.

The SUV stopped to a cacophony of sounds as dogs and wolves barked in excitement. Her father bellowed a welcome and poked his short-cropped grey head out the barn doorway, giving an exaggerated wave. Cassidy looked at the old farmhouse with fresh eyes.

The building was a five bedroom sprawling ranch house with an outdoor patio and an herb garden along the front. Scratches, gouges and dirty marks adorned one side of the house, which doubled as part of the kids' play area. The warm, earth tone colors of the house blended in with the landscape. White lace curtains in the windows completed the welcoming picture. She grinned, feeling comforted and secure. She was home and that's all there was to it. Cassidy flung the door open and jumped from the SUV, closely followed by Bethany and Logan.

A fast-moving flurry hit Cassidy around the waist and almost toppled her. Without Logan's arm around her, she would have hit the ground.

"Whoa there, wolf boy. Where you going so fast?" She grabbed her baby brother in a tight hug and moved him back to get a good look at him. Ten years old and already a heartbreaker. His shaggy black hair needed a trim and the olive complexion, which made him look Greek, glowed with the vitality of youth. Cassidy inhaled his sweaty little boy perfume. She smiled as a combination of musk, chewing gum and wet fur assaulted her.

"Hey, have you grown a little? I swear you're taller now than you were three weeks ago."

"Cass, you're home. Mum didn't tell us you were coming. How long can you stay? Can you watch me change? I can almost catch a rabbit now. I'm bigger? You think I'm bigger, cool!"

"Hey, take a breath there, Davy. I'm sorry, I can't stay long, but I promise to watch you next time. Beside, I brought you fresh meat to play with."

"Uhh, I don't think I like the sound of that." As the rest of the clan broke into contagious laughter, Bethany inched behind Logan.

“Hush, Cassidy Luna Quinn. You’ll have your guests thinking we’re animals. Well, we are, but we offer you supper and safe passage which means you’re part of the clan until we rescind the invite. Now, everyone, this is Bethany, Cassidy’s friend, play nice.”

Sarah put her arms around both Bethany and Logan. “And we all know our adopted son, Logan. It’s good to see you again, boy. Next time, make it sooner and that’s an order.”

Cassidy squirmed as Logan stared at her. Her mind flashed back to the incident in the SUV. She prayed he hadn’t cottoned on to what had happened. Her face was probably bright red with embarrassment. As it was, half the members of the clan were sniffing around her in curiosity. Her mother wasn’t curious, but being the spiritual guide of the clan, she probably already knew.

Cassidy ignored her cousins and siblings as they crowded around her. She wasn’t about to “fess up” in front of them. Tilting her head to the side, she caught her mother’s attention and looked meaningfully at the house.

Catching the hint, her mother made a shooing motion with her hands. “Now all of you go inside and we’ll get Bethany settled. Logan and Cassidy aren’t staying long. They have to get back to the city.” Sarah maneuvered her troops inside with the panache of a general and quickly settled Bethany in her own room.

Cassidy grabbed her mother’s arm and by an unspoken mutual agreement, made for her mother’s inner sanctum, the library.

This room had always inspired hope inside of Cassidy. The floor to ceiling shelves were crammed full of every known text on lycanthropes, otherworldly freaks and unexplained phenomena. It was comforting to know there was probably no question left unanswered in her mother’s library. It just took a while to find it.

Her mother immediately took point.

“What the heck is going on, Cassidy? You told me you would explain and the time is now, young lady.” Sarah stood with her hands on her hips, facing her only daughter. “Spit it out, girl.”

Cassidy walked slowly toward her mother with her hands outstretched and her throat bared, in an effort to calm her. You didn't take on a pissed off alpha female, especially when she's the wise-woman of the clan.

"It's alright, Ma, I have everything under control. Bethany is here because she's vulnerable and Logan came for a ride. I know who the wolf is and we're keeping an eye out for him. No need to worry."

Sarah was sidetracked at the mention of Logan's name. "Speaking of Logan, he's a very nice man isn't he? You almost swear he's Were or has some Were relative back in his past."

"Now, Ma, don't get carried away. Because he came for a ride and he's a healthy young man in his prime doesn't mean I am going to—"

"Cassidy Quinn. I might be old, but that doesn't mean I can't tell a lie anymore. He means a lot more than that and beside, you reek of lust for him. Dish the dirt, child of mine." Cassidy's mother sat on the nearest sofa and crossed her arms, waiting.

Cassidy gave in and sat in the chair facing her. "Alright, I like him, fantasize about him, but nothing else. Things are way too confused at the moment and I do not want to settle down. Besides, hello, he *is* human."

"Racist. He's a different race, but that doesn't mean you can't be with him. You know Weres breed true eighty percent of the time. Yes, there are hybrids, but they aren't common. I do agree with you though, now is not the time."

Cassidy gritted her teeth. "Like my wolf has a say in anything I do. Change of subject time. Have you found any more information to help me with the beast?"

Her mother pursed her lips. "Actually, I have found something else you might be interested in."

She reached into her climate-controlled cabinet that held their fragile writings. "I found this buried in the back of my to-be-read pile. It's an account, a footnote, of an unnamed figure in our clan's history."

Sarah laid the parchment on her desk and motioned for Cassidy to have a look. "He would disappear at length from the clan lands, sometimes coming back wounded or with other beings, both Were and

otherworldly. It was known if there was a great evil or a harm done, he must be told so as to avenge. He also had great and strange gifts that evolved slowly over time and he was the longest lived of our clan. It was said he was the 'empty one', a changeless Were until his thirtieth year when the impending massacre of the clan drove him to a full change." Sarah paused as if to gauge Cassidy's reaction.

"Look, Ma. I can't read Lupin. I'll take your word, but how does this help me?" Cassidy bit her tongue and tried not to scream at the ambiguity of the information.

"I think you're like this man and something will trigger your full change. Maybe this man was some sort of—I don't know the word—maybe a guardian of the people. There's more of this passage to translate, but I think you're special, given to us to help fight evil."

Cassidy pushed away from the desk and started to pace. "Excuse me, if I hear you right, the fate of the world or the death of all my loved ones will trigger a change. And I'm supposed to turn around and keep saving the world? Pass please. If someone wants my help, they can damn well pay for it. I don't give out freebies." She stormed to the door of the library and grabbed the handle.

"Arrogant child," her mother roared from behind her as she took a leap, grabbed Cassidy by the shoulder and spun her around.

"This is not a mother talking. This is your wise-woman, your spiritual guide. What I say will take precedence over your petty fears. You may be what our clan, all the different clans, need. Take your stubbornness and let it run out the door like a cowardly cub. You're scared of yourself and your possibilities. Well, let me tell you, child, possibilities have a habit of turning around and biting you on the ass. Deal with it."

Cassidy bit her lip and fought to control the tensing of her muscles. Her mother would be able to spot her fear a mile away otherwise. Her mother's home truths spun through her mind, churning the contents of her stomach like a shark's feeding frenzy. She wasn't superwoman, how did her mother think she was going to save everyone??

Abruptly turning, Cassidy blew through the living room like a dervish and descended on the kitchen full of laughing, warm bodies. She spotted

Logan and immediately a fire began to burn in her stomach. She couldn't win a fight with her mother, but she could damn well pick one with Logan.

"Logan, I'm going for a walk and you can either come or stay here. We'll leave when I get back. If you don't like it, tough, you can walk back. Your decision." She ignored the look of bafflement on his face and stormed past, not even acknowledging her family.

Logan stared after Cassidy's furious form. What the hell had put the bug up her ass? He stood and leisurely stretched. No way was he rushing for the likes of Cassidy Quinn. On the other hand, in the mood she was in, he might be walking back.

Sarah came up and stood by Logan's side. "Keep an eye on her, Logan. Cassidy has some serious decisions to make and she doesn't want to think about them at the moment. I'm afraid she'll put off the choice until too late."



His howl of defiance for his missing prey ripped out of his throat like a bone breaking the surface. *Quiet!* He had to be quiet. No one must know he was here. Did she think she could escape him? He knew her secrets better than anyone else. He had studied her, loved her.

The beast knew where her family lived, her clan. They thought themselves superior and safe, but they weren't. He'd tracked them, his she-wolf leading the way to this bloody betrayal. He hungered for the children's essence gushing down his throat as he ripped them apart and drank their life's blood. He would shred her family skin from skin and feast on their bones.

There would be a special place for her friend Bethany, as his plaything, for a while, until he was tired of her. She would be perfect for baiting his trap for her, the she-wolf. There was always collateral damage in a war and this was a battle to the death—hers and all she held dear.

The predator saw the clan's farmhouse nestled into the land like a baby to its mother's breast. Saw the cubs careening in and out of the back door. He heard the laughter of the unwary victims. Soon they would

sense him like their stock already had. The animals huddled in distress in the corner of the paddock, deathly silent for fear of provoking bloodshed.

His fangs gleamed silver in the sun as he contemplated the feast before him.

He did love his work.

Chapter Fourteen

Even the trees before her appeared to edge out of her way as she thundered past, as if afraid of the imminent eruption of anger.

“Damn, damn, damn,” Cassidy swore, battling her way through the forest and into a clearing. It was a good thing their property backed on to a national park. At least there was some kind of privacy. What the hell was supposed to happen now? How could she be a savior to her family when she was weaker than they were? She strode further into the clearing and threw herself on the grass and tried to calm down. The surrounds of the forest and the musk of the grass lulled her weary soul.

“What did your mother say to get your panties in a knot?”

The sound of Logan’s voice shocked her. She’d been preoccupied with her problems, her senses hadn’t even heard or smelled him behind her. But this was beginning to become the norm for her and Logan. Maybe he was her blind spot?

“Excuse me? Could you at least announce your presence before doing that again? If I’d had a gun, you could be a bleeding wreck by now.”

“I repeat, Cassidy Luna Quinn. What made you blow through the kitchen like a tornado?”

Logan dropped onto the ground beside her as he measured her expression. *Good*. She’d calmed since storming out, but he still felt her anger and frustration simmering under the surface.

She turned around to face him, eyes wide. “What makes you think my mother has anything to do with my mood and why would I talk to you?”

“Because you went to talk to her privately and the next moment you come out all bitter and twisted. And the reason you are going to talk to

me is I care and I'm not going to judge you. No matter what your decision is."

She inhaled deeply and Logan saw the heat of anger on her face fade. Maybe she'd actually taken in his words.

"Ma told me some stuff and I'm pissed because she was right and I don't like it. The whole family has driven themselves crazy trying to work out why. I kept getting more and more bitter. Finally, she might have worked out a reason why and all I do is throw it back in her face like an ungrateful pup. She's gotta be pissed at me."

Logan heard the plaintive little girl she hid from the world as she considered disappointing her mother. "She's not disappointed, only worried. There's a difference."

"I know she is, but how am I supposed to react to this? I'm meant to be this super-wolf of the clan world, hunter and guardian of the supernatural. Yeah right, I can't even manage a change. How am I going to pull that off?"

"Take life as it comes, Cassidy. Don't tie your hair in knots trying to work out what to do next. You'll know when it's time." Logan rolled over and pushed himself upright. "Beside, you are the most capable, crazy, headstrong person I know. If anyone can do it, you can. Now come on, let's go back."

He reached down and hauled her upright, overbalancing her accidentally at the same time. She fell flush against his body and he felt her muscular form settle snugly into the cradle of his arms and legs. A shaft of pure lust shot straight to his groin and his cock jumped in elaborate excitement.

Unable to resist, he pulled her tighter against him. She radiated so much heat, he would swear they were in a sauna if he didn't know better.

Logan tried to be the gentleman and think of mundane things to take his mind off her tight, hot body, but all he could think of was sinking his teeth into her sweet neck. Maybe he'd spent too much time with the Quinn family. He was turning feral.

Cassidy couldn't believe after all her fantasies in the car, here was Logan holding her against him. And he seemed to be enjoying it, if the down south object poking into her was any indication. She felt his heartbeat pounding like a drum. His musky fragrance swirled around her, increasing in heat as his arousal surged. Logan's sweet breath tickled her neck as he bent to whisper into her ear, sending quivers of excitement coursing along her spine. After the car, she could more than imagine what it would be like to be filled entirely by this incredible man, if only their being together didn't come with ties.

"What were you really thinking about in the car on the way here?"

She jerked back in embarrassment. Heat rose in her cheeks. "Umm, like I told you. I was angry at the beast and I let it get the better of me." No way was she telling him. He already had the advantage because she had the hots for him. She certainly wasn't going to dish the dirt on herself.

"Why don't you go on back to the house? I think I might stay out here for a while and calm down some more. Tell my mother I'll see her in a moment." Cassidy made herself step back further as her body cried out in withdrawal for the warmth of his. Like an addict for her drug.

Logan grinned at her as she put distance between them. She didn't want to know what the smile was for, but she had a sneaking suspicion he could see right through her. Even if he wasn't a Were he was still enough of a hunter to know to back off.

"I'll see you soon, Cassidy. Don't be too long. We have to get back and make sure we don't miss the meeting with Shannon." He strode off and Cassidy hoped the memory of her pointed nipples drilling holes into his chest kept him as much on edge as she was.

As she watched Logan leave, Cassidy pressed a hand over her breasts and winced as the sensitive tips echoed the pain the rest of her body was feeling. This love and romance crap was too hard to deal with right now. Maybe she should...

Suddenly, the light seemed to dim in the clearing.

"Strange."

She glanced at the blue sky.

“No clouds in the sky.”

The trees at the other end of the clearing began to waver, indistinct, and the line between her temporary haven and the trees became opaque.

“Ahh, crap. What the hell is this?”

She shifted her body into a fighting crouch, all thoughts of hot, frantic sex with Logan on hold until she dealt with this next challenge.

“Cassidy Luna Quinn, a pretty name. Named after the Moon and a spirited Irish ancestor. A strong combination, a combination sorely needed by our clan.” The voice wavered, small and fragile at first, strengthening as the filmy figure gathered solidity in front of the trees.

The image became firm and she made out a few details, like a tunic and pants, black, shoulder-length hair and piercing blue eyes. She opened her senses to see what the heck kind of freak this man was and received nothing. No scent, no impressions, nothing. It was if he wasn't even there.

“Technically, I'm not. I'm dead, but I've been let back to the corporal world to help you on to your path.”

“Yeah, okay.” Cassidy shook her head in disbelief. Weird things seemed to happen to her regularly, but this was far out even for her.

“What path would that be?”

“The one of the protector. The Guardian of the clan. My path.”

