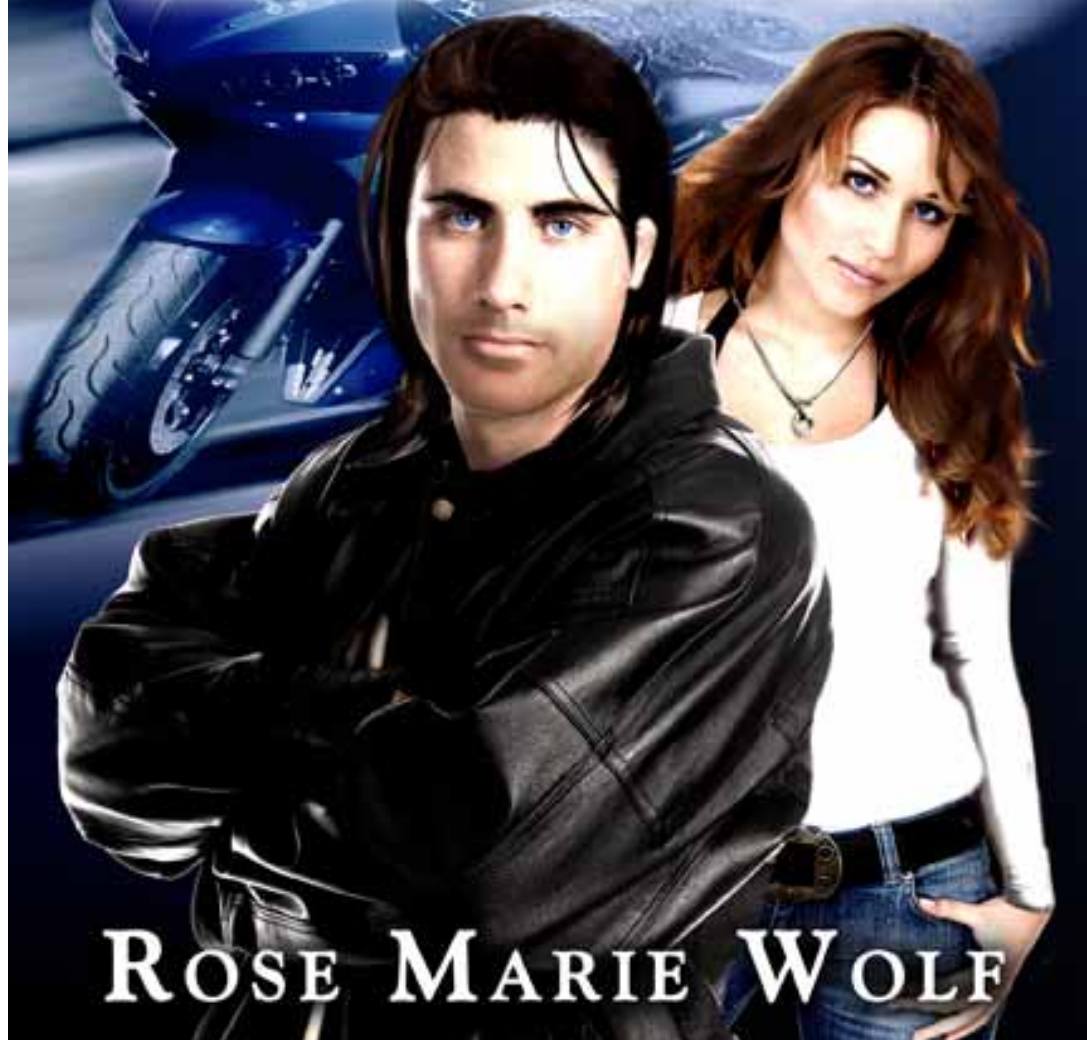


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Sweet Moon DREAMS

BOOK 1 OF THE MOON SERIES



ROSE MARIE WOLF

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Sweet Moon Dreams

Rose Marie Wolf

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my mother, for believing in me, supporting me and for first introducing me to the world of books. Though you are no longer here in body, your spirit is always with me. I know you'd be proud.

I wish to thank the Samhain Publishing staff for all the hard work you do each and every day to make dreams come true. I give a huge thank you to the "real" Jason for your endless support and encouragement and another to Mari Lynne for all your help in the earliest stages of the Moon Series.

Most of all, I thank you, the reader, for giving this book a chance. Here's hoping you enjoy it and all the books to come.

Without any of you, I would still be a struggling writer, trying to make it in the literary world.

Chapter One

The house was dark, save for a very soft light in the front room window, and the harsher glow of security lights outside. Slowly, she pulled the car beyond the drive and around to the back of the house. She had to drive through the grass and mud. Hidden between the shed and the house, her Mustang couldn't be spotted from the road. Extra precautions were not going to be ignored.

Rose Sullivan stepped out of the car and shivered as the cool night air seeped into her skin. This was not where she wanted to be in the dead of night. She would much rather be with her mate, Jason, but circumstances being as they were, it didn't look like it was going to happen any time soon.

She was being hunted.

Being a werewolf had its advantages, like the extra sensitive hearing, super strength and advanced healing. But there was a darker side to it all. There was always the fear of being discovered, of being persecuted, of being hunted.

Something happened, something that destroyed what little security she had. A detective by the name of Marcus Brown was now after her. He had come to her one day, out of the clear blue, accusing her of homicide. Sure, she knew the two people who had been found mauled in a local park and sure, she had fits of sleepwalking and moments where she blacked out and couldn't remember the night before, but that didn't mean she had killed them. Marcus didn't seem to believe her though. He knew more than he would admit and that unsettled Rose.

What unsettled her even more was that she might, in fact, be behind the murders.

Rose didn't want to think of it. She shivered, looking up at Tiffany Clark's back porch. She had only come here on a desperate note. Rose needed to get away from Marcus and gain some piece of mind with her friend's advice. Tiffany was the first person she could think of. She would know what to do.

At least Rose hoped.

Her breath came out in gasps of fog as she reached the back porch and climbed up the steps. She tried not to shiver again as she knocked on the aluminum screen door.

Tiffany was most likely in bed and Rose felt sorry she would have to wake her friend in the dead of night, but it was of the utmost importance. When she received no response, she waited an interval of a few minutes, before trying again.

"Tiffany! Open the door, it's me, it's Rose!" she called. She pounded her palm against the metal door hard enough it stung. She caught the glimpse of a shadow passing by the window. The porch light turned on above her head.

Rose turned her head quickly and looked behind her. She saw nothing but an unsettling darkness. Even though she was sure there was nothing there, she felt eyes upon her. She didn't like it.

"Goddamn it, open the door!" Rose's voice rang very loud in the silence of the night. She turned back to the door to face a very sleepy, very bewildered-looking Tiffany.

"Thank God," Rose breathed. "Let me in." Tiffany rubbed her eyes.

"What?" she asked. Rose could hear the sleep in her voice as she pushed by her. Tiffany watched as she shut the door behind her and immediately flipped off the porch light.

"Rose, what are you doing here at...?" She paused as she tied her robe around her. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?" Concern washed over her face as she continued. "I didn't hear your car."

"I parked behind the house," Rose told her in a hushed voice. "I was being followed."

"Followed? What?"

Rose glanced out the window. She couldn't shake the feeling that any second Marcus would show up. She didn't say anything and Tiffany was finally awake enough to understand. She reached for her arm.

"Who was following you?" she asked. Her dark eyes looked into her friend's apprehensively.

Rose's legs felt suddenly weak and she sank into a nearby armchair. Tiffany ran a hand through her tousled hair and crouched down beside her.

"Who is it?" she whispered

"A man. He says he's a detective. Marcus Brown. Have you heard of him?"

Tiffany gave a vague shake of her head. She blinked a few times.

"He's after me, Tiffany. I know he is. I know he's not a detective. He's a hunter," Rose said. There was an edge in her voice.

"Rose, what are you talking about?"

Tiffany stood, took a glass from the cabinet and poured water from the tap into it. She handed it to Rose. It was cold against Rose's hand, yet she couldn't bring herself to lift it to her lips to drink from it. Her hands were visibly shaking. The glass was too full and some of the water sloshed onto her thumb.

She paid no attention to it as she spoke. "He said he was on the case. Jason doesn't think he's a detective, and neither do I."

"You need to explain yourself more, Rose. I'm very confused," Tiffany said. Rose let out a sigh and turned an annoyed glance to Tiffany.

"He knows I'm a *werewolf*!" Rose hissed. Tiffany shook her head.

"I don't understand."

Rose took a deep breath and exhaled it sharply. "He came to the magazine office a few weeks ago. He said he was a detective, investigating the murders of Lisa and Todd."

Tiffany nodded. Tiffany, Rose and Lisa Marks had all worked together at the Paranormal Research and Development Institute. They had all been good friends. Todd Nahmad was Rose's former work colleague.

“He was asking suspicious questions. He said the murders looked like the work of wild animals, and then told me it was werewolves.”

“He flat out told you that?” Tiffany asked incredulously.

“Yes, he did, actually. He told me he wanted to discuss werewolves, since I knew so much.”

“From writing the books?”

“Yeah, that and my involvement in the PRDI.”

“He knew about that?” Tiffany asked.

Rose nodded. It wasn't a surprise that Marcus may have known of her books. She was an author and a magazine columnist, all pretty public...but her involvement in the PRDI was something she kept to herself.

“He seemed suspicious of me. He wanted to know how I knew so much. Seemed to think it was because I was one.”

“You didn't say anything about that, did you? You didn't tell him?”

“No. I'm not stupid, Tiffany. I tried to act like I had no idea what he was talking about, but he scared me.” She let out a breath and lifted her glass of water to her lips. She took a small sip and then lowered her shaking hand. “He didn't seem like a cop. He flashed a badge. It looked real and all, but I didn't inspect it closely. I don't think it was real...and then, he interrogates me, accusing me—”

“Accusing you of being the killer?” Tiffany interrupted.

Rose gave a slight nod and she heard Tiffany sigh deeply. There was a long moment of silence before Rose lifted the glass to her lips and moistened them again.

Tiffany studied her. Her eyebrows came together a moment in deep thought. She was silent, an indication for Rose to continue. There were a few more moments of silence before Rose could compose her thoughts. She changed topics from Marcus to something equally important, something she had wanted to discuss for some time.

“I had the dream again last night.”

Tiffany's stare was blank for a moment, as if it had somehow been a shock to her.

"Oh..." She said, "Again?" She composed herself and settled into the chair Rose had just occupied.

"Yeah." Rose's hands still shook, but only slightly now. Her voice was soft and low. "Just like before. It was so...so," she struggled to find the right word but her hand faltered with a formless gesture, "so real."

Tiffany's green eyes never left her face.

Rose continued, in a whisper. "So real, I'm not even sure it was a dream..." She brought her hands to rest on the table in front of her and folded them one over the other. "You know my problem, Tiff, and I'm afraid it's getting worse, not better. I still black out. I still sleepwalk." Her voice faded into silence.

She stared at her hands for a long moment as she waited for Tiffany to say anything to break the uncomfortable silence. Tiffany left her armchair to sit across from Rose.

"Rose, never think that, ever." Her expression was a perfect match to the sternness of her voice. "These are only dreams. Even if you're sleepwalking and blacking out, you can't do that. You can't kill anyone like that, I mean..." She paused a moment. "I know you're a werewolf, and I am bound by the PRDI to not tell anyone about you, but I know you, Rose. I know you didn't do it. You aren't like the old legends. You aren't a mindless killer."

Rose only felt a little comforted by her words.

"I know, Tiff." She gave a bit of a smile, but it faded. "It's just...blacking out like that. It makes me feel vulnerable. I mean, what am I capable of? When will it happen next? It always happens during the worst times."

Tiffany tried to change the subject.

"Don't worry about it. That jackass though... He's serious news. You should be worrying about him."

Rose said nothing and Tiffany stood and turned to the faucet to pour her own glass of water. She took a long and deep drink from it. Rose

watched her as a hundred thoughts ran through her mind. She knew what she had to do. She couldn't stay any longer. If they were right about Marcus, and he was still out there...

"I need to get to Jason's. He's probably worried about me." Rose stood to her feet. "I can't stay here any longer."

"What are you going to do?" Tiffany asked.

"I don't know, but Tiffany, I can't stay. I have to go. He could still be out there. I need to get to Jason's. I was supposed to meet him at the bar."

Tiffany followed close behind her. Rose turned her head back to give a warning look to her friend, but it was lost upon Tiffany. She stared beyond her, behind her.

And that's when she caught that scent of cheap cologne. Rose felt all color drain from her face and felt her heart drop to the very pit of her stomach, where it pounded audibly.

Rose slowly inclined her head to look from the corner of her eye and saw the familiar male shadow near the back door. She fully turned and stared down the barrel of a handgun.

Marcus' lips twisted sadistically, and a mad gleam shone in his eyes. Rose stood frozen in the doorway. As she stared past the cold metal of the gun and into those harsh glinting eyes, she knew death was only a second away.

And Rose found she couldn't move.

"I was right. You are a little wolf bitch." Marcus' sneered in his rough voice. There was a slight laughter in his words. Rose shuddered at it, forcing herself to focus on the shaking gun in his unsteady hand.

Tiffany made a little sound in her throat as if she wished to interrupt, and Marcus turned his intense gaze upon her.

"Is she one?" Marcus didn't pause for either of the women to answer. He gave a shake of his head. His usually neatly combed grey hair was now disheveled. His eyes were bloodshot. Rose could've sworn he was drunk and delirious, but she could smell no alcohol.

"I know she is. Your kind always sticks together. Like a pack," he said.

Rose heard Tiffany take a few steps back. She stank of fear. It permeated the air surrounding Rose. She felt sick.

But she did not allow her gaze to stray from him. A hundred million thoughts blazed in her mind, but there was no way out. There were no options.

She was dead.

It happened before Rose could even think to blink an eye. She wasn't sure who took the first step, but the distance between she and Marcus had greatly diminished.

Rose heard a voice coming from her own mouth, but it didn't sound like her. It betrayed a calm she did not feel. "Don't do this, Marcus. You're wrong."

It happened in less than a second. The gun went off, the blast sending a sharp acrid smoke into the air. The sound was loud. Rose braced herself for the shot, instinctively. Her heart jumped up back to her chest, and then to her throat, where it pounded loudly. She anticipated a screaming pain, but felt nothing. Something wet and warm splashed across her bare arms.

But the bullet had missed.

With that realization came a brief and very short-lived moment of relief. Then Rose turned.

Tiffany slumped to the floor beside her. Blood trickled down her forehead from the entrance wound at the side of her head. Her lifeless eyes stared up at Rose, the shock still evident in the wide gaze. Her blonde hair was stained red.

Rose could smell the blood, and saw it red and thick as it pooled from the wound in Tiffany's head. Blood was splattered on the doorframe, and the warm wet substance Rose had felt only a second or so earlier was blood that had sprayed on her shirt and her arm.

Her throat closed up. For a moment, she found herself unable to speak, unable to even comprehend what had just taken place. She

couldn't move. Tiffany was dead. Her head leaned against the doorframe, and those empty eyes staring at the source of her demise.

A demented chuckle issued from Marcus' throat. When Rose heard the sound of a gun cocking back, she forced her attention toward her attacker. Through tear blurred eyes, she beheld the shadowy form of Marcus as he took slow and deliberate steps closer.

She was aware of her breath exiting from her nose and mouth in fast, hard gasps. Rage rose within her, and the growl she had so been longing to express now sounded from her throat. It was an angry warning growl, meant to threaten him.

It was the wolf that responded. It was the primal essence Rose longed to keep locked within the human shell. It was the animal. It was the beast. It was the wolf.

And like a wolf, her thoughts focused on survival, fueled by instinct. She had been threatened. It was kill or be killed.

The gun locked onto its new target, and he fired once more to deliver the bullet that would send the werewolf back into oblivion. But the bullet zinged through empty air where the target had been only moments before. She charged at him and Rose felt the weight of his body thrown back by her immense and sudden strength.

Her entire body tensed. A pulling began in her muscles. Her tendons stretched. It popped bones out of place, bones that would soon grow much stronger, and more powerful. The sensation could've been described as painful, but to Rose, it felt delicious.

The shift began.

The werewolf took a defensive stance several feet away from the man. Any resemblance to a human was lost. She was becoming a wolf. She had succumbed to a rage shift. She knew what was happening.

Her normally dainty and soft fingers extended with sharpened claws and her height increased with powerful sinewy legs. The sound of cloth ripping to conform to her new form was drowned out as she let out a louder, more menacing growl. Her face elongated into a muzzle. Newer

and deadly teeth formed from her jaws. Tatters of ruined cloth fell to the floor. A silver-colored pelt spread across her otherwise naked flesh.

Standing before Marcus now was not a normal wolf. At any moment Rose could undergo the rest of her transformation and stand before him as a wild wolf, upon four legs with gleaming yellow eyes. She wasn't going to do that.

The half shift, the rage shift was better suited for what she wanted to do. She wanted to tear him limb from limb, to face him as he wanted to be faced, by a werewolf. And what was the typical werewolf image? One that stood upon two legs, the hideous monster depicted in Hollywood film.

Well, she would give him his delusions before ending his miserable life. He seemed to want it so much.

Never before had Rose felt anger such as this. Never before had she felt this strong desire for revenge and death. Things like that were lost on the young woman.

But not with the wolf. The wolf knew.

She used her anger and she used her rage to fight and to defend. She knew what she was doing.

