

A man with teal hair and a goatee, shirtless and wearing blue jeans, embraces a woman with long, wavy red hair. She is wearing a red and white corset-style top and red pants. They are standing in a lush, green landscape with a body of water and a cloudy sky in the background. The man's hands are resting on the woman's waist and hip. The woman's arm is around the man's neck.

AUDRA
COLE

NIGHT
WATCHERS

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By

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BOOK THREE in the canid
SERIES

dedication:

For Tom

A Good Friend, Always...

prologue

Talia Coe watched as her father, Victor Kane, was led down a long, dark corridor. Shackles, connected to a chain around his waist, bound his wrists and ankles, and he shuffled along like a child just learning to walk.

Standing off to the side, she desperately wanted to reach out to him, but couldn't move. The guards, their footsteps echoing noisily on the cracked tile floor, urged him along with ugly looking nightsticks, poking and prodding at him, almost making him fall several times.

Then, as though sensing her presence, Victor glanced her way, only to be slapped on the side of the head by one of the large, ape-like men escorting him.

"Eyes ahead, you're all ours now, Kane." The man sneered and gave his helpless prisoner another poke in the back as though reminding him who was in charge.

Talia tried to cry out, but no sound came from her constricted throat.

At the end of the corridor was a steel door, which now swung open on noisy hinges. Straining to see what lay beyond, she stared into a black void. Talia's heart began to pound, her body shook and tears ran down her cheeks. She knew that once her father walked through that door, she would never see him again. He would be gone forever...lost...

"No!" the scream erupted from her throat and tore through the night as she bolted upright in bed and peered at the familiar surroundings of the bedroom she shared with her mate, Lucas.

* * * *

Lucas Knight had fallen into an exhausted sleep a little after midnight.

Now, in the pre-dawn hours he was jarred awake by Talia's wail and jumped from the bed, ready to fight whatever intruder lurked in the gray, shadowy corners of the room. Instead he found Talia huddled on her side of the bed, hugging a pillow and shaking uncontrollably.

"Another nightmare," he said matter-of-factly, sitting down and pulling her into his arms.

Only this time he knew the nightmares were not about the wolf pack they'd once been part of, or the shapeshifting that was her heritage, or events that had resulted in several deaths. They were about her father, Victor Kane, who was

about to go on trial for the murder last July of Craig Lynch, a local reporter.

“He should have taken the deal,” she lamented.

Yes, that would have been easier for everyone, because God only knew what would come out once the trial started, Lucas thought, stroking Talia’s long auburn hair and suddenly becoming aware of her nude body pressing close to his.

chapter one

*t*he *Arcadia Messenger* had been priming the pump, so to speak, about the upcoming trial of Victor Kane for over a week. Lucas, sipping a cup of coffee at the kitchen table, looked at the headline in disgust and tossed the newspaper aside.

The trial was just days away and with each passing moment, he felt the knot in his stomach tighten just a little more. Who knew what would come out once witnesses started taking the stand? Why hadn't Victor just taken the damned deal?

A tall man with thick black hair and brown eyes flecked with gold, Lucas had the kind of face that was just a little too long and narrow to be considered handsome. Yet he was a striking looking man, with a goatee that gave him a certain air of mystery.

As was his custom of late, he was having his morning coffee clad only in a pair of boxer shorts. What with all the sexual activity that had been

going on here lately, he found it easier to wear less clothing around the house.

Talia came into the kitchen, went to the refrigerator, got out a carton of orange juice, poured a glass then joined Lucas at the table. "I'm sorry I woke you up like that."

She was so beautiful. Looking at her across the table, he felt those carnal urges gnawing at his groin. Today, she had her fiery hair pulled loosely back at the nape of her neck. Her amber eyes stared at him and he could see that she knew exactly what he was thinking. "I like that sweater, by the way. Shows off your curves. Are you wearing any underwear?"

Talia smiled, parting her lips and slowly running her tongue over them. Then she tweaked each nipple with a fingertip and they protruded seductively beneath the soft emerald green material. "Why don't you find out for yourself?"

"I guess I'll have to, won't I?" He got up and went to her, pulling her hard against him as longing surged through his body.

The mating urges that had plagued them for the past two months were just beginning to lessen, but Lucas knew that even when their primal desire as wolves to couple had vanished, their need for one another as humans would be just as strong.

Finding out that she was a shapeshifter had been traumatic for Talia. The accident that had

erased her memory had made it difficult for Victor, her father, and Lucas, her mate, to bring themselves back into her life. But now, that was behind them. Except for one remnant. Lucas shoved those thoughts to the back of his mind as Talia rubbed her body against his. Moving his hand down to her ass, he squeezed gently, then pronounced, "No underwear. I think you need to get dressed all over again."

With that, he removed her sweater and watched as she shook her hair free of the ribbon that held it. Her breasts were milky white, her nipples rosy nubs just waiting for him to take them into his mouth, which he now did, first one then the other.

* * * *

Talia laced her fingers through Lucas's hair and drew his head closer. The feel of his tongue on her nipples aroused her to a fevered pitch. Thick fluid now ran down the insides of her thighs and all thoughts of the ordeal that lay ahead with her father's trial vanished from her mind as she gave herself over to the electrifying sensations that now raced through her blood.

As Lucas's fingers found her folds, she spread her legs, welcoming his touch as the muscles deep

within her core began to quiver. She felt warmth rush out to her skin and her breath came in short gasps when he pinched at her clit, drawing it out, coaxing it to respond.

She pulled down his boxers and took his cock in her hand. Hot jism bubbled over the top and she longed to lick it from the head but she didn't want him to stop those wonderful strokes inside of her that were bringing her close to the brink. As though reading her mind, Lucas gently lowered them both to the floor then turned around straddling her so that his erection was near her lips and his mouth could easily reach her sex. Talia took the full length of him into her mouth, running her tongue up and down the sides, then licked the salty fluid that flowed from him. She loved the taste of him, loved the way he smelled – musky, sexy.

When Lucas pulled away, and rolled onto his back, she straddled him, running her hands over his chest, which was now slick with perspiration. Teasing him a little, she hovered just above his cock, bringing herself down just enough to touch him, then raising herself up again, just out of reach.

Finally he grabbed her around the waist and brought her down with force. As she sheathed him and the orgasm began, she felt her swollen walls contract wildly and the heat spread through every

part of her body.

* * * *

For Talia, making love to Lucas was the most natural thing in the world. She really didn't know what she'd do if she ever lost him. She loved their life here; adored the small stone cottage they shared off Oak Tree Lane, just minutes from town. However, she still had stirrings of discomfort when she peered into the nearby woods and recalled the tragedy that had taken place there. But it had also been the place where her past had finally come rushing back, hitting her head-on like the blow from a sledge hammer.

Lucas had left for the antique shop only twenty minutes ago and already she missed him.

Stepping out of the shower, she began to towel herself dry. As they often did, her thoughts returned to last November and the Stewarts, Nick and Abby. When the brother and sister had moved into the long-vacant estate nearby, she'd been thrilled to learn that Nick, like her, was an artist. At least that's what he'd told her. And, if he seemed to be flirting with her, that was something she'd managed to handle. In fact, at first it had been a little flattering, but would never have gone any further than that for her.

Abby, on the other hand, seemed to have only

one thing in mind—seducing Lucas. Pale blond, beautiful and curvaceous, the woman had pursued him with a vengeance, even showing up at his antique shop clad in alluring clothing with nothing underneath. But the worst part was that Talia could sense there was something about the woman that fascinated Lucas. He'd been tempted, and that had cut Talia to the quick. But the Stewart's real identities had finally been revealed and now they were gone and Talia couldn't be happier.

What's so great about blondes, anyway? Was that it, the hair? Or was it the way she looked in those filmy see-through dresses? I could be a blond...I'd be a drop-dead gorgeous blond, as a matter of fact.

"My God!" Talia jumped back from the mirror. She closed her eyes then quickly re-opened them, shaking her head a little to clear her vision. She had to be imagining things. *The stress must be getting to me.* That had to be it, her eyes were playing tricks on her. But for just a split second, she could have sworn that the image looking back at her from the partially steamed-up bathroom mirror *was* a blond.

chapter two

the one-block downtown area of Arcadia was called Main Street. Not very imaginative, Lucas had to admit, but he liked it. On one end was Carver Avenue and on the other was a large park aptly named Town Square. Main Street split into two one-way lanes around the park, which sported a bandstand, benches, various large trees, a pond, a fountain and a gazebo.

In the summer there were concerts, picnics and other gatherings to attend. Children and adults alike could fish in the pond and citizens would spread out blankets under the shade trees and picnic, read or just take a nap, if that was their preference on a lazy summer afternoon.

Now, however, it was February and this morning Lucas trudged along sidewalks covered with the slushy remains of the four-inch snowfall from two days ago. Salt pellets crunched beneath his boots as he rounded the Main Street loop and

passed Victor Kane's art gallery. The sign reading 'Sorry We're Closed' was still in the window. Checking his watch he saw that it was a little after eight o'clock in the morning. The gallery didn't open this early and neither did his own shop but today he was interviewing someone for the job of part-time assistant and had scheduled the appointment for eight-thirty.

Knight's Antiques was located on the corner of Main and Carver across the street and on the opposite end of the block from the gallery. As Lucas crossed the street, he passed the large city building that also housed the jail and courts. He thought of Victor, behind bars all these months awaiting trial, and wondered what was going through his mind this morning, with the proceedings just two days away. Passing the drug store, he waved at the owner who was already inside filling prescriptions.

Finally reaching his shop, Lucas unlocked the front door and stepped inside, stomping the snow from his boots on a large black mat. Disabling the alarm, he flipped on the lights, raised the rattan blind in the front window and headed toward the back room that served as his office. Checking his watch again, he saw that he had fifteen minutes to make coffee and get things in some semblance of order before his appointment.

Why do I feel like I need to impress her? I'm the

boss, right? She needs to impress me. I'm not used to this. I've always worked solo. Maybe this is a mistake.

Lucas's plans to expand the shop, because of an increase in business, had made it necessary for him to hire an assistant. Now that Knight's Antiques was nationally known, people from all over the country were visiting and with the recent purchase of a computer and an Internet connection, he'd been able to expand his customer base even more. One of the tellers at the bank had helped him set up a website, which had brought an onslaught of requests as well as increased orders. Through this Internet experience, Lucas had learned one thing, people liked to buy on-line. They also liked quaint little towns where they thought they could get a bargain and often spent weekends just driving around "antiquing."

Lucas didn't exactly feel as though he'd put Arcadia on the map but he did believe that he'd had a hand in it. Of course, the rumors of bizarre happenings and the murder of Craig Lynch had played their part in attracting out-of-town visitors.

He was just sipping at his first cup of freshly brewed coffee when he heard the bell above the front door herald the arrival of, he assumed, his applicant. *Eight-thirty exactly. Right on time. Score one for her.* Looking at his desk, which was littered with stacks of invoices, print-outs of orders and other things he couldn't even begin to recall, he

decided it was too late to do any internal housekeeping, and went out to meet his latest applicant.

The woman standing just inside the front door was of medium height with short brown hair, brown eyes and a face that somehow fell just short of pretty. She had already taken off her coat to reveal a tan, oversized sweater and a pair of brown corduroy slacks. "I hope I'm not late," she said in a voice that carried just the hint of an accent.

"Just on time, actually, that is if you're Rachel Lewis," Lucas said, coming around the sales counter.

"I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself right away. Yes, I'm Rachel. I love the way you have this shop arranged." She glanced around and Lucas could see that she meant it.

"Well, it's a little crowded right now, but when the addition is built, things will be a lot roomier."

She wiped her black snow boots on the mat then advanced into the sales area. "Still, it has charm and warmth. Cozy."

Lucas smiled. "Why don't we go into my office, such as it is, and talk some more."

He led her through the narrow hallway and signaled for her to sit in the chair next to his desk, then took her coat and hung it on the nearby wall rack.

Once he was seated, he fished around for her letter and resume. "You're not from around here."

Lucas watched her settle into the chair. Her demeanor was relaxed, unhurried and she looked him in the eye as she replied, "Virginia, actually. Born in Bristol. I moved to Kinnard about five years ago."

He watched as she took a pair of gold-rimmed glasses from her purse and put them on.

"You worked in your uncle's photography shop?" He asked, referring to the resume.

She nodded. "Until he became too ill and sold the business. He's in a nursing home now."

"Antiques are a long way from photography," Lucas commented, watching for her reaction.

She smiled and it seemed to transform her face. Now he could see that underneath that somber countenance lurked a young woman who could be very attractive if she put her mind to it.

"My uncle was a collector. I used to go with him to flea markets, auctions and estate sales. I have a good eye, Mr. Knight. And I'm very..." She looked at the mess on his desk, "organized."

Lucas smiled and got up. "Let me give you a tour of the place. There's more to it than what is out front."

He led her to the stairs where a sign reading *Grandma's Attic* was nailed to a crossbeam. "I have the less valuable things up here. Bargain hunters

love it."

"You're appealing to a wide range of buyers, that's very smart."

Coming from anyone else Lucas would have considered that an ass-kissing comment, but the way she said it carried the ring of sincerity.

She took her time looking around at the tables strewn with little trinkets and other assorted glassware marked \$5.00 each. She then turned her attention to the furniture. "This is nice, but a reproduction. A good one, though," she commented running a hand across the top of a narrow library table made of dark wood. The veneer is hardly cracked." She looked at the price tag. "You might be able to get a little more for it."

Lucas smiled but said nothing, as he watched her move around the attic. When she joined him at the top of the stairs again, he felt a pang of disappointment. "Let's go back to my office," he said, almost sharply.

As they started down the stairs she said rather casually, "Mr. Knight, you might want to take that Fostoria Baroque flat oil cruet, the topaz one with the clear stopper, off the five-dollar junk table and move it to the main sales area. Fostoria only made that line of glassware between 1936 and 1966, so I'd price it at somewhere between \$160.00 and \$265.00"

Bingo! He'd found his new assistant.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, she smiled up at him and asked, "Well, did I pass the test or did I miss something else you planted up there?"

Lucas laughed out loud. "You found me out. I admit it. The job is yours if you want it."

chapter three

Caroline Thomas had tossed and turned half the night. Then, she'd swatted at the alarm clock, pushing the snooze button four times before she could drag herself out of bed. With the start of Victor's trial just two days away, she was finding it increasingly difficult to sleep at night let alone keep her mind on business matters at the art gallery. *Did I make a mistake urging him to go to trial? No. He'd already made up his mind he wasn't going to take their deal. But, I re-enforced it. I told him I thought he could get acquitted. It was an accident. It was!*

When Victor, who had been on the run since Craig Lynch's murder, had shifted into his wolf form and pulled her out of this burning condo several months ago she'd been pregnant with their son. Now, Alexander Victor Kane was a happy, healthy three month old, who smiled toothlessly up at her and cooed when she spoke to him. A

miracle. Their miracle, her's and Victor's. She wanted him to be free. She needed them to be a family.

Caroline went into the bathroom and assessed herself in the mirror. Her short dark hair was in complete disarray, her blue eyes a little bloodshot. *God, people are going to start thinking I'm a drunk!* She opened the medicine cabinet, got out the bottle of Visine and squirted two drops in each eye.

While she was petite in stature, she had a voluptuous figure. Her breasts were large and although she'd tried to breast feed Alex, she'd finally resorted to giving him bottles.

Keeping the gallery in business had been quite a struggle and the events last fall had caused a big setback, making it necessary for her to cancel one of the largest art exhibitions the gallery had ever organized. The murder of her assistant, Victor's daring escape from jail, and the attempt on her own life had just been too much. But she was determined to have that exhibition and had sent pleas to the artists and galleries to give her another chance.

She turned on the shower and stepped under the hot, pulsing spray. As the jets of water stung her breasts she felt a tug in her womb. Just imagining Victor's fingers pulling at her nipples caused them to harden and swell. As she soaped

herself up, she tugged at the nubs then moved one hand to her core and massaged her clit until it, too, throbbed with desire. She needed him, missed him. Sometimes she thought she couldn't go another minute without feeling his cock inside of her. The orgasm came quickly, but was unsatisfying, and she hurriedly finished washing and turned off the water.

Twenty minutes later, dressed in a royal blue business suit and crisp white blouse, Caroline descended the stairs. After the fire in November, the living room had been completely remodeled. She'd stayed with the same soft earth tones—beige, off white, and a splash of light blue here and there. There was also an aquarium, plenty of plants and comfortable, overstuffed furniture. Track lighting added a subtle touch and she'd added several tabletop fountains. Luckily, the upstairs had been undamaged.

In the kitchen she found Claire Fontaine, the nanny she'd hired a month ago, giving Alex his morning bottle. Claire was a godsend. She'd had excellent references and was wonderful with Alex.

"He's quite a chow hound," Claire said, as she sat the baby up to burp him.

No pun intended, I hope, Caroline thought. After all, Victor was a shifter and although she was not, the baby was half wolf. She'd asked Victor when it would present itself, this penchant

for turning canid at will, and he'd just smiled and given her some vague answer about "involuntary shifting episodes with the young ones."

Caroline caressed the baby's cheek, kissed the top of his head then headed for coffee pot. Claire, who arrived each morning at five o'clock, always put the coffee on to brew, straightened up the downstairs, and started the laundry. By then, Alex was awake and ready for his morning feeding. Luckily, he now slept through the night, so it was not necessary for a nanny to live in.

Claire got up and put the empty bottle in the sink. She was a tall woman in her mid-fifties, with stylishly-cut ash blond hair and soft brown eyes. Her features were classic—straight nose, high cheekbones, full lips.

"Can you do the grocery shopping today?" Caroline asked.

"I'd planned on it. Tomorrow is Alex's pediatrician appointment. Will you be going?"

Caroline nodded. "You bet. This little guy is growing so fast, Claire. It just seems like yesterday he was..." Tears stung her eyes. "It's not fair that his father can't be here..."

"You're frightened for Victor. That's understandable."

"I'm terrified. What if he goes to prison? It's bad enough they've put this trial off, keeping him caged up..." She stopped, afraid to say anymore.

Claire mustn't know the truth about Victor or Alex...what they really were. *If she ever finds that out, she'll be out of here like a shot, for sure. Who wouldn't be?*

"My guess is the doctor will tell us tomorrow that Alex can start having baby cereal, so I'm picking some up today." Claire cuddled the child close to her.

Caroline stood up. "I have to get to the gallery, but I need to hold him for a minute before I go." She reached out and took the baby, kissing his nose, his forehead, then pressing him against her bosom. "Mommy loves you. And Daddy will be home soon, I promise."

"His hair is getting so much thicker," Claire commented.

Caroline looked at her child. He was plump, with dark auburn hair, large brown eyes and the cutest little pug nose she'd ever seen. "Well he gets that honestly," she finally said, handing the Alex back to Claire.

Much of the snow had melted, but there were still grungy looking piles of it where the maintenance people had plowed the parking area. Arcadian Ridge was a gated community build around a large courtyard. Her home was number 109 in the center of one of the two U-shaped buildings that sat at either end of the expanse. Another building comprised of seven connected

units bordered the back.

As Caroline pulled her sleek, black Lexus out of its parking spot behind her condo and drove around the building toward the front exit, she found herself glancing across the courtyard at unit 117, and a pang of both sorrow and apprehension surged through her.

That had been Neil's unit. Gentle, handsome, deceptive Neil, who had wormed his way into her life with his own agenda in mind. Would she ever hear from him again? The thought of it caused Caroline's hands to grow sweaty on the steering wheel. She hadn't had any contact with him since that awful night three months ago, when he'd stood with her on the hill near the old estate and watched five wolves battle it out in the eerie glow of a full moon. He'd taken pictures, she remembered seeing the flashes as the camera clicked away, one shot after the other. But that had also been the night Alex was born and when she finally was able to ask about Neil, no one seemed to know what had happened to him.

Pulling onto Main Street from Carver Avenue, she noted that Lucas's antique shop was open. As she passed City Hall, she was tempted to visit Victor now, but knew that his attorneys would be there this morning, helping him prepare for the trial. She'd see him later. Tonight. Privately. A special visit.

She parked beside the gallery, noting that her new assistant, Ben Walker, had already arrived.

As she entered the building, she felt a sense of satisfaction. Most of the pieces by local talent that were to have been displayed at the Christmas show now sat on easels and hung on the walls in the main showroom of the gallery. At least those artists had a chance for some sales prior to the spring showing. She looked across the room to where several of Talia's pieces were prominently positioned. Since December, four paintings had sold, however. *At least she's keeping busy painting new pictures to keep up with the demand. Maybe that has helped keep her mind off of what lay ahead. Who am I kidding? We both know it is always there – the fear, the anxiety over what will happen to a man we both love. It never goes away. God, how I want this to be over!*

As she turned off the alarm and walked toward her office, Caroline heard her new assistant clanging around in the storeroom. *He's not anything like Jeremy. Jeremy. Why can't I stop calling him that? He was Doug. He lied to me, used me too...*

"You got a call from the Benson Gallery in New York just a little bit ago," Ben Walker said, suddenly appearing in the hallway. He was a tall, rangy man with a casual demeanor, thick black hair, and wide-set hazel eyes. He had an open, honest-looking face and a toothy smile.

"And?" Caroline said somewhat irritably as she

hurried toward the office. She felt nervousness twitch at her insides.

Ben followed behind. "The answer is yes. They'll send four paintings by up-and-coming artist with the stipulation that if they don't sell you keep them on display here for a month after the spring show and that you place paid ads in newspapers statewide to promote them and that you pay Bensons' a fee if they have to be returned."

Caroline felt both elated and piqued. "A fee?"

"Yeah. They called it a recovery-of-loss fee, whatever the hell that is."

"Their recovery our loss," Caroline grumbled. Up-and-coming artists meant unknowns, not exactly a big drawing card, but after she'd had to cancel the Christmas show and return the paintings Bensons' had sent, she felt lucky that they were willing to give her another chance at all. "I'll call them back and accept. We can't afford to get on their bad side at this point."

Ben smiled as though he understood completely and turned to leave, mumbling something about finishing the shelves he was building. As she watched him walk, she saw absolutely no resemblance between him and Jeremy, which was exactly why she'd hired him. No attraction, no sexual urgings, no desire. And he knew absolutely nothing about art. He was

mule labor, hired to do manual work and do data entry into an inventory system in their newly purchased computer system, pure and simple. The program had been set up by the vendor, who had assured her that a monkey could operate it. "It's just a matter of dropping numbers into a slot and pushing a button." So, she'd had them put the processor, monitor and keyboard in the back room so Ben could enter the information as pieces came in. Simple, easy, no fuss, no bother. And, minimal need for her to have one-on-one contact with him, since she could check inventory from her terminal in the office at any time. His hours were part time, three days a week, Monday, Wednesday and Friday, nine o'clock in the morning until two o'clock in the afternoon. The fact he lived in the apartment above the bank that Jeremy had once occupied, was of no interest to her. In fact she knew little about his personal life, just that he was thirty-two years old and liked old movies.

As Caroline began to shuffle through the papers on her desk, her mind returned to Victor and what he must be going through as his day in court approached.

chapter four

Victor Kane was sitting in one of the two interview rooms at City Hall, waiting for his attorneys to arrive. Three officers had brought him in, one walking in front of him to unlock the doors and two behind, guns drawn to make sure he didn't try "anything funny like before."

After his escape a few months ago, and in view of the odd circumstances surrounding it, the guards had been instructed to take extra precautions when transporting Victor from one place to another. On the other hand, his attorneys, Rich Adkins and Kevin Mahew, regularly threw fits if they saw their client in shackles, so now the officers made sure Victor was already in the interview room, unshackled but handcuffed to the chair when the pair arrived.

Today, as always, Rich and Kevin, not only partners in their law firm but life partners as well, swooped in and began the usual barrage of

questions.

"Did you get to see Caroline and the baby yesterday?" Rich began, slapping his attaché case on the large tabletop.

"We told them you were to have visits from them and your daughter, Talia, whenever they chose to come," Kevin added.

Rich was slender, of medium height with thinning brown hair and alert green eyes. His rimless glasses always seemed to sit near the tip of his nose so he could look over the top of them. He was what could be referred to as a natty dresser and today wore a dark blue pinstriped suit, white shirt and blue tie.

Kevin, on the other hand, was tall and bulky with close-cropped salt and pepper hair and dark blue eyes that could turn almost black when he was angry. His dress was more casual; navy pants, open necked shirt and plaid blazer.

"They came by yesterday evening. The powers that be here didn't seem too thrilled by their late visit." Victor eyed the two men with a raised eyebrow.

"Too damned bad. If they want to come see you at fucking midnight, that's the way it will be. The judge said so!" Kevin stormed.

Victor smiled. He had no doubt of that. Somehow, Kevin Mahew had pulled a string or two (or knew where a few bones were buried) and

Victor's incarceration was not the horror show it had once been. Even the food was better now.

Rich sat down and spread out a pile of papers on the table. Kevin sat next to him, taking out a legal tablet and pen.

"We have two days until jury selection begins. I'd say that could take a week. My motion for a change of venue was denied, as expected, so we're stuck here for the trial.

"And," Kevin added, "We just found out that the prosecution has added someone named Neil Wade to its list of witnesses."

Rich sighed. "We were supposed to have the complete list of witnesses last week. I think they held this one back on purpose. Of course, they claim they just realized he could be a valuable addition to their case."

Kevin snorted with disgust. "They're lying. That prick, Deacon Hunt, is notorious for pulling last minute maneuvers like this one. Mark my words, there will be more to come. Oh, and guess who is sitting second chair with District Attorney Hunt for the prosecution?"

Rich was practically jumping out of his chair to tell, so Kevin relinquished the floor to him with a nod.

"ADA Brianna Hadley!"

At Victor's blank look, Rich added, "His former piece of ass, who he dumped for some paralegal

named Hannah Nance. We think he picked Biranna just to watch her squirm."

"Or to get her stirred up and ready for action again," Kevin put in with relish.

But Victor had tuned out that part of the conversation as he felt a growl well up deep inside his throat at the thought of Neil Wade returning to Arcadia. He knew about the affair Caroline had had with Wade, and the thought of him being anywhere near her, or Alex, was unbearable.

The growl finally erupted as a snarled, "Keep Wade away from Caroline. I want to know where he is, where he's staying once he arrives. Put one of your investigators on him, I want that bastard watched."

Taken somewhat aback, Rich glanced at Kevin. But Victor could see that Kevin knew exactly what it was all about.

"He boffed Caroline?" His eyes widened dramatically.

Rich gasped. "But...she was pregnant...Good God! How can we use this to our advantage to discredit him as a witness?"

"I don't want that brought out. Are you fucking crazy," Victor snapped.

At this point, Kevin stood up and placing both hands on the table and leaned forward, his face just inches from Victor's. "You are on trial for second degree murder. You refused the second

degree manslaughter deal. We are going to do everything we can to see that you do not spend the next decade or even longer behind bars. Do you or do you not want to be acquitted and go home to that beautiful woman and your son?"

Victor stared into eyes now as black as onyx, and knew that if anyone could do the job it was this man and his partner. "Go talk to Caroline. She'll tell you about Neil Wade."

* * * *

Caroline was discussing a sculpture with a customer when Rich and Kevin arrived at the gallery.

Attaché cases in hand, they had on their professional faces and she felt an arrow of alarm shoot through her. Had something happened to Victor? Was something wrong?

The customer, Mrs. Giddings, never failed to get under Caroline's skin and had, on one occasion, rudely interrupted a rather intense sexual encounter with Victor in his office. However, she was a good customer, purchased frequently and was now showing them her full support. She was also an influential woman in Arcadia and Caroline knew she needed to remain in her good graces.

"I'll be with you in a minute," Caroline told Rich and Kevin, who were now perusing the paintings on the walls.

Mrs. Giddings cooed, "I love this piece, dear. It will be the perfect birthday gift for my nephew. He lives in Los Angeles. I'll take it. Can you have it delivered?" She smiled, exposing lipstick-stained teeth.

Once Caroline was finished with Mrs. Giddings and had escorted the woman out the door, she joined the two attorneys.

"What's wrong? What's going on?" She couldn't hide her anxiety.

"We need to ask you some questions," Rich told her.

"About Neil Wade," Kevin added.

Caroline felt her pulse quicken and her knees grow a little weak. "Why?"

"Perhaps we should go into your office," Rich suggested, walking that way.

Caroline followed the pair but left the office door open so she could hear the chime that would alert her should another customer enter the gallery. Walking briskly now, she sat down behind her desk. Kevin and Rich chose the two leather armchairs across from her.

"First of all, how are you holding up?" Kevin began.

"I'm not," Caroline snapped. "Why do you

want to know about Neil Wade?"

"Okay, then, right down to business," Rich snapped back. He put his attaché case on his lap, opened it and took out a legal pad and a pen. "The prosecution has, at the very last minute, added him to their list of witnesses. He is going to testify. Victor said to ask you about him and so that's what we are doing."

Caroline's face flushed and she felt dizzy. Neil would be coming back to Arcadia! She'd have to face him. God only knew what he'd say on the stand.

"I can see the wheels turning up there in your head, Caroline," Kevin told her. "We need the truth. Now."

"You had an affair with him, that much we know," Rich said.

"But there's more." Kevin prompted.

Caroline took a deep breath, willing herself to focus on the important thing, which was getting Victor acquitted. "Neil Wade was a good friend of Craig Lynch's. He came to Arcadia to find out what happened to him, and he used me as a means to that end. I was lonely, Victor had disappeared, I was vulnerable..."

"What did he think happened?" Kevin shot.

Caroline shrugged. "I don't know. I think he just needed closure, maybe he thought if he came here, where it happened..."

"Bullshit!" Rich spat.

"Ditto," Kevin added.

Both men were staring hard at her now, waiting.

Dear God, I can't tell it all. What do I do now?

"He's a reporter, like Craig was, I think he just wanted to get enough facts to write a book about it...true crime sells well, I hear. He was after a story. He probably thought it would put him on the best seller list or something, you know, he knew the victim, he could get the inside story, talk to the people involved. But instead of coming right out and saying that, he went about it in a devious way. He seduced me. I so needed someone to be my friend then, to..."

Kevin studied her closely, then exchanged glances with Rich.

"Did he write the book?" Rich asked.

Caroline shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe he's still writing it, or trying to find a publisher."

"Have you been in touch with him since he left Arcadia?" Rich asked.

Caroline felt her muscles tense. "No!"

"Has *he* tried to contact *you*," Kevin asked, turning the question around a little.

Caroline shook her head.

"Where was he staying while he was here?" Rich asked.

Again, Caroline's stomach lurched. "In my

complex, Arcadian Ridge. He sublet unit 117."

"How handy," Rich's eyebrow shot up almost into his hairline.

"So, you're asking us to believe that a writer, who just wanted to write a true crime book, went to all the trouble of coming into town undercover, moved into your complex so he could seduce you and get information. Did he go to the police for copies of reports, or look up back copies of the Messenger for info, or talk to the other people around town who might have information?"

Caroline flared, "How would I know? I wasn't with him every minute of the day! We had a very brief affair. Then he was gone. That's all I know!"

Kevin got up and snatched his attaché case from the floor where he'd put it when he sat down. "We'll do a little Internet research once we get back to our office and see what we can find out about this guy," he said to Rich, who had replaced his pad and pen in his case and snapped it shut.

Rich, on his feet now, too, nodded at Kevin, then looked down at Caroline, who found she couldn't stand up. "The truth will come out, Ms. Thomas," Rich said, reverting back to addressing her more formally.

As the two attorneys headed for the doorway, Caroline finally found the strength to stand. "I want to visit Victor tonight, privately."

"Go ahead. However, you should be aware,

they have now installed a closed circuit camera in the interview room. But, we'll make sure the guards leave you two alone. There's no sound on the camera," Rich threw back over his shoulder.

chapter five

talia was in her studio, struggling with a landscape, when she heard the doorbell ring.

She'd been working on this painting for over two weeks but just couldn't seem to get it right. She had hoped to capture the icy beauty of the woods, as seen from her studio windows, but something was wrong. After the first snowfall, she'd sketched the breathtaking vista, and made more sketches after the latest storm, but still she wasn't satisfied.

Wiping her hands on a rag, she stuck the paint brush into the can of turpentine she kept on the worktable beside her easel and went to answer the door.

"Claire, what a wonderful surprise!" she exclaimed. "And, there's that little man." She smiled at Alex, who grinned toothlessly back at her.

"I hope it's all right that I just dropped by like

this," Claire began, following Talia into the living room. "We're on our way to the grocery, but I thought you might like to visit with Alex for a few minutes."

Talia eyed Claire questioningly. The grocery was near Caroline's condo, which was on the other side of town. "I'm always glad to see both of you. Would you like some tea or coffee? It's pretty chilly out there."

"Tea would be wonderful," Claire said, smiling warmly.

Talia had liked the woman from the moment she'd first met her at Caroline's condo shortly after she'd been hired. There was something infinitely comforting about her; she put Talia at ease.

Claire took off her coat and laid it over an arm of the sofa. Lifting Alex from his carrier, she removed his snowsuit then put him back in the carrier and followed Talia into the kitchen, where she put the baby seat on the table. "He's due for his juice," Claire said, removing a bottle from the diaper bag she'd also brought with her.

"Caroline was lucky to find you, Claire. You're so good with Alex," Talia said moments later, as she put a steaming mug of Earl Grey tea in front of the woman. She took her own mug and sat down opposite her guest at the kitchen table.

"I'm the lucky one. This little guy is such a good baby. And so bright." Then, as if noticing

Talia's attire for the first time she added, "You were working and I interrupted you. I'm so sorry. You should have said something."

Talia chuckled. "You're a welcome interruption. I'm getting nowhere with the painting I'm working on. It's a disaster. I'm about ready to paint over it and start again."

"It can't be that bad. I've seen your other work. It's brilliant."

Talia got up and took Alex from the carrier, put him over her shoulder and began patting his back to burp him. "Do you mind?"

Claire shook her head. "It's good to see the two of you together."

That's an odd comment, Talia thought. Just then Alex released a loud belch and both women laughed. "No trapped gas for you, huh, little brother?" Talia said, cuddling the baby in her arms.

"I know you must be on edge because of the trial coming up, Talia. Is there anything I can do?"

Talia eyed Claire for a moment. *What was it about this woman that makes me want to pour out my heart to her?* "Just take care of Alex. At least Caroline won't have to worry about him during this ordeal."

"That, I can do. But who will allay your fears, Talia? Who will take care of your nightmares?"

Suddenly Talia felt tears spring into her eyes

and held the baby closer. Then, reluctantly, she put him back in his carrier. "Would you like to see my studio?" She led Claire into the large work area and made a grand gesture with her hands. "Well, here it is, the great artist's atelier!"

"It's perfect. Look at that exposure. The light is just right. Oh, is this the painting you're displeased with?" Claire went to the easel and examined the picture closely.

Talia stood beside her, waiting for her reaction to the half-finished picture of the scene outside the windows which included a path and the woods, trees heavy with snow—a landscape white against a clear winter sky, with just hints of the green lurking beneath. "Something's missing, though," she finally said.

"Paint all that you see, Talia. Describe to me what is there," Claire told her, pointing toward the bank of windows.

Talia, somewhat chagrined, bit back a sharp comment. Instead she said, "Well, beyond the window panes, there is just what I've painted..." Then she stopped. Of course! She was painting this picture from inside the house...the windows had to be part of it! "The windows..."

"Indeed," Claire replied with a smile.

"With the windows in the foreground, the painting would have a whole new perspective!" Talia cried.

Alex, wiggling in his carrier, began to fuss a little. "Well, it's on to the grocery for us, because it will soon be time for this little fellow's nap."

Minutes later, suppressing the desire to give Claire a hug, she watched her take Alex to the car and hook the carrier in place.

After she watched Claire drive away, Talia went back to the painting and began to add the needed touches. But deep inside of her, she felt a pang, something she couldn't quite explain, like something missing, nearly found, then lost again.

And, how did she know about the nightmares?

* * * *

Once she returned to the condo, Claire unloaded the groceries, then prepared Alex's bottle. Taking him to the nursery, she sat in the rocking chair and fed him. When he was satisfied, she changed his diaper, then put him in his crib, kissed him and left the room. Twenty minutes later, she peeked in on him and found the crib empty.

"Okay. Where are you?" Claire said, her voice calm, soothing. Looking under the bed, she found him, nub of a tail wagging, slightly pointed ears up and alert, his small human body partially covered with just a hint of soft, down-like fur.

Picking up the baby, she cradled him until he shifted fully back into human form again. "You

know, I don't know how your mother is going to handle this, but I don't dare tell her I've seen you do it."

When she finally left the nursery for the second time, Alex was snoozing peacefully, sucking his thumb just like any normal infant.

chapter SIX

Caroline left the gallery at five. She'd already called Claire and asked her to stay later tonight because she wanted to visit Victor. "But, I'm coming home first to change clothes," she'd told the nanny.

Now, as she drove toward the condo, she thought of Kevin and Rich's visit and the barrage of questions they'd thrown at her. She had to see Victor tonight; she needed to know if she'd done the right thing by withholding certain information from his attorneys.

Of course I did the right thing. What was I supposed to do tell them that Victor is really a wolf, a shapeshifter, and that what Neil witnessed in November could prove it? Boy, the jury would really love that one. And just how much is Neil going to tell them in court? Probably spill his guts. Show them the pictures. Then what? It's all over, that's what. God Almighty, what a fucking mess!

She pulled into her parking spot next to Claire's

red Monte Carlo. Inside, Alex was cooing in the cradle they kept downstairs for him and Claire was preparing a light dinner. Caroline picked up the baby and hugged him tight, planting kisses all over his little face. Then she noticed it, the tuft of fur-like hair behind one ear. Stifling her alarm, she rubbed at it and it seemed to magically disappear. Breathing a sigh of relief, she put him back in the cradle.

"You have time for a bite, don't you? It's just salad and sandwiches."

"I'll eat later," Caroline nearly snapped, then apologized to the woman. "I just want to get back to town." Casting a nervous glance at Alex, she then went upstairs.

"I understand," Claire said to her retreating form.

A half hour later, Caroline pushed open one of the double glass doors and entered the city building. Just inside, to her right, was the police station. As she entered, she was again baffled by the random arrangement of the desks. Going to nearest one, she said to a young, blond, officer, "I'm here to see Victor Kane." His name tag read, Matt Dixon. Sort of sounds like Matt Dillon, she thought suppressing a smile.

When Officer Matt Dixon looked up at her, Caroline was amused to see that he did a wide-eyed double take.

Tonight, she chose her outfit carefully. The short black skirt and red, scoop-necked sweater molded to her curves in a sexy, enticing way. She'd even spiked her hair up a little and applied red lipstick to what Victor always referred to as her sensual lips.

"And I'll bet he can't wait to see you," young Matt Dixon said, never taking his eyes off of her as he pushed a button on his phone. "Kane has a visitor. Use Room B."

Caroline left the police station and stepped out into the main hallway. Straight ahead was another, smaller hallway, leading to two interview rooms on the left, and the main prisoner visitation area on the right. Behind those were the jail cells. Memories of Victor's spectacular escape a few months ago came to mind and she again smiled. As she waited, she glanced to her right, toward a lavish atrium and the courtrooms beyond. In a couple of days, either Courtroom A or Courtroom B, would seem like her second home.

Officer Dixon joined her shortly and led her into the second interview room.

"Wait here, they'll bring him in," he said, then with one final look up and down her body, closed the door and locked it from the other side.

Interview room B was about ten by ten and contained a scarred oak table and four chairs. The walls, painted a sickly green, were dirty and

streaked. The floor was wood, scuffed and rough looking. She felt suffocated, closed in. Then, she heard a key turn in the door on the opposite side of the room and Victor was brought in, escorted by three other officers, two of them with guns drawn. He was shackled, but the minute they got him inside, they removed those and she flew into his arms.

"How touching," one of the officers quipped as the trio left. Within a half second, the sound of a key turning in the lock echoed through the room.

But Caroline didn't care. All she wanted was to hold him, to feel his body next to hers. She'd visited him many times over the past few months, but usually had little Alex with her. Tonight, however, with the trial so close, she wanted them to have some private time. She ached for him and had decided that no matter how she had to do it, she would have him tonight.

"I'm hard for you," he whispered in her ear. "Feel it?"

She pulled away and looked up into his face, thinner now, yet still handsome. The auburn dye job he'd given himself when he was on the run had almost grown out and there was now a lot more gray in his dark hair. He'd kept the beard and mustache, though, something they'd discussed and would probably have to talk about again. He like them, thought they gave him an air

of sophistication. She wasn't sure of that; she didn't mind the mustache, but the beard was questionable, although he did keep it short and neatly trimmed.

Holding her passion in check for the moment, Caroline, in a voice barely above a whisper, told him about Rich and Kevin's visit, leaving out nothing. "They acted like *I* was the enemy, somehow!"

"Don't be upset," he told her, still holding her close. "They're just doing their jobs. And we don't have to whisper, this room isn't wired for sound."

"I wouldn't be so sure," she flared, "I wouldn't put anything past Arcadia's finest."

Then he pushed her away and looked into her eyes, his gaze intense, almost brooding, "Were you honest with them...Kevin and Rich...about you and Wade?"

Caroline glared at him. "Yes. And I've been totally honest with you, too!" She felt color rise in her cheeks, felt angry all of a sudden, with him, with Kevin and Rich and especially with Neil Wade.

"Do you think they bought the rest of your story?" Victor pressed.

She noted that, in spite of his assurance that the room was not bugged, he kept his voice near a whisper. "Not for a second. They know there's more to this, they just can't fathom what."

Victor smiled sardonically. "Neither could you, at first."

Caroline felt her stomach clench. "What if Neil tells everything? He took photos..."

Victor pulled her close again, "If Wade had proof, we'd have all been on the front page of the tabloids months ago."

She relaxed a little in his arms.

"I'm still hard for you," he reminded her, pushing his erection into her abdomen.

"We're being watched, you know," she said softly, nodding toward the corner where the closed circuit camera was in plain sight.

"I can fix that," Victor said.

Recalling the lecherous way young Matt Dixon had looked at her, as well as the ogling she'd gotten from the rest of the squad room, Caroline said, "Allow me."

Grabbing one of the wooden chairs, she scooted it over to the corner, underneath the camera. She then stood on the seat, stripped off her top, revealing her voluptuous breasts, and flung the garment over the camera lens.

"That will be those keystone cops' thrill for the year," she stated.

On the other side of the room, Victor was wedging the back of one of the chairs under the doorknob, while Caroline did the same at the other door.

"Privacy, at last," Victor said with a smile.

He came to her, his eager lips seeking hers. The kiss, sent tendrils of desire through her as his leg pushed her thighs apart, causing the skirt to ride up even further. His lips nibbled at her throat, then moved to her breasts, licking at one nipple then the other until they throbbed with an ache that reached clear down into her sex. Like a hungry child suckling for nourishment, Victor pulled at her with his mouth, nipped with his teeth, licked with a tongue that felt hot as fire. She laced her fingers through his hair and held him there, as juices flowed down her legs and her body begged unmercifully for release. She could feel the heat of his erection against her abdomen, and when she finally unzipped the jumpsuit, he shrugged out of it effortlessly revealing that he wore no undershorts. His cock was slick with jism. "I want to taste you," she muttered, dropping to her knees and eagerly taking him into her mouth. She drank him in, savoring the taste as he held her head in place and thrust his hips forward.

Then, they were on the floor and she was on her back. Victor removed the skirt and tossed it aside. With no panties to complicate things, Victor quickly found her clit and pulled at it, coaxing it out, sending electric pulses through her body. Her skin tingled and her breath came in ragged gasps as he rolled over so that she was on top of him and

entered her with one savage thrust. As his cock raked up her thick, moist walls, she moaned his name over and over. Then she felt her own release as his orgasm began and she rode him until every bit of her strength seemed to be gone.

They had little time to bask in the afterglow of their lovemaking, since the guards were now banging on the door.

"Hey, you two, what the hell..." came one voice.

"I know what you're up to in there, we saw what you did to the camera!" shouted another.

Hurrying to get dressed, Caroline threw on her skirt and retrieved the sweater, waving in the camera lens and smiling widely at whoever might be watching. Then, just for good measure, she threw them a kiss.

In the meantime, Victor slipped back into his jumpsuit, took the chairs out from under the doorknobs and put them back around the table.

By the time the three guards finally got the doors open, Victor and Caroline were fully dressed, and sitting across from each other at the table holding hands.

Officer Matt Dixon, entering the room at a trot, stared at them for a moment, looked at the three guards, then smiled. "Those surely are some fine knockers you have there, Miss Thomas. We all agreed to that in the squad room right before you covered the camera up."

Irate, the other three grabbed Victor, put him back in shackles and dragged him from the room.

"I'll report your rough treatment to Mr. Kane's attorneys as soon as I get home," Caroline shouted after them.

Then, turning to the young officer, she said, "Thank you for the compliment and tell your colleagues I appreciate it, also." With that, she brushed past him and left the building.

In the parking lot, a voice out of the darkness startled Caroline and she whirled around to see a tall, slender young man approaching.

"Ms. Caroline Thomas?"

Fear gripping at her, Caroline turned to run, but the man was quick and stepped in front of her, thrusting a paper into her hand. "Consider yourself served," he said, before turning and walking away.

Confused now, Caroline hurried to her car, unlocked it, got in and turned on the overhead dome light. "What the fuck..." She was staring at a subpoena, stating that she was being called as a witness for the prosecution!

* * * *

Ben Walker had followed Caroline home, then to the city hall building. Hunching down in the front seat of his gray Chevy Lumina, he fought the cold

with a thermos of hot coffee. She'd gone into the building a half hour ago and was just now emerging. She was visiting Kane, as was her habit almost every day, but usually not this late.

He watched as she had some sort of confrontation with a man in the parking lot, was handed something, ran to her car, sat a moment then started the engine and pulled her Lexus out of the lot, heading toward Carver Avenue. *Going home no doubt.*

Turning the key in his own ignition he heard the engine come to life. Pulling out onto Main Street, he drove in the opposite direction, toward Oak Tree Lane.

chapter seven

“So tell me about her,” Talia said, as she and Lucas sat opposite one another at the kitchen table. For dinner she’d prepared baked chicken, candied yams and steamed green beans.

Lucas, who always ate like a ranch hand, speared his second chicken breast and put it on his plate. “She’s great. Smart, savvy, and she spotted that cruet in a flat-ass second. Only, she didn’t tell me right away, she waited until we were on our way downstairs then just mentioned it casually.”

Talia eyed him closely. “What does she look like?”

Lucas put down his fork and stared at her for a moment before replying, “Kind of plain. Ordinary. But she seems nice. We’ll have her over for dinner, then you’ll see.”

See what? That she’s no threat? God, how insecure I must have sounded. What’s she look like? Pitiful. Suddenly feeling a little sick at her stomach, Talia

pushed her plate away and took a sip of her tea.

"I got the plans back from the architect today on the shop expansion. They're great. I brought them home, if you're interested."

"Of course I'm interested. And, I guess I should meet this Rachel, so invite her for dinner," Talia replied, as a wave of nausea hit her and she felt the bile rise up in her throat. He was watching her closely and she felt her cheeks redden a little. "What?"

Lucas shrugged. "I don't know. You look different, somehow."

The wave passed and she felt relieved, almost elated. "That's because I had a successful day. I finally got that damned painting right. Thanks to Claire Fontaine."

"She was here?"

Talia nodded. "She brought Alex for a visit. He's so adorable. She has a good eye for art."

"And I have an eye for you," he said, adding, "Did I tell you that you look really sexy in that color?"

Talia got up and took her plate to the sink, dumping the remainder of its contents down the garbage disposal. Again, her stomach recoiled.

"Not hungry?" Lucas asked.

"Nervous, I guess. The trial and all..." she replied vaguely. When she turned around, he was behind her. She moved into his strong, muscular

arms and buried her face in his chest, letting his scent fill her senses. "I'm so scared."

His hands rubbed her back in slow, steady strokes. "We'll get through this. We've gone through worse. You go relax in the living room, I'll take care of everything out here."