“Look, no offense, mister but I've already had this little chat with my mother and I didn't like it then. What makes you think I'll like it now?”

“Asher, my name is Asher. Like you, I once denied my path. My family, my clan, was all but destroyed. Do you want that to happen to you before you decide?”

“What am I suppose to do? I'm human, I can't change like the rest. What do you want from me?”

“Trust and faith is what I need from you. Trust in your strengths and faith in your abilities, and your wolf will be there. Special gifts will come your way when you least expect and when your greatest need is here.”

“But—”

The still, ghostly figure of the previous protector overrode her objections. “Time has not yet run out for your family. I suggest you enter into the fray or your family and friends will be lost.”

With that, she watched his body dissolve and the trees gain color and form again. What did he mean her family?

Cassidy flew from the clearing on fast legs as the sounds of fighting finally broke through the inertia caused by the otherworldly visit. Damn it, the beast had come calling and she hadn’t been there to help. If her family were injured, she would never forgive herself and she would spend her entire life hunting the animal who did it.

As she broke through the forestland to the sloping paddocks of her family farm, she stumbled across the bloody carcasses of some of the cattle. The door to the family home had been torn off.

Too late.

She was too late, he’d killed them all. The salty tang of human blood and the miasma of darkness and evil covered the farm and its inhabitants.

She tried for her wolf, but her grief had taken hold and the energy needed for the change failed to respond to her internal pleas. From behind the house, the darkness seemed to gather as if for an ambush. She launched her body round the side, ready for battle. The sight of her mother, her brother Jace, and of all people, Logan, facing the beast, the great evil, stopped her in her tracks.

“Ahh, my great love has returned. Do you like your giffft?”

His sibilant tones iced over her spine as she stepped in front of her mother. “Look you reject, if it’s me you want, come and get me, but you’re in for a fight.”

“Oh, please, so predictable. Don’t you know I want you to hurt first? It’s no fun otherwise.” The beast hunkered into a crouched position ready to spring and attack.

Her mother placed a hand on Cassidy as she took a step forward. “My turn, my daughter. Watch and learn your heritage.” The outline of Sarah’s body began to pulse with an unearthly blue glow. Her body grew

in density and the impression of a multitude of faces and people standing behind her, supporting her, grew strong.

“Evil thing, leave. Our ancestors command it. The meeting is not yet.” She raised her hand and a spark of blue light arced out like an electric shock and zapped the wolf.

A sharp high-pitched yelp was driven from the beast and he turned to run. “You haven’t won yet. There are some surprises in store for you. I will have your daughter, dead or alive. No force on this earth can stop me and I will choose the time and the place.”

Sarah smiled sweetly at the beast. “You don’t know my daughter. Cassidy’s stubborn and strong and when she’s pissed off you don’t want to be around her. *Now leave!*”

Sarah collapsed into Cassidy’s arms as the beast left at a run.

“Ma.”

“Ma.”

Cassidy and Jace both lowered Sarah to the ground and peered worriedly at her.

“Don’t fuss you two. I’m fine, but it’s draining calling on the ancestor spirits to help. It’s why I had to wait for the right time. Go help your father, see if he is okay. Logan can help me inside.” Sarah shooed the others away and grabbed for Logan’s helping hand.

Jace and Cassidy sped off toward the house and ran through to the kitchen.

The sharp tang of blood overwhelmed them.

“Da, how are you?” She knelt next to their white-faced father as Jace grabbed some cloths to stem the bleeding. Cassidy searched for Bethany and found her in the background surrounded by a crowd of family members.

Her belly trembled as Cassidy shook with the strength of her emotions. That evil animal had almost taken one of her clan, her family. All because of the arrogance in her belief the beast would be cowed by her family’s heritage. She had led him here and hadn’t even been around to help. Instead, she’d been communing with an asshole ghost who had a rotten sense of timing.

Cassidy bit her lip until blood pooled in her mouth. Tears demanded liberation, but she fought them back.

"I'm fine." Her father patted her hand reassuringly. "He got the jump on me. I'm not as young as I used to be, but don't repeat that to your mother." He chuckled and winced in pain as he jolted the wound in his shoulder.

Her Aunt Rita hurried round with antiseptic cream and handed it to Cassidy as her Uncle James came back from scouting outside.

"Repeat what to me, Charles?" Sarah slowly walked into the kitchen, aided by Logan.

"That I was sure you were fine. Rita was worried." Cassidy's father gingerly pulled himself up and took the tube of cream from his daughter. "He's gone then?"

Sarah grabbed the back of a chair for support. "Yes and everyone else is all right. It's not our turn anyway. It's Cassidy's." She looked straight at Cassidy. "I'm sorry and I'm not kicking you out, but it's time for you to deal with that rancid piece of meat, once and for all."

Cassidy stood slowly and looked at her hands, then straight across to Logan. "I know. I have some decisions to make. It's time to get going. Logan, are you with me?"

Logan gave a thumbs-up and stepped toward the door.



The SUV responded to Cassidy's anger with a purr of contentment. The car shot forward and for a moment, almost flew down the highway. On the edge of her vision, she saw Logan grip the door, his knuckles white. Did he have no faith in her skills? She was in complete control of the car. Besides, wasn't she supposed to be some sort of superhero? Cassidy wrenched the steering wheel around and took a curve almost on two wheels.

"*Enough.* I have had enough," Logan roared, grabbing the wheel and giving it a sharp tug until they were on all four wheels. "You can kill yourself, but I prefer to live, thanks very much. Now pull the hell over."

In shock at the dominant Logan rearing his ugly head, Cassidy pulled over into a rest stop on the side of the highway. *Fine. Great.* At least this fight could be won without her feeling like a naughty child. She turned off the car, unclipped her seatbelt and swiveled to face Logan in anticipation of a meaty, satisfying fight.

“What flea bit you, bud, and how dare you touch the wheel when I’m driving. You could have caused an accident.”

“Excuse me? You were the one who thought she was on a motorcycle, driving on two wheels. You need to focus Cassidy. Yes, he hurt your family, but they’ll heal. The best thing you can do right now is catch the bastard.”

He leaned over and clipped her seatbelt in. Then he turned the key in the ignition and restarted the car. “Driving the car and not killing me would be a good start. Now get over it and let’s get back on the road and you can kick some ass.” He settled back into his own seat and motioned forward with his hands. “Go on. Head for your place, I’ll go from there. I’ll also call Shannon and we’ll get together to have a brainstorming session later on this afternoon. Maybe get a bite to eat as well. Suit you?”

Cassidy shrugged, strangely at ease now with Logan taking over. Her fury had subsided at the thought of kicking evil’s ass. “Suits me for the moment. Don’t get use to me following orders. Otherwise, I’d have to take you down.”

“You mean I’d have to take *you* down.”

She eased back onto the highway, calmer than when she had pulled off, but she still had to get the last word in. “You and what army, bud?”

Chapter Fifteen

Cassidy glared at her watch. Why was everyone else late? Cassidy wasn't angry at Shannon, more at herself. Those hang up and heavy breathing phone calls had started coming again as soon as she'd entered her apartment after the farm. Only a day had passed, but already the malice and hate seemed to fairly ooze out and she felt coated in dread and evil afterward.

The fat bookseller. She knew it was him making the phone calls. He had to be the beast. She kept remembering the dark black haze around him, thick enough to taste.

"I'm sorry, I slept in, had another date. This time he slept over. I'm absolutely exhausted."

"Well, I'm glad one of us is having some fun and getting some." Cassidy grinned impishly at her. "No need for all of us to be celibate and frustrated."

Logan's partner turned toward the waiter as he paused at their table. "An iced tea and a Caesar salad, please. Oh, Cassidy, did you order?"

She shook her head and held up the cup. "I'd like a refill, please, and a slice of Decadent Midnight."

Shannon shuddered, envy-ridden longing flashing across her face. "I'd love to have a piece of their mud cake, but I'm not like you. I'd have to work out for about ten hours before I could get rid of all the fat. Anyway, I had my own decadent midnight earlier." She eased back in the chair and smirked.

"Yuck, thanks for the picture, Shannon. Please, no more details, or I won't be able to eat my cake." Cassidy focused on Shannon. "Okay, since

you happen to be boasting about your date, give me all the details about him.”

The grinning woman tried to look solemn as their order arrived. “Actually, I don’t want to say too much about him. I might jinx the whole thing. He’s coming out of a bad break up and he doesn’t want to telegraph it to the ex he’s seeing someone. Apparently, she’s a bit of a loony tune.”

“Anything secret can’t be good, Shannon. Look, watch yourself. You don’t want to get into a situation that turns ugly. What’s his name anyway and what does he do?”

“Nope, my lips are sealed, but thanks for the head’s up. Don’t worry, I’ll be careful. And what about you? Logan and you getting on better than you were?”

“So what? We’re not... I mean... Oh damn it, alright, I’m interested, doesn’t mean he is.” Cassidy rubbed her hands through her hair and left hair stuck in different directions. “Yes, to tell you the truth, he’s got me running like a coward. I’m thinking about families and it scares the bejesus out of me. Besides, how do I know how he feels?”

As the expression on Shannon’s face froze, Cassidy stopped babbling. She closed her eyes and sighed. Could her luck be that bad?

“Hi, Logan, I didn’t realize you wanted to be in on the meeting as well. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Sorry, I tried to call you, but you must have taken the phone off the hook and turned your pager off. Have you started talking about the case yet?”

He tried to cover the fact he’d heard Cassidy talking about him. Well, at least he assumed they were talking about him. He didn’t know how he felt about what she’d said. Lately he’d started thinking the same things about her. He’d been pretty relieved when she’d decided not to date the rich guy, she’d only had the one date, but sometimes that’s all it took. He just didn’t know whether he wanted to settle and have a family straight away either.

Cassidy took an audible breath and turned around to face him. “Yeah, we’d already started going over it, but we can rehash for you. Take a seat.” She motioned to the other side of the table.

“I had that fat bookseller under surveillance.” Logan grabbed a chair. “His name’s Mancini. Our boy happens to have some strong connections to the local mafia family and he owns a black Chevy.”

Cassidy snapped her fingers. “I told you there was something about him. I think he’s hiding something.”

“Yes, okay, he might be in the family,” Shannon chipped in. “But it doesn’t mean he’s our beast. You could be picking up on the mafia connection. Is there anything else you know that could help us?”

“Umm, the beast seems to be giving me dirty phone calls. I get a man on the other side and he heavy breathes and listens to me or he disconnects as soon as I answer.” Cassidy shrugged. “Since I’m not working on any other cases, it has to be him.”

“What about Mr. Kyle Chandler? Could it have been him?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Nosy, but no, it isn’t him. He seems too well mannered to let his anger get the best of him.”

“He didn’t look well mannered the other night when he nearly caused a fight at the club.”

She brushed his statement away with the wave of her hand. “I told you it was a mistake. He seems like an extremely nice and controlled person. You keep Mancini under watch.”

Shannon stood and threw some money on the table for the lunch. “Excuse me, but my hot date is in the car, he had to make a business call. Can’t make him wait any longer so I’ll leave you two to duke it out without me. I’ll turn my pager on, you should be able to get me, but make it good or I’ll have to kill you myself.” She waved and scooted quickly toward her car.

An awkward silence hovered between the two of them. Logan felt totally unsure of Cassidy and didn’t want to admit to any feelings, which might blindside both of them.

“She seems happy. I just hope she’s careful. You never know who you’re dating these days, even a cop.” Logan grabbed Cassidy’s fork and speared some of her neglected cake.

Cassidy smiled at the sight of him with a little blob of cake smeared in the corner of his mouth. “I agree it’s all gone pretty quickly. I’m worried it’s too serious too soon. By the way, you have this...” She reached over with her napkin and wiped away the trace of chocolate on his sensual lips. She couldn’t stop herself from staring at his mouth and thinking about the taste of Decadent Midnight and him.

“Decadent Midnight.”

“Sorry, what was that?”

Her face blazed as a wave of heat swept through her. “Umm, the name of the cake is Decadent Midnight. Here, you have the rest. I’m not hungry anymore.” She shoved the cake at him and prayed he would take it and leave her alone in her misery.

“Thanks for the cake. Seriously though, you’ve warned the rest of us, now take your own advice. Be careful, don’t assume anything. That way you’re not surprised if anything out of line happens.”

“You still aren’t convinced, are you? I mean, that Mancini might be the beast?”

Logan finished the last forkful of cake and stared wistfully at the empty plate. “Let’s say I’ve been in this business too long to take things for granted. There’s always a twist at the end. Be careful, all right?”

“Whatever I do, trust me, I *will* be careful. I don’t let innocents get hurt no matter what the cost.”

“Look, I need to go back to the office. I’ve got all this work backed up I need to clear. Check in with me if anything happens. See you later.”

“Hey Logan, did you happen to hear any of the conversation when you walked up?”

“No I didn’t, should I have?”

“Oh no, you should be glad you didn’t. It was only Shannon giving me the juicy details about her hot date last night. You would have been grossed out. Anyway, I’ll talk to you later.”

Cassidy watched as he strode off. He was cute when he was thinking, all manly concentration. She wondered if he used the same energy when he was dating or in bed? *Whoa there girl, get away from the date thing.* She had to focus on the case before anyone else was hurt. The last thing Cassidy needed to do was spark the beast into a frenzy at the sight of her getting close to someone. She had a feeling it would topple whoever the beast was right over the edge.

She smiled as the waitress came over to clear the table. She really was going crazy talking to herself. Time to get on with the job.

Cassidy turned toward the side street where her car was parked. As she drew abreast of the vehicle, she glanced at the corner of the street.

The woman and man about to slip into a car grabbed her attention. Shannon. It was Shannon and her hot date. Cassidy raised her arm to give a shout and a wave, when some intuition stopped her. She couldn't see the man properly, his face was obscured, but he seemed familiar.

Her spine started to tingle as her warning alarm dropped into danger mode. Whoever he was, there were no good vibes. She opened her car and ducked in so they couldn't see her. Qualify that, she hoped *he* hadn't seen her. Her gut feeling was it would be bad for Shannon's health if he had. Cassidy didn't know what was going on, but she needed to get home and call Logan before anything happened.



Her apartment reeked of her. The beast and man smiled at the thought of the woman's blood spilled. Their vengeance for her rejection would be painful, mentally and physically.

The animal now inside the man wanted to howl his rage at her defection. The man suppressed it. The last thing he needed was to be caught in her apartment. Especially when he was about to leave such a nice gift for her.

The man trailed his sharpened nails through her clothes and the fresh washing on the bed. He paused to snag a pair of black thong underwear and sniff them, making sure to leave his spoor everywhere.