The smell of fear flooded the air and combined with the much harsher and disgusting scent of cologne. Rose snorted at the smell.

That noisy piece of metal in his hand lifted once more to fire at her, but with one swipe of her claws, she knocked it loose from his hand. Marcus cried out in pain as her clawed hand encircled his wrist in a tight grip.

His normally mean look was clouded by terror, and the scent of his fear became combined with the scent of urine. He had pissed his pants.

Rose's grip only tightened around his wrist. Bones cracked under the pressure. He let out another cry of pain.

A snarl blew heated breath upon the hunter's face. With a powerful thrust of an arm, she sent the hunter back so that he stumbled. He toppled over a chair and fell harshly onto his backside. He stared up at the werewolf and blinked in sheer disbelief.

Then a cold grin replaced that look. She hadn't seen where she had thrown him and hadn't realized that his precious gun was within arms reach. He held his useless broken wrist close to his body and reached for the weapon.

The metal glinted in the yellow light of the room, a moment too late for her. Rose prepared herself to charge at him, but the gun had already discharged.

A blinding pain momentarily crippled her, and she fell upon all fours, emitting a sound akin to that of a wounded pup. It stung madly in her shoulder. It had struck bone. Blood poured from the wound.

The cold shock of it was enough for her to resume her human form. Her wolf form seemingly melted away as she conformed once more to the human shell the wolf resided in. Rose remained on her haunches. One palm touched the floor, the other rested upon the gaping wound. She didn't care if she appeared to him as a half naked woman with a bloodstained chest. Her long hair made a perfect veil around her face and tears brimmed in her golden eyes.

The pain was crippling, and she cried out as she tried to rise to her feet. He towered over her and gave an extremely hard kick to her side. Rose screamed as torturous pain coursed through her body. She doubled over. Her gaping gunshot wound spilled even more blood down her chest.

"Please..." She tried to say. Tears fell down her face. The pain was too much. She couldn't see further than the bright colors of the hurt.

She could hear Marcus' laughter, and smell the stink of his cologne, his urine and his fear as it emanated from him. Another deafening shot rang and pain sliced through her midsection. It exited. This time it took her breath away, and all she could do was gasp for the air that was not there.

No, it cannot end like this. Her mind raced. The wolf within her struggled to come out again, but the pain kept it at bay. Wounded even on the inside, Rose felt powerless to stop her inevitable death.

Marcus gripped her hair and pulled her up into a sitting position. Tears blurred her vision, but not enough that she couldn't see the gun pointed at point blank range at her forehead.

Rose forced herself to look beyond it and into those cold grey eyes. The malicious gleam shone brightly in those orbs and she knew she had only once chance left.

Arrogant as men often are in situation in which they exert their power, Marcus gave a cocky smirk.

"Any last words, bitch?" he asked. He spat his words at her. Rose barely heard him through her agony. She continued to gasp for breath. Blood now stained the carpet around her feet. Rage blinded her, but she stared up in the direction of his voice.

"Just...two..." She finally choked the words out through gasps of air. She was a little surprised to find her own lips were slipping into a sneer. "Fuck you."

Marcus' self-pleased leer became a grimace of anger. He let go of her, throwing her back. She fell with a groan, rolling onto her side. He cocked the gun. The resulting click was ominous. Rose's breath was heavy and her heart pounded. Blood and sweat mingled their scents. It putridly filled the air around her. Her fingernails dug into the floor as she rolled onto her back to look at him.

Inches from her death, Rose made her move. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. She saw his finger edge back on the trigger. The blast of the gun was clear and the bullet left its chamber.

And hit an empty space where Rose had just been.

She crouched to the floor. She ignored the blistering pain that accompanied her movements and pounced forward. Her strong back legs gave her just enough push to accomplish the distance.

No sooner had the shot been fired, Rose was on him. Her preternatural strength was only matched by his determination and gusto. The force of her shove knocked the man back.

Marcus let out a cry and cradled his broken wrist close to him. The gun clattered to the floor and out of the way.

Her panting was heavy as she pinned him down on the floor. Her grip resumed around the broken wrist. She snarled and stared down at him angrily.

“I’ve had enough of you” she growled at him. There was a perfect combination of fear and anger in his eyes, and she delighted in it.

“Bitch,” Marcus spat at her. At that, Rose grinned. The man made a move to struggle out of her grip, but Rose only tightened her strength on the wounded wrist. A whimper of pain issued from Marcus.

“I have half a mind to let you live,” Rose told him. She had already begun to feel the lightheadedness associated with blood loss. She fought to ignore it and kept her focus on holding this criminal down. “But keep it up, and I might change my mind.”

Laughter rang from the hunter. His face contorted in mirth. He leaned his head back and opened his mouth wide as he laughed. Confusion rose for a moment within her. She saw spots dance before her eyes. She felt dizzy.

“I don’t think so, Ms. Sullivan,” the hunter said. “I really don’t think so.” Taking advantage of her weakened state, he broke free of her hold and threw her back from him with a swipe of his good arm.

Rose rolled to her side and struggled to climb to her feet. She stumbled a few times and collapsed on the floor once more.

This isn’t happening, a voice within her head screamed. *This can’t be happening*.

Through her pain and her lightheadedness, the wolf steadily began to take over. Instinct once more kicked in, and Rose felt a surge of adrenaline rush through her body. It gave her strength enough to stand to face Marcus. The wolf couldn’t come out. The pain prevented her from changing, but being human had its advantages.

Marcus was looking for his gun.

As Rose stood to her full height, she found the gun just within her reach. A moment too late, Marcus saw it and he scrambled for it. Rose moved fast and the gun was in her hands, heavy and foreign. She aimed

it directly at the hunter. All color drained from his face when the realization hit him. He started to make his move.

The gun fired one shot. Having very limited experience when it came to guns, Rose's aim was off, but it hit him in the left leg. He crumbled to the floor. His enraged cries echoed.

"You fucking wolf bitch!" he screamed. Marcus began to crawl out of the way. He tried to seek shelter behind a cabinet. Rose fired the gun once more.

The bullet ripped through the torso. Marcus screamed this time. His one good hand touched the gaping and bloody wound at his stomach. "Bitch..." he choked out. His face contorted in pain.

Rose fired one more shot. This one held more precision than the rest, and it struck true in the chest. Marcus soon slumped into a silent mass on the floor.

The handgun fell from her hand and hit the floor with a thud. Fresh blood dotted along the walls and pooled bright on the carpet. Rose stared at the lifeless body, feeling numb.

He was dead. She had killed someone. She had killed a hunter.

It was a numb realization. Her movements were fluid, yet slow as she moved through the house. She stepped over the dead bodies on her way. She found simple clothes in the laundry room, and though it pained her, she put them on. It was with a blank mind and blank thoughts that she left Tiffany's house, got into her car.

She had killed someone. Her best friend was dead. Her way of life as she knew it had come to an end. It was all over. She had done the single worst thing a werewolf could do, that anyone could do. It had been self defense. It had been instinct...but she couldn't shake the horrible feeling that, in saving her own life, she now risked exposing all of her kind to a most certain fate.

All she could do was cry.

Chapter Two

Rose breathed harshly and closed her eyes tightly for a very brief moment. She fought back a wave of pain and nausea when she moved her arm to the stick shift to move the gears. She winced. The pain throbbed and she only had to move but slightly to feel it.

She glanced down and over at her shoulder. She pushed aside the cloth of her blood-stained T-shirt. The wound was deep and red, but it had stopped bleeding. That was a good sign. It was healing. The blood that had splattered along her neck, arm and chest had dried. It was still sticky, and whenever she inclined her head, she could feel the sickening pulling sensation against her skin.

Rose had to shift gears again. She clenched her teeth to bear the sudden hurt. Easing her foot down on the clutch, she gave a jerk to the stick shift and cried out against the pain. It brought tears to her eyes. She had to get that bullet out.

It wasn't very far to Jason's now. If only she could hold out that long.

The silver bullet burned every second it remained in her flesh. Rose could feel it. It hurt more now than it did when it first hit her. It was lodged somewhere in the meat of her shoulder. Every movement burned through her.

Rose knew full well that silver had no ill effect on werewolves, but it still hurt. The scent of blood was strong and overwhelming. Her blood was distinguished easily enough. She had smelled it before. She could smell Tiffany's blood, and Marcus'. She felt another wave of nausea and quickly thrust all thoughts of the asshole hunter from her mind. She couldn't think on it now. She had to get home.

At any minute she could pass out and veer off the road. She could hit a tree and die. She fought to stay conscious just long enough to reach Jason's. The lights of oncoming traffic were bright. They blinded her and Rose squinted against the brightness. It wasn't far now.

She took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. The lightheadedness was returning. She had lost too much blood. She pressed her foot harder against the gas pedal, and the Mustang GT accelerated dangerously along the dark highway. She was going well over the speed limit, but she didn't care. She just wanted to get to Jason's, get help...

Be safe...

Rose forced herself to check the rearview. There were no flashing lights. The cops were not after her. There was no ominous black BMW on her tail. There were no cars of any kind. Rose breathed a slight sigh of relief.

She focused on the road. The white lines that flew past on her right and the yellow lines on her left began to lull her predisposed body into a stupor. She shook her head. She was almost there. Almost there.

She thought of her fiancé with a strong longing to be with him. His muscled arms would wrap around her, and she would take comfort as she would rest her head against his chest. He would stroke her dark hair softly and whisper words of comfort. He would protect her.

Rose closed her eyes briefly and lifted her arm to touch the chain around her neck. Pain stung through her limb, but she endured it enough to touch the engagement ring that dangled at the base of her throat.

Jason...

Whenever she touched it, it reminded her of him. Now it was sticky and wet with blood. She let go of it.

Rose tried to pull her focus away from her past memories. She needed to focus on the road ahead.

The lack of light and the looming trees only made the dark road even more menacing and shadowed, but she continued on. Her foot pressed

hard against the gas pedal. She clenched her teeth tightly as she moved to downshift again. She slowed the car just enough to take the turn she needed.

Her right shoulder throbbed with pain and her stomach continued to cramp where the bullet had passed through. She couldn't tell if there was any internal damage. She was healing fast. The cramping would end shortly.

I have to get that bullet out. Her flesh had already covered over it, but as long as the bullet remained, it would continue to burn and would never fully heal. The skin would have to be reopened, which meant more pain and more blood.

She fought a wave of sudden nausea at the thought and took a deep breath to regain her composure. There was no time for a weak stomach now.

She saw the cabin come into view up ahead. The road was still long and rocky. Rose took it too fast. Every jar the Mustang made on the unpaved path sent jolts of pain through her. She didn't slow down.

The small cabin was dark. His bike wasn't in the drive. He wasn't home. Rose felt her stomach drop. A sudden lump of despair formed and she cried out. She would have to do this alone. Jason couldn't help her now.

She winced as she opened the door of her silver car and stepped out. Rose took comfort in the woodsy smell that surrounded the cabin, but it was short lived. Pain shot through her shoulder and arm suddenly, and she cried out again.

She hurried up the steps and inside the house. With a flick of the switch, the living room was filled with sudden harsh light. She let the door fall shut behind her.

She had made it.

The room spun. Quickly, Rose gripped the back of the couch and waited until the room stopped moving. Once she had collected herself, she started for the bathroom at the end of the hall.

Once she made it into the room, the dizziness hit once more. This time she held the door frame and balanced herself between the hall and the bathroom. She felt sick. Hair fell into her eyes and she could see the dark strands were matted with blood.

She fought to keep her consciousness. She waited for the lightheadedness to subside once again. When it did, she was so overcome with a sense of foreboding doom, she almost lost her balance. She stumbled into the bathroom and grabbed hold of the sink to keep from falling.

Tiffany had been killed tonight, and she had been attacked. The man was dead now. She had killed someone. He had been a hunter. She had put herself in danger. She had put Jason and every other werewolf that she was connected with in danger.

Somehow, Rose knew it wasn't over yet.

* * *

The loud music of the bar did very little to drown out his increasingly worried thoughts. Again, Jason Barnett dialed her cellular phone number, but there was no answer. Instead, her soft voice repeated through the earpiece:

"Hi! This is Rose! I'm not able to answer my phone right now, so if you want to leave me a message, just tell me your name and number and I'll call back! Bye!" It was followed by a beep, to which Jason hit the "end call" button on his phone. He gave out a sigh as he watched the number flash on the flip phone's screen.

It wasn't like her to not answer her phone...

With a small click, he closed the phone and put it back in his pocket. The bar was crowded and noisy. People pressed past him and he scowled at the laughing drunken couples.

With the sneer still there, he lifted his bottle to his lips and took a long drink of the cold beer. It wasn't his favorite drink in the world, but it was cold and refreshing. He savored it. He was in need of something

stronger, something harsh that burned his throat and made him forget about things. He knew better though. He was going to be driving later and being drunk wasn't something he wanted right now.

His gaze traveled over the dimness of the bar. He looked at people briefly when they passed. Bits and pieces of conversation drifted to his ears, and his sensitive hearing, much more sensitive than that of a human, could close in on anyone he wanted to in this place. But Jason didn't exactly want to listen to anything being said here.

He had his own problems.

He was tempted once again to reach within his pocket and remove his phone and hit redial, but he refrained and instead rested his hand on the bar top. This wasn't like her. She would've called back.

Jason only prayed her phone battery was dead or that she had left it at home. Not anything else, not something horribly bad. Images flashed in his mind and he quickly pushed them out.

Loud voices penetrated his thoughts just then and he was momentarily grateful they had been interrupted. That gratitude left when he glanced to the corner of the bar and eyed the ones who had caused it.

One of the men looked very familiar. He had short feathery brown hair, wisps of which fell across his forehead and clung to it. Nervous grey eyes darted around the bar. He quickly downed a shot glass full of dark liquor. It was the dark man beside him doing all the talking. He was muscular, with short black hair, brown skin and a goatee. He stood beside the other man and peered down at him from his lofty height.

Jason narrowed his eyes at the paler man and listened in avidly on the conversation.

"I told you, he's not going to like this." the burly man said. "Just give it up."

The other man laughed. "Yeah, right. I got a lead." His gaze flickered for a moment in Jason's direction then away just as quickly. "Trust me Eric, okay? Tell him to trust me, and I'll work it out."

The other man's gaze drifted in the direction his comrade had looked to so briefly. Jason calmly raised an eyebrow as this man didn't look away as quickly. The man nodded and looked back at his seated buddy.

"All right...I'll tell him. But he will *not* be happy." With that, the heavier man made his way toward the exit. He threw a contemptuous glance at his companion, and then threw one at Jason. He disappeared into the evening.

Jason looked down at his beer bottle and furrowed his eyebrows together. That man was familiar. He didn't know his name, never spoke to him, but he had seen him more than once. It sparked some suspicion in him. Who was this guy? Was he being followed?

And only one thing came to Jason's mind. *Hunter*.

He had encounters in the past with other hunters and he wanted no more of it. For werewolves, it was a matter of keeping things hush-hush, something many younger rogues were incapable of. Even a half-blood, like himself, with only half the genes and strengths of a full-blooded werewolf, knew that. It was common knowledge.

But leave it to a few to ruin it for everyone else.

Perfect, Jason thought to himself with a shake of his head. He took another swig of beer and tilted his head back as he drank. When he finally lowered his head and the bottle, he found the guy was no longer seated where he had been a few moments ago.

Instead, he stood right next to Jason.

"Hey, man, care if I take a seat here?" He indicated the stool beside Jason.

Jason moved to open his mouth in protest, but the guy had already plopped himself down and was making himself comfortable.

"Bourbon," he said to the bartender, and then turned his grey eyes to Jason. "I've seen you around before. Do you come here often?"

Jason stifled a smile. It sounded like some lame pickup line, but he was able to keep a straight face. He gave a shrug. "Only when I can."

The man nodded, then turned and extended his hand. "The name's Davis Miller," he said. Jason hesitated before giving in to the man's handshake. His palm was sweaty. So was his brow. He looked nervous and smelled of fear.

"I'm Jason," he answered. He didn't seem to fit the profile of a hunter, but then again, no one really did.

The man gave a nervous smile and tried to spark up a conversation.

"So...you from around here?"

Jason rolled his eyes, and then turned to the man with a slight glare. "Are you trying to hit on me, because if you are, I think there's a nice gay club a few blocks down the street." Jason leered at him. "I don't swing that way."

Davis stammered as he tried to come up with a response to that, but he faltered. Jason slid off the barstool. He brought his half finished bottle of beer with him. He didn't have time to mess with the guy, and if Davis was what he thought, he really didn't want to mess with him.

He headed for the exit.

He had more important things on his mind, like finding out what was keeping Rose. An uneasy feeling settled into the pit of his stomach as he crossed the parking lot to his Honda Interceptor. He finished the bottle of beer in a few gulps and tossed the bottle against the side of the building, where it smashed into a thousand glittering pieces.

He would try her apartment first. If she wasn't there, then he would head home. Something just wasn't right, and he wasn't going to sit around in a bar chatting it up with some asshole if Rose was in danger.

Jason climbed on the bike and started the engine. He revved it several times just to hear the roar, just so it would drown out the bad thoughts. He squealed out of his parking place and out of the lot. Tires smoked on the pavement as he left tracks behind.

He only hoped this troubled feeling would go away.