She wasn't sure if she dozed off for a few minutes or an hour, but suddenly there he was beside her on the sofa and she felt safe and secure again. It was so good to be in his arms, savoring the aroma that was distinctly Lucas. Talia nestled against him in the dimly-lit living room. "It's snowing," she observed lazily, watching the gentle flakes fall outside the living room window.

"No heavy accumulation predicted, but we all know how that goes," he murmured, his lips brushing against her hair.

"But it really is beautiful right now." She snuggled closer, wrapping her arms around his waist, kissing the base of his throat, where dark curly chest hairs peeked out from the top of his partially-buttoned shirt. Now, Talia felt something close to contentment as she held her love, her Lucas. The frantic urgency that had brought on their explosive sexual encounters over the past few months was beginning to ebb. Tonight, she knew they would make love slowly, languidly, the way they used to before mating season had turned them into nothing more than... *animals*. The word

spiraled around in her brain like an unwelcome whirlwind. *But, basically, that's what we are, isn't it. Animals.*

"This is no time to question your humanness, Talia," Lucas said, as though reading her thoughts.

"You know me too well," she muttered.

"Look out there." He pointed toward the window. "The snow cleanses, make everything bright and new."

In the glow of a full moon and the flakes shown like diamonds as they floated slowly to the ground. She felt her muscles loosen as the tension seemed to flow from her, replaced by a rosy glow. Lucas rubbed her back, his strong, nimble fingers caressing her through the sweater. She could feel the heat of his touch, and savored it, wanting more, yet somehow content with just this. He nuzzled the top of her head, and when she lifted her face toward his, she was treated to a warm, soft, kiss that held the promise of more to come. She searched the inside of his mouth with her tongue, tasting the Merlot he'd had with dinner lingering there. She felt an urgency, yet knew there was no hurry; they had plenty of time, all night if they wanted it that way. She could sit here on the sofa, kissing him, touching him, watching the snow fall outside the window, for as long as she pleased. Talia felt a drowsy complacency come

over her and she sighed with contentment. She hadn't felt that in a long time. She wanted nothing more than to bask in this glow, enhanced by Lucas's masculine presence, forever.

Then, he gently pulled away. "Come with me." He stood up and held out his hand to her.

She looked up at him, unwilling to end the moment, and was again struck by the sheer sexual power of the man. Without asking why, she let him lead her through the kitchen, and out the back door into the night. They stood on the patio as the light, feathery snow landed silently all around them. The hedge running along the back of the property looked almost ghostly, as its spindly, leafless stalks cast black, shadowy tendrils on the fresh white blanket that now covered the ground.

"It's so quiet," Talia finally said, feeling less chilled now that Lucas stood behind her, his arms wrapped around her breasts, his body pressed close to hers.

"A wonder of nature. Just like us, Talia."

"Is that what we are? Wonders of nature? Some people would call us freaks."

"Then they're wrong. Look at this," he waved one hand at the vista before them. "We're part of this, just like every other living creature is part of it...human, wolf...what's the difference? We are who we are."

"The mating...the frenzy...it's passing..." she

began.

"I know," he said, turning her around and looking into her eyes. "Why do you think I'm trying so hard to seduce you?"

"Maybe I'll play hard to get," she countered, feeling her spirits lift.

"I always did love a challenge," Stepping back, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her toward the back door.

The cottage offered welcome warmth after the chill of the patio and when Lucas finally put her down, Talia rubbed her hands together and blew on them.

Then he took those hands in his and kissed them. "Cold hands, warm heart," he said, quoting the old adage.

"I'm freezing all of a sudden..." she began.

"I'll warm you up again," he told her, leading her through the living room and down the darkened hallway to their bedroom.

At the threshold, he hesitated, one hand fumbling around on the wall. As the lights barely came on, she realized he'd been looking for the dimmer switch. When Lucas finally stepped aside, Talia stood in the doorway, staring in awe at the scene before her. The white satin comforter on their bed was scattered with red rose petals, as was the floor. As she watched, Lucas took a matchbook from his pocket and began lighting

candles...everywhere candles—on the dresser, on the chest, on the night tables—white candles, giving off a glow that turned the room into a shimmering, beautiful dreamland. An ice bucket, holding a bottle of Champaign, was on the antique wash stand in the corner. Then soft, seductive music seemed to surround them. Lucas turned off the overhead light now so that the room was aglow with only candlelight, reflecting off the walls, the ceiling, and the mirror above the dresser. The French doors were closed, but the curtains had been pulled back, so that the glistening snowfall outside became part the magical scene

Talia walked slowly around the room, stopping beside the bed, where she scooped up a handful of the petals and inhaled their fragrance. “It’s like something out of a fairy tale,” she murmured, her heart beating faster, her skin tingling. “You amaze me,” she added simply, dropping the rose petals back onto the coverlet. When she turned around he was standing just out of reach, his body in a relaxed pose, the golden flecks in his eyes dancing in the candlelight. A lock of dark hair had fallen over his forehead, giving him a slightly roguish look. She felt her knees weaken at the sight of him, and her breath caught in her throat. *I feel like a heroine in one of those Victorian romance novels, all swoony and flushed.*

He moved toward her and her heart fluttering in her chest like a moth nearing a flame.

"May I have this dance?" he asked, bowing from the waist. His voice was low, almost guttural, like that first night months ago in the gallery, before she'd know who he was, and who she was.

And then she was in his arms, swaying in time to the music, a tune she knew yet could not place, hauntingly beautiful and so, so seductive.

His lips brushed her temple, then kissed that spot, tenderly, softly. "You are the most precious thing in my life, Talia. Nothing will ever change that."

She heard a touch of melancholy in his voice, and it tugged at her soul, bringing tears to her eyes. But, why? All of a sudden she wanted to cry, to weep for...what? "I love you, so much..." was all she could manage to whisper.

His body pressed against hers and she felt his need, felt the heat grow stronger by the second, and her own desire for him kept pace.

Suddenly her clothes seemed too heavy and she yearned to shed them, so she could feel his hands on her naked body, his lips on her breasts, his tongue slipping inside her core. When he finally stepped back and pulled the sweater over her head, she shook out her hair and just knew that the candlelight was dancing through it with wild

fiery abandon.

"You are magnificent," he told her, slipping her pants down.

He drew her to him and kissed her with a feverish intensity that set her body aflame with desire. Her juices flowed now, soaking the thong and running down the insides of her legs. As his tongue explored the farthest recesses of her mouth, she pulled at his shirt, urging him silently to undress. But he didn't make a move to break the embrace, so she fumbled with his zipper, which seemed reluctant to move. His hands were tangled in her hair now, pulling her closer so that it was impossible for her to undo anything he was wearing. Then he moved his lips down to the hollow of her throat and licked her skin lightly, sending chills up her spine. His muscular thigh suddenly pushed her legs apart and she felt the rough material against her bare skin. "Oh, yes, keep on doing that, God it's so good..." she muttered, while his lips traveled to one of her breasts and lingered there, teasing the skin around her nipple, yet never quite reaching it. At last she grabbed his hair and yanked his lips toward that nipple, the urgency fierce, the fire raging through her veins. Still he lingered in one spot, taking his time, making her crazy, twisting her insides into rigid knots. She rode his leg, sending spirals of warmth up her channel. Her body ached to feel

Lucas in there; everything inside of her cried out for satisfaction.

Then he released her and stepped back. Looking at her through eyes that shone with an almost predatory glow, he dropped to his knees, pulled down her thong and buried his face between her legs lapping at her, his tongue finally finding her throbbing clit. She held his head there, oh it felt so good, so good! "I can't hold out much longer...I can't," she moaned. Lucas got up just as she felt herself about to go over the brink, and again picked her up in his arms. Kicking her slacks and thong off of her ankles, she allowed him to lay her down on the bed of roses he'd created. The petals felt cool and smooth against her back and buttocks and her senses were overcome with the sweet, almost heady, aroma.

"You look like an angel lying there," His voice was husky with emotion.

"My thoughts aren't very angelic," she managed to say through lips dry as sandpaper.

Then he peeled off his shirt, exposing his muscular chest and the tangle of dark hair. She let her eyes wander slowly down to his pants and the bulge there. A dark circle of jism was spreading quickly on the material. As he unzipped, his cock sprang free and she felt her mouth water. Licking her lips slowly, Talia met his gaze, only to find that half-smile she loved so much forming at the

corners of his mouth. She called it his devil-grin, because combined with his goatee, it gave his face a movie-villain look. "You're driving me crazy, Lucas," she finally said.

Then he was lying beside her, holding her in his arms, caressing her hair, her neck, her breasts, and finally the spot between her legs that waited hungrily for his touch. She fondled him in return—his back, his chest, his groin, then finally his cock, as it seemed to throb in tandem with her own wild heartbeat. "I want to taste you," she murmured. She took the full length of him in her mouth, sucking hard, then relaxing the pressure, then sucking again. Over and over, she licked his shaft, feeling the thick, bulging veins as they pumped blood there. She drank his jism savoring the tangy taste of him.

"Now," he moaned, lifting her up and rolling her onto her back. Even before his cock slid inside of her, she could feel his climax as though it were her own, and as she teetered, then fell over into the abyss with him, she hung on tightly, her body out of control, her head throbbing with the sheer intensity of the orgasm.

Out of breath, panting wildly, Talia opened her eyes, to find Lucas propped up on one elbow, hovering over her. Now his hair was in wild disarray and she reached up and tousled it even more, then smiled. "You're evil."

"And you love it," he replied, smoothing back a stray lock of her hair.

"I love you, I know that."

He got up and she watched him walk to the wash stand and take the bottle of Champaign out of the ice bucket. Once he popped the cork, Lucas poured the sparkling liquid into two stemmed glasses and brought them back to the bed.

Talia sat up and took the glass he held out to her.

"To celebrate," Lucas said, with a smile she thought looked a little secretive. He tilted his glass toward her in a toast.

Clinking her glass against his, she watched him take a sip. "Celebrate what?"

"Say yes," he said. He set their glasses on the night table.

Mystified, she stared at him, not quite sure how to respond. "Yes?"

"Good, then I didn't waste my money," he replied, opening the night table drawer and withdrawing a small, black velvet box.

Talia felt her pulse quicken as he opened the lid and exposed an exquisite diamond solitaire ring. Pear shaped and set in gold, it reflected the candlelight like a prism, throwing off a rainbow of colors "My God, Lucas!" she exclaimed, her hands trembling.

He took the ring out of the box and slipped it

on her finger. "Yes?"

She didn't need to think about it. How could he have thought for a moment she would? "It's amazing. You're amazing. I love you so much..." Her voice shook with emotion. She held up her hand, admiring the way it looked, her heart full of joy and love and hope—yes hope—for a normal future with this man who was her soul mate.

"The wedding bands are in the dresser," he told her. "Plain gold. That okay?"

Unable to speak, she merely nodded and then she was in his arms and they were making love again.

chapter eight

When Caroline pulled open the heavy wooden door and entered Courtroom A, she found herself in a high-ceilinged room with ivory walls and dark blue carpet. She'd stolen in here early to take a look around, to get a feel for the place. She now stood in an aisle that separated the two sections of the spectators' gallery. There were six rows of padded benches on either side. Straight ahead in the middle of the room was a podium. Next to it was a sturdy looking wooden table. Beyond those was the judge's bench and next to it the witness stand. She walked down the aisle and stood near the podium. To her right were two more wooden tables. *One for the defense attorneys, one for the prosecutors.* On her left was the jury box. *Soon, twelve people will sit there and hold Victor's fate in their hands.* She felt her stomach lurch as she thought about that and about the crowd waiting outside to occupy the spectators' seats. *Curious onlookers, reporters and witnesses.*

"Not a very warm looking place, is it?" came a voice from behind her.

Caroline whirled around and faced a petite looking woman with reddish-blond hair and smoky green eyes. She was dressed immaculately in a gray silk suit and navy blouse. She carried a leather attaché case.

"I'm sorry...I just wanted to see where..." Caroline stammered.

"I know who you are Ms. Thomas. So let me introduce myself. I'm Assistant District Attorney Brianna Hadley."

One of the prosecutors. Great. Then Rich and Kevin's revelations about this woman and her history with the prosecutor, Deacon Hunt, came to mind and Caroline said, "Well, I wish I could say it was nice to meet you, but I'd be lying."

Brianna Hadley gave Caroline a cold stare. "We wouldn't want that. After all, Ms. Thomas, lying in court is against the law, isn't it?"

Caroline inflected her voice with anger. "Why am I being called to testify for the prosecution?"

Brianna Hadley walked past Caroline toward one of the tables. "I'm not obligated to discuss that with you, Ms. Thomas. You'll obviously be a hostile witness."

"You've got that right!" Caroline turned and exited the room. She checked her watch. *Eight fifteen. I've got forty-five minutes until court convenes.*

Outside, the newspaper reporters were waiting to get inside, while television crews set up equipment, preparing to cover the comings and goings of those involved in the case. Turning around, Caroline headed for the glassed-in atrium where beautiful flowers bloomed indoors against a backdrop of the snow still visible on the other side of the large windows. She knew it was cold out there, but the sun was shining, giving the brisk morning at least the illusion of some warmth.

"They're like vultures," Talia stormed, coming down the hallway toward Caroline. "Lucas and I barely got in here with our lives."

Caroline turned around and felt the tears begin. Going to Talia, she flung herself into the other woman's arms and wept.

"Be strong...we both need to be strong..." Talia told her in a quivering voice that did little to bolster Caroline's courage.

Finally Caroline pulled away. "Did they let you see him?"

Talia shook her head. "He's getting dressed for court."

Then Caroline looked at Talia's left hand and saw the ring. "My God! Is that what I think it is?"

Talia smiled, "It is."

"It's gorgeous. I'm happy for you, Talia....for both of you..." Caroline told her.

"I hope my father will feel the same way," Talia

said doubtfully.

Caroline knew better, but just nodded and smiled. "He'll adjust to the idea."

"With your help, maybe."

"Count on it," Caroline promised.

Lucas joined them, his face a mask of anger. "The police are out there now doing crowd control. Lazy bastards...just sitting on their asses until I raised hell!"

"We'd better go into the courtroom," Talia told them.

The feeling of dread that had been nestling in the pit of Caroline's stomach for weeks now swelled into her chest, enveloping her entire being, making it almost impossible for her to breathe or even think.

chapter nine

When Talia followed Lucas and Caroline into the courtroom, she saw that there were two people at the prosecutor's table.

"The woman is Brianna Hadley, the assistant prosecutor. I ran into her earlier," Caroline whispered.

Lucas motioned them to seats about halfway down on the left.

Talia briefly appraised the woman then shifted her gaze to the man occupying the other chair. He was tall and looked to be in his mid forties, with a fringe of close-cropped dark brown hair around an otherwise bald head. As if sensing her eyes upon him, he turned and fixed her in place with an icy-cold green stare. She shivered involuntarily.

"You okay?" Lucas asked.

She nodded, tearing her gaze away from the man's, but not before she noted the sneer that curled up the corners of his lips. *Cocky and cruel.* Her stomach cramped and she felt bile rise up in

her throat. Fighting the nausea, she closed her eyes for a few seconds, willing the feeling to pass, which it did.

Suddenly, people began to pour into the courtroom and the remaining spectator seats were quickly filled. Next to enter were Kevin and Rich, Victor's attorneys. With a quick glance around the room, they smiled at Talia, Lucas and Caroline, ignored the prosecutors and took their place at the defense table, one on either side of the third chair.

That's where my father will sit. Between his lawyers. On trial for murder. My father. Talia felt her eyes well up with tears. Glancing over at Caroline she saw that she, too, was trying very hard to keep her emotions in check. When Lucas slid his hand over Talia's, she clung to it like a drowning person clutching a life preserver. Then, another door opened and a woman came in carrying a small machine, which she set on a stand near the judge's bench. The court reporter had arrived. Next, the same door opened and twelve people filed into the jury box, accompanied by the bailiff.

"Oh, God," Caroline whispered, her voice shaking.

Talia followed her gaze and found herself looking straight into her father's eyes as he was escorted into the courtroom.

The beard was gone and only a neatly trimmed mustache remained. His salt and pepper hair was

cut short and he was wearing a navy blue suit, white shirt and dark red tie.

"He looks like a politician," Lucas quipped in a whisper.

Talia felt herself begin to breathe again and, in spite of the tension in the air, she managed to smile at Victor as he was led to the defense table.

Caroline reached over and took Talia's other hand. "I picked out the tie," she said, throwing Lucas a don't-you-dare-say-another-word look.

Comic relief, Talia thought, as she had the overwhelming desire to giggle hysterically at Lucas's remark.

When a door near the judge's bench opened, a short, bald man with brown eyes and a florid complexion walked brusquely to the bench and sat down. Talia guessed he was somewhere in his early sixties.

"Hear all Ye present, this court is now in session, the Honorable Abel Russo presiding!" called the bailiff, and a hush fell over the crowd.

By lunch time eight jurors had been approved. This seemed to please Judge Russo, who recessed with the comment that he saw no reason why the remaining four could not be selected by the close of the day. Before he banged the gavel, he eyed Deacon Hunt and Brianna Hadley severely and threw an even more pointed look Rich and Kevin's way.

chapter ten

Caroline flew into Victor's arms the minute the door to the interview room closed. Rich and Kevin, looking equally uncomfortable, stood off to the side while the couple kissed.

"Talia and Lucas are outside. We each get a few minutes to visit with you," Caroline told him.

"You look sexy enough to eat," Victor whispered in her ear. "I love you in red. It's your color."

Caroline smoothed down the red silk suit she'd chosen for the first day of the trial. She wore minimal jewelry, just a pair of diamond stud earrings and a watch.

"I'm so frightened..." she began.

Victor put an index finger to her lips to stop the words. "I'm not. And I don't want you to be, either. Think of Alex, our son. I have no intention of missing out on his life."

His gaze, dark and intense, held hers, drawing her in, giving her strength. She'd scanned the

visitors section for Neil Wade, but had found no sign of him, much to her relief. He probably wouldn't show up until it was time for him to testify, anyway. But was he in town? Would she run into him, or, worse yet, would he come by the gallery looking for her?

As though reading her mind, Victor said, "He won't come near you. That prick, Hunt, will warn him to stay away, so don't worry."

Shocked, Caroline gaped up at Victor. "I wasn't...I don't want him to..."

Victor's smile seemed bittersweet. "Of course not. But if you should see him, don't talk to him, understand?"

Rich stepped forward. "Wade *is* in town."

Eavesdropper, Caroline wanted to shout. Instead, she asked, "Where?" She got the answer she dreaded.

"He's staying at Arcadian Ridge, in the same unit he occupied before," Kevin put in, his voice somber.

Unit 117. Panic surged through Caroline like a white hot poker. "No! He can't. That's not..."

Victor forced her to look into his face by grabbing both of her arms and turning her around toward him. "Listen to me! If he comes near you, call Kevin or Rich at once. He's a prosecution witness and has no business bothering you. Understand?"

Caroline exchanged glances with Rich and Kevin, then said, "So am I, Victor."

Victor's face turned nearly ashen. "What?" He tore his gaze from Caroline's to Kevin's, then to Rich's. "What the hell is she talking about?"

"We just found out this morning. That dickhead, Hunt, has subpoenaed her." Kevin finally said.

Victor began pacing the floor. "Why? What is he..."

Then he looked at Caroline, and she could see he knew exactly why. He searched her face for what seemed like ages and she felt perspiration break out on her forehead and upper lip. Then he pulled her into his arms whispering very softly into her ear, "Don't betray me, Caroline."

* * * *

"Four men and four women, not bad for a start," Lucas observed, standing with his arms folded across his muscular chest as Talia clung to her father.

Pulling away from Victor, Talia faced Rich and Kevin. "I hate that prosecutor, he's a conceited, arrogant bastard."

"Well, if it's any consolation, Judge Russo can't stand his ass either," Kevin said with relish.

"Don't be so cocky," Rich interjected, "he doesn't like us any better."

Ignoring the two attorneys, Talia looked closely at Victor. "Are you all right? Really, all right?"

Victor glanced toward Lucas, then walked Talia toward a far corner. "Keep an eye on Caroline. She's under a lot of stress..."

"And?" Talia asked, waiting.

"Neil Wade is staying in that condo in her complex again."

"God, Dad, you don't think she'd..."

Victor shook his head. "Not really, but I don't trust Wade. He saw everything that night we had it out with the Stewarts."

Talia's insides twisted into a knot again. "We can't do anything about his testimony...we can't control what he'll say up there on the stand. Besides this trial has nothing to do with what happened that night."

Lucas joined them. "Secret pow-wow?"

Briefly Talia told him about Neil.

"I don't think he's going to say a thing about what he saw," Lucas said, keeping his voice low.

"Oh, and why not," Victor scoffed.

"He's a journalist. If he was going to spill the beans, he'd have done it by now."

"I've wondered about that myself. Why didn't he write the story?" Victor said.

Talia nudged both men, indicating that Rich

and Kevin were about to join them.

"Time's up, boys and girls. We need to get some lunch into our client and ourselves before we go back for round two," Kevin announced.

* * * *

By five o'clock that afternoon a jury consisting of seven men and five women had been sworn in. Talia wasn't exactly thrilled with the choices, but she supposed it could be worse.

"Well, I must say this went much more smoothly than I expected," Judge Russo said from the bench. "Let's just hope the rest of these proceedings go as well. Do you think that can be accomplished, Mr. Hunt...do you think you and your...assistant, there, can begin presenting your case tomorrow morning?"

"The prosecution is ready, Your Honor," Deacon Hunt snapped.

Talia saw Brianna Hadley's face turn scarlet and felt sorry for the woman, but only briefly.

Then, the judge fixed his gaze on the defense table's occupants "And how about you two ladies? Are you ready to tango?"

Talia was appalled at the degrading way the pompous little man spoke to Rich and Kevin, but they seemed to be taking it in stride.

Rich stood. "The defense is ready, Your Honor."

Kevin stood next. "And thank you, Your Honor, for bringing your rapier wit into the courtroom. As always, you manage to end the day on a light, amusing note. It just sends everyone home in a better mood."

Russo glared at Kevin for a moment and was met by a wide smile. "Court's adjourned until nine o'clock tomorrow morning," he finally said, rapping the gavel so hard that several of the jurors and spectators nearly jumped out of their seats.

chapter eleven

When Caroline drove into Arcadian Ridge that evening, her thoughts were on Victor and the next day in court. Then, her glance drifted across the courtyard and she slammed on her brakes. There was a light on in Unite 117. *Neill! He's here.*

Then she saw the front door open and saw a man silhouetted in the doorway. Her heart racing, she jammed her foot on the accelerator and pulled around behind her building. Memories of how she'd met Neil Wade—the fender bender at the front gate of the complex—came rolling back. She was convinced now that he'd purposely bumped her car as a way of meeting her. *Bastard!*

She hurried in the back door slamming it soundly behind her. He wouldn't dare try to approach her. Would he?

Claire turned from the stove, staring incredulously her way. "Are you all right?"

"Where's Alex?" Caroline shot, looking around.

"In bed. Asleep. Why?"

Caroline stared at Claire, noting the look of alarm on the older woman's face. Sighing deeply, she tried to smile. "I...I'm sorry. I'm fine. It was just a nerve-wracking day, that's all."

Claire poured boiling water into a mug and opened a packet of herbal tea. "This is Chamomile, it will help." She put the steaming brew on the table.

Caroline flung her purse on the counter and sat down. "Oh, God, Claire. It was awful...seeing Victor sitting there like that...knowing he could go to prison for..."

"I've made some homemade vegetable soup. I want you to eat some. No arguments. And, I have another suggestion," Claire ladled the soup into a deep bowl and brought it to the table, along with some saltines.

Sipping at the tea, Caroline found herself beginning to relax. The rich fragrance of the soup filled her nostrils and she realized she was hungry. "What suggestion?" she asked. She tried a taste of the soup, then another.

"I think I should stay the night. You're exhausted and if Alex wakes up, you won't be disturbed. In fact, I'm willing to stay over for as long as you need me."

Gratitude rushed through Caroline almost making her weak. She'd dreaded being alone

tonight, especially with Neil Wade right across the courtyard. "That would be wonderful. I'll pay you extra..."

"No you won't," Claire protested firmly. "I'm glad to do it. I brought an overnight bag this morning, just in case. Now, I'm glad I did."

With her mind more at ease, Caroline ate the rest of her soup while Claire went upstairs to check on Alex.

* * * *

"Not hungry?" Lucas asked.

Talia glanced across the table at him and shrugged.

They'd picked up Chinese on the way home from court. Not Lucas's favorite fare but he knew Talia liked it. "Oh, I meant to tell you, I have to go by the bank tomorrow morning and sign some more papers for the loan. Then I'm meeting briefly with the architect. How about looking at the architect's plans tonight...I'd like your opinion..."

Talia interrupted with, "My father is on trial for murder, Lucas. Don't you think that should be our first priority right now?"

He stared at her for a moment, then put his fork down and leaned forward, both elbows on the table. "I just thought it might be a good idea to

talk about something else for a while, to help take your mind off the trial."

"You think it's that easy? This is my father!" she snapped.

"I realize that, Talia," Lucas said, his own patience running short, "but I think you need to remember that Victor and I are not exactly allies, never have been. My loyalty is to you...you are my first priority. Just keep in mind that what I'm going to do is for *you*, not *him*."

What you're going to do and what I'm going to do – God, it has to work. Talia got up. "I'm tired. I'm going to bed." With that, she left the kitchen.

Letting out a long, weary breath, Lucas decided not to follow her. When he entered the bedroom a half hour later, he found Talia lying in bed, still awake.

"I guess I'll approve the final plans, since you have no interest in seeing them. I'll be in court as soon as I can." Lucas snapped. When she didn't respond, he went to the bathroom, peed, brushed his teeth and rinsed off his face. Returning to the bedroom, he found her standing by the French doors, staring out into the night.

"Do you ever miss it, Lucas?" she asked quietly.

He knew what she meant. Going up behind her he stood close but didn't touch her. "The hunt? The pack?"

She nodded.

Finally, he put one hand on her bare shoulder. She leaned back against him and he felt her warmth. "Sometimes," he replied honestly.

"I feel like there are still things about myself I haven't rediscovered...missing puzzle pieces." Talia told him.

Lucas felt disquiet stir within him. "Like what?"

She chuckled, "Well, if I knew that, I'd know everything, wouldn't I?"

He smiled, burying his face in her thick, luxuriant hair. "You feel so good, smell so good..."

She turned and kissed his lips quickly, then climbed back into bed. "Hold me. Tell me we're doing the right thing," she said.

He wanted to offer her that reassurance, but how could he? At this point things were just too precarious to predict what would happen.

Finally she pulled away and sat up, snapping on the light. "Go get the plans. I really do want to see them. You're right, we have to go on with our lives." When he didn't move, she shooed him with a hand gesture. "Now, Mr. Knight. Don't you know it isn't nice to keep a lady waiting?"

* * * *

Caroline lay awake in the dark staring at toward the bedroom ceiling. Sleep would not come, no

matter how much she willed it to do so. Alex hadn't even awakened when she went to give him a goodnight kiss. He looked so peaceful, so carefree, lying in his crib, his thumb in his mouth. Her little angel. Her son.

Suddenly she sensed she was not alone. She felt his presence before she saw the dark shape moving toward the bed. He moved slowly, stealthily, yet, she felt no fear. She knew that body. Victor. He slid into bed, his hand finding her breast, teasing her nipple until it swelled, became hard and ached with need. His other hand caressed her thigh with slow, gentle strokes, and she spread her legs, inviting him inside, willing him there.

"You knew I'd come to you," he whispered, his breath warm against the side of her neck, his scent spicy, almost pungent.

She reached for him, felt his body warmth against her skin, then his erection. Closing her hand around it, she moaned with pleasure.

* * * *

Victor lay in his bed, sweat soaked, his penis hard as a rock. "Caroline?" he murmured into the darkness. He felt her soft flesh next to his, her breasts pressing against his side. He reached over and squeezed her nipple and it responded by

hardening between his fingers.

Turning toward her he ran his hand between her thighs and she spread her legs giving him access to her warm, moist cunt. He played there, stroking her clit and she moaned as it throbbed in response to his teasing.

"There will never be anyone else for me, but you," he whispered, as she grabbed his cock.

* * * *

Caroline awoke with a start, disoriented, confused. Her right hand was on her breast and her left one between her legs, vigorously pulling at her clit. The orgasm began and she savagely tugged at her nipple as the muscles of her vagina contracted violently. Perspiration soaked the sheets as her body convulsed. When it was over she sat up, drawing her knees up to her chest and wept. A dream. Victor hadn't been here...it had only been a dream.

* * * *

Victor's climax began with Caroline's touch and ended with his own hand pumping his dick in the loneliness of his small jail cell. Perspiration covered his body and his breathing was ragged and irregular.

What the hell. A dream? Just a dream? No! It was so real...I could actually feel her, smell her.

His thoughts returned to Caroline and he drifted into an uneasy, restless sleep.

chapter twelve

As it had been on the day before, Courtroom A was packed.

Caroline and Talia had gotten there early again, only this time the police were running interference with the media outside, so they were able to get inside with minimal problems.

Talia, wearing an emerald green knit dress, had her hair tied back. Caroline had chosen a black suit and red blouse. They sat in the second row, on the side near the defense table.

Deacon Hunt and Brianna Hadley were already seated at the prosecutor's table, conferring in low tones. Talia, even with her acute hearing couldn't pick up any of what they were saying, however.

Rich and Kevin, spotting the two women, got up and came their way. Talia prayed things would go as planned.

"The prosecution is going to have a short, sweet case. I'm sure you'll get called today. Just stay calm and remember what we discussed," Kevin

told Caroline, also throwing a look Talia's way.

Then one of the side doors opened and Rich said, "They're bringing Victor in, let's get seated. He patted Caroline's hand. "It will be all right. I promise. We know what we're doing."

Talia caught her father's eye as he walked by and wished Lucas was here for support. Suddenly, Caroline grabbed her hand. Following her gaze, Talia saw Neil Wade enter the courtroom and take a seat on the other side of the aisle.

"Dear God," Caroline muttered.

"Easy," Talia said her voice shaking a little in spite of her resolve to remain strong.

Then, Judge Abel Russo entered, and court was in session.

Deacon Hunt's opening statement was brief, less than five minutes. He told the jury that the prosecution would prove that Victor Kane had motive and opportunity to kill the victim, also citing the fact that the defendant was "on the lam" for weeks and if he was innocent, why did he do that? "Jealousy is a powerful motive...one that often leads to murder, as it did on that fateful night when Victor Kane struck down Craig Lynch, ending his life," Hunt finished, a somber look on his face.

Talia tried to gauge the jury's reaction, but their faces revealed nothing, although she did notice one man taking notes.

When Judge Russo told the defense to make its opening statement.

Rich rose. "We're waving opening statement, your honor."

Murmurs erupted and Russo banged the gavel. "No opening statement?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

Instead of answering, Rich sat down and stared at the judge.

Throwing the defense attorney a wry glance, Russo snapped, "As you wish." Then turning his attention to the prosecutors he said, "Proceed, Mr. Hunt."

The first prosecution witness was the medical examiner, Dr. Arleen Reynolds, who explained the extent of Craig Lynch's injuries, including his findings that the man had died of a blow to the head with a rock that was found near the body.

At this point the rock, which was now sealed inside a clear evidence bag, was introduced by Deacon Hunt, who waved it in front of the jury. Smears of blood coated the inside of the bag and Talia noted that several of the jurors grimaced in distaste.

After that, the medical examiner also testified that some sort of animal, possibly a wild dog or wolf had mutilated Craig Lynch's body.

When it was time to cross examine the man, Rich got up and slowly approached the witness

stand. Talia watched as Dr. Reynolds shifted in his seat and crossed his hands over his ample middle.

"Were there any fingerprints on that rock?" Rich asked, his tone abrupt. He pointed at the object, which now lay on the evidence table.

"Well, with an irregular, jagged surface such as that one..." His eyes darted to the rock and back.

"Just answer the question," Rich interrupted.

The man cleared his throat. "No."

"I see. Tell me, could this fatal wound have just as easily happened if the victim had fallen, let's say trying to escape an animal attack, and hit his head?"

The medical examiner looked uncomfortable, then finally said, "The angle of the blow indicated..."

Rich interrupted, "A man is running for his life, he falls...who knows what position he's in when he takes that fall...the angle could be almost anything, wouldn't you say? I mean can you be that certain, given the other...injuries and uncertain circumstances, just how that blow was *really* delivered?"

"Well the rock had been dislodged from its original resting place..."

"And found less than a foot from the victim. That easily could have happened as he fell against it or during the ensuing animal attack or as a combination of both..."

Deacon Hunt jumped up, "Objection, Your Honor, defense counsel is testifying. Is there a question for this witness in there somewhere, because I sure didn't hear one!"

"Sustained. Ask a specific question or move on, counselor."

Rich smiled. "I have no further questions for this witness, Your Honor."

The second prosecution witness called was Detective Paul Muncie. Dressed in a navy blue suit, the short, balding man took a seat in the leather-upholstered chair.

Talia looked on in distaste as Deacon Hunt strutted toward Muncie, who stared at the prosecutor with the same deadpan expression she remembered so well from her dealings with him.

After Paul Muncie stated his name and occupation, Deacon Hunt asked, "You investigated the death of Craig Lynch, am I correct, Detective Muncie?"

"Me and my partner, Stanley Reed."

"In the course of that investigation you questioned Lucas Knight, Talia Coe and Caroline Thomas, am I correct?"

"Yes."

Hunt produced several pieces of paper. "I'd like to introduce copies of these police reports made by Detectives Muncie and Reed into evidence, Your Honor."

"So documented," Russo replied, once he'd examined them.

The reports were placed on the evidence table.

Hunt continued, "Detective Muncie, I want you to tell the court about one particular event that occurred during that investigation. Did you go Talia Coe's cottage on July 23rd?"

"Yes. We found Lucas Knight there, also. So we attempted to question them both."

"Attempted?"

"During the course of our questioning, Lucas Knight struck me and made a run for it, toward the woods. Minutes later, Ms. Coe followed him."

"What did you do?" Hunt raised his eyebrows as though in astonishment then glanced significantly at the jury.

"Reed and I followed them. When we got to the edge of the woods, Ms. Thomas came stumbling out, half dressed, hysterical."

"Caroline Thomas?" Hunt asked.

"Yes. I proceeded to go into the woods where I found Lucas Knight and Talia Coe. They were naked."

Several spectators gasped and Talia felt her face burn with embarrassment. "That son of a bitch," she muttered.

Caroline took her hand and held it tight.

"Naked?" Hunt repeated.

Muncie replied, "That's right. Mr. Knight was

pretty beaten up, had cuts and bruises."

"Did you ask him what happened?"

"He said that Victor Kane had killed Craig Lynch and tried to kill him and Ms. Coe."

Talia felt tears burning her cheeks. She looked at the jury and saw the horror in their eyes.

"No more questions," Hunt snapped as he returned to the prosecutor's table.

Kevin rose slowly and eyed Muncie carefully as he walked toward the witness stand. "Did you believe him, Detective?"

Obviously surprised, Muncie said, "Pardon?"

"Was my question unclear, Detective? I asked, did you believe what Lucas Knight told you?"

"Well, he said it..." Muncie started.

"That's not what I asked though, is it?" Kevin smiled, then leaned against the railing separating him from the witness. "Isn't it true that you told him not to insult your intelligence? Isn't it true that the reason you were there at the cottage questioning Mr. Knight and Ms. Coe was because you found out that Craig Lynch had been putting the moves on Ms. Coe and Mr. Knight found out and was furious with him? In fact, there's reference to it in one of your reports, if I'm not mistaken."

Muncie seemed to be suddenly uncomfortable. "We pursued lots of leads trying to solve the case..."

"What did Ms. Thomas say to you when she came running out of the woods?" Kevin asked.

Muncie hesitated. "She was incoherent..."

"What did she say?" Kevin pressed.

"She was babbling about wolves," Muncie finally responded.

"No more questions," Kevin said abruptly and returned to the defense table and sat down.

Talia felt a stab of satisfaction as Kevin glanced her way.

"The prosecution calls Neil Wade to the stand," Deacon Hunt intoned.

Caroline jumped and gasped. Talia tightened her grip on the woman's hand. When she looked his way, Neil was staring at Caroline, his cobalt-blue eyes intense, his expression grim.

"Oh Lord, here we go," Talia said.

After Neil was sworn in and stated his name for the record, Deacon Hunt asked, "What was your connection to Craig Lynch?"

"He was my best friend. We went to college together at Ohio Northern. We were roommates and frat brothers."

"When was the last time you heard from your friend?" Hunt asked.

"The week before he was killed, Craig wrote to me. He said he didn't trust the security of his phone or e mail. He said he was onto the story of the century and didn't want anyone to find out

until he had all the proof he needed to go public."

"Any idea what the subject of this story was?"

"No, but he did mention Caroline Thomas. He said she was instrumental in putting him onto it. And he said it involved Victor Kane. He said Kane was at the center of it and that he was involved in something up to his neck."

Murmurs could be heard in the courtroom and Talia heard Caroline exhale slowly.

"After Mr. Lynch was murdered, did you then come to Arcadia and sub lease a condo in Arcadian Ridge where Caroline Thomas lives?"

"Yes. I wanted to find out what really happened to Craig."

"Did you make the acquaintance of Caroline Thomas?"

Neil hesitated and Talia noted that he at least had the good grace to blush a little. "Yes."

"In the course of your *own* investigation, did you form an opinion about Craig Lynch's murder?"

Rich and Kevin jumped up in unison.

"Objection, Your Honor," cried Rich.

"Calls for speculation and the witness is *not* a police officer," Kevin shouted.

Judge Russo banged the gavel. "Settle down, gentlemen. No one said he was a police officer." Then, looking at Deacon Hunt, he said, "I'll allow it."

Neil cleared his throat and seemed to be choosing his words very carefully. "I found no proof, but I...I couldn't help but conclude that it somehow revolved around Victor Kane..."

"No more questions." Deacon Hunt said curtly.

Rich marched up to the witness stand and slapped a hand on the railing. "Where is this letter you received from Craig Lynch? I didn't see it introduced as evidence."

Neil shifted slightly in his seat. "I lost it."

Rich's eyebrows shot up and he glanced at the jury then back at Neil. "How handy."

"It didn't happen on purpose, I can assure you of that. I thought I'd put it in a folder with some other papers I was saving, but when I went back to retrieve it before coming to Arcadia, I couldn't find it. I don't know..."

Rich's mouth curved up in a near-sneer. "You can produce no letter from Craig Lynch, yet, you showed up here. Let me tell you how I see it: you're a wannabe novelist, stuck in a dead-end job as a reporter for a small-time newspaper. Then, as luck would have it, you happen to read that an old buddy of yours has been murdered. Oh yes, Mr. Wade, that story made all the news services...even the ones in your town. We checked. Caroline Thomas is mentioned, as are Lucas Knight, Talia Coe and, of course, the suspect, Victor Kane. All the elements of a best seller, if you can get the

inside scoop. And who better to get that from than the lover of the murder suspect! Quite a career maker, I'd say. Your ticket from obscurity to the best seller list. So, you come here and zero in on Caroline Thomas first thing...you seduce her and when she finally learns that you came here under false pretenses, you disappear."

Hunt was on his feet, "Is there a question in there somewhere Your Honor?"

"Move it along Mr. Adkins," Russo said.

"Isn't it true, Mr. Wade that your coming to Arcadia had more to do with getting hold of that story than finding out what happened to your so-called *best* friend?" Rich asked.

"If that's the case, where's the book, Mr. Adkins? Why didn't I write it?" Neil replied.

Rich raised an eyebrow. "You tell me? Could it be there was no letter to begin with?"

"I told you..." Neil began.

Rich cut him off with, "Yes, you *told* us, but you can't seem to *show* us. Just like the prosecution can't seem to *prove* that Craig Lynch's death was any more than a tragic accident in the woods."

Deacon Hunt leapt up and yelled, "Objection!"

"No more questions, Your Honor," Rich said complacently as he walked slowly back to the defense table.

Talia watched as Deacon Hunt started to say something else, but Brianna Hadley put a hand on

his arm, whisper something to him and he sat down.

When Neil Wade left the stand and walked up the aisle toward the exit, she noticed that Caroline didn't look his way, and he didn't look at her.

"The prosecution calls Caroline Thomas."

"Stay calm," Talia told Caroline as she watched the woman rise shakily to her feet and advance toward the stand.

* * * *

Seated and sworn in, Caroline stated her full name for the record, all the time keeping her gaze locked with Victor's.

"I request that the court allow me to treat Ms. Thomas as a hostile witness, Your Honor," Hunt stated.

"Request granted," Russo said.

"You are Victor Kane's lover?" Hunt asked sharply, making it sound more like an accusation than question.

Caroline felt her stomach lurch and her pulse hammered loudly in her ears. "Yes. He's also the father of my child."

"Well, you answered my next question before I asked it. If this keeps up things should move along quickly, Ms. Thomas."

"Let's hope so," Caroline shot back, bringing

several chuckles from the spectators and smiles from a few jurors.

"What was your connection to Craig Lynch?"

"I was working with him on a project."

Hunt seemed surprised and Caroline smiled inwardly. Since she was being called as a hostile witness, there'd been no prepping by the prosecution and Caroline had not been obligated to meet with them beforehand.

"What sort of project?"

"I asked him to find out the connection between Victor and Talia Coe. I was jealous. I thought they were lovers. Turns out Victor was Talia's father and Lucas was her lover, only Talia didn't know them because she'd had a head injury and suffered from amnesia. I can't tell you how silly I felt once I learned the truth." She glanced at the jury with a sheepish look on her face and was pleased to see their response. The women showed complete understanding in their eyes, the three older men looked at her as though they'd like to pat her hand in a fatherly way and say "It's all right my dear", while the younger men ogling her cleavage. When she glanced back at Deacon Hunt she was equally happy to see that she had taken some of the wind out of his sails by openly admitting her connection to Craig. And, she didn't miss the way Victor was suppressing a smile.

"Did you see Victor Kane the night Craig Lynch

was killed?"

"I did. He stayed the night at my place."

"He was there all night?"

"I just said as much."

"He couldn't have slipped out at some point?"

"Why would he do that?"

"To kill Craig Lynch, perhaps?"

"Victor and I have a habit of...well...you know..." Caroline spaced her words carefully. Again she glanced at the jury, meeting one of the younger men's eyes and seeing there that he could well imagine a man wanting to stay with her all night.

"No, I don't know, Ms. Thomas, so why don't you tell me and the court."

"We like to make love often...during the night. That night was no different," Technically, it wasn't a lie. She thought about waking up to find him gone, then his sudden reappearance and the erotic shower they'd shared.

"You must have slept at some point."

"Off and on. Mostly off," she said and again chuckles could be heard.

Deacon Hunt threw a sharp look the jury's way. "Back to Craig Lynch. Isn't it true that you and Mr. Lynch were more than just...friends?"

"That's absurd!" Caroline felt her cheeks flush.

"Why? You were obviously cozy with him. Isn't it true that Victor Kane suspected you were

fooling around with Lynch and was jealous, insanely jealous?"

"That's not true!"

"How do you know, Miss Thomas?"

Hunt produced more papers for the bailiff to take to the judge. "I'd like to introduce Ms. Thomas' and Mr. Lynch's cell phone records into evidence. They show numerous calls between the two over a period of time preceding the murder."

"So ordered," Russo agreed.

The records were added to the mounting evidence on the oak table near the center of the courtroom.

Hunt's gaze locked onto Caroline's and she saw the evil glint there. "Isn't it true, Ms. Thomas, that Victor Kane slipped out of your condo that night, and didn't return?"

He's guessing, she finally realized. He's hoping to prove some sort of triangle between me, Victor and Craig that would explain the murder. Caroline willed herself to relax, knowing that if she let Deacon Hunt rattle her, she might make a mistake and that would be disastrous. "I'm a light sleeper," she finally said.

"That's not the answer to my question," Hunt snapped leaning close to her face.

Caroline turned to Judge Russo. "Your Honor, I've answered this question to the best of my knowledge."

"I agree. Move on, Mr. Hunt," Russo ordered.

Caroline could see a slight hint of defeat in Deacon Hunt's eyes, along with loathing as he snorted, then said, "No more questions."

But she also knew that he had just given the jury Victor's motive for murder. Jealousy.

Kevin stood, but didn't leave his position behind the defense table. "Miss Thomas, did our client ever confront you about Craig Lynch, or exhibit any jealousy regarding him?"

"No."

"Did you see Lynch often?"

"No, I didn't. Only to ask him to help me look into Talia and Victor's relationship. That's what the calls were all about"

Kevin chuckled. "So, in essence, Miss Thomas, *you* were the jealous one in this supposed triangle." Deacon Hunt began to stand, but Kevin waved a hand dismissively, "Never mind. No more questions."

Caroline stepped down from the stand feeling a sense of peace and satisfaction and she could tell by the look on Victor's face that she had done well.

Finally, Brianna Hadley stood and said, "The prosecution rests, Your Honor."

Rapping his gavel, the judge declared, "Then we'll hear from the defense after lunch. Court will reconvene at one o'clock."

Before leaving the courtroom, Talia and Caroline spoke briefly with Victor.

"You did great," he told Caroline in a low tone.

"I love you," she told him, touching his face lightly with two fingers.

He kissed her hand, then turned to Talia. "How you holding up, my girl?"

"I'm afraid I won't do as well as Caroline did," Talia admitted, tears stinging her eyes.

"Don't be. I have sharp lawyers. Just keep on course. Plus the prosecution's case is weak and I can tell the judge thinks so, too. Their basing everything on Lucas's accusation, my so-called jealousy, and the fact I ran away. It's flimsy and Hunt knows it, that's why he only charged me with second degree murder." He looked again at Caroline. "How's our boy?"

"Claire is staying around the clock until this is over. He's fine."

Then the guard took him away.

chapter thirteen

Furious, Deacon Hunt stormed from the courtroom with Brianna Hadley close behind. He left the building, pushing several news people aside and marched to the parking lot. Then he whirled around and faced his co-counsel. "Our case looked weak! I never should have put that bitch, Caroline Thomas, on the stand. I thought I could get her to slip up. Damn!"

Brianna stared at him, a hard glint in her eye. "You knew our case was circumstantial at best. What did you expect?"

"Oh, lay it on my doorstep, Bri, that's rich!"

"I'm not laying anything at your doorstep. Look, we did the best we could. We know he killed that man, but we also knew we were on a slippery slope. There are a lot of things about this case that don't add up and some weird things that went on, even the police couldn't figure out half of what happened."

"I want that bastard in jail, Bri. It's where he

belongs!" Deacon fumed, unlocking his car. He got inside and drove away, leaving her standing there looking after him in dismay.

* * * *

"Where is Lucas?" Talia asked, as she and Caroline left the building and wended their way past the crowd outside.

"Let's go get something to eat. He's bound to be here soon. Speak of the devil," Caroline pointed to her left.

Talia saw Lucas coming toward them and breathed a sigh of relief.

"How'd it go," he asked once he caught up.

"Caroline was wonderful. She made Deacon Hunt look like an amateur," Talia said.

"Neil Wade, testify?" Lucas asked

Talia chuckled, "Rich made him look like an opportunist who came to town to cash in on his friend's death." She looked up at him, slipping her hand into his. "Everything go all right at the bank?"

"Like clockwork. The architect agreed with some of the changes you suggested last night."

Talia smiled. "Really?"

Lucas smiled back. "It's true. You are a talented lady, that's why I wanted you to look at the plans." Then his expression sobered. "So, where

do we stand with the trial?"

"The prosecution rested," Caroline told him.

Lucas looked down at Talia. "Well, I guess you and I will get our turn this afternoon, then, huh?"

chapter fourteen

When court reconvened at one o'clock sharp, it was the Rich and Kevin's turn.

Talia said a silent prayer that things would go as planned.

"The defense calls Maria Delgado to the stand." Rich intoned.