He strolled back into the living room and pawed through the photos and files strewn on the coffee table.

His handiwork stared back at him. The blood lust rose in a tide of longing. This time it would be her life-giving fluid he tasted, her skin his talons sliced through. His nails would carve and cut and leave nothing but pain and brutality in their wake.

First step, her friends. She hadn't suffered enough yet, it was time to increase the ante. But first, he needed more information and if he couldn't access her, it would have to be the next best thing. A friend of hers.



Cassidy's hand poised inches away from the keyhole in her front door. The door was slightly ajar, only an inch, but it had been closed and locked when she'd left. She paid more attention to the door and realized it wouldn't even close properly now. All the hinges were out of whack.

She crouched low and opened all her senses. The immediate stench that hit was the beasts. Cassidy shuddered at the thought that an animal who had no compunction of maiming and killing had been in her home. She couldn't sense any active scents. This had been done a while ago, probably straight after she'd left.

On point in case she was wrong and he was still here, she gave the door a slight push, wincing as it creaked in protest. Instant desolation hit her as she took in the devastation to what she'd called her own.

Books were torn apart and shredded, the couch literally sliced to pieces. Photos lay shattered and torn on the floor, and her stereo and television were on their sides, completely emptied of any inside workings.

Superimposed over all of her possessions was his spoor. The predator, the beast, had sprayed urine and other things over her belongings. He had marked his territory and told her he would be back for her.

She picked her way through the apartment toward her bedroom. On the way, she glanced into the kitchen. The drawers were emptied of all pots, pans and plastics. Her plates and dishes shattered, and the

contents of the fridge and cupboard strewn all over the floor in a gigantic technicolor painting.

Cassidy stood in the doorway to her haven—her bedroom. The desolation was infinitely worse in this room. The bedclothes were hacked into tiny squares, the entire contents of her wardrobe torn apart as if by a wild animal. Photos and electrical equipment all carved like someone had taken a chainsaw to them. Even her stuffed animals were shredded into pathetic piles of fur and filling.

Once again, over everything was his spoor. His excrement dotted the floor here and there. Blood was painted in a red wash over her creamy, cheerful walls.

She sniffed. The blood belonged to the beast, no one else, thank the goddess for small mercies. But the blood still carried a powerful message. No holds barred. He wanted her dead—and soon. He'd definitely given up on the couple idea.

Pain welled inside and almost doubled her over. Her stomach churned with nausea from the savage intrusion.

Cassidy clenched her fists and gritted her teeth. She would *not* let anyone take her feeling of safety away. She loved this place and what it represented—independence from the clan. She'd fought long and hard for this. Most shapeshifting clans stayed in the same locality, for support, protection and love. The family ties were very strong. She'd fought to be her own person and to find her own way, and this thing had tried to steal it from her. It would not be tolerated.

She carefully unclenched her hands and relaxed her jaw, deliberately trying to release the building tension.

“Time to talk to Logan. The cops might be able to test the blood on the wall. This bastard has possibly given us the break we needed.”

She smiled as she considered the blood. “It’s time for payback, buddy. You may have made the biggest mistake of your soon-to-be-short life.”

Chapter Sixteen

Satisfaction gleamed in his eyes as he handed the woman into the car. Humans were gullible, always looking for the perfect mate and it was the perfect front to gain information. An expression of hate ghosted across his face, quickly smothered. There was no such thing as a perfect mate, no fate and eternally yours. There was only the afterlife and who he sent there.

He bent his human shell and climbed into the woman's car. She let him drive, which was the only true delight he took from the mortal world anymore. A powerful, fast car, driving at a top speed, gave him the same rush spilling blood did.

The female detective turned to him, smiled and motioned for him to move off. He fought the urge to growl at having to pander to her whims, but he would do anything to enact his revenge, anything at all. He looked over his shoulder to reverse and caught a quick glimpse of his prey. The dark tinted windows should disguise specific features. The only sight she would have of him would have been a vague and general one.

The man smiled at his passenger and pulled off the curb slowly toward her house. It was time, he had decided, to step up his campaign anyway. His partner had fed him enough information for him to know confusion reigned and they had no concrete evidence of who the beast was. The male cop was the one he had to worry about, the very observant Detective Logan.

He relaxed his tight grip on the steering wheel as his passenger shot him a confused glance. He had to relax, keep his emotions under wraps until they were back at her place. Then he could start the plan moving along.

Pain suddenly clamped his stomach in a harsh hold. Fiery tendrils shot up and wrapped around his throat to consume the very air he breathed. The woman on his other side asked him a question. All he heard was the roaring in his blood. All he felt was the pain in his body, like an intense fire reshaping his very bones.

As abruptly as the cramps and pain had hit him, it disappeared like it had never existed. Something had gone wrong, dreadfully, dreadfully wrong. He had to go back to the book on rituals he'd discarded in his sanctuary and find out what had happened.

Nothing must affect his plan, nothing.

Shannon looked askew at the other occupant of her car as he grunted in pain and nearly drove them off the road.

"What happened? Are you okay? Talk to me, what's going on?"

He didn't answer, only kept repeating the pain-riddled tonal growl.

Shannon's worry escalated and she contemplated dragging on the handbrake, to get him to pull over. Without warning, he stopped his pained sounds and straightened from his hunched position. She expelled a relieved sigh. "What happened to you?"

"I forgot to take my medication this morning, for my ulcer. When I have an attack, it feels like it's killing me. Sorry for worrying you. Do you mind if we go back to my place so I can take it?"

She laughed shakily. "Of course not, I thought you were dying. You worried the hell out of me."

"I'm sorry. Don't worry, I'll be fine once I take my pills. Anyway we're nearly at my place."

He had to pull a sharp turn and brake before the gate as he pressed a button on his key ring. The gates opened silently while Shannon watched. "Cool. I love these gates, not to mention your house. It's beautiful."

He pulled to a stop at the front and gestured for her to hop out and follow him. The door opened easily to his key and they clattered into the main marble hallway.

"You can wait in the library while I get my pills, if you want."

“Sure, I’ll have a sneaky peek around, if you don’t mind. I love old books.”

He agreed and was only gone a short while before he returned. She looked from the small pile of books she had amassed beside her. “Oops, sorry, I’ll put them back, but they grabbed me and said *read me*.”

“I have a butler, an honest to God butler. He complains I don’t give him enough work, he won’t mind putting them away. Come on, there’s somewhere I need to go, we can go to your place after. It’s much more welcoming than mine.” He extended his hand and pulled her upright.



The harsh knock at the door broke into Cassidy’s pained solitude. If it was the thing who’d done this, he was dead. No one would get the better of her again. Cassidy couldn’t believe her own stupidity. Of course it wasn’t the beast. Why would he knock? She opened the door and motioned Logan and his forensic team inside.

“What the hell.”

Logan raised his eyebrows as he looked at the devastation.

“Hell, whoever did this wanted to hurt you.” He turned to his team. “Two of you take the bedroom. There’s blood on the walls to collect and the rest fan out and see if there are any prints.”

“Thanks for coming, Logan. The bastard made a mistake. He left his blood behind. I want to nail this man, bad.” She made an effort to relax her clenched hands and calm down. “He invaded my privacy. This place is my sanctuary and it’s by invite only.”

“We’ll do what we can. I’ll put a rush on the bloodwork, but it will still take at least twenty-four hours. They’re backed up at the labs.” He glanced around at the living room. “Anything lying around giving you any ideas about the beast?”

Cassidy considered her first impressions of the room, when she’d first walked in and discovered the devastation. “He’s taken his gloves off. There won’t be any more help for me if I get into any tight spots. I think he’s switched his game plan. Instead of drawing me to his side, he wants to draw blood.”

“What’s the bedroom like? Is it as bad as this room?”

“It’s worse, he went to town on it. Why do you ask?”

“You can’t stay here tonight. Stay at my place instead.”

She stared in shock at him. “What? Your place? Jace would never let me forget it if he heard about it. Not to mention how my family would react. They’re pretty traditional, even if they are lycanthropes.”

Logan smiled wearily at her. “I’m not proposing we jump into bed. Frankly, I’m exhausted and I’m sure you are, too. It’s only a bed. I do have a spare bedroom, it’s not as if you’d have to bunk in with me if you don’t want to.”

Cassidy tried not to consider the offer, but it was tempting. “All right, I suppose since you’re not planning an orgy tonight, I should be fine.” She almost choked on a bubble of air and saliva, which mixed together at the look on his face when she started talking about orgies.

“Umm, y-yeah, sorry, not tonight,” Logan stuttered. “The guys should be through in your bedroom pretty soon. You can go in there and pick some gear.”

“Nope, don’t need to. He didn’t leave me any clothing intact. I do want to check on Shannon though, make sure she’s okay too.” Cassidy reached for the phone and dialed Shannon’s home number, but all she got was the answering machine.

“Logan, didn’t Shannon say she’d be in tonight? She was going to answer any calls which came through?”

“Yeah, on duty bright and early tomorrow so she won’t be kicking her heels up tonight.”

Her worry spot started to tingle. “Look, why don’t we swing round there anyway? We may even get to meet her hot and heavy, if he’s there.” She placed the phone back into its cradle. “Speaking of Shannon, I saw her and her date leave after our meeting today. I didn’t get a good look at him, but there was something familiar about him. I’m sure I know him from somewhere.”

The phone jangled harshly, the sound unexpected amidst all the destruction. It scared the daylight out of Cassidy. “What.”

“Now, is that anyway to answer the phone, especially when it’s your mother?”

Cassidy glanced around the room as her mother’s voice echoed on the line. Thankfully her mother hadn’t seen this. She would go wild if she had, and a mother wolf trying to protect her cubs is not a pretty sight.

“Excuse me. Cassidy, are you still there?”

“Sorry, Ma, I got distracted for a moment. How are you?”

“I’m fine, actually we’re all okay here and Bethany wanted to tell you everything’s fine. In fact, she’s gone clan all the way and has shed her clothes. I also wanted to say I’m sorry for having a go at you, I’m worried.”

“I know, Ma. If it’s any consolation, you’re right, as usual, and I am thinking about what you said. I’ve got a lot on my mind at the moment.”

Sarah grunted worriedly. “Take care and trust in yourself. Now, speaking of the Were, I have more information about the ritual.”

“Go ahead, Ma, I’m listening.”

“All right, the ritual is only temporary. Pretty soon the conversion will start to decay and the Were will be in some spectacular pain. His strength and senses will wane as well. To cement the process, he needs to commit a sacrifice somewhere on consecrated ground, our ground.”

Cassidy was sure her face had telegraphed to Logan something was going on. “Keep going.”

“He needs to do this in the next twenty-four hours or the process will be too far along to repair. It has to be completed between dawn and mid morning, although goddess knows why. Cassidy, he needs a human sacrifice.”

“Don’t worry, Ma, I’m not about to let that happen.”

She replaced the phone and turned to look at Logan’s impatient face. “I think we caught another break. He’s starting to lose his powers and he needs a sacrifice to make his new state permanent.”

“How is this a break for us? It’ll be another day before we get any information off our tests on the blood.”

“Because my dear sir, he has to do this on consecrated ground. Lycanthrope ground, not human, and trust me, there aren’t many

around this area. Plus, he has a specific timeframe, otherwise he'll be human and you only get one shot at this."

"What about the timings? We have no idea where in that twenty-four hour period he's going to strike."

"He has to commit the sacrifice between dawn and mid-morning. Ma didn't know why, but I'm betting it's mainly due to the fact all of our holy places have pretty heavy traffic during the night and from late afternoon on. In between that time, it's too open, too many hikers around. The only time is dawn to early mid-morning when it will be quiet and deserted."

Her teeth gleamed as she pictured the corner she'd pinned the beast into. *Ahh*, revenge. Nothing like it. "All I have to do is to narrow it to which holy ground he'll target. Like I said before, there's only two in the area, it's picking which one."

"Is there anything you need to get started?"

"Only a map of our end of the national forest and some quiet to work in. Let's get going. Don't forget to stop at Shannon's place first. What are you standing here for?"

Cassidy strode past him and flashed a saucy grin in his direction. "Always slow on the uptake. Typical."

Logan shook his head. "Aggressive and gung-ho, what a combination, probably one that's going to get you killed."

She ignored his comment and headed downstairs while he spoke to the forensics team in her apartment.



She pounded her fists on the door again, but no one answered her summons. She turned and shrugged her confusion at Logan, who sat waiting in the car. Cassidy walked back to the vehicle and stuck her head through the opened passenger side window.

"She must have gone out or is having such a good time, they decided not to open the door or answer the phone."

"Shannon can't help herself with the phone. If she was there, she would have answered it. I have a spare set of keys for emergencies at my place. Hop in the car and we'll go get them."

Logan shoved the door open and Cassidy climbed in. He was finally going to get her into his house. Funny, it wasn't quite the way she'd pictured the moment. It would be interesting to see what sort of place the sexy cop lived in.

Cassidy looked in shock at Logan's place. "You live in a haunted house?"

"No, I live at the back of a local heritage museum that happens to have a bit of a reputation."

She couldn't believe the sight in front of her. It was the epitome of the haunted house everyone crossed to the other side of the street to avoid. Although it was night his street was well lit and Logan's house stood out like the proverbial sore thumb. The grey stone towered over the rest of the street like a stern sentinel guarding the residents from evil, or maybe locking them inside. Ivy crept over the front face of the house like a curtain shielding its secrets from the outside. Bare windows hung like black holes, discouraging anyone from entering. The once immaculate lawn cried out for some good old-fashioned weeding. The garden had exploded in wild abandon and resembled a jungle more than anything else.

"Umm, wasn't there someone murdered here?" Cassidy fumbled for her seatbelt and eased the car door open. It wasn't like she was scared. After all, she'd seen a ghost at her mother's farm. But this place gave her the creeps and she couldn't imagine Logan living here.

"Someone died, but they weren't murdered. The owner died of a heart attack. My ma was the housekeeper and he left her the house. She loves her own home too much to move so we decided to turn it into a local heritage museum. I'm like a caretaker for the place." He slammed his door shut. "As you can see, I don't have a hell of a lot of time free to do the upkeep."

Cassidy winced at his phrasing. "Could you please not mention hell in conjunction with this place, it's worrying." She sniffed the air and drew back in surprise. The essence of jasmine and herbs tantalized her

with their aromatic perfume and the distinctive odor of a clan-marked area jabbed at her senses.

“Logan, how long has your mother had this place?”