* * *

Rose sat on the edge of the bathtub. She was in incredible pain. It hurt to move. Quickly, she leaned forward as a wave of nausea overcame her. She felt the bile rise in her throat, and she gagged. She made it to the toilet and allowed the vomit to leave her. After a moment or two of retching, she pulled back and wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her ruined shirt.

Rose clenched her teeth against the pain as she moved to strip the bloodstained T-shirt off, taking special care when it came to the wounded shoulder. She let the bloody shirt fall carelessly to the bathroom floor.

Once the cloth was away from her body, she could see the wound. It had healed and the flesh was whole over the entrance wound. Yet the bullet was still in there, lodged into the muscle tissue. She let out a deep breath. She had no other choice.

Carefully, she brought herself to her feet and caught sight of her reflection in the mirror. She paused and turned to face the sink.

That can't be me, she thought as she stared at the pale, ghostly image in the mirror. She blinked her wide blue eyes slowly.

Blood covered her chest and bare breasts. The splotches dotted around the wound at her shoulder. It was on her cheek and thick in her dark hair. Rose continued to stare at herself. Her chest heaved with labored, suddenly frantic breaths.

The wound screeched with pain with every intake. It was still red, despite the flesh that had grown over it. It was barely even a scar now. She grimaced, and her reflection became menacing. The wolf knew what she had to do.

The wound that grazed her side was already healed. There was no more pain from it. She glanced down. It would probably leave a temporary scar that would fade in time.

She turned away from the reflection and winced again as she stumbled down the hallway and into the kitchen. Not bothering to turn on the light, Rose quickly found what she was looking for, a small, yet sharp kitchen knife.

Somehow, without clearly remembering how she did it, Rose made it back to the bathroom. She leaned against the sink and looked up at the mirror. She scowled at the reflection she saw there.

It was time to get the bullet out.

Rose took in a deep breath and held it. She pressed the sharpened tip of the knife into the wound. Fresh blood began to trickle down her shoulder as she reopened it. She clenched her teeth in pain. She took another hard breath.

She gripped the porcelain sink basin tightly with one hand, so tightly she could hear it crack under the pressure. Rose dug the knife further into the wound and felt the bullet give. She closed her eyes tightly as she dug her forefinger and thumb into the wound and pulled the fresh wound apart. It hurt so much. She sucked in a shaking breath. She had to feel around, but soon she found it. Her fingers closed around the bullet and pulled.

It was out.

Rose stared at the bloody bullet she now held between her fingers. She waited for the pain to subside. When it had passed to a bearable minimum, she leaned forward, rinsed it in the sink and held it up to the light.

Her suspicions had been confirmed. It was silver. It fell from her fingers and dropped into the sink. It clanked loudly against the hard surface of the basin.

Rose suddenly felt very weak. The pain had dulled, but she still had lost a lot of blood, and the shift earlier tonight had weakened her. Slowly, she washed the blood from her hands and face. She watched the red-tinged water swirl around in the sink around the silver bullet.

She pulled on a thin white shirt that hung behind the bathroom door. She made it into the bedroom, having maneuvered carefully through the darkness. She met the bed with a groan and fell back against the pillows.

Her thoughts race as she thought back to her first meeting with Marcus. She should never have listened to him. She regretted not

trusting her instincts earlier. And look where she was now. There was nothing she could do to change what happened. What's done was done.

Blackness began to surround her, and Rose was out before she could think on anything else.

Chapter Three

The crotch rocket roared down the highway at speeds that would've rivaled the Indy Speedway motorists. He accelerated and pushed the bike harder. The lights of the city loomed ahead of him and he knew upon entering the city limits he would have to cut back on his speed. Until then, Jason would take advantage of it.

He found his thoughts drifting away. He could hardly focus on the road. He kept thinking back to earlier that week.

What if their suspicions had been right? What if that detective asshole was actually a hunter? Deep in his heart, Jason had hoped that they were wrong.

He'd been a fool to leave Rose alone. Hunters were a real threat, and he did not trust this guy. It seemed paranoid, but he had to keep her safe.

Determination set within him. He wasn't about to let anything happen to the woman he loved. He had made a vow that nothing like this would ever hurt her. He tried to keep that promise.

The road ahead became more congested with traffic, and Jason reluctantly slowed his vehicle down. It was probably a good thing. He had been in the city limits for five minutes and hadn't realized it. He wouldn't do well at all if the cops decided to pull him over.

Jason made his way through the streets until he reached her apartment building. The first thing he noticed was that her silver Mustang GT wasn't in the parking lot. Not a good sign. Nevertheless, just in case, he climbed the several flights of stairs to her apartment. His keys jingled as he brought them out of his pocket.

As Jason slipped the key inside the lock, he mentally prepared himself for the worst. The door swung open and he reached for the light switch. Rose's apartment was filled with sudden harsh light. He stepped inside the front room carefully and slowly. Everything looked about the same, perhaps a little untidy, but that was just how she was.

Jason sniffed the air and caught the lingering scent of her perfume. She had been here, but it had been a while ago.

With a disappointed sigh, he took it upon himself to search the rest of the house. It didn't hurt to be extra sure. The kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom were all empty as well.

Where could she be? He left the apartment, securing the door behind him. The only logical place that entered his mind was his cabin out in the country...

He was tempted to take out his phone and call her again, but he had left her three voice mail messages already. He knew she would've returned them by now if her phone was nearby.

Jason walked down the stairs and back to his bike. Before gunning the engine however, he took one long look around him. He felt as if someone had their eyes on him. The hair on the back of his neck stood up.

He narrowed his eyes as he turned to look around. There was nothing out of the ordinary. He sighed and turned the bike on. Jason revved it a few times and shot out of the parking lot. He was determined to find Rose, even if it meant he had to drive all night.

He pushed the accelerator and gained speed as he left the city. His frustrations continued to grow as he accelerated his bike well past the speed limit. Once out of the city limits, he was well on his way home.

All he cared about now was finding Rose and making sure she was all right. He could not shake the looming feeling that something had happened to her. He leaned his head forward. The wind rushed past him and tangled his long hair even more.

"Please, God, don't let anything happen to her... Let her be all right," he mumbled under his breath. He didn't know which god, if any, would

answer his plea, but he hoped it would be taken care of soon. He didn't pray often, only when circumstances warranted it. He didn't want to lose her.

The road back home seemed strangely long. Even at the speed Jason traveled, it seemed to take longer than usual to get back. He couldn't get to her fast enough.

A dark blue luxury sedan suddenly cut him off. It swerved into the path of Jason's bike. Jason cut a sharp turn and swerved to avoid a collision. He laid an inch of rubber on the pavement as he hit the brakes and came to a stop.

"Mother fucker!" he yelled. He shut down the bike and climbed off. The driver stepped out of the sedan.

The man was dressed really first-class in clean blue jeans, a crisp white shirt that looked practically new, and a leather jacket. He didn't look very old, possibly mid-twenties at the very oldest. He looked like the type of guy that could be a swell friend. There was only one problem with him.

It was Davis, the jackass from the bar earlier tonight.

Fuck, not this guy again, Jason thought with a groan of annoyance. He balled his hands into fists and approached him.

"Who the hell are you and why the fuck are you following me!?"

There was no answer from the young man, at first. He took one step forward, hands in his jacket. There was a smug grin on his face as he began to speak.

"Ah, sorry about that. I was just curious as to where you were going this late, and in such a hurry. So I followed. Nothing wrong with wanting to know, right? Got a date or something you don't want to be late for?" His tone was sarcastic. He was lying.

Jason rolled his eyes and forced a tight-lipped smile.

"I was heading home, not that it's any of your business. I was making good time and I want to keep it that way. So if you don't mind—"

Jason brushed him off and turned toward his bike. He was just about to climb back on, start it up and leave Davis in the smoke of his squealing tires when the other man started to laugh. Jason stopped in his tracks and turned to stare at him.

He saw the quick flash of what looked like an official police badge. It looked convincing, but it had to be phony. Jason's mind flashed back to what Rose had gone through with Marcus a few weeks back, and he narrowed his eyes at the young man.

His suspicions about Davis seemed to be right on the mark. This guy wasn't who he appeared to be. He had to be a hunter.

Davis' voice was arrogant as he started to speak, but Jason detected a slight hint of the fear-scent. He wasn't so sure of himself. "Jason, I'll have you know I am a de—"

Jason cut him off before he could get the word "detective" out of his mouth.

"You're what? A dick? You got that right." Jason moved away from his bike and started toward the man again. "That badge is a fake. You're probably not even affiliated with any of the police stations here. Hell, you're probably not even from around here."

A funny look spread across Davis' face, as if he hadn't thought any of that would've made a difference. He stumbled to say something.

"Um well...err...I'm a private detective...key word is private." Though he tried to speak with assurance, his voice lacked self-confidence. It trembled. Jason smirked as he continued forward. He began to speak in a low voice.

"Davis, I may be young, but I'm not stupid. I can see through your costume, and I know what you are. I know your type. What kind of game are you playing?"

Beads of sweat dotted Davis' forehead and his eyes darted back and forth. Jason lifted his eyebrow.

"Are you a hunter?" he asked. He enjoyed the terrified look that came over Davis' face. The young man had his back to the backdoor of his car. The truth was out.

Davis fumbled as he tried to find the right words to say. When words didn't suffice, he reached inside his leather jacket. He removed a law enforcement type Beretta handgun. The hand that held it shook terribly.

Fuck, I was right. He managed to keep his face calm, despite the fact a gun was aimed at him. He swallowed hard.

"Let me guess...you're packing silver bullets in that?" He spoke with more confidence than he really felt. He stood his ground.

Davis nodded. He still had a nervous gleam in his eyes and his hands still shook. He aimed at Jason's chest.

"Silver bullets kill werewolves." Davis finally got out. "Everyone knows that."

Jason laughed loudly and then froze. "Funny." He stared into Davis' eyes. He spoke so low it had a growl to it.

"There are more of you guys out there, I know. One of you...hunters...has been bothering my girlfriend. Well, let me tell you something, buddy." Jason took one menacing step forward. "A bullet—silver or not—will kill *anything*. You don't have a single clue what you're trying to do, and I suggest you and your pals back off and leave us alone."

Jason took another step toward him. He threatened him with clenched fists. Davis' finger squeezed the trigger, suddenly, and the gun fired.

The sound of it was loud, deafening. Jason braced himself for the fatal shot, but Davis had missed. His hands shook too much to aim properly. It was probably the only good luck Jason would have.

"Your aim is off...badly," Jason growled angrily. Davis aimed the gun to fire once more.

In a blurry flash, Jason made his move. He grabbed the Beretta in one swift motion and tossed it aside. It slid across the asphalt and into the ditch.

Jason wished there hadn't been much of a struggle, but once Davis had been threatened, the young man was swift to react. Jason made a move to grab at the man, but his movement was blocked with a forearm.

He was surprised to feel Davis' fist connect in his stomach. He hadn't been expecting that. He thought he would have the biggest advantage, being just more than a normal human.

For a moment, Jason was stunned, the air knocked out of him. He doubled over and gasped. He had never had the wind knocked out of him before. Davis scrambled toward the ditch. Jason grabbed the would-be hunter by the ankle. He stumbled and fell.

"You prick!" Jason straightened and grabbed the man roughly by the back of his shirt. Davis tried to use a self-defense move to remove Jason's grip, but he soon found his arms were painfully pulled behind his back.

"Goddamn hunter," Jason muttered, and with a great deal of his preternatural strength, he shoved the young man back against his car door. He released him.

"I'm tired of all your fucking bullshit!" he shouted and grabbed Davis by the front of the shirt.

His eyes were wide and frightened. The back of his head met with the glass. It caused quite an indentation in the driver's side. Jason gripped him firmly by the forehead and thrust his head back again. And again. The glass shattered with a crash and left sparkling debris on the road.

Blood dripped from the back of Davis' head, and he let out something akin to a whimper. Disgusted, Jason grabbed him a final time. He hesitated little in turning him and throwing him headfirst through the gaping hole where the glass had once been. The force was strong enough to leave the young man crippled. He didn't move.

Jason stood back and panted heavily. He stared at the non-moving mass of Davis as his back end and legs stuck out of the sedan's window. He was out cold, possibly dead. Jason didn't really care.

"My win," he growled and turned. He shook off the particles of glass from his leather jacket. He returned to his bike, revved it up and started once more down the road, tires squealing.

He prayed for no more interruptions. His own inner worries caused him to push the bike much faster than he had previously been going.

The thought of Rose in danger, of her hurt was enough for him to almost turn the bike around and tear that hapless son of a bitch limb from limb. He greatly wanted to do that, but he pushed his blood lust out of his mind. He wouldn't be able to help Rose if he paused to do that. He had wasted enough time already, and he tried to keep the uncertainty from rising within him yet again.

There had better not be any more interruptions, he thought again. The road to his cabin was just up ahead. From the very end of the long driveway, he could see a light on. He hadn't left one on. Hope surged in him.

A chill went through him. He took it as a sign she was there, and sure enough as he brought his bike closer, he could see her Mustang GT parked next to the house. Jason breathed a sigh of relief and rolled up beside it. He turned the bike off and listened to the calming silence that came with country life. He took a deep breath of air.

And caught the unmistakable scent of blood.

He froze. His heart paused momentarily. Fear consumed him. He turned his head and stared toward her car. Blood smears, though hardly visible and small, shone on the Mustang's door handle. He swallowed a lump in his throat and took a few slow steps toward the car.

The scent was stronger here. It was her blood. Jason didn't even have to peer inside the driver's window to see the bloodstains on the seat. That was enough for him.

His feet barely touched the ground as he ran from the car to the front door. The door opened easily because it was unlocked. He entered the front room.

The bathroom door was wide open. Bright light spilled into the hallway.

"Rose?" Jason called. The only answer he received was the silence of the house. His gaze fell to the floor. He noticed the trail of blood smeared on the hardwood floor. He had been walking in it all along, and now he followed the trail with his eyes. It led into the bathroom.

“Rose?” he called again, louder and more desperate. Still there was no answer.

His heart pounded loudly in his ears. His footfalls were slow as he moved toward the bathroom. The blood was brighter and easier to see in the fluorescent light of the bathroom. It glistened on the tile.

Rose was nowhere in sight.

Blood discolored the white porcelain basin of the sink, and a discarded blood-drenched shirt lay on the floor. With shaking hands, Jason lifted the shirt. Most of the blood was dried onto the garment, but it was bright and still somewhat wet. He let it fall back onto the floor.

Fear and panic began to rise within him, but he quelled them with a few deep breaths and clenched fists. Someone had hurt her and badly.

His head turned and searched for the rest of the blood trail. It ended here. It led no where else. But she was in the house. She had to be. Jason's gaze lowered. Something glittered in the light and caught his attention.

A bullet.

Jason found his hands shaking once again as he crooked his fingers to lift it from inside the sink. It was a silver bullet. He dropped it and let it fall into the sink with a loud clank. He stepped back and stared at it.

Once again, Jason felt a snarl rise. His fears had been confirmed.

He did not hesitate any longer and proceeded to tear through the house. The bedroom door was already ajar, not how he had left it earlier that day. The light from the bathroom poured across the bed.

There she was. Rose lay on her back on the bed, her eyes closed. Jason caught himself in the door and closed his own eyes. Silently, he said a prayer to a god he feared would never answer.

God...don't let her be dead...God...don't...

He walked closer and sat on the edge nearest to her. Rose was breathing. She was alive.

“Rose? Rose, wake up...it's me, Jason...” he whispered softly and leaned over her.

She didn't move.

"Rose? Rose, wake up...it's me, Jason..." A very familiar male voice spoke in a whispered tone. It was too much like a dream. Paralyzed and unable to move, she was too weak to even lift her head.

"Rose?" His voice was clear suddenly. Was he there? She couldn't see him, but her eyes were closed. She fought to open them, but the bright light that came from the bathroom momentarily blinded her. They closed again.

"Come on, Rose, sweetie..." Jason's voice coaxed once more. She could feel his hands on her shoulders. They moved beneath her to cradle her close. She tried to open her eyes and focus them but she only saw blurred shadows. One great shadow loomed above her. The shadow spoke.

"I'm here Rose, I'm here..." She tried to see more clearly. As her eyes adjusted, the shadows began to fade away, and she could see him.

"Jason?" Rose whispered incredulously and she tried to raise her head again. Jason placed a hand on her forehead to stop her. He smoothed back her hair.

"Rose, don't try to move. Just rest. I'm here for you." Rose blinked a few times and saw the look of relief wash over his face. She gave a sigh and closed her heavy eyelids.

He spoke quietly, "God, I was so worried. I saw the blood." His voice trailed off.

His gaze trailed over her body. She had missed a few buttons when she had done up her shirt, and he could see the dried blood. He held his breath, almost afraid to even look.

Gingerly, Jason peeled back the opening of her blouse and saw the blood crusting around what appeared to be a fresh wound. It was red, but not bleeding and it had already begun the necessary and thankfully quick healing process.

Rose stirred slightly and whimpered.

“Shh...” Jason whispered. He clasped her hand. Her skin was cold against his touch. She had lost a lot of blood. “It’s okay, love...its okay. I need to see.”

His fingertips moved carefully over the injured flesh. It was swollen, and Rose breathed in sharply as his fingers grazed over the wound at her shoulder.

“It hurts,” she said, the words barely whispering from her lips.

Jason felt his entire body tense. His mate was in immense pain. Someone had hurt her, and hurt her bad. He took a deep breath. Someone was going to pay for it.

He forced himself to calm down when Rose spoke once again.