The woman was short and stocky, with dark hair and brown eyes. She was wearing a flowered dress and flat-heeled black shoes. She was sworn in, took the stand and looked nervously at Rich. She stated her name for the record, all the time fidgeting with the square black pocketbook in her lap.

"Where are you employed, Mrs. Delgado?" Rich asked.

"*The Arcadia Messenger*. I'm the cleaning woman." Her voice shook a little.

"Were you cleaning on the evening of July 16?"

"Yes, sir, I was."

"On that night did you have occasion to witness

a confrontation between Craig Lynch and Lucas Knight?"

Maria Delgado, glanced at Lucas, her mouth set in a straight line, her eyes wary. "Yes...he was at Mr. Lynch's desk...they had...a fight."

"What kind of fight, Mrs. Delgado?" Rich asked.

"I heard Mr. Knight say to Mr. Lynch to leave her alone. He had hold of Mr. Lynch, by the throat...I was frightened. He told Mr. Lynch he wouldn't get another warning..." She ended with a gulp, her hands massaging the purse almost frantically, her eyes jitting around the courtroom, but now avoiding Lucas.

"Did Craig Lynch say anything to you?" Rich asked.

"He said Mr. Knight was...dangerous. I asked him if I should call the police, but he said no."

"No more questions," Rich said.

Talia held her breath. Of course Deacon Hunt would try to discredit Mrs. Delgado's testimony. He hardly wanted another suspect muddying the waters. But, to her surprise, this time it was Brianna Hadley who rose and approached the witness.

"Relax, Mrs. Delgado." She flashed a tight smile at the woman. Then after several seconds of silence that seemed to make the poor woman even more uncomfortable, she asked, "So, tell the court,

who were Mr. Lynch and Mr. Knight discussing?"

Oh, so suddenly it's a discussion, not a confrontation, Talia thought, chewing at her bottom lip.

Maria Delgado looked confused and blinked several times. "I...I don't know."

"Did you see Mr. Knight come in?"

"N-No..but..."

"So, you had no way of knowing how long they'd been having this discussion?"

"No...I mean...I just saw that he had Mr. Lynch pinned down...by the throat."

Brianna Hadley raised one carefully-sculpted eyebrow. "Did Mr. Lynch cry out for help?"

"No..."

"So you came in on the tail end of a discussion and saw what...how did Mr. Knight have Mr. Lynch pinned down?" Brianna Hadley asked, her voice taking on an edge.

"In his chair..." Maria stammered.

"So Mr. Lynch was sitting?"

"Yes...and Mr. Knight had his hand at his throat..."

"At his throat or just against him...perhaps his upper chest?" Brianna Hadley pressed.

Maria glanced at Rich.

"Objection, your honor, asked and answered," Rich said.

"Move it along Ms. Hadley," the judge ordered.

"No more questions," Brianna Hadley said and returned to her seat.

Kevin rose. "The defense calls Lucas Knight."

Loud murmurs arose as Lucas got up and walked toward the witness stand.

Talia reached for Caroline's hand. "Hang in there, Talia. We just need to stay with the plan."

When Talia had met with Kevin and Rich, they'd gone over her testimony and Lucas's. That had been the first time she'd known about his visit to Craig Lynch. She'd been angry at first, but then realized that it could cast reasonable doubt on the prosecution's case. Rich and Kevin had assured her that Deacon Hunt would never pursue a case against Lucas, simply because there was not enough concrete evidence to do so. All they had to do was destroy the prosecution's witnesses and bring in enough of their own to cast reasonable doubt. Now she wasn't so sure the strategy was going to work. It could all backfire in a big way and Lucas could be put on trial. *What will I do if that happens?*

Kevin said to the judge, "I'd like the record to show that, in view of Mrs. Delgado's testimony, Mr. Knight must be considered as a hostile witness, Your Honor."

There were murmurs among the spectators.

Russo nodded. "So noted."

Once Lucas was seated, Kevin said, "Did you

go to visit Craig Lynch at the Arcadia Messenger on the evening of July 16?"

"I did," Lucas affirmed.

"Why?"

"He kept leaving messages that he needed to ask me some more questions for an article he was doing about me and my newly-opened antique shop."

Kevin had several papers in his hands and held them up. "I have here more cell phone records of Mr. Lynch's as well as records of calls from his office phone. They show only two calls to Lucas Knight's antique shop. I'd like them introduced as evidence."

Once that was accomplished and the records had been added to the rest, Kevin said, "Two calls? I'd hardly classify that as 'kept leaving messages.' Why didn't you just return one of them? The phone is a lot handier than paying a personal visit, I'd think."

"I was in the area, so I just dropped in," Lucas replied.

"Did you have material to deliver to Mr. Lynch, for this...article?"

"Not really."

"So a phone call would have done just as well, wouldn't it? What else did you discuss?"

Lucas sighed. "I'd noticed him making unwelcome advances toward Talia and I told him

to stop."

"Ah, now we get to the *real* reason for the visit." When Lucas started to say something, Kevin rushed on with, "How do you know the advances were unwelcome?"

"Talía had mentioned it to me and told me how uncomfortable they had made her feel."

"Is that when you attacked him?"

Lucas appeared to bristle. "*He* came at *me*...told me it was none of my business. I pushed him down into his desk chair, to get him off of me. That's when the cleaning woman came in."

"And saw you with your hand at the victim's throat?" Kevin prompted.

"I don't remember where my hand was," Lucas said vaguely.

"Really? Well, Mrs. Delgado seems to," Kevin said, then added, "No more questions."

Deacon Hunt remained seated. "You heard Detective Muncie's testimony, didn't you?"

Lucas replied, "Yes."

Now Hunt stood, but stayed behind the table. "He stated that you accused Victor Kane of killing Craig Lynch and trying to kill both you and his own daughter, Talía Coe."

"I heard what he said," Lucas replied.

"Well, did you make that accusation?" Hunt asked impatiently.

"Who knows? I was in shock...we'd just been

attacked by wolves or wild dogs or something. One minute we were making love in the woods and the next we were fighting for our lives. I don't recall much about what I did or didn't say," Lucas replied.

Hunt sighed. "Ah, yes, those pesky old wolves."

Twitters of laughter could be heard and Judge Russo rapped his gavel once.

Lucas met the prosecutor's gaze steadily. "Or wild dogs...not sure, it all happened so fast."

Talia glanced at the jury and saw confusion and uncertainty in several of their eyes. Good. Reports of wolf or wild dog attacks had been well documented in the area, so no one should be surprised by Lucas's revelation, even though Deacon Hunt was trying to make it sound ridiculous. She did, however, catch several of the men glancing her way and appraising her body as, no doubt, the image of her and Lucas romping around naked in the woods was whirling around in their minds.

Hunt shook his head and said, "No more questions."

Lucas took his seat beside Talia and squeezed her hand. "If you get frightened just look at me," he whispered as her name was called.

Talia felt shaky and uncertain as she sat down and watched Rich approach her. She glanced at

her father, saw the reassurance in his eyes, and felt a little better.

"Did Lucas Knight visit you on the night of July 16?" Rich asked.

"Yes," Talia replied softly.

"You'll have to speak up, Ms. Coe," the judge instructed.

"Sorry," Talia said, clearly this time, "Yes, he did."

"Why?"

Talia prayed she would get this right. "I guess I sort of invited him."

"Sort of?"

"We'd been...attracted to each other since ...well for a while."

"So, what time did he arrive?"

"I didn't look at the clock," she replied. "I'm an artist, I work all hours. Time doesn't mean much to me when I'm involved in a project."

"Was it dark?"

"Yes, it was dark."

"How did he look?"

Talia glanced at the jury, catching one man's eye briefly then said, "Sexy."

Laughter erupted and Judge Russo banged the gavel.

"Look, Miss Coe, I understand you're involved with Mr. Knight..."

"Actually we're engaged," Talia said, flashing

the ring. She looked at the jury again and could see the women's smiles of appreciation as they viewed the large diamond.

"Whatever," Rich snapped. "Didn't Mr. Knight mention Craig Lynch to you? In fact, didn't he tell you he'd taken care of the problem of Lynch's advances?"

"We had other things on our minds," Talia said, with a shy smile.

Rich raised his voice. "That's not what I asked you."

"I don't remember...we were...you know..."

Rich seemed to soften. "You were actually suffering from amnesia at the time of Craig Lynch's death, were you not?"

"Yes."

"And, in your mind, exactly who was Victor Kane?"

"He was my mentor. He'd given me a roof over my head and encouraged me to pursue my art."

"So, at that time you didn't know he was actually your father?"

Talia shook her head. "No."

Rich nodded, then asked, "Did you ever discuss Mr. Lynch with your father, Victor Kane?"

"No."

"To your knowledge, did Victor Kane have any dealings with Mr. Lynch?"

"No."

"So, that day in the woods, when you heard Mr. Knight accuse him of murdering Mr. Lynch, what did you think?

"I didn't hear him say anything like that." Talia said, and several members of the jury shifted in their seats and leaned forward.

"But you were there...what was it...about a week after the murder, when Lucas Knight supposedly told Detective Muncie that our client had killed Craig Lynch and tried to kill the two of you, weren't you?"

"Of course I was there. We were attacked by wild animals, then I passed out. My father never attacked me. He would never hurt me or anyone else," Talia stated.

"No more questions," Rich quickly said.

Talia didn't miss the glint of satisfaction in the defense attorney's eye just before he turned and walked away. *He's pleased, I must have done well.*

Deacon Hunt approached Talia aggressively. "Was your father in the woods that day, Ms. Coe?"

"I'm afraid Lucas and I were busy with our own...matters" she stated, keeping her voice even. Several jury members stirred in their seats and Talia noted that a couple of the women jurors were now looking at Lucas as though he were some sort of sexy rock star.

"Well if Victor Kane wasn't there, what was Ms.

Thomas doing there?"

Kevin was on his feet, "Objection, Your Honor, the answer would be heresay."

"Sustained," Russo said, throwing Hunt a warning look.

"Did you speak to Ms. Thomas that day?"

"No."

"Not at all. Didn't say a word to her, even though she came running out of the woods like the devil was after her?"

Talia looked the man squarely in the eye, "If she was there, I don't know what she was doing."

"I'll ask you again, was your father there?" Hunt asked, a predatory glint in his eye.

Kevin jumped up. "Asked and answered, Your Honor!"

"Tell me, Ms. Coe, when exactly did you get your memory back?" Hunt asked quickly, changing the subject.

"It was a gradual thing...I still have blank spots," she told him.

"Evidently that day is one of them," Hunt said sarcastically. "No more questions."

Talia breathed a sigh of relief as she left the stand and walked back to her seat.

Rich stood. "Your honor, the defense rests."

Sitting between Caroline and Lucas, she reached for Lucas's hand, then Caroline's.

"Good job," Lucas whispered in her ear.

"I just hope it was enough," she whispered back, as the judge declared that court was adjourned for the day and told the attorneys to be ready for final arguments when it reconvened in the morning.

chapter fifteen

Lucas stepped into the cool, shadowy interior of his antique shop. Although the sign on the door still indicated the business was open, all but the night lights were turned off and he knew that Rachel would be getting ready to close for the day, since it was after five o'clock.

Outside, the street lamps had come on as darkness closed in on the little town. On his walk from the city building, he'd noticed the air felt heavy with moisture again, indicating more snow was on the way.

"Oh, I wasn't expecting you today. How did it go in court?" Rachel asked as she stepped out of the hallway and came around the counter.

Lucas shrugged, "As well as could be expected, I guess."

"And at the bank?"

"Perfect. Everything's in order and the architect is making some final adjustments to the plans," he said. Then he looked across the room. "Where's

the armoire?"

"Sold it. This afternoon. The customer's deliverymen just picked it up a little while ago. And," she smiled, obviously proud of herself, "he also bought that cruet."

Lucas smiled. "*The* cruet?"

Rachel returned the smile and he saw how it transformed her face. She wasn't particularly pretty, but her features were pleasant. Then he noticed the way she was dressed. The royal blue suit was tasteful and business-like. She definitely would make a good impression on the customers. "Who is this buyer?" Lucas asked.

"A man named Caleb Sinclair. He said he'd be back. There are a few more pieces he's interested in, but he wants to meet you."

Lucas crooked an eyebrow. "Interesting. I don't recognize the name. Is he from around here?"

Rachel moved closer and he caught a whiff of lavender, subtle yet unmistakable.

"He didn't say and I didn't ask. He paid cash. It's in the safe."

She looked up at him and took off her glasses, rubbing the bridge of her nose. Her hands were small and delicate, with unpolished nails. Then, he realized he was staring and that she had noticed it and he felt his cheeks flush. "I'm sorry, what?"

"I asked if you needed me anymore tonight," Rachel said, her gray eyes meeting his.

Only now he noticed the blue flecks in them.
Funny he hadn't noticed that until now

Before he could answer her, the door opened
and the bell sounded.

"Talía," Lucas said.

* * * *

Talia stepped into the antique shop and stopped
just inside the door, appraising the scene before
her.

Lucas was leaning against the counter and a
young woman was standing just off to the side of
him. *Too close for my taste.*

When the woman turned around she caught a
momentary glint in her eye that immediately put
Talia on guard. Then the woman slipped on her
glasses and smiled.

"I was wondering when I'd get to meet you,
Mrs. Knight..." the woman said, advancing toward
her, hand out in greeting. "I'm Rachel Lewis. Mr.
Knight was kind enough to give me a job. I just
hope I haven't disappointed him."

Deciding not to correct the name mistake, Talia
took the woman's hand and gave it a very brief
shake. "Well, so far, Lucas has had nothing but
praise for you," she said, eyeing him as he stood
there with a silly grin on his face.

"And if she continues to do as well as she did

today, the praise will continue," Lucas said, coming to Talia and kissing her briefly on the lips. "She sold that French Provincial armoire I've had for months."

Talia looked at the large, blank spot across the room. *Well, well, isn't she swell.* Aloud, she said, "If this keeps up, you'll have to negotiate with Lucas for a commission." Then, she looked up at him. "I've ordered carry out from the Pizza Palace, it should be ready in about twenty minutes."

"I'm out of here," Rachel said, grabbing her coat from on top of the counter. "Will you be in tomorrow...Mr. Knight?"

"I'm not sure. We'll see how it goes in court," he replied, tightening his arm around Talia's waist.

Talia stepped away from him and opened the door for Rachel. "Have a good evening, Rachel."

Once she closed the door, Lucas said, "Wow, I'm glad you opened the door just now, so the air from outside could take some of the chill out of the room. What was that all about?"

"What?" Talia asked, turning the sign hanging in the door to "Closed."

"The big freeze-out. And don't play innocent. Rachel had to be suffering from frostbite before she even left the shop," Lucas replied, turning Talia around and staring hard at her.

She met the dark gaze that always drew her in

and destroyed her defenses. "She's hardly the unshapely waif you made her sound like, Lucas."

Lucas loosened his grip a little. "I really don't know what you mean, Talia. And I don't remember portraying her as a waif. She looks very...professional."

His attempt to placate her hadn't work, however, and as he tried to pull her close, she stepped away and turned toward the door. "We'd better go pick up the pizza and head home. I'm tired and I'm sure you're hungry," she said somewhat snappishly.

* * * *

As Caroline pulled her Lexus up to the gate at Arcadian Ridge and pushed the remote that would slide the barrier open, her glance shot across the courtyard toward Unit 117. She could see a light burning in one of the downstairs room. *His testimony is over, why the hell isn't he gone?*

Pulling her car behind the building, she slid it into the carport and shut off the engine. The entire day in court had totally unnerved her. Then, after court, when she'd gone to the gallery, she'd discovered that Ben Walker had disturbing news for her. The painting she'd shipped to Mrs. Giddings' nephew had not arrived yet and the woman was perturbed. Instructing Ben to trace the

shipment at once, she'd then gone into her office and closed the door.

As she'd sorted through the pile of mail, her thoughts kept returning to her testimony. Had she done Victor any good? Had any of them? The carefully laid out strategy that Rich and Kevin had concocted was designed to confuse the jury and plant doubts in their minds. Had it worked? Both attorneys had warned them that it could just as easily backfire, but Victor had given them the go-ahead. She recalled Kevin telling them that the prosecution had a weak case to begin with and it wouldn't take much to topple it like a house of cards. She prayed he was right.

Sighing she opened the car door, got out, clicked the button that would set the alarm then turned around and found herself almost nose-to-nose with Neil Wade. Her heart leapt into her throat as she stared at him, standing there so quietly. She hadn't even heard him. Where had he been hiding? He was so close she could feel his breath brush against her cheeks as it swirled around her in a thin vapor cloud. Suddenly she felt a chill that couldn't be entirely blamed on the frigid temperatures.

"What...how...keep away...I'll scream," she blurted out, taking a step back.

"You think I'm here to hurt you?" he said softly.

Caroline clutched her purse, ready to use it as a makeshift weapon if necessary. "Then what are you doing here?" she demanded, her voice raspy with fear.

"I wanted to see you," he told her.

The only light came from the mercury security bulbs positioned around the perimeter of the parking area so his face was partially in shadow, but she could see the intensity of his blue gaze boring into her and felt a familiar tug. *No. Not a chance. I have no feelings for him. He's a liar. He used me. My God!* His close-cropped blond hair glowed in the sparse illumination and she let her gaze wander down his body. In her mind's eye she envisioned the firm musculature she remembered so well. "Get out of my way, Neil. I'm going inside now, to my baby. I have a nanny, she's in there and will call the police..." Caroline began.

Suddenly, he reached for her, grabbing her arms and pulling her close. "You fool! There's a lot more going on here than you, or Victor, know. I haven't changed my opinion about him. I still think he's a dangerous man. At least for you...Can't you see that...can't you feel it..." Neil hissed, his mouth close to hers.

Stamping her foot down on top of his, she felt him loosen his grip. Taking the opportunity, she wrenched herself free, pushed him, and ran out of the carport toward the back door of her condo. She

didn't look back to see if he was following, but as she mounted the narrow stoop, she could have sworn she heard him call after her, "I never meant to hurt you."

"Claire! Claire!" she screamed, hurrying through the empty kitchen and into the living room. There, she found her nanny sitting serenely in front of the television sipping at a cup of something hot and tempting smelling.

Claire jumped up and came to Caroline. "What's wrong? Are you all right?"

"Neil Wade...he was waiting for me in the carport..." Caroline couldn't stop shaking.

Claire's face showed only a modicum of concern. "What did he say?"

Caroline went to the front window and looked across the courtyard toward Unit 117, which was now in total darkness. "I don't know...something about me not knowing what was really going on. It was spooky. He was just standing there, behind me when I got out of the car! Look at me, I'm a wreck."

"Well, I think you need more than the herbal tea, which is what I'm having. I think you need a stiff drink, a hot bath, and then bed."

Caroline felt safe all of a sudden, as the older woman began to help her out of her coat. "I want you to go upstairs, and get into a big fluffy robe. Alex is fine, sleeping like the angel he is. I'm going

to pour you that drink, draw you that bath and turn on some soft, soothing music. By the time I'm through with you, you'll be ready for a good night's sleep. Nanny's orders."

Caroline, feeling the tension of the day begin to drain away, did as she was told. Tonight, she needed to be taken care of and she was very grateful that Claire was here to do it.

* * * *

Neil stepped inside his condo and turned out the living room light. That had been a close one. If Caroline had been ten minutes earlier, she would have caught him inside her condo with Claire.

Caroline. The feel of her body close to his in the carport had churned up the old feelings, leaving him restless and edgy.

He paced the floor in the dark, thinking about the trial, and last July. Now he was back and events could spin out of control again. He just didn't want Caroline caught in the crossfire. That's why he'd decided not to leave Arcadia. He still had several months left on the sub-lease and he intended to stay and see this through. Let the chips fall where they may, he was here for the duration.

* * * *

Brianna Hadley left her office and walked toward her car, which was parked nearby. It was dark and cold and she wanted to get home, have a drink and take a hot bubble bath, in that order. Deacon was a dick. Pure and simple. He'd specifically asked that she sit second chair on this case then turned around and assigned her grunt work that could have been done by a second-year law student. It was humiliating. Everyone in the office was talking about it. *Why do I let that bastard get away with it?* But she knew the answer to that, as did most of the people with whom they worked. She'd had the hots for Deacon since the first days she'd met him. Then she'd made the terrible mistake of falling in love with him.

She pulled her black wool coat tighter around her shivering body. *He plays me for the fool and I let him. God, why can't I be strong? I should tell him to get lost. He's treated me like shit...sleeping with one woman after another. And now he's screwing that slut Hanna Nance!* Brianna thought about her rival, Deacon's newest conquest. So many of them had come and gone over the past few years, she'd lost count. *All except me. I'm still here and they aren't. The same will be true of dear Hannah, eventually.*

A sound caught Brianna's attention and she felt her heart skitter a little. She always felt nervous at night making the walk from their office to the back

of the parking lot where she parked her car. A line of spruce trees bordered the perimeter and the shadows were deep, since the pale yellow of the so-called security lights did little to brighten the area.

"What's that?" she said aloud, when movement near one of the trees caught her eye. She squinted into the semi-darkness. "I see you. I've got mace. Don't come any..." Then she heard a scuffling and saw several low hanging branches move as though a breeze had ruffled them.

Hurrying to her car, she deactivated the alarm and got quickly inside. Slamming the door, she hit the automatic lock, started the engine and roared out of the lot at breakneck speed.

"What the hell was that?" she said turning up the heater. She was freezing. "My eyes must be playing tricks...God, do I need that drink!"

* * * *

Deacon Hunt was angry, frustrated and horny. After his day in court and the disappointing way things had gone, he was ready for several stiff drinks and some pussy. The drinks were accomplished at a bar just outside of town and the pussy was about to be collected from Brianna Hadley.

He hadn't bothered to call. He knew she'd be alone. She'd been pining away for him since he'd dumped her pathetic ass seven months ago. When he'd chosen her to sit second chair for this trial, he thought she was going to cream herself. Well, tonight she'd get her chance.

She'd worked for him for four years. He'd started banging her almost as soon as he hired her and it had been hot and heavy until a year ago, when he'd hired a new administrative assistant, Hannah, who had quickly taken Bri's place in his heart and in his bed.

He still chuckled when he thought about the time Brianna had come to his house drunk and crying. She'd begged him to take her back, to take her to bed, to want her again. She'd even gotten down on her knees, the poor, pathetic bitch. So, he'd fucked her, out of pity, and need, since Hannah was out of town visiting relatives and not due back until the next day. Of course, that had given Bri hope and when he'd virtually ignored her for the next two weeks, while he put his hands all over Hannah, the tears had started again. He had, however, made it a point to throw her intermittent scraps of attention, which kept her hope alive and guaranteed her availability in case he was in a pinch. Like tonight. Tonight his lust could only be satisfied by her because he could do things with her that he could never do with

Hannah.

Deacon parked under the carport beside Brianna's garage and shut off the engine. The upstairs bedroom light was still on, which meant she was up. No matter, she'd get out of bed for what he had to give her. He climbed out of the car and hurried up the walk. Damn it was cold and he could feel snow in the air. He'd spent part of the last three hours in his office going over his closing for the trial tomorrow. Those two queers, Adkins and Mahew, had impressed the jury with their sleight of hand tactics, but he'd expose all of that for the sham it was and then victory would be his.

He rang Brianna's bell and waited. Shortly, the porch light came on and she opened the door.

"Deacon. What are you doing here? Has something happened?" she asked.

She was wearing an emerald-green silk robe that hit her mid thigh. She was petite but had beautifully shaped tits, just a nice mouthful and Deacon felt his tongue itch to suckle one of them. His cock stirred and lust coiled itself around his insides. "How about letting me in, Bri? I'm about to freeze my balls off out here. You wearing anything under that robe?" He walked past her, slamming the door with one hand and pulling the sash around her waist free with the other. The robe fell open and she made no attempt to cover her nakedness.

Grabbing her roughly, he pulled her against him and kissed her, darting his tongue around the inside her mouth. She moaned, leaned against him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

His hands roved all over her body, pinching her nipples hard then moving between her thighs, where he probed at her in short, jerky movements until he felt the moisture begin to flow. He pulled the robe off of one shoulder and ran his tongue down her neck to her collarbone and then to the hollow of her throat. She thrust back her head and rode his invading fingers while gurgling noises erupted through her lips. She grappled at his belt and he let her. The more effort it took, the more grateful she'd be when she finally reached the prize. He continued to manipulate her clit with his fingers as it swelled and pulsed under his touch and then he clamped his lips around one of her nipples and sucked so hard she cried out.

Pulling back, he picked her up. She felt feather-light in his arms. He carried her up the stairs and into her bedroom, depositing her on the bed. He stripped quickly then turned her over on her belly and entered her from behind, quickly and with more force than necessary. Again she cried out and he could see she was gritting her teeth. He pumped furiously, each time harder, needing to inflict pain, needing to cause her to scream. And she did, especially when he pulled her hips off the

bed so they were fucking doggie style and grabbed a breast in each hand and squeezed as hard as he could, while a finger and thumb of each hand savagely pinched her hardened nipples.

At one point she tried to tell him something but he was lost in his own world, boring into her so hard that her head actually hit the headboard several times before he came in a burst so gigantic that he thought his dick would explode. But it still wasn't enough. He withdrew and rolled over, his cock still hard. Pulling her close he moved her head down until she could take him into her mouth. She licked, sucked and brought him to the brink, while he urged her on with guttural phrases like "...suck harder, cunt...I said harder!" and, "...I'll make your pussy scream, make you beg for mercy..." Then he sat up, entwined his fingers in her hair, and yanked her head back. He stared into her eyes, noting that their normal green-gray was now a dark with either need or pain, he wasn't sure and didn't care. "You like it rough, don't you, bitch?"

She nodded and he yanked again. "Yes...rough...really rough..." she croaked.

He pulled her onto her back by her hair and began working on her breasts again, pinching, jabbing, biting. Then, he nibbled his way, not too gently, down to her cunt and spread the delicate lips with his hands. His fingers worked her, then

his teeth took over and she screamed out, squirming around on the bed. The more she squirmed, the better he liked it. He felt her come as his tongue probed up her thick, satiny walls. Oh yes, Bri liked it rough.

When she was finished he flipped her over, slipped on the condom he'd deposited on the night stand, then entered her anally, making sure he rammed her hard and fast for a good ten minutes before he released himself inside of her again.

That accomplished, he rolled onto his back, breathless and feeling just fine.

Beside him, Brianna lay in a fetal position, crying softly into her pillow. *Like music to my ears*, he thought as he listened to the muted sounds of her pain and misery.

* * * *

Talia settled into the hot bath water and sighed. Lucas, standing at the bathroom sink was trimming his goatee. "I'm starting to resemble a sailor who's been at sea too long," he said.

"I sort of like the shaggy look, gives you an aura of mystery," she said, with a slight smile. Then she sighed and laid her head back against the cool porcelain.

"What you doing under those bubbles,

anyway? You're doing an awful lot of cooing," he asked.

"You're a pervert. Besides, if you're so curious, why don't you join me and find out?"

He turned and looked at her. "I think I just might take you up on that," he said, stripping off his undershorts and walking toward the claw-footed, antique tub.

Once he was settled opposite her, his feet wrapped around her hips and her toes toying with his penis, he said, "Bliss. Pure bliss."

"Oh, you haven't seen anything yet," Talia promised, feeling a sense of contentment she hadn't experienced in a long time. She'd been a real bitch at the shop earlier, she realized that. Rachel Lewis was just a young woman trying to earn a living and had been fortunate enough to come across Lucas's ad. Of course she was enthused and felt good about herself—she had a job she liked and was good at. Jealousy was an evil monster and Talia had made a vow tonight to never let it get the better of her again. "I'm thinking we should have Rachel over for dinner soon. She's probably not rich by any means, having just gotten the job at the shop and could probably use a free meal now and then," Talia ran her big toe across the tip of Lucas's cock and smiled as it jerk in response.

"What changed your mind about Rachel?"

She met his gaze. "I didn't have any particular mindset about Rachel, Lucas. I just was surprised by her, that's all. Now I want to get to know her better."

Lucas shrugged. "Sure. Let me know when and I'll ask her. But, right now, I think I have other things on my mind."

Talia smiled. "Oh, like what?"

"Guess."

She bent her knees and scooted toward him. "Meet me halfway?" He did and soon her mound was nestled against his cock. She submerged her hands and played with him languidly while he grew more erect with each stroke.

Blowing away some of the bubbles that surrounded them, Lucas took one of her breasts into his mouth and licked at the nipple until it was a hard rosy nub inviting more attention from his tongue.

"I could get used to this," she said. She felt his hand between her thighs, rubbing lightly. It felt even more sensual with the water swirling around her flesh like a lover's caress. Then his fingers played at her lips, opening them and she knew that her own juices were now joining the bath water.

"I smell your need," Lucas whispered, pulling her face toward his with his free hand. "You drive me crazy, you know. Every time I look at you."

Their lips met as urgency grew and she pressed in close, driving his finger further up into her moist, slick canal. Then he withdrew and the water sloshed as he lifted her up and brought her down over his erection.

Talia sighed as she felt his length fill her up.

"Not so easy to maneuver in here," Lucas muttered, leaning back.

"We'll manage," Talia replied breathlessly as she braced herself on the sides of the tub and moved up and down over him. But when he kneaded her breasts, she drew back a little. "Hey, take it easy, I'm a little sore for some reason."

The water was cooling off, but Talia's passion was not and as Lucas drove himself into her in smooth, even strokes she felt her muscles clench around him, contracting over and over as heat rose in her blood and her pulse pounded in her ears. The orgasm grew slowly, though, and she nursed it along that way, savoring the feel of his hot flesh inside her, reveling in the way it caused her entire body to throb and tingle. When he added his fingers to the mix, stroking at her clit, she felt the orgasm burst wide open carrying her with it on a wave of pleasure that wiped everything else from her mind.

* * * *

Lucas slipped out of bed and quietly left the room. Opening the back door he stepped onto the patio and looked at the star-studded sky. They hadn't gotten the predicted snow, although he'd heard on the late news that counties north of them had been slammed. The night was so quiet and little of the remnants from the last snowstorm remained. There was a half moon hanging up above and as he watched a thin strip of clouds moved quickly across it, obscuring it for a few seconds.

Talia's question came back to him. "Do you ever miss it?" He'd told her sometimes, and for some reason tonight was one of those times. To be able to run free and unencumbered in the woods, senses honed to a fine point, the night as his playground had always given him a heady feeling like no other. But he and Talia had made a vow. *A vow we broke in July.* But that had been self preservation. Tonight, if he did this, it would be purely for the pleasure of it.

Seconds later, Lucas felt his face contort, his nose lengthen into a snout, his arms and legs reshape themselves as his body shifted into the sleek, black wolf who had once been the alpha male of the most powerful pack alive.

Then he sensed her, smelled her – wild, musky. He turned quickly, his teeth bared, then relaxed. The umber wolf stood just a few feet away. His mate. Her fur was full and luxuriant, her amber

eyes bright and shiny in the light of the silvery crescent above. Her breath misted around her and she pawed the ground then lowered her head.

Leading the way, the black wolf ran toward the woods, the other one following close behind.

* * * *

Ben Walker was just about to give up and go home when he saw two shapes dart across the lane and run into the woods.

"What the hell," he exclaimed from his position about one hundred yards from the cottage. "Jesus, were they...Damn!" He took out his infrared binoculars and looked through them. The bushes rustled and he thought he saw the back end of some sort of canine disappear into a thicket of trees.

"It's them. I know it!" he muttered, cursing his bad timing.

Slowly he advanced, treading carefully, finally reaching the line of pine trees. Patting the Glock nine millimeter tucked in his waistband, he slowly made his way into the woods.

chapter sixteen

Lucas and Talia arrived at the antique shop just as Rachel was unlocking the door. They'd come into town early, before court, because Lucas wanted to catch up on some paperwork.

"I'll make coffee and see what awaits me on my desk," he said, winking Talia's way.

She knew what he meant. This was her chance to talk to Rachel and mend a fence. Talia watched as the woman moved around the shop, opening the blind and checking the surfaces for dust. She noted that Rachel wore black slacks today and a red turtleneck sweater. Her hair was pulled back, but tendrils had come loose and fell around her face in delicate wisps. Her glasses were perched on top of her head.

"Rachel, I wanted to talk to you. Lucas and I were thinking it would be nice if you came to dinner soon. Maybe, once this trial is over..."

"And your father acquitted," Rachel finished, turning to face Talia.

Talia met the pale gray gaze. "You sound so sure. I wish I could be that certain."

Rachel smiled, exposing a row of white, even teeth. "He's innocent, isn't he?"

Talia said quickly, "Yes, of course he is."

Rachel shrugged. "Then it will turn out all right. I'm an optimist, Mrs. Knight..."

Talia interrupted with, "Actually, it's not Mrs. Knight quite yet, but soon." She displayed the ring.

Rachel's eyes lit up and she squealed. "Oh! It's gorgeous! I just assumed you two were already...when is the wedding?. Oh, please say you'll invite me!"

Seeing the rather plain, ordinary looking woman become so animated made Talia smile. Lucas had once described her as serious and rather dour, yet this seemed like a completely different person.

"Consider yourself invited," Talia said, warming up to the woman. "And I meant that about dinner, too." In her mind, Talia was already thinking of ways to delicately suggest that Rachel get a new hairdo and wear more skillfully applied makeup.

"I'd love that, Miss..." Rachel began.

Talia waved a hand. "It's Coe, but call me Talia, please. Now, I don't know about you, but I'm ready for some of that coffee I smell perking in the

back room."

Lucas eyed Talia as she entered his office area. "No bloodshed?" he asked wryly.

"Don't be silly. She's really sort of charming. She just needs a few fashion tips, that's all. She'll have young men's heads turning in no time after I help her..." Lucas's warning glance signaled Rachel's arrival and Talia quickly said, "...so do you think this new customer will return? Oh, Rachel I was just asking Lucas about this new customer."

"He had an eye for several other pieces, actually. He's renovating a house out in the county, about ten miles from here, he said." Rachel told them. She poured a mug of coffee and handed it to Talia, then poured another for herself.

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "So, I'm suddenly chopped liver?" he said, eyeing his empty mug.

Rachel looked alarmed. "I'm sorry, Mr. Knight...I thought..."

Lucas smiled up at her. "Relax, Rachel."

Talia put a hand on the woman's arm. "Don't worry. His bark is *much* worse than his bite." She winked at Lucas.

* * * *

Caroline entered the gallery and was greeted by the sight of Ben Walker slipping down the hallway

leading to her office. The chime above the door stopped him in his tracks and he turned around.

"Oh, there you are. I was just taking these delivery slips into your office," he told her, holding them out.

"Delivery slips for what?" she snapped irritably. She hadn't slept well after her encounter with Neil in the carport last night and had found herself looking over her shoulder every few seconds as she'd headed for her car this morning. The idea that he might stay in Arcadia was ludicrous! What business could he possibly have here now that his part in the trial was over?

Ben smiled. "Some New York gallery sent two paintings."

"You're kidding!" Caroline felt an arrow of excitement shoot through her. "Who?"

"Bentley's," Ben said, reading the name from the blue slips he held in his hand.

Caroline snatched them away and verified the information. *They're starting to respond...the big galleries. I'm going to pull this out of the fire, yet!* Suddenly, Caroline realized Ben was staring at her, an expectant look on his face. "What?" she asked, blinking several times.

"Should I put them out in the showroom?" Ben asked, his tone making it clear this was the second time he'd asked the question.

"No. They're for the spring show. And we need

to hope and pray the rest of the galleries I contacted come through, also. This is a very good thing, Ben. It's proof that Bentley's hasn't lost faith in me because I canceled the Christmas show..." She stopped as she detected the confusion in his eyes. "Never mind. Did you unpack them yet?"

"No. Do you want me to?"

"I can't wait to see them, but I have to be in court shortly. Go ahead and uncrate them and put them in inventory. I'll come back later and take a look..." She stopped, wondering if she'd be in any mood to look at artwork if Victor was convicted.

"You okay, Miss Thomas?" Ben asked.

Caroline stared at him for a few seconds, taking in the tall man's casual demeanor. His hazel eyes were full of concern and she forced a smile. "I'm fine, Ben. Just make sure you catalog them correctly in the system.

"The setup is simple, but could use some modifications. I've been working on a spreadsheet that might do a better job for us."

Caroline couldn't hide her surprise. "I didn't know you were such a whiz on the computer, Ben. But I guess it can't hurt to have a backup inventory program just as long as you enter the arrivals into the standard system," she told him, taking the blue slips to her office and shutting the door.

Checking her watch, she saw that it was eight-

fifteen. She hurried through the mail, stacking it in piles to be attended to later, hopefully by Victor.

chapter seventeen

When Judge Abel Russo called the court to order at precisely nine o'clock, Talia, Lucas and Caroline were seated in the same spots they'd occupied for the past two days.

Talia felt her stomach lurch and nausea grip her as she looked at Victor. He seemed so composed, so confident. How did he do that? She was a bundle of nerves, yet he'd smiled encouragingly at her when he was escorted into the courtroom. Wasn't she supposed to be the one reassuring him?

Caroline's revelation that Neil Wade had accosted her in her own carport last night had rattled Talia and she'd told Kevin and Rich the minute she'd seen them this morning. Noting the placid look on her father's face, though, she was pretty sure they hadn't told him yet. Glancing around the packed courtroom she was relieved to see that Neil had not shown up. And knowing her father, if the so-called author knew what was good

for him, he'd get out of town the minute the jury came back with an acquittal. She'd seen her father in action and knew how ferocious his temper could be, both in human and wolf form.

Talia squeezed Caroline's hand as Deacon Hunt, sitting alone at the prosecutor's table, got up and strode forward. Today the popinjay, as she'd come to think of him, was dressed in a charcoal gray suit, light blue shirt and blue and gray striped tie. As he passed by, she noted the monogrammed cuffs of his shirt, just before he pulled the suit coat sleeve down to neaten his appearance. The letters *DBH* were in fancy script in dark blue, so they'd show up against the lighter background. Talia idly wondered if his jockey shorts were also monogrammed, although she had no desire to really find out.

"Your honor, I regret to inform the court that Ms. Hadley has taken ill and cannot be here today." Hunt said, his voice somber.

Probably sick of your bullshit, Talia thought as the judge acknowledged the pronouncement.

Hunt walked slowly to the jury box and leaned against the railing. "Today, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you will be asked to make a weighty decision. It won't be easy. I will be the first to admit that. You have listened to the testimony, you've viewed the objects offered into evidence and now you must go into that jury room and

decide the course of another human being's life. Frankly, I don't envy you. But I would ask one thing of you: do not be mislead by defense counsels' attempts to confuse you and divert your attention from the *real* facts of this case. Fact number one: Victor Kane is a jealous man who discovered that Craig Lynch, a local reporter, was having an affair with his lover, who is also the mother of his child. You saw those cell phone records. Those two were hot and heavy, calling back and forth sometimes two or three times a day. That cries out, affair!

"Fact number two: Lucas Knight, who is Talia Coe's lover, was heard by one of our town's most respected detectives, Paul Muncie, making an accusation against the defendant. He *told* Detective Muncie that Victor Kane had killed Craig Lynch and had even tried to kill him and Ms. Coe, who also happens to be Kane's daughter. A man who would try to kill his own daughter would not hesitate to kill someone he barely knew, especially if that person was fooling around with the woman he considered *his*.

"Fact number three: Victor Kane fled when the police began closing in. He was gone for months, leaving Caroline Thomas, his pregnant lover, to fend for herself. Innocent men don't flee. It's that simple.

"Mr. Adkins and Mr. Mahew would have you

believe that Lucas Knight had motive to murder Craig Lynch, but don't be fooled by their diversionary tactics. Look at the *facts* not some *fairy tail* dreamed up by two desperate defense attorneys."

Hunt was still leaning against the rail, making eye contact with each and every juror and Talia could see that his ploy was working. They seemed mesmerized. She felt bile rise in her throat as she glanced toward the defense table and saw that Kevin and Rich were fidgeting uncomfortably in their seats. She also noted that the "fairy tail" remark, with its double meaning, had infuriated Rich, as evidenced by the bright red streak of color on the back of his neck and tips of his ears. She couldn't see his face, but she imagined it was the same shade of crimson. Kevin, the more casual of the two, had his hands grasped together so tightly on the table that his knuckles were white.

"That guy's a slimy bastard," Lucas whispered in Talia's ear. "Maybe he needs a lesson."

Talia shot Lucas a glance that she hoped conveyed her disapproval of that kind of thinking. For someone who was not one of Victor's biggest fans, Lucas certainly had come through for him during this trial. Memories of their carefree romp in the woods last night came to mind and she felt herself calming down. To be able to run free like that again had been like a balm on an open

wound. She'd needed it. In spite of their vow to remain in human form, Lucas had known it was just the right medicine for her, proving again just how suited they were for one another. *Soul mates. Forever.*

Deacon Hunt was turning away from the jury now, walking to the center of the room, near the evidence table. He picked up the rock and held it high for all to see. "Victor Kane attacked Craig Lynch in the woods that night. He picked up this rock and smashed it down on the poor man's head as he was fleeing for his life. What was Craig Lynch doing in the woods, you might ask? Who knows? We will never know the answer to that, will we, because he's dead. Dead in a horrible way and left, by his killer, Victor Kane, to be chewed and gnawed on by wild animals. There's no dignity in that, ladies and gentlemen. A grisly death, followed by disfigurement. That's the kind of man who sits at the defense table before you today. A man who would strike down..." He brought the rock down suddenly and several of the women jurors gasped. "...Another man in the dark of night, from behind...a man who is just as much of an animal as any marauding creature living in those woods. A killer who did this deed and has no remorse for his actions. Don't let him go unpunished. Craig Lynch can't speak for himself today, but you can see that justice is

done.”

Talia watched the prosecutor put the rock carefully on the table, look once more at the jury, then walk back to his seat in slow, purposeful strides.

The silence was complete and Talia felt Caroline’s grip tighten on her hand as Kevin rose from his chair. The defense attorney sighed as he approached the jury box. Talia watched as he passed by the evidence table and gave the rock an appraising glance. He still wasn’t dressed as formally as Rich, but in his brown pants, pale yellow shirt and tan corduroy blazer, he looked trim and neat.

“Well, Mr. Hunt spins a very intriguing *fairy tale* of his own, doesn’t he?”

Several jurors allowed themselves the luxury of slight smiles but Talia saw that others remained grim-faced, obviously still remembering the way Hunt had described Craig Lynch’s death.

Kevin continued, “You’ve watched and listened to what went on here yesterday. You’ve heard the prosecution’s own witnesses, under our cross examination, cast doubt on what was already a weak circumstantial case, at best. Detective Muncie’s report states one thing, yet the principals of that report, state quite another. Why is that?”

“Caroline Thomas got on the stand and readily admitted she’d made numerous calls to Craig

Lynch and told you why. In her own words. Under oath. You know, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, it took a lot of courage for her to get up here and admit she was spying on her lover. She had to have felt humiliated, having to air that piece of dirty laundry before you. But she did it, because it was the *truth*. All of you live in this town, it's a small town. People know one another's business, oftentimes. Caroline Thomas is a high-profile individual. She is the assistant of Victor Kane, one of the most prominent businessmen in this community. Do you honestly think she could have hidden an affair with a local reporter, who was well-known also, for very long? Come on, let's not get carried away here. Phone calls do not constitute an affair.

"In essence, Victor Kane had not motive to kill Craig Lynch, which becomes obvious once you strip away the thin veneer upon which the prosecution has based their flimsy case. No witnesses can place Victor Kane in those woods that night. Did the prosecution put one person on the stand who even saw him out and about that night? No. And Caroline Thomas has testified that he was with her all night. The fact that the prosecution doesn't want to believe her, doesn't prove she's lying."

Kevin moved away from the jury box and motioned toward Talia. "Oh, you might say, he

was Talia Coe's father and if Craig Lynch was bothering her he might very well try to put a stop to it. Yet, it was Lucas Knight who went to visit Mr. Lynch and Lucas Knight who threatened Mr. Lynch. Not our client! The prosecution has failed to bring forth one person who ever saw Victor Kane anywhere near Craig Lynch. Their paths obviously didn't cross! And are we to believe Victor Kane tried to kill his own daughter, after he mentored her, nurtured her, helped her for months, hoping all the time that she'd get her memory back? Come on, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, let's have a reality check here!

Kevin continued his course toward the evidence table. "Cell phone records that were easily explained, a rock with no fingerprints, innuendoes, accusations with no basis in fact..." Kevin stepped away from the table shaking his head. Then he looked at the jury. "Craig Lynch is dead and that is a tragedy. I agree with that. But the prosecution had failed to prove, *beyond a reasonable doubt*, that it was even murder, let alone that Victor Kane had any part in it. Therefore it is your duty to find him not guilty."

With that, Kevin returned to the defense table and sat down.

Judge Abel Russo thanked both the prosecutor and defense attorneys, then turned his attention to the twelve jurors. As he read the instructions,

Talia closed her eyes and bit at her lower lip. Lucas's arm, which had been around her shoulder, drew her a little closer.

"What do you think?" Caroline whispered.

Talia shook her head, unable to even put into words the fear she felt. Once the jury left to begin their deliberations and the judge adjourned the court with a sharp rap of his gavel, Talia got up and, followed closely by Caroline, went to the defense table. She embraced her father, then stepped aside so Caroline and he could have a few moments before Victor was again hauled off by an officer.

Talia looked around, expecting Lucas to be behind her, but he was nowhere in sight. She turned to Kevin and Rich, who were busy putting papers back into their attaché cases. "You did a wonderful job," she told them, hugging each one in turn.

"We were brilliant," Rich said with a flourish.

"Hunt's a prick with his brain in his pants," Kevin said sourly. "Wonder why Brianna didn't show up? I don't believe that lie about illness for a minute."

Victor, who had been kissing Caroline, released her and said, "I had to wonder why she was here at all. He didn't let her say two words."

"For show and as a power play. He loves to humiliate his staff. I could tell you horror

stories...things I've heard..." Rich told them.

"But he won't," Kevin interrupted, as a police officer stepped up to the group and put the handcuffs on Victor.

Talia felt her heart sink and tears sting her eyes. *What if, when the jury returns, those cuffs go on again and he's led away, only this time for good?*

* * * *

After Talia, Lucas and Caroline left the courthouse they went to the local coffee shop. It was nearly noon and the place was hopping. Talia recognized several of the people who had been in court as spectators. Their whispers reached her ears as Lucas led them to a table in the back.

"I hate this. I just want to hide...I can't stand the way people look at us," Talia said miserably.

Caroline slammed her purse on the table as she sat down. "Ignore them," she hissed. "Our *real* friends aren't here whispering about us, nor were they in that courtroom." She glared at a table nearby where several men sat talking in low tones and leering their way. "Hicks!"

Talia saw that they had read Caroline's lips as she'd enunciated that last word and smiled as they quickly shifted their gazes away.

Lucas signaled the waitress. "I'll have a BLT and coffee."

The young woman looked expectantly at Talia, who felt her stomach lurch again. "Just something to drink...a diet soda."

Caroline ordered a bowl of clam chowder and hot tea.

Once the waitress left the table, Lucas leaned in close and said, "You need to eat something, Talia. It won't help anyone, least of all Victor, if you get sick."

"I'm *already* sick, Lucas. That's why I can't eat," she snapped. She felt Caroline's hand on her arm and looked her way. Caroline was smiling. What the hell did any of them have to smile about, least of all Caroline?

When they were halfway through lunch, Kevin came rushing in. "The jury's back!"

Talia's mouth flew open. How could that be...so soon?

"Is that good or bad?" Lucas asked.

"Come on! Court will reconvene in ten minutes," Kevin urged, without answering the question.

Caroline grabbed her purse and followed the attorney.

"Go," Lucas urged Talia, "I'll get the check and be right there."

* * * *

Talia kept watching the door for Lucas, her heart hammering in her ears, her stomach clenching in spasms. Next to her, Caroline sat ramrod straight, her small hands twisting in her lap. When they brought Victor in, Talia wanted to go to him and throw her arms around him and weep, that's how frightened she was.