“Ahh, about ten years I guess. We’re closed for renovations at the moment, but we’ll be open again in another week. Why?”

Cassidy prowled forward and opened her senses to the looming stone house in front of her. There it was—the unique musky tang that heralded a shape-shifter. Whatever Were had lived here wasn’t one of her clan, but had certainly been powerful. The markings were older than ten years, probably at least fifteen years, but they were unmistakable. The Were who’d left them must have had a heck of a lot of power for the trails still to be here.

“Well, come on. Show me your place.” She climbed the small set of stairs and stood on the front porch, tapping her heel while she waited for Logan to catch up.

A confused look on his face, he grabbed the keys from his pocket and joined her at the door.

“Weren’t you the one worried about ghosts? And what were all the questions back there?” He opened the door and let her into the musty, dust-covered entrance way.

Cassidy tried not to react when her body brushed against his as she walked into the house. “I wasn’t worried about ghosts. As far as what happened outside, did you realize in all probability the last owner was a Were?”

The marking of the other shape-shifter had a decidedly feline tang. The room that drew her the most, where the scent was strongest, was the sitting room. She stepped inside and stared at the contents. It was full of a hodge-podge of antiques and knick-knacks. Glad to have something to take her mind off Logan, she started to investigate.

Her skin still bristled with the electricity she’d received from his body when they’d accidentally brushed against each other. At least she had on her padded bra today, otherwise the evidence would be staring him in the face right now. Heat rose inside her and swept through her body. It

took a major effort to keep the picture of the two of them alone in his silent house from repeating like a short film.

“Okay, but I never saw any dogs or wolves around. The old guy was nice enough, but not very talkative.” Logan shrugged as if the information was common place and motioned for her to precede him.

“Dogs.” Cassidy took a deep breath and tried to hold onto the thread of the conversation without giving in to the need to beat Logan around the head. “Firstly, there are no Were dogs. And secondly, he wasn’t a wolf. He was probably some sort of feline, maybe something small like a lynx. They are a little bit bigger than a domestic cat and have a black tipped tail and yellowish brown to grey fur.”

Comprehension lit Logan’s face as he opened the door to his small apartment. “Ahh, which would be why there was always a large cat which hung around and why it disappeared when the old man died.” He ushered Cassidy in, turned on the lights, grabbed the pile of washing by the door and shoved it under the hall table.

Blinking at the sudden change in light, it took a while for the state of the apartment to hit Cassidy. Piles of newspapers, books, case files and dirty plates littered the table in front of her. The unused vacuum cleaner gathered dust under the couch and the whole room stank of dirty socks and underwear.

“Maid’s day off, Logan?”

“Yeah, I’m not normally this messy, but this case has me burning the candle at both ends. Cleaning has taken a backseat to everything else.” He grabbed the newspapers and shoved them into the garbage bin in the kitchen.

“Don’t clean on my account. I’d hate to put you out or anything.” Cassidy smirked sweetly at him as he paused in his mad dash to clean his bachelor pad.

“Shut up, Quinn. Unless you want to do the cleaning yourself.” Advancing toward her, he grabbed a broom and brandished it in her face.

“In your dreams, pal. I don’t clean for anyone.” She grasped hold of the broom and shoved him back toward the sofa, careful not to exert too

much pressure. She wouldn't want to break this toy—Logan, that is. Cassidy jerked in shock as they both over-balanced and fell on the sofa.

Oh my sweet goddess.

They'd landed with Logan on the bottom, her plastered all over him and his hands on her ass. Cassidy froze, unsure how to handle the sensory overload. His woody cologne curled around her and she all but purred as his hands moved to soothe her lower back. She tasted his minty breath and heard the thudding beat of his heart speed up like a set of tribal drums. Conscious thought evaporated as she dived into the white-hot heat of lust.

Cassidy lowered her mouth to the side of his throat and slowly licked from the collarbone to below his ear. His salty, sweaty taste drove her wild and she rubbed herself hard along his leg. His arms tightened around her as he jolted and groaned. She felt his hard sex throb against her as she quickly devoured his mouth. The silky smooth cave of his mouth beckoned her as their tongues dueled, with Cassidy the dominant.

Logan's hands slid from her back to curve around her ribs and inch toward their goal. His hands gently closed around her swelling breasts and they both groaned as electric sensation shot through them. Cassidy drowned in pure fire as his fingers worked their magic on her taut, pained nipples.

One minute they'd been wrestling like a couple of pals, the next thing Logan knew, they were on the couch and his hands were on her butt. *God, that butt.* It was luscious and surprisingly full for a skinny chick. He quickly shifted his hands to her lower back as he felt her body tense. She growled and deepened the kiss, her body relaxing against his.

Don't make me get up; I think I've gone to heaven. Her breasts were hard and full against his chest. One of her legs snuggled tight against his growing erection and he felt her hot center sitting lushly astride his leg.

His groan echoed hers when she ran her hands toward his belt in search of an opening. He shifted slightly to give her greater access and suddenly he felt her sliding. A shriek ripped out of her as she rolled to the floor.

Logan couldn't believe it. *God, I wish I'd vacuumed the floor*, was all he could think of as he followed her. Cassidy yelped again as he lowered his full weight onto her.

"Wait, wait. Sorry, I'm laying on something." She pulled out the bag of clothing and old books she'd fallen on. An old tarnished coin, which lay underneath the bag, caught her attention.

"Where the hell did you get this?" Cassidy held the old coin in front of Logan's nose.

Trying to clear the lusty fog from his brain, Logan focused on the coin. "It was with a bunch of things the old owner gave to Mum to give to me before he passed away. Why do you want to know?"

"This is a clan coin, *my* clan's coin."

"Clan coin? What's that?" Logan gave up on the sexy mood and hoisted himself back onto the couch.

"The clans give it out when a great debt must be paid. Normally it means whoever carries it, outside of a clan member, has done a great service to the family. As such, when it's presented to a member of the clan we must honor any request the holder has. As long as it doesn't break clan law." Cassidy frowned. "I thought all the clan coins had been accounted for. Obviously not."

"I guess this old man or someone from his family did you guys a favor."

"Maybe, but I thought we'd know about it. We keep track of all the coins. We're very careful. These are rarely given out except for something big. He passed it onto you as his successor. So now we owe *you* a favor." She closed her hand tightly around the coin.

"Look, Cassidy, it's not like I knew anything about this."

"Stuff it, Logan, and take the damn coin. For goodness sake, don't let it out of your sight, it's important." Cassidy gently placed her clan's honor into his hand.

"Cass..."

"Son, I'm home. Are you in?"

Logan gaped as his mother opened the door and sashayed in, only to stop and stare.

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“Well now, I’m please to see you finally took my talk to heart and you’re providing me with a grandbaby. But surely you could have vacuumed your floor first?”

Chapter Seventeen

Cassidy didn't know whether to laugh or cry. First her inopportune moment with the coin, then his mother waltzing in and mentioning babies. Talk about giving up. She was starting to think they weren't meant to be.

"Hey Ma, what are you doing here?" Logan scrambled to his feet and turned toward his mother.

"Now that's no way to talk to your precious mother. Come over here and give me a big kiss. I brought your washing back."

Cassidy grinned as she watched a shame-faced Logan give his mother a cuddle and kiss and quickly grab the laundry bag from Molly.

"I never took you for a mommy's boy, Logan?"

"Don't be silly, young Cassidy. A good boy always gives his mother something to fuss over. It's not like I'm working anymore. And it's nice to see you here with my boy and not that fancy pants Chandler man you were with at the ball." Molly dropped her bag on the now cleared table and smiled at both of them.

"Umm, speaking of work, Molly, Logan tells me you used to work here?"

"Why, yes, dear, I did. And a cantankerous old man my employer was indeed, but he paid well." Molly cleared a space on the much abused couch and sat.

Logan grabbed the coin and showed it to his mother. "Do you know anything about this coin, Ma?"

Molly reached for the glasses hanging around her neck and perused the coin. "It's the coin Mr. Gatos, my employer, gave to Logan before he died."

Cassidy smiled, talk about hiding in plain sight. “Gatos means cat in Greek, Logan.”

“Of course it does. It’s a fitting name for a man who changed into a cat sometimes.”

Pure shock held both Cassidy and Logan immobile as they stared at Molly’s matter of fact face.

“Ma, you knew he was a Were-cat and you never told me?”

“The proper term is Were-Lynx actually and I thought you knew. He is a distant relative of ours after all. I assumed he’d told you, especially when he passed you the coin, in light of you being a friend of Cassidy’s family.”

A light bulb flicked on in Cassidy’s mind. That was why Logan seemed like a Were male. It ran in his family. Gatos must have been a hybrid, part-human and part-Were. Most of the time they bred true, but not always.

“Do you know how Mr. Gatos may have gotten this coin?”

“Let my tired old brain think. He was handed it by his father who got it from his wife. She saved some wolf clan member’s life. I think he mentioned a man called Ash? Funny sort of name if you ask me.”

“It couldn’t be.” Cassidy felt shell shocked at the direct link to her clan through their ancestor, Asher. Talk about a small world. All paths led straight back to Logan.

“Cassidy, what’s the matter? You’ve gone pale.”

“Ash is actually Asher. He’s a direct ancestor of mine.” She quickly flicked her gaze around the room and swore she heard a faint chuckle come from a far corner. Between the two Weres, they had set this up to link her more strongly to Logan. This would be exactly what a sly lynx would do for kicks. They were quick and devious and there was no telling when they would strike.

“Well, there you go, all’s well that ends well. But I’m pleased you’re carrying on the families’ tradition of taking up with a Were. Even if you’re not a Cat, you’re still welcome in the family.” Molly stood and from her diminutive height grabbed Cassidy in a steel-strong hug.

Logan risked a quick glance at Cassidy before quickly turning to his mother. “Thanks for your help, Ma, but we have to be going now. We’ve got some work to do.”

Molly sighed. “Yes, you are both busy people, but you’ll have to slow down when the babies come, won’t you?”

Cassidy shuddered and carefully extricated herself from Molly’s trap of words and sweetness.

“Umm, we haven’t discussed children yet, but I’m sure you’ll be the first to know.” *Kids!* Lord, they hadn’t even had a date yet. She backed away from Molly, aka the loaded bomb, and indicated the door with a nod. “We have to go, but it was nice seeing you again. Goodbye for now.”

Logan followed Cassidy to the door, grabbing Shannon’s house keys off the hall table as he passed.

“Don’t worry dear,” Molly called out. “I’ll do the vacuuming for you while you’re gone. In case you want to roll around on the floor again. I’d hate for your moment to be interrupted.”

Cassidy groaned and charged out the door before Molly could say anything else. As the front entrance neared, she couldn’t help but notice the welcoming sense of comfort and warmth in the house that hadn’t been there before. If she didn’t know better, she would say the house was welcoming her in. Crazy.

She shook away the thought and spun around on the spot, forcing Logan to a halt. “We will never speak of this again, to anyone. Okay?” She poked his rock hard chest with her finger for emphasis and tried not to notice his heat.

Logan’s lips twitched as he looked on solemnly. “Agreed. Jace would never let me live this down and that’s after he beat the daylights out of me for hitting on his sister. Let’s go to Shannon’s.”

Cassidy opened the car door. Hopefully tonight’s humiliation was at an end, because she didn’t think her ego could stand anymore pummeling.

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Cassidy banged on the door again, but still no answer. Shaking her head at Logan, she strode toward the car. When she was close enough, he threw her Shannon's keys. The two detectives must have exchanged keys in case of emergencies. Cassidy didn't know if this qualified, but checking on Shannon was important. She had a bad feeling about Shannon's hot date.

The key turned in the lock and she let herself in the front door. "Shannon, are you there? I had a bad feeling and wanted to check on you since you weren't answering the phone. Please don't be naked." Cassidy prowled around the small house, flicking on lights, only to find it completely empty. "She must have decided to go out, or over to her new boyfriend's house."

Shrugging Cassidy searched the bedroom, just in case. She stumbled over a tangle of sheets on the floor. "Whoops." Obviously they'd enjoyed their date. The blankets and sheets were half-on, half-off the bed.

Sensing nothing she spun around and started to walk back out to the waiting Logan. A black folder half-concealed by the sheet captured her gaze.

"What's that..." Cassidy reached for the opened billfold. Shannon's picture greeted her shocked stare.

Her police identification. She couldn't go anywhere without this. She was supposed to carry it at all times.

Cassidy's worry spot suddenly spread to her whole body. Staring around the room, she noticed certain things, which hadn't claimed her attention before. Drops of blood sprinkled on the floor. Sheets ripped in the corner. A couple of photos overturned. All of these could be put down to active or rough sex, but not her identification folder.

The beast had grabbed her. She was sure of it. *Shannon was his sacrifice.*

Her revenge had got a whole lot more personal. Moving quickly out to Logan she jumped into the car. "We need to get to my office, as soon as possible."

He frowned at her. "What happened in there? You look upset?"

Her body stiff with anger, she glanced at him. “The beast has Shannon. Her room looks like there might have been a struggle and I found this under the bed.” She offered him the black folder.

He took it and stared. “It’s Shannon’s ID folder. She wouldn’t leave the house without it. It’s the first thing you’re taught as a rookie.”

“Yep, you have to drop me at my office. I have some supplies there I need to get.”

“No problems, but I have to get to my office to launch an all points bulletin on her. I’ll try to hurry the lab along as well but this time of the night it will probably be pointless. *Damn it.*” He slammed his fists against the steering wheel. “Of all the people, why her? I should have paid attention to her and her date.”

Cassidy broke into his guilt trip. “It’s no-one’s fault, except for the bastard who has her. Don’t worry, we’ll get her back. She’ll be fine. Why don’t you drop me at my office and I’ll call you when I need a ride?”

With a nod, he gunned the engine and pulled out of the driveway.



Cassidy rummaged through the drawers of her office desk for the key to her weapons’ cupboard. “Nothing like some extra insurance, in case.” Grabbing the key, she knelt in a corner of the room and peeled a bit of the carpet away. A small lock greeted her satisfied gaze. At least the beast hadn’t found *this* stash.

The key turned smoothly and a panel slid away to show a large space filled with all sorts of weaponry. Cassidy reached in and pulled out a small caliber lady’s pistol. Next was an old police-issue Beretta Jace had gifted her with. The bullets she grabbed were from a very special order that had cost her more than she cared to remember, but it looked like it was going to come in handy.