“Did you...check...the sink?” she asked slowly, weakly. Somehow, even under Jason’s protest, she was able to lift herself into a sitting position. He supported her in his arms and held her close.

“I saw,” he answered low. His jaw was set. “What the hell happened?” he asked. He strained to keep his voice soft. Rose leaned against his shoulder, her head turned toward his neck. “Was it the bastard that was asking questions? Marcus?”

Rose’s only answer was a weak nod. Jason growled low as he spoke his next words.

“I’ll fucking kill him.”

Jason allowed his anger to soak up just a little more. He glanced down at the helpless form of his mate. She was so pale and weak. Jason choked back his rage and held her.

“I will...I will fucking kill him,” he repeated, this time amid a growl. It was then that Rose spoke up. Her lips moved at first with her silent words, so she tried again.

“You won’t have to kill him.” Her voice was steadier, stronger. She shifted her weight and rose a few inches more. She avoided her mate’s eyes.

Jason felt the change in her attitude and saw it in the way she avoided her eyes. He felt his heart skip a beat or two.

"What do you mean?" he asked. He forced himself not to tighten his grip on Rose, for fear he would hurt her unintentionally. "What happened?"

Rose exhaled deeply. She turned her dark eyes to him.

"He's already dead," she said softly. "I killed him."

For a moment, there was nothing but a stunned silence. Jason stared down at his mate in disbelief. This dark haired angel, this woman who had no hate or desire to hurt others in her heart, had killed a man. He couldn't believe it. He didn't want to believe it.

But the pleading look in Rose's eyes convinced him. Jason lowered his head and fought back the urge to tear something apart. Instead, he spoke in a dark voice.

"How?"

For a moment, Rose was silent. Then, she began to speak. Her voice was soft, but confident and determined. She told him everything. He listened, not saying a word. When she was done, she closed her eyes and let out a breath. Jason fought to contain his anger.

When Rose opened her eyes, Jason caught her stare. Her eyes were wide, frightened.

"I killed him when he attacked us," she said in a trembling voice, "but I'm afraid it's not over yet."

Chapter Four

“What are we going to do now?”

Rose stood against the doorframe of the bathroom and crossed her arms. Her glazed eyes followed Jason’s movements as he paced the hall. She had just finished telling him everything.

“I don’t know,” he said as he turned to her. “I just don’t know.”

It had taken her longer than she had thought to recount her story, but once she had, Jason’s entire attitude had changed. His vengefulness only increased, and his anger continued to grow. It frightened her.

“I’m not one to run, Rose.” He gave an annoyed shake of his head. “You know what? Fuck it...”

Rose blinked once or twice when he turned his back to her and entered the bedroom. Warm light flooded from the overhead bulb.

She followed him, but stopped in the doorway. The light filtered from the room and highlighted Jason. Though the light gave a healthy golden look to his skin, it only made her skin look even whiter than before. Her once wounded shoulder rested against the doorframe.

In the PRDI, Rose had met with individuals who had special abilities, including those who could sense another’s pain and emotions without even setting foot in the same room. The emotions emanating from Jason filled the room with such an intense negativity that she was glad she wasn’t one of these people. It would’ve overwhelmed her.

“I’m sorry, love,” she whispered. The words sounded ugly coming from her, but she didn’t know what else to offer.

Jason appeared at first not to hear her. He was immersed in his self-appointed task of packing. Rose let out her own sigh and ventured to continue.

“Please don’t be like this,” she pleaded but kept her soft tone. “I hate it when you’re like this.” Her fingertips toyed with the sleeve of her shirt. Her eyes strayed from him briefly.

Jason continued to ignore her. He threw their clothes into an already overstuffed duffel bag. Rose waited for an answer, and it came following an annoyed exhale of air.

“I’m not one to run,” he repeated. He paused and dropped the article of clothing he was holding. He lifted his blue eyes and met hers. Rose couldn’t be sure, but she thought she caught a glimmer of sadness in them.

“If it wasn’t for my concern for your safety...I would stay.”

Rose opened her mouth to protest, but immediately shut it when Jason continued. “I need to get you to someplace safe. And I know of a place.”

A very small smile lifted the corners of her mouth. Softly, she spoke. “I can take care of myself, Jason.” Her smile faded then. She replaced it with an almost stern look. “I killed someone, didn’t I? Doesn’t that constitute as being able to take care of myself?”

Immediately, she wished she hadn’t said any of it. Jason glared daggers in her direction, and then quickly he averted his gaze. He resumed his packing and struggled to zip the over-filled bag shut.

“I know. I just...” His brow knotted together in thought. “I just don’t know what to do now. I would feel better if you were someplace safe.”

Rose understood where he was going with his point. She had to admit defeat, and she did so with a heaving sigh. She unfolded her arms and made a sweeping motion with them both.

“So, where would I be safe?” Rose asked, with a condescending tone she immediately wished she had left out.

There was a pause from Jason. He seemed to be in deep thought. He stared at the bag resting on the bed. Rose could see his temples flex as he clenched his jaw.

“Not here, that’s for damn sure,” he muttered and lifted the heavy bag over his shoulder. Its weight caused him to lean forward. He approached the door where Rose stood and changed the subject to avoid any questions from her.

“You feeling okay?”

A look of concern washed over his features, and Rose couldn’t help but smile. She nodded. “I feel fine, love,” she said softly. “Still tired, but I think the blood has built itself back up...for the most part.” The smile faded.

The concerned look remained on his face, now combined with incredulity.

“I’m fine. Really.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, love. I’m sure” She considered a moment. “I do feel stronger.”

Jason’s only response was a nod. A somewhat grim expression now replaced the uncertainty and worry on his face. Rose looked away from him and stared down at her feet as she sidestepped to allow him to pass. He hesitated in the doorway.

“How long do you think it will take before they find out? How long before they find us?”

The questions had been a long time coming, and Rose wasn’t really surprised by them. Still, she avoided his eyes. Jason continued, with an annoyed tone.

“There are other hunters out there besides that asshole. I know,” he said. “I ran into one of them trying the same trick Marcus did to you.”

Rose lifted her head. She stared at him in confusion. She started to open her mouth to say something, but Jason didn’t pause.

“He claimed to be a detective.” He tensed as he turned his eyes earnestly to regard her. “Then, he pulled a Beretta on me.”

Rose's trembling hand lifted to her lips. She said nothing.

Jason turned away from her and out the hall. "I did what you did. I attacked for my own survival. Hell, I'm not even sure if I killed the guy or not..."

He turned his eyes back to her. "My point is...there could be more, and they could be on their way here. We were lucky last time, but I'm not so sure we'll come out on top this time. They will stop at nothing to destroy us. You have to understand that."

After his words were spoken, there was a long moment of silence. Rose understood, though she didn't voice it. It didn't help to ease the situation of her troubled mind. It only added fuel to the fire.

"You should get ready to go." Jason looked her up and down. She still wore her jeans from earlier, and a half soiled shirt, halfway buttoned up. Her hair was a tangled mess.

Blinking, he moved just past her and down the hall. Rose lingered in the doorway with her hand resting on the wood frame. She watched him exit through the front door. She sighed.

She loved the guy, but at times, he was completely unreadable. She knew it was their current situation that had him upset, but with Jason, there always seemed to be something more. There had been times when Rose felt a longing desire to find out what was really bugging him, but she knew all too well she would never tap that knowledge. It was useless.

Instead, she brought herself to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. Distraught feelings and worried thoughts plagued her. Her head went into her hands in a gesture of desperation.

Whatever he had planned, Rose hoped it led to more good than bad.

Jason worked on securing the large bag into the overly small compartment on his crotch rocket. The bag wouldn't fit and he let some of his anger loose as he punched it down into the compartment. Having successfully forced the bag into its place did little to comfort him.

With a groan, he leaned against the bike. He now debated whether or not he should go back inside for Rose, or wait out here for her. He decided on the latter. He needed time to think.

So many thoughts clouded his mind, and while he hated to admit it, he was scared. Fear was something he had learned to put aside. Fear was something he could not afford to have. It was simply not allowed.

And now, in the face of the most difficult thing to ever cross his path, fear was the force most dominating his emotions. Even the rage he fought to suppress was overshadowed by the fear he felt. The mixture of emotions brought about a new wave of thoughts as well. Jason gave a shake of his head as doubt grew stronger.

Maybe Rose did kill those two. Maybe she killed Lisa and Todd.

"No, that can't be," Jason said out loud. His gaze shifted toward the porch. A shadow moved across the front room window. The faint light went off.

He didn't want to leave room for doubt. He loved Rose, after all...but what if?

What if it were true? What if she had blacked out one night when he wasn't with her? Her sleepwalking habits didn't seem to fall into such an extreme category. Murder was something Rose could never do...

Until tonight, that was the single thought that kept him so reassured when doubt prodded in his thoughts. Now, Jason wasn't so sure. She had killed someone tonight. What if it wasn't a first?

Jason crossed his arms over his chest. His leather jacket creaked with the slight movements. He exhaled and watched the door as he waited for Rose to emerge. While he waited, he racked his brain and tried to remember when she had last walked in her sleep. He hated his memory for being fuzzy on things like that.

It had been more than a month ago, before word of the murders had gotten headlines in the papers and on TV. Jason had woken to an empty spot in his bed, and when he rolled over, he found the spot cold. Rose hadn't been there for a while. Quickly, he sat up and rubbed the sleep away from his eyes and took a deep breath. He could smell her scent.

He had stood up from the bed and entered the hallway. He followed the scent. It didn't take him long to find her. Rose stood in her nightshirt, bare legs bright in the darkness. She stood by the front room window. She stared out at the moon.

From across the room, Jason watched her with a racing heart. For the first few minutes, she had just stood there, as if in deep concentration. He took a step toward her, at the same time she made a move away from the window. So as not to startle her, he stopped in place and observed her movements.

Her bare feet carried her from the window to the front door of the cabin. One slender hand twisted at the doorknob, and Jason held his breath. He was thankful it was locked. In her sleeping mind, she didn't think to turn the lock. Again, Jason was grateful.

He let out a breath and silently crept forward. His hands gently touched her shoulders.

"Let's go back to bed, Rose," he whispered and gently steered her away from the door. She complied instantly. Her glazed eyes stared at nothing in particular. He smoothed back a strand of hair from them. He knew it was important to not startle her out of her sleeping state and so he was very gentle as he returned her to the bedroom.

Once there, Rose slipped back into bed and rested among the sheets and pillows as if she had never left them. Jason sat there and watched her for the longest time.

She stepped out from the cabin just then, with a clean shirt and jeans on, her own leather jacket wrapped around her body. She locked the door behind her and made her way down the steps. She looked tired.

Without a word, he climbed on the bike. The key turned and the vehicle roared to life. Rose climbed on behind him and slipped her arms around his waist. She held herself close to him.

No, she couldn't be a killer. He tried so hard to get that nagging doubt out of his mind. No, Rose couldn't even get out of the house when she was sleepwalking...so was she even capable of hurting someone in that state?

As he moved the bike out of park and drove it down the long driveway away from the cabin, he told himself no. How possible was it for Rose to get out of the house, into her car, drive to the park, shift into wolf form and attack two innocent passersby, and be back before morning? It didn't seem logical. It made no sense.

Jason put the thought to rest in his mind finally and instead focused on the long road ahead. The sun wouldn't rise for a long while yet, and they had a lot of ground to cover before it did. Once on the highway, he let the bike go, and the world flew past them in a flurry of shadows.

Rose tightened her grip around her mate's waist and buried her face in his back. It was then that she cried for the second time that night. Her sobs were silent. Her fingertips curled onto the front of Jason's shirt and gripped tightly.

Uncertainty now loomed over them just like the half moon that was partially hidden behind the clouds. What was going to happen to them now? Would it be smooth waters from here on out, or were there worst things waiting for them?

Rose didn't want to think about it, and she wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket and tried to put the thoughts out of her head. The cold wind bit at her wet cheeks and eyes, and once more she buried her face against Jason's back.

Exhaustion threatened her awareness, and Rose was only too welcome to the idea of falling asleep and letting it all fade into just a bad dream.

Chapter Five

The autumn air was already cold and biting with a wintertime chill. Rose could barely feel her fingers. It took some prying to remove them from the folds of Jason's shirt. Even then the chill wouldn't let her move them without momentary pain.

The sky was quickly turning pink in the east and she inclined her head toward the rising sun. Her frozen hands found warmth inside her jacket and beneath her arms. Her face was numb.

The drive had been too long and Rose's legs were stiff. Stretching was welcome and doing a world of good. Slowly, she walked around the nearly empty parking lot of the hotel. Every once in a while her gaze would shift to the office.

Jason was busy in the office. They would have a room soon. Rose turned her head toward the horizon. Warm colors brightened the sky.

A yawn overtook her, and Rose gave in. She covered her mouth with her hand. Her eyes watered with sleep tears. A warm bed did sound good though, she had to admit that. There would be plenty of time to sleep and rest soon enough, she hoped.

She made her way back to the motorcycle and leaned against it as she waited. Jason hadn't told her where they were going, or even where they were now. Rose was upset by it. She would at least like to know where this mystery place of his was.

But, all in good time, she thought bitterly.

A door creaked open and she turned her attention toward that direction. Jason exited the office and walked toward her. A grin played on

his face, and Rose knew him well enough to know it was a forced one. In one hand, he held up the key card.

“Well...I got everything set. Room 102.” He gave her the card. Halfheartedly, Rose took the card from him and lingered a moment while he began to remove the bag from its compartment.

She thought about saying something, about asking the question that lingered in her mind, but she thought better of it. Instead, she nodded.

“Yeah...okay.”

Jason didn't look at her the entire time and concentrated on the jammed bag as his excuse. Rose thought about waiting for him, but with the negative emanations from him being so strong, she decided against it.

Instead, Rose walked toward room 102. She glanced over her shoulder at Jason briefly when she reached the door. She hated when he was distant like this. With a sigh, she turned back, fitted the key card in the lock and turned the handle when the light flashed green.

The inside of the hotel room was dark. She could see just fine, but she felt along the inside wall for a light switch just the same. She was tired of darkness.

She soon found it and the room was flooded with brilliant light. She left the door open as she stood there. She looked around at the meager furnishings of the room.

She had been in worse places, but at least this one was clean. She looked around the room, and she had just peeled off her jacket when Jason walked in. A normal man might've strained under the weight of the backpack, but Jason heaved it without as much as a thought. It found a place in the chair next to Rose.

She draped her jacket across the chair and, without saying a word, made her way to the bathroom. The door shut with a click and left her in the tightly enclosed and brightly lit room.

Her reflection in the mirror above the sink looked discolored and her face had splotchy places on it. Rose's eyes were bloodshot and tired. With

a shake of her head, she turned on the water. She didn't bother letting it warm up before she splashed some on her face.

Using one of the towels, she dried her face off and returned to the other room. Jason was seated in another chair next to the window. The curtains were tightly shut, and the door was locked.

"Jason..." Rose started to say, but he flashed a look that clearly said he wasn't in the mood to talk.

Rose withdrew, defeated once more. She felt too tired to argue with him now. She allowed him his moment of anger. He needed to cool down.

And she needed sleep.

Rose removed her jeans and pulled back the blankets and sheets on the bed, and slipped between them. She lay on her side and watched Jason as he stared out the window. The sun's light streamed in through the break in the curtains and shone across his face. Rose could see sleep was threatening him as well, and she bit on her lower lip as she tried to persuade him.

"Love, why don't you come to bed and rest for a few hours?" Rose moved two of the pillows and positioned them under her head. She watched Jason as she tried to ignore the heaviness of her eyelids.

Jason shook his head. He didn't look her way. Instead, his eyes were scrunched up to dim some of the incoming light. "I'm fine."

Rose pushed the issue just a bit further. "You're tired. I can tell. Just go to sleep for a little. You'll need your strength."

"I'm fine, Rose." The answer was inevitable and harsh. "You sleep for a while. You need it more than I do."

Finally, he turned his eyes in her direction. They were bright and sad as he regarded her. Rose was ready to protest, but he spoke again.

"I'll keep a look out while you rest...just in case," he added, and then turned his eyes away. He blinked a few times. "Just sleep, love."

Rose felt the sudden urge to cry, yet again. Her eyes watered but no tears fell to her cheeks. Still, she turned her face to the pillow. She never liked him to see her cry.

She waited until the threat of tears subsided, then raised her head. For all she knew, he had not removed himself from his position near the window or even moved in the slightest. After a moment, he exhaled and glanced at her from the corner of his eye.

With her head resting on the pillow and inclined in Jason's direction, her resistance to sleep became no more. Soon, she was conked out and snored lightly as she often did when totally exhausted.

Jason watched her for a few moments. She looked so peaceful lying there like that, with one hand curled beside her face, and her mouth partly open. He suddenly hated himself for making her feel bad.

But Rose knew just as well as he did he was unreachable when he was as moody as he had been lately. He just didn't like hurting her.

Jason rubbed his eyes. Sleep was trying its best to get him. He stifled a yawn and glanced once more outside. The parking lot was blissfully clear. Jason was thankful for that. It was also leery. How long would it stay that way?

How long before they get here?

Jason didn't have time to think on it any more. His cell phone buzzed in his jacket pocket. Quickly, yet silently, he jumped from his seat and grabbed the key card to the room. He found the phone and answered.

"Hello?" He maintained his soft voice for the purpose of not waking Rose.