Lucas rushed in and sat down in the aisle seat next to Talia, on the aisle.

Judge Russo entered, then came the jury.

Talia tried to read something in their faces but it was useless. They were like stone masks, revealing nothing. She glanced at Deacon Hunt, who was also watching the jurors closely, his face an inscrutable mask.

Rich and Kevin sat stoically on either side of their client, eyes straight ahead.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?" Judge Russo intoned.

The foreman, a middle-aged man with close-cropped gray hair and rimless glasses, stood and said, "We have, Your Honor." He then handed the folded paper to the bailiff, who took it to the bench.

Russo opened the document, scanned it and handed it back to the bailiff. Once that was done and the paper was back in the hands of the foreman, he said, "How say you?"

The foreman's voice was almost staccato as he

read, "We the jury in the case of the state versus Victor Kane, on the charge of second degree murder, find the defendant...not guilty."

There was a second or two of stunned silence, then the courtroom erupted into a cacophony of disjointed sounds.

Rich's whoop of joy could be heard as he shouted, "Yes!"

Talia found she'd been holding her breath and felt the dizziness overtake her as Caroline jumped up and ran to Victor. Then the world swirled, went sideways and blackness narrowed her vision until it was totally gone.

chapter eighteen

Talia awoke to the sound of strange voices and the clang of metal hitting metal. She opened her eyes and blinked several times. Above her a large circular orb glowed starkly and she averted her gaze, looking to her left, then her right. Slowly, a form dressed in green came into focus. In that instant, the form turned and Talia was greeted with a friendly smile.

“Well, you’re awake. Good. I’ll get the doctor.”

Talia tried to respond, but her lips felt like they were glued together and the sound came out resembling a raspy croak. *What the hell happened to me?* She tried to clear her mind. The last thing she remembered was the courtroom. *The verdict! Not guilty. My father was found not guilty. Where is he? Where’s Lucas? Why am I here? Where is here?*

She surveyed her surroundings. A hospital? She felt something around her left arm. Raising her head a little she saw that it was a blood pressure cuff. *Did I get sick in the courtroom? How*

humiliating. No, wait. I remember now. I felt dizzy, then everything started to go black. I fainted!

Suddenly a tall woman in white came into view. Close behind that woman came Lucas, a worried look on his face.

"Is she all right? I've been out there waiting for an hour. What the hell is this, anyway?" he demanded.

Talia tried to open her mouth to tell him that she was okay, but again all she could emit was an odd noise that seemed to alarm Lucas even more.

"She's going to be fine," the woman assured Lucas, who didn't seem convinced.

"I passed out," Talia finally managed to say.

Lucas leaned closer and kissed her forehead. "I know. You scared the hell out of me, too. And out of everyone else in the courtroom. Talk about upstaging your father's great moment." He smiled.

She smiled back and felt much better now that she realized he was joking about it. *Nothing can be terribly wrong with me if Lucas is making jokes, can it? No. Of course not. It was just stress. I'll be fine. I need to see my father, though.* "Where's Victor..."

"Out in the waiting room," Lucas told her.

The woman in white stepped into view again. "Ms. Coe," she began in an authoritative voice, obviously taking charge of the situation, "I'm Dr. Maria Hurst. I was called in to consult, after the

results of your tests came back."

"Tests? Why? I just fainted...the stress of the trial... Lucas just said I'm okay..." she began, then stopped. She'd heard that name before during conversations with Caroline. She was the doctor who delivered Alex! Talia struggled to sit up, but Lucas held her down. "No, let me up. I know who you are," she continued, her eyes on the doctor. She shot a glance at Lucas, who was now smiling broadly. "Wipe that smirk off your face!" she ordered.

"Your tests confirm it, Ms. Coe. You're pregnant. About nine weeks, I'd say. Everything is fine. I will be happy to see you during the remainder of your pregnancy, if you wish," the doctor said with a reassuring smile.

Talia looked at Lucas again and noted he still had that silly grin on his face. Then she felt her own mouth curving up in a smile as the words sunk in. "I'm having a baby?"

"*We're* having a baby," Lucas corrected, raising a eyebrow. "I did contribute to the cause, if you recall."

"Can I go?" Talia asked, needing to get out of the flimsy hospital gown, into her own clothes and out of there.

Dr. Hurst nodded. "I'll write the discharge instructions. You can call my office for an appointment tomorrow. That is, if you want me

to..."

"Of course. You took excellent care of Caroline," Talia responded, as the nurse returned and removed the blood pressure cuff. To Lucas she said, "A baby. Us." Then she was off the table and into his arms. The feel of his strong arms around her erased all the bad memories of the past few days. Her father was free and she was going to have a baby. Life was finally going to be good again! She pulled away from him. "Go wait with Dad. I'll get dressed and be out in a minute," she said, then added as he turned to leave, "I love you." Lucas looked at her over his shoulder and for just a second, before he smiled again, she saw the flicker of concern that was in his eyes. But it was so quickly gone that she put it out of her mind as the realization that she and Lucas were going to be parents took its place.

* * * *

Victor entered the gallery that bore his name and stopped just inside the door, looking around. While Caroline had explained to him the changes she'd made to the interior, he was astounded at what he saw. The soft colors, the comfortable looking furniture, the placement of the exhibits and the dropped ceiling all combined to create an ambiance that encouraged one to browse, stay a

while, look some more, and buy!

He removed his coat and looped it over his arm. Why did he suddenly feel like a visitor in his own art gallery?

"So, what do you think?"

Victor turned at the sound of Caroline's voice and smiled. She was standing in the hallway that led to the offices. She'd changed clothes, he noticed and she now wore a short red skirt and a soft looking black sweater cut to a low vee in the front. The effect was stunning and he felt his pulse quicken and his cock twitch.

"I think you light up any room you walk into," he said, moving slowly toward her.

She took a few steps his way, then stopped. "How's Talia?" She took his coat and hung it on the rack tucked away in the corner of the hallway.

Victor smiled. "Pregnant, actually."

Caroline showed no surprise. "I figured as much.

Victor shook his head. "How do you women always know these things about each other without even being told?"

Caroline smiled slyly. "We know a lot of things; that's how we stay one step ahead of you men."

Victor was smart enough not to argue with that. He ran a hand through his hair. "Hard to believe I'm going to be a grandpa. Think you can adjust to being with an old codger like me?" He closed the

gap between them. "By the way, the place looks great. And you look good enough to eat."

Caroline stroked his cheek, then moved her fingers to his upper lip, tugging lightly at the mustache. "Are you planning on keeping that?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Well...it does add an interesting sensation...against my bare skin..."

Victor drew her close running his hands down to her buttocks. "I don't think I see enough bare skin right now to help me make an informed decision about whether or not to keep it..."

Just then the sound of someone clearing their throat could be heard and Victor saw a tall, muscular man standing in hallway. Stepping back from Caroline, he looked at her then again at the man.

Caroline turned abruptly, then said, "Oh, Ben. I thought you'd gone already."

"I was just finishing up on the computer."

Victor evaluated the man, taking in the thick curly hair and wide-set hazel eyes. He also noted the casual demeanor and the way he moved with a slow, easy stride as he came into the room. *Put a ten-gallon hat on him and he could pass for a ranch hand in a old western.*

"You must be Mr. Kane. Good to finally meet you. I'm Ben Walker."

I'll just bet you are, Victor thought, taking an

instant dislike to him. Aloud, he said, "Well, Caroline has told me all about the way you've taken to the new computer system. Tomorrow, we'll sit down and you can bring me up to speed."

"Glad to, Mr. Kane," Ben replied, glancing at Caroline.

"Ben only works part time. He'll be back in the day after tomorrow," Caroline said.

Victor quickly asked, "Oh, and what do you do the rest of the time?"

Ignoring Caroline's fingers digging into his forearm, Victor waited for a reply.

Ben seemed nonplused by the question. "This and that," he replied with a shrug, adding, "You know how it is."

"Actually, no, I don't..." Victor began.

Caroline interrupted with, "We need to get going. Thanks, Ben. Victor, I'm sure you want to get home and see Alex." With that she turned and strode toward the office.

Shit, she's pissed, Victor thought as he watched Caroline's retreating form. When he turned around again, Ben was gone.

Caroline had closed the office door. When Victor opened it and walked in, he found her sitting behind the desk, sorting some papers. Quickly scanning the room, he was relieved to see she hadn't changed a thing. *Well, she looks a hell of a lot better sitting behind that desk than I ever did, so I*

guess that was a worthwhile change.

Finally she looked up at him and he nearly cringed at the scowl on her face.

"What was that all about?" she demanded.

Victor feigned surprise. "What?"

Caroline stood and came around the desk, stopping a few feet from him. "You know damned well what I'm talking about. Your little pissing contest with Ben, that's what!"

Victor shrugged. "He got under my skin."

"Why? Because he has been such a big help? Or is it because he's able to operate our inventory system? Or is it because he's reliable, shows up on time and does as he's told without complaining and whining? Which of this horribly unattractive traits did you find so repulsive, Victor?"

He looked at her standing there with her hands on her hips, her face flushed with anger, her azure eyes ablaze and thought she'd never looked so beautiful to him.

"And quit looking at me that way!" she cried.

"What way?" Victor was at a loss now.

"*That way,*" she repeated, adding, "Like you want to ravage me."

Victor smiled. "But I do." Caroline sighed heavily and he knew he'd won. Maybe not the entire argument, but he'd stemmed the tide for the moment. Slowly he began to walk around the office, touching things as he went. "A lot of

memories inside these walls," he said, turning toward her when he reached the other side. "Is there any surface in here that we haven't screwed on?" Caroline's hands seemed to be busy now, fidgeting with the belt that encircled her small waist and Victor let his eyes drift to the spot just below there.

"I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you..." Caroline began.

"And I'm trying to get laid...have pity on the poor jailbird, won't you? I mean, this might not be as adventurous as the visitor's room at the city building but it does have a lot of...history."

Caroline abruptly turned around. "Sorry, Mr. Kane. I'm afraid I'm saving myself for marriage."

Victor smiled and walked toward her. "Well, in that case, Ms. Thomas, it's a good thing I have this with me, isn't it?"

He drew the small, velvet box from his suit coat pocket and held it out to her. When Caroline had pressed him about his after-court errand, he'd told her he needed to meet briefly with Rich and Kevin, to settle up his account. In truth, he'd made a visit to the local jewelry store.

Caroline blinked several times, looking up at him with an astonished look on her face. "What...I mean...I didn't..."

Victor opened the lid and heard her gasp. Satisfaction spiraled through him at the look on

her face. The ring, a two-carat pear shaped diamond set in platinum, had drawn his eye the minute he'd looked in the display case. It was generous enough to be impressive, but not too large for Caroline's small, delicate hands. "Do you like it? We can return it if you don't and get something..." he began, then stopped as he saw the tears on her cheeks.

"You...I...Oh, my God...I didn't think you'd..."

Victor bristled a little. "You didn't think I'd make an honest woman out of you?" She looked up at him and he felt his heart flutter. *I'm getting soft. That trial turned me into a sissy!* He took the ring out of the box. "Yes or no?" He tried to sound stern, like the old Victor, but the tremor in his voice gave him away and he cursed inwardly. *I'm sunk.*

"You're supposed to put it on my finger," Caroline was saying.

Victor smiled awkwardly. "Not until you say yes."

"A girl should play a little hard to get, don't you think?"

He crooked an eyebrow. "A little late for that, isn't it?"

"You dog!" Caroline swiped at him with her right hand, as he slipped the ring on her left.

"Wolf, actually," he whispered, his smile widening. Then he breathed a sigh of relief as he

felt the tension between them evaporate like smoke in the wind. In an instant, she was in his arms and he heard her whisper “Yes,” into his ear.

Victor felt his erection grow as Caroline’s body made contact with his. Their short-but-sweet romp in the visitor’s room while he was in jail had done little to curb his overwhelming sexual appetite.

Her hand slid down his back, slowly, gently, then with more urgency, as he sought out her lips with his. He kissed her deeply, letting his tongue work its way around the inside of her mouth, probing further as his passion ignited. She felt warm, and soft in his embrace, molding herself to him, letting him lead the way. His hands cupped her buttocks again, this time drawing her closer and his cock throbbed with desire.

Caroline moaned as he cupped her breast and squeezed. The way her nipples protruded beneath the sweater made it obvious she wore no bra. He drew back and pulled the garment over her head, throwing it on the floor. He looked at her for a moment, taking in the perfect shapes before him, then caressed one with his mouth, sucking hard on the nipple, letting up, then sucking hard again. His other hand drifted under her skirt to her inner thighs where the liquid now flowed thick and sweet, unencumbered by panties.

“I want to taste you, drink you in,” he muttered, raising the skirt and getting to his

knees. She spread her legs to accommodate him and he licked the droplets from her skin, then worked his way upward, until he was able to part her moist lips with his tongue and lap at her juices. He felt her clit swell and contract as he worked at it, then her orgasm vibrated against his tongue as he probed even deeper, and she grabbed his head, holding it in place. His groin ached for release now and he stood, letting her undress him, which she seemed to be doing with excruciating slowness. And still she wore the skirt, which he now viewed as a barrier to be eliminated. He undid the belt and pulled down the zipper almost frantically. As the garment dropped, he again found her core and let his fingers do the walking this time.

Her touch on his penis set his blood on fire. She ran her finger over the tip and he felt the jism run down his shaft, knowing that much of it was coating her fingers. Oh, how she loved that. He knew what she liked. With that in mind he backed her up to the desk and reached behind her back, sweeping the contents off the top. As papers, files and pens scattered to the floor, he lifted her up and perched her on the edge of the shiny wood surface. He entered her with force, jamming himself deep inside as she clutched at him, riding him hard and fast. He felt her muscles spasm against his shaft until his body found release and

he climaxed with a fury that made him actually see stars behind his closed eyelids.

Afterward, he pulled Caroline into his lap in the large, leather chair behind the desk. Oh how he had missed her, missed the intimacy they'd shared. Now he was back and she was his. He had her and his son, as well as a mended relationship with Talia and a grandchild on the way.

"Penny," she said, looking at him acutely.

"For these thoughts? Okay, I was just thinking about what a lucky man I am."

Caroline kissed him on the cheek and got up. "We need to get home. Alex should start learning who his father is."

He was almost finished dressing, when a noise in the hallway grabbed his attention. "Is the gallery locked up?"

Caroline, fully dressed now, handed Victor his tie, which he stuffed in his pocket. "It should be. Ben always makes sure the doors are secured before he leaves at five."

Opening the office door, Victor walked into the darkened gallery. Everything seemed in order. But, as he entered the storeroom, he thought he saw, out of the corner of his eye, the back door just closing. Rushing across the floor, he pulled it open and seconds later the shrill bleating of the alarm pierced the silence. "Damn it!" Victor swore randomly pushing buttons on the keypad in an

effort to silence the unearthly noise.

"Here, let me," Caroline said nudging him aside. Within seconds the wailing stopped.

"When did you put in this new system?" Victor roared, then realized he didn't have to yell.

"Ben advised me to change it. The one we had before was antiquated and kept malfunctioning. I have to call the security company and tell them it's a false alarm or the police will be here," Caroline told him, turning to go.

Victor stepped outside and searched the alley thoroughly, not that he expected anyone to still be lingering there. Then he hesitated a moment, recalling the events that had occurred in that alley several months ago while he'd been on the run. With that memory came one he didn't want, that of Caroline's involvement with Jeremy, or should he say, Doug. *But, he'd dead and I'm back now. Things will be different.*

Victor glanced at his watch. It was almost six o'clock. He wouldn't push it today, but tomorrow, he would let Caroline know that he intended to take over the management of the gallery again.

chapter nineteen

Talia was on the couch sipping a third cup of herbal tea Lucas had made for her. He'd insisted on starting dinner but was still in the kitchen trying to decided what to fix. *This can't go on. Seven more months of this and I'll strangle him with my bare hands!* She put the mug on the coffee table and called, "I'm not an invalid, Lucas. I'm pregnant. If we were in the wild, what would you do?"

He came into the room, wiping his hands on a dish towel. "You're saying I'm being overprotective."

"Well...yeah," she responded. Then she noticed the crestfallen look on his face and added, soothingly, "Look, the doctor says I'm fine. We can go about or normal lives...whatever the hell that is. Anyway, we can do whatever we want...even have raunchy sex. Get it? I'm fine."

Lucas raised an eyebrow, a sign that he was still skeptical. "And did you ask him if it's okay for

you to shift and romp around in the woods at night when the mood strikes?"

Talia stared at him for a moment, then said, "You know damned well I didn't. Now, if you or my father should happen to know of any shifter-friendly doctors in the area, I'll be glad to have my records transferred." Then a thought struck her and she felt her blood run cold. "You don't think...when we turned...that didn't hurt the baby..."

Lucas shrugged. "Evidently not, since they examined you after that. But I don't think we'll a habit of it."

Talia nodded her agreement, then said, "I guess there's no manual on childbirth or child rearing for shifters, is there?"

Lucas smiled and went to the television, turning up the sound. "Oh look, it's our old buddy, Deacon Hunt, trying to put a positive spin on losing the biggest case of the year," he said.

"Slimy snake. There's something about him...something not quite right." Talia watched as Hunt smiled mechanically at reporters, his voice smooth and deep. His courtroom voice.

"...I feel we presented a solid case, but the jury didn't agree, obviously. I learned a long time ago that juries don't always go with the facts, and often let emotions get in the way. I also learned that good pre-trial research is the key to a successful outcome. That

may have been our only weak spot..."

When asked if he thought his co-counsel had been remiss in her duties, Hunt snapped, "I'm really not at liberty to discuss Ms. Hadley's part in this case."

Talia turned off the set in disgust. "Did you hear that? His insinuation was pretty clear. He's trying to blame Brianna Hadley for losing. What a bastard!"

Just then a knock sounded at the door and Lucas went to answer it.

Talia was surprised to see Rachel standing there, holding a large bag in her hand. "When you called and told me the news, I couldn't help myself," she said, looking at Lucas, then noticing Talia, added, "I hope you don't mind, but I thought with all of this going on you wouldn't feel like cooking...and I know you like the food from Italia...Mr. Knight told me..." she said, referring to the town's only Italian restaurant.

Talia smiled at the woman and invited her inside. "This is very thoughtful, Rachel." She found that the aroma emanating from the bag was making her mouth water. Hunger. Real hunger. For the first time in weeks. It was a pleasant sensation and she took the bag and walked toward the kitchen. "I hope you brought enough for three, because I want you to join us."

"Oh, I couldn't. I mean, this is for you two..."

Rachel began.

Talia turned and shook her head. "I won't hear anything but an acceptance from you. You're eating with us." She smiled and was gratified that Rachel returned the smile with one of her own. *I have to think of a tactful way to tell her she needs a new hairdo.*

"You okay?" Lucas asked Talia.

He was now standing beside her, that worried look on his face again and Talia patted his arm, then turned her attention back to Rachel. "Let's get the table set and eat. I'm starved!"

* * * *

When Caroline drove into Arcadian Ridge, she again fought the urge to glance toward Unit 117. Keeping her eyes straight ahead, she pulled around the building and into the carport. "Welcome home," Caroline said, turning to Victor. The lease on Victor's small apartment had expired while he was in jail awaiting trial and Caroline had moved his personal belongings to her townhouse.

"Home is where you and Alex are," Victor told her.

Caroline smiled, then opened the door and got out. She suspected that Victor was still a little disoriented. Spending months in jail had to have

made this world seem like a lifetime ago. It would probably take him some time to get back into the swing of things. But she believed that once he got settled in with her and Alex everything else would fall into place.

Walking into the kitchen, Caroline was once again grateful for Claire. A delicious aroma filled the air. "What is it?" she asked, after calling out Claire's name.

Victor closed the door and said, "I don't know, but it's got to beat that slop they served at the jail."

Just then Claire, carrying her overnight bag, entered the room and stopped, her gaze resting on Victor. Then Caroline saw the strange look on Victor's face and turned to look at Claire. The two were staring at one another in a odd way, one Caroline didn't understand. Then, as if a spell was broken, Claire put down the suitcase, moved to the nearby coat rack and slipped on her parka.

"This is Victor Kane, Claire, Alex's father," Caroline said by way of introduction. She touched his arm and felt a muscle ripple beneath the jacket.

Claire shrugged into her coat, then said, "It's nice to...meet you. Congratulations on the acquittal...Mr. Kane. It's good that Alex will have his father with him now."

Caroline watched Victor shake Claire's hand, feeling unsettled at what she saw flicker in his eyes. A spire of the old jealousy that used to rear

its ugly head during the earlier days of their relationship came rushing back. *How long does a damned handshake need to last?* When Victor finally withdrew his hand, she felt that he did so reluctantly. Claire, however, seemed suddenly anxious to leave and hurried to the back door.

"I need to go," she said, glancing at Caroline. "Alex has eaten and is sleeping. There's pot roast in the oven and apple pie on the counter. See you in the morning."

Is it my imagination, or is Claire blushing, Caroline thought as the woman hurried out into the night.

* * * *

Victor stood and gazed down at the sleeping baby. *My son. He's a good mixture of me and Caroline, that's for sure.* He ruffled the child's thick dark hair, which definitely resembled Caroline's but had a hint of red pigment added to give it highlights. Alex stirred and emitted a muffled little cry, then settled down again. His eyes, however, were a deep chocolate brown, and he'd noticed during one of the jailhouse visits that the golden flecks had begun to form. *My little alpha.* "Maybe I should tell Lucas to beware of the beast nipping at his heels," Victor whispered.

When he went downstairs and found Caroline busy in the kitchen.

"This roast is done...I think we can eat..." she began.

"Hold dinner for a minute, will you. I have something I need to take care of," Victor interrupted, grabbing his coat off the nearby rack and opening the back door. He hurried out into the night before she could question him further.

Rounding the building, he marched across the courtyard and rang the bell of Unit 117. When he got no answer, he rapped sharply, using his fist.

If Neil Wade was surprised to see him standing on his doorstep, he didn't show it.

Pushing past the man, Victor stepped inside. "We need to get something straight, Wade."

"Come in why don't you Victor. Good to see you out...and about." Neil said, stroking his mustache briefly before closing the door.

"Let's cut the shit. This isn't a social call," Victor snarled. "I came to tell you that I don't want to see you anywhere near Caroline or my son. Ever. Not for any reason. I'm going to be living over there with them now, so don't try anything or I'll know about it and then I'll be back, only the next time it won't be with just a warning."

Neil raised his hands, as though in surrender. "Take it easy, Victor. I'm not here to make any trouble."

Victor's eyes narrowed. "That's another thing.

Just why *are* you hanging around? The trial is over, so why don't you get out of town?"

"I have some unfinished business," Neil replied.

"Such as?" Victor demanded. He wanted to wipe that half-smirk off the younger man's face but instead just balled his fists at his sides and waited for an answer.

Neil sighed. "Look, Victor, there's a lot going on that you don't know about..."

Victor took a step forward. "Enlighten me."

The ringing of the telephone interrupted them, and Neil went to answer it.

Victor opened the front door. "Just remember what I said. Keep your distance." Although Neil didn't turn around, he could have sworn he heard the man say in a low tone, "Not possible, I'm afraid."

Stepping out onto the front porch, Victor hesitated a moment before closing the door. Neil's voice, somewhat muffled by distance, but still discernible due to Victor's acute hearing, was saying "...he was just here. It's not going to be easy...I know that, but...yes, I'm staying, but I'll need to be very careful...just a minute..."

Victor heard footsteps and closed the door, stepping quickly into the shadows of a tall bush next to the porch. Then he heard the lock snap into place and the lights in the living were turned off.

Out in the courtyard, Victor stood for a moment, trying to control the rage that boiled up in him at the thought of Neil Wade putting his hands on Caroline. *Oh, not just Neil, but that other one, too. The one who called himself Jeremy. Damn them all! And what the hell did Wade mean by that crack he made about me not knowing about everything that is going on? Also, just who the hell was he talking to on the phone? He's staying, is he? Unfinished business. Said he'd be careful. Yes, Wade, you do that..you be very careful, because I'll be watching, and waiting.*

Hunkering down inside his coat, Victor hurried toward the townhouse where Caroline and his son were waiting.

* * * *

After dinner, Talia led Rachel into her studio. Lucas had insisted on clearing the table and Talia wasn't about to argue with him. Some pampering was a good thing, she decided.

"Your eye for detail is extraordinary. And the subtle use of shadowing adds an air of mystery," Rachel said, moving immediately to the picture Talia had on the easel. "Painting the woods from a perspective through those windows is brilliant."

"Well, I have to admit, I struggled with this until someone suggested that approach," Talia revealed. "Obviously you know a little bit about

art. Not many people mention shadowing and perspective. They just say they like it or don't."

"Will it be for sale?" Rachel swung around and threw an inquiring glance Talia's way.

"I'm hoping to have it ready for the gallery's spring show."

"Oh, yes. I've heard about that. I understand galleries from all over the country have been invited to send pieces. I wonder what the response will be?"

Talia watched Rachel walk around the room, looking at other paintings. "Well, you weren't here a few months ago... there was supposed to be a Christmas show, but then...with everything happening with my father and the murders..."

"It didn't take me long to get caught up on town history. People who come into the shop and find out I'm the new girl in town are only too happy to tell all."

Talia smiled ruefully. "I'm sure that was especially true during the trial."

Rachel nodded. Then she stopped in front of a painting propped against a far wall. It was one of those from what Talia referred to as her dark period.

"You did this?" Rachel asked, obviously surprised.

Talia joined her. "During a time when my life was in great turmoil."

"When you had amnesia," Rachel said softly, almost as though she were talking to herself.

Talia nodded.

"Can I buy it?" Rachel asked suddenly, pointing to the painting.

Talia blinked at her in surprise. "This? You want to buy this?" She looked again at the picture of the lonely hilltop and the hopeless-looking figure who seemed to be struggling to fight off inner demons under a moon that did little to chase away the shadowy illusion of doom. "I can't imagine why you'd want it. Actually I was going to paint over it..."

Rachel exclaimed, "No! I want it. Please. Name your price."

Taken aback, Talia finally picked up the picture and handed it to the woman. "Consider it a welcome-to-Arcadia gift," she said.

Rachel took the picture. "I couldn't...I have to pay you something..."

Talia shook her head and said firmly, "No. I wasn't going to keep it anyway. If you like it, I want you to have it."

"It could be worth something, you know." Rachel said, staring intently at the painting.

"Not to me. It's just a reminder of some of the worst days of my life," Talia told her, feeling relieved that the last of those awful nightmarish renderings was about to walk out the door. Then a

thought struck her. "However, you can do me one favor."

Rachel faced her. "Name it."

"I need a day out...you know, shopping, hairdresser, the works and I don't want to go alone. How about it? Saturday?"

Rachel's smiled widely. "You want me to go with you? Shopping? But...Mr. Knight might need me at the shop..."

"Lucas will give you Saturday afternoon off, I'll see to it. After all, you held down the fort for two days during the trial; it's the least he can do. Oh, and we can't forget lunch. Definitely lunch," Talia hoped Rachel would accept. This might be her chance to suggest a new haircut and an updated wardrobe to the woman. But there was more to it than that. She liked Rachel and felt that if they spent more time together they could become good friends. She needed that—a good friend.

"Then it's settled. I'll pick you up at the shop at noon," Talia told her.

Lucas passed them as they came into the living room and stopped, throwing a questioning glance at the picture Rachel was carrying. Talia gave him a look that she hoped conveyed this was no time for him to ask questions. Evidently it worked, because he silently helped Rachel on with her coat, handed her the picture again and opened the front door.

"I'll see you in the morning, Mr. Knight. Thank you so much, Ms. Coe."

"Talía."

Rachel smile. "Talía, yes, thank you."

With that she was gone.

"Okay...why did she just leave with Quasimodo?" Lucas asked.

He'd nicknamed the painting that because he claimed the figure on the hill looked disfigured. When Talía had tried to explain to him that it was an abstract, he'd scoffed and said there was nothing abstract about it, just a spooky guy with a posture problem.

"She liked it, so I gave it to her," Talía said, going down the hallway into the bedroom.

"She liked *that*? Well, well, maybe our Rachel has a twisted side we know nothing about," Lucas said, coming up behind her and slipping his arms around her waist. "Maybe she's kinky underneath all that proper behavior."

Talía turned around in his arms and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Maybe *I* have a kinky side, did you ever think of that?"

Lucas smiled and rubbed his goatee lightly against her cheek. "I know what you really like me to rub this against," he whispered.

His warm breath fluttered against the side of her face as he reached up and raked his long fingers slowly through her hair. She felt the

beginnings of desire, then smiled as his erection pressed into her belly. "I think I might have a little bit of amnesia again. Maybe you'd better demonstrate what you're talking about..."

He swept her up into his arms and carried her to the bed, lowering her carefully onto the thick quilt. "Well, we'd better have a refresher course, then," he said, stripping off his shirt.

The room was nearly dark, with the only light coming from the full moon outside the French doors. Lucas went to close the curtains, but she asked him not to. She loved the shadowy effect and there was enough illumination for her to see his muscles ripple as he moved. *There are advantages to having superior vision and hearing.* Talia's eyes followed his slow progress back to the bed, all the while longing to feel his body against hers. She also wanted to feel him inside of her, filling her up, nudging against the womb where their child was now nestled, safe and secure. *Our child. A pure shifter. A new generation.*

Lucas slowly undressed her, brushing her nipples with his fingers as he pulled the sweater up over her head.

"You're amazing. So beautiful," he muttered, burying his face in the place between her breasts.

His tongue lapped at her, as he made his way to one of her nipples, then took it into his mouth sucking lightly. She threw back her head and

moaned. It felt so good. Lately her breasts had been sore, her nipples tender, but the feel of his lips on them was a mixture of pleasure and pain that made her pulse pound and her clit contract in anticipation. "More, harder, Lucas, please..."

His hands moved to the snap on her jeans then to the zipper. In seconds he'd managed to slide the pants down and she squirmed around, helping him remove them. She knew her panties were soaked by now and as he slipped them off then ran his hand up the inside of one thigh, she thrust her hips forward, urging him on, willing him to touch her most intimate spot. His fingers played around the outside of her sex, then probed deeper and she felt her muscles contract, trying to draw them deeply inside of her.

Need snaked up her slick, swollen walls into her very core and she felt the warmth of release begin. It rolled over her like a hot wave, as Lucas pulled at her quivering clit and sucked at her nipples, giving each one equal attention. She bucked off the bed, thrashing wildly as she gave herself over to the pure pleasure of the moment. When it was over and she lay there bathed in perspiration, he mounted her and slid his cock into her slowly, easily, setting off another pulse-pounding orgasm that left her exhausted and fully satisfied.

* * * *

After her shower, Caroline found Victor in the nursery, giving Alex a bottle. "When did he wake up? It's barely ten o'clock. He shouldn't..." She stopped when she saw the look on his face. "You woke him up, didn't you?"

"He was moving around...he would have gotten up soon anyway."

Caroline felt a rush of tenderness as she watched Victor cradle their son. If someone would have told her a year ago that she'd be witnessing such a scene, she would have called them crazy. She pulled the other rocking chair over next to Victor's. "He's something, isn't he?"

"He's perfect," Victor replied.

"You never did tell me where you went right before dinner," Caroline said.

"Just out for some air," Victor replied.

"You went to see Neil," she stated.

"You spying on me?"

"I watched you cross the courtyard."

Victor shrugged and readjusted the baby in his arms. "I just wanted him to know I'll be keeping an eye on things around here from now on."

"And are you going to be watching me, too, Victor?" She looked into those dark eyes and saw the flecks dancing there.

"Be kind of hard not to, since I'm living here

now. Look, I just gave Wade a friendly warning, that's all. And I don't want to talk about that jackal anymore tonight." He looked down at Alex, then asked, "Has he shifted yet?"

Knowing from experience that it would be impossible to get anything further out of him on the subject of Neil Wade, Caroline shook her head. "I'm living in fear that he'll turn when poor Claire is here and she'll freak out."

"Maybe you should start spending more time with him. You know, start phasing Claire out..."

Caroline felt her cheeks redden as a flash of anger surged through her. "Are you saying you don't want me at the gallery any longer?" She got up and put the chair back where it had been.

"No, but if you're worried about Claire..."

"I'm not *worried* about Claire. She's wonderful with Alex. I couldn't get along without her. You know, Victor, while you were gone, I kept the gallery afloat..."

Alex stirred and whimpered. Victor got up and put him back in his crib. "Let's take this out of the nursery."

Once they were in the hallway, Victor said, "I'm sorry I mentioned it. You know how important you are at the gallery..."

Caroline sighed and kneaded her forehead. She was exhausted; the last few weeks had drained her. "I'm sorry, Victor. I'm beat. I can't talk about

anything else tonight. Go back and be with Alex."

Victor put an arm around her shoulder and led her toward their bedroom. "He's fine. Fed and happy. But I think you need some tender loving care right now."

An hour later, with Victor softly snoring next to her, Caroline found that while she was bone-weary, she couldn't sleep. Carefully she slipped out of bed and put on her terrycloth robe and a pair of slippers. Going downstairs, she went to the kitchen and deactivated the alarm. Then she went out onto the patio. The air was sharp and cold, the sky a dark tapestry of twinkling stars. Several things had unnerved her tonight. First was the strange feeling she'd gotten when Victor met Claire. If she didn't know better, she'd swear he'd been instantly attracted to her. *Is that so hard to imagine? She a beautiful woman. Close to his age, too.*

Next had been his suggestion that she spend more time at home, which she translated as meaning that she spend less time at the gallery...now that he was back. *I saved that gallery from closing while he was away. I kept it going and even managed to see that it survived that Christmas show fiasco. I'm the reason he has a gallery to come back to. And I stood by him, testified under oath that...*

She shivered and turned to go inside, her mind made up. Tomorrow she would talk to Victor about making her an equal partner in the gallery.

She deserved it, especially now that she was going to be his wife.

* * * *

It was nearly eleven o'clock when Deacon Hunt knocked on Brianna Hadley's door. He loved popping in like this, at bedtime. She answered the door, opening it just a crack. Pushing it open the rest of the way, he barged in and slammed it behind him. "You look like hell," he pronounced, looking her over from head to toe. "Comb your hair. And what's with the scruffy robe?"

He went to the kitchen and rooted through her cabinets until he found a bottle of nicely-aged scotch. Pouring some into a glass, he brought it back to the living room, where he found her sitting on the sofa, staring at the television. Glaring down at her, he said, "You know why we lost?"

Brian's gaze met his. "I guess everyone in town knows now, don't they, Deacon? You just told them on the six and the eleven o'clock news. *I* blew the case, according to your backhanded comments."

Deacon drank the scotch in one gulp and after putting the glass down on the coffee table with a thud, reached down and roughly pulled Brianna to her feet, putting his face very close to hers.

"You ungrateful bitch! I paved the way for you in the district attorney's office. You were nothing but a glorified errand girl until I noticed you. I can't take the blame for this loss, so you will. Got it?" With that he shoved her away and she fell back onto the sofa. In the process her robe fell open, exposing part of one breast and a lot of thigh. The liquor he'd already consumed before coming here tonight, plus the scotch he'd just drunk, had set his blood on fire and there she was ready and waiting. Memories of their last encounter stirred his cock to life. Deacon smiled inwardly. With many men, liquor made it impossible for them to get it up, but with him it worked just the opposite. The more booze, the better the erection. He loved it. He could screw sober or drunk. Who the hell needed Viagra? Life was good!

He leaned over and ran a hand up one of her thighs, then down the other, flipping the robe open further. Then he scooped out her partially exposed breast and pinched the nipple. She cried out and he pinched harder. Pulling her to her feet again, he flung open the robe and forced it down over her shoulders, tossing it aside.

"Not tonight, Deacon..." she began feebly.

She could protest all she wanted, he knew she was burning for him on the inside. She always was. That's the way it had been with them since the first night he'd fucked her in a deserted

courtroom. They'd done it across the arch-shaped judge's bench, then had another go-around on the defense table. Sort of his way of sticking it to the defense and Bri at the same time. He'd loved the irony of that and screwing her in such a sacred place as a courtroom had heightened his pleasure astronomically. She'd been younger then, of course, and a hell of a lot more eager to please. Now, he had Hannah for the slow, easy, "meaningful" sex. With Brianna, it would always be quick and dirty and rough. "Missed you in court, Bri. What's the matter, still sore? Too damned bad." He smacked her soundly on her bottom and she squealed, which only made him want to smack her again, so he did, this time with more force. "Don't worry, sweetie," he whispered in her ear, "I'll kiss it and make it better."

chapter twenty

On Friday morning, Lucas decided he'd better go into the shop early, since Rachel was scheduled to attend an auction in Kinnard. He'd decided to give her more responsibility since she had done such a good job of minding the store during Victor's trial.. Besides, it was a small estate auction, the type he often didn't bother with, but now that he had an assistant, he'd be able to sent her and therefore cover a lot more territory.

He arrived just as Rachel was getting ready to leave. "All set? Don't forget our limits and be on the lookout for any larger pieces of good value. You know how to arrange for delivery. We'll be starting on the addition next month and we'll need things to fill the space. The builder doesn't think it will take more than three months to complete the project and we can always crowd things in here until then. I just want to make sure we have stock when we have our grand opening." Lucas had spent some time last night going over

his future plans for the shop, including a timetable based on the builder's estimated completion date.

"I know," Rachel smiled up at him. "I've even made notes, so I don't forget anything."

He looked at her. She was wearing a pair of dark blue corduroy slacks and a yellow sweater. Her hair was pulled back and she wore very little makeup. Good. She wouldn't stand out in a crowd. That would make it easier for her to wander around and evaluate the pieces without drawing attention to herself.

"I'm off. Good luck today. I'm sure a lot of people will come in, just to say they're glad you're back. People kept asking about you. Oh, and if the auction runs late..."

"Just go home. But be sure to call and tell me what you've purchased, and what the delivery plans are."

She nodded, opened the door and was gone.

Lucas breathed a sigh of relief. Having someone as savvy as Rachel here would take a lot of the burden off of him and give him more time to spend with Talia and eventually, their new offspring. *Our baby. I wonder if it's a girl? If so I hope she has her mother's wonderful eyes. And that thick chestnut hair. God forbid she gets my nose! Anything but that. Of course, it could be a boy. Then he'd need the nose...definitely build character, this nose would.*

Lucas was behind the counter, so lost in his

thoughts that he started when the bell above the door rang, heralding the arrival of the first customer of the day. Looking up, he expected to see one of his regulars, but was surprised when a tall, lean man whose dark hair was streaked with silver. His eyes were gray, yet held just a hint of green. He was wearing a camel's hair top coat and expensive looking brown leather gloves. Around his neck was a wool scarf with brown, black and tan stripes. His trousers were black, his shoes shined to a glossy finish. Lucas idly wondered how the man had kept them so clean, considering there was still some slush remaining from the recent snowfall.

There was a brief silence then the man came forward and extended his hand. "You must be Mr. Knight. I'm Caleb Sinclair. I purchased two items earlier in the week and your assistant, Ms. Lewis, was very helpful."

Lucas snapped out of his near-trance and came around the counter. "Nice to finally meet you. I'm sorry I wasn't here when you came in originally..."

Caleb Sinclair waved a hand. "Don't give it a thought. I know about the trial and the outcome. You must be very relieved."

Lucas hesitated a moment trying to figure out if relieved was the right word, then smiled, "It's good to finally have things back to normal," he finally said, deciding to take the low road here.

"So, Mr. Sinclair..."

Again the hand waved in the air. "Caleb, please. And I'll call you Lucas, if that's all right. I have a feeling we're going to be doing a lot of business together."

Lucas liked the sound of that. "Caleb it is, then. Is there anything in particular you're interested in?"

As Caleb walked around the shop, slowly examining various items, he said, "Furniture, mostly. I had my eye on that desk over there," He pointed on a slice of wall next to the side window, then headed that way.

Lucas knew that the finish on the oak roll top desk was somewhat ragged, but it was a good, solid piece. "It might need some refinishing," he told them man, following him.

"Oh, indeed it will. But I know an excellent restorer who could work wonders with it. Rachel didn't feel comfortable bickering over the price, however, so I thought I'd save that for you. Is she not in today?"

Lucas returned the man's smile. "She at an estate auction, as a matter of fact."

"I see. Well, I'll tell you what, I would like that Waterford crystal vase on that table," He pointed to the opposite corner. "And, I'd like that pedestal table next to it and the brocade settee along that wall. Make me a deal on the lot."

Lucas motioned for the man to follow him into the back room, where he did some quick calculating. Within five minutes, the deal was struck. "Where do you want them delivered?"

Caleb said quickly, "I'll have them picked up tomorrow. The delivery men will have a cashier's check with them."

This peaked Lucas's curiosity. He recalled that Caleb had also insisted on having the last order picked up by his own delivery people, according to Rachel. "Just where do you live, Mr. Sinclair? I'm sure I can get my delivery service to take the items to you."

"It's on the other side of Kinnard, in the country. Very remote. It will be much easier if I arrange for the pickup."

The words had been spoken with authority, inviting no argument and Lucas let it go. No sense antagonizing a new customer who obviously had money to spend. The reduced price they had settled on had only been \$150 short of the asking price. It was almost as though Caleb Sinclair was going through the motions of striking a bargain.

"I understand your wife is an artist, Lucas," Caleb said as they re-entered the main sales area.

Somewhat surprised, Lucas asked, "You've heard about her work?"

"I've been getting acquainted with the town and people. It was mentioned."

Lucas wanted to ask by who, but instead replied, "Well, yes, she is. And a very good one."

"So I've heard. I understand some of her work is on display at the Kane Gallery. I'm going there now, to take a look at what they have."

As Caleb walked toward the door, Lucas said, "I hope we can continue to do business," he said.

Caleb turned and pulled his gloves out of his pockets. "As I said, I'm sure we will. I hope Rachel finds some interesting things at the auction today. I'll make it a point to come back next week and see what new treasures you've added."

As Lucas watched the man cross the street and walk the opposite way, toward the gallery, he fought an uncomfortable prickling at the back of his neck that usually warned of something not quite right.

Several minutes later, just as Lucas was putting the final "sold" sticker on the items Caleb Sinclair had purchased, he heard the bell again and looked around to discover Talia rushing into the shop. Her hair was loose and a little ruffled from the winter wind that blew outside but her cheeks were red as cherries and her amber eyes alive with excitement. She hurried across the room and hugged him.

"Well, this is a nice surprise..." He began.

She pushed him away and said, "I...just got a call from Lordson's Gallery in...New York City!

They want me...*me* to send three of my paintings for a show their having. It's called American Panorama and it's going to feature artists from around the country. They ask me, Lucas...*Me!* The show will be in April and they want me to be there...in New York. My God! I can't believe it. Pinch me...I must be dreaming!"

She'd was talking so fast he had to concentrate to keep up with the torrent of words. But he'd gotten the most important point. Somehow, Talia's talent had drawn the attention of a New York gallery. "How did they find out about your work?"

She jumped up and down, hugged him again, then pulled away and replied, "Caroline sent them a brochure announcing the spring show here...you know...trying to get the galleries to again commit to sending some pieces. Anyway, the brochure featured one of my paintings, and they saw it and asked who the artist was and...well, the rest is history! I'm so excited I can hardly...my God...me in a New York gallery."

Lucas pulled her close, kissing the side of her face and inhaling the wonderful floral scent of her hair. "It's great. Congratulations. You deserve it."

She stepped back. "Of course, they're not one of the most famous galleries...they're small, but very trendy. And, they're in *New York!*"

He could tell she was having a hard time

containing herself. Lucas smiled down at her and stroked her cheek with one finger. "You'll knock them dead," he predicted.

"I have to tell my father and Caroline!" Talia said, almost doing a pirouette as she spun around and rushed to the door. "I'll be back, though. Lunch. Okay?"

"Better make it carry-in. Rachel's gone for the day, to an auction in Kinnard." Lucas called after her as she hurried out the door.

* * * *

Victor had spent the morning leasing a new car, since the one on his old vehicle had run out while he was in jail. Now, he was driving back to town. Checking his watch he noted that it was just after eleven o'clock. He'd awakened at seven to find himself with an amazing hard-on, but when he'd reached across the bed, Caroline was gone. Thinking she was in the nursery he gotten up and padded across the thick carpeting and out into the hallway, where he could hear that the shower in the main bathroom was running. All the better, he'd thought, heading that way to join her. Then movement on his left had caught his eye and he'd been shocked and dismayed to see Claire Fontaine making her way up the stairs. So there he was nude, with a hard on, standing in plain sight. At

that moment, she was paying attention to the stack of baby laundry she was balancing and hadn't yet looked up. Quickly, he'd backtracked into the shadows of the bedroom doorway and watched her go into the baby's room. *And that's how I found out that Claire's hours were 7:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m.*

But that wasn't what bothered him. What had him tied up in knots was his reaction to seeing her coming up those stairs, knowing that at any moment she could lift her gaze and see his manhood exposed and ready. It had excited him. For a split second, he'd actually wanted it to happen. In his mind, he'd envisioned running his cock up the insides of her thighs, and his tongue down to the hollow of her throat and beyond. She wasn't young like Caroline, nor vivacious and fiery. She was quiet, reserved, classy. Yet something inside of him answered that call.

Easy boy, he urged his growing dick, as he turned onto Carver Avenue and then swung a quick right onto Main Street. The gallery was just ahead and as he pulled into the parking area beside the building and slid the silver Chevy Malibu to a stop next to Caroline's Lexus, he willed his erection away by thinking of how he would approach his soon-to-be-wife about returning to her former role as his assistant.

When he entered via the back door, he found Ben busy at the computer, typing various numbers

into a spreadsheet. "Remember, you going to explain that computer system to me later today," Victor told the man in passing, not waiting for a response. *And that's an order, not a request.* Striding through the hallway, he entered his office to find Caroline sitting behind the desk and Talia seated in a chair opposite.

The minute he stepped into the room, his daughter jumped up and came running his way, throwing her arms around him and planting a big kiss on his cheek. A warmth that only a father can feel for his daughter rushed from his heart out into his limbs and he hugged her. "Okay, if you were a teenager I'd expect you to ask for the car keys about now," he joked, winking Caroline's way. Now she was smiling. "You two have a secret, I can tell. Give."

"Caroline's ring is *gorgeous*. You're a sly one. You didn't even tell me!"

"Well, knowing women, I figured Caroline would spread the news quickly enough," Victor commented.

Talia slapped him playfully on the arm. "I'm happy for you...Dad. And we have to celebrate."

Caroline put in, "Tell him your reason for celebration."

"Well, two other things, really. A man who introduced himself as a good customer of Lucas's by the name of Caleb Sinclair was just here and

bought one of my paintings! He said it had depth and character."

"Which one?" Victor asked.

"The one of the two deer on the edge of the woods behind the cottage. He said the trees seemed alive, like their branches would start to wave in the breeze at any moment, and he could almost see something else lurking deep in the shadows."

"Congratulations, hon," Victor said sincerely. Then as Talia told him about the Lordson's offer, he felt pride swell inside of him. It was about time her talent was recognized outside of the small circle of Arcadia's residents. "You have to send at least one of paintings on display here at the gallery. They're special. I'd suggest the one of the cottage, it shows color and depth," Victor told her.

"I suggested that, also," Caroline affirmed.

He noted that she did not come around the desk, and wondered if it was because she wanted father and daughter to share this moment with some privacy, or if it was because she was afraid to give up the position of power it represented, even for a few moments. *Is she asserting herself? Don't try it, Caroline. I never lose.*

"I wanted to thank Caroline for putting a shot of one of my paintings in the brochures she sent to the New York galleries to promote the spring show. That's what did it."

Caroline smiled, her gaze flickering to Victor then back to Talia. "I just wanted them to see the best and that painting looks so good with the new decor in the background. It was a natural."

Victor felt his gut wrench a little. Caroline had certainly made her mark while he'd been in jail. She'd gained the respect of the townspeople and the art community, evidently. In spite of the Christmas show cancellation and the inconvenience it had caused many of the participating galleries, she'd obviously managed to get back on their good side. He had to give her credit for that.