The ammunition happened to be silver casings. Silver bullets to be specific. Most of the legends were make-believe, but that one was the truth. Silver could hurt and, scar and regeneration, if there was any, seemed to be slowed or nonexistent after exposure to the silver. Get the right shot and it would kill as well. Any pistol could do the same, but it

was easier with the silver. It slowed the target long enough to get the killing-shot off.

She locked, loaded and secreted the guns on her body, the Beretta to the small of her back and the lady's pistol to a small holster on her ankle. They would probably be useless if she had to try a change, but you never know. Reaching back into the hole, Cassidy grabbed some local maps, which would help her pinpoint the holy places.

Reaching for the phone on her desk, she punched in Logan's cell number. It didn't even ring before the recorded message told her the phone had been switched off or the user was out of range. She tried her own cell. Maybe he'd left a message for her.

The only message that blinked was a quick text from Shannon. She hurriedly opened it, hoping it would allay her fears, but it was a single line, an address.

It may be a trap, but if she got to Shannon quickly, she may have a greater chance of survival. Cassidy checked her weapons, grabbed her maps and strode out of the office. The only problem she had was no car and she didn't have any time to waste. Out in the corridor outside her office, Cassidy noted the light that burnt bright in the accountant's office next door. "Well, I can only ask once. You never know what someone will say."

She knocked on the door and watched as an older woman glanced up and motioned to the closed sign. Cassidy knocked on the door again. "I need your help. A friend of mine has been taken hostage by a crazy boyfriend of hers and I need to get to her to help. Unfortunately, I don't have my car. Can I take yours?" She waited for the explosion of laughter.

The older lady stared at her as if she was a mental patient, escaped from an institution, but still stood and opened the door. "Let me get this straight, you need my car to help a kidnapped friend? Are you from next door, the detective agency?"

Cassidy nodded and held her breath.

The woman shrugged and smiled. "Okay, Not a problem, but if you scratch it, you bought it."

"I...what... Did you say yes?"

“Yes, your secretary, Bethany, is always telling me about the adventures you have. Umm, I’m actually a writer and your adventures give me some great ideas. This one will probably be a doozy.” She tossed a set of keys across to Cassidy. “It’s the black Hummer downstairs, you can’t miss it. Drop the keys back to me here tomorrow.”

Cassidy backed away, as quickly as she could, before the crazy lady retracted her offer. Who in this day and age would lend out their car to a total stranger? She wouldn’t, if the roles were reversed, but never mind. Don’t look a gift horse, or an accountant, in the mouth.

As Cassidy sped out of the car park, the Hummer handled like a dream, the power of the engine rumbling through the steering wheel under her hands. This little wolf could get used to this. Maybe she should let the lady do her accounts. The accountant might be able to get her the extra cash to afford one of these babies.

Cassidy dragged her mind back on track as she reached the address listed in the text message. The old, burnt-out shell of a building greeted her frantic gaze. Even in the dark, with her sight, she could tell this fire had been set a long time ago. Long enough no remnants of its occupants’ essence remained to help her. The only scent, which marked this area, was of the beast and of blood, freshly spilled blood. *Human blood.*

The Hummer screeched to a stop, leaving the headlights highlighting the ruined house, she flew out of the car. Although Cassidy tried, she couldn’t track one specific trail. It seemed to be everywhere. This was obviously where the beast had kept his sanctuary. Where he had performed the ritual.

The ruin of the old house beckoned her and instinct took over as Cassidy prowled forward. Pure black energy hit her as she stepped close. This had been no accident. Whoever had set the fire had meant for its occupants to die, and die horribly. And the killer had enjoyed every minute of the victims’ pain and terror.

Shuddering at the thought of getting closer to the black evil surrounding the house’s charred remains, she pushed at some old wood and stared in shock at what she’d found.

A door, a metal door, set into the only thing left intact, a concrete floor. It looked like some sort of cellar left undisturbed from a long ago fire. Reaching for the handle, she noticed the brand new padlock. Obviously someone had been here recently.

Cassidy carefully squeezed and watched the padlock shatter. Pushing the debris away, she opened the door and adjusted her eyes to the dim light below the stairs. The disturbing tang of the beast polluted her senses as Cassidy eased her way down. Pausing at the bottom, she gathered herself and stepped fully into the room. Cassidy could handle anything this maniac could dish out, couldn't she?

Candles still burned in the room. Chalk still outlined symbols on the floor, but there was no beast and no Shannon. Cassidy edged slowly around the symbols, trying to take in everything she saw in this pain-soaked room. A large crate had been overturned and covered with material for a makeshift altar. Holding pride of place in the very center was a beige-covered, large book.

The ritual book.

She lunged forward to grab it, but pulled herself to a stop before touching it. The book felt wrong. A miasma of fear and pain seem to hover like an evil spirit. Suddenly, her mind clicked and she realized what made her uneasy. The book was covered in ancient skin—human skin.

Revulsion surged to the back of her throat and threatened to overflow. If it was the last thing she ever did, this book was toast. As her hands touched the book, her senses tumbled into a chaotic spin and an outside force grabbed hold of her body and spun her to face the chalk-drawn symbols.

Her consciousness hijacked, she was forced to see the past unfold before her. She became a passenger in somebody else and could only see what they saw, feel what they felt.

She saw flames flicker and gutter, casting elongated shadows like obscene caricatures on the night-darkened walls. The wax ran in rivulets down the cylindrical sides of the candles to collect in a heated pool at the

base. The chanting rose and climbed higher, keeping pace with the power flooding through the body she temporarily inhabited.

It was working. She felt the excitement of the beast in the man's body as it grew and flexed, like a babe in the womb as it enjoyed the first flutters of movement. Fear, stark and primal, and a harsh hunger for power jockeyed for an equal foothold. At long last all his goals, all his manipulations, were coming to the boil and...

Cassidy had to fight for a separate identity. She wasn't the beast and this wasn't *her* past. She wasn't really here.

The thought slipped away. Ahh, the pain. Much more than he expected. A harsh scream tore from his throat, the pitch almost inhuman. It slipped into a tonal growl. Unnoticed, too low and intense for human ears. But not his, not anymore.

The agony streaked through him, like wildfire, intent on devouring all in its path. It lashed at his body, first here then there, until eventually it consumed all of him. Wherever it touched, it burned. The slap of the pain was beyond his level of consciousness. It became his whole universe. His body reshaped. Bones elongated. Skin rent, the sound an affront to his senses. Sinews snapped in the smoke-tinged air, resonated throughout the room. Became louder, grew in strength, until his mind was filled with nothing else.

The throb of agony increased to a point where he would gladly have traded his life, his soul, anything, to end it. His mind crumpled under the strain, couldn't take it any more, and everything went mercifully black and empty.

He came to—suddenly—as if something had awoken him. A pounding in his ears fought to deafen him. The noise level increased, grew in intensity, drowned out all else.

Stop.

He tried to scream out the word with everything in him, but all that emerged was a menacing growl. For a moment, panic surged, filled his mind and drove the air from his lungs. He reined it in, struggling for control in the nightmare remembrance of his horrendous pain.

The breath rasped through his throat as he filled his lungs, pushing aside the terror to concentrate. He cast a quick glance around him. His eyes widened at what he saw. Everything was a mess, the room almost destroyed. He blinked, forcing his brain to function.

Something was wrong. *His eyes*. He couldn't focus. No, that wasn't right. He was focusing too much. Startling clarity now became the norm and dragged everything into sharp relief. Even the wax on the floor on the other side of the room.

Had it worked?

Could it be true?

He took stock of his body. *Yes, it had worked*. He felt the power surge through him. The beast's hunger and bloodlust pulsed in tandem to the beat of his body. The pounding noise—a heartbeat—his. The insidious call and lure of the outside rushed through him. The call of the earth, and most of all, his prey.

It was time to get to work and find out how powerful he was.

Chapter Eighteen

Her supine body lay at his feet, bloody and bound. His spirit soared at the supplicating position. His plan, without a hitch, was proceeding. Soon the outclassed detective would arrive and the show would start.

He let his mind drift over how the future would be. The beast howled his triumph at their perceived victory. His she-wolf would be prostrated before him, in pain, both mental and physical. Bleeding from the hundred wounds he would inflict upon her. It was a picture that sang to his dark side.

His unsated desire for revenge surged anew. He would have her dead or alive by his side, it was her choice. He smiled at Shannon, admiring his handiwork. Slashes decorated the side of her face and trailed over her chest and stomach.

The cuts were shallow and just for show, but blood was necessary, the pain needed to entice his she-wolf to action. He wouldn't tear the female cop apart since her role was to be bait for the others. His powers may have been waning, but he was still a match for a female of his species. The male detective need not even be mentioned. His fate was locked in blood.



Logan reached for the printout of the background check he'd run on both remaining booksellers. Reading the details, he slammed his hand on the desk. "Damn it, I knew it." He was reaching for the phone to ring in a warrant when it emitted a high-pitched beep indicating a text message.

“Cassidy’s pinpointed the beast’s location. He’ll apparently let Shannon go if Cassidy turns herself over to him.” He turned to their chief. “Did you get all that?”

The chief agreed. “Yeah, I’m assuming you’ll be going there? Take a swat team with you, we don’t want any mistakes.”

He shook his head. “No, this guy is extremely irrational and Cassidy’s the closest thing we have to an expert. Trust me, she can handle it. I’ll go by myself, but I’ll radio if we need any help. You can have a team standing by in case, at the nearest town.” He consulted the location that had been sent to him. “It’s about an hour from here, but there’s a small town only thirty minutes away from the national forest.”

After arming himself, Logan strode toward the door. His hand was wrapped around the handle when the chief yelled out to him.

“Watch your back. I have a horrible feeling we’re about to make a mistake.” The chief paused before continuing on. “God, I hope I’m wrong.”

Logan hoped so, too.

(((

Cassidy threw herself out of the body and slumped to the floor, shock and terror holding her immobile.

“What the hell is going on here?”

The sound of her own voice, not the beast’s, reassured her as nothing else could. She was still herself, no outside power controlled her. Feeling like she’d had too many drinks, Cassidy raised her head and peered around. Everything seemed back to normal. Whatever happened hadn’t actually been here. It was like her brain had simply hooked onto the strong emotions in the room and had taken a ride back to see what happened.

“Freaky. Asher did warn me my powers would grow. I wonder if this is what he meant.”

She stood like an old woman might, hunched over and in pain, staring at the evil laying quiet in her hands. It still disgusted her, but at least it didn’t have a hold over her anymore. The abomination needed to

be destroyed and she knew the woman for it—her mother. This book was definitely coming for a ride with her. She couldn't risk leaving this behind for the beast or anyone else to find again. Shannon and her kidnapper obviously weren't here, it was time to get going.

Cassidy double timed the stairs as she ran toward her borrowed car. The sound of scuffling feet caught her attention. She focused on the door as her senses went to red alert. The beast and Shannon's scent hit her like a sledgehammer. The trip into the beast's past had distracted her and she hadn't sensed the evil that lurked. As Cassidy reached the door, it slammed shut and the bolt slide home on the other side.

Are you stupid, beast? She was a Were, with stronger than normal strength. She could break the door down in a heartbeat.

Eyeing the door, she realized there was no handle. "No problem, I'll push it in. At least I don't have to worry about getting my bond back in this place." Cassidy shoved her whole weight against the door and braced herself to go flying through, but the door didn't move. *What the?* It hadn't even budged. What was going on?

No matter what she did Cassidy couldn't move the door. Her frustration gnawed away at her until she felt like she wanted to howl. "Damn it." Anger and worry about her friend exploded and she hit the door with a swift kick.

"When in doubt, use brute force. Works for my psyche." But the door still refused to give. Hunkering down on the stairs for a breather, she rested against the offending door. *What do I do now?*

Her skin started to itch and burn and Cassidy absentmindedly scratched at her shoulder and pondered the problem. The pain intensified and she looked at her arm. Shooting red lines had appeared on her arm. Lifting her shirtsleeve on her shoulder she saw the skin had started to peel off. It looked like silver poisoning, but she hadn't touched any. Had she?

A faint flaking of paint off the door at her shoulder level caught her eye. She touched the paint chip, obviously damaged by her kick, and winced as pain needled her questing finger.

“Damn it. The bastard had the door lined in silver and painted over. Sneaky, I can’t even break the door; otherwise it’s going to hurt me badly.”

So what next?

No point trying the door again. She was stuck unless she could find another way out. Turning and stomping back down the stairs was the hardest thing she might ever have to do. Every instinct she possessed screamed at her to run, break the door and get out of there. Stifling them, Cassidy looked over the beast’s sanctuary again. There had to be another way out. He had lined the silver door to stop others of her kind getting in, but he had to have another exit in case he needed get out in a hurry.

It only took eight paces to go from one side of the room to the other, a door of some sort should be obvious. Hopefully. She ran her hands over the walls looking for a lever to open a panel, but nothing. No clichéd bookshelves with a fixed book opening a door. No wall hangings covering a priest hole, nothing. She knocked on the wall and noted the solid sound. There was no way she was kicking the walls in either, too thick.

Cassidy slowly spun around on the spot, her gaze moving over every nook and cranny, over every crack that might be an exit. The candles created monstrous shadows on the walls, mocking her tension. There was nothing else in this room except for the altar and it was solid stone.

Or was it?

Running her hands around the altar, she bit her lip on an exclamation of disgust. The images, carved in relief on the side, were of ritual sacrifice and orgies, *yuck!* Suddenly, as her fingers depressed a picture, her sensitive ears picked up a click and a panel slid open to reveal a hole.

“Well, aren’t we a smart beast.” Cassidy slid carefully into the hole and let herself drop, making sure she still had the book of rituals with her. She landed on a dirt-packed floor, let her eyes adjust to the absence of light and stared at the long tunnel. This building must have been very old to have what was probably a servant’s passage. Well, it led somewhere, so she might as well get on with it.

The tunnel seemed to go forever, but in reality it had probably been only five or ten minutes. At least there was air here, even if it tasted like musty old socks. She tried not to think of the meters of earth and goddess knows what pressing down on her. The tunnel started to incline upwards. Cassidy felt like yelling out a cheer as she literally walked toward the light that filtered sluggishly through cracks around the edge of the rusted door. At least the door at the other end weren't silver, she could touch them without agony shooting through her.

She poked her head through the opening, stared straight into the headlights of her car and took a deep breath of the pre-dawn air and thanked whatever goddess in the heavens she'd made it out. Looking at her watch, Cassidy realized a hell of a lot of time had passed while she'd been hitchhiking mentally with the beast's past. She only had a few hours to get to wherever the beast was holding Shannon before dawn hit. Now it was time to take it to the beast. She wanted him to pay.