"Hey, man." The familiar voice on the other end was a welcome sound. It was Glen Cole, Rose's cousin and fellow werewolf. The young man was associated with the PRDI, the institute where Rose had spent most of her childhood. Jason wasn't accredited with the place but Glen was reliable enough. As well as being Rose's cousin and a trustworthy friend, he knew a lot about werewolves and was a good source for tactical information.

And weapons.

"Hang on, man," Jason replied and busied himself with the locks on the door. He glanced at the sleeping Rose. She didn't stir when he opened the door and slipped out. He made sure to close it softly.

"We are in deep shit, Glen."

"What's going on?" Glen's deep voice confirmed the obvious and expected concern. "I tried to call Rose."

"Her phone's dead," Jason explained. He began to pace the sidewalk, as he often did when he talked on the phone. He was sure to keep his voice in an even and soft tone. He kept a constant look out.

"What's going on?" Glen asked again. "What's happened?"

"The worst possible thing." Jason sighed. "To make a long story short, we're on the run, and we're headed your way."

"Whoa, whoa...headed this way? What the hell—I think I want the long story, Jason."

"I can't." Jason interrupted before Glen could continue. He paused outside the door to their room. He now spoke in a hushed whisper. No one was around, but he wasn't taking chances. "We're held up at some backwater hotel, and I don't know who may be listening."

"Okay. I can understand that..." Glen's voice trailed off as he waited for Jason to continue.

"I'm taking Rose to that safe place she's always talking about. Get everything ready for us, okay? We were attacked and I don't know if we're being followed. I plan on taking a less direct route, just in case."

All that was heard from Glen's end was a long sigh. Jason tried again.

"Just help us out, man. Rose has been hurt. Badly."

There was silence on the phone this time.

"Please, Glen? I don't ask much of you. Just help us out with this..."

Glen still didn't respond, and Jason had a sinking feeling he would refuse. Jason refrained from voicing so. His grip on his cell phone was already near crushing. He loosened his hold on it somewhat.

"This is some serious shit, Jason. Once we get involved, there is no turning back..." He trailed off once more. He seemed to be contemplating.

"You're already involved, Glen." Jason took a deep breath and tried to keep his voice from rising. "Your cousin was shot and almost killed. You owe it to help her. You're the only family she has—are you going to help us or not? If not, then I'll hang up, and I'll take care of this myself."

Jason wasn't one for ultimatums, but he didn't feel he had a choice.

"Well?" His voice was a low growl now.

Glen let out a breath, evidently trying to keep his own cool.

"I'll see what I can do." His attitude seemed to change. "I'll get the place ready and try to get some others in on this, for support and back up. When are you going to get there?"

Jason was unbelievably glad to hear Glen was willing to help. He thought for a moment.

"Given there are no further...complications, probably early tomorrow morning."

"Less than twenty-four hours, huh?" Glen noted. There was a pause and Jason could imagine the other man scratching the goatee on his chin as he thought. "Lose the cell phone. They may not be smart enough or have the technology to trace you down with that, but take no chances. We'll wait for you at the safe place, but if you guys don't show up before tomorrow night, we'll assume the worst."

Jason nodded his head in agreement, even though Glen couldn't see him. "It sounds like a plan," he answered.

"All right then. See you soon."

"Yeah... Later, man."

There was another pause. Neither man seemed to want to hang up right away. It could very well be the last time they ever spoke. It was Glen who finally broke the silence.

"Give Rose my love. Take care of her. You're right...I'm the only family she has, and she's the only family I have."

The words brought a faint smile to Jason's face. "Yeah, I'll make sure of it."

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye, Glen."

Jason hit the "end call" button and slumped against the door. He wasn't sure just how he felt. He didn't want to drag others into this mess.

Jason had his own opinions of the PRDI and wanted nothing to do with the institute. He had qualms about places that kept tabs on every major and minor milestone in the lives of "supernatural creatures" everywhere. No, that was not for him. He enjoyed being nameless, faceless and anonymous.

But the place had done so much for Rose and had helped her through many hard times, and for that he was grateful. He only hoped he would be grateful for any other help that would be offered. He wasn't ready to just openly trust anyone. He learned his lesson about that a long time ago.

Jason gave a shake of his head, pocketed the cell phone and turned to face the door. The keycard slipped into its slot easily and allowed admittance. Silently, he shut and locked the door, then sat on the empty side of the bed. He glanced at Rose.

She was still asleep, now on her back. Her chest rose and fell with her deep breaths. A small smile slide across Jason's face, and he lay on his side so he could face her. His hand gently and softly ran across her cheek.

"I promise you, Rose," he said as he laid his head on the pillows. He blinked a few times and forced his heavy eyelids open. "I promise that everything will be fine. We'll make it through." His words barely came out in a whisper.

Jason's eyes closed. He wasn't going to fall asleep, just rest his eyes. They were tired. Before he knew it, Jason had fallen into a deep sleep beside her. His hand was curled up next to hers, their fingers interlocked.

* * *

Jason rolled over on his back. Sleep tried desperately to end its hold on him. His body and senses were still half asleep and groggy. He kept his eyes closed. Erratic thoughts plagued him, and he wondered just how long he had been asleep. It couldn't have been for very long.

One eye opened lazily. His mind gradually woke up. He was aware enough to know that it was no longer light outside. Darkness had fallen, and a chill air swept through the room from the open hotel door.

Both eyes flew open, and he was instantly awake. The hotel door was wide open. Cold autumn air seeped through the room. He shivered and turned his gaze to the empty spot in the bed beside him.

Rose was gone. Her perfume and were-scent were still faint in the room, but there was no sign of her.

Jason threw back the blankets of the bed without another thought. A second later he was out the open door. His eyes moved back and forth along the lighted sidewalk. She wasn't there.

Only one thought coursed through his mind, and it was far from being pleasant.

"Damn it, Rose." he whispered, "You better have just gone to the vending machines for a snack..." Jason had one last glimmer of hope. Blood soaked images dominated his mind, and he pushed them away.

He wouldn't believe it. There was no way in hell Rose could be sleepwalking. There was no way in hell she would do that to him.

Jason continued to reassure himself as he stepped past the main office and glanced inside. Rose was not there. In fact, the only person there was the short bald man who had been there earlier in the day. No one else was in sight.

He turned away from the window. He was ready to begin the trek through the parking lot and around the back of the place for her. Something suddenly caught his attention. There was a spot on the pavement. It was blood.

Jason's breath caught in his throat and his heart skipped a beat. His heightened sense of smell caught the scent of the fresh blood, and his eyes followed the track of bright red splatters as it trailed away.

His breath picked up, and without another hesitating thought, he ran across the pavement. His boots smacked audibly against the asphalt. His eyes never left the grim trail. It led around the establishment and into the grass, and even further it led into a wooded area just behind the hotel.

He didn't stop. There was no time to waste. The scent of blood became even stronger as he ran closer to the forested area. He willed himself not to panic, but it wasn't working.

The scent of Rose's perfume and undeniable werewoman scent now mingled with the scent of blood, and Jason felt as if he would be sick. Other colognes and perfumes and the acrid stench of smoke permeated the air as well. A growl rose in Jason's throat.

The blood trail became lost in the moist dark earth and the underbrush of the forest floor. Jason relied on the scent of it alone to track her down. Branches of the trees clawed at him menacingly, but he just shoved them out of his way.

There was a clearing up ahead, and Jason stopped in his path. He dared to even breathe. It was worse than anything he had imagined.

She lay upon the cold ground. Her blue eyes stared up at him through the darkness, cold, motionless and empty. The blood pooled around her and soaked into the soil. Her necklace glittered in the faint light of the half moon above. The engagement ring he had given to her not long ago rested at the base of her throat.

And the silver bullets littered the ground around her glinted mockingly in the moonlight.

Chapter Six

“Rose!”

With a startled gasp, Jason sat upright in bed. His shirt clung to his body, the sweat sticky on the bare parts of his skin. Strands of his hair gripped his forehead and cheek.

Panting, he threw back the blankets that were now bunched around his waist. The tangled heap fell to the floor. The pillows from the empty side of the bed fell to the floor.

It had all been a dream, just a horrible mixed-up dream. It wasn't real. But before Jason could breathe a sigh of relief, his still somewhat sluggish mind finally comprehended. He was alone in the bed.

Images from the recent dream gathered into one panic filled thought. Rose was gone. The dream was becoming a reality.

Jason knew there were instances when some would dream things that later came true, and among the tumult of his thoughts and emotions, he felt this to be one of those times. The better part of his logic told him otherwise. This could not be happening.

He refused to believe it. He was out of bed the next moment and frantically scanned the small room for any clue of where she had gone. She was definitely not in the room with him.

But the room door was shut and was perhaps the only thing unlike the beginning of his dream. Everything else was the same—the panicked feeling, Rose's lingering perfume and his determination to find her.

His hand fumbled as it went for the locks on the door. It took him longer than necessary to undo the chain. More sweat dripped down the side of his face.

“Jason?”

Her questioning voice was very soft, but it caused him to jump nonetheless. When he spun around, he was greeted by the most welcomed sight he was sure he had ever seen.

Rose stood in the doorway to the bathroom, towel in her hand. She was freshly scrubbed, and even from this distance Jason could smell the light scent of the soap on her skin. The clean shirt she wore was wet at the shoulders from her dripping hair. Her face was knotted with a look of confusion.

“Where are you going?” she asked. She lifted the towel to squeeze out water from her drenched hair.

Jason was dumbstruck for a few seconds before he was able to shake it off. Embarrassment burned his cheeks. He was foolish and had been quick to jump to the wrong conclusions. He didn’t even think to check the most obvious place. He felt like a moron.

It was definitely a mistake he wasn’t keen on repeating yet again.

He forced himself to smile for her, but his red cheeks revealed otherwise about his feelings. And Rose seemed to see right through that mask.

“What’s wrong?”

Jason didn’t want to reveal the true nature of his panic and just shrugged. “I just thought you had disappeared.” Again, he flashed a fake smile.

Rose’s face scrunched up in disbelief. She wasn’t buying it.

She approached him. She draped the towel over her shoulder. Her touch was soft when she rested her hand on his shoulder.

“Love, what’s wrong? You know you can tell me.” Rose’s fingers ran along the sleeve of his shirt. Her piercing eyes stared directly at him.

Jason couldn’t tell her. He couldn’t let her know just how scared he had been at the idea of her disappearing. It was a weakness. He gave a shake of his head.

"I'm fine, Rose...really. Just..." He sighed and gave a slight smile. "I've been really edgy because of everything that's happened."

Rose nodded her head in understanding. "I know...I have been too, but..." She paused and lowered her gaze. "I heard you call out. You were having a bad dream, weren't you?"

Her eyes lifted, and Jason suddenly felt compelled to confess everything when her bright blue gaze fixed on him. All he did was give a nod.

"Oh, sweetie." Rose immediately wrapped her arms around him and held herself close to his body. Her head rested against his chest and she sighed deeply.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered. Her touch comforted him.

Jason wrapped one arm around her. When that didn't satisfy him, he wrapped the other and embraced her tightly.

"Sorry for what?" He said. A hand smoothed over her hair.

"I'm sorry for everything. For this whole mess. For getting us into trouble..." Jason knew silent sobs were soon on the way. Her voice cracked as she spoke. "You shouldn't have to deal with my mistakes..."

"Hey, hey...don't talk like that." It was his turn to do the comforting. "Don't ever talk like that. It's not your fault. And even if it was, you know damn well I would stay beside you until the end. No matter what." He looked down. Rose stared up at him.

"Things will turn around. I promise you." He tried to sound hopeful, but was afraid it came off too sentimental.

"I know, love, but..." Rose's voice cracked. Tears glistened in her eyes. "I'm still afraid." She buried her face in his chest.

Jason's warm breath touched her cheek as he whispered, "I feel you, Rose. I really do."

He pulled back just enough and lifted Rose's head so he could look in her teary eyes. "We've both had enough bad times to last us several lifetimes. I think it's time something good happened for us both."

Rose was speechless for a moment, but despite the tears that had formed and spilled from her cheeks, a smile spread across her face.

"I am...so glad to have you," she said. Her lower lip trembled. "You are just...too good to me."

A tear fell onto her cheek and Jason gently brushed it away with his thumb. His face moved very close to hers.

"And I always will be, my Rose." He planted the softest of kisses on her lips, and Rose's teary eyes closed. She reopened them as he pulled back from the kiss. The smallest of tear droplets clung to her lashes.

Jason smiled and earnestly stared into her eyes. "I'll make everything all right for us..."

She pulled away from his arms and shifted her eyes elsewhere. "I need to tell you something..."

A slight wave of panic from before rose once more, but he quelled it with a few deep breaths. His heart raced. What did she have to tell him?

"What is it?" he asked. Rose sat on the edge of the bed, and he sat beside her. She took a deep breath and collected herself. When she spoke, it was in a soft voice.

"I don't know anything about this dream you had...but I'm guessing it was bad..." She looked over at him for confirmation, and he nodded a little for her to continue. "Well...I've been having dreams too."

Jason's brow furrowed. He knew about the dreams. It was the main reason why she had been visiting Tiffany, though, he didn't know just what the dreams were about. That was a mystery.

"I know that, love..." he started to say, but Rose gave him a look.

"Please...let me finish," she told him, and then looked away. "Sorry."

"It's fine." Jason waited as patiently as he could for her to continue. When she did, she spoke so low he could barely hear her.

"The dreams I have are...disturbing." Her hands shook as she fiddled with the hem of her shirt. "It's like two different dreams, but they always seem to turn into one. They meld together. Things become blurry, but I can always remember the important parts..."

Again she paused, as if unable to go on. He wrapped an arm around her and rubbed her shoulder.

"The dream starts out where I'm alone, somewhere I don't know. I see trees, and I see buildings. It always looks like some sort of park to me. And I'm there, but it's not me..."

Rose furrowed her brow, as if gathering her thoughts. She continued, "I'm in full wolf form. Everything is so clear to me. The earth smells so rich, the sky so clean. I smell the choking scent of cars on asphalt, and I smell people. The people are very close to me. I never really see who they are. The features are all blurry, but I see them coming close, and I begin to run."

She fell silent there for a long while and Jason felt it was his turn to say something. He wet his lips before he began.

"And this is what you're afraid of? That it's not just a dream, but real...?" he questioned. She wasn't looking at him. Her head lowered, and her eyes fixed on her fidgeting hands.

"Yeah, more or less." She shrugged, and then her eyes turned to him. Tears once more glistened brightly along the edges of her eyelids. "But there's more."

"The other dream..." Jason supplied. Rose nodded.

"Yes. It happens at the end of this dream, but they don't always happen together. Sometimes I have the dreams separate." She moved her hand to her face and wiped at one eye. "I am always running in the dream, trying to find you. That's the dream I have the most. That's the one that scares me."

"I can smell your scent everywhere, and I'm panicking because I can't find you. I run into a wooded area, and I shift. I run faster and faster..." She trailed away. She turned her head to look out the window. The sky was dark outside the partially opened curtains.

"When I finally stop, I see you. But you're..." She hesitated, closing her eyes before she finished. "Dead."

Haunting images of his own dream flashed before his eyes, and involuntarily he felt a shudder start down his spine. To hear her say

things, to have a dream so like his. It made him feel all the more worse. She shouldn't have to go through that.

Instead of saying a word, Jason's arms wrapped around her and drew her close to his side. Once her head rested against his chest, he spoke.

"You know that will never happen, love. I am not going to die on you."

"I know, Jason, but...the dream seems so real, and I keep having it. I want it to stop. I don't want to see those images any more... I don't want to see you dead." The words spilled from her lips. Tears formed in her eyes.

Jason tried to soothe her and cursed himself for his apparent inability to do so. He wasn't good at comforting anyone, and right now he felt useless as he held her in his arms. Rose gasped her sobs and buried her face against his chest and shoulder. He rubbed her back. He endured it all in silence.

When she had quieted down, he spoke just loud enough for her to hear.

"It won't happen, love...I promise you. It's just a dream, and nothing more. I won't die." He gave a smile to reassure her. "Not until I'm old and grey, and my hair turns white just like my fur."

This attempt at a joke received a slight chuckle from Rose. She wiped her eyes once more and looked up at him. She even smiled, if only slightly.

"Thanks, love," she said softly. "I guess everything's just getting to me. I'm stressed out a bit."

"I think 'a bit' would be an understatement." Jason embraced her once more, tightly. He kissed the top of her head. "Like I said, we'll be fine...you'll see."

Rose nodded. "Yeah..." She pulled away from his embrace and moved to sit back further on the bed. "So...where do we go from here?"

Jason gave a slight shake of his head. "Glen called while you were asleep. He's going to help us."

"How?" She crossed her legs one over the other. Jason stood up and walked across the floor.

"The PRDI, at one of the safe houses. He mentioned he's going to get some more people involved."

"One of the safe houses?" Rose asked, bewildered. "Which one?"

Jason shook his head and waved dismissively. "It doesn't matter which one. We just need a place to regroup and crash for a while, until this whole thing blows over."

Rose once again let out a sigh and stared down at her hands. She licked her lips and glanced up at Jason. She opened her mouth to speak, but he interrupted her.

"We need to leave as soon as we can. I can get us there by morning, if nothing else happens along the way."

Jason paused and turned his eyes back to her. "I'm going to take a shower now. Might be the last chance I get for a while."

"Yeah, I thought the exact same thing," Rose answered. Jason walked over to her, leaned down and placed a soft kiss on her lips. Rose returned it. One hand rested on the curve of his neck.