"I'm proud of you, honey," he told Talia. "Your talent is what sold them." He saw a slight frown flicker across Caroline's face and added, "That and Caroline's efforts."

"Well, although that's not exactly glowing praise, I guess it's better than nothing," Caroline snapped, just as the intercom buzzed. She snatched it up and said a terse, "Yes, what is it Ben?"

Victor felt Talia's hand pulling at his arm and followed her across the room.

"What's wrong? Is she mad?" Talia asked.

Victor smiled and brushed a strand of auburn hair away from her face. "She's a little overwhelmed. I think my being back is putting a crimp in her style."

"She did keep things going while you were away. You owe her, Dad," Talia reminded him.

Caroline replaced the receiver and Victor looked over at her expectantly. She came around the desk and started to leave the office.

Victor moved toward her. "What was that all about?" he asked.

She stopped and turned. "Ben says another shipment has arrived. This time from Leland's Gallery in Chicago."

He didn't miss the self-satisfied smile on her lips. "Looks like you've pulled it off, Caroline. I guess congratulations are in order for you, too," he admitted. He saw something else flicker in her eyes. Smugness? Another flash of anger spiraled through him but quickly died when he thought about all she'd done while he'd been languishing in jail. Talia was right, he did owe her something, just not complete control of his business.

Ben was rounding the corner as the trio entered the hallway. "You want me to go ahead and uncrate and log them in?" he asked, his gaze fixed on Caroline.

Victor stepped quickly between the two. "I want to be there. That will give me a chance to see how the new computer inventory system is set up." He was prepared for Caroline to say something, to argue even, but she didn't. Instead he heard her footsteps retreat toward the office.

Ben was looking at Talia and Victor realized they probably didn't know each other, so he did a quick introduction.

As Ben's gaze slowly drifted down Talia's body, a small smile formed on his lips and he said, "Pleased to meet you...finally." He moved a little closer to her. "You smell like wildflowers. Very nice, sweetie."

"Are you from Arcadia?" Talia asked abruptly.

This seemed to catch Ben off guard and Victor smiled inwardly. She was her father's daughter, wasn't she?

"Uh...not really." He stepped back again.

"Where, then?" she pressed.

"I'm a country boy," he replied. A roguish smile that Victor pegged as having been practiced many times in front of a mirror, played at the corners of his mouth.

"What country?" Talia retorted. Then turning to Victor, said, "Okay, I'm going to go. I'll think about that picture out in the showroom for the New York show. But I've also been working on something that I think will go over well. In fact, your nanny, Claire Fontaine, made a suggestion when I was stuck on how to bring it to life that turned the entire thing around."

Victor felt a twinge in his gut. "You're friendly with Claire?"

"Of course. She brings Alex to see me once in a

while. She's great with him," Talia replied heading for the door.

"I'll be with you in a minute, Ben," Victor called over his shoulder as he followed his daughter through the showroom. "Did she tell you much about herself?" he asked, helping her on with her coat.

Talia shrugged. "Not really. I didn't ask. But she seems to know a lot about art—very cultured, if you get my drift."

Memories of Claire's smooth, porcelain-like skin, classic features and full lips created a firestorm inside of him and he felt his mouth go dry, his pulse quicken.

"Victor?" Talia said.

She was looking at him and he knew she'd asked him something. "What, I'm sorry, honey."

"Can you and Caroline and Alex come to dinner on Sunday?"

"I'll check with Caroline," he said absently, opening the door for her.

When Victor entered the storeroom Ben was standing by the back door, smoking a cigarette. He spun the man around, and with a powerful thrust pushed him against the doorjamb, holding him there with his right forearm. "Okay, here's how it is. That was my daughter you were ogling. Two rules you need to remember from here on out, *country boy*. One, *I'm* the owner of this gallery.

Two, my daughter is to be treated with nothing but respect when she comes in here. In fact you're to call her Ms. Coe. Not Talia, not sweetie, honey, or sugar pie. Ms. Coe. Got it?" For emphasis he took his left hand and pulled the cigarette from between Ben's fingers waving it very close to his face, in a threatening gesture.

"Got it," Ben croaked, gagging a little.

Victor took a deep breath and stepped back. "Good. Now uncrate those paintings then we'll take a look at that computer system you're always crowing about."

When he re-entered the office a half-hour later, Caroline was shuffling papers around, but not really looking at any of them closely, a sure sign she was pissed. He closed the door, went to her and pulled her out of the desk chair and into his arms. He kissed her soundly, feeling the tight-lipped resistance at first that eventually melted into a softness as her muscles relaxed and her body became less rigid. That accomplished, he released her and looked into her eyes. "Okay, let's get it out into the open." He was aware that his voice was husky and that she could probably feel his erection growing against the soft flesh of her abdomen. He stepped away. "You have something to say, so say it."

Caroline backed up and went around to the other side of the desk, then crossed the room and

poured herself a drink. "You want something to drink?" she offered waving a bottle of vodka at him.

"Not now. Talk to me."

She took a drink then turned around. "All right. I accepted this ring," she flashed it at him, "because you asked me to be your life partner. Marriage is a serious matter...especially under our circumstances. But I'm more than just someone to raise your son and keep your bed warm. I'm the one who made sure this gallery stayed in business while you were running away, then sitting in jail. I stood by you...I testified..."

Victor raised a hand and came around the desk toward her. He stopped several feet away and stared at her for a moment. "You want a *partnership*?"

Caroline tilted her chin up in a gesture Victor took to be defiance. "All or nothing, Victor." She took another drink.

He closed the gap between them and took the glass from her hand, setting it down on a nearby table. "And if I say no?" He ran a finger down the side of her face to the base of her throat, lingering there before continuing down to the place between her breasts.

Caroline's eyelids blinked several times in succession and she swallowed hard. *I hope you never take up playing poker*, Victor thought. He

waited patiently, staring at her and caressing that tender spot in her cleavage. To his surprise, she pushed his hand away and smiled slyly.

"Then I'll say no," she said softly, slipping off the ring and laying it beside the glass. "Let me know when you decide."

Before he could respond, she walked to the door, opened it and was gone.

* * * *

Caroline pulled the Lexus into the small parking lot and got out of the car. The drive to Kinnard had been an uneventful one, and since she was now somewhat familiar with the town, she had no trouble finding her destination.

Walking around the red brick building, she entered the glass door at the front, swinging it open with purpose. The law offices of Beresford and Dunlap occupied the entire second floor and while she waited for the elevator, she thought about her go around with Victor. Anger, mixed with a feeling of betrayal welled up inside of her, but quickly died. *Keep emotion out of it. I'm just here to find out what my rights are as far as the gallery are concerned. The effort I put into that business must count for something.*

The elevator doors slid noiselessly open. She stepped in and pushed the appropriate button. As

the car rose smoothly, she found her thoughts returning to the one person she couldn't seem to get out of her mind: Neil Wade.

chapter twenty~one

It was one-thirty by the time Talia returned to the antique shop. Opening the front door, she stepped into the welcome warmth and put the bag containing lunch on the counter. "Lucas?" No answer. Going into the back room she found it was also empty. Then she heard footfalls overhead. Upstairs, she found him rearranging glassware on one of the tables. "I have lunch downstairs," she called.

"Tell me something...do you think I should discontinue Grandma's Attic?" He looked at her, his brow furrowed in concentration.

"Why would you do that? It's an ideal way to get rid of items you buy in box-lots at auction?" Talia joined him beside the table.

"Maybe I should just concentrate on larger pieces and quit bidding on boxes of junk just to get one item inside it that might be worth something," he speculated.

Talia thought for a moment. "I have a better

idea. Keep Grandma's Attic and put Rachel in charge of it. She seems to have a good eye for the smaller items. That way you can concentrate on larger purchases."

Lucas smiled. "You are a very smart lady, Ms. Talia Coe, in addition to being an outstanding artist."

Talia reached out and stroked his chest, feeling the muscles ripple as she moved her hand up and down. "And you are going to be eating cold Lo Mien, if you don't come downstairs right now."

Lucas reached around and squeezed her ass, giving it a playful pinch.

"Ouch. Beast. Come on, I'm starved. After all, I am eating for two now."

They shared the Chinese food at his desk and talked about the upcoming New York show.

"I'm going to have to work hard to finish the picture I'm doing right now, but I can make it. They don't need the paintings in New York for another month, so that will give the oil time to dry enough so that it can be shipped. And," she added, her enthusiasm running over, "I'm sending the one of the cottage that Victor has displayed at the gallery. But I'm unsure about the third one."

Lucas hesitated, then said, "The one you're working on now is a winter scene. The one of the cottage is fall..."

She nodded, wondering what he was getting at.

Lucas continued, "You did a painting of Town Square Park, remember? It's sort of a late spring, early summer picture, if I recall...some of the trees are blossoming and some already have leaves..."

Talia thought about that painting. She'd done it in late May. The rose bushes were just beginning to bud, yet some of the tulips were still displaying their colors along with daffodils and pansies. "Perfect. Those three will show the best of Arcadia's seasons!"

"Turn about is fair play. You gave me a good idea, I gave you one," he commented. "By the way, I met the mysterious Caleb Sinclair, finally."

"Well, I met him, too. He came into the gallery while I was there visiting Victor. He bought my deer painting," Talia told him proudly.

Lucas studied his food for a moment before saying, "He asked about you, said he'd heard of your work. How do you suppose that happened?"

Talia was taken aback. "I wouldn't know. Maybe he's seen one of my paintings in the gallery window, Caroline switches them around to give everyone fair exposure."

"Maybe," Lucas said, sounding unconvinced.

"What did you think about him?" Talia asked. She'd immediately picked up on the uneasiness in his tone as they discussed the man. "Or should I say, what's making you uncomfortable about him?"

Lucas didn't seem surprised by her insight. "I'm not sure. He was...vague."

"Vague?"

"He didn't didn't want to talk much about himself," Lucas replied with a shrug.

Talia didn't see where that mattered and said so. "Not everyone wants to spill their life's story to a stranger. We, of all people, should know that."

Lucas admitted that she had a valid point, then added, "But there was more...I just got the feeling that he's hanging around Arcadia for another reason."

Talia smiled. "Lucas, I wouldn't call coming into an antique shop twice and buying one painting at the gallery, hanging around. You should look at it as a blessing. Obviously word has spread that you're a reputable antique dealer and that *I* am an extremely talented artist!" She grinned at him.

"And modest, too, I see. Okay, no more harbinger of doom talk. Is your shopping spree with Rachel still on for tomorrow?"

"Yep, you'll be flying solo all afternoon," she acknowledged, adding, "and I expect that to be paid time off for her. She is entitled to some benefits with this job, isn't she?"

"You're really looking forward to this, aren't you?"

"More than you'll ever know. I really don't

have a friend here, Lucas. Caroline is fine, but she and I will never be best buddies...too much past history. I think Rachel and I could end up being best friends." She reached across the desk and squeezed his hand, then rubbed his forearm. Again muscles moved at her touch and she felt a sudden need to feel the warmth of his entire body against hers. Hormones. Raging hormones. Pregnancy certainly did a number on them.

Lucas was smiling at her, "I think I like that twinkle in your eye," he said.

"Oh, so now you're a mind reader?"

"I can read that look," he quipped.

The bell above the front door pealed and she stood up. "I have to get going. It's almost three o'clock. I need to put in some time on that painting while there's still good light."

Lucas stood and took her in his arms and she got a whiff of his spicy aftershave. The tip of his goatee tickled her forehead as he drew her close. She leaned into his embrace, laying her head against the solid wall of his chest. His heartbeat was strong, steady. "By the way, I made that appointment with the doctor. It's on Tuesday. The nurse said they'll do an ultrasound."

"Then, I'll be there, too," Lucas promised.

She welcomed his lips on hers, kissing him hungrily, wanting him now. Reluctantly, she broke the embrace. "That should hold you until

tonight," she said, smiling as she brushed her fingertips across the bulge behind his zipper.

"Anybody ever tell you that you can be a cruel wench?" he asked as they walked out into the sales area.

"Only you," she replied, noting that the customer was a stocky, middle-aged woman who was paying particular attention to a Victorian balloon-back chair across the room. As Lucas went to help her, Talia stepped out the door and ran, literally, into Brianna Hadley.

"Oops, I'm sorry..." Talia said, recognizing the woman at once, in spite of the heavy faux fur coat collar she had pulled up around her chin and the large round sunglasses that covered her eyes.

"Damn...watch out," Brianna snapped, hurrying past.

Talia stood watching the woman walk away. *She didn't even look at me. But, there's no mistaking that shiner she's trying to hide behind those Foster Grants!*

* * * *

Victor checked his watch for the fourth time in an hour. It was quarter till four and Caroline had not returned. *Where the hell is she?* He'd called the condo an hour ago only to have Claire tell him she hadn't heard from her. After he'd spent a half

hour with Ben going over the computer system, he decided to go through the files, and he had to admit, Caroline had done an outstanding job of keeping things on track in his absence.

"That's it for the day," he muttered, getting up and turning off the desk lamp. He was going home and be with Alex. He'd deal with Caroline when she returned. After straightening some papers on the desk and refiling several folders, he turned off the overhead lights and left the office, closing the door behind him. He was tempted to lock it—he didn't like the way that Walker character roamed around the gallery. He'd talk to him about that on Monday.

After telling Ben he was leaving and reminding him to set the alarm, Victor got into his new car and pulled out onto Main Street. The drive to Arcadian Ridge took about ten minutes and when he pulled up to the gate, he searched his pockets for the remote that would open it. That accomplished, he drove around the building, after a quick glance at Unit 117, and parked in the carport. *First come, first serve*, he thought as he got out and locked the car. Caroline could park in one of the guest spots.

The kitchen smelled of cinnamon and other spices. Claire was bending over the oven, poking a toothpick into something that looked like a loaf of bread. Her ass was not small but it was shapely

and well rounded—the kind a man likes to grab hold of and knead while he’s fucking. Pushing such thoughts from his mind, he closed the back door. When Claire stood up and turned around, Victor thought he detected a look of apprehension flickering in her eyes. Her face was flushed from the heat and he found himself wondering what those full lips would feel like pressed against his. She was wearing a pair of gray slacks and a soft blue sweater that came to a vee between her nicely rounded breasts. He licked his lips, as his eyes scanned her body quickly. *Okay, so there’s some sort of strange chemistry going on here. But why? And where is it coming from?*

Claire spoke, breaking into his train of thought. “Alex should be getting up soon. I haven’t heard anything from Caroline. This is cinnamon streusel pound cake in the oven. I’ll take it out right before I leave.”

Her nervousness was obvious, and Victor was hit with the thought that perhaps she, too, felt the pull and was having anxiety because of it. He stepped forward, closing the gap between them and she sidestepped, going to the sink to wash her hands.

“You and I need to get to know each other a little better, Claire,” he finally said.

“Well, I’m sure Caroline can fill you in on my credentials...” Claire began.

He walked up behind her, leaving her no room to flee this time. "I'm not talking about your resume," he told her quietly. He could feel her body stiffen and he saw that she was gripping the edge of the sink so hard her knuckles were white. At that moment, a wail from overhead pierced the uneasy silence and Victor stepped back. As Claire hurried toward the stairs, he followed, realizing that the sound had an urgency to it.

In the nursery they found Alex had gotten himself wound up in his blankets and was kicking furiously to get free. In the process he had managed to turn sideways in the crib, something else that seemed to infuriate him.

Claire picked him up and cradled him against her bosom, whispering soothing words. Victor watched her with the baby and was again struck by feelings he could not describe.

"He's going back to sleep, could you straighten out the blanket so I can lay him down?" Claire asked.

Victor stroked the baby's head, then met Claire's gaze. She looked back at him this time and he saw there something akin to fear. *No, that's not exactly it. She's not afraid of me...it's more like she's afraid for me...or is it for us?*

When Victor went to the crib and lifted the blanket, something fell out and he picked it up. Staring at it for a moment, he realized that what he

held in his hand was a tuft of soft fur. Quickly pocketing it, he turned around and smiled at Claire, "Okay, all set."

Leaving Claire to get Alex settled, Victor went downstairs. Where the hell was Caroline? Grabbing a jacket from the coat closet, he went outside and strode across the courtyard. Rapping impatiently on Neil Wade's front door, he waited. No answer. He knocked again, with the same lack of results. *Wade's gone and Caroline's nowhere to be found. Coincidence? It had better be!*

* * * *

Talia walked slowly along the lane leading to the quaint stone cottage she shared with Lucas. Most of the snow was gone now, but the air felt heavy again and she predicted that there would be more within the next twenty-four hours. Clouds hovered in the west, pushing against a hazy blue sky. She'd made one stop after leaving the shop, at the drug store, where she'd picked up shampoo, and some other personal items. Now evening was fast approaching and Talia realized that she'd lost most of the good light in her studio for today. Well, tomorrow was another day.

Approaching the cottage, the first thing she noticed was that the front door was slightly ajar. She stopped on the porch and listened carefully, tapping into her superior sense of smell, and

hearing. All was silent, except for the sounds of nature around her. No noises emanated from inside the house. She sniffed the air, smelling something pungent, yet familiar. She took a tentative step forward and pushed the door open a little. Then she stepped inside and stood transfixed at the horrific sights that met her eyes.

The living room was in chaos—chairs overturned, end tables toppled, the sofa slashed, its stuffing overflowing onto the carpet. The crystal candleholders that usually sat on the mantle were in shards on the hearth. Both table lamps now lay shattered, their cords ripped from the wall. In one corner, the library table had been thrown on its side, the yet-unopened mail from yesterday was scattered around the floor like large pieces of confetti.

Stifling a cry, Talia ran to the kitchen, where the contents of the cupboards lay strewn at her feet. Next she went to the bedroom and stopped short, screaming, “No!” Her quilt was in shreds, the curtains at the French doors looked even worse, and her clothing had been ripped from its hangers. Her gaze fell on the dresser, where the drawers had been dumped onto the floor.

My studio! She ran that way, then stopped in the hallway. The smell of oil paint and brush cleaner filled her nostrils. “Oh God, no!” she cried as she crept forward until she was finally in the

doorway. Slowly, as though in a trance, she walked into the studio and looked at what was left of her paintings. Those that hadn't been slashed, had been destroyed by the solvent she used to clean her brushes. None had been spared, not even the one she was currently working on.

Feeling hysteria well up inside of her, Talia ran to the phone and pressed speed dial to connect herself with the antique shop. When Lucas answered she found it hard to get a coherent sentence out, but he must have gotten the gist of it because his instructions cut through the fog that had enveloped her mind.

"Get out of the house. I'm calling 911. Go to the patio and stay there until the police come. Don't touch anything. Now move!"

Outside, Talia stood shivering in the cold in spite of the heavy coat she wore. Her home had been invaded, her work destroyed. Why? Who would do such a thing? Then she groaned. In her haste to go into town and tell Lucas and Victor about the New York showing, she'd obviously forgotten to set the alarm! Tears welled up in her eyes as the gravity of what had happened began to sink in. Her shoulders shook and sobs erupted from deep within her as she began to cry as though her heart were broken, which it was.

* * * *

Lucas pulled up in front of the cottage just as a police cruiser arrived. Not waiting to see who emerged he ran through the yard and around to the back of the cottage. "Talial" he called, then saw her leaning against the rough-hewn stone exterior, crying.

"Oh, baby," he said, taking her in his arms and holding her close. Her legs gave out and he scooped her up and carried her toward the back door, only to be stopped by Stan Reed. "Take Ms. Coe to the squad car and get her warmed up. Then you come back, and we'll let you in. Obviously Ms. Coe has seen quite enough and we don't want anyone else in here until we gather some evidence," the tall, thin detective told him.

Great, the dreadful duo, Lucas thought knowing that where Reed went, Paul Muncie was there, also. He didn't look forward to being under the two detectives' scrutiny again, in spite of the fact that, this time, he and Talia were the obvious victims of a crime and not suspects in one.

Several minutes later, with Talia in the police car and the heater running, he left her and went back into the cottage. The first thing he noticed was that the alarm was deactivated. Had she even set it? Returning to the car he asked her and she shook her head, breaking into a new round of tears.

What he found when he was admitted to his own living room caused a wellspring of fury to rise up inside of him. But it wasn't until he walked into her studio and saw the destruction there that a near-murderous rage took hold of him. "Bastards!" he shouted.

"Not a pretty sight, is it, Mr. Knight? Someone had a lot of anger inside of them to do this," came Paul Muncie's flat voice from behind Lucas.

Lucas spun around and glared at the square-shouldered, balding detective. "Just do your job for once and catch the son of a bitch who did this, will you?" he said through gritted teeth.

"We need to know if anything is missing, although I doubt it was robbery," Muncie said.

Lucas returned to the living room where Stan Reed was flicking a round-handled brush with a feathery tip over the doorjamb. "I'm dusting for fingerprints, but he probably wore gloves. Oh well, have to go through the motions," he said, taking a piece of wide tape and flattening it against the wood, then slowly lifting it off. "We'll need yours and Ms. Coe's for comparison, of course."

"Mr. Knight's are on file," Muncie interjected, his face remaining bland.

"Oh yes, from that nasty business before," Stan Reed muttered.

Lucas snorted in disgust. "Enough of this dog

and pony show! I'm not amused and Talia is hysterical. She's pregnant and doesn't need any more stress!"

Stan Reed seemed to brighten, but Muncie's expression remained the same.

"A baby. Well, I guess congratulations are in order," Reed said, smiling up at Lucas.

"Just find out who did this," Lucas snarled.

"Why don't you look around and see if anything is missing?" Muncie repeated, adding, "I'll go with you. We'll do it room-by-room, starting at the back of the house since Stan's working out here." He took out a pen and small notepad from his breast pocket.

When Lucas saw the destruction in their bedroom, he vowed that he would kill whoever had done this to them.

* * * *

As Caroline came through the gate at Arcadian Ridge, she passed Claire just leaving. The dashboard clock read 4:45 p.m. Caroline stopped the car, but Claire's just kept moving. *I know she saw me. Why is she leaving early?* Then she saw the reason, which she should have guessed. Victor's new Malibu was in the carport. In her parking spot. She pulled into a guest slot, got out and set the car alarm.

Inside the condo, she found Victor sitting in the living room, his tall, solid frame draped casually in one corner of the sofa. A half-finished drink sat on the coffee table and Caroline unconsciously looked for a second glass, but there was none. The thought that Claire may have shared a drink with him, and perhaps more, had flitted through her mind for a split second, she had to admit. Still perturbed by their conversation at the office, yet fortified by the attorney's reassurances, she said a terse hello and started to climb the stairs to check on Alex.

"Where have you been, Caroline,?" Victor's voice was soft, yet carried clearly.

Caroline turned on the first step and saw that he was now facing her. "I had some business to take care of. I'm going to check on Alex. Why did Claire leave early?"

"We need to talk, now. Alex is fed and sleeping. Claire left early because I came home early and there was no need for her to stay. Now come here and sit down."

Caroline bristled at his tone. So demanding. Ordering her around. How dare he. She felt her face heat up. She didn't move. "I'm tired, Victor..."

So quickly she didn't have time to react, he came across the room, grabbed her arm and dragged her to the sofa. "Sit down!" he roared.

Caroline struggled to her feet. "Don't tell me

what to do! I'm not your back street whore! The days of *you* being in charge of *me* are over! I'm the mother of your son and I've poured my heart and soul into that goddam gallery of yours while you were off doing God-knows-what, leaving me to handle *everything* by myself! Then when you finally get you ass caught, I put myself on the line to make sure you were a free man again. We all did, including your daughter and Lucas! Show some fucking appreciation, Victor! A lot of people went the distance for you!" That said, Caroline wrenched her arm free of his grasp, spent and breathing hard.

Alex's cries from the nursery caught Caroline's attention. At the same moment, the phone rang and as she got up and hurried up the stairs, she yelled over her shoulder, "Do you think you can manage to get that?"

In the nursery, Caroline found Alex red-faced and open mouthed, obviously irate at having his nap interrupted by the argument downstairs. Picking him up, she wrapped the blanket tightly around him and sat down in the rocking chair, talking to him in soothing tones. The motion soon settled him down and he went back to sleep. When she looked up Victor was standing in the doorway, his face pale, his eyes flashing angrily.

Thinking the anger was going to be directed at her, she tightened her grip on the baby.

"That was Talia," he said, his voice tight with anger. "Someone vandalized their cottage...they even destroyed most of her paintings..."

Caroline got up and put Alex back in his crib then followed Victor into the hallway. "When? Do they know who? My God..."

Victor shook his head, stroking his mustache with one finger. "Muncie and Reed are investigating, which is about as good as nothing. I invited Talia and Lucas for dinner. Claire made plenty. Do you think we can put aside our...differences long enough to play host and hostess?"

Caroline was surprised by the almost pleading quality in his voice. "I can, if you can." She thought he was about to step forward and expected to feel his arms go around her waist, but he didn't attempt to touch her. Instead he nodded and turned away, going down the stairs.

Then, when he reached the bottom, he turned and said, "This discussion isn't over yet, Caroline."

You've got that right, Victor. It is far from over, Caroline thought as she turned and went toward their bedroom to change clothes before their dinner guests arrived.

* * * *

At first Talia hadn't wanted to leave the cottage, not even to have dinner with her father and Caroline. Lucas had begun cleaning up the messes, room-by-room, while she gathered up the contents of their dresser drawers and started running them through the wash. She wasn't about to wear anything that their intruder had touched until it had been thoroughly laundered. Even then, she was tempted to throw out her panties and buy new. Just the thought of someone handling her intimate apparel made her want to throw up.

"Let's leave it for a while and go," Lucas had urged. "We need to get out of here for a least a couple of hours."

Finally she'd agreed. Now they were sitting around the kitchen table in the condo trying to make conversation amidst an atmosphere that Talia found both baffling and uncomfortable. She'd noticed at once her father's stiff demeanor and the way he and Caroline had avoided eye contact. Talia had spent a little time in the nursery, watching Alex sleep. He was so perfect, so cuddly looking. She vowed then and there to start spending more time with him. She didn't want him to think of her as some distant relative he rarely saw. She was his half-sister. She was part of him and he was part of her, through Victor. Lucas had joined her briefly and they'd stood there for a few minutes, just looking at the baby in silence.

When they'd returned downstairs, they found that drinks were being served in the midst of an uncomfortable silence between their hosts. That atmosphere followed them into the kitchen and lasted throughout the meal. Now, they were having dessert and things weren't getting any better.

"This pie is good," Talia ventured, now that the conversation about the break-in had exhausted itself. "Claire has a real cooking talent."

Victor grunted something and Caroline quickly got up and brought the coffee pot to the table, refilling Lucas's cup then her own. Talia had opted for herbal tea and asked if she could have some more hot water. This time, Victor took care of it and Talia selected some Chamomile from the wicker basket Caroline had placed on the table earlier.

"I'll call Ben tomorrow and have him come to the cottage and help you clean up the rest of the mess," Victor finally said, gazing across the table at Lucas.

"Ben doesn't work on Saturday's," Caroline snapped.

Victor sipped his coffee, then aid, "He does this week. I'll pay him time and a half, don't worry."

"He may have plans..." Caroline began.

Victor cut her off with, "He'll cancel them, then. Ben and I have come to an understanding." Then,

he reached across the table and covered Talia's hand with his, adding, "Don't worry, honey, he'll be there bright and early."

"We'd appreciate the help, Victor, thanks," Lucas said. "Morning would be good, since Talia and Rachel have something planned for the afternoon and I'll need to be at the shop."

Talia sighed. "I'm not sure about going, now. Not after all this..."

Caroline said, "You should go. Don't let this disrupt everything. And I'm so sorry about the paintings, really I am."

"But, the ones at the gallery are safe," Victor reminded her.

Before Talia could respond, Caroline asked, "Tell me, Talia, did Lordson's specify they wanted only oil paintings?"

Confused, Talia shook her head. "No, not really. They just said three pieces."

"Then why don't you send the remaining painting at the gallery, one of your sketches and one of those earlier pieces? I know those weren't my favorites, but we're talking about a different clientele in New York."

Talia felt her mind clear and the fog that had enveloped it since she'd found the inside of the cottage in shambles lift. For the first time since then, she felt a ray of hope and an idea emerged. "I don't have any of those dark period paintings

left, but I do have several good sketches...done in charcoal, actually. And, in the attic with them I have a watercolor I did of Town Square Park. It was the inspiration for the oil painting I did later."

"Then, you have three pieces to send," Lucas told her.

Talia felt herself smile. "The exhibit is called American Panorama...what better way to depict that than to display three different mediums done by the same artist!" She felt excitement quicken her pulse.

"Caroline always did have a way of turning even the worst situation around," Victor said.

It was then that Talia noticed that Caroline was not wearing her engagement ring.

* * * *

"I still think they should have spent the night here," Victor said, as he watched his daughter and Lucas drive away.

"I'd like to know how you're going to convince Ben to show up at their cottage on his day off," Caroline commented, closing the dishwasher door and pushing the button. As the machine began to hum, she turned off the kitchen light and went into the living room.

"I told you, we have an understanding," Victor told her, his voice even and low. "But enough of

that bull, Caroline. Let's get it all out in the open. I want this behind us."

Caroline's eyes registered something he interpreted as alarm and Victor felt a pang of satisfaction. Did she think he meant their relationship? Let her. Playing the waiting game, he stared at her.

"I said all I had to say earlier, Victor. You either want this...us...or you don't. Only now, I come with a price tag and that price tag is a partnership in the gallery. So, which is it? Decide!" Caroline said.

Victor was so shocked by her statement, and how he'd misjudged the look in her eyes, that he found it hard to speak. He thought about how their relationship had evolved, how he'd begun it for sexual pleasure, out of lust for her. But now he saw her in a whole different light. She'd become so much a part of his life...of his very being...that he couldn't imagine life without her. Yet, almost as strong inside of him was the desire to dominate, to be in charge. *That alpha male thing*. That's what she'd called it once. He felt a smile turning up the corners of his mouth and stroked the mustache to hide it.

"Well?" she demanded, standing just inches from him.

He smelled her perfume, heady, sweet. Her hair, dark as a raven, was shiny and he longed to

stroke it, feel it slip effortlessly through his fingers. The red cashmere sweater, the one he'd gotten her for her birthday last year, hugged her upper body as though she'd been born to wear it, and the navy slacks fit in such a way that no panty lines were visible. Knowing Caroline, there was nothing underneath but soft, silky pussy.

"Have an attorney draw up the partnership agreement and I'll sign it," he finally said, his voice husky. "Now will you put the damned ring back on?" He took it out of his pocket and held it out to her. Caroline smiled at him as she held out her hand indicating she wanted him to do the honors. The feel of her smooth skin, as he slid the ring into place caused his heart to thud against his chest wall. As he reached for her, Alex cried out and Victor felt his senses go on alert. "That's different," he said heading for the stairs.

When they got to the nursery they found the crib empty. Victor yelled, "Alex!"

The high-pitched yowl came from the corner, and Victor turned on the lamp on the baby's dresser, chasing away the shadows.

Caroline gasped and Victor followed her gaze a spot underneath the rocking chair where a small wolf cub lay, eyeing them with dark bottomless eyes. He was tan and black with a russet band of fur across the bridge of his little black nose. White fringes of fur framed his head and face like a

downy halo.

"My God," Caroline said, moving forward.

Victor reached out and took hold of her arm, stopping her. "Don't startle him. Close the door."

Caroline did as he said. "He's so...tiny...is he all right?" she whispered.

Victor "He's fine. Just let me...just wait." Victor got down on all fours and crawled the cub's way. "Good boy...Daddy's boy..."

"Are you going to shift, Victor?" Caroline asked.

"No. Just stand still, it won't last..." Victor reached for the cub, who clawed at him. Just when he was thinking he'd have to shift to teach the youngster some manners, one wolf to another, the transformation occurred and their human infant son lay on the floor.

Caroline rushed forward and scooped the baby up into her arms. At that moment, Alex, diaperless due to the shift, sent a wide arch of urine shooting into the air, most of it hitting Victor, who now stood behind Caroline.

Caroline laughed. "Well, Victor, you always did want a golden shower...now you got one!"

Victor pinched her ass and she squealed. She diapered Alex, then turned around. "I'm worried, Victor. What if this happens while Claire is here?"

Knowing that Caroline would explode if he suggested getting rid of Claire, and deep down

knowing he didn't really want the woman to go, he replied, "Actually, it's a legitimate concern. I think he's turned before tonight. I found a tuft of fur in his crib earlier." Noting that Caroline was distressed, he added, "It doesn't happen often and it will get tougher, the older he gets."

"So what? It will only take one time," Caroline said.

"True. That's why I'm leaving this in your capable hands...partner," Victor said. He then smiled, patted her ass, leaned down, kissed Alex's cheek and left the room.

chapter twenty~two

Talia felt her stomach clench as the cottage came into view. The place that had always given her joy, now evoked a sense of foreboding. She prayed the feeling would go away in time. *But what if it doesn't? What if I always feel fear when I walk up this lane and my beloved retreat comes into view?*

Lucas's voice cut into her thoughts. "We're home, Talia. You okay?"

She stared out the car window at the house. They'd left many of the lights on and she knew the alarm was set this time, but still she felt a stab of apprehension. "I'm sorry, I'm just wiped out..." she said, climbing out of the car. "Are you going to pull around to the side?"

"Not tonight," he replied, getting out the driver's side. "I want it to be obvious we're here."

Inside, Talia looked around the living room as though expecting to see further destruction, but it

was as they'd left it. Lucas had done a good job in cleaning up most of the broken glass, but there was still much to do.

Lucas walked past her and disappeared into the bathroom, the one room that had been untouched by their vandal. Seconds later she heard the water in the tub running. When he reemerged, he said, "I want you to take a long, hot bath. I'm going to finish cleaning up the bedroom. The rest can wait until Ben Walker arrives tomorrow morning."

Talia thought about arguing, thought about telling him that they needed to get as much done tonight as possible, but the words just wouldn't come. She needed that bath, and more. Once she was submerged in the hot, fragrant water, she let the aroma of the jasmine bath salts carry her away into a world where people didn't try to destroy one another's lives. She thought about the baby and the upcoming ultrasound. Did she want to know if it was a boy or girl? Did Lucas? She'd have to ask him. Later. Right now she wanted to give herself over to the pleasure of the moment and the warmth surrounding her. She let her mind roam freely, thinking about Lucas and the way he made her feel. He'd freed her from the prison of her amnesia and now they truly belonged to one another. During the mating frenzy of the past couple of months, she'd craved raw sex and so had he. Now, she was becoming more and more

content to make love slowly, lazily.

Talia sighed as her hand touched one nipple. She flicked it then pinched slightly, feeling the tug in her vagina. It felt good and she did it again. Her other hand rested between her thighs, massaging the outer edges, then moving inside. A sharp knock on the door caused her to jump and sit straight up while bringing both her hands to the rim of the tub.

"Hey, you're going to turn into a prune in there," Lucas said, poking his head inside. "Come out here, I have a surprise."

When she emerged, still naked, she was pleasantly surprised to find the bedroom in perfect order. An alternate set of curtains, which had been stored in the linen cupboard hung at the French doors and the slashed bedding had been replaced by a fresh set. She recognized the comforter she'd purchased last year and was grateful she'd kept it even though it wasn't as plush as the other one. Lucas had lowered the lights, just as he'd done the night he proposed, and several lit candles sat on various surfaces. The room looked soft and comforting. He held out his hand to her and she took it, allowing him to lead her to the bed. He was wearing only a pair of undershorts. His thick mat of chest hair seemed to glow in the light from the candles. She looked up into his face and saw the gold flecks in his eyes

dancing mischievously. "You, my lady, are hereby the winner of a full body massage from one of the leading experts in that field."

"And just who is that, may I ask?" She threw him a perplexed look.

"Very funny," he replied. He caressed her shoulders then lowered her onto the bed. "Roll over on your stomach."

The cool fiber-filled comforter felt almost luxurious against her breasts and thighs as she stretched her muscles, feeling them relax already. "How do I know you're an expert, by the way?" He straddled her buttocks and she could feel his bare flesh against hers. Obviously the shorts had been removed.

"Because I said so," he whispered in her ear.

His warm, spicy breath brushed against her face and she breathed him in, as something warm and thick hit her skin. Oil? Skin cream? But as the warmth began to spread, she realized Lucas had introduced something new. "What is that?"

"Like it?"

"Yes...um...what is it?"

"Massage oil...warms on contact. Just enjoy."

And then he began to massage her back with his palms, moving from her lower spine outward to her hips. He applied a small amount of pressure and it felt so wonderful she moaned with pleasure. Then he moved up, using the flat of one

hand and the fingers of another to create a mixed effect that made her entire body tingle. When he reached her shoulder blades, he began to knead the muscles with both hands. "Heavenly," she muttered. A feeling of well being came over Talia as the stress of the past few weeks began to unknot itself from her body.

When he moved off of her, she was afraid he was finished, but he settled next to her and she soon felt the oil being poured on the back of her legs. He started at the top, just under her buttocks with his manipulations and she felt her clit begin to respond, even though he wasn't touching her sex. Her calves came next and she groaned as he pressed his thumbs into the tightness and worked at it until her legs felt like jelly. Lifting one of her legs and bending it at the knee, he flexed it sideways one way then the other several times, then repeated the maneuver with the other leg. When his thumbs pressed into the bottom of her feet, she thought she was in heaven. "I'm like a rag doll," she told him, her voice muffled because the side of her face was pressed into the bed.

"And I haven't even started on the front yet," he told her, leaning over and kissing her cheek. "Roll over."

She obeyed, eager to feel his touch on every part of her body. He remained in a kneeling position at her side but this time put the aromatic

oil on his palms and rubbed them together. Starting on her right side, he massaged the muscle between her shoulder and neck with one thumb, then worked his way down her arm using both hands, spreading the warmth as he went. Once he'd done the other shoulder and arm he moved to her legs, applying more oil to her skin and spreading it up to her triangle, eventually finding the place where her juices now flowed freely onto the bed beneath her. She felt his fingers flick her clit and she arched her hips off the bed to meet the demand. "Oh, my God, Lucas, this is so...Oh, there, more, please don't stop," she moaned as his lips found first one nipple then the other. He licked them, sucked them lightly, then moved his tongue down to her abdomen.

He spread her legs. "Lay still," he whispered.

She closed her eyes, enveloped now in the sensuality of the moment, the magic of his touch, All of her senses were at their peak. He'd brought them to life, while relaxing her entire body at the same time. How was that possible? She felt him moving above her then his legs were against the outer part of her arms. She opened her eyes to find that his feet were near her shoulders. He was lying on his back, his naked buttocks nestled between her thighs, the tip of his cock barely touching her mons. She could feel the jism seeping from its head, warm and thick. Close the gap, for God's

sake, Lucas, she thought as she tried to inch closer. Her body begged for release now, but he just lay there unmoving.

"You have to do the work now, baby, I'm helpless in this position," Lucas said with a grin.

She grabbed his hands and pulled, sheathing him. She moved up and down then sideways as her muscles clamped down over his cock. It was all sensation, since she could not see him in this position. He felt hot as fire and when the wave began inside of her, she shook with the force of the orgasm. Then as his hot, thick semen hit the base of her womb she spasmed again, this time crying out from the sheer force of it. Realization that they had climaxed together made Talia want more and she began caressing her breasts, playing at her nipples until they were rigid and her vaginal muscles began to flex again. The third orgasm came on quickly and took her by surprise with its intensity. When it was over she lay there exhausted, sweat coating her body, but feeling more satisfied than she had in a long time.

Much later, as they lay spoon fashion in bed Talia yawned, then said, "You were right...you are an expert in the art of massage. Where did you learn that, anyway?"

Lucas kissed the side of her neck. "Trade secret."

"Umm...well, I won't ask what trade...at least

not now," she replied as sleep pulled at her and she felt herself drift off.

chapter twenty- three

On Saturday morning, just as Talia and Lucas were finishing a breakfast consisting of eggs and toast, there was a knock at the door. "I'll get that, it's probably our help arriving," Lucas told her.

After last night, and Lucas's wonderful lovemaking, Talia felt less inclined to cry every time she walked into one of the rooms. But the heartsick feeling was still there, along with the feeling violation. As for her studio, she hadn't gone in there since her initial discovery yesterday and she wasn't sure how she would react when she saw the carnage again. But Caroline's idea had been a good one and Talia knew that she would have to shove aside her feelings of despair and get to work if she was going to pull things together for the New York show. That, and the thought of the new life growing inside of her, gave her courage and helped wipe away the depression she'd felt

yesterday. *But why us? It wasn't robbery so that leaves only one reason: someone has a grudge against us.. Could it have been because of the trial? In that case Victor and Caroline could be targets, too!* That thought brought about a whole new round of anxiety and Talia felt her palms grow moist and her heart rate pick up.

"Most of the things from the cupboard that ended up on the floor could not be salvaged, so we dumped them. But there is still flour covering part of the kitchen floor and various other objects broken here and there. Talia had to clear a path to fix breakfast...luckily there were three eggs that had been spared and a loaf of bread in the freezer," Lucas said, as he escorted Ben Walker into the kitchen.

Talia didn't know much about Ben, but the minute he entered the room, she noticed a distinct change in his demeanor from the cocky, flirtatious jerk she'd been introduced to yesterday.

"We really appreciate this, Ben," Talia began, as the lanky man squatted and began picking up the pieces of broken.

"No problem. Crime seems to be running rampant in Arcadia for some reason all of a sudden."

"How so?" Talia stopped clearing the table and looked at him.

"I had a break-in at my place last night."

She set the dishes on the counter. "Didn't I hear Caroline say once that you live in that apartment above the bank where..." She stopped.

"...The murdered guy lived? Yeah. Must be bad karma or something."

"Did you report..." She stopped as he looked over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. "Of course you called the police." Then a thought struck her. "You weren't there when it happened were you?"

He shook his head and a lock of jet-black hair fell over his forehead. He made no effort to push it back into place. "I went out last night... when I got home about one o'clock, my place had been tossed."

"Did they steal anything?"

Ben seemed to hesitate, then replied, "I had a gun, a nine millimeter automatic. It's gone, along with some cash I had stashed in my sock drawer."

Talia felt her stomach knot up. "Why did you have...I mean..." Talia hated weapons of any kind, especially guns.

Ben straightened up. "Why did I have my money in a sock drawer or why did I have a gun?"

She tried to smile but knew it probably looked more like a grimace. "Both," she finally replied.

He shrugged. "It wasn't much cash, just forty bucks. The gun though, that's a different matter. And to answer your question, I had it for

protection."

Yet you didn't have it with you when you went out last night, did you? He was a single man who had been out until one in the morning, probably bar hopping. It seemed logical to Talia that he'd have taken the gun along, even if he left it locked in the glove box of his car. Aloud, she said, "Well, I'm sorry that happened, Ben. You probably have your own mess to clean up at your apartment. If you want to go..."

"Nah. I took care of it already. It's a studio apartment and I don't have that many personal belongings...it's furnished, somewhat anyway."

While Talia was trying to figure out what "somewhat furnished" was, Lucas came into the kitchen with two trash bags full of debris and opened the back door. "Got a bag filled yet, Ben. I'll take it to the garbage can along with these."

Talia watched the two men working together and it occurred to her that they were about the same height and coloring—dark hair, lean, muscular bodies. But there the resemblance ended. Actually, Talia felt that there was something off about the tall, rangy man who reminded her more of a cowpoke than an art gallery gofer. He seemed out of place here.

* * * *

Several hours later, Talia was ready for her

afternoon with Rachel. Lucas had called his assistant earlier and told her why he wouldn't be in until noon. Of course, Rachel had offered to postpone their plans, but Talia had insisted they go ahead. She wasn't going to let this vandal, whoever he was, turn her life upside down!

Talia was pleased with the way Lucas and Ben restored the inside of the cottage to some semblance of order. Of course, many of her treasured belongings were gone forever, but Lucas vowed to replace them with items from the shop. "This place will be my best advertisement," he'd vowed, as they locked the front door and set the alarm.

To Talia's relief, Lucas did not mention the fact that she had yet to go into her studio and begin cleaning up the mess there—something she'd told them she wanted to do herself. *Later. Tonight. When we get home. But, not now.*

When they arrived at the shop, Rachel rushed to Talia, embracing her briefly then looking her in eye. "Are you *really* all right? You look pale. Maybe we shouldn't go...we could just have lunch, then..."

Talia stopped the torrent of words and smiled. "I'm fine. Next week, I'll be shopping here. Lucas has given me carte blanc. We have many things to replace."

Rachel's eyes widened and she clapped her

hands together. "It will be fun...we'll make it an adventure. I'll help you..." Then she leaned closer and whispered, "I've noticed some very nice things in a so-called junk box I got at that auction. I've been holding them back...you get first pick!"

Talia felt her spirits lift and found that she was again looking forward to this afternoon. "Where did Lucas go?" She looked around the shop, noting that other than two browsing customers, she and Rachel were now alone.

"Caleb Sinclair's truck arrived a while ago to pick up the things he bought. Lucas told me to mind the store for a minute so he could talk to them." Then she laid a hand on Talia's arm. "Lucas told me about your studio. I'm so sorry."

Talia told her about the New York show and what the vandalism had cost her in that regard. "But, I'll still be able to send three pieces. I had some things stored in the attic that will go nicely with their theme."

Rachel smiled and squeezed Talia's arm. "Wonderful. But it must be awful for you, knowing that someone came into your home and..." She stopped then, eyes downcast as if she'd said too much.

"It's all right, Rachel. I want to talk about it. It helps. But I think right now, you have a customer who needs help," Talia said, pointing to a short, bald man who was looking anxiously their way.

* * * *

Lucas helped Caleb Sinclair's deliverymen heft the last piece of furniture into the back of the truck. "Come into my office, I have the receipt for you to sign," he told them. He'd purposely not brought document with him into the loading area because he wanted to talk to the two men privately for a minute. Once they were standing beside his desk, he said, "So, tell me, do you make a lot of pickups for Mr. Sinclair?"

The larger of the two was dressed in a brown jumpsuit that did little to hide his thick gut. "Some. He pays good."

The other, somewhat taller and thinner, added, "He's rich. I figure he inherited money. He has that look, ya know?"

"What's his house like?" Lucas asked.

Both men shrugged. "Not sure. We delivered the last stuff to a storage place and that's where this is going."

Lucas looked again at the receipt, then said, "This address is a storage facility?"

"Yeah, you know, one of those self-store places. You pay a monthly fee and..."

Lucas cut in with, "Yes, I know what they are. Don't you have a home address for him?"

The taller man snorted, "Why? We ain't

delivering things there. We only need the address of where we're takin' the stuff. Anything else is his business, not ours."

"How do you get paid?" Lucas asked.

"He pays us in advance. Cash. Much simpler that way," the heavier man said with a wink.

"Why you so curious, anyway?" the other man demanded.

Ignoring the question, Lucas asked, "Do you have a phone number for Mr. Sinclair?"

"Cell number. But if he didn't give it to you, we ain't," the thinner man stated. Then he quickly initialed the receipt and held his hand out for their copy.

* * * *

Talia and Rachel had lunch at Italia, then went to Gloria's, a small hair salon wedged between the gallery and the bank. Gloria was a small, petite woman with curly blond hair and vivid green eyes. On Saturdays she had a part-time girl, Denise, who was tall, with coffee-colored skin and short hair. Her eyes, large and luminously brown, were fixed on Talia and Rachel as they came into the salon.

"Not bad for a Saturday afternoon," Talia said to Rachel. Talia knew the routine. You signed in and waited your turn. During the week Gloria ran the place by herself and she never played

favorites.

Denise sauntered over to the counter. "Glad your dad got off," she said to Talia by way of greeting. "It was a bum rap, anyway. I permed one of the jurors. She never for a minute thought he did it."

"Thanks," Talia said. Denise was a gossip and Talia always watched what she said around her.

"Both of you?" Denise asked, fixing her chocolate orbs on Talia.

"Just Rachel. Oh, this is Rachel Lewis. She works..." Talia began.