And the coin would be blood.

Cassidy had a sudden premonition, Logan, the man she may care about, was in trouble. Grabbing the phone, she quickly dialed the number and listen with mounting worry as it rang out. Trying again, Cassidy prowled around the car, worry eating away inside. In frustration, she rang through to his station.

"Dispatch, I'm on a case with Detective Patrick Logan. I need to speak to him urgently and he's not responding to his mobile phone. Could you patch me through to his office, please?"

The sound of her fingers tapping against the hood of the car distracted her. "What? Sorry, I didn't hear you. He's out on a call? Okay, thank you." She replaced the phone and panic churned at the base of her stomach.

"Where the hell is Logan?" She had a sick feeling she knew exactly what had happened.

The beast had turned on her, wanted her death, and she had a feeling he wouldn't mind taking a few of her friends along the way, too. He had Logan. She felt it. It was her job to get him back.

Cassidy spread her map out and tried to pinpoint some of the holy places in the area. At least her map showed major mystical sites, lycanthropic ones amongst them. Thanks to her ma's foresight, she was fully prepared.

Two sites leapt out at her, Shenandoah and George Washington National Parks, both an equal distance from town. She considered her options. Both were easily reachable, but one was further out of plain sight than the other and backed onto a cliff edge.

"If I wanted to get rid of a body's remains easily, which place would I pick?" She jabbed her finger onto the coordinates for Blood Rock. Talk about an ominous name. She hoped it wasn't going to jinx their chances.

"The cliff edge is where they are and so am I." Shoving the map back into the car, she climbed in and prepared herself for the drive into hell.

It seemed to take longer than the predicted hour. All Cassidy could think about was Shannon. And Logan, the man who might be animal enough to cope with her. She didn't even know what their status was. Neither one of them had been brave enough to admit what they felt. They were still circling each other and looking for an opening. She would never forgive herself if he died because of her, especially before she worked up the courage to tell him how she felt.

She dragged herself back to the subject of the beast. He was a wild card, not exactly predictable. As she imagined what this rogue animal would do to Shannon, not to mention Logan, her breathing quickened and her tension rose.

"Damn it." Cassidy slammed her hand into the dashboard and winced when a small crack appeared. "Whoops, I guess I bought a secondhand Hummer."

Her anger swelled again, this time at herself. Left no choice about it, she'd tried to live as a human for so long. Now, here came this monster who had accepted his animal side and gone on a killing spree. Okay, she told herself, look at your family. They haven't gone on a murderous rampage, have they?

Accepting the beast in her was difficult. Yes, her family had all done it, but they lived in an out-of-the-way farm. Was that accepting or

hiding? Cassidy gritted her teeth in frustration. She wanted the wolf, but wanted the human as well. There had to be a balance between both, without having to move back home to the family. She had to find this equilibrium, otherwise the beast would win and her friends would be dead.

Pulling the car over to the side of the road, Cassidy consulted the map. "The turn off should be straight ahead." The sound of her own voice reassured her. Whatever or whoever this monstrosity was, she would deal with it, hopefully without having to try a change and kill the beast in front of Shannon and Logan. She wasn't sure if their budding friendship and possible romance respectively, could handle the sight of two animals tearing at each other in a killing rage. And it was all dependent on the fact she and her wolf could change.

With a grimace, Cassidy considered the dilemma. She wanted to accept her heritage, but was too scared to let her friends see her. What sort of hypocrite was she? Besides, this was all academic since she couldn't change anyway. Hopefully her silver-loaded weapons would take this thing out before it got to her.

"Enough of this, Cassidy Luna Quinn. Pull yourself together, you're making me sick." If anyone saw her now, they would swear she was a nutjob, yelling at herself.

Pulling the car back onto the road, she concentrated on the turn. Even so, she nearly missed the sharp right and had to swerve sharply to keep the car on the road.

The road was a side entrance into the national park, not normally used and overgrown trees and bushes could be heard scraping the side of the car as it passed. "I am so going into debt to pay for this car." She winced as another nasty scratch on the car echoed in her sensitive eardrums.

The pull of the holy place was strong as the car braked. They weren't a naturally religious race, but these places had a certain draw to them. Originally, their people had practiced sacrifice to their goddess, the moon, and to the first shape-shifter, King Lyacer. They had outstripped

that belief, but some of these places still existed, as no one wanted to offend a possible deity, just in case.

Cassidy's phone rang as she turned off the car. *Not now.* But she couldn't afford not to answer it in case it was Logan, in case she was wrong about the beast taking him.

"Logan?"

"Cassidy. Need...talk."

Her mother's voice, distorted by static, came through in patches.

"Ma, I can't talk."

"Cass, found info on the...tector. It's who you are, why you can't..."

"You're cutting out, I can't hear you. And I already know some of this."

"You grow into your... When the body can cope, it... great evil... But be careful, it can kill. And the sacrifice isn't..."

"Ma, Ma!" Damn bloody phone. "Okay, I know about the protector part, but what was the great evil and death stuff? The sacrifice isn't what? All round great things to know when you're trying to save your friends from a horrible, painful fate."

She didn't bother to lock the Hummer. They may need it to make a fast exit, if someone was hurt. Her mind shied away from the prospect, even as it offered the possibility.

Moving forward, she kept her silent conversation running. Shannon and *Logan are fine, they're probably not even here, but are back at my place wondering where the hell I've gone.*

Cassidy climbed steadily up the trail. All the time, she hoped and prayed the two people she'd become close to would come out of this alive.

Logan crouched behind the rock and hoped his camouflage would hold in the dim light. He made out the prostrated form of someone, probably Shannon, bound and unmoving. He couldn't make out too much, the sun had started to rise so there was some light but it was still mostly dark. But he could see that the beast had stripped her in readiness for whatever he had planned.

Shifting forward, he tried for a better view of the site chosen for the beast's sacrifice. An altar-like, flat-topped rock stood in the middle of a stone-ringed circle lit by an unneeded hurricane lamp, dawn was here and the light was growing. Logan couldn't see any sign of Cassidy or the beast, but had a nasty feeling he had been lured here for bait, the same as Shannon.

He silently thanked whatever gods Cassidy believed in that she wasn't here. Having to kill someone of your own kind, even if he'd only belonged for a short while, would be very hard to cope with. His head jerked as his ears picked up a rustling from in front of him. Adrenaline shot sky high as he prepared to take the animal out.

A small squirrel scampered up a tree and he relaxed his firm hold on his pistol. He gave a mirthless grin. An animal all right, but not the right one. Again, a sudden noise, this time from behind him, had him quickly on edge. Logan rolled onto his back and trained the gun at the figure, which had somehow crept close enough to kill him. A human, not a beast, met his shocked eyes.

"How did you—" Before he could complete his sentence he saw the pistol barrel descend and pain whipped through his body like a tornado. His surroundings flashed blood red in his eyes and morphed into a thick black soup covering his sight.

The last thought flying through his mind was of Cassidy. He and Shannon weren't the sacrifice. It was Cassidy. She was the target.

Navigating the terrain proved to be tough. Thankfully she had her sneakers and her enhanced sight. Any other footwear would have been a nightmare and navigating this climb in full dark would have been torturous even for her. But the faint light of dawn was starting to edge its way down the hill and illuminate her path. That was good and bad news, at least she could see where she was going, but it put the beast's plans in motion. Cassidy grabbed a tree and hoisted herself over the last of the incline and breathed a sigh of relief. The path had eased out for the moment and she would have some time to go over her game plan.

Concentrating on the path ahead, she winced as the outline of the trees began to waver. *Why now?* Why did relatives always pick the wrong time to visit? She crouched to await her ancestor, Asher's, arrival. It seemed like his appearance took hours to be completed, but only five minutes had ticked away.

"Clan member, we sadly meet again. I wish there were better tidings."

"Yeah, nice of you to drop in, but could you have timed it a little better? I'm sort of busy." Her impatience broke the bounds of family courtesy and she had to throttle back on what she wanted to say—*why the hell me?*

"Child, patience and calm must be exerted. Your youth and bravado won't help here. Listen carefully to my words. You will receive no other warnings."

"Look, I'm sorry. But things have snowballed. The beast has two of my friends and I have to get there before he hurts them. Can you help me?"

"No, I am not allowed. But I can tell you this. It's time to make the first choice and take a stand. Embrace yourself and all you are or you have no chance of victory."

"What the hell sort of help is that? What choice do I have to make?" Cassidy gritted her teeth. He sounded more like an oracle than a ghost and that metaphysical crap always made her want to scream.

"The choice between chaos and order."

"Okay, thanks for all that. Gotta go now." Cassidy jumped from her crouch and started climbing toward the beast again. The sound of Asher's voice trailed its way along her spine again as he spoke one last time.

"Beware."

She whirled around, ready to pin him down if he wouldn't tell her what the heck he meant. But there was no Asher. He'd disappeared.

"Typical, runs out, leaving behind an ambiguous comment which could mean anything. Well, bully for him, he's delivered his comment now it's my turn to kick some ass. Sharpen your claws, dog boy, it's time to find out why the female is the deadlier of the species."

Chapter Nineteen

He stared at the other man's bound and bloody body. Fun had been had with this one. No screams though. Disappointing, but there was more fun to come. His hatred of the man swelled and burst like a seed taking root. This man had taken away from him, from both of them, but no more.

His sharp talons trailed down Logan's leg and he watched with a lust-filled focus as the skin split like a rotten fruit and blood trickled out. A taste was all he wanted, a simple taste to tide him over until the main meal arrived.

The man stared back with a vivid hate sparkling out at him. It was more satisfying when they were conscious and saw what was happening.

The beast twitched in a febrile enjoyment of what was to come. Oh, so many little surprises for his mate. It was her fault, for everything about to happen. She hadn't understood their bond, the bond between family members, between the same clan. She had rejected him and herself and all the others like them. Disloyalty must be paid in kind and he knew the right person to execute it.

She had a lesson to learn—you should never let anyone come between a person and their future mate. You won't like the outcome.

Cassidy slowed as she neared the top of the climb leading to where the altar stood. She hunched down and tried to peer through the bushes into the clearing. Logan and Shannon lay bound in the middle of the stone circle, next to the altar. They'd both been gagged although Shannon had slipped her gag somehow, but seemed to be frozen in shock.

The beast's stench covered almost every inch of the cleared land, his spoor dotted here and there, marking his territory. Something strange impinged on her senses, a hint of familiarity, of a clan or family members. She ignored it; the marker was probably left over from another time. Although the taint of the beast was all around her, he seemed to have disappeared.

She scouted the edges of the clearing and gingerly stepped out into the open. Her careful watch on the surrounds of the forest focused and concentrated on the area to the side of her captured friends. From the corner of her eye, she could make out Logan. He appeared to be trying to tell her something, his movements and gestures agitated.

Once again on the move, she prowled closer to Shannon and Logan. Shannon let out a feeble groan and rolled over, eyes open wide as she noticed Cassidy. Her moan gained strength and Cassidy heard Shannon call out her name.

"Cassidy, Cassidy, watch out, he's here somewhere. Quick, can you release us?"

"Shh, keep quiet."

She edged closer, her Beretta in her hand, ready, in case of trouble. Logan had exploded into frantic movements. She saw the blood on his wrists as he tried to break the rope. As Cassidy neared him, he shook his head in a panic.

"It's okay, Logan, I'll get you free in a moment. I'll untie Shannon first, then you." Cassidy started to work at the knots, she needed to get the other girl untied first. Shannon was the weakest link, Logan could handle himself around a Were, but Shannon had no experience whatsoever. All Cassidy heard now was Shannon's whispered thanks over and over again. "You'll be fine now, you're almost free."

A stray sound from her left side muffled by Shannon's voice impinged on her consciousness. She swiveled lightning fast and tried to bring her gun up to a firing position. Before she could complete the maneuver a heavy paw clubbed her to the ground in a heap and her gun flew into the air, landing near Logan. Sharp pain radiated out and traveled to her left side. Cassidy forced herself to roll over and face her assailant.

The animal, the beast, stood there in all his glory. A huge mass of fur and muscle greeted her, his stench overpowering now he stood close. The odor from her dreams and the victims he had mauled and killed lay heavy and musky around her. This close, she saw the rage that glowed from his eyes, making them a feral red. Sounds issued forth from his muzzle, distorted by the non-human throat and vocal cords, although still understandable.

“Betrayer, whore, filth, you rejected me and mine. You put obstacles between lifemates. You deserve death and pain, very, very slowly.”

He extended his talons and leapt for her, raking a score down the side of her clothes, but only nipping at her body.

Cassidy twisted frantically to avoid his knife-like claws. Panting, she rolled to a crouch and stood, facing him. Her pistols lay on the other side of him, near Logan’s feet. Even with the gun, the beast was so maddened with bloodlust, silver bullets might not slow him down. But it was worth a try, if she could reach he ankle holster and her lady’s pistol— Her thought was cut short as once again he leapt at her. She tried to backpedal, but was thrown to the side by their combined weight.

His furious, vengeful face filled her entire vision as they rolled over and over, wrestling until one of them gave in. His claws flicked here and there as she tried to throw him off, keep him from slicing her at the same time as she tried to grab the pistol. Numerous little nicks formed on her face and arms as they fought. Her struggles started to weaken. Even though he’d yet to complete the ritual, he was still as strong as she was and he had demonic, insane fury on his side. She managed to grab her lady’s pistol and drag it out only to have the beast slam it away as well.

Giving up on the gun, Cassidy tried a different plan and lured him into locking his teeth around her arm and prayed to the fickle moon he wouldn’t damage her too much at this stage. She strained with one hand to feel around at her side. Cassidy tried to show no emotion on her face as her hand closed around a small but sharp rock.

Without thought, she raised the rock behind the beast. Pain coursed through her entire body as he ripped into the arm she had used as bait. Before the pain grew too hard to handle, she brought the stone down

hard on his temple. Its sharp contours bit into the beast's skull. Blood cascaded onto her from his open wound. His body suddenly went limp, at the same time a heartfelt groan erupted from his distorted mouth.

He collapsed on top of her and Cassidy almost cried with relief. She shoved his body off and scrambled back on her haunches away from him. Blood and muscle greeted her as she stared at her arm, in some places a glint of white bone could be seen.

Pain slammed into her as she looked from the wolf's prone body to her savaged arm. It always seems to hurt more when you noticed a wound. A growling moan broke her appraisal of her arm and snapped her gaze straight to the beast. He was regaining consciousness. The sight was enough to galvanize her abused body into motion. No matter what she did as a human, she couldn't best him, guns weren't going to help her even if she could reach them, but as a wolf... Only then would she have a chance.