He pulled away, a smile on his lips. "Just promise me you won't leave the room, even for a minute."

In any other situation, Rose would've laughed and smiled as she called him paranoid, but not in this case. She nodded. "Promise, love."

"All right." Jason nodded, convinced. He turned and disappeared inside the bathroom. A few moments later, Rose could hear the water run from the shower. She collapsed back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

Just what are we going to do? What if laying low isn't a possibility? Rose closed her eyes for a moment. She moved her arms behind her to support her head. The nagging questions would probably never be answered.

There was a feeling of hopelessness she couldn't shake, no matter what sort of reassuring things Jason said to her. Something worse was

going to happen to them. She didn't know when it would, but it seemed too inevitable. The chances were too great.

Rose opened her eyes. They felt heavy and she blinked them. More questions plagued her already worried mind.

Will we ever be safe again? Will any of us ever be safe? Are the hunters out there, right now, searching for us? Will they find us? Will they kill us?

Rose closed her eyes again. Her breathing was slow. Even with the heavy burden and the deep thoughts that formed a cloud around her, she found herself drowsy. She began to drift off.

She couldn't fall asleep now. They had to leave soon, but a voice in the back of her head told her, "Take it. Rest... It may be the last time you get this chance."

And she listened to the voice and the water that ran from the shower. They lulled her into a deep and hopefully dreamless sleep.

Chapter Seven

Cigarette smoke drifted from the partially open window on the driver's side of the car, and a flash of red sparked briefly on the highway. Even with the window down and the smoke billowing out into the night, it did little to improve the air quality within the car.

The young woman in the passenger seat shifted her weight, uncomfortable in the cramped space. She turned to regard the driver of the car, and when he glanced in her direction, she turned back to the road ahead.

Cars headed in the opposite direction sped past them. Their headlights barely dimmed to the legal brightness. The young woman rubbed her eyes, and then turned her attention back to the glaring blue light of the laptop screen in front of her. A few keystrokes later, a program had loaded. The screen flashed momentarily.

Her name was Claire Hennessy. She was a college graduate and part of this...mission. She had been willing to join at first. Now she wasn't so sure she wanted to stay involved. Things had gotten too out of hand.

She intently watched the screen, doing anything to keep her mind occupied. Otherwise, she would think about their situation. And she did not want to go there.

A strand of her hair came loose from its ponytail and fell across her forehead and into her eyes. She smoothed the hair back away from her forehead and focused on the system.

The blip on the screen that identified Marcus had now come to life. Claire furrowed her eyebrows together and bit her lip. They had been looking for him for more than half the day and now they had a lock. But

their leader had given up on finding Marcus and instead was headed away from town.

In the backseat, Davis moaned. He was stretched out on his back with his legs propped to allow him room to lie down. An ice pack in one hand rested on the crown of his head. A bottle of extra strength painkillers rested in the other hand. His fingers curled around it. Claire chose to ignore him for the moment.

Instead she directed her attention once again to the driver. The ash from his cigarette flew out the crack in the window and disappeared. The driver was of a muscular sinewy build, tall, with short dark hair that seemed to stick out in almost every direction. His brown eyes, a darker shade than her eyes, focused on the road.

His name was Simon Conner and he was the undisputed leader of this operation. It was he who had first approached Claire and gotten her support on his mission. At the time, young ambitious Claire had been only too eager to help out another with technologically advanced ideas and designs. And it was she who was funding this endeavor, thanks to an inheritance from her wealthy and now deceased family.

This wealth had allowed her to go to the finest colleges available, and she had learned quite a lot. Her field had been Advanced Computer Programming, with a few extra tricks thrown in. Hacking had become almost second nature to her after college.

So it was no wonder Simon had contacted her. Her resume had all the necessary elements for what he needed. Smart, rich and a computer expert... It was exactly what he had been looking for. And she had been too naïve. She had only seen it as an incredible career opportunity.

But something had happened. Things weren't like she had thought they would be. Simon started rattling on about werewolves, about hunting, and Claire became more worried as time progressed. Werewolves weren't real.

They were searching for two vigilantes. That's what Simon told her. These two had been involved in a murder a few weeks back. Simon

wasn't about to let them get away with it. He pulled no stops and ordered the small band to get together.

There was only problem with that. Davis and Marcus had gone missing. With their tracking system momentarily offline, they were unable to pinpoint their precise locations. Luck had shown on them briefly when they came across the wrecked mess of Davis, stranded and wounded in the middle of some less traveled back road. He had been only coherent enough to mutter something about werewolves before passing out in the backseat. Simon began their search for Marcus.

When Davis had regained consciousness, they learned their suspects were now on the move, and Simon had abandoned his search for Marcus.

Apparently, Simon knew where they were headed, or at least knew the direction they had gone in, and had been silent for a long while now. The radio would've been welcome, but Simon hated it. He refused to have it on. Claire endured the silence by keeping her mind busy.

The tracking system was back online, and Claire watched the stationary blip for Marcus continue flashing on her screen.

"Simon." She broke the silence. Simon threw a cold glance in her direction. His exhaled smoke blew in her direction. She did her best not to cough.

"What?" His reply was gruff.

The woman took as deep a breath as she could. The thick smoke clouded around her head.

"I found where Marcus is."

"About damn time our system came back up," he muttered. He flicked what was left of his cigarette out the window. "Where is he?"

From the backseat, Davis moaned again. Claire looked over her shoulder at him briefly then glanced back at the computer screen.

"He's somewhere on the outskirts on the other side of town." She sighed, and then gave him the exact address.

Simon seemed to think for a moment. He set his jaw and blinked a few times. Their leader had expressed his anger more than once at Davis and Marcus for not following his orders, and this was one of the times when his anger affected all. Claire held her breath, as if she expected a blow.

"Why the fuck would he be there?" Simon snapped and shook his head. "You know what, I don't fucking care. I don't have time to turn around to get his ass."

The cell phone charging between them now came to life as Simon hit his speed-dial option. He threw a glare in Claire's direction, and then focused once more on the road.

"Eric." His voice rose, so the man on the other end could hear him better. "We know where Marcus is. Where are you?"

He waited for a response, holding the phone up to his ear. Eric's voice was deep and loud, and she could hear him very clearly from the passenger's seat.

"Getting ready to head to the rendezvous point."

"Fuck the rendezvous point. There's been a change in plans. Marcus never met up with Davis, and because our system was down, we couldn't track him. We are on our way after the suspects now." He glanced in the rearview mirror a second. "We don't have time to turn back now. Pick his ass up and get moving."

Simon dominated the conversation, as Claire had noted he often did, and she turned her head away. She watched the trees and fence posts pass by the window. She sighed, and her breath made a soft mist of fog on the glass.

"Where is he?" Eric asked. Simon made a noise like a growl. Claire turned to look back at him and his expression was all she needed to get to work. She hit a few keys. She found Marcus' location and gave the address. Simon relayed it briefly.

"You know where we're going, out of town," Simon continued. "Get Marcus and then head out that way. We'll stop at the first hotel we see

on this godforsaken road, so meet us there.” He paused a moment and looked back at Davis. He gave an annoyed growl.

“And have Michael bring the first aid kit. Mr. Miller here had a run-in with our friends last night.”

That was it. He didn’t wait for a confirmation simply because he expected it to be done. He shut the phone off and tossed it back into its compartment. Claire looked over at him, then down at the computer. She pretended to study the flashing dot on screen, but her mind was far away.

Was it too late to pull back now? Could she withdraw her funding and go back to the safety of her home office and return to her old job? Somehow, deep inside, she knew it would probably kill her if she got involved in this mess any further. But really...what choice did she have?

“Claire, see if you can’t access the phone records for Ms. Sullivan.” Simon’s order interrupted her thoughts.

With a wordless nod, Claire accessed a directory and was soon able to find a listing for the female’s cell phone number. A few keystrokes later, and Claire had accessed her call history. She scanned the files.

“What exactly am I supposed to be looking for here, Simon?” she asked. All she was coming up with were the outgoing and incoming calls. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Simon had lit up another cigarette and the car was quickly filling up with the putrid smoke. “Check for any phone numbers that appear more often than the rest.”

“All right,” she answered, and did just that. There were several numbers that appeared more than once, but one number seemed to take up at least half the record.

“I found one that takes up a lot of her call time. Want me to check it out?”

“Yes,” Simon stated, annoyed. “Fuck. When was the last call made?”

“It was made last night.”

That didn't help them any. They had already wasted nearly an entire day sitting around, waiting for confirmation from Davis and Marcus. Neither of them had contacted Simon. And only God knew how long Davis had been incapacitated on that backwater road.

"All right, Claire, this is what I want you to do. I want you to do a search on that number. I'm sure that has to be her boyfriend. Perhaps there's a chance he's made a call within the last twenty-four hours. That would give us a clue maybe, if he called anyone for help."

Silently, Claire did as she was told and ran the search. It took a moment longer than it had for her phone records to show up, and when they did, Claire's eyebrows rose in surprise. Simon had been right. The number did belong to the boyfriend, Jason Barnett.

"There was a call sometime this morning," she said.

Simon nodded and a bitter smirk moved on his face. Claire looked over at him expectantly and the expression faded into a sneer.

"Well...don't look at me. Do a fucking search and find out who the fuck the number belongs to!"

Claire took a deep breath and started with her task. She had found it best to do what he asked right away. Davis groaned in the backseat and finally sat up. The ice pack tottered unsteadily on top of his head, and he moved one hand to hold it in place.

"Fuck, man..." He moaned. Dried blood was on the side of his face. It trickled down from his temple where a large gash was, just slightly above the eyebrow. More dried blood was caked in the hair at the back of his head. He had been lucky to survive.

"I think I have a concussion." He whined. "I need to go to the hospital."

Simon let out a snort. "Fuck the hospital. It was your own damn fault. You got what you deserved. Didn't I tell you and Marcus to lay low?" Simon's knuckles turned white as he gripped the steering wheel.

"I'm not your mommy, and I'm not going to kiss your boo-boo all better. Just fucking deal with it."

Claire looked at Davis and rolled her eyes at him. Davis tried to act macho, to keep things cool wherever he went, but when faced with trouble, he was the first to run. She had never met anyone like him. Claire was still trying to figure out just what his purpose was here.

Her attention returned to the computer screen. The results were up, but she waited for Simon to finish his rant toward Davis before she interrupted.

"Simon, I thought..." Davis started to say, but Simon was quick to jump in.

"Yeah, that's your fucking problem—you thought."

"Simon, give me a second to explain! He jumped me. He was following me, and he found out I wasn't what I said—"

Simon glared at him through the rearview mirror. "That's a likely story," he said sarcastically. "If you want to stay alive another day, I suggest you keep your trap shut. I don't want to hear your excuses. I'll deal with you later."

The threat was real and Davis knew it. Obediently, he shut up and fell back against the seat. He opened the bottle and he swallowed a mouthful of the painkillers. Claire watched him, disgusted.

Simon sighed deeply.

"You're lucky we picked your sorry ass off the road. I had half a mind to leave you there to rot," Simon continued. "Just be sure it never happens again."

"Yeah, yeah," Davis muttered, and leaned his head back against the seat, his eyes closed. Soon he was lost in the euphoria of his pain medication. Claire was finally ready to give her results.

"I found the location of the last call on his record." Claire paused. "The name on the record is Glen Cole."

If the name made any sense to Simon, his face didn't show it. Instead, he nodded his head for her to go on. Claire gave him the address, and a slight smirk of satisfaction moved across his face.

"I knew it," he whispered, barely under his breath.

“Knew what?” Claire glanced up from the laptop, confused.

He glanced at her, as if he had just noticed she was there, and he shook his head. “Never mind. Keep trying to dig up some dirt on them...every little bit helps.”

But his smirk did not go away.

With a slightly indifferent shrug, Claire continued to press away at the keys on the laptop. She searched for whatever she could. She decided to do more thorough searches on the other numbers on the list. Perhaps something else would present itself.

The darkness outside continued to grow as it became later in the evening. Claire’s eyes were blurred from having stared at the screen for so long, and she took a break from them to stare outside.

She did so just in time to see the sign of a local hotel loom before them. Simon slowed the car and pulled into the vast and nearly empty parking lot of the place. There were a few cars here and there, and a blue crotch rocket motorcycle. No people were visible.

A long stretch of her legs would do some good. She shut off the laptop as Simon turned off the car, grabbed the cell phone and opened the door. He stepped out, taking a deep breath of the fresh air, air that was soon polluted by the billowing smoke of his cigarette.

“Get him out of there, and I’ll get us a room.” Without waiting, like always, he took off in the direction of the office. Claire rolled her eyes and opened the back door. She reached in for Davis’ arm. She gave a tug, and the man was set off balance. He fell across the seat.

“Come on, you ass,” Claire muttered and tugged his arm again. Davis grumbled, groaned and sat up.

“When I find that little fuck, I am going to kill him,” he said as he exhaled. He gingerly kept the nearly melted ice pack on his wound.

“Yeah, I’ll believe it when I see it.” Claire shook her head as she looked him over. “You look like shit.”

“Yeah well...” The injured man tried to force himself to grin, but could only manage a grimace, “You’re not looking so hot yourself.”

Claire rolled her eyes, but despite it, she still smiled.

“Come on. Let’s get this shit unpacked before Simon starts bitching.”

As Davis climbed out of the backseat, Claire turned to watch several speeding cars zoom down the highway.

Davis continued his complaining a little more loudly than he probably should have. “That...asshole...”

Claire used her own set of keys to unlock the trunk of the car. Several suitcases and bags filled the space there and she reached for one of them while she answered Davis.

“Which one, Simon or the guy who attacked you?”

“Both,” Davis answered. He balanced himself against the back of the car. He didn’t help lift anything from the trunk. Claire was used to it, but she still glared at him.

“Between that asshole almost trying to kill me and that other asshole threatening to kill me...” Davis said.

“I’m betting you wished you had stayed at home.”

“No shit.”

Simon, just then, stepped out of the office. He stared at the others for a moment and then held up one hand. In it was the key to the room. Claire nodded while Davis narrowed his eyes at Simon.

Simon did not look happy, as usual. His eyes continued to dart around, as if searching for something. Claire tried to ignore him.

They exchanged no more words as Davis took the initiative to grab something from the trunk and follow Simon. Claire followed shortly after she slammed the trunk of the car. She entered. She lugged a huge and heavy suitcase and set it down with a thud.

Davis tossed his luggage onto one bed and threw himself onto the other. He was totally out of it. Simon unzipped the case on the bed. He was silent.

Claire slumped into a chair and watched Simon in silence. Her eyes were tired, and she wanted nothing more than to close them and sleep.

She was going to take a well deserved break and rest her eyes from the strain of using the laptop, if anything.

Simon removed another laptop computer from its case and set it up on the bed. It switched on with an electrical hum and started to boot up.

Claire rubbed her eyes. It was going to be a very, very long night.

For a long while, the only sounds in the room were the clacking of the keys on Simon's computer as he accessed something. It was interrupted by Davis as he groaned in pain.

After a moment, the injured man spoke up. "Do you have to fucking do that?" he asked Simon.

"Yes, I do, actually," Simon answered, sounding annoyed. Simon raised his gaze briefly to Davis. Before he could ask, Simon spoke again.

"I'm posting a few messages to some connections I have. Other hunters I know about, in other parts of the country. I'm posting something so others may be able to point us in the right direction."

"And how is that supposed to help?" Davis sneered. Simon ignored him. Claire started when a loud buzzing sounded from Simon.

His cell phone was ringing.

Chapter Eight

The back wood roads twisted and winded along a dozen different curves and Eric followed every one with dangerous speeds. The tracking radar indicated Marcus was in this area somewhere. But why out here?

It was a question neither Eric nor Michael could answer. Marcus was a city boy, and it was well known that he never strayed too far away from the walls and roads of concrete. It had to be something extraordinary to drag his ass all the way out here.

Marcus had higher aspirations, and he was foolhardy enough to pursue them no matter what. Eric knew without a single doubt this particular occasion had to be one of the more foolish ones.

"Where the hell are we?" the man in the passenger seat asked. Michael looked out the window. His pale eyes followed the never-ending line of trees. "Marcus wouldn't be out here. He's too much of a fucking pussy."

Eric shook his head. Michael was right. Marcus was too much of a chicken to actually do something. He and Davis were alike. They were made for each other. The tracking program beeped a few times.

"He's within a five mile radius," Michael said as he turned to look at the screen. He brought his pale eyebrows together as he studied it.

"Good," Eric answered. "Let's get him and get out of here. I hate this place."

Michael agreed with a nod of his shaggy blonde head. "Yeah, man..."

They drove on in silence for a while longer. Eric's thoughts drifted back to a few nights ago. Marcus had gotten into an argument with

Simon and had left their leader totally livid. A plan had been devised by the mastermind, Marcus, and Simon apparently disapproved.

That still, however, didn't keep Marcus from overstepping lines left and right. Davis was always close behind. It made Eric sick to think of the two of them working together. If there wasn't a mess to begin with, they would create one.

He could just imagine the look on Simon's face if that were to happen. Hell, he probably wouldn't have to imagine. Simon was already pissed.

Eric gave a slight shake of his head once again. He lowered his speed. At any moment now they could come across Marcus' BMW and he didn't want to miss it. He kept an ever vigilant watch for any sign of it.

Michael interrupted his musings. His eyes followed the blip almost constantly. "He's close, about half a mile from our present location."