"Yeah, at your husband's antique place," Denise finished.

"Well, he's not my..." Talia began, only to have her remark cut off by Gloria's sing-song voice.

"I'm soooo glad to see you, Talia. But you're not due for a trim yet...Oh, I was soooo relieved when that jury acquitted your father....Caroline comes in here all the time...touch up, you know. People with black hair do tend to gray early on..."

Isn't there such a thing as hairdresser-client confidentiality? Aloud, Talia said, "Rachel is here for a trim..."

Rachel interrupted with, "I'm here for a makeover! That is the point of this day, after all, isn't it?" She smiled sweetly, glancing at Talia.

Talia felt her cheeks redden, realizing that she hadn't fooled Rachel with her "girl's day out"

ploy. The woman had been onto her all along! "I didn't mean to..." Talia began.

Rachel patted her arm and chuckled. "Don't fret. I'm long overdue for this. And I love that you care enough to prod me along. Now, let's get to work!"

An hour later, Rachel had a new, softer looking hairstyle and Talia couldn't help but be proud of the way things had turned out. Denise had worked wonders, highlighting first, then trimming so that feathery strands framed Rachel's face in a flattering way.

"I love it. And it will be so easy to take care of, just blow and go!" Rachel had exclaimed once she saw the results.

Next, they went to the only clothing store in town, Style, and while Rachel headed for the handbag section, Talia scanned the maternity clothes.

"Oh, you must try that on...it won't be long until you'll be needing it anyway...time flies," Rachel said, coming up behind Talia as she stood examining a pale green dress.

"It's awfully light...I'm not sure..." Talia replied hesitating.

"Only one way to find out."

In the fitting room Talia slipped the short-sleeved cotton dress over her head and assessed her image in the full-length mirror. *I was right. The*

color just isn't right with my skin tone. While Talia looked spectacular in emerald green and other rich tones, the pastels did little for her. *This is definitely a dress for a blond...someone with blue eyes and peachy skin.* Turning sideways, out of the corner of her eye, she caught the image of just such a woman in the mirror. The hair, pale as sunlight was long and straight with bangs covering the forehead. The body was soft and curvaceous, the eyes cobalt blue and dazzling beneath long dark lashes, the lips full and pouty. Talia stood frozen for a breathless moment, then spun around only to see her own image staring back at her. A wave of dizziness overcame her and she quickly sat down on the chair in the corner of the dressing room.

"You all right, Talia?" Rachel called, knocking on the door.

Talia tried to answer but couldn't make the words come out.

"Talia, answer me," Rachel repeated, this time her voice edged with concern.

"I'm fine...just getting dressed. This color isn't right for me," she finally managed. Dear Lord, what is happening to me, she wondered as she quickly put her own clothes on.

When Talia and Rachel returned to the antique shop, it was just five o'clock and although the "Closed" sign was already displayed in the door,

Lucas was chatting with an elderly woman as he wrapped her purchase.

"Oh, my dear," the woman said, as she passed Talia on her way out, "I'm so happy your dear father is a free man again. Such a nice gentleman. I go into the gallery all the time and he is always so polite and charming." Then she whispered in a confidential tone, "But that assistant of his, Miss Thomas, can be sort of snappish, if you know what I mean."

Talia watched the woman leave, then turned to Lucas and shook her head. "Well, I'll have to be sure and tell Caroline to pour on the charm," she said wearily.

Rachel, however, seemed to be full of energy. "We came by to show you...the new me!"

It took Lucas a moment or two to catch on, but finally his face broke into a grin. "New hairdo. Very nice, Rachel. It suits you."

Talia smiled at him and he looked relieved. Men were always happy when they said the right thing to a woman, she'd noticed.

"I bought a slew of new clothes...under Talia's watchful eye, of course. She's got such a sense of style and color...well, I guess she would, being an artist and all. Well, I have to go...I'll see you Monday, Mr. Knight." Then turned to Talia she added, "Thank you sooo much. I know you had other things to do today, but..."

Talia put a hand on the woman's shoulder. "You did me the favor, Rachel. I needed an outing to help get my mind off of what happened at the cottage. So, *I'm* saying thanks to *you*." Rachel's cheeks reddened and her eyes lit up. Talia truly liked her and hoped they could do this again. When she said as much, Rachel's enthusiasm doubled.

"Well, isn't she the whirling dervish all of a sudden," Lucas commented, gathering up some papers and heading for the back of the shop. "Wonder what happened to the quiet, subdued young woman I hired?"

"She made friends with me, that's what happened. And you know how I am when I see possibilities in someone." Talia said following behind.

"Relentless? Obsessed? Compulsive?" He ticked off the words in rapid-fire succession.

"Determined." Talia stated. "Speaking of sex...when am I going to get another massage?"

Lucas dropped the papers on his desk and turned to face her. "How did we get from talking about your compulsive behavior to sex?"

"We weren't talking about my behavior, *you* were. I was thinking about the way your hands felt on my thighs – and other places – last night."

Lucas threw back his head and laughed. "You never stop amazing me, you know that?"

Talia felt a stirring deep within her body, as the need to be held and caressed came rushing to the forefront.

As though reading her mind, Lucas came to her and enfolded her in his strong embrace. "Something's wrong. Is it the studio? I'll help you clean it up. In fact, I won't take no for an answer. We have all day tomorrow. "

Talia longed to tell him about the frightening experience she'd had in the dressing room at Style, but she couldn't. Not yet. So, she'd let him think that the mess at home was bothering her. What would I do without you? You're my rock."

"Well, your rock is now going to take you out to dinner. How about the Country Mile Inn?"

Suddenly, the idea of a nice, relaxing dinner at the quaint, historic restaurant located between Arcadia and Kinnard, sounded like heaven and she quickly agreed.

"So did you buy anything?" Lucas asked as they left the shop and stepped out into the cold night air.

"No, but I tried on a few things. Maternity clothes. I just didn't find anything that seemed like me, though," she replied vaguely.

The Country Mile Inn was the former home of a millionaire land developer that had been turned into cozy restaurant shortly after the Korean War. It was made of stone, similar to that used to build

Talia's cottage and she'd always loved the sense of warmth and peace that seemed to envelope her when she walked into the single-story structure.

Tonight, its multi-paned windows were coated with steam, a result of the heat inside contrasting with the cold outdoors. The interior revealed off-white stucco walls and plush carpeting in rich, deep burgundy. There were fireplaces in each of the rooms, which were separated by wood-beamed archways. The ceiling was low with more wooden beams creating a criss-cross pattern. The bar was made of gleaming mahogany with a mirror on the wall behind it. Bottles of various sizes and shapes sat on glass shelves, their reflections gleaming brightly under a row of strategically placed track lights.

They were greeted by Rita Pierce, owner of the restaurant. A reedy woman with rich brown hair and a ready smile, she led them past the bar and into a smaller back room, one Talia guessed had once been a study or den. Cheerful flames danced behind the stone hearth. As a waiter threw on another log, embers spit into the air making dazzling sparks of light. The tangy aroma of pine, mixed with the food smells made Talia's mouth water.

Once they were seated at a table in the corner of the room, close enough to the fireplace to catch some of the warmth but not too close to be

uncomfortably hot, Talia leaned back and sighed. "I needed this, Lucas. You are my hero."

Just then a waiter appeared and swept Talia's decoratively folded linen napkin off the table and laid it across her lap. "A drink before dinner?" he inquired.

Lucas ordered a glass of Merlot for himself and Talia asked for a diet soda. Once the waiter had disappeared, Lucas leaned across the table and took her hand. "The worst is over, Talia. You'll be a hit at that New York show, even though you won't be sending all the paintings you wanted to. I believe in you."

The drinks came quickly and they ordered; baked chicken for Talia and steak for Lucas.

Talia sipped at her soda, then said, "The ultrasound is Tuesday and I know you said you wanted to be there. But we need to decide whether we want to know the sex of the baby...the nurse said they will ask us."

Lucas put his wine glass down. "How do you feel about it?"

She thought for a moment, fiddling with one of the forks. "I don't think I do. But if you do..."

"No. I feel the same way," he said.

"Good. You know it just seems...well, I want to be surprised."

Lucas was staring across the room now, a scowl on his face. "Well, speaking of surprises, look who

is sitting at the table just inside the door."

Talia turned around and felt her stomach clench at the sight of Deacon Hunt. He was dressed in a dark blue suit and she could see the dark monogram against the white cuff of his shirt as he reached for his drink. With him was a woman Talia didn't recognize.

"Maybe he won't notice us," Lucas said hopefully as their salads came.

Talia speared a piece of lettuce. "I if that's his wife?"

Lucas shook his head. "He's not married. That's Hannah Nance, his executive assistant. She'd been in the shop a couple of times. Never bought anything, just looked around. Evidently they're an item."

Talia raised an eyebrow. "Oh, and how do you know that?"

Lucas smiled. "I listen to what people talk about in the shop. You'd be surprised at some the things I hear when people don't think anyone is..."

"Eavesdropping?" she finished for him. Then, as unobtrusively as possible, Talia move her chair around the table until she was closer to Lucas and also had a better view of the other couple's table. Tonight must have been a special occasion, because she noticed that the auburn-haired Hanna was in something very slinky and sexy that seemed to hug her rounded figure and show off

her ample cleavage.

"Looks like they're celebrating something," Talia finally said.

"His court defeat?" Lucas said with a sardonic smile.

Talia chuckled just as Deacon Hunt looked their way. "Damn, he's seen us."

"Ignore him," Lucas told her, concentrating now on the greens scattered around on his plate.

Talia stood up. "Before our main course comes, I need to use the rest room. One of the less attractive things about being pregnant, I hear...frequent trips to the john."

As she passed Deacon Hunt's table she caught only snatches of the couple's conversation, but heard enough to realize the prosecutor was not in a good mood. His companion, on the other hand, seemed to be taking it in stride.

Ten minutes later, as she was emerging from the women's restroom, she found Deacon Hunt standing by the water fountain in the small hallway that separated the two facilities. Trying to step around him, she suddenly found him blocking her way. The alcove was dimly lit but she could see his icy green stare fixed on her.

"Tell your father, I'm not finished with his ass, yet," the man said, his voice low and menacing.

Talia felt her temper flare. She could smell the liquor on his breath. "Tell him yourself, if you

have the balls," she shot back, taking another step forward. When he still didn't move and it looked like he was about to reach for her, Talia emitted a low growl and felt her face begin to contort.

"Jesus!" Hunt exclaimed, jumping back. Then he shook his head as though trying to clear his vision.

By then, Talia was smiling at him, her face back to normal. "You have a nice dinner with your *friend*, Ms. Nance. She seems very...pleasant. Makes me wonder what she wants with the likes of you, but then I guess there's no accounting for taste, is there?" When she emerged from the shadows of the hallway into the deserted area around the coat racks, she told herself that it had been just a small, mini-shift and not enough to harm the baby or for that idiot to swear to in court. *But it sure did scare the crap out of him...I'll bet he really needs to use the restroom now!*

* * * *

When the red Monte Carlo turned off of Carver Lane onto the dirt path, the woman behind the wheel doused her full beams, relying on the parking lights to show her the way to her destination. As the path narrowed she coasted to a stop in the small clearing. A blue Lumina was already there, a man leaning against it. Within

minutes another car, low slung and sleek, rolled into view.

A tall man, his silver hair gleaming in the moonlight, climbed out of a black Porsche 911 Carrera Cabriolet. He approached the woman, pulling her close in an embrace, then shook the other man's hand. They conversed for a few minutes, finally heading toward a cluster of trees, talking in low tones as they went.

From his vantage point several yards away, Ben Walker watched the trio through night-vision binoculars. When they had disappeared from view, he got up and inched his way in that direction, checking to make sure the .38 revolver was still tucked securely into his waistband, just in case.

chapter twenty~four

Talia stretched slowly as she awakened. Opening her eyes, she looked over at Lucas, who was still sleeping peacefully beside her. She pulled the new comforter she'd purchased yesterday during her shopping trip with Rachel up under her chin and snuggled down into the new sheets. They smelled of fabric softener, like spring rain, and she inhaled deeply, taking in the freshness of the new bedding. Lucas stirred, mumbled something and turned onto his back.

She looked at his profile, sharp and clearly defined against the backdrop of the white curtains at the French doors. Reaching over she tickled the tip of his goatee and he moved his head a little. Then, burying her hand under the covers again she stroked his bare thigh, pulling at the hairs on his leg. He muttered something that sounded like "too much wax." She moved her hand upward and found he was already hard, his cock twitching slightly as she flicked the side of it with her

finger nail.

"A man can't get any rest around here," he muttered, his eyes still closed.

"A *man* shouldn't sleep naked if he doesn't want his woman to do this," she whispered, caressing his dick with long, slow strokes.

Lucas smiled, eyes still closed and replied, "Is that the best you can do?"

Talia knew a challenge when she heard one. "Oh, I'm not adventurous enough for the alpha male, is that it?" She sat up and stripped back the covers, exposing his body, including a fully erect shaft. Jism already bubbled from the tip and she ran her tongue slowly over her lips, making sure he saw the gesture. "Hmmm, breakfast," she cooed, leaning down and licking the clear liquid away.

"Wicked, wicked girl.." Lucas began.

"Just what you like," she interrupted, taking him into her mouth and sucking. Then, she released him and sat back. "Want more?" She could feel the heat of his desire even though they weren't touching. It was coming off of him in waves and she felt the moisture between her own legs began to flow.

Lucas sat up and dove at her, pushing her back onto the bed and burying his face in the place between her breasts. "You drive me nuts, sometimes, and you know that," he said, his

words muffled. He nipped at one nipple then the other and she felt the tug between her legs as the need for him spiraled upward making her womb contract and her skin prickle. Then, as she'd done to him a few minutes ago, he drew away. Lying back, he put linked his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling. Talia sat up. "What are you doing? Finish what you started."

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised. "*I* was sleeping contentedly, if I recall. *You* are the troublemaker here, not me." He glanced at her erect nipples and made a sucking motion with his mouth.

Talia wanted him right now, no more games, but she knew how Lucas liked to play, liked to tantalize. *Well, let's see how he likes it when the tables are turned.* Smiling she got on her knees and moved toward him, straddling his thighs. She stroked his chest, then leaned down and touched her mouth to his, her tongue darting in and out, promising more but not quite yet. His hands found her breasts and she moaned as he pinched and rubbed the sensitive points that were now hard and taut. His penis pressed into the nesting place that harbored their child, turning her skin hot where it touched. She felt her clit twitch as he moved his hands between her legs and stroked the insides of her thighs. As his fingers moved up, working their magic, she gave herself over to the

heat that now raced through her veins. When he lifted her up, balancing her in mid-air for a second, then brought her down over his swollen shaft, she felt something akin to relief. She was complete now, part of him, joined with him.

* * * *

It had barely been dawn when they'd made love. Afterward, they had curled up together and gone back to sleep. Now, three hours later, Talia woke up to find Lucas gone and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filling the air. She glanced again at the alarm clock. It was after ten o'clock.

She found him in the kitchen dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. He was pulling strips of bacon apart and putting them in a large cast iron skillet. "You let me sleep too long..." she began, then smelled the rich aroma of the hickory-smoked meat as it began to sizzle in the skillet.

"I have been busy. I went to the store...we now have something for breakfast," he pronounced, grinning at her.

Talia picked up the tea kettle and took it to the sink and turned on the tap. "Any herbal tea?" she asked.

"Four kinds...mint, lemon, chamomile and something called..." he picked up a box from the counter and read, "...ginger snap."

Talia took the box from his hand. "A variety pack. Very good." She smiled up at him and patted his chest.

"I'm making bacon and eggs and toast," he continued, pouring himself a cup of coffee. He sipped at it then added, "As soon as we eat, we'll tackle that studio."

Talia felt her stomach jump at the thought of going in there again. She shivered just as the tea kettle came shrilly to life, emitting a high pitched whistle that never failed to make her sensitive ears ring.

Lucas was now breaking eggs into the skillet. The crispy bacon lay on paper towels, and the toast was ready. Idly Talia turned on the television, just in time to see the words "Breaking News" flash across the screen.

"What's this?" she said, as Lucas joined her in front of the small set. She took a tentative sip of the lemon tea and turned up the sound. A frazzled looking blond holding a microphone looked earnestly into the camera.

"As we reported earlier, the body of Assistant District Attorney, Brianna Hadley, was found in her home on Carver Avenue early this morning. Details are still sketchy, but we did find out that it appears she died from a single gunshot wound. The body was discovered by a friend who usually goes jogging with Ms. Hadley on Sunday mornings. As you can see behind me, the residence is still swarming with police, who are

processing the crime scene, searching for clues in this mysterious and violent death."

Lucas put their plates of food on the table, then sat down. "Murdered? Jesus," he said, shaking his head.

Talia stood transfixed, still staring at the television. Then, she turned and joined him. "I saw her on Friday as I was coming out of the shop. Lucas, she had sunglasses on but it was obvious she was hiding a black eye," Talia told him.

"Are you sure?"

"Very. I bumped into her. She wasn't in a good mood, believe me."

Lucas seemed to be pondering this, then said, "I wonder if that's part of the reason she didn't show up in court that last day?"

Talia's eyes widened. "Do you suppose she was the victim of domestic abuse?"

Lucas shook his head. "Who knows? Was she married or did she have a live-in?"

"I have no idea, but someone gave her that black eye and now she's dead...murdered."

Lucas took a bite of egg, then said, "Maybe it was revenge."

Talia felt fear snake through her gut. "For?"

"An assistant district attorney makes a lot of enemies. After all she was just part of a high profile case, and probably had other cases on her plate..."

"You're thinking of my father, aren't you?" Talia interrupted, pushing her plate away. Suddenly her appetite was gone.

"I'm not accusing him. I'm just saying the police will probably want to talk to anyone connected with any of her cases, that's all."

"My father was acquitted. Besides if someone wanted revenge they'd go after Deacon Hunt first. Why target Brianna Hadley?"

"She was part of the prosecution team. Maybe she was an easier target." Lucas replied simply.

"You still don't trust Victor, do you?" Talia felt her lip quiver and lowered her head to hide the tears.

Lucas took a drink of coffee, put the mug down and replied, "No."

Talia got up and left the kitchen. "I'll be in the studio. I can do it alone. If I need you, I'll let you know," she called over her shoulder.

Lucas slammed his hand on the tabletop. "Shit!" he said standing up and pushing his chair back so hard that it fell over backwards with a resounding thud.

* * * *

Victor flicked at Caroline's nipple with his tongue and felt the response immediately. She had gorgeous tits—firm and full—just right. *Perfect*. He

sucked at one then the other as she writhed beneath him, her cunt clutching his cock like a vise. Even after giving birth, she was still as tight as a virgin, her passage silky smooth and wet, grabbing him, squeezing at him until he was ready to burst.

Alex had awakened them at six o'clock in the morning, but had blessedly taken his bottle and gone back to sleep. It was now after ten-thirty and they were still languishing in bed, fucking each other's brains out. Just the way he liked to spend a Sunday morning.

Since he'd given in to Caroline's demands for a full partnership in the gallery, she'd been more like her old self. No more arguments, no more snappish remarks. *Peace in the valley at last.* He rammed himself up to the hilt, making her emit a moan. She reached down and grabbed his balls, her legs wrapped around his waist. He felt as though he couldn't get himself up inside of her far enough. He pumped faster and harder, until with a shudder the orgasm began. Then in the middle of his ecstasy, he heard a banging from downstairs, then the shrill cry from the nursery.

"Son of a bitch!" Caroline yelled, pounding on his back. "Who the fuck is that? God, they woke up Alex!"

She pushed at him and he groaned, "No, wait...I'm..." But she'd slithered out from

underneath him and was gone. He felt his penis protest the intrusion by sending a cramp up into his abdomen. Caroline donned a robe and was out the door in a flash. "See who the hell is at the door, Victor, I'm going to get Alex."

Frustrated and sweat-soaked, he got up, pulled on pajama bottoms and hurried down the stairs, fling open the door ready to do battle.

Paul Muncie and Stan Reed stood on the small porch. Muncie's expression, as always, revealed no emotion. Reed, tall and bespectacled, smiled pleasantly and said, "Mr. Kane. Good morning. I hope we didn't get you up?"

Muncie pointedly looked at his watch but said nothing.

"What the hell do you want?" Victor demanded.

"A word, that's all," Stan Reed said.

"Well, I've got two words for you," Victor said, "Get lost." He started to close the door, but Muncie's hand was suddenly flat against the wood, preventing that.

"It won't take long," the detective said, stepping inside.

"Why are you two here?" Caroline asked from the bottom of the stairs.

Victor turned around and passed her. "I'm getting some clothes on. You guys can wait." He noted that Caroline now wore a pair of jeans and a

sweater. Alex, quiet at last, was in her arms.

When he returned a few minutes later, he found her sitting on the sofa, face pale, eyes wide. "Brianna Hadley has been murdered, Victor," she said before Muncie and Reed could say a word.

Victor felt his temper flare. "So naturally you came to hassle me. Why? I didn't even know the woman! Get the hell out of here. Now!" He went to the door and opened it.

"Do you own a gun, Mr. Kane?" Muncie asked, not moving from his position next to one of the easy chairs.

"No." Victor snapped.

"That's quiet a temper you have there, Mr. Kane," Stan Reed commented, walking behind the sofa where Caroline sat with Alex.

"Don't start that shit with me. I didn't kill that woman. Now, I'll ask you again. Leave."

Stan Reed took up a position near the aquarium. "Very nice. Colorful," he commented, then looked at Victor. "We're questioning anyone who has had any dealings with Ms. Hadley, or the prosecutor's office, in the past few months. It's nothing personal, Mr. Kane."

The detective's mild manner irritated Victor even more and he huffed, then said, "Well, I didn't have 'dealings' with her. She didn't even show up for the final day of the trial. I never even spoke to the woman. My 'dealings' were with that bastard,

Hunt. Now, if *he* turns up dead, you'll have reason..."

Caroline stood up. "That's enough, Victor. Don't say any more!"

The tone of her voice stopped his torrent of words and Victor cursed himself for his stupidity. He'd let these two clowns egg him on until he said something stupid. Clamping his mouth shut, he went to Caroline, took Alex and headed for the kitchen. Behind him he could hear Caroline telling the detectives to get the hell out and not come back without a warrant. Then he heard the door slam.

When she came into the kitchen she went to the phone and punched in a number. "Rich? Where's Kevin. Good, put me on speaker...."

Victor listened as Caroline told the two attorneys about Muncie and Reed's visit. Alex squirmed in his arms and he went to the refrigerator, took out a bottle, popped it in the microwave and set the timer for twenty seconds. He was beginning to see Caroline in a whole new light. She wasn't the same person he'd left behind last summer. She was stronger, more self assured. Maybe having her as a partner at the gallery wasn't such a bad idea after all.

* * * *

Talia took another ruined canvas and stuck it into a heavy duty trash bag. The beautiful scene she'd been working on was beyond repair and she'd cried again at the sight of it. She'd wiped up some of the spilled paint with a rag, but most of it had soaked into the floorboards. She didn't want to use the solvent she cleaned her brushes with because she'd have to pour a good bit of it out and the fumes wouldn't be good for the baby. Insurance would pay to replace the flooring, but nothing could replace the paintings.

Lucas stuck his head in the door. "Still mad?"

She looked at him, standing there with that errant lock of hair tumbling onto his forehead and knew she'd never be able to stay angry with him for very long. "You might as well make yourself useful. I need to get into the attic and get down those sketches and watercolors."

She watched as he pulled down the attic stairs and climbed them. Within minutes he returned holding a box.

They went through the things together. The watercolor of Town Square Park was in good shape and she knew she had a frame that would showcase it perfectly. Sifting through the pictures, she finally selected a charcoal sketch of the Methodist church, a historic landmark with a small cemetery next to it, as the third piece. She'd put it in a black frame behind glass so the charcoal

wouldn't get smudged. The picture from the gallery would complete the trio.

While Lucas took the ruined artwork out to the garbage can, Talia went into the kitchen and began making a list of things she'd need to replace. When the phone rang, she picked it up absently, saying a distracted "Hello."

"Did you hear about Brianna Hadley," Victor asked.

Talia put down her pen and walked into the living room with the cordless phone. "Yes, it's awful." She was going to tell him about Friday and bumping into Brianna but he was talking again.

"Well, the police were just here, questioning me. This never stops!"

"You didn't even know her so what reason would you have..." A knock on the door interrupted her. Just then Lucas returned and she motioned for him to answer it.

"Do I need a reason, in their eyes? To them, I'm still a killer who got away with one murder so why would I hesitate to commit another," Victor replied.

"Oh, Lord, Dad. It's Muncie and Reed. They're here," Talia said softly into the mouthpiece as she watched Lucas admit the two detectives. Quickly hanging up the phone, she turned and said to the pair, "I assume you're here to tell us that you've

found out who vandalized our home."

Muncie's lips moved but his expression didn't change. "I assume you've heard about the murder of Brianna Hadley, the assistant district attorney." His gaze zeroed in on the phone.

Talia could tell he'd seen her talking to someone. She moved away from the table and sat down on the sofa.

Lucas said, "We saw it on the news. That still doesn't explain why you're here."

"Looks like you got things pretty well cleaned up here," Stan Reed commented, walking around the living room.

"I'll repeat, why are you here?" Lucas said.

Talia could see his jaw muscles working and knew he was about to lose his temper. "Actually, I'm glad you're here," she said, eyeing Muncie who still stood stoically just inside the front door. "I saw Brianna Hadley on Friday, outside the antique shop. Actually I bumped into her. She had a black eye. She was trying to hide it behind a pair of sunglasses, but it was there. It looked fresh, too." She noticed with satisfaction that she'd gotten their attention. She ignored Lucas's glare.

"Did you speak to her...ask her what happened," Reed said, taking out a pen and a small notebook from his coat pocket.

"No. She and I weren't friends. I said I was sorry I bumped into her and she said that I should

watch where I was going, or something like that," Talia told him. "I'm sure she still has that shiner. Maybe you should be looking for whoever gave it to her," Talia said, watching for a reaction. *Bingo*, she thought as she saw them exchange glances.

As Lucas showed the two detectives to the door, Muncie turned and said, "We are still working on your case. But the murder of an ADA is going to have to go on the front burner. You understand."

Talia did, actually. What had happened to Brianna Hadley was ghastly and she hoped they found the killer soon.

"They questioned Victor," she told Lucas once he closed the front door.

"I'm not surprised. I assume that's why you told them about the black eye."

Talia nodded. "My father sure as hell didn't give it to her, but someone did."

chapter twenty~five

Caroline was feeling restless and unsatisfied. After Muncie and Reed left, she tried to settle Alex down so she and Victor could resume their lovemaking, but the baby was wide awake and Victor didn't seem in the mood any longer. Finally, after lunch, she announced that she was going into town. Victor opted to stay at home with Alex.

"We need to bond," he said with a wink.

Caroline was relieved. She really wanted to go to the gallery and sort through some correspondence. As she pulled her Lexus out of the complex, she glanced in her rearview mirror. Was Neil home? Had he heard about Brianna Hadley? Had he seen Muncie and Reed at their door? Was he thinking about her and remembering?

Stop it! You have to quit thinking about him...about all of it. Your life is with Victor. You love Victor. Neil deceived you, lied to you. Victor is finally going to be

your husband. You have his child. You're now a partner in the business. You have it all...everything you wanted. It's yours. Don't screw it up! But deep down in a place she seldom allowed herself to go, she knew that Neil Wade still lingered, waiting.

When Caroline opened the front door of the gallery and deactivated the alarm, she got the feeling the place was not deserted. Quickly, she checked her office. Empty. As she made her way quietly to the storeroom, she could hear movement, then the unmistakable clicking of computer keys. She stood in the doorway for a moment, watching as Ben worked, but what she saw on the screen didn't look like the pre-programmed inventory system or the spreadsheet he'd created. From this distance she couldn't make out many details, but it looked like a grid of some kind, or a map. He moved the mouse and something else appeared, a document, and he began typing furiously. Uneasiness replaced the concern she'd felt when she thought there might be an intruder. *Don't jump to conclusions. He has a key, he probably just came in to catch up. But, on what?*

"I'm surprised to see you here on a Sunday, Ben," she finally said. Then she watched as he clicked the mouse again and the familiar spreadsheet popped up on the screen. She moved closer, wishing she'd done that before she spoke,

and he had a chance to get rid of what he'd really been working on.

He turned and looked up at her, a tight smile on his face. "I wanted to make some upgrades...to the system. Sunday's the best time. Too busy during the week." He stood and turned off the machine. "I didn't expect to see you here today."

"Obviously," she said before she could stop herself. "That didn't look like company business you were working on, Ben. What was it?"

He moved toward her, a frown replacing the pasted-on smile. "Don't know what you mean, Ms. Thomas. What exactly is it you think you saw?"

There was no menace in his words or demeanor, yet she knew he wasn't being completely honest. But before she could answer, he smiled sheepishly and his cheeks reddened.

"Okay, you got me. Sometimes, when I come in on weekends to do system upgrades and catch up, I stay for a while and...well, I play computer games. They don't cost you anything...they're all on the system already, bundled into the package that came on it. I just...well, get bored, you know? There's this one...it's called Fortune Hunt...you use maps to find the treasure and get points and move on to higher and higher levels..."

Caroline held up a hand. "Whoa! You've already lost me. I know enough about computers

to be dangerous and until you came along I was fumbling around trying to keep track of things and doing a piss-poor job of it. You've worked miracles here, so if you want to come in on your own time and play games, have at it. Just make sure you set the alarm when you leave." Before he could reply, the chime at the front door sounded. "Damn, I forgot to lock the door...Who doesn't know we're not open on Sunday!" Caroline hurried to the front and stopped dead in her tracks. "Neil," she said breathlessly, feeling her heart leap into her throat.

"I saw your car outside. We need to talk, Caroline," he said advancing toward her.

She couldn't take her eyes off the way he moved, strong, sure, steady. The tan slacks and yellow sweater suited him, went perfectly with the light brown hair, the cobalt blue of his eyes. Those eyes, intense, seeing right through to her core. The aroma of his after shave reached her nostrils now, tangy, musky, alluring. And then he was standing inches away, reaching out. "No!" Caroline jumped back and pushed at him, throwing herself off balance in the process. Neil steadied her, his strong arms sliding around her waist, his hands pressing into her back. It would be so easy to just lean forward and feel his body connect with hers again. So easy. Instead she said, "Let go of me, Neil. Leave. We have nothing to say to each

other!"

"That's where you're wrong, Caroline. There are some things...I couldn't...God, I hate this secrecy! The lies! Damn!" He stepped back and balled both hands into fists at his sides.

"Everything okay in here?" came Ben's voice as he stepped out of the hallway and came into the room.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Mr. Wade was just leaving," she managed. Her throat felt constricted, her mouth dry. But her eyes were now wet with tears she was trying hard to hold back. She met Neil's gaze and saw misery, anger and something else she couldn't quite identify lingering there.

"Stay out of it, whoever you are. This is between me and Caroline," Neil shot, then turned his gaze on her. "We need to...You can't shut me out, don't do that. You don't know everything...the truth..."

Ben stepped between Caroline and Neil. "Maybe you don't hear so good. The lady says she doesn't want you here."

Caroline watched as though in a trance as Ben grabbed Neil's arm and shoved him toward the front door. And when Neil looked at her, his eyes pleading for a chance to explain, she looked away.

As Ben opened the door, Neil called, "Caroline, we will have that talk, sooner or later."

Then she heard the front door slam and the lock turn. Suddenly the world swam back into focus and she ran to her office, closing the door behind her. Shaking, she leaned against the solidness of the desk, palms flat on its surface, and began to cry.

chapter twenty~SIX

On Monday morning, Lucas read the Arcadia Messenger over breakfast. The headline ADA SLAIN was certainly an attention getter. When Talia joined him, he read aloud as she made herself a cup of tea. "...was killed between one and two o'clock Sunday morning. The weapon, believed to be a nine millimeter hand gun, was not found at the scene. District Attorney, Deacon Hunt, was quoted as saying: Ms. Hadley was a great asset to the district attorney's office and will be greatly misled. I have the utmost confidence in our police department and their ability to solve this brutal, senseless crime quickly and make a speedy arrest. And when that happens, you can rest assured that my office will see to it that a guilty verdict is rendered!" Lucas put down the paper and snorted in disgust. "Pompous bastard."

Talia sipped at her tea, then said, "I guess that last sentence was his way of insinuating that Craig Lynch's murderer got away with it."

Lucas was silent for a moment, pondering his response. For, in his own mind, there was no doubt that Victor had gotten away with killing the reporter, although he wouldn't go so far as to say it was premeditated. "Hunt is still stinging from his defeat. He's liable to say anything. And in case I didn't say so yet, I think you did the right thing, telling Muncie and Reed about Brianna Hadley's black eye. If she was being abused, it could be connected to her murder."

"It's like everything is spinning out of control, Lucas," Talia began, sitting down opposite him.

He offered her an English muffin, but she declined. "You need to eat. And you need to get back to normal life." When she eyed him skeptically, he added, "Get back to work, Talia. Paint. The studio is cleaned up, and I'll call a carpenter to come replace the stained floorboards if you want..."

She stopped his words with a raised hand. "No. Leave them. Paint on the floor isn't unusual for an artist's studio, is it?"

He returned her wan smile with a wide grin, then reached for her hand. "Eat a muffin, with lots of jelly and butter. Have a second cup of herbal tea. Then go in there and get those creative juices flowing again."

"What are you my personal cheerleader now?" she asked. "Now if you want to talk about juices

flowing..."

Lucas laughed. "You are sooo bad."

"And you love every minute of it."

Lucas felt her foot creep up his calf, then his thigh until her toes found his crotch, where they nestled in, massaging, manipulating. "Where were you this morning when I was taking a solitary shower?" he asked.

"You could have gotten me up, you know."

Lucas reached under the table and grabbed her foot, tickling it. She squealed and withdrew it. "I have a business to run, remember." He got up and took his plate to the sink, rinsed it off then put it in the dishwasher. Coming back to the table he saw that she was watching him intently. "What?"

"I was thinking about trying my hand at nudes...would you pose for me?"

For a split second he thought she might be serious, then he saw the mischievous glint in those amber eyes. "Will the artist be nude, also?"

She got up and came to him. "Of course."

"Then you've got yourself a model. Now let me get to work...and you do the same." He held her, kissed her, then squeezed her ass before moving away. "See you tonight."

* * * *

Victor poured body wash on the white nylon scrubby and motioned for Caroline to turn

around. She did so and he began making sudsy patterns on her back. With his free hand, he kneaded one of her breasts, then slid his hand down her slick, wet abdomen to the place between her thighs. She spread her legs to allow him access and he probed there, feeling her own nectar mixing with the soap and water.

It was a little after seven o'clock and he assumed Claire would arrive any minute. Last night he'd talked to Caroline about changing Claire's hours. Finally she'd agreed that the nanny didn't need to be there at the crack of dawn. They'd agreed that eight-thirty was better. *It will be a hell of a lot better for my sex life, I sure as hell know that*, Victor thought as he jammed his penis against Caroline's buttocks. Then she turned around and he lifted her up, sheathing himself with her. *Oh yes, yes, tight baby. Flex those muscles, God...that's it...tighten up...feels so good.*

Victor felt the climax begin and held onto her tightly, bracing her against the wall, pumping hard, draining himself into her. Then he felt her passage quiver and she shuddered, as the water beat down on their bodies moving in perfect rhythm.

Ten minutes later, when Victor emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist, he nearly ran into Claire in the upstairs hallway. She stood staring at him, one foot on the top stair,

the other on the one below it. Unlike the last time he'd seen her coming up the steps, he didn't hide but stood still. Today she wore a soft-looking knit dress that clung to her curves. It was pale lavender and he wanted to reach out and touch it, and her. He heard the blow dryer running in the bathroom. Caroline wouldn't be in there much longer. *What's really on your mind, Kane, a little slap and tickle with the nanny? Hell, you don't know a thing about this woman. So what is it you want from her?*

"I have Alex's bottle here," she said, cutting into his thoughts.

Victor felt a tremor in his cock, and wondered for a second what her long slender hands would feel like wrapped around it. Then he saw her gaze go there and repressed a smile. She was thinking about it, imagining it. And when she met his eyes again, he could see that she knew what he was thinking. He expected her to blush, but instead, she reached up and stroked his cheek with one finger.

"Another lifetime," she said softly. Then, she stepped past him and disappeared into the nursery.

Victor felt disoriented for a moment, then slowly walked into the bedroom. *What the hell did she mean by that?* He stripped of the towel and looked down at his hard-on. *Damn! What was it about that woman?*

* * * *

Once Lucas was gone, Talia finished cleaning the kitchen then went into her studio. The familiar smells of oil paint and solvent permeated the air and she decided to open one of the side windows just a crack. She was wearing a sweatshirt so she should be warm enough, at least for a while.

Several blank canvases rested against the wall and she lifted one onto the easel. She'd already made up her mind that she was going to recreate the painting she'd been working on when the vandalism occurred. Of course the snow was gone from the pine trees outside the window, but she would imagine it there and if she could see it in her mind, she could paint it.

As she made the first tentative sketches on the clean, white surface, she let her mind drift to thoughts of her past. A year ago she hadn't known who she was—had no past, afraid of an unsure future. She'd been having dreams lately of the pack, a miasma of images where she was running away from danger in the dark, her heart pumping like a steam engine, her breath forming smoky clouds in the cold air. And Lucas was there, too, racing beside her, his body sleek, his black fur plastered to his skin. The forest was his kingdom, and she was his chosen one.

But other dreams had also invaded her sleep. She was always lost, in a city and as she passed stores and glanced in the windows she saw the image of someone else. She knew she had red hair, amber eyes, was tall and willowy, yet the woman in the reflection was different...each time, different. How could that be? *Boy a shrink would have a field day with that one. Probably tell me I hated Brussels sprouts as a kid, so now I have an identity crisis, or some such nonsense! Well, guess what, when I was a kid, I was a cub, so there!*

Talia laughed and the sound echoed off the bare walls. *And that's another thing, why are the walls bare. This is an artist's studio, for God's sake. Hang some of those painting up there!* With a new resolve, she began gathering up some of the pictures she and Lucas had retrieved from the attic and spent the next few hours framing them and hanging them strategically around the room. Once the task was finished, she stood back and observed her handiwork.

"Well, it's a start," she said, satisfied for now with the results.

* * * *

Caroline walked into the gallery at nine o'clock, deactivated the alarm and went straight to the

office. Where was Ben? She went to the storeroom, but it was empty. Opening the back door, she glanced around but saw nothing unusual. Still, something nagged at her and she stepped outside. When she saw the glove lying a few feet away, picked it up. Was it Ben's? All at once, the past came rushing back and in her mind she was in this same alley several months ago, the morning they'd discovered Jeremy's mangled body.

"Ben!" she cried, running toward the intersecting walkway behind the bank. And there she found him, in a crumpled heap. "No!" she screamed.

A half hour later Victor was at her side and Ben, badly beaten but alive, was on his way to the hospital. Muncie and Reed had arrived in record time and were now asking her questions.

"So, what made you think to look out there?" Reed asked.

Caroline sat on the sofa in the office with Victor next to her, his arm thrown protectively over her shaking shoulders. "I looked out back to see if he was there, maybe smoking and I saw the glove...then...all of it came back...I had this feeling...something wrong..."

"Shouldn't you be at the hospital talking to Ben to find out who did this?" Victor growled.

Muncie stepped forward, his dour expression never changing. "He's unconscious. Kind of hard

to question an unconscious man. You get along with him?"

Caroline felt her stomach sink and looked sideways at Victor just in time to catch the scowl he sent Muncie's way.

"I'm not even going to respond to that. You're a real jackass, Muncie, anybody ever tell you that?"

"Often. But I get the job done. Not my fault juries can't make intelligent decisions," Muncie retorted.

Victor started to get up, but Caroline pressed against him and he stayed put. Aloud, she said to Muncie, "Are we finished here. We have work to do and I'd like to check on Ben."

Reed flipped open his cell phone and punched in some numbers. "Save you the trouble, Ms. Thomas." He spoke into the mouthpiece, then flipped the phone shut. "He's awake but groggy. Let's go, Paul."

After the two detectives left, Victor paced the office. "First Talia's mess, then the murder of that Hadley woman, now this. What the fuck is going on?"

Caroline said nothing. She couldn't get it out of her mind, the way Ben had looked, his face bruised and bloodied, his breathing ragged. And the first thing she'd thought of when she saw him lying there was Neil. Could he had done that? She hadn't told Victor about what happened here

yesterday between Neil and Ben, in fact she hadn't told him Ben had been in here at all and she certainly didn't intend to do so now. *What if it was a lie? What if he had other reasons for being here? First his apartment is broken into, now this? If Neil didn't attack him up, then maybe he's involved in something else, something that got him nearly killed.*

* * * *

Detective Paul Muncie looked down at the battered man in the hospital bed and repeated his question. "Who did this, Ben?" When he got no response, he looked over at his partner, Stan Reed and shrugged.

"He's still pretty doped up. Seems odd though, I mean his place is robbed and now this?"

Muncie noticed the man stir and his eyes opened to slits. "You're awake, good." He moved closer to the bed and bent over the prone figure. "Did you see who beat you up, Ben? Come on give us something to go on, here. We're trying our best for you."

"Where am I?" came the mumbled response through lips that were swollen to twice their size.

Muncie sighed and stood up. "You want to give it a try?" he asked Reed.

Stan Reed stood on the other side of the bed. In a voice that was much louder than necessary, he

asked, "Ben Walker, we're the police. Someone beat you up and left you in the alley behind your apartment. Who was it?"

Ben winced in pain as he tried to move. "Don't know. Dark. Couldn't see."

"What were you doing in the alley at night?" Muncie asked.

"Walkin' home...I want out of here..."

Reed's cell phone rang and he stepped away from the bed to take the call.

"Let's go, Paul. They found a gun in a dumpster about two miles from Brianna Hadley's house. It's a nine millimeter, could be the murder weapon."

* * * *

The police activity around the gallery had drawn a curious crowd and once the police were gone, many onlookers came inside, supposedly to look around, but Caroline knew they were just trying to find out what had happened. Victor avoided them by closing himself in the storeroom, supposedly to check the inventory files. That left Caroline to contend with the thrill seekers.

She called the hospital again only to be told Ben was fully conscious and would be released later that day. "It's funny you should call because he gave me your name and number. The doctor really

felt he should stay overnight, but Mr. Walker refuses to do that. You know, that means he is leaving against doctor's advice. We do not like to see that...but he already signed the release form. He'll need a ride home."

Caroline told the nurse she'd be there around four o'clock had hung up before the woman could say any more.

* * * *

Talia turned on the radio, looking for a station with some soft, soothing music. She liked that when she was working. Easy listening, they called it, whatever that meant. When the news came on, a deep voice was saying something about Brianna Hadley and Talia turned up the sound.

"...found this afternoon in a dumpster at the Oakleaf Apartments just outside of town. The gun, a Glock nine millimeter automatic, has been identified as the murder weapon and is said to be registered to Ben Walker, a local resident, who reported it stolen just days ago. Ms. Hadley, assistant district attorney of Allen County, was found slain in her home on Sunday. Now we've learned that her body also showed signs of a recent beating, but that those injuries did not occur at the time she was murdered. We've also learned, just moments ago, that Allen County District Attorney, Deacon Hunt may have had a personal relationship with the victim and is being questioned regarding that

relationship by local police. Mr. Hunt could not be reached for comment. Back to you, Bill..."

As another voice came on with more news, Talia turned off the radio and stood looking out the window. *So, Deacon Hunt will now find himself on the other end of a murder investigation*, she thought, unable to stop the feeling of satisfaction that enveloped her. The phone jarred her from her reverie and she went into the living room to answer it.

"Hello, sexy," Lucas said.

She smiled. "You'd better quit calling me like this, my fiancé is the jealous type."

"He's a sissy. You want a *real* man, and I'm it."

"Oh, really? Prove it."

His chuckle filled her with a warm, safe feeling. Nothing bad could ever happen to her as long as he was around. She briefly told him about the news report she'd just heard.

"Well, it gets more bizarre. Walker was found beaten to a pulp in the alley behind the gallery this morning. Caroline found him."

Caroline doesn't seem to have much luck with assistants, Talia thought and was at once sorry. "Is he going to be all right?"

"Not sure. You could call Caroline later, maybe she'll know something. Anyway, the reason I called, I'm going to Fairview after work to look at some items from an estate. I should be home by

eight or so. You going to be all right? You can come along if you like. I'll swing by and pick you up."

While Talia thought about it, Lucas told her Rachel wanted to talk to her.

"You should come over to my place for dinner. You've never seen it...I've been fixing it up...I'm not a bad cook. I'll make pasta and salad and I have some really great chocolate truffle ice cream for dessert. I'll drive you home afterward, since Mr. Knight will be taking the car."

"Tell Lucas the chocolate wins and I'll see him when he gets back from Fairview," Talia said.

chapter twenty~ seven

With Caroline leaving the gallery early to pick Ben up and take him home from the hospital, Victor was left alone to catch up on more of the paperwork Caroline had shoved aside while their lives had been topsy turvy. The partnership agreement had been signed that afternoon and although he still had mixed feelings about it, he could live with it. *At lease I don't have to worry about her humping Walker. No chemistry there at all. But it was there with that undercover cop.* Victor felt resentment curl around his insides. Caroline had sworn it was just physical, a reaction to loneliness, of feeling abandoned. *Yeah, but she didn't use that excuse when I asked about Neil Wade, did she? She talked around the issue, about how he deceived her, lied to her, but never told me how she felt.* Deep down, Victor knew that Neil Wade was still a problem.

"That's it for today," he said aloud, pulling the chain on the banker's lamp and getting up from

behind the desk. Leaving the office he made his way into the storeroom and tuned on the light. The computer was set up along the wall to his right on a workstation that looked like one of those you bought unassembled and put together yourself. *Ben's handiwork, no doubt.*

Victor sat down at the computer and turned it on. As it hummed to life and began beeping and clicking, he rummaged through the papers on the workstation. Invoices, bills of lading, packing slips were in disarray, but he found nothing else of interest. Finally the screen turned a bright blue and several icons appeared. Utilizing the mouse he clicked on the one called My Computer. After several frustrating minutes of searching, he finally saw a file called AWRP. What the hell was that? He double clicked on it and was met with a pop-up box demanding a password. *Hell! How am I supposed to know the damned password?* Again Victor shuffled through the papers, hoping to find the elusive code written somewhere. Then he had an idea and ran his hand under the shelf that held the keyboard. Sure enough, a sticky note was dangling there and he pulled it out. Once he typed in the password a file called "Logistics" opened and he was startled to see a map displayed on the screen. Taking a closer look, he realized it was an aerial view of Arcadia, with lines overlaying the original picture and different colored arrows

indicating certain areas. Mystified, Victor tried to make sense of it, but there was no legend to show him what the various colors meant so after twenty minutes he finally gave up. He closed the program, replaced the sticky note, turned off the machine and sat back. *Just as I thought, he's up to something. But what?*

It was close to six o'clock when Victor finally stepped out into the brisk night air. He'd called home, and Claire had answered, telling him to take his time since Caroline wasn't home yet.

There wasn't much activity downtown tonight, which was typical for a Monday. As he stepped around the side of building to the parking area he heard footsteps behind him and put his back against the building, waiting. *Old habits die hard.* Then he saw who was passing by and stepped out of the shadows.

Deacon Hunt jerked his head sideways and stared at Victor, a look of surprise, then disdain on his face. "Well, still skulking around in the dark, I see," Hunt said.

Victor smiled. "You should be more careful. You never know who's going to come up behind you."

Hunt's eyes narrowed and his mouth formed a sneer, as she took a step toward Victor. "You got away with killing Craig Lynch, Kane, but I'm not finished with you, yet."

"Threats from an officer of the court? Not very ethical, is it?" Victor replied, keeping his voice low and calm.

"Don't talk to *me* about ethics, you murdering son of a bitch! I hear the police questioned you about Brianna's murder," Hunt spat, his face contorted.