Her wolf crouched, battle-ready, inside. It welcomed the coming fight and howled its defiance of the other. She wouldn't go down without a battle. To beat the beast she needed to accept all of her, as Asher had said. She let the realization flow over her and instant calm descended, pain receding. Her body was ready and there was a choice to be made. Cassidy felt the tension build. Could sense the suffocating evil that threatened to cocoon her in pain.

Was she ready to take on everyone else's problems, to protect her clan and others from forces they couldn't control? Not sure, but Cassidy was damn sure ready to welcome her wolf in. Her dual natures needed to be in balance, but the details could be worked out later. They needed to deal with him together. First step was to stop fearing what the future would bring and what others would think of her, and embrace her heritage. And damned if she was going to let this animal hurt the man who gave her the best ever orgasm without even touching her.

Cassidy let her wolf out with a challenging roar. Her body lowered itself to a crouch. A harsh scream tore from her throat, the pitch almost inhuman.

The agony streaked through her like wildfire, intent on devouring all in its path. It lashed at her body until she felt it would consume her. Wherever it touched, it burned with a fire she knew would strip skin to the bone.

The slap of the pain was beyond her level of consciousness. It became the whole universe. Her body reshaped. Clothing flew off her in pieces. Bones lengthened and crunched with an audible scraping noise. Skin rent, the sound an affront to the senses. Sinews snapped and the sound resonated through the clearing. Muscles and ligaments elongated to cope with added strength. The throb of agony increased to a point where she would gladly have traded her life, her soul, anything, to end it.

Fur raced along her back until it covered every inch of her. Hands and feet morphed into paws and claws and suicidal sharp talons gleamed in the morning light.

Her head and face receded until a wolf's muzzle punched through, fangs and face no longer human but wholly animal. A canny intelligence gleamed in the predator's eyes. Cassidy's personality still hovered in the background, neither one shoved aside for the other. They were one now and in complete balance.

Her change was swift but still gave the beast time enough to gather himself into a crouched position, awaiting the she-wolf's attack. Lust for her had changed now, evolved into a longing for her pain and death. The beast stared at her as she initiated a lightning quick change to her animal form. Her experience in this form was negative. He was the more formidable with the greater strength, and even if it waned, he was still the alpha, still in charge.

The two animals launched themselves into the air and met in the middle. Using their fangs, each tried to sever a vital organ of the other. Heavy bodies dropped to the earth and they immediately threw themselves forward, fighting until their bodies entangled on the ground. Each trying to force his opponent to give way.

Flying talons and snapping mouths dominated the wrestle. Blood flew every which way, decorating the ground like some obscene painting.

A cacophony of growls and snarls filled the air, almost an obscure symphony and their fight a choreographed ballet, with Cassidy as the lithe ballerina and the beast as a clumsy amateur. The atmosphere thickened with a tension that was hard to breathe in, the watchers silent as they concentrated on a battle of the titans.

The beast watched as she gathered her muscles for a leap, the female wolf faltered for a moment as she put weight onto her torn arm, but then launched into the air. He mirrored her action, meeting her in the air with a gigantic clash. Their claws connected and scraped as they met again and again. It seemed like forever before their heaving bodies hit the ground. Wrestling on the clearing floor, he felt her claws rake his side and his blood start to trickle to the earth.

Primal anger bit deep as the beast pinned Cassidy to the ground, fully resting his greater body weight on her body. He reared back to deal the mortal slash to her jugular. The beast flashed his claws toward her, but she'd already completed the movement, which opened his stomach from side to side. He roared his pain and grabbed at his body as his entrails slipped out.

Collapsing, the male wolf curled in a fetal position and tried to futilely hold his stomach contents inside. He knew she watched as his body, overloaded by pain and unused to such a fight, dropped out of the change and back into human form.

The beast growled as the change was forced from him. Finally, she was about to see who he truly was. Satisfaction for her imminent pain momentarily distracted him from his torn stomach. Even if he hadn't been born as a beast, his heart remained in that form. He felt his hold on sanity growing weaker and a little nursery rhyme popped into his mind, the one his mother use to sing to him.

"Hush, little baby, don't say a word." All he could do was mumble it over and over as the other wolf rolled him from his side onto his back.

Her job completed, Cassidy's wolf flowed back. Her human body crumpled and she lay on the clearing floor, panting. Pain from numerous cuts and slashes decorating her threatened to overwhelm the remaining

reserves of energy. But joy at that first long-anticipated change warred with the remorse of killing one of her kind, even a rogue. Operating on pure adrenaline, her left arm in agony, she forced herself to crawl toward the now-human body.

Sheer, unadulterated shock rocketed through her as she leaned over the man. He had changed backed to human form, still clasping his stomach, moaning in pain. The man was mumbling nonsensical phrases, and drool and blood had mixed into patterns on his chin and neck. In the background, she vaguely heard Shannon, screaming and crying.

Cassidy looked into the face of the human side of the beast; finally she knew who it was. Kyle Chandler. Disbelief fought with grief. How could she not have known who it was? He must have masked his scent. Speechless she tried to fathom this sudden twist. She'd been sure it was the other bookseller.

The darkness she had sensed in the fat bookseller must have been his connection to the local mafia family. Staring at Kyle's pain-riddled face, she contemplated what she had to do next. The ritual had failed. There had been no sacrifice, but there had been blood spilled...hers. And lycanthropic blood was very powerful. Conceivably, the ritual could have worked and if that was the case, no jail would hold him.

Cassidy stared at his writhing body. Although his wound looked threatening, with time he could actually heal himself. There was no other way. She had to take him out of play or other innocent people could be hurt or subverted by him.

"I'm sorry Kyle, I have no choice."

She lengthened the nails of her hand until they were gleaming and sharp, and punched through his chest over his heart.

His heart pumped in her hand until she tightened her hold and pulled it out of his chest. Slowly, she grasped it tighter until it was still in her hand. His left-behind body jerked and lay permanently still. She opened her hands, let it drop to the ground and stared at his strangely peaceful form in front of her.

A sharp penetrating scream knocked Cassidy out of her grief-stricken guilt. She turned and watched as Shannon rushed at her, fingers

extended into a parody of the flashing claws the prone body had sported. Her earlier connection of Shannon's date hit her. It hadn't been the Bookseller. It had been Kyle.

"I'm sorry, Shannon. I didn't realize he was the man you'd been seeing."

Shannon's fingers eased from the claw position as she stooped and grabbed the discarded lady's pistol. She brought the gun up and pointed it at Cassidy, all the while tears poured down a face twisted into a hideous mask.

Cassidy started in shock. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Shannon? It's okay now. You don't have to be scared. He's dead."

Shannon laughed, a hideous cackle that echoed in Cassidy's ears. She stared at the woman who held the pistol expertly, seeing clear and true for the first time since meeting her. Finally recognizing the hate radiating from her soul.

Cassidy had a feeling what had come before was the preliminary and the main fight was about to heat up.

Chapter Twenty

“Shannon, what’s going on? Why are you pointing the gun at me?” Cassidy couldn’t believe the sudden change in her friend.

“You silly bitch, why do you think I have a gun pointed at you? I want to kill you.”

Cassidy stood and crossed her arms, as if she were cold, all the while hanging onto her arm so the bleeding would stop. “Why, Shannon? Why would you want to hurt me? I’m your friend, or at least I thought I was.”

“Oh, in the beginning I liked you.”

The murderous look of rage on Shannon’s face faded for a moment and Cassidy relaxed only to tense a moment later.

“You were strong and everything I wanted to be. When Kyle saw you and wanted you, I didn’t like it, but I would have done anything for him. But you spoiled it by rejecting him. Next, you finally looked at Logan.”

“Kyle? You knew Kyle before I did? I don’t understand. What do he and Logan have to do with this?”

Shannon bared her teeth in a feral smile. “You don’t get it, do you? Are you that stupid you can’t join the dots? Well, let me help you. Before I joined the force and changed my name to a more suitable one, my surname was Chandler.”

Shock slammed into Cassidy at this unexpected revelation. “Kyle was the brother you mentioned? You’re his missing older sister?”

“Well, give the lady a prize. Yes, he was my little brother, my baby brother. Our rich parents left me in an institution when I was a girl. They said I was a sick little girl who needed help. They were scared of how close Kyle and I had become.”

“Let’s see, you were a certified whacko and they put you away. Seems fair to me and it obviously runs in the family.”

Shannon jabbed the gun at her. All semblance of professionalism had dissipated and Cassidy fought a flinch as the gun wavered wildly.

“Excuse me, woman with a gun here, don’t piss me off too soon or you’ll never hear my plan.”

Shrugging, Cassidy motioned Shannon to get on with it. “Typical Hollywood villain, they always have to tell you the plan. Well, the floor is yours, Shannon, have at it.”

“I tracked down my parents when I was eighteen and Kyle was sixteen. They argued with me. They didn’t want me to see him, but he heard and snuck out to see me. He loved me and we hated our parents for separating us. We decided we didn’t need them, only ourselves. So we gave them a send off.”

Cassidy choked at such a benign term for murder. The sanctuary was his parents’ house. It’s how he knew about the cellar and the tunnel. “You murdered them?”

“Well, that’s such a harsh term, but yeah, I guess you could say that. We lit a fire and burned them alive. The only thing to ruin the party was forgetting the marshmallows.”

Shannon sneered like it was her biggest regret. Cassidy shuddered at the menace obvious to her now. “What has this to do with me?”

“Kyle wanted power. He performed the ritual and became what you are. He was magnificent, he could have had anyone. Instead, he wanted you. You had to stick your nose in and ruin all our plans. He was going to help me convert and I would help Logan.”

“Logan? What does he have to do with this?” She flicked her attention subtly over to him and saw he’d dislodged the gag and was listening intently, a sick expression on his face.

“Don’t you understand? You were Kyle’s mate and Logan was going to be *mine*. He would have looked at me eventually, but you involved yourself and spoiled all of our futures. You rejected Kyle, wouldn’t take him as your mate, so we had to pay you back. Make you hurt like we had. We made it look like I’d been kidnapped. We sent a message to

Logan and one to you and trapped you in the cellar. Logan arrived to find poor old me bound and bloody on the ground. The scratches hurt, but we had to make it look good.”

She smiled a surprisingly sweet smile at Cassidy. “You hurt Kyle, but he’ll be fine. I’ll fix him. It’s what big sisters do. The only thing is, you have to die now. You shouldn’t have hurt Kyle and when you’re dead, Logan will be mine again.”

“What about Logan? What are you going to do to him?”

“Haven’t you been listening? Nothing will happen to him. He loves me and when you’re gone, he’ll realize it. We’ll be a family. Now I’m sure you loaded this gun with silver, in case you had to shoot the beast. It’ll work fine for you.”

Shannon raised the gun and brought the pistol forward to fire at point-blank range. Cassidy prepared herself to hit the ground, but as Shannon settled into a firing stance, Logan yelled at her. Shannon looked toward him and took her attention off Cassidy for a split second. It was all she needed. Launching herself at Shannon, she propelled their two bodies backward. Cassidy released a tension-charged breath as the gun flew out of the woman’s hands.

Shannon held under her weight, but staggered back as the two women traded punches. Teetering on the edge of the cliff, they still grappled, each trying to grab the other and subdue her.

Once again Cassidy heard Logan yell, his worry for them evident. Moving to counter Shannon, she tried to dodge around her and the ground gave way beneath them.

As they slipped, Shannon grabbed her around the middle and hung on. Cassidy arched her back and grabbed a large root exposed when the ground had given way. She clung to it with her one good arm and prayed it wouldn’t let her down, but she already felt her shoulder starting to protest all the weight. Shannon smiled at her, her slightly plump face angelic at this angle.

“Oh well, if I can’t kill you with a gun, I can take you with me. I’m pretty sure we won’t survive a fall like this. Besides, Kyle is dead and you

deserve to die as well. At least I'll get to be with him always." She started to pull and tug on Cassidy's legs and laughed as the root started to go.

Urging her shredded arm to work, inch by inch Cassidy brought it up until she'd formed a firm fist. She ploughed it into Shannon's exposed face.

Shannon's scream of agony was nothing but a liquid gurgle as the blow forced her nose back into her face. She let go and mouthed Kyle's name as she fell backwards onto the rocks below, her body deathly still.

Grabbing the root with both hands, Cassidy pulled herself onto the ground above her. Adrenaline fled and the strength she had used to get out of her dangerous plight deserted her as her damaged arm fell limp, paralyzed. Vaguely, in the distance, she heard Logan's voice becoming clearer, but her energy had weakened to the point where breathing was an effort. A yawning fog of black engulfed her and sound became blessedly non-existent.



Heat spread through Cassidy's body, slowly warming and bringing to life each part of her body. Pain receded, replaced by a sense of well-being. She eased herself into a sitting position and, eyes wide open, stared at what once had been her mangled arm.

"What the hell, no bruises, no blood? What's going on?" The black of unconsciousness had faded away to be replaced by the icy feel of marble tile beneath her. Statues of gods and goddesses ringed Cassidy, eyeing her benignly. Light rebounded off the statuesque columns that soared off into the heavens. "Goddess, I'm dead. This isn't hell, it's heaven."

Panic bubbled inside her and welled in her throat like viscous bile. Emotion threatened to overwhelm her. She looked at her hands where her fingernails had cut bloodless half-moon circles into her fleshy palms. They wouldn't even allow her to bleed normally. Thoughts of her parents, her brothers, and Logan, and what might have been, crowded her head until she wanted to scream and howl with loss.

"I'm dead and the beast's dead, but what about the others? What poor bastard has to take on my path? At least I finally learned the score.

Now some poor sap has to start all over again.” She shoved her face into her hands and tried not to curse again in what was obviously a holy place. Better not damn herself any more than she already was.

“Please, enough of the pity party, as you say. I don’t think the rest of us could stand it.”

Cassidy shot to a standing position. “Asher? Is that you?”

“No, it’s your fairy godmother. Of course it is I.”

Grinning at his acidic tone, she peered around the shining marble in an effort to spot where he’d been hiding.

“Hey, you’re starting to sound like me.”

“Probably because I have spent far too much time looking after you.”

“After me? I’m dead, how is that helping me? For pity’s sake, show yourself before I loop out.” Cassidy crossed to a marble bench and took a load off. Now Asher was here, she felt one hundred percent more comfortable.

“Is this better?” Asher’s form solidified until he was obvious to the naked eye. “By the way, you’re not dead and this is not heaven. It’s a way station for choosing.”