They had slowed to a stop at a four way intersection. Eric looked at Michael and the young man pointed straight ahead. Eric kept his steady pace as they drew closer to the beeping icon of Marcus. Michael watched the computer screen. Now and again, he lifted his gaze from the screen. Soon, his eyes focused more and more on the outside world.

They had seen only a few houses out this way. Signs of life were few and far between. A light shining from a spotlight up ahead indicated at least one more forlorn country house.

"This has got to be it," Michael said. "Let's pull into the drive."

Eric gave a brief nod. He said nothing and pulled the van into the long driveway. Gravel crunched beneath the heavy tires, and the brakes squealed as they came to a complete stop. The engine cut off, and silence filled vehicle.

With the headlights still on, both men looked over the scene before them. Michael blinked a few times and stared at the black BMW parked in the driveway just in front of them. The headlights gleamed off the slick paint of the car and glared from the chrome bumper.

There was no sign of Marcus. Eric flipped the van's headlights off, and the place was submerged in semi-darkness. An outdoor light cast its

yellow beam, but the surrounding darkness was ominous despite it. Both of the men stepped out of the car, and flashlights went on. The harsh illuminating beam followed Eric's steady hand as he walked forward.

Even with the security spotlight shining light directly onto the house, it was difficult to see much more than shadows and he shifted his beam of light to focus to his right. There was another car parked just in front of Marcus' and both men studied it. It was a white Ford Escort, in good condition. It was empty as well.

Michael's flashlight followed along the grass and the front of the house. The beam of light caught droplets of dew and made them sparkle like so many tiny diamonds. The front of the house was clear. He returned to where Eric stood.

"Doesn't look like anything's here," the blond man reported. Eric just nodded and turned his gaze to the house. They would have to go in.

They both knew it would be foolish calling for Marcus. He probably wouldn't answer, willingly or unwillingly, and it would draw unwanted attention toward them. Some discretion and stealth were heavily needed. Eric shined his light on the other car once more.

Slowly, he began to walk around the side of the cars, along the side of the house and into the back. A set of tire marks imprinted in grass caused Eric to raise an eyebrow momentarily. He moved on behind the house.

More tire markings had been dug into the mud. They left deep impressions where it had sat. It had ruined any resemblance of grass, and was quite noticeable. His eyes followed the trails as it had cut back, and went back along the side of the drive and house. Another car had been here, and it seemed whoever was driving had left in a very big hurry.

But still none of it made sense.

He watched the windows of the place. There were lights on, but he could see nothing else. He thought it over, removed his sidearm from its holster and then motioned Michael to follow him.

The two men walked around the house. They kept their guard up and found the back door. To their surprise, it was unlocked and partially opened. Eric took this as a bad sign and signaled for Michael to be his backup. The young man nodded and waited for his cue. He drew his handgun from its holster and flipped the safety off.

With one solid kick, Eric knocked open the backdoor. A dim yellow light shone in a room just adjacent from him, and he wasn't taking any chances. With his gun drawn in one hand and his flashlight in the other, Eric proceeded into the house.

The yellow light cast ugly shadows upon the walls, and Eric checked the lighted room first before continuing. Michael was not far behind him.

It was in the next room they made the grim discovery. Furniture lay overturned in what appeared to have been a scuffle, and dried blood flaked on the carpet and walls. The body of a blonde female lay lifeless near the door, a pool of congealed blood soaked and dried into the carpet from a massive head wound.

Marcus' body lay several feet from her, in his own pool of blood. Eric took a slow step toward him. Michael stared in shock at the bodies.

"God..." he breathed. He stopped in the doorway, unable to move any farther. He looked as if he would be sick.

Eric said nothing as he crouched down and examined Marcus. The older man's limp body had multiple gunshot wounds, and the angle of the wrist was off. It had been broken. Eric stood to his full height.

Simon wouldn't be happy at all. And he had to be the one to deliver the news. At least they had found him.

"What a mess. I have to call Simon," he said and flipped off his flashlight. He returned it to its place at his belt and removed his cell phone from his pocket. He dialed the number and waited as it began to ring.

* * *

The cool water washed away the sweat and grime from his body and Jason imagined it washed away all of his worries, too. He envisioned the water swirled all his fears and anger down the drain.

Once out of the shower, he dried himself off with the standard white towels that were typical of these little roadside hotels. His anxiety only grew.

He dressed quickly in fresh clean clothes. It took a moment or so to run a comb through the gnarled locks of his hair. Jason faced his reflection and shook his head. His long hair sprayed water droplets across the mirror's face. His eyes were bloodshot, he noticed, and his face held that grim, determined look he usually got when faced with a difficult situation.

He knew there would only be one way to truly get rid of his fears and that was destroying whatever it was causing them. Sooner or later, he would have to face it. They couldn't take running for very long.

When he stepped out of the door, he was greeted with the sight of Rose as she lay on the bed. She dozed quietly. For some reason, it brought a faint smile across his lips. She needed her rest. Even though her wounds had fully healed, he still could sense she was weak and needed her strength. And like a good mate, he would let her sleep. She needed it more than he did.

He walked across the floor of the room. He gathered up some items and articles of clothing and stuffed them into the duffel bag. He stared at her. A few more minutes, he decided, then he would wake her and they would leave.

The light outside the hotel had turned a dark blue-black, and nightfall was well underway. He pulled back the blinds just enough to see out into the parking lot. There were new vehicles in the driveway, and another approaching. He sighed and withdrew himself from the blinds and finished packing.

Rose stirred maybe once or twice the entire time, but Jason was so sure she would awaken prematurely. He tried to keep the noise down.

Once everything was packed and in place, he grabbed the card key from the bedside table.

But he lingered a moment and stared down at her. Her face was pale and her dark hair framed her cheeks while short wisps of it fell across her eyelids. Gently, with the softest touch he could, he brushed those hairs back onto her forehead.

"I'll be back soon, Rose...I promise you." His words barely came out in a whisper. He slipped away from the bedside and out the door. Once outside, he immediately secured the duffel bag into the small compartment of the bike. It took some more punching, like before, but he was able to fit it.

It was only a simple matter of checking out and waking Rose...then they would be well on the way to a safe place.

At least, he hoped.

* * *

There was an intense air in the room, and no one dared to even breathe. Simon paced back and forth. Claire's eyes followed his every movement. He hadn't said two words to Eric. He listened intently to what Eric had to say. Whatever it was, it had to be bad. Simon's face had taken on a tense, clenched-jaw look.

And Claire knew it was best to avoid him. He was pissed. Davis, however, didn't see Claire's logic.

"What is it?" he asked the moment Simon picked up the phone. A few angry glares from both Claire and Simon hadn't shut him up.

Simon threw another poisonous glare directly at Davis. The doped man gave no notice. He leaned back on the pillows of the bed and groaned. His arm was still thrown over his face. It hid his eyes and forehead from view. Claire stared at him a moment, shook her head and turned her attention to Simon.

There was a moment when it seemed Simon would crush the phone within his angered grasp, but instead, he took a deep breath. His nostrils flared as the air exhaled through his nose. He spoke in a low voice.

“Get rid of everything. Burn it down, lose the car. Just...get rid of it. You know where to find us when you’re done with that. And don’t take all night.”

And that was it. The phone call ended. With an annoyed sigh, Simon tossed the device onto the bed. Without warning, he kicked a desk chair and it flew across the room. It hit the wall next to Claire with such force it shattered the wooden legs.

Claire flinched and instinctively covered her face and head from the splintering pieces. Immediately after the chair, or what was left of it, settled to the floor, she was on her feet.

“What the hell is your problem?” she asked, suddenly vehement. She stared at Simon. His eyes seemed to blaze with some deep-seeded fire. She backed off, but still stared at him. She waited for an answer.

“They found him. Marcus.”

“And?” Davis interjected. He sat up on the bed and looked over at Simon. There was a mixed look of annoyance and confusion upon his face.

“He’s dead,” Simon answered.

A wave of shock shot through the room. Claire’s mouth gaped open stupidly, and Davis let out a breath of something that sounded like, “Fuck...”

Simon took a deep breath, exhaled and turned back toward the computer. His anger had already seemed to subside. His fingers moved quickly over the computer keys. Claire finally regained her composure and approached him. She hoped to catch a glimpse of what he was doing.

But his broad shoulders blocked her view. Instead, she inquired, “So...what are we going to do now?” Davis was silent. He opened his pill bottle and took a few more caplets of the pain numbing medication.

Simon hesitated before he answered. He opened his mouth, closed it and continued with his typing. Claire was patient however. She crossed her arms and walked across the floor. She sat on the bed next to Davis and sighed.

"This complicates everything," Simon said. He glanced at Davis with a slight sneer. His voice was angry. "If you and Marcus had listened to what I told you, we wouldn't be in this mess. Just what the fuck was Marcus doing way out there? What was he doing?"

Davis seemed flustered at first for words. Claire looked at him expectantly, as did Simon. A cold sweat had broken out across his forehead. The words finally came out of Davis

"We thought...well...we wanted to do our own investigating and find out what was really going on..."

Simon scoffed and rolled his eyes. Davis went silent. He knew Simon wasn't buying it, not for a second.

"I've had enough shit from both of you. Marcus is dead, they are on the run, and it's all thanks to you and Marcus wanting to play detective." Simon let out something that sounded very much like an annoyed growl and turned his attention away from Davis.

"You're lucky I don't do something to get rid of you," Simon stated. "We never should've picked your sorry ass off the road." He turned to Claire, but he said nothing to her.

Claire was glad for that. She hadn't known Simon for very long, but she knew enough now to avoid his raging temper. Silently, she stood from the bed and returned to her previous seat. She kicked away a piece of splintered wood in her path.

Davis was trying to appeal his situation to Simon.

"It wasn't my fault! It was all his idea! He thought if we cornered them, we could get a lot more answers than just sitting around, waiting for shit to happen...like you were planning on doing..."

"What I was planning?" Simon once more stopped what he was doing and turned his livid gaze onto Davis. His voice became lower, angrier and

darker than Claire had ever heard before. "My plan was flawless, Davis..."

Claire didn't have to see the scared look in Davis' eyes or the pallor that had taken over his features temporarily to know Simon's words had hit hard. He immediately went silent. Simon's voice held an edge, a dangerous quality that caused Claire to shiver.

"My plan...was perfect." Simon chose his words carefully, and spoke them slowly. "My plan was laid out seamlessly and everything was going as I had wanted." He paused a moment, and then turned away.

It was as if something else had demanded his attention and he began to take out folders from the laptop's case, folders that had been hidden inside. Claire did not recognize the black folders, and she could barely make out the small writing on the tabs. She wanted to question him, but Simon had already begun.

"This," he said as he held up one of the files, "was the foundation of my plan. Without these files, we wouldn't have gotten this far. It has all the information we need." He tossed the one in his hand at Claire.

She caught it and raised an eyebrow as she read the outside tab.

"What is this?" She asked.

"Read it. You may learn something."

"The Paranormal Research and Development Institute?" she read aloud. She scanned the papers within. Claire stared at a photograph of a woman she didn't know. She had dark hair, and though the picture was black and white, she could tell her eyes were a light color.

"That," he pointed at the picture in her hand, "is one of our suspects. The PRDI, an institute created to help others with their paranormal gifts and psychic abilities. They accommodate psychics, vampires, werewolves... You get the idea."

Davis sat up and shook his head. He said nothing and gingerly touched the hard swollen lump that had been a long time forming on his forehead. Claire threw a glance at him, then back to Simon.

"Wait a minute...vampires...werewolves...are you fucking serious?" she asked. She stared down at the photograph of the dark-haired

woman. She certainly didn't look like a vampire or a werewolf—not like any Claire had ever seen on television.

Simon narrowed his eyes at her a moment. “Yes, I’m fucking serious. What did you think I was recruiting you for, Claire? Why do you think I needed all this technology? You think I’m just a freelance detective or something?”

Claire found herself at a loss for words. She hadn't really questioned what it was all about, and she felt a wave of stupidity wash over her. How could she have not realized it was something more than that? How could she have not thought to ask? This never would've crossed her mind.

She shook her head. “They don't exist. Creatures like that aren't real. They're in movies, on TV. They write about them in fiction books. They don't exist,” she said.

Simon's lip curled in a wicked sneer. “Oh...they are very much real. I can assure you. They exist, and the ones we are after are werewolves. The female killed Marcus, I'm sure of it. The house they found him at was the house of a good friend of hers... The boyfriend is just an accomplice. He probably sees himself as her protector.” His sneer deepened. “They do things like that.”

It was all too much for Claire. She stared dumbly at Simon. He finished his speech and flipped through another file. Her gaze fell onto the open folder in her lap. She stared at the words. “Werewolf”, “lycanthropy”, “werekin” and many more caught her attention. She shook her head and closed the file. This couldn't be possible.

Her gaze shifted to look at Davis. He stared at her. It was almost as if he knew what she was thinking.

“It may seem fucked up,” he said. “But it's true.”

“How do you know?” Claire asked. She questioned Simon as well. “How do you both know it's true? What if you're wrong?”

Simon peeked over his shoulder at her. His dark eyes seemed to glow for a moment. “I've seen them. I've killed a lot of them. I'm not wrong.”

Claire's hands were clammy and she wiped them on her jeans. She looked over at Davis. He gave a shrug.

"I've never actually seen one—in wolf form, I mean—but I believe Simon and I believed Marcus. If they say they've seen them, then that's good enough for me."

Her breath caught in her throat as she tried to form more words. *Oh God, I'm stuck with a bunch of crazies.*

"What do you plan on doing?" she asked. She feared she already knew the answer

"We're going to interrogate them and kill them once we've gained enough information to track down more of them. The world doesn't need their kind," Simon answered coldly. Claire watched as he loaded a gun. The metal of the bullets glinted in the artificial light of the hotel room, and Claire let out a gasp.

They were silver bullets.

She couldn't think of anything to say. Her mind swam. *These people are crazy...*

Simon loaded the clip finally and cocked his handgun back. It made a loud click in the room and Claire felt her stomach do a flip-flop.

This cannot be happening.

Claire suddenly felt suffocated. She needed air. She stood to her feet and moved toward the door, but she was quickly cut off by Simon's booming voice.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Claire stopped and turned to see the newly loaded gun pointed straight at her. She felt her heart jump within her throat and she swallowed hard. Was he seriously pointing a gun at her?

"I don't have a problem using this, Claire," he warned. Simon's eyes blazed.

He regarded Davis with his next statement as well. "No one leaves this room without permission from me. Got it? We need to be quiet,

unnoticed, unseen. That means staying hidden, as much as possible. Sit down, Claire.”

Claire didn’t argue as she resumed her seat. Only when she sat did Simon remove his lock on her and returned to what he was doing before. He explained further.

“Marcus is dead. He probably deserved it, but that doesn’t change the fact he’s dead.” Simon glanced first at Davis, then at Claire. “And I would like to leave the body count to just one. So don’t fucking go anywhere.”

This was serious, Claire realized, but she still didn’t know what to believe. She looked over at Davis. The young man leaned back on the bed. His arm once again covered his face.

She crossed her arms and silence once again dominated the room. Simon continued with whatever computing he had planned. Davis passed out and she wanted nothing more than to run out of this room, get in the car and get as far away from here as she could.

She knew it would be useless to do so but the longer she stayed here, the more she knew she would die one way or another. This was some dangerous shit, and she had somehow wound up in the middle of it all. She wasn’t sure if she even believed anything.

It wasn’t what she had expected. None of it was. She was scared now, and all she could do was wait to get out, or wait to die.

Chapter Nine

Rose had never been called lazy in her entire life, even when she was a young child. She had always been active, always doing something productive. It was that trait, combined with some PRDI involvement, which had gotten her published, and secured her a job with the magazine office. She was not one to give up on anything.

But, in the light of recent events, it was the thought of giving up that haunted her every thought. And it was laziness that fueled it. Lying upon the warm bed, dozing, she was aware Jason had slipped out of the room and that she was alone. She didn't want to get up. She didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay, to sleep, to dream pleasant dreams and be rid of the nightmare that was her reality.

She wanted to give up on everything.

Rose knew this wasn't the best option, but it would be the easiest. That way, she wouldn't have to face any more death or pain. She opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling of the room. Sleep had fallen away from her, and she was awake. She mused.

Rose knew she couldn't kid herself. Giving up was just not in the nature of a wolf. It was something she could not do.

If she were to give up, where would that leave them? At the mercy of the other hunters who would surely follow. And an almost equally horrible scenario played out in her mind. What would happen then, to all the others like her out there in the world?

It was simply something she could not allow to happen. She made up her mind right then and there as she lay on the hotel bed and stared at

the white ceiling. She was not going to give up on this. This was not the end of everything.

It was only the beginning.

A sudden loud crash alerted her and she sat up in the bed. She turned her head in the direction of the sound. She didn't hear it again, but it had caused her to jump, and that wasn't good. She took a deep breath and shook her head. It was probably the people in the next room. She put the thought out of her mind.

Rose ran one hand through her tangled hair. It was still damp from her shower earlier. She looked toward the window. They needed to get going soon.

She got dressed and took the few steps toward the door, opened it and stepped outside. She left the door partially open and stood there in the doorway. The cool night breeze washed over her sweaty skin, and she was thankful it was at least refreshing.

Briefly, she thought of the noise and wondered what it was, but she let it slide out of her mind again. It was probably nothing important. After all, she was more edgy than usual and little things often made her jump.