"Speaking of Ms. Hadley," Victor began, stepping closer to the man, "I hear you two were more than just colleagues." Victor had suspected it during the trial, had heard the cops talking during his incarceration, and the news stories now confirmed it. "Maybe *you're* the one the police should be questioning." As he watched the man ball his hands into fists at his sides, he readied himself for a blow. Instead, Hunt turned and walked away.

Shaking his head, Victor went toward his car, then stopped again. Nose in the air, senses alert, he darted his gaze around, sure that something was there. He spun around and glanced at the deserted street behind him, then looked over the roof of his Malibu toward the back corner of the lot, where a large green dumpster stood. Nothing. Deactivating his car alarm he was just about to open the door, when he saw movement between two parked cars a few spaces away. Neil Wade came into view, his face partially illuminated by the overhead security lights.

Without hesitating, Victor moved away from the car, met Neil halfway and swung at him, clipping him on the jaw. Whether it was from the force of the blow, or the surprise of the sudden attack, Victor wasn't sure, but he smiled in satisfaction as Neil's ass hit the pavement with a dull thud. "Don't come sneaking around here anymore. Your days of bothering Caroline and me are over, Wade. Stay away, got it!" He glowered down at the man, itching to hit him again. With lightening speed, Neil was on his feet and had Victor in a headlock before he could react.

"I'm not the enemy, here, Kane. Remember that," he hissed.

Victor felt hot, moist breath brush against his ear, then was shoved forward so hard he nearly fell. When he turned around, Neil had disappeared. Again movement caught his eye and he saw a shadowy figure being swallowed up by the clump of trees behind the dumpster.

* * * *

When Caroline followed Ben up the stairs to his loft apartment, she felt her stomach twist into a tight knot of apprehension. As he unlocked then opened the door, unbidden yet inevitable memories seemed to surround her and she felt her eyes sting with tears. This is where she and Jeremy

had made love, where they'd shared secrets, laughed at silly things, had pizza and gorged themselves on chocolate brownies—all the things lovers did. *His sculptures were over by those windows...No! It was all a lie. He wasn't an artist; he wasn't even Jeremy.* Ben was looking at her and she suddenly realized she was still standing in the doorway. "I'm sorry, Ben...I...it's just hard for me..."

"Do you want to come inside?"

She stood rooted to the spot, still looking around. The decorative screens that had separated the bed from the rest of the loft were gone. In the center of the apartment, there was a love seat and two chairs grouped around a beat-up coffee table. A floor lamp that tilted slightly to one side sat beside the love seat. In the far corner was a single bed. Next to it was a night stand with a spindly looking lamp on top. Now, the area by the windows was bare. *There's no warmth here, no sense of permanence. It's a place to temporarily hang his hat, not a home.* She looked up at Ben and saw that he was eyeing her with a strange expression on his face. "I'm sorry, Ben, but I need to go. Will you be all right?"

"No problem. Thanks for the ride home. I'm hitting the hay early. Getting the shit beat out of you makes a fella tired, but at least I got some good drugs from the hospital," he said with a

lopsided grin.

She smiled perfunctorily at his attempted humor. She knew he was still hurting and needed to rest. "Take a couple of days off. No one expects you to come back work right away."

"I'll see how I feel. I'm pretty tough."

Caroline rushed to her car, got in and drove quickly away. It wasn't until she was on Carver Street and could no longer see downtown Arcadia in her rearview mirror that she was able to slow her frantic breathing and relax her white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel.

* * * *

"This was so much fun," Talia exclaimed, as she and Rachel finished their ice cream. Talia had been very impressed with Rachel's apartment. It wasn't fancy, but had a warm, homey feel. She'd obviously shopped at second-hand stores and probably garage sales for some of the items, but the place was neat and clean with a charm all its own.

"We'll have to do it again," Rachel said, smiling. She took Talia's empty bowl and her own to kitchen, then came back into the living room.

"You know, your lucky to have a place so close to town. I've heard these apartments have a waiting list," Talia commented.

Oak Hill was a grouping of twelve apartments surrounding a nice-sized swimming pool. It was located a block east of Main Street, near a small strip mall and the town library. Talia had always like the landscaping which consisted of large trees and ornamental shrubs. In the summer, climbing roses abounded and in the fall mums were planted to brighten up the landscape.

"I love it here. I understand it was built back in the eighties, and a lot of the old trees were saved, instead of being plowed under to make way for the construction. It gives the place character, I think."

Talia looked at her watch and saw that it was nearly seven-thirty. "I'd better go, Rachel. I hate to rush off, but I need to get some things done before Lucas gets home..."

Rachel smiled and got up. "I understand completely. Although, as you probably know, these after-hours appointments can run on sometimes, especially when the parties involved are trying to strike a good deal."

Talia chuckled, as she shrugged into her coat. "Tell me about it. I probably won't see Lucas until ten tonight, but we do have that ultrasound tomorrow, so I'd like to get some rest. You know..." Then she realized that Rachel didn't know and stopped.

When they pulled up in front of the cottage,

Rachel asked, "Do you want me to come in with you?"

Talia had to admit the idea was tempting, but she shook her head. "I'll be fine. But could you wait until I get in and you see me wave, to pull away?"

Rachel reached out and squeezed Talia's arm. "Of course. I would have done that anyway."

After thanking Rachel again for a fun evening, Talia got out of the car and started up the walk. Once she unlocked the door, deactivated the alarm and scanned the living room quickly, she turned and waved at Rachel. Once the car was out of sight, she closed the door, locked it and reactivated the alarm.

She'd really enjoyed her evening with Rachel, although she hadn't learned much more about her than she already knew. She had found out that Rachel was the only child of two college professors. She was from Michigan and her parents still lived there. She'd had a dog named Jake, a black lab, when she was growing up and hadn't dated much in high school or college.

Ready to settle in for the night, Talia checked all the rooms. *Okay, Miss Paranoid, the alarm was on this time, no one is lurking around in here.* Then she eyed the basement door. *Oh no, I'm not going down there!* Instead, she checked voice mail, thinking that Lucas may have called and left a message, but

there was no word from him. She flexed her shoulder muscles, as the tension returned. Finally, she decided the best thing she could do for herself was take a hot shower and have a cup of chamomile tea.

After stripping off her clothing in the bedroom, she padded down the hallway into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Grabbing a large clip from a basket under the vanity, she pinned up her hair, then went to the shower and turned on the water. *The hotter the better. Maybe I can work out some of these knots. Of course, another massage like the last one Lucas gave me would be ideal, but since he's not here, this will have to do...for now.*

As naughty thoughts circulated inside her head, she stepped under the pulsing spray and pulled the curtain shut around her, locking in most of the steam. She inhaled deeply, then turned around so the stinging jets of water could beat against her back. Closing her eyes, she let her mind wander, thinking about things in random order: the ultrasound, the wonderful dinner she'd just had with her new friend, the relief she'd felt when the verdict had been read at her father's trial, the murder of poor Brianna Hadley... *What was that?* It sounded like something or someone brushing against the bathroom window. Her heart raced and she pulled back the curtain a little and looked around the bathroom. *Was that a scraping noise?*

She glanced at the window but there was just an opaque square of frosted glass, looking back at her. Then a memory surfaced, of another night many months ago when she'd been taking a bubble bath and thought she heard someone outside this window. *The night Craig Lynch was killed.*

Settle down, she told herself, taking a deep breath. *Maybe I will wash my hair, after all.* Reaching up, she removed the clip and let the tresses fall freely down her back. She leaned back into the shower and as the water washed over her head, she closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind. She had to quit being so skittish. She was safe; the alarm was on, and Lucas would be home soon.

Just as she was beginning to relax, a loud crash from below made her squeal. Then the lights went out and she felt her blood turn to ice water and her heart leap into her throat. The sound of breaking glass was next and she turned off the water with shaking hands and ripped open the shower curtain. Quickly stepping out of the tub, she fumbled around for a towel, found one and wrapped it around her, tucking the ends together between her breasts. Slowly, she made her way to the bathroom door and opened it, peering out into the hallway. Her acute vision was a help and she was able to reach the bedroom. The French doors were securely closed. Next she crept into the living

room. Fear snaked up into her abdomen and she felt her muscles tense. If the electricity was out, so was the alarm system. The kitchen loomed ahead, and she crept that way, picking up a bronze statue from an end table to use as a weapon.

"Oh!" she gasped, when she heard the unmistakable sound of the knob at the back door being turned. Moving quickly, she hid behind the door and waited. A scraping noise was followed by the door opening and a dark form came into view. As the shape advanced, she pushed the door shut and swung the statue. But the intruder easily sidestepped the blow and she felt the weapon swish through empty air. Then he had her in his grasp and the statue fell to the floor with a loud clang.

"Let go of me...I'll scream...." She felt herself begin to turn, then heard the familiar voice.

"What the hell are you doing!" Lucas roared. "What's wrong with the lights? Why are you skulking around in the damned dark?"

Relief flooded through Talia and she felt her knees give way. The next thing she knew she was on the couch and he was hovering over her, flashlight in hand. "I fainted?" she asked weakly.

"Went down like a rock," he affirmed. "I checked around outside, someone cut the wires. I called the police on my cell phone."

"I guess I need to get one of those, huh?"

Although I didn't even try to use the cordless phone in the kitchen." She sat up and put her hand to her forehead. "I heard noises, I think in the basement."

Lucas got up and headed that way, returning in a few minutes. "One of the windows down there is broken."

Just then the doorbell rang and Talia could see the red and blue swirling lights reflecting off the front window. The police had arrived. While Lucas answered the door, she grabbed the flashlight and hurried to the bedroom to get dressed.

* * * *

An hour later, Talia was tucked in bed, cozy beneath the thick comforter. Lucas was giving the cottage another once over to make sure everything was as secure as he could make it until morning, when the electrician would come and repair the damage. When he finally crawled into bed beside her and pulled her against him, she whispered, "I thought of shifting, I'm much scarier as a wolf."

"Oh, I don't know about that," he said with a chuckle, "you seemed pretty frightening coming at me with that statue."

She smiled and played with the thick hair on his chest, then snuggling closer. "Did you see anyone around the cottage when you pulled up?"

"Not a soul. But I did realize it was odd that all the lights were out. I figured you'd be here and probably still be up. So I decided to check things out. That's when I noticed the dangling wires by the back door.

"Why are we being targeted?"

"Who knows?" He kissed the top of her head.

She nestled into his warmth, needing the contact and the reassurance that he would protect her. She felt his shaft hardening against her. She reached for him, encasing it in her hand. He kissed her, his tongue playing tag with hers and she wrapped her legs around him, maneuvering herself into position. When he entered her, she felt a tingling in her body that spread to all her extremities.

"We've fought hard to get to this place. My life had no meaning when I thought I'd lost you. I would never have stopped looking for you, not ever," he whispered into her ear.

Then she lay still, savoring their intimacy. When he started to move inside of her, she felt her muscles clench, holding him fast. The friction was like a delicious thrill and she responded by arching her body and tightening her hold on him. She could feel the pulsing waves wash over her, bringing her to the brink, then pushing her into the abyss. Afterward, she lay in his arms, feeling safe and secure once again.

chapter twenty~ eight

The office of Dr. Marcia Hurst was located in a modern structure five miles outside of Arcadia. Today, as Talia lay on a paper-covered table in one of the examining rooms, with Lucas sitting on a stool beside her, she eyed the ultrasound machine with trepidation.

"Don't look so scared," Lucas said, patting her hand.

"Look who's talking," Talia quipped, noting that Lucas was fidgeting nervously and his gaze kept going to the door every few seconds.

"We've been here for a half hour, how much longer is it..." he began.

Just then the door swung open and the doctor entered, smiling widely. "Ready for the first look at your baby?" she asked in a voice Talia found just a little too perky for her taste.

Talia felt the butterflies that had been fluttering

in her stomach earlier return as the doctor turned on the machine, poured some gooey substance on her abdomen, then picked up something she referred to as the transducer probe. Then slowly she began moving the probe over Talia's stomach.

"Now, I understand you don't want to know the sex of the baby, so if that's the case, you might want to not look at the"

Talia's heart leapt and she shot a look at the confusing images on the screen. "I can't make anything out. What's wrong?" She grasped Lucas's hand tightly, and bit at her lower lip.

"Well..." the doctor began, "I...let me move this around a little to be sure...yes, there...oh my..."

Lucas was on his feet now and Talia raised her head for a better look, straining to see what the doctor was babbling about. "Is something wrong with my baby?" she demanded.

Doctor Hurst pushed a button and the machine produced a printout. "Babies," she said, her smile returning. "Congratulations, Talia and Lucas, you're going to have twins!"

Talia heard Lucas's ass hit the stool.

"Two? There are two?" he said, his voice registering disbelief.

"Twins? Let me see that," Talia said, reaching for the picture. She looked at it quizzically, then laughed when the doctor turned it upside down and handed it back. "Oops. I'm still not

seeing...wait, is that one?" She pointed to a small shape.

Lucas got up and leaned over for a look. "There, isn't that one of them?"

Doctor Hurst took a pen out of the pocket of her lab coat and pointed out the two babies. "One of them is sort of laying over the other at this point. The next time we do this, we'll be able to see more clearly-defined images. Here you keep this. And the way they are positioned, it is impossible to tell their sex." Then the doctor turned to Lucas, "Why don't you take the picture and go out in the waiting room. I need to do an internal exam on Talia."

Twenty minutes later Talia emerged to find Lucas in the waiting room staring at the ultrasound picture, a self-satisfied grin plastered on his face. He got up and came to her, kissing the side of her head. "A litter," he whispered in her ear.

She elbowed him in the side and smiled with satisfaction when he winced. "I'm not amused," she scolded, as they left the office. "Do you realize how gargantuan I'm going to get with twins?"

"You'll be beautiful. Now we need to think about a wedding date, don't you think?"

"Before I start looking like an elephant, you mean?" Talia asked.

Lucas smiled down at her then said, "You can't

turn into an elephant, you're canine, remember?"

"Smart ass." She stuck her tongue out at him. Then asked, "I'm starved, want to stop and get something to eat. I didn't have much breakfast."

He checked his watch. "It will have to be quick. I need to be at the shop by ten-thirty. Rachel has a dental appointment in Kinnard and needs to leave by then."

Talia felt hunger pangs and put her hand to her midsection.

"Is everything all right? I mean the exam went okay, right?" Lucas asked.

"Fine. I'm in perfect health. Just hungry right now. We'll make it quick. Besides, I want to get to work on that painting. But first the babies need food!"

"I think they're boys," Lucas pronounced. He opened the car door for her then went around and got in the driver's side.

"Oh, really? And how did you decide that?" Talia took the picture and struggled again to make sense out of the shapes.

"Intuition."

"Men don't have intuition."

"Says who?"

"It's a know fact. Men are problem solvers and rescuers. Women are intuitive and nurturing," Talia replied with certainty.

"You've been watching Doctor Phil again,

haven't you?"

Talia decided not to validate that question with an answer. Instead she reached over and took his hand, gently squeezing. "Our *babies*," she said softly, looking again at the picture.

* * * *

Victor knocked on Ben's door and waited. "Open up, Walker, I know you're in there!" he called, pounding again.

Finally, Ben Walker answered and stood looking at Victor, a half-smirk on his face. "Ms. Thomas gave me the next couple of days off," he drawled.

Victor pushed his way into the apartment and turned to face the man. "Can the 'aw shucks' shit, Walker. I went into that computer system of yours at the gallery last night and found some pretty strange things in there. This morning, when I wanted to show them to Caroline, they were gone. All that's in there now are the inventory program and the spreadsheets you created." He waited for a response but got nothing but a blank look.

Ben walked past Victor and into the small kitchenette. It was then that Victor really began to notice the place. It had a cheap motel look about it. He got no sense of permanence. He saw the small single bed in the corner. Obviously that hadn't

been here when... *This is where Caroline and Jeremy...no, Doug, used to make love. They'd come here and screw, and she was pregnant with my child. What kind of man fucks a woman who's carrying another man's child?*

"Want some coffee?" Ben asked.

"No, I want some answers," Victor stormed, turning to face the man.

Ben shrugged his broad shoulders. "Don't know what you mean. All I ever put in there were the spreadsheets. There are a few computer games. Ms. Thomas knew about those and said it was okay if I played them after hours."

"Bullshit! I know what I saw." Victor moved toward the man, only to have Ben nonchalantly sidestep and saunter into the living room area. It was then Victor noticed the laptop on a small, drop-leaf table. "What did you do, go into the gallery and download those maps onto your own laptop?" Then it hit him. "Damn, you could tell I'd been in the files, couldn't you...or at least that someone else had been." He glared at the man, fighting the temptation to beat the truth out of him. "Why did you have a map of Arcadia in that computer with lines and dots drawn all over it?"

Ben smiled. "Don't know what you're talking about, sport. No idea. You sure you're feeling okay?"

Victor was enraged by the smug way the man

was acting, to say nothing of condescending tone. He moved toward Ben with lightening speed and grabbed his shirt front, putting his face very close to his. "You're fired! Got it, *sport*?" He pushed him away and felt a surge of satisfaction when the man lost his balance and fell against one of the chairs, then to the floor. "Don't bother getting up, Ben. I'll see myself out!"

* * * *

"You fired him? Why?" Caroline got up from behind the desk and faced Victor. When he finished explaining, she stared at him in disbelief. "You have no proof he was doing anything wrong!"

"He lied, Caroline!"

"How do you know?" She put her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"What the hell do you mean? I just told you..."

She cut in sharply with, "Maps? You saw maps. They could have been part of the game he was playing, Victor."

"They were of Arcadia!" He yelled.

She moved toward him. "So? Lots of those computer games allow the players to adapt the scenarios to their own environment. Did you give him a chance to explain?" Victor looked at her but didn't respond. She'd thought as much. As usual,

he'd gone off half cocked without thinking things through. "Great. The best assistant I've ever had and you punch him out and fire him. Just wonderful!"

"Did you check Walker out before you hired him?" Victor stormed.

Caroline bristled. "He was supposed to just be mule labor, Victor, and I was in a pinch. I had a lot on my mind, if you'll recall...like trying to get *you* acquitted on a murder charge. But to answer your question, I contacted one reference, a woman up in Michigan who said she'd known him a while and he was a good worker."

"Probably his damned mother or something," Victor muttered.

"Could have been his fucking Aunt Hattie for all I knew, or cared, quite frankly! I was just grateful for the help, since you weren't around!" The minute she said it, she was sorry but it was too late to take back the words, or rescind the vehemence with which they were said. He seemed to deflate before her eyes and she felt a lump of regret forming in her throat.

"I have a meeting with a gallery owner from Butler. I have to go." Victor told her.

The look he threw her before he turned and walked away broke her heart. She felt like a heel, but before she could call out to him, he was gone. With a weary sigh she sat down and put her head

back against the soft, cool leather of the chair and closed her eyes. When the ringing of the phone jarred her awake, she jumped and snatched up the receiver. A glance at the onyx desk clock indicated that she'd had dozed off for over twenty minutes.

"Yes, Talia, hi. Victor isn't here," she said, stifling a yawn.

"Well, I can't wait to tell someone...we went for the ultrasound this morning..."

Caroline was wide awake now and sat up straight, resting both elbows on the desk. "And? Don't leave me hanging here!"

"Twins!"

"No way!"

"It's true. We have an ultrasound picture of them."

"Oh my God," Caroline said. She was happy for Talia and Lucas, but she also felt a little resentment hovering just below the surface. Up until now, Alex had been the center of Victor's universe, his only son and heir. Now, Alex would be sharing the spotlight with not one, but two grandchildren. And, they would be full-blooded shifters. Victor, Talia, Lucas and now the twins would all share a common heritage. It was like they belonged to a secret society, a for-members-only club, that she'd never be able to join. *I'll always be on the outside looking in.*

chapter twenty-nine

Victor's meeting went well, but afterward he didn't feel like going back to the gallery. It was almost four o'clock when he pulled his car into the carport behind the condo and got out. He'd send Claire home early and spend some time alone with his son.

When he walked in the back door, he found her at the sink, rinsing out baby bottles. She must not have heard him right away, probably because the water was running, so he had a moment to watch her from behind. She was wearing a soft looking coral sweater and tan skirt. He liked the way the fabric hugged her body. Then she turned around, as though sensing a presence, and he saw that the sweater was cut to a vee in front that exposed little but promised much. She wore a thin gold chain around her neck with a heart-shaped pendant that nearly, but not quite, dipped into the cleft between her breasts. His tongue itched to trace that shadowy contour, to explore what lay hidden just

below the tip of that gold locket.

"I wasn't expecting you home this early. Where's Caroline? Is everything all right?" Claire asked.

He watched her lips move, saw her gracefully take a few steps toward him then stop, a look of trepidation passing over her face. In three strides he was across the room and had her in his arms, covering her mouth with his. He held her tight, thrusting his hips forward so she could feel his need hardening between them. She stiffened, then tried to push him away, but he held fast, urgently forcing her teeth apart to accept his probing tongue.

Then it became apparent to Victor that something was happening to the woman in his arms, he wasn't sure, but he felt her body change, felt the lips become thinner, the breasts change contour, the ass he now held reshape beneath his hands. He released her and stepped back. "What the hell..." he exclaimed, his heart clenching, his eyes widening. The woman standing before him now was the same height, but there the resemblance ended. The Claire he now saw had deep auburn hair hanging to her shoulders, and amber eyes.

She reached out and stroked his cheek. "Hello, Victor. I was afraid you'd sense something."

Victor stood transfixed, thinking it had to be a

dream. It couldn't be. *No! I'm hallucinating. This isn't real. That voice, that face...older, yet somehow the same!*

"Our daughter is so beautiful. I wish I could have been there to see her grow up."

Victor tried to swallow, but couldn't. He tried to speak, but found it difficult. Finally all he could manage to say was "Lilah." Like a sleepwalker, he allowed her to lead him into the living room. She'd transformed right before his eyes, not into a wolf, but into his former wife. *My dead wife. How can that be? It's not true. She's long gone.*

"Sit down. We have to talk before Caroline comes home." Lilah said.

"You're dead," he said, then realized how dumb that sounded. That night in the woods, all those years ago, he'd seen her nearly torn to pieces by members of the other pack...seen her dragged away. He'd searched for days as a wolf and a human to find her, or what was left of her, to no avail. Then he'd gone home and tried to figure out what to do with his infant daughter. Help had come in the form of a neighbor woman who had offered to be an unofficial nanny once she heard his wife had run off. He'd had to make up the lie, how else would he explain Lilah's sudden disappearance? But he wasn't about to tell Talia that, or the truth about the horrible way her mother had perished. Instead he'd found it easier

to tell her that her mother had died in childbirth. Years later, when control of the pack had been taken from Victor and Lucas had claimed Talia as his mate, Victor had seen no reason to reveal the truth. Nor did he bother to tell her that her mother had been a trimorph, a female wolf capable of taking other human forms.

"I can see that you're thinking about that night," Lilah said, sitting beside him on the sofa. "I was near death. I shifted back to human form and was found by someone who cared enough to nurse me back to health."

"But you didn't come back to me, or our daughter." Victor choked out the words.

"My recuperation took a long time and we were in hiding. By then, I was in love...I'm sorry Victor. You remember how it was then, the two packs determined to destroy one another. I guess I felt it would be safer for you and Talia, if I stayed dead."

He studied her, this older version of the young beauty who had been his mate, sitting there, looking at him through eyes that so resembled their daughters that he felt weak in the knees. He wanted to say something, but words wouldn't come.

"I'm here now because of Talia and Alex," she finally said.

That got Victor's attention. "Why? What's going on?" He felt his senses go on alert.

"They are in danger."

"From?"

Lilah sighed, stood and shifted back into Claire. It was something to behold, the quick transformation from one to the other. "There are enemies here."

Victor stood and took her by the upper arms, shaking her slightly. "Tell me what the hell is going on, Lilah. Now! Who are these enemies?"

She shook her head. "Will you trust me, Victor?"

He snorted and let her go. "That's not something you want to ask me right now." Then he thought of something. "Have you seen Alex shift?"

She nodded. "Caroline doesn't know I witnessed it, though. He's strong, even if he's not a full shifter. I was surprised, actually."

"I need answers, and I need them now." Victor stared at her, wishing she would turn back to Lilah, so he could take her in his arms and make love to the woman who had once been his. But those thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of the phone and he went to it and snatched it up. It was Caroline.

"What are you doing at home, I expected Claire to answer. Is Alex all right?"

"He's fine. I just decided to call it a day after the meeting," Victor said, all the while keeping his

gaze locked into Claire's.

"Is Claire still there?"

"She's busy right now," Victor snapped.

"What's wrong, Victor?" Caroline asked.

Her voice was trembling a little and he wondered if she'd noticed his attraction to Claire and was imagining the worst. *Well, isn't she right?* "Nothing's wrong. I just wanted to spend some time with Alex, that's all. Male bonding, I believe it's called." He'd tried to make his voice light, but could tell she wasn't buying it.

"I closed the gallery a little early, I'm on my way home, anyway. I'm in the car now" she said, then added, "Oh, and by the way, Talia called, they're having twins."

Then he heard the click and a dial tone.

Victor replaced the receiver and stood for a moment with his hand still on the instrument. "Talia's having twins," he finally said.

Claire sighed. "Three new members of the pack," more to herself than to him.

He stared at her, the urge to have her in his arms hitting him like a thunderbolt. He saw something flash in her eyes, also. They stood, like statues, gazes locked, bodies taut.

Alex's cries from upstairs, broke the spell and Claire went toward the staircase. Then she turned and looked at Victor, her expression stern. "Not a word of this to anyone, Victor. We will talk again

later, I promise. And nothing can happen between us, understand that."

As she turned away, he said, "Talía's a trimorph too, Lilah, but she doesn't know it yet. We kept it from her, Lucas and I."

Claire spun around and glared at him. "How could you do that to her?"

Briefly he told her about the accident that resulted in Talía's amnesia and the events of the past year that had brought so many other trauma's into her life, including how her memory was restored. "How could we tell her that, too? She has to adjust to all the other...at least we felt it was best..."

"It's part of her heritage—passed down from mother to daughter. You should never have kept it from her. She could morph by just wishing she had a straighter nose, or wondering what she'd look like if she was taller or shorter. Did either of you stop to think about what the shock of turning, when she doesn't know what is happening, could do to her?" Claire continued up the stairs. "I read the newspaper accounts of the wolf sightings here, but I had no idea that was when she regained her memory...like that...how awful..."

"Don't you want to see your baby, Lilah? Tell her who you are, hug her, tell her you..." Victor began, his voice cracking.

"Tell her I love her? Of course I do, Victor. But I

can't do that yet, not until the enemies have been destroyed...not until the threat is gone."

"Then let me help you!" he cried, again taking hold of her. They were in the upstairs hallway now.

In the nursery, Alex's cries became demanding shrieks, and Claire went to him.

When Victor turned around, Caroline was standing at the top of the stairs, her eyes full of fury and fire. "Get out of my way!" she demanded, brushing past him.

Victor followed her, entering the room just in time to see Caroline wrench a whimpering Alex from Claire's arms.

"Get out! Now! And don't come back," Caroline said through clenched teeth.

Claire looked at Victor, who stood in the doorway feeling that no matter what he did now, he couldn't win. "We'll see you tomorrow, Claire. Goodnight and thanks," he finally said.

Caroline started to speak, but seemed to change her mind. Instead she took the baby to the changing table and started taking off his diaper.

Victor followed Claire from the room and down the stairs. "Just give me time to placate her. I'll make it right."

Claire got her coat and slipped it on. "Right now, my priority is Talia, her babies and your son. Things are about to come to a head, Victor. I

suggest you prepare yourself and your...fiancé for the outcome."

* * * *

It was shortly after five o'clock and Lucas was in his office going over some invoices, when he heard the bell above the front door peal. *Evidently people can't read. I know I flipped the sign over to Closed. Guess I forgot to lock up, though. A bad habit I need to correct, obviously.*

When he looked up, Talia was standing in the doorway. Her hair was tumbling onto her shoulders in lustrous curls and waves. She'd taken off her coat already the he felt his cock twitch as he saw the sexy outfit she was wearing. It was royal blue, cut low and clung to her like it was custom made. Talia never wore much makeup, but tonight she'd applied a little bit. Her eyes were accented, the lashes long and thick. Her full lips were the color of ripe peaches. He could smell her scent, light and enticing as it wafted into the room.

"Busy?" she cooed.

He could see the all-too-familiar come-hither look lurking behind that vibrant amber gaze. He couldn't take his eyes off of her as she advanced into the room, moving with a sensual grace that made his heart flutter and his breathing speed up. "How did you get here? It's dark out...you know I

don't want you walking..."

"I'm not afraid of the dark, Lucas." She smiled and held out her hand to him, which he took at once. Why was he sitting around asking about how she'd gotten here when it was obvious she was attempting to seduce him. He liked it. Her hands were smooth, warm, soft. Her gaze held his as he stood up and she ran her other hand down his chest, stopping in spot over his pounding heart. "This beats for me, doesn't it, Lucas? No one else?"

"You know that," he said, his voice low and husky.

She moved away, but not before she let her hand trail down to his zipper. "I locked the front door."

He turned and she was just a few feet away, standing there, looking at him. He felt the need gnaw at him, take over his body as he moved toward her with purpose, his cock straining inside of his jeans. But instead of coming into his waiting arms, she moved away again, walking slowly, her hips swaying seductively beneath the fabric that now seemed to float along with her rather than cling to her.

So, she wants to play a little. Nothing wrong with that. Maybe this is pay back for that excruciatingly slow massage I gave her. Well she's sure massaging my libido. Lucas stood still, watching her and when

she turned around and faced him, he felt the breath leave his body. Her eyes were locked on his as she slid her finger down the crevice between her breasts then slipped her hand inside the sweater and began pinching at her nipple. Instantly it jutted out, pressing against the fabric. "Want a taste?" she asked, moving a few steps toward him.

Mesmerized by the motion of her hand rhythmically working inside the sweater, he merely nodded. His mouth felt dry, and his hands itched to ravage her body, to feel those mounds himself, to pinch those nipples until she cried out in ecstasy. She moved closer, yet just out of reach and Lucas seemed rooted to the spot, unable to move. She withdrew her hand from the front of her sweater and walked slowly toward him, her hip swaying seductively. As she brushed past him, the side of her arm barely touched his, but still he felt the hairs stir there. Once she was behind him, placed one of her hands on each shoulder.

"You're tight as a bowstring," she said, her fingers kneading the tight muscles. He sensed the presence of her body, so close, felt the heat emanating from her, but she didn't press herself against him. Oh, how he wished she would. Every fiber of his being cried out to feel her breasts against his back, her hard nubs pressing into his

taut flesh. Then he smelled the musky, rich aroma of her need. When her hands slipped off of his shoulders and down to his sides, he shivered. His cock ached, his balls swelled and tightened as one of her hands stroked his abdomen, stopping just above his belt buckle.

"Prove your love for me, Lucas. I need to feel it," she whispered, her lips now close to his ear.

He turned and she stepped back, again out of reach. With a quick movement she slipped off her sweater. "Look at me, want me, but don't touch me. Not yet," she said softly, her gaze intent, blazing.

He obeyed; he had no choice. He felt trapped inside a body that was suddenly in her control. She reached around and undid the button on her skirt, then pulled down the zipper and let the garment fall to the floor. She had nothing on now, her body smooth as silk, her face alive with desire. He felt jism seeping through his shorts and jeans, felt his cock pulse as the blood coursed through his veins in response to his ever-increasing heart rate. He tried to speak but couldn't. Why? What the hell was happening? His vision blurred, then he realized she was moving toward him, her body swaying with a seductive grace that made him moan in sweet agony.

He reached for her, longing to caress the soft, smooth flesh, sensing the wetness between her

legs, imagining the way his cock would feel as he slid it up her velvety passage.

* * * *

Victor stood with his hand on the doorknob for several minutes after Claire left, just staring into space and thinking about what she'd said. It was Caroline's voice that cut him loose from his inner thoughts and brought him crashing back to the present.

"So have you fucked her yet, Victor, or are you still in the foreplay stages?"

Victor turned. She was at the bottom of the stairs but Alex wasn't in her arms.

As though anticipating his question, she said, "He went back to sleep. All he needed was to be changed. Something our so-called nanny could have done if she hadn't been otherwise occupied."

Victor sighed and went to her, only to have her move away, putting one of the easy chairs between them. "Nothing is going on between me and Claire," he stated.

"Not for lack of trying, I'm sure. I just wonder who will end up making the first move, or was that embrace in the upstairs hallway it? Pretty lame, even for you, Victor. You're more the grab and demand type..."

Victor moved with agility and speed as he

closed the gap between them and grabbed Caroline, shaking her. "Stop it! This isn't what it looks like! There's more going on here...things you don't understand!"

"Funny, that's what Neil said," Caroline said softly.

Victor felt as if he'd been kicked in the gut. "Neil Wade? You've been seeing that son of a bitch? I warned him..."

Caroline wrenched herself free. "When was that, Victor?"

Victor stopped, cursing inwardly. "Never mind. We need to talk about what happened tonight."

Caroline's eyes flashed angrily as she stared up at him. "When did you talk to Neil?"

Victor felt his temper flare. "Worried about what he might reveal, Caroline? Afraid he might give me all the gory details? He's right over there. Handy. Just a short walk away..."

Her hand came up and he caught it, squeezing so hard she winced. Pulling her close he whispered, "You're mine! We're two parts of the same puzzle. Neil Wade can never give you what I can, never satisfy you the way I do!" His lips pressed against hers and she struggled against him but only for a moment. Then, she returned the kiss and he hungrily probed her mouth with his tongue, deep and slow, until he heard her moan.

Her body molded to his with a sensual

familiarity and he was hard as a rock in seconds, his cock throbbing against her. He felt the power surging to his loins as his balls contracted. She was still tense, he could feel the anger bubbling beneath the surface, but need was winning out. "Who do you want?" he said, against her lips. Without waiting for an answer, he picked her up and headed for the stairs.

He carried her into the bathroom and closed the door, pushing her against it, pinning her there. His hands moved to her ass, pulling her hips into his as his lips moved to the hollow of her throat, licking and nipping at the soft, smooth skin there. She encircled his neck with her arms and held him in place.

"You bastard," she gasped.

"You love it...you crave me like a drug. I'm the one you dream about, the one you need," he responded, his hands now working at her blouse to undo the buttons. The satiny garment was soon on the floor and he ran his tongue down between her large breasts, while pinching her nipples. He loved the feel of her, the way her body responded to his touch. Her tits seemed to grow as he kneaded them and her nipples hardened to sharp, tight points. He hadn't touched that place between her thighs yet, but he knew she'd be wet, and that the honey that flowed there would be oh so sweet. He reached down and undid her slacks, scooting

them down over her hips. Thrusting one of his knees between her legs, he felt her press down against his flesh, felt the wetness that had seeped through her panties. He ripped the material away and thrust a finger inside of her, prodding deeply as she rode him, her muscles clenching tightly. Then he withdrew and stepped away, taking in her disheveled appearance, the glassy look in her eyes. Smiling with satisfaction, he said, "Turn on the shower." He stripped quickly and led her into the enclosure, closing the sliding glass door. "Up for some good, clean fun?" he said, caressing her body with languid strokes that he saw raised goosebumps on her skin.

"You can't get out of every argument by seducing me, Victor," she protested.

He slid a finger across her nipple and saw it rise to the occasion. "Nothing wrong with wanting to make love to my future wife, is there?" He teased the other nipple and it quivered in response. Then he nipped at it with his teeth, pulling it out, making it grow. She threw her head back in the hot spray and begged him for more. She grabbed his hand and jammed it between her thighs, gyrating her hips until he spread her lips and massaged her clit. He could feel the thick juices, but the shower was washing them away and he swung her around so that his body shielded her from the spray. Then he got on his knees and lapped at her,

using his lips to tug at that hot, swollen nub. She grabbed his head, holding it in place and cried out his name. He loved the taste of her womanhood, relished the frenzied movement of her body as she came at the very moment his tongue slid up her soft, velvety passage.

His cock was on fire for her now, his whole body filled with a hunger that chased all thoughts from his mind except the one that led to satisfying his need. He got up and pressed her against the tiles lifting her up until he could jam her down onto his cock. Her muscles were swollen and clamped around him as another spasm shook her body. He could feel his own orgasm start deep within his groin and work its way to the surface as he pumped harder and faster, his body shaking as he spilled his hot seed into her with each ferocious thrust.

"Yes, oh, yes. Harder! Victor, don't stop now, God, don't stop now!" she cried, as the water beat down on their writhing bodies.

Neil Wade will never make you feel like this, Victor thought, as he gave Caroline more of what she was begging for.

When they emerged from the bathroom a half hour later, Victor went to pour himself a drink downstairs, while Caroline checked on Alex. But before he could even make it across the living room to the liquor cabinet, he heard Caroline's

screams and ran back upstairs.

"He's gone!" she cried, standing in the nursery.

Victor sighed. "He's hiding. Probably shifted. I'm going to have to have a serious talk with that boy,"

They searched the upstairs and downstairs, ending up in the kitchen. "My God," Caroline said, pointing.

Victor stared in horror at the back door, now ajar and at the green light on the alarm system which indicated it was deactivated. On the back porch they found Alex's baby blanket. Victor felt his heart sink. There was no way the baby could have opened the back door, even if he had shifted and made it downstairs by himself, then shifted back to human form. He was an infant, for God's sake!

"Where the hell is he?" Caroline tugged at him, panic edging her voice.

Lilah's words came back to Victor in a rush. And suddenly he knew that his son had been taken by those unknown enemies.

* * * *

Lucas started and sat straight up in his desk chair. He was naked. Looking around the office he called for Talia but no one answered. Her clothes still lay on the floor and his own were nearby. He got up

and checked the shop only to find it dark and the alarm set.

"What the hell?" he muttered, checking his watch. It was nearly six-thirty! "Talial" he called. He went upstairs but found it as deserted as the rest of the place. It had been a little after five when she'd arrived, he remembered that. They'd made love. Hadn't they? Of course they had. She'd been quite the little minx. He picked up her sweater and skirt, raising it to his nose so he could breathe in the sweet smell of her. Then he felt himself break out in a cold sweat. Where could she have gone without her clothes?

He bolted to the phone and called the cottage. No answer. Getting dressed in a record time, he left the shop and ran to the car. He knew something was wrong the minute he pulled to a stop in front of the house and saw that it was completely dark. No warm glow shone through the windows, even though the electrician had been there bright and early to repair the wiring. He got out of the car and ran up the front walk, fumbling for the right key. Finally finding it, he got it into the lock and opened the door. At once he knew she wasn't there. The place had a cold, deserted feeling about it that hit him like a blow from a sledgehammer.

"Talial?" he called, going from room to room. Then it occurred to him that he hadn't had to turn

off the alarm. Rushing back to the living room he saw that the light was green, meaning it hadn't been armed when he'd come inside. "Jesus," he said as a feeling akin to despair washed over him.

* * * *

Caroline ran to the phone and picked up the receiver. She could hear her heart hammering in her ears. Her baby was gone and all she could think of was getting help as quickly as possible. When Victor wrenched the phone from her hand, she turned on him, her eyes narrowing, her lips pulling back in a snarl. "What the fuck are you doing. We need to call the police. Give me that phone!" Victor stared at her and Caroline felt her blood run cold. What was he doing? Why didn't he want the police?

"What's Claire's phone number?" he said.

Caroline couldn't believe her ears. Claire? What the hell did she have to do with this? Then it hit her. "She took my baby? That bitch. What have you two been up to? Have you been screwing her? Why did she take my baby? You bastard..." Victor grabbed her so quickly it took Caroline's breath away and stopped her torrent of words. She stared up at him, the air barely making it out of her lungs. She felt dizzy, weak. The next thing she knew she was sitting on the couch and he was

kneeling on the floor in front of her.

"That's right, breathe slowly. Now calm down, Caroline. Claire didn't take the baby. I do need to talk to her, though. What is her phone number?"

Caroline blinked several times, trying to make sense of it all, but the fear was winning again. "Where is Alex? Where is he?" she demanded. Her gaze locked with Victor's and she saw something flicker there but wasn't sure what. "Don't shut me out. Not now, Victor."

Then he sighed and sat beside her. "Claire came here to protect Alex, not harm him."

Caroline felt her head swim. Protect Alex? From what? And why did she think he needed protection? "Who is she, Victor. Who is that woman?" She watched him, looking for the truth and praying she'd get it.

"She's my wife. Claire is Lilah, Talia's mother."

Caroline heard the ringing of the phone but it was muffled by the buzzing in her head as she tried to absorb what Victor had just said. *Lilah? No, it can't be. She's dead. Victor said she died giving birth to Talia. How can she be alive? My God, no wonder Victor's been acting so strange around her. No wait, he told me once that Talia looked so much like her mother...Claire didn't look anything like that!* Caroline heard Victor's voice and suddenly became aware that he wasn't beside her anymore, but across the room on the phone. Who

was he talking to? She got up and turned around just as he was replacing the receiver. She gasped when she saw the expression on his face. His skin was ashen and his eyes were blazing with fury.

"What is it? Is it Alex?" she asked, fear shooting a sour, acrid taste up into her mouth.

"It was Lucas. Talia's disappeared." His voice was tight, as though he could barely control himself.

Going to the phone, Caroline punched in a number and handed the receiver to Victor. "Tell Claire or Lilah or whoever the hell she is to hurry," she said, walking back to the couch. *There will be no ransom call, no demand for money. This has nothing to do with that. It's because of who, and what, they are. When will this end, this pack rivalry, this need to destroy one another? Again, I'm on the outside looking in, only this time my baby is caught in the middle. Damn you Victor, damn you all!*

chapter thirty

Lucas raced through the streets of Arcadia as horrible thoughts whirled around in his mind. Talia had been at the shop just two hours ago. So, whoever had taken her had done so somewhere between there and home, or perhaps after she arrived home. *No sign of a struggle, though. And that damned alarm was off. I know she wouldn't have left the house and not turned it on. Had someone been waiting for her in the shadows and grabbed her after she deactivated it, maybe before she had a chance to lock the door again? God, it makes no sense. Why did she leave the shop and go home in the first place? More to the point, what was I doing sitting stark naked in my office chair?* He wracked his brain trying to recall the sequence of events, but clear memories eluded him, like wisps of smoke in a gentle breeze, almost within reach but slipping away when he tried to grasp them. Fear coiled itself around his insides again, as he pulled up to the gate at Arcadian

Ridge. Victor was waiting and the wrought iron barrier slid noiselessly open to admit his car. Motioning him around the building, Victor followed on foot.

"Claire is on her way, also," he said as Lucas jumped out of the car and slammed the door.

Lucas was even more confused. "What's she got to do with this?"

"I'll explain inside when everyone's together," Victor replied shortly, striding up the back walk and into the condo.

The sight of Caroline, pale and shaken, sitting on the arm of one of the easy chairs, made Lucas's stomach lurch. She'd been crying and the look she threw him was hard to decipher. He'd intended to go to her and give her a reassuring hug, but thought better of it. "I'm sorry about Alex, Caroline. Have you heard anything?" He knew it was lame, but it was the best he could do.

Instead of answering, she got up and walked past him into the kitchen.

"She's frantic," Victor said, "and she's not too fond of any of us right now."

Lucas nodded his understanding. "Can't say I blame her, to be honest. What the hell is going on, Victor?"

The doorbell interrupted Victor's reply and when he opened the door, Lucas was shocked to see Neil Wade on the porch. Then, to his

amazement his newest customer, Caleb Sinclair, came into view.

"Wade! What the hell..." Victor began.

A middle aged woman who could have been an older version of Talia stepped around the two men and entered the living room. "We don't have time for pissing contests, Victor, let us in."

Victor stepped back and the three visitors entered the room.

"My God, you look just like her," came Caroline's voice from the kitchen doorway.

Lucas spun around. "You know who that is?" He felt off balance as he had in the shop a short time ago.

Caroline nodded, then her gaze shifted to Neil Wade. "What are you doing here?"

Seemingly oblivious to everyone else, Neil went to Caroline and she leaned into his embrace.

When Victor tried to intervene, Caleb Sinclair took hold of his arm and Lucas poised himself to step between the two men, in case a fight broke out. But to his surprise, Victor stepped back.

"Has anyone called yet?" the auburn-haired woman asked.

Victor shook his head.

Lucas had had enough. He needed answers. "What's going on? Why is Wade here and why are you here," he asked glancing at Caleb Sinclair. Then he looked hard at the woman and asked,

"And who are you?"

The woman's lips curved up in a smile that held no humor. "I guess we've never met. You were never at the cottage when I visited Talia."

Then the woman transformed herself in front of him into an entirely different person. The change was like watching a wave wash over her body as it quivered several times, then seemed to re-emerge as a solid life-force. She now had short ash blond hair and brown eyes that seemed kind and gentle. Her features were classic, more angular but not harsh.

"My God. You're a trimorph," Lucas whispered, his mouth suddenly dry as dust.

Victor said, "This is Claire. As you may have gathered she's also Lilah, Talia's mother. The resemblance is pretty startling, don't you think?"

Lucas stood immobile for a moment, then realized he was holding his breath. Exhaling noisily he managed, "Talia's mother is dead."

"Obviously not," Claire replied wryly. "Look we don't have time for this now. I understand Talia doesn't realize she's a trimorph."

Lucas shot Victor a glance, then replied, "No. I mean, we never told her. She had amnesia...didn't even know she was a shifter..."

Claire interrupted with, "Yes, I know about that."

Caroline, her eyes wide, stepped away from

Neil and said to Claire, "Trimorph? How did you do that? You have some explaining to do. Why are you here and who is that man?" She pointed at Caleb Sinclair.

"Caleb is my husband and Neil is his son," Claire replied in crisp tones. Then she morphed back to Lilah. "I don't think we need Claire any longer since the cat's out of the bag."

"Where is my baby?" Caroline demanded looking from one of them to the other and finally resting her gaze again on Lilah.

Lilah said, "That's what we hope to find out. We've been trying to protect Talia and Alex for weeks..."

Lucas interrupted with, "From what?"

Just then the phone rang and Lucas noted that almost everyone jumped in response. Everyone except Lilah, that is. *She's been expecting this call. When she came into the house she asked it we'd gotten one yet!*

Caroline raced for the phone, but Victor was closer and quicker. "No. I need to answer this," he said sternly, lifting the receiver. Then in a voice cold as ice he said, "Where are my children?"

chapter thirty~one

Talia opened her eyes and blinked several times. *Why is it so dark? Did the electricity go out again?* She tried to move but her limbs felt heavy as lead. Her mind was foggy, unclear. When she tried to concentrate, she couldn't. *Is it night? Why am I so cold?* She was lying on her side and the surface beneath her was hard and very frigid. Her head ached a little, too. *God, I feel hung over. Did I drink too much?* But right away she knew something was wrong with that thought, only what? Why was it so difficult to believe she'd had too much wine? As the cloud began to lift, the answer came to her. *I'm pregnant!* She hadn't had any alcohol in months. She tried to sit up but a wave of nausea swept over her and she lay down again, waiting for it to pass. Carefully she began to take stock of her situation. She wasn't bound, or gagged. She could scream. She opened her mouth to do just that but found that her throat was so dry she could only emit a small, feeble squeak.

She tried to remember when she'd last had a coherent thought, when she'd last been at home. She shook her head trying to clear it. She remembered breakfast, then going into her studio. Lunch? Yes. But after that everything got fuzzy. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths. *This will help. I'll remember. Did the doorbell ring? Yes...someone at the door. But when? After lunch? Mid afternoon? Evening? I have to concentrate. Why is everything so hazy?* She moved around, trying to get the circulation going, trying to wake herself up. Slowly she began to feel better. As she became more alert, fear set in and she felt her heart begin to hammer against her ribcage. *I'll shift. Damn!* She got on all fours, trying to stand, but found that her legs wouldn't hold her. Tears now stung her eyes as frustration turned to terror. She sat down and hugged her knees to her chest. *Lucas! Where are you? Find me, please find me!*

* * * *

When Victor hung up the phone and turned around, his face was pale, his eyes blazing with fury.