“I’m not?” Cassidy felt like her eyes were bulging out their sockets and knew she looked like a cartoon character.

“Your injuries were serious, but given time, as a Were you will recover. This place is actually in your mind, but was chosen to represent an environment you were at ease in. As I mentioned, this is a place of choice, to go on or to remain and fight.”

Patting the bench, she marveled at how real it looked and tried to work out what Asher meant. “I can go to heaven if I want?”

“Your reality of heaven. Gods and goddesses do exist, but they are petty and playful and do not concern themselves with the running of the hereafter. It is left to the individual and the greater good.”

“Okaay, there are gods, but they can’t be bothered with the little things, like people dying. You let us work it out ourselves. How whacked is that?” *Man what a letdown. You die and you still have to look out for yourself.*

“Ahh, full of promise and defiance.” A half smile twitched the corners of Asher’s lips. “There is a greater good which guides people and balances the universe. But there is a war on and you have been chosen as a champion. You have been filled with the greater good’s purpose and that is to be a guide and to protect others, whether human or otherworldly.”

Cassidy stared at Asher in shock. “I’m a champion for good? Ahh, crap, they always die in the end.”

“It is your choice. Will you return to your life and work for us? Or will you proceed on to what you perceive to be heaven?”

“Excuse me, but that’s a no-brainer. I want to go back and fight. I know the beast and Shannon are gone, but there are others out there and I won’t let this happen to anyone else.”

She watched as joy seemed to burst out of Asher in a blinding light. “Whoa, tone it down, bud, you’ll blind me.”

“You are strong and will do our clan proud. You will see me from time to time, but it’s up to you now. Follow your heart and it will lead you to the fight.”

His form start to waver and Cassidy tried to grab at him to get his attention. There was still one question left unanswered.

“Hey, wait. I have a question.” She clasped her now sweaty palms over her crossed arms in nervousness. “Umm, I had a dream about a family and a man. What does it mean? Can I have a mate and a family, or is that out now, and will he be human or Were?” She bit her tongue and tried for patience for the first time in her life.

“The dream was sent to remind you of the ties that bind your family. The dream was a possibility, a future path you might take.”

“But the man isn’t a Were, but in the dream he is.”

“As someone once said to you, ‘there are more things in heaven and earth’. You carve your own path. No gods will ever be able to control you. Now it’s time to go, for both of us.”

Cassidy’s surroundings once again darkened. The pain hit her in fierce waves, as what had been numbed felt life again. Hot, jagged lightning hit her chest and traveled to her toes, reanimating all in its

wake. She heard Logan's voice, muffled, but growing in volume, as she was ripped back into consciousness.

"God, are you all right? Speak to me, Cassidy, can you hear me?" Logan gathered her away from the edge and cradled her in his arms. "Come on, here you are, naked again, in front of me and you can't even enjoy it. At least this time I'm the one doing the looming, you can't be arrested for that. Besides, I still have to hand you your clan coin back, since you can safely say you saved my ass."

Cassidy winced at the poor joke and the pain exploded like a nuclear device in her body. "That hurt, don't make me laugh." She opened her half-closed eyes and grinned weakly at him, breathing easier. "What does it feel like to be the damsel in distress for once?"

They both winced this time after they'd finished giggling.

Anticipation zapped through her as Logan came in close for a kiss. The excitement of this event would kill her, *ha*. This would definitely be better than her solo fantasy performance in the car, or the interrupted foreplay on the couch in his apartment. She tensed as he drew closer and jolted her shredded arm. Pain blossomed through her and her grip on her consciousness began to fade again.

As the black hole of pain threatened to drag her back, Cassidy's last thought was of their combined bad luck. *The hero's congratulatory kiss for a job well done and she probably won't even remember it, talk about bad timing.*



Cassidy eased back into the bed and adjusted the covers, trying not to flash anything interesting. Maya wasn't going to let her out of this hospital bed for another twenty-four hours so she was stuck here. Even if she was a Were and healed fast, the injuries had been extensive and she needed to recoup energy before her body could heal.

The first change had been excruciating, but she had a feeling the pain had been a barrier and a test. Now she'd passed, Cassidy was pretty sure the pain had gone for good...well, fairly sure. Plus she was definitely chomping at the muzzle to get out for a run. Her dream while out of it, or

“dying” as Logan called it, still lingered fresh. She knew it would fade with time, but Cassidy kept expecting some sort of sign from above it was time to go to work. Time to save the innocents and triumph over evil. *Goddess*, she sounded like a bad comic book. Cassidy stifled a giggle at the thought.

“I go away and this is what happens.”

Bethany’s sweet voice rumbled through her aching body. Cassidy grinned as she walked into view. “Well, I take it you survived my parents’ place. Did you enjoy a bird’s eye view into my crazy life?”

“They were wonderful and I have a standing order to come back whenever I can, preferably with you next time. I guess you got your man, or should I say animal, like a Mountie or a bloodhound.”

Cassidy scowled at Bethany. “Before you say anything; Logan, Maya and my mother have all lectured me. You don’t have to, let’s say I agree with you now.”

“Fine, we won’t go there, but I will get all the details later. By the way, did the doc tell you how many stitches you got? Fifty-two, has to be some sort of record for you.” She glanced around the room. “Where’s our hunky cop? How come he’s not here? Don’t tell me, Logan’s done a runner now he’s seen you as a wolf. Like the lowlife lawyer last time.”

Cassidy shook her head, gasping as her stitches pulled at the skin. “He sort of went to ground for a while to tie up the loose angles of the case. He came and visited me this morning. Turns out me being a wolf didn’t worry him. He was more worried about the fact I didn’t even work up a sweat shoving my fist through somebody’s chest. Go figure.”

“I thought for a moment you were going to tell me he couldn’t handle the animal in you?”

Her long ago dream of the future, with Logan and her as a fully Were family with children, suddenly jumped back into her mind. “No, I’m pretty sure he can handle all of me. It was meant to be. Besides, if he can’t, I’ll handle him my way.” She grinned back at Bethany. And oh, what an electric, mind-zapping joy it would be.

The future, that’s what the dream had meant, a promise of what might be coming. There were safe ways to turn a human if they wanted,

ways that were closely guarded secrets, more so after all this tragedy. But they weren't in any rush. Neither one wanted to settle down yet and she had more than enough on her plate, saving the world and all.

That's if my luck holds out. Nearly losing Logan had helped her understand there were people out there who needed protecting, evil that need an ass-kicking. The protector gig would take precedence for a while. Maybe she would think of Logan and settling later. Although, it didn't mean some nooky once and awhile was out of the question.

Then again, you never knew what the future held and her life always was a little bit more dangerous than everyone else's.

Kelly Ethan

To learn more about Kelly Ethan, please visit <http://www.kellyethan.com> Send an email to Kelly Ethan at kelly@kellyethan.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Kelly Ethan! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/kellyethansworld/>

Shape-shifters threaten more than a woman's sanity, when she mates the leader of the pack.

Wolverton Blood

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Timber's life was always a series of foster homes. She was a freak with her ability to shapeshift into an animal. She never knew there were people like her, so when she learns she has a family, she rushes to embrace them with her open heart. Only she soon discovers they had thrown her away and still don't want her.

Kan is overwhelmingly attracted to the beautiful, green-eyed young woman. However, he sees her as an upset to his life and to his emotions, and he wants her gone as much as anyone else. Except, after taking the sweetness of her in his bed, he can't let her go. The animal in him likes the way she sates his lust.

While they struggle with their relationship, the sinister plots of someone in the family threaten to destroy the love and trust they work to build...but then they knew, all along, that evil lurks in Wolverton Blood.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolverton Blood

His masculine scent intoxicated her heart. When his touch reached her face, it brought an instant calming. The back of his knuckles stroked her cheek gently. The exceptional soothing choked up her emotions and a sob broke from her throat.

"Easy does it," he cooed.

The pressure lulled the quake to her insides and her vision cleared. He brushed under her chin repeatedly while she stared. Her breathing slowed, but retained some force, leaving her floundering in a tranquil stimulation.

"A little unbalanced in the control department, aren't you?" His sarcasm didn't fit with his caressing tenderness.

“Don’t look at me like that, please.” Her blood pressure rose. A fiery heat singed her cheeks at his remark. His dark gaze remained locked with hers and prevented her from looking away. The moment blended fear and uncertainty with her resilience.

His brows jerked up and defiance glittered like stardust in his blue eyes. It was what she needed to dispel the heat from her inflamed skin. She lowered her lashes and allowed the turbulent emotions to retreat behind the shades of her soul.

“Like what?” His voice came out low and raspy.

Timber didn’t answer. It was a mistake to have said anything in the first place. She didn’t want him to take his hand away. She wanted to indulge in the fantasy of a man loving her for everything she was, no matter what. The flight of the imagination had soared in those brief moments of his kindness. She had no clue the beast in her could be quashed with someone’s gentle touch. No one had ever come near her, let alone touched her, when she went through her periods of unrest. The adrenaline rush left her in shivers.

“Please, no more.” She couldn’t let him hear the purr of contentment rumble from her. Though she appreciated the way his strokes quelled the emergence of the beast in her.

“Who are you?” She longed to have him holding her again.

“A Wolverton,” he answered. “Kane Wolverton, to be precise.”

His fingers reached for the stick shift between the seats. She watched his hand tremble as if he were fighting off her affliction. When his long, tanned fingers blanched for a moment, grasping the silver ball of the shifter, she pet the back of his hand. His care came swift and free as if it didn’t matter there was something wrong with her, and she wanted to offer him the same kindness.

He went still.

She swallowed unable to comprehend what she witnessed or how she felt. If he wished to hide his unbalance, it seemed best if she didn’t comment on it.

“We’re related?” Her voice rattled.

“Maybe.”

Within her mind, the list of questions grew rapidly in two groups. Those to ask directly and those she was afraid to ask.

“You said we were cousins as if you knew the answer.”

“I might. Tell me about your parents.”

He shifted gears and the car sped through the gates.

“I don’t have parents. I never knew them and I was raised in foster homes.” A fact she resented along with the strange creature she became.

“A throw-away,” he grumbled.

Timber didn’t know what he meant. It didn’t sound good. However, she did know being different made life hard and her existence lonely.

Kane swerved the car to avoid something darting across their path.

“What was that?” She twisted in the seat and stared out the rear window.

Her hand rested on Kane’s thigh. A muscle twitched, sparking a series of hot, scintillating spasms burning through her nervous system. She tried to withdraw her fingers from the pulse, only his hand clamped over it. His breathing accelerated along with hers.

“A worse version of you.” He pet her fingers, pushing them tighter into a throbbing pulse on his leg.

Timber pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. He talked, but she didn’t listen. Curious, she leaned toward him and inched her fingers deeper between his legs. The wondrous generation of heat aroused her. She tipped her head down and watched her hand. With a will of its own, her touch glided smoothly over the taut denim. Her thumb bumped the roll of fabric where the zipper hid and she stopped.

Kane tried to hide his moan beneath a cough. She considered backing off until his hand squeezed hers and forced her fingers to grip the bulge of his pants.

Her chest sunk in with each deep exhale she released. She lifted her gaze and watched him breathing in sync with hers. His wide shoulders seemed to expand with each intake of air. Beneath the smooth black T-shirt, the muscled contours of his body flexed. His nipples were hard beads. Her gaze rolled up shyly to look at the outline of Kane’s face. Her

hand left his lap and snaked up his waist. The edge of sexual desire had them waiting, anticipating, and lingering with a drawn-out foreplay.

He opened his mouth to speak. Timber didn't want him to ask her to stop and she scraped a fingernail over one nipple. The car slowed, his arm reached out to downshift. She saw him bite the inside of his cheek.

What he said about the shadow whisking past them gathered her attention to a lone detail. If there were others like her and they were allowed to stay, then it was possible they'd make room for her. She settled into the soft leather at the warm idea. Her hand came off Kane and she gave him a small embarrassed smile. In the five seconds their gazes locked, the car lurched. Timber grabbed for the dash as the car wheels screeched on the black pavement.

He brought the car to an abrupt halt in the middle of the drive. The house loomed ahead at least another thousand feet. The closer she came to the house, the grounds, and the people, something she couldn't put a finger on tried to make her change. She thought of Kane's word for it—shifting. It fit more appealingly than saying she changed. The biggest news of all—there were others like her. Maybe not exactly, since she didn't look like Buckeye, but she'd found the place she'd searched for in her prayers. She'd found home.

"A bit far from the front door, aren't we?" She stared straight ahead at her destination. The place held all the answers. With fear ebbing away, tenacity returned.

"Get out!" Kane turned off the car and opened his door. "Go on, get out," he demanded, coming around to her side of the car.

Fear swelled, but Timber remained seated, not understanding what went wrong.

"You are a testy fellow," she snapped.

He opened her door and yanked her off the sticky, black-leather seat.

"Not enough red meat in your diet to stabilize your system? First you force me into the car and then you jerk me out of it."

Her shield of sarcastic wit had returned. Kane's generosity, or maybe his weakness, gave her a modicum of instinctive trust. She slammed the car door harder than need be, hoping for damage. She hadn't appreciated

his callous reference to her being a throwaway. She wanted something to take the muscle-head down a peg or two, yet nothing came to mind.

“Don’t tell me you get girls with the charm you ooze like some dreadful fungus,” she quipped.

“Shift.” He grabbed her arms and shook her slightly.

She shook her head in shock of what he asked her to do.

“Go on, shift.” He thrust her away.

She stumbled back a few paces and thought how best to ignore the brute crossing his arms over his broad chest. She pivoted to study all the sights filling her eyes. She turned in a complete circle and included him in her survey of her surroundings.

Timber took a quick inventory of bulging muscles. The rolled ridge in his pants remained prominent and she examined the area a bit more discreetly.

“I want you to shift,” he growled.

He seized her by the upper part of her slender arms. His fingers, long enough to almost connect like a band of steel, clamped tight to her skin.

“I will not!”

She held her breath, trying not to inhale his arousing scent. It permeated her nostrils like sweets for the soul. His stare melted all her free will. His blue eyes hypnotized, and not in the magical sense. They were a mesmerizing blue-gray, challenging her emotions. She sized him up from a lust-driven mentality. A strange concept she only knew from what she saw on television or read in books. Passion, affection, and intimacy eluded her.

“I want you to shift into whatever it is you are inside,” he demanded, shoving her away again.

His fingers stretched open like flames were going to shoot from the hot tips. She shook her head in defiance and fear.

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