Caroline grabbed at his arms. "Where is Alex? What did they say?"

Lucas could see she was about to lose what little control she had left and apparently Victor

was in no mood to comfort her. Instead of answering Caroline, he turned his attention to Lilah and Caleb. "He has them both. He want's two million in cash. He's given us two hours."

Lucas felt like he was in the middle of some crazy dream where nothing made sense. "How the hell are we supposed to get that kind of money on such short notice?"

Victor stared at Lucas, "He said we should have no problem. He said Sinclair has it if we don't."

Lucas's gaze shot to Caleb. "How does he know you?"

"This isn't about money, at least not totally. I was afraid of that," Caleb said quietly.

Caroline stifled a sob and just as Victor was about to go to her, Neil stepped in and led her to the sofa and made her sit down. Then he turned to the rest of the group and said, "I think it's time we explained to Caroline what this is all about, don't you Victor?"

Victor whirled and faced the man.

Lucas could see the hatred burning in his eyes.

Caleb Sinclair cleared his throat and addressed Victor. "Where does he want the money delivered and when?"

"He wants me and Lucas to meet him at a house outside of town in two hours. He gave me directions."

"Did the voice sound familiar?" Lucas asked.

Victor shook his head. "The house is on the other side of the woods off Carver Avenue."

"It's a trap, of course," Sinclair commented.

"We need a plan," Lilah said.

Caroline jumped to her feet and rushed at Victor. "You son of a bitch! You get my baby back and I don't care how you have to do it or who you have to kill...this time!" She pounded his chest with her fists.

Victor grabbed her wrists to stop the blows. "Calm down. We only have two hours and Lilah's right, we need a plan. No way Lucas and I are going out there alone. Now go sit down, Caroline, and let us figure this out!"

Lucas led her back to the sofa where Neil threw a protective arm over her shoulder. Then he faced Victor and the others. "I think I'd like to know who's who here. Maybe this enemy isn't just after me and Victor."

Caleb Sinclair spoke, "Perhaps actions will speak volumes and save time." With that his face elongated, his arms became misshapen and coarse salt and pepper fur sprouted all over his body. Within seconds a sleek, muscular wolf with pale gray eyes and a muzzle of almost pure white stood before them. The growl he emitted was low, but clear.

Lilah spoke, "Caleb was the alpha of our rival pack, before another took over. Victor, you may

remember that."

"The white one," Victor said, looking lost in memory. "Powerful, strong and willing to sacrifice even the members of his own pack to accomplish his goals. Even that one," he motioned toward Caleb, "was no match for him."

Lilah continued, talking to the entire group now. "Caleb was ousted by this white one, as we called him, much as I understand Victor was by Lucas. Anyhow, the pack split. I was torn between two loyalties, since I was born into that pack and left it when I became Victor's mate. It was difficult, but I never lost the sense of where I'd come from. Right after Talia was born, there was that awful battle when I was left for dead."

Caleb made the transformation back to his human form and began gathering up his clothing, hastily dressing behind the semi-privacy provided by one of the easy chairs. "Now, if you'll excuse me," he said when he was completely dressed, "I'll go arrange for the money." He took a cell phone from his pocket, and walked into the kitchen. Within minutes he was back. "A courier is on the way; we should have the money within half an hour."

Lucas snorted. "Well, here we are, three alpha males at the mercy of a voice on the phone. Pretty pitiful, if you ask me. So, I guess we need to put our differences aside and concentrate on getting

Talia and Alex back. Sound like a plan?"

Neil got up and joined them. "I want to go, too. I can be of help."

Victor gave him a disparaging look that Lucas knew would be followed by a rude comment, so he jumped in first with, "Good. We'll need all the help we can get. In fact everyone needs to be involved. Victor and I will have to arrive alone, of course, but the rest of you can take up positions around house. I know that area; it's densely wooded so hiding should be easy.

"Oh, and just what is this grand plan of yours, Lucas?" Caroline asked acidly. "How are you going to get my baby back?" Then she turned to Neil, "And how do you fit into all of this?"

"I'm Caleb's son. I'm not going to let my family, or you, face this alone. My mother was human. I guess you could say little Alex and I are kindred spirits in a way."

Lucas faced Victor. "Okay, time is slipping away. Our personal issues will have to wait. Right now we need to focus on getting Talia and Alex back. We're going to do what he said, go to that house. The rest of you hang back and wait until we're inside. Our first order of business will be to find out where in the house he's keeping them. We'll keep him occupied, away from the windows and you guys try to find alternate ways to get inside. Quietly. Shifting might be an option,

especially once you're in."

"Sounds shaky at best," Caroline said dubiously.

Lucas sighed. "Well, if anyone else has a better idea, I'm all ears."

Twenty minutes later, the money arrived. Lucas didn't bother to ask how Caleb Sinclair was able to get his hands on two million dollars in cash that quickly.

At a little after nine o'clock, Lucas and Victor drove away in Lucas's car while Neil, Caleb, Lilah and Caroline followed in Caroline's Lexus.

chapter thirty~two

Talia crouched in the corner behind the door. When it swung open, she pushed her back against the wall, ready to pounce, to escape, if possible. But then the room was flooded with light and she was momentarily blinded.

"No need to hide, or try to trick me, Talia. Even if you do overpower me, which wouldn't be hard, I'm sorry to say, you won't get far. Besides, I doubt seriously if you'd want to leave your little half-brother behind. He's got quite a set of lungs, actually. Very annoying. I'm about to lose patience with the little bastard."

Even before she stepped out from behind and door and saw him, she recognized the silky smooth voice, the lazy drawl of the accent. "Nick Stewart." Memories of the monstrous twins, Nick and Abby, came flooding back to Talia in a kaleidoscope of horrendous flashbacks. Actually she'd hoped, when she'd heard that Muncie and

Reed had hit one of them with the cruiser on that November night after the big showdown, that they'd both been killed. *No such luck, obviously.* Talia looked at Nick Stewart and could barely believe her eyes. He'd aged dramatically since then. The white-blond hair was thin and lackluster and his face was etched with lines. But it was the sight of his right leg, misshapen and twisted looking, the hip out of alignment with the rest of his body that caused her to gasp. He carried a thick wooden cane, its stalk as twisted looking as his leg. He gazed at her through the same hazel eyes, but his smile was more a grimace, lacking any warmth or humor. He made her blood run cold and she shivered.

"I see you've noticed my infirmity," he said softly, then chuckled. "Hard to miss it. This is what my encounter with your precious Lucas and Victor cost me. Now, I'm a cripple."

Talia mustered her strength. "More likely it was an encounter with the front bumper of a police cruiser. That was hardly Lucas's fault, or my father's."

The cane whipped out so quickly she didn't have time to react. The pain in her kneecap sent her to the floor where she lay flat on her back looking up at him as he hovered menacingly above her. Then, the tip of the cane pressed into her abdomen just enough for her to feel the pressure. "Boy or

girl, Talia? One poke from this cane I'm chained to for life and it won't matter, will it?"

Afraid to move, she lay there, cursing him in her mind and promising herself if she got the chance, she'd kill him.

"But don't worry, you're not my target. Yet. You were just a means to an end. It's Lucas and Victor I have plans for."

A baby's cries caught her attention. Alex! "Don't hurt him, please. He's just a little baby!"

"Best you worry about your own baby, Talia," Nick said, pressing just a little harder with the tip of the cane. Then he backed out of the room and the door slammed shut. Within seconds the lights went out and Talia was again in total darkness. Quickly she struggled to her feet and went to the door, pressing her ear against it. She could hear his uneven, plodding footsteps as he made his way across a floor, then what sounded like his slow progress up a flight of stairs.

I'm in a basement, obviously. It smells musty, damp. Damn my leg hurts. Fight the pain. I have to fight the pain. I have to get out of her...figure out some way to overpower him...shouldn't be hard...he's crippled. Look who's talking. Painfully, she got down on all fours and crept along until she hit a wall. Trying to remember the layout of the room from the short time the lights had been on, she recalled there was a washtub along one wall with pipes coming

down to it from the ceiling. *I'm in a laundry room. And what good does that knowledge do me? I still can't find a way out. When he comes back, I'll have to shift and attack. He won't be able to catch me with that bum leg. I just need to get my strength back.* Slowly, she got to her feet, gritting her teeth against the stab of pain coursing up and down her leg. But, after several minutes of flexing the injured joint, it began to feel better. She'd be ready for her captor when he came back.

* * * *

Lucas walked toward the dilapidated looking two-story house, carrying the attaché case containing the money. At his side, Victor kept pace. The night was cloudless and their breath made thin vapor clouds in the wintry air.

"There's a light on in one of the downstairs rooms," Victor whispered.

Lucas nodded, but didn't reply. By now he assumed that Caleb and Neil were probably at the back of the house at the edge of the woods. The plan had been that Caroline and Lilah station themselves near the door on the north side that could possibly lead to a basement.

They reached the porch, and Lucas went up the stairs first, knocking soundly on the door. His heart raced, his limbs tingled in anticipation. He'd

kill whoever was behind this, as soon as he got Talia and Alex back. He'd shift and tear them limb from limb! The door swung open and Lucas's mouth dropped open in surprise. Behind him, Victor's intake of breath signaled his shock as well.

"Welcome to our humble home, gentlemen. Come in, no sense completing this transaction out in the cold," Nick Stewart said smoothly, his lips curling up in a sinister smile.

Lucas heard Victor's growl. "Don't Victor!" he warned. For he could see what his companion couldn't—that Nick had Alex strapped to his chest in one of those cloth baby slings. Lucas took in the man's appearance, including the cane, but it was what he held in his other hand that made Lucas's stomach churn dangerously. Pressed against the baby's temple was the barrel of an ugly-looking revolver.

"My God," Victor said, stepping up beside Lucas. "You're insane. Give me my son!"

Nick Stewart backed up carefully and swung the door completely open, as though inviting welcome guests in for a friendly visit.

"We have the money," Lucas said tightly, as the urge to shift became almost overwhelming.

Nick slammed the door. "Put it on the table then go sit on the couch," he ordered, pressing the gun harder against the baby's head.

Lucas felt Victor move, but grabbed his arm. "Where's Talia," he demanded of Nick.

Nick smiled icily. "Never mind that for now. Just sit the fuck down."

* * * *

Neil squatted beside a large evergreen and stared at the back of the house. He could hear rustling several yards away, on his right, and assumed it was Caleb. Then he heard a twig snap on his left and poised himself for a fight.

"It's me," Caroline's voice was barely above a whisper but he recognized it immediately.

"Damn," he exclaimed. "You're supposed to be with Lilah."

"I slipped away. I think she shifted and is looking for me, though."

She settled down next to him and he felt his pulse quicken as it always did when she was near. "You shouldn't be here. It's too dangerous."

"They have my baby! Don't tell me not to be here!"

He could imagine the color rising in her cheeks and those eyes flashing brightly. She was shivering. He put an arm around her. She leaned closer. "I never meant to deceive you," he whispered.

"At least I know now why you didn't write the story about what you saw in November. Did Craig Lynch know you were...you know..."

"A shifter? No. I really did come here to find out what happened to him, regardless of what Victor's attorney said in court. Then I realized something bigger and more sinister was going on. When I told my father and Lilah about the situation here...well..." He shrugged. Caroline got the picture, he was sure.

"Your last name is Wade...yet Caleb's is Sinclair..."

"I write under the pen name of Neil Wade. Actually Wade is my middle name. Not very original, using it as my pen name, but what can I say—I'm just an ordinary guy." He smiled at her.

Caroline's expression remained somber. "Tell me, Neil, the time we spent together, did it mean..."

He stopped her words with two fingers to her lips. "That was real. I just didn't count on falling in love with you, that's all. That made it more...complicated." he stopped, realizing he'd said too much. But it was too late to take it back now.

* * * *

Lilah Sinclair crept low to the ground toward the

spot where she knew her husband awaited. Caroline had disappeared. Maybe Caleb could help locate her, before she did something stupid and got somebody hurt or killed. *Nothing more fierce than a mother protecting her baby. I'm doing the same thing myself.*

The black wolf with the white muzzle sat between two pine trees staring at her. He emitted a low growl and she felt her limbs begin to twist and her face muscles tense and stretch. She emerged as an umber wolf with a heart-shaped crest of black on her back. Her broad face was edged in wisps of pale fur, her coat thick and lustrous. She shook herself before joining her mate.

chapter thirty~ three

When she heard the key turn in the lock, Talia felt her heart flutter and adrenaline course through her veins. Poised to fight now, including shifting if necessary, she stood against one wall, watching and waiting. When the lights were turned on, she shielded her eyes with her hand. Soon a familiar figure came into view. “Rachel! My God. You’ve found me. How?” she rushed toward her friend, relief flooding her senses.

“It wasn’t so difficult,” Rachel said, smiling slightly.

Suddenly the improbability of such a rescue registered and Talia stopped in her tracks. “Where’s Lucas? Is he here, too?” She tried to see around the other woman, into the dim recesses of the basement beyond.

Rachel’s smile broadened. “Oh, he’s here all right. But that isn’t what should be concerning

you right now."

Talia felt a cold, icy feeling snake itself around her insides. Then before her eyes the woman she'd come to know as her friend made an amazing transformation as she became more curvaceous and the dark hair turned into a ashen halo around a face Talia remembered all too well. "Abby Stewart," she said, her voice stony with hatred.

Abby reached into her skirt pocket and drew out a gun. "You really are too trusting, Talia. Just one of your faults."

Talia forced the bile down as she said, "This is about what, Abby? Revenge? The pack? What?"

"All the above. You know, I'm really surprised you haven't morphed. Then it occurred to me that maybe you don't know you can. Is that it, Talia? Or are you so determined to be 'normal' that you've forsaken your shifter heritage?"

Morphed? *I'm like her? My God, that day in the bathroom...it really happened?* Then something Abby was saying cut through the haze and Talia felt her knees go weak. "My mother? You said something about my mother..."

"Pay attention, bitch," Abby shot, her hazel eyes narrowing, her lips forming a firm line.

"My mother is dead," Talia stated flatly.

"Or so you've been led to believe. Another lie, perhaps? But that's not important now. What is important is that Victor and your precious Lucas

are upstairs with Nick, making a lucrative money exchange they think will get you and your half-breed baby brother out of this alive."

"You did all of this for money?"

Abby sneered. "My brother is a cripple...a deformed freak because of you! I want to make you suffer, as he's suffering. The money is an extra bonus."

"You'll never get away with it..." Talia began.

Abby cut her off with, "I've gotten away with a lot. I trashed your place and ruined your chances of sending your prize paintings to New York. You never suspected a thing and neither did the police. I had you fooled into thinking I was some poor pathetic loser who needed your help with a total makeover. And I had Lucas fooled...especially earlier tonight, when he thought I was you."

Talia's breath caught in her throat. "What the hell do you mean?"

"Oh, he loved *your* little visit to the shop shortly after closing. He loved some of the things *you* did to him...couldn't get enough...even said he couldn't believe what a tiger *you* suddenly were and begged for more...why he was practically drooling by the time *you* got finished with him. Morphing can be so much fun. You should try it sometime, Talia. And, by the way, Lucas is definitely a keeper...dick like a stallion and what he can do with that tongue..."

Talia felt the snarl build deep within her chest before it ever emerged from her throat and flew out of her mouth. "You fucking bitch!" she cried and lunged at her nemesis. Then, to Talia's amazement a dark form appeared behind Abby and grabbed for the arm holding the gun. With a quick movement the figure rendered her unconscious, how Talia didn't know or care. She was rescued and that's all she cared about.

"C'mon, quick, before she's missed and that gimp comes looking for her," the voice said. It was deep and she'd heard it before, but couldn't recall where or when.. She stepped over Abby's prone figure and squinted at the tall, lanky man.

"Where do I know you from?" she asked, as he took her hand and led her through the maze-like basement. He was dressed in black jeans and a black hooded parka.

"We need to hurry. Explanations will have to wait, I'm afraid."

They arrived at an open door that led to a room no bigger than the one she'd just left. Talia hung back, trying to wrench free from the man's strong grasp. "Where are you taking me?"

"We're going out that way," he said pointing across the room, to an opening that resembled a window, but was larger. "Old coal shoot; this was the coal bin, I reckon. Anyhow, it serves our purpose just fine."

"You came in through there?"

"Yep. It was boarded up, but a good kick took care of that."

She saw a crate on the floor, which he obviously intended to use to boost himself up once she was outside.

She was close to him now, their bodies almost touching and she remembered. "You're Ben...from the gallery!"

"No time to get reacquainted. And you'll have to help me here, I'm still sort of sore from that beating," he told her. He lifted her up and Talia clung to the edge of the sill then felt him push on her ass and she was suddenly lying outside on the cold ground. Ben followed within seconds. "Now, let's skedaddle," he said, pulling her across the yard toward a line of trees.

At the berm of the woods they stopped short as two shadowy figures came into view. Talia drew in her breath and felt her body stiffen as she readied herself to shift, if necessary. Then she realized it was Caroline and Neil. Pulling Ben into a crouch beside her, she led him to the other pair. "What the hell is gong on? Why are you here?"

"We're here to rescue Alex and you," Neil whispered.

Talia watched Caroline's expression turn stormy. "What do you have to do with all of this, Ben?"

Answer Caroline, what the hell are you doing here, Walker?" Neil demanded.

Ben seemed nonplused by Neil's threatening tone, and instead of answering the question he said, "The old dude shifted and is in the woods at the back of the house with the red headed lady...she's shifted, too, by the way." Then he turned to Talia. "You one of them?"

Talia couldn't hide her astonishment. "I...them?"

Ben sighed. "Look, proving that you guys exist has been my life's work...well at least so far. So don't get slippery on me now. I saw them." He looked from Talia to Neil to Caroline.

Talia didn't know what to do or say.

Finally, Neil spoke. "So you're, what, like one of those people who chase tornadoes, only you chase after..."

"Shapeshifters," Ben finished for him.

"Why?" Caroline shot the question into the air like a cannonball.

"We're wasting time," Neil said, moving away from the group a little. "I'm going into the basement the way you guys came out. It's too quiet inside that house to suit me."

Talia heard Caroline's sharp intake of breath as Neil transformed into a slender brown and black wolf with dark amber eyes. Even without a full moon to light the scene, her superior eyesight took

in the distinctive pale stripes on his back. Most of his face was multi-colored, his ears as black as his muzzle. He looked at Caroline, snorted once, then took off running.

"I'm never gonna get used to seeing that, I swear," Ben commented with a chuckle.

* * * *

Lucas watched as Nick limped toward the oak library table behind the sofa. He could hear Alex's whimpers and felt Victor stiffen beside him. "Easy," he cautioned.. He'd thought of shifting, but rejected the idea. Nick could, and would, pull that trigger before Lucas could attack. Now he listened, because he knew the man would have to either put down the gun or relinquish his hold on the cane in order to open the attaché case. That would be his chance to take action. He just hoped that Victor was thinking clearly enough to realize the same thing.

Then movement from the shadowy recesses of the archway leading to another room, caught Lucas's eye and a woman came into view. "Abby Stewart," he said softly.

Victor stood up. "Might have known. You have the damned money, now give me my son."

Abby went to Nick. "Someone got into the basement and hit me. Talia is..." she lowered her

voice, "...gone."

Lucas heard that and felt Victor nudge him in the side with an elbow, indicating he'd also heard. Lucas stood up and turned around. Nick's face contorted in anger. Then Victor lunged over the back of the sofa at the man, making a grab for the baby as Lucas went for the gun. The loud report, as the revolver discharged a bullet into the ceiling, was like thunder in the room and the smell of gunpowder filled the air.

"No! Ouch...goddamn you...let go!" Nick cried as he staggered back.

"What the hell..." Lucas exclaimed as he saw a flash of fur, and blood began to stream down Nick's face.

Next, a small claw flashed and landed a blow on the delicate white skin of Nick's throat and blood gushed forth. The sling was suddenly empty and out of the corner of his eye Lucas saw Victor scrambling toward the corner of the room after the small wolf cub.

"He's shifted!" Victor cried.

"Jesus..." Lucas gasped as he brought Nick to the floor and straddled him. Somehow, he didn't know how, he'd dislodged the gun and it lay across the room, near the archway.

"She's getting away," Victor yelled, pointing.

Lucas caught sight of a bushy fawn-colored tail disappearing into the other room. "She's shifted!"

he called, then looked down at Nick, who now appeared to be nearly unconscious.

"That pup packs a wallop," Lucas said, smiling at Victor, who now sat in the corner holding his son in his arms.

"I'm getting too old for this," Victor muttered, getting to his feet.

* * * *

The slender wolf with the tan stripes was just closing in on the house when he saw the pale creature creeping around the corner into the back yard. Following, he sniffed the air, his muzzle high, his steps purposeful. Instinct told him the others were out there, waiting, watching. He was wary, unsure if they were friend or foe. But there was no mistaking the intent of the fawn-colored wolf he now followed. She was foe.

Then he sensed the humans and looked around just as three of them came into view. He stopped, as did his adversary. In his mind, he sensed the familiarity, knew who they were even though his instincts were purely animal right now. Friends.

The foe spun around and growled menacingly at them. Her eyes shone like dying embers, her lips were curled back in a vicious snarl, exposing long fangs dripping with saliva.

* * * *

Talia shivered even inside the warmth of Ben's jacket. He'd given it to her before they came out of their place of concealment behind the trees. Now she stared at the wolf she knew to be Abby Stewart and felt the hatred well up inside of her again. At the sound of the gunshot, Caroline had sprinted for the front door, so now Talia stood with Ben, staring at Abby and the other wolf, Neil. They were ready to do battle, those two, but Talia knew Abby's first target would be her. "Back slowly away, Ben. Now." Talia commanded. Then movement along the tree line caught her attention and she saw a black wolf with a white muzzle emerge. Close behind him was an umber creature, whose eyes seemed to glow yellow in the sparse light afforded by the half moon hanging in the midnight sky.

Talia longed to shift, knew she shouldn't, but felt the urge grow stronger with each passing minute. Then, things began happening so fast she could barely react. Suddenly the pale wolf lunged at her, closing the gap between them in record time, and she was knocked to the ground. Pain shot from her buttocks up her back. The beast was upon her, its hot, fetid breath washing over her face. Then, just as suddenly it was yanked off. Talia scrambled to her feet in time to see the

umber wolf sink her teeth into the back of the pale one's neck.

"Stop, Abby. It's over. You're out numbered," Talia cried, knowing even as she did so that the creature was out of control. It shook itself free and, again Talia felt the force of a blow from it's snout, a sharp pain that wrenched at her guts. The large, black wolf joined the attack on the pale one and it was as though the four wolves were in a frenzy as they scrambled around on the ground. The striped one howled and limped out of the circle of activity. He licked at his leg, where blood now ran from an ugly looking wound. Then he shifted and she gasped at the sight of Neil's wound as he lay bruised and battered on the cold ground. Taking off Ben's coat, she threw it over him, "Lie still," she said. Then it was over, almost as quickly as it had begun. The pale wolf ran toward the woods at top speed, but just before she got there, she stopped, turned and let out a horrific howl that seemed to echo off the sky itself.

Talia, still kneeling next to Neil, looked that way just in time to see Abby, still in wolf form, scamper away between two trees. But just as she did that, Talia caught a glimpse of something else, a pure white canid with a very long snout and eyes that glowed as yellow as a candle's flame. Was it Nick? No it couldn't be, she decided as she saw the grace and agility with which it moved as

it closed in behind Abby and disappeared into the darkness. Then she saw another one, light in color, limping from the back of the house toward the woods. She could smell blood in the air. He was hurt. Badly. Yet, he struggled on, until he, too, disappeared into the thicket. *That has to be Nick, his leg is misshapen. But, who is the other?* Talia looked around now, ready to do battle again if necessary, but she and Neil were alone in the yard. The black and umber wolves were gone. And so was Ben.

chapter thirty~four

“**T**alia!” Lucas’s voice cutting through the night was the most welcome sound she’d ever heard.

“Over here, Neil’s hurt,” she called, jumping to her feet. Lucas ran to her and she felt his arms close around her body. Welcoming the warmth, she held him for a moment, then backed away. “Where’s Alex? Is he all right?”

“He’s good. It was the Stewarts. He did a number on Nick, though. The son of a bitch and that treacherous sister of his got away while Victor and I were trying to catch Alex...then Caroline came running in...Damn, I wanted to see that bastard pay for what he did!”

Talia nodded. She could hear the frustration in his voice. “There were others who helped us, a black one and a lighter female.” She told him about the battle in the yard and he briefly told her what had transpired inside.

Lucas knelt down beside Neil, who was now

sitting up. "Come on, let's get you inside and get some clothes for you to put on."

Talia followed them into the house. She realized it was more important right now to get somewhere warm, in fact she was shivering almost uncontrollably. But there was one thing she would have to know for sure—was what Abby said earlier true? Had Lucas made love to that woman?

Inside the living room, Talia saw Caroline sitting on the sofa cradling Alex in her arms, while Victor stood next to Ben, although the two men didn't appear to be talking to one another.

Lucas left the room and returned shortly with a navy blue sweat suit. "I found this upstairs. Looks clean." He handed it to Neil, who stepped into the next room to change.

Talia went to Caroline. "He's okay?" She touched the baby's forehead, then realized he was naked also, although he was swathed in a towel. "Where are his clothes?"

Victor smiled. "He sort of...shifted...his stuff got bloody, but not with his own."

Talia stared at her father for a moment, then said, "*He* shifted? What about you two?" She glanced from Victor to Lucas.

Lucas had the good grace to blush a little, Talia noticed, as he replied, "We were kind of busy chasing him around."

"Looks like the little guy can scrap with the best of them," Ben commented, then turned to Neil as he reentered the room. "Here, sport. Better wrap up that gash." He reached into his back pocket and handed over a handkerchief. "It's clean, don't worry."

"You shouldn't be here," Victor grumbled, frowning at Ben.

"Yeah, I know. I'm fired. But we may want to re-negotiate that. After all, I did save your daughter tonight," Ben drawled, a smile turning up the corners of his mouth.

"You're not fired," Caroline stated, getting up. "Now, we're going home. I'm tired and Alex is hungry."

"Remember I said there were two other wolves out there that helped us, then they disappeared..." Talia began, looking from Lucas to her father.

"That was my father and...his wife," Neil cut in.

Talia sensed she hadn't heard it all. "And Abby told me things, when she had me in the basement...about...my mother..."

Talia watched Lucas's face, then added, "...and about something that happened earlier tonight..."

"Neil needs stitches in that leg," Caroline observed, getting to her feet.

Talia noticed that, although, he'd wrapped a handkerchief around the wound, it still continued to bleed.

"We'll explain things later," Victor said, as he picked up the attaché case and led Caroline and his son to the front door.

But Talia didn't miss the look that passed between Caroline and Neil and had to wonder just how involved the pair had become in one another's lives this time around.

chapter thirty~five

Victor stood at the front window of the condo and looked idly out into the night. He was on his second Scotch and Caroline was still upstairs tending to Alex. Now, in the quiet of the living room he found his thoughts returning to Lilah. Tonight's events had been hectic and nerve-wracking. Talia could have been killed, as well as his son. His hatred for the Stewarts welled up inside of him again and he took another swig of the amber liquid. But overshadowing that, was the memory of how Lilah's body had felt pressed close to his, how her lips had tasted and how her scent had aroused in him with primal feelings of desire. Memories of their life together before she'd been yanked from it on that fateful night came back in a rush. They'd been so young, so vulnerable and so in love. Supposed to be, anyway. *How could she have made a life with someone else? She was mine. I was hers. Wolves mate for life. Ah, but humans don't, do they?*

The two wolves Talia had referred to earlier had to have been Caleb and Lilah. Where were they now? Where was she now? *To hell with Sinclair. He took her away from me. Seems to be a pattern emerging here. Sinclair took my mate, Lucas took my pack. So now what?*

After pouring a third drink, Victor went to the coffee table, picked up Caroline's purse and fished out her cell phone. Sure enough, on speed dial was Claire's number. He hit the button and waited but the call went immediately to voice mail. "Lilah...call me...it's Victor...I think we need to talk." He repeated his cell phone number, hung up and snapped the phone shut, dropping it back into the bag. Then he took his own cell out of his pocket and recorded her number in his speed dial register. He hoped she call tonight, he needed to know she was all right but most of all he needed to hear her voice.

* * * *

Caroline watched from midway down the staircase as Victor put his cell phone back into his pocket. After their return he'd changed into gray flannel slacks and a red sweater, an outfit she'd gotten him two years ago. She'd told him then that it made him look urbane, yet sexy. *He's thinking of her, consumed with her. Well, tick for tack, I suppose.*

I'm thinking of Neil, so how can I fault Victor for letting his thoughts wander to Lilah? It was true. Since their return, Caroline's thoughts had been on Neil. Was he all right? Was the wound serious? Where was he now? Would he contact her?

Victor walked past the stairs without glancing her way and went into the kitchen. *He doesn't even know I'm standing here. It's Lilah he wants right now. Did they make love...right here in my home, with our son sleeping upstairs? Did he take her into our bed? Would I take Neil into that bed if I had the chance?* The memory of his solid, muscular body pressed against hers tonight in the woods came flooding back and she felt her palms grow moist. His spicy scent still clung to her, just from the closeness of that brief encounter.

Going down the steps, Caroline went to the front window and pulled the curtain aside, looking across the courtyard. There were no light on in Neil's condo. Worry lines creased her brow as she turned around and faced Victor, who was now standing in the doorway between the living room and kitchen.

"Looking for someone?" His tone held a challenge tinged with sarcasm.

"Did I hear you making a call? Was it to Talia? Is she all right?" Caroline countered.

Victor stared at her for a moment, then replied, "I haven't called Talia and Lucas. I assume they'll

want some privacy."

"Then who did you call, Victor?" Caroline stepped forward a few paces and waited for either the truth or a lie. Which would it be?

She saw his eyes flash, then he smiled. "Actually, I called Lilah. I wanted to make sure she and Caleb were all right. I'm thinking they might be with Neil. Any word on him, by the way?"

Caroline felt her spine stiffen. "No. There are no lights on in his condo, so I guess he's still at the hospital."

Victor came to her and moved a strand of stray hair off her forehead. "Well, he has a father and stepmother to look after him and he's a grown man, so I'm sure he can manage."

"Just as...Lilah can manage, since she has a husband to look after her." Caroline said.

He let one hand wander languidly down to her neck and around to the place between her breasts, where it lingered for a moment. His other arm was now around her waist, stroking her back, lightly, gently. "And you have me to look after you."

She relaxed a little. Victor knew all the right buttons to push, didn't he? *What a pair we are. Two good ones together, some would say.* Aloud, she said, "Why don't you fix me a drink? I think you're a few ahead of me."

He smiled and it transformed his face, as it

always did, taking years off his appearance. "I think I'll join you. Tonight was one for the record books, wasn't it?"

Three drinks later, Caroline was to the point where her desire for Neil was focused on the only person available, Victor. Was it fair? No. But then, who was he really thinking of as he nibbled at her sensitive nipples and probed her pubic mound until he finally reached her clit? And when he entered her core, and thrust himself up into the wetness there, whose face did he see behind his closed eyelids?

chapter thirty~SIX

Talia stood in the bedroom doorway and stared at Lucas, who had his back to her, looking out the French doors. After their return to the cottage, she'd taken a long, hot, bath. Lucas had not offered to join her. Just as she was getting out of the tub he'd called through the door that Claire Fontaine had called and that she and Caleb Sinclair were on their way over.

"What do they want, did they say?" Talia asked. She went to the dresser and got out an emerald green sweat suit. She still felt chilled, in spite of the bath. What was Claire doing with Caleb Sinclair? What was going on?

"No..." he turned and she saw his gaze sweep her nude body, but he made no move toward her.

"Did you call the hospital about Neil?"

"No."

Well, so much for making conversation. "Maybe we should make some coffee, or something. Do you mind doing that while I finish dressing?" Talia

couldn't help but notice the look of relief on his face as he quickly turned and left the room. An icy chill of apprehension sniggled up her spine. When were they going to talk about Abby Stewart and her claim? She could tell by the way Lucas was acting that he had something on his mind...or his conscience. Feeling an overwhelming need to get it out in the open, she hurriedly slipped on the sweat suit and headed for the kitchen. But the chiming of the doorbell stopped her. *Damn! It's probably them.* With resignation she went to the door and opened it. Claire was wrapped in a long fur coat of palest beige. Her short ash blond hair was only slightly ruffled from the cold breeze that now whistled through the trees. She rested her warm, brown gaze on Talia and smiled. Next to her stood Caleb Sinclair, as refined looking as ever.

Lucas appeared in the doorway and strode across the room. He nodded at Claire, shook Caleb's hand then took the couple's coats, hanging them in the hall closet.

Motioning the pair to the sofa, which now sported a furniture throw to hide its damaged cushions, Talia sat in one of the easy chairs. Lucas remained standing.

"First of all, let me say that Neil is fine," Caleb began, "That fellow, Ben Walker, dropped him off at his condo just a while ago. We didn't stay

tonight because..."

Talia was confused. "Wait a minute! You know about tonight? How?" Then it hit her and she felt a little foolish. "Neil said...you were there...you're Neil's parents?"

Caleb nodded. "I'm Neil's father and Lilah is his stepmother."

"Lilah?" Talia felt a cold lump form in her throat.

Claire stood up and came to Talia. "Please try to understand. I didn't want to leave you...to never see you again..."

Talia drew away from the woman, pressing herself into the back of the chair. "You're not making any sense...Lilah was my mother's name..."

"I think actions speak louder than words," Claire said.

In the next few seconds Talia watched the woman she'd known as Claire transform herself into someone with auburn hair and clear amber eyes. The chic turquoise suit she wore still fit perfectly, that's how close they were in stature, but there the similarity ended.

"Caleb told the truth. I'm his wife, Lilah. I'm also...your mother."

Talia sat very still, unable to move, unable to even breathe. She sensed that Lucas had moved and was standing next to her, but couldn't turn

her head to confirm that. Her face was hot, her heart was pounding like a runaway jackhammer inside her chest and yet she seemed incapable of speech.

"I know this is a shock. I know what Victor told you," Lilah said, reaching for Talia's hands.

Talia felt the warm flesh squeezing hers and wanted to draw away, but couldn't. She searched the eyes that were so like her own and knew in that instant that it was true.

Caleb cleared his throat and Talia felt the spell break. Once again she could move and speak. "Where have you been all these years? Why didn't you...My God..."

Slowly Lilah explained the events that had led up to her disappearance, ending with, "I know it's no excuse...but things back then were so distorted, so violent...and then it just seemed easier to leave well enough alone."

Talia felt tears spring into her eyes. Quickly she withdrew her hand. "I grew up without a mother! Do you know how lonely that was? I went through hell when I couldn't remember who I was, then when I did get my memory back I sometimes wished I hadn't because the memory of all those lonely nights when I used to cry myself to sleep because all the other kids had a mom and I didn't were there again. My father kept the truth about who I was from me and so did Lucas. But

I've forgiven that, because I understand why they did it. But this...how do I begin to understand a mother abandoning her child? How could you have done that? What kind of person are you?" She got up and fled the room, knowing she couldn't stay there another minute.

Ten minutes later, Lucas came into the bedroom. Talia turned from the French doors and faced him but found herself tongue-tied all of a sudden. When she looked at him now, in the glow of one solitary table lamp, all she could think of was Abby's smug face.

"They're gone. Lilah said she'd come by tomorrow, if you'll see her. You two need to talk, Talia."

"Not as much as you and I do, Lucas. She's waited over twenty-five years to come back into my life, she can wait another couple of days." She knew her tone was cold and unforgiving but she didn't care. Lucas's eyebrows shot up in obvious surprise and Talia felt a certain sense of satisfaction that she was making him uncomfortable. *He should be on edge. He has a lot of explaining to do and I'm not letting him slide this time. I'm through with lies and liars.* "Rachel is Abby. She's a trimorph. So am I. You knew that, though, didn't you?"

Lucas nodded, then said, "Victor knew it was more than likely. I didn't know for sure, but once

he told me about Lilah and that she could morph, I figured you could, too."

"Well, the truth. Now isn't that refreshing. Let's go on. It was Rachel a.k.a. Abby who broke in here and trashed the cottage and my work."

"I'm not surprised."

She saw the wariness in his eyes, as though he knew the worst news was yet to come. *Well, you're right, Lucas.* And then she told him what Abby had said and she watched as his face paled and his breathing became a series of short rasps. "I wasn't at the shop last night, Lucas. I was here in my studio yesterday afternoon. There was a knock at the door shortly after four-thirty and when I answered it someone pushed their way inside and put a smelly cloth over my nose. The next thing I remember is waking up in that cold, dark basement." She stared at him, waiting.

Lucas came to her, but she backed away. "She...was you. It was you...she...I felt...drugged when I woke up...she was gone...you were gone...I thought it was *you!*"

"Only better?" she shot, moving around him to the other side of the bed. "That's what Abby said. She claimed that you even commented on it...how much better it was than usual! How could you not know *she* wasn't *me!*" She was yelling and hated herself for it but she couldn't help it.

Lucas's gaze moved to hers then away. He

looked at the floor, then past her to a spot on the wall.

"You can't even look me in the eye, you bastard! You fucked her...and don't even try to tell me that somewhere in the back of your mind you didn't know something wasn't right!"

"How could I? She'd obviously shifted to you. You, Talia. I thought I was with you!"

"Bullshit! You had the hots for her back in November and don't deny it. I saw the way you looked at her, the way she worked you and you lapped it up like a love struck puppy dog! You want her now, Lucas? Huh? You want that murderous bitch? Okay, here, have her!" With that Talia willed herself to shift into the curvaceous blond woman who had obviously captivated Lucas months ago. Talia watched in the mirror above the dresser as her body shaped itself into that of Abby Stewart. Her figure became more curvaceous, her features softened and her hair turned from fire to ice in a split second. Now she stared in amazement at herself, then looked at Lucas. His reaction appeared to be one of shock and dismay, not uncontrolled desire. Yet there was something hovering beneath the surface of his expression that made her heart sink and her eyes fill with tears. She looked away and her mind cleared. *What am I doing? My babies? My God, shifting could hurt them!* Talia shifted back and

immediately felt weak and shaky. Grabbing the headboard for support she was aware of Lucas rushing to her side and of his strong arms forcing her to sit down.

"I'm calling the doctor," he vowed and began to get up.

Then she felt it, the most incredible sensation she'd ever had. A flutter in her womb, then another and another. "No! Lucas, come here! Now!" She was crying and laughing at the same time as she took his hand and placed it over her abdomen.

"What...what's wrong...Whoa! Wow!" he exclaimed sitting beside her on the bed.

Talia's voice quivered with emotion. "It's them! Our babies...telling us they're here..."

Lucas's free arm was around her waist now, holding her against him and she leaned into the embrace. "I love you so much...that's why it hurts so much," she cried.

"You can't doubt my love for you," Lucas replied, "not after all we've been through."

His kiss on her temple felt as light as the brush of a feather, yet it sent a feeling of warmth through her body. She'd always felt safe with Lucas. He was her rock, her strength, her...mate. But now she wasn't sure what the future would hold. Her world had been rocked to its foundations by two revelations tonight and she

didn't quite know how to handle either one. She disengaged herself from his arms and got up. "Was she...did she...satisfy you, Lucas?" she asked, looking down at him.

Lucas sighed. "I don't even remember...it was like a dream...one minute you were...*she* was there...close to me but out of reach...the next thing I knew I woke up...I was in my desk chair...naked... and you...she was gone."

She evaluated his bumbling explanation like a scientist dissecting a frog. "So she came in, somehow mesmerized you, hypnotized you, whatever, teased you until you were a babbling idiot, unable to remember your own name, then screwed your brains out until you lost consciousness or got so tired you went to sleep, and left you there in the nude." She looked at him, holding his gaze with hers, until he finally looked away and muttered, "Yeah, that pretty much covers it."

She went to the dresser, staring into the mirror again. "You know, I can go anywhere now. Change my appearance and start a new life. I can be whoever I want." She picked up her hairbrush and began pulling it through her long tresses. She knew the effect that had on Lucas—he found it erotic, sexy. "No one would find me; how could they? Not even you, Lucas. I can have the babies and hide anywhere in the country with them. I can

get a job giving private art lessons, raise the twins myself. How do you think I'd look as a brunette? Or, how about a blond, but younger, hair shorter, eyes blue or maybe a vibrant green. Maybe I'll knock about ten years off my age, while I'm at it." She turned around to find him standing beside the bed, a stricken look on his face, tears glistening in his eyes.

"Don't do this, Talia," he began.

"Did you beg Abby for more when she was stroking your cock, Lucas? That's what she said, you know."

He reached her in three strides and grabbed her by the arms, shaking her, "Stop it! I love you. If I hadn't thought it was you in the shop I'd have thrown her out on her lying, crazy ass and you know it! You know there will never be anyone in this world or the next for me but you! Damn it!"

She looked up at his red face, contorted in anguish and anger. *Okay, maybe he's suffered enough. Maybe.* "So, you want me to stay?"

He stepped back. "What? Shit, what kind of question is that?"

He looked befuddled and shaken. Good. He deserved it. "I'll think about it," she said casually, walking around him and out of the room. Five minutes later he joined her in the kitchen, where she was making a cup of hot herbal tea.

"I guess I had that coming, huh?" he said.

"You did."

"We're not out of the woods yet, are we?"

"No."

"What can I do?"

She stared at him and noted the misery in his eyes. "I'm not sure. I've had a lot of surprises in the past day or so...some good, some...bad. Right now, I need rest. Tomorrow is another day."

chapter thirty~ seven

Caroline knocked on Neil's back door and pulled her parka tightly around her body to keep warm. A stiff winter breeze whipped at her face, and ruffled her hair. She shivered as she knocked again, this time louder and more urgently. She'd been unable to sleep after her bout of lovemaking with Victor. If you could call it that. To her it had seemed more like Victor was re-staking his claim, or re-marking his territory, perhaps. When Neil opened the door she managed a smile. "I wanted to make sure you were okay," she told him as he motioned her inside. She rubbed her hands together to warm them and looked up at him. His hair was in disarray, his intelligent blue eyes a bit puffy.

He looked tired and she wanted to take him in her arms. So, she did just that. His mustache tickled her face as he kissed her cheek, then

moved on to her lips. Her body responded with a shiver and he tightened his hold. She craved his touch and soon her coat was on the floor and he was kissing her neck. She felt the tug in her sex as he moved his hands from her back to her buttocks, pulling her tightly against his growing erection.

"I've missed you so much," he whispered against her lips.

His warm breath brushed her face and she inhaled his tangy, familiar scent. He was a shifter, something she never would have suspected. Her life seemed inexplicably linked to his kind. Why? Suddenly that didn't matter. Neil pulled away, looking down at her and she stroked the side of his face. "Are you in pain. Is the leg bad?"

He led her into the living room. "Twelve stitches and I'm in possession of some very good drugs," he replied with a wan smile. "How's Alex?"

"None the worse for wear. He came through like a champion; in fact he inflicted some pain on Nick Stewart, from what I hear."

"Good. The bastard deserved it."

"I don't have much time, Neil. Victor could wake up and come looking for me."

"Then, I suggest we don't waste another minute," he said, pulling her into his arms again.

She ripped at his clothing with an urgency she couldn't explain and didn't want to. He did the

same, pulling up her sweater then taking one nipple into his mouth. She moaned as he sucked, and she could feel the pull between her tit and clit...a tug that made her body sizzle with desire. Neil lowered her to the sofa, his hands expertly removing her slacks. Next, she pulled his sweater over his head. His nipples were hard pebbles begging to be sucked and she moved her mouth from one to the other then unzipped his pants and released his cock which was already soaked with jism. She loved the feel of him as she caressed his shaft and traced her fingers up each side and across the top. Hot, smooth liquid coated her fingers and she longed to taste him, suck at him until he came in her mouth. He lay back and let her have her way. She ran her tongue up and down his lower abdomen, lost in the saltiness of his skin mixed with the thick creamy liquid that dripped from the end of his cock. He moaned several times and she occasionally looked up at his face, noting the look of pure pleasure there.

Finally, he repositioned them so that he was partially covering her body with his and as his fingers found her clit and it swelled beneath his touch, she spread her legs and gave herself over to the sensations wracking her body. He fondled her lovingly, and she couldn't help but compare it to Victor's urgent, rough handling of a few hours ago that had left her physically satisfied but emotional

wanting. Neil loved her. That's what he'd said earlier as they'd huddled together in the cold. As Neil entered her, she felt the climax slide through her like molten lava, as it seemed to melt everything in its path. Then her muscles clenched, holding him in place, and she knew she'd never be able to completely vanquish Neil from her life.

chapter thirty~ eight

Lucas was reading the newspaper when Talia entered the kitchen the next morning. She'd heard him climb out of bed very early after a night of tossing and turning that had awakened her several times. But he'd made no attempt to talk to her or touch her.

She trudged to the counter and put the tea kettle on to boil. After selecting a tea bag from the box in the cabinet, she put it into the mug then she sat down opposite him. "I didn't sleep very well, either." As her gaze went to the headlines, she felt a tug of satisfaction when she read that Deacon Hunt was now a "person of interest" in Brianna Hadley's murder and that he had been put on administrative leave from the District Attorney's office, pending the outcome of the investigation.

He lowered the paper and looked at her. "Lilah called a little while ago. You were in the shower."

Talia ran her fingers through her still-wet hair and pulled her terry cloth robe tighter around her body. "I know I have to talk to her...but what do I say, Lucas? How do I bridge the gap? Up here," she pointed to her head, "I know she's my mother, but in here," she pointed to her heart, "I still feel numb."

"Take it one day at a time, Talia. That's all anyone can expect of you."

She met his serious gaze, "Including you?"

He nodded. "Especially me."

"I really thought about running away last night. I was going to wait until you were asleep and leave...just pack a bag and go off somewhere, like I said." she admitted. She saw fear flash in those soft amber-flecked brown eyes.

"What changed your mind?"

She wasn't fooled by his casual demeanor. She knew him too well. The exaggerated stretching of his arms, the squirming in the chair, the tilting up of his head, all signaled a man who was in agony but didn't want to show it. "You and..." she put her hand on her abdomen, "them. They'll be looking to us for guidance and what kind of an example would I be setting if I ran away from my problems instead of confronting them?" She shrugged. The teakettle whistled, piercing the silence left behind by her statement and she jumped up to snatch it off the burner. As she was

pouring the water into her mug, she felt him behind her and leaned back. Then she turned into his arms and felt the safety and comfort she'd always found there.

"I never want to lose you," Lucas whispered against her face as his lips closed on hers.

His mouth tasted of coffee and the tangy scent she'd come to associate with him. Desire blossomed forth like a flower in bloom and moisture seeped onto her inner thighs as she felt him harden. Her nipples ached for his touch. As though reading her thoughts, he ran a hand inside the robe and pinched at one. An exquisite ache shot down to her core and she felt her clit quiver and throb. Had he tried to make love to her last night, she wasn't sure what her reaction would have been, but this morning, in the cold light of a new day, she realized she couldn't lose him, even though they had some issues to sort out.

Her robe hit the floor and she quickly helped him out of his sweat suit. Then she stepped back and at his lean body—the tangle of dark hair covering his muscular chest, the ripple of muscles along his stomach, the tightly corded thighs. Finally, her gaze went to his face, to the slightly puffy eyes that indicated lack of sleep, to the goatee that could use a trim, and finally to that perpetually stubborn lock of dark hair that refused to stay put and was always falling over his

forehead. She couldn't imagine life without him. There would be no life without him.

Now she was aware that he was studying her with the same intensity. "See anything you'd like to change?" she asked. He took her into his arms and held her tight.

"Not on your life. We'll make it through this. Just don't give up on any of us, please. I need you...and God knows I want you..."

"Actions speak louder than words, Lucas..." she began, as his mouth covered hers.

To be continued...

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Dead of Night

BOOK FOUR in the CANIS SERIES

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