There were many scents out here, both familiar and unfamiliar, but Rose did not focus on them. Instead she let out a soft sigh and crossed her arms. There were more important things on her mind.

Leaning against the doorway, Rose waited for Jason to return. She hoped he wouldn't be long. The growing darkness around her lonely self made her nervous.

* * *

The silence in the room had become almost unbearable, and Claire was afraid she was going to crack. The stuffiness of the small cramped room intensified when Simon lit up yet another cigarette. Claire coughed once or twice and finally broke the silence.

Simon gazed at her. One of his dark eyebrows rose and increased the smugness of his expression. "Yes?" He inquired. His voice was arrogant. More cigarette smoke wafted away from him. Claire's eyes watered.

"Can we at least open a window in here? I'm choking," she said as she rose from her seat and started for the window. Simon watched her for a moment and then turned back. He inspected more of the guns he had brought and loaded the clips. He tossed a few empty clips to Davis. They hit him square in the gut and disrupted his stupor.

"Damn it," he cursed, sitting up. He was still disoriented when Simon tossed him a pack of the bullets. They hit him in the chest.

"Stop throwing things at me," Davis whined, but left it at that. He began to load the clips without another word.

Claire pulled back the curtains just enough to get to the window latch. It was stuck, but with a bit of applied force she was able to twist it. The window opened, and a cool breeze hit her full on. She savored the fresh air, but soon it dissipated and the thick smoke continued to fill the room. The window wasn't going to be enough.

"I need to go out, Simon," she stated. Claire edged toward the door. Simon let out something like a laugh and held the gun in one hand as he removed the cigarette that was precariously balanced on his bottom lip with the other.

"Why?"

Claire bit her tongue. She wanted to snap at him, but she knew better. Instead, she sighed. "It's hot in here. It's stuffy, and I can't breathe because of your stupid cigarette smoke."

Davis looked up at her from his place on the bed. His eyes were glazed over, and Claire wondered how many of the pain pills he had taken. She had seen him pop half a bottle of them without as much as a blink. That kind of dose could seriously hurt someone. Her gaze moved back to Simon. He grinned unkindly.

"Simon..." she started. She didn't want to beg. "Just two minutes. That's all I ask. In and out. I won't go anywhere."

Simon's grin faded. He gave in, though reluctantly. "Fine, but stay near the room. If you're not back in two minutes, I'm coming after you."

"Yeah...thanks," Claire muttered under her breath. She undid the lock and stepped outside. The breeze was so much more cool and refreshing out here.

Her footfalls led her to the car. She opened the door and sat in the passenger's seat for a moment. Her gaze followed the highway. She watched as a continuous line of twin lights passed by.

She blinked. The surrounding darkness played tricks on her. Many lengthy shadows spread across the pavement of the parking lot. The lights from the windows along the hotel's walkway cast yellow light against the parked vehicles there. Her eyes continued to roam.

Claire noticed one of the doors was open and a female figure stood there. She leaned against the frame as she stared out across the highway and the distant stars in the sky. Claire couldn't quite place it, but the woman looked familiar.

Claire studied her a little more. She had long dark hair that looked freshly washed and pale skin. She couldn't see the eyes from where she stood. Who was she?

She looked away and focused on the floorboard of the passenger's seat. Her laptop was there. She retrieved it, but didn't flip it on.

She got out of the car and slammed the door. The woman looked in her direction. She offered a faint smile to Claire, but she didn't return it. She had recognized her now.

It was Rose Sullivan, the woman whose photograph was in the files Simon had. Claire recognized the features of her face. The hair was longer, surely, but it was undeniably her.

They were here. The man and woman the others thought to be werewolves were here. And in the next room nonetheless.

Claire's two minutes were up, and she hurried back to the room. Once inside, she set her laptop on the table and said, a bit breathlessly, "They're here."

Simon immediately stopped and turned to glare at her incredulously.

“What do you mean?” His eyes narrowed. The cigarette smoked had multiplied. He had started a fresh one.

Davis dropped what he was doing as well. His bloodshot gaze turned to her. “You mean the fucking werewolves are here?” he asked.

Claire took a deep breath and swallowed hard. Two pairs of expectant eyes watched her and waited for an answer. She nodded.

Simon regarded her with close scrutiny. He didn’t seem to believe her because he gave a slight shrug and glanced back at the computer screen.

“How do you know it’s them?” he asked. He pressed a few keys.

“The picture, from the file... It’s the woman. I swear it.”

He still didn’t seem so sure. He threw a meaningful glance toward Davis, and the young man balked.

“What?” He asked, dumbly.

“Get your ass up and check it out.”

“What? Why me? Why can’t you go out and—” Davis was immediately silenced when he soon found himself staring down the barrel of Simon’s handgun. An arch of an eyebrow, an inclination of his head toward the door and a harsh look was enough to get Davis off his behind.

“Check it out,” Simon repeated. “All right? We’ll see if Claire is right.” He threw a nasty glance toward her. Davis quickly moved toward the door.

Claire stepped back to allow him to pass. She brought her eyebrows together in thought and crossed her arms. “You don’t trust me with anything, do you?”

“I trust no one but myself.” Simon responded. He lowered the gun finally and gave the closest thing he had to a smile, his sick twisted smirk. “And even then I’m not too trusting.”

* * *

The bald man in the office stared at Jason with an air of scrutiny. “What room did you say again?” He asked. He diverted his attention long

enough to tap a few keys on his computer's keyboard. Jason let out an exasperated breath.

"Room 102. We checked in this morning, and we'd like to check out now," he explained for the second time. The man nodded his head and continued looking up the records.

Jason waited impatiently and drummed his fingers along the top of the counter. His gaze traveled over colorful travel brochures without much interest. His thoughts trailed elsewhere. He wished the man would just hurry up.

After what seemed like an hour, the man had retrieved the file and went through the necessary dealings of checking out. Jason's eyes drifted toward the window and stared out at the night. A female figure emerged from a room close to theirs and sat out in a car parked adjacent to it. He looked back.

"That's that. Thanks for staying with us," the man finally said. A smile beamed on his face.

Jason gave his mutter of thanks and left the office. As he exited, he caught a glimpse of the female as she returned to her room. Rose greeted him by stepping out from the open door. She gave a faint smile.

"Are we all set?" she asked and gave a slight tilt of her head. Her drying hair cascaded along her shoulder. Jason gave a brief nod and a faint smile as well.

"Yeah, just finished checking out. You sleep well?"

Rose shrugged. "As well as can be expected." She gave a brief glance toward the next door down. "Our neighbors are a bit noisy."

"Well, that's typical," Jason answered. "The walls in these places are paper thin." He looked behind Rose into the dark hotel room. "You got everything?"

Rose pondered for a moment. "I think so..."

"Good," Jason said. He reached over and took her hand. He smiled. "Let's get out of here."

"Good idea." They began to walk to the bike.

The door next to the room they had previously occupied opened. A familiar man exited the room, and Jason stopped in his tracks. His mouth gaped open.

A similar reaction of shock rested on the face of Davis, who stared at the person responsible for his recent pain. Davis' face blanched, and his mouth opened and shut as if he were trying to say something. His voice didn't work.

A deep rage filled Jason from the very core of his being. It ran heated through his blood. He released his hold on Rose's hand and tightened his fists. He took a step forward, his jaw clenched, with no other thought in his mind but to tear Davis apart.

He was surprised the hunter had survived the impact with the car. Davis wasn't looking too well. Jason took only a bit of satisfaction at the damage he had inflicted. The man stumbled backwards and held out one hand as if to command Jason to stop. He tried to speak again, but once more failed.

"You...bastard," Jason growled under his breath. He neared his intended target.

"Love..." Rose started to say. It was just enough to distract Jason from Davis, and his stare momentarily moved to her. He opened his mouth to say something. It was at that moment Davis found his courage. He scrambled for the hotel room he had just exited.

"Simon! It's them," he shouted. He disappeared inside the room.

Davis was not alone. Jason cursed under his breath and grabbed Rose's arm.

"We have to go! Now!"

Rose did not argue. She didn't need much of an explanation. She ran with Jason and jumped on the back of the bike. Jason started the ignition and gunned the engine. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw the other occupants of the room emerge—the man, the woman she had seen earlier, and another man wielding a pistol.

Hunters.

But there had been a scent that seemed very familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. It reminded her of another time, another place. She didn't have time to dwell on it.

Rose took in a sharp intake of breath and held on tightly to Jason. The tires of the crotch rocket spun and squealed as Jason brought them roughly out of their parking space.

Rose expected a blast, expected the bullets from the gun to pierce her skin, but nothing happened. They were too far out of range. She didn't dare look back.

Chapter Ten

Claire stood in the doorway just behind Simon, arms crossed over her chest. The two were gone. She watched the bike's tail lights disappear from view. Something akin to a small smile tugged at her lips. One sudden look from Simon was enough to kill any thought she had of laughing. She became solemn.

Simon's fist was clenched at his side. His grip tightened around the pistol. He stared off in the direction they had gone, just staring. Claire could feel the tension in the air, and she stepped back. Her backside pressed against the door.

"Why didn't you fire at them?" Davis asked, his voice agitated. The young man cowered behind Simon. He looked up at the taller man. "They were right there!"

"Would've caused too much of a scene. Too many people..." Simon answered. His voice was uncharacteristically monotonous. "Besides, I don't want those two dead just yet."

Davis looked confused, but he knew better now than to question. He took a few steps back, eased past Claire and back into the room.

"Are we going after them now? Follow them in the car?"

Simon was silent for a moment, before he turned to face her. His eyes burned with an unnatural gleam. Claire swallowed.

"No," he finally answered. "No, we wait for Michael and Eric." He looked down at the gun in his hand. A smirk warped his face. "I know where they are going."

* * *

“Who the fuck was that?” Rose yelled over the roar of the engine and the wind that sped by them. Her arms were tightly secured around Jason’s waist, but she loosened them just enough so she could lean close to his ear.

Jason pretended not to hear her. His knuckles had gone white under the intense pressure he had against the accelerator of his bike. It didn't look like he was going to slow down any time soon.

Rose tried again to grab his attention again. “Jason...”

Once more, she was met with silence. She sighed and regained her grip on him. The cold wind tore at her skin, and she lowered her head against his back to shield herself from its chilling bite.

She knew she really didn’t have to ask. They had to be hunters. Once or twice so far in their flight she had looked over her shoulder. Headlights glared at her from way behind them and prevented her from really identifying any vehicle behind them. There was no way to know for sure if they were being followed. Jason was driving as if they were, and Rose tightened her grip yet again and Jason passed a line of cars moving too slowly for him. He returned to the correct lane a moment before a car was due to hit them.

Rose held back a startled cry as the headlights blinded her a moment and the car’s horn blared. Jason didn’t slow down. Her fingers were ached from the tight grip she had on him. His recklessness was going to get them killed. She had to intervene. This was insane.

“Love, stop the bike!” she yelled over the rush of the wind. A strand of her hair whipped across her face. It stung with its propelled force. She brushed the annoying strand away from her eyes. “Pull over!”

Jason, once more, did not appear to hear her. She took a deep breath. He was really starting to frighten her. She tried again and hoped this time it wouldn’t be in vain.

“Pull the bike over, Jason. You’re scaring me!” she screamed.

This time, her words hit him and he veered off the side of the road. Gravel kicked up from the shoulder, and he hit the brakes. Rose lurched forward with a hard force against Jason's back.

"What? What is it, Rose?" Jason asked. There was a tone to his voice Rose had never heard before. It was dark and unpleasant. It made a cold shiver snake down her back.

"Jason..." she said. She touched his shoulder. His muscles were tense beneath his leather jacket, and Rose withdrew. "Just calm down, please..."

"They were right there, for God knows how long..." He did not look over his shoulder at her, but kept his gaze forward. Tail lights vanished down the highway. "They were right there, waiting for us. We were so close to being killed. We were caught off guard. I wasn't prepared..." Jason's words trailed off, and he gave a huge sigh.

He was right.

They had come so very close to meeting their end, and they hadn't even realized it until it was right in front of them. They were both unprepared and they had both ignored the most key element to their survival. Awareness.

"Jason..." she started to say, but stopped, uncertain what words to use. She knew just what would happen to him if he got too angry. A rage shift would occur, and Jason would snap. None of them could really control the strength and power the wolf gained when unleashed in anger. She knew she couldn't.

All she could do was try to calm him down. Once Jason became so, the wolf would quiet down and the shift would be completely bypassed.

"We can't stay here long." Jason revved the engine, and Rose secured her arms around him again. He was right yet again.

"I'll take a few back roads I know, we'll lose them." His voice rose over the growl of the engine. He glanced back at her. A change came over Jason's face for a brief moment. His features softened.

"I'm sorry I scared you. I'll try not to let it happen again," he said "But no guarantees."

Rose said nothing, and rested her head against his back once more. Gravel flew from the back tire of the Honda Interceptor as he spun out from the shoulder and back onto the road. He zipped in between two cars and into the middle lane.

It was going to be a long ride. She tightened her eyes tightly and adjusted her hold on her mate. Too many thoughts filled her mind, and each one was more horrible than the last.

But a single ray of hope shone through the clouds of despair covering her. It was the only thing that was keeping her going...

Somewhere out there, Glen was waiting with them at the safe place. And there, they could rest and wait until the whole thing settled down. The safe place...

It sounded too good to be true. Everything had gone to shit in a matter of a day or so. There were no safe places any more for them, for her. She had ruined that. After all, she had killed a man, a hunter.

There were no safe places for them any more.

* * *

"Let's get the fuck out of here!"

Michael raised his voice to overcome the sound of cracking fire and snapping lumber. The blaze was well underway, and he stood near the door. He waited for Eric.

"Hang on!" Eric yelled. He put the finishing touches on the dead bodies. They had piled the dead body of the woman and Marcus together in the center of the room. Dousing them with gasoline, he stepped back to watch the fire quickly reach the flammable liquid and ignite. The house was now a raging inferno. There wouldn't be much left by the time the fire was discovered.

Michael darted out of the house. He coughed from the smoke as he exited. Eric was close behind him. He ducked down to avoid hitting his head against a flaming beam. He returned to the van as Michael took the BMW.

The next part of the plan wasn't going to be too easy. They had to lose the BMW and Eric's initial idea was to burn it with the house, but that idea was quickly scrapped. It would be identified sooner or later, and Eric knew Simon would want it to be much later.

Instead, the BMW was going to end up in the bottom of a lake, and Eric knew just the right one. It would be only a slight detour. He lead the way out of the driveway and back down the narrow winding road, as smoke rose into the sky. The horizon behind them was as bright as a sunrise. Red spilled across the earth and sky.

The lake was only a few miles from the house. He had spotted it from the road. They pulled off the road and flipped off the headlights in order to not be detected by any locals. Michael put the BMW in neutral on the edge of the lake, stepped out, and together, he and Eric pushed it into the water.

It was deep enough to sink the fancy vehicle, and they both stood to watch as the water covered the roof of the car. Soon, the black car once belonging to Marcus was at the bottom of the lake.

It had been easier than they had thought.

Without exchanging words, the two men climbed into the van. Michael stared out the window and studied the now serene looking lake. A smile spread over his soot and grim covered face.

"Too bad we couldn't have kept that BMW. I could've done things with that..." he said, with a shake his head. Eric gave a slight scoff and reached for his cell phone.

"With what time? Simon never gives us a day off."

Michael glanced over and shrugged. "Well, whenever. Shame to see it go." He fell silent. Eric dialed the number.

Driving with one hand, the other holding the phone to his ear, Eric careened dangerously down the country roads. There was the necessary few seconds before the phone picked up.

"Simon. We got rid of everything." There was a pause. Michael couldn't hear what was being said, but he inclined his head and attention toward Eric just the same.

Eric's eyebrows went up in an obvious look of surprise. "Really..." he said. It was more of a statement than a question.

"What?" Michael asked, but was silenced with a harsh look from Eric. Eric rarely showed surprise or shock of any kind. This had to be big.

He waited. Eric's eyes never left the road, and soon, they were back on the main highway. They headed toward where Simon had told them to meet.

"Yeah," Eric said. "We're on our way now. We'll be there soon." He shut off the phone. He sighed as he tossed it into the console compartment. "Damn it."

"What is it? What happened?" Michael asked once more. He held an eager look to his young face. Eric regarded him with a very cold gaze.

"The wolves were there at the same hotel, and no one realized it until it was too late. They got away."

Michael blinked a few times, in disbelief. "They were right there...and they got away?" He let out a chuckle. "Simon won't be able to live this one down." He grinned.

"Simon is *pissed*," Eric said. Michael's grin faded. "I'd avoid trying to kid around with him for a very long time."

"Yeah. No different than any other day, right? So, why haven't they gone after them?"

Eric shook his head. "I don't know. Simon didn't say. He just told us to get our asses in gear and meet them there."

Michael fell silent briefly. He watched the headlights of passing cars grow brighter as they neared and disappeared behind them. "Why do I have this bad feeling we may have gotten in over our heads?"

It was Eric's turn to be silent. He concentrated on the road, but he mulled over the question as well. He had his orders, and he was loyal to Simon. That man had saved him once before and now he was indebted to him. But that was something he never mentioned. The point was he trusted him.

But he too felt they had gone too far. What was going to happen to them next? Where was this road going to take them? He shook his head and finally answered his companion.

“Because maybe it’s true... Maybe we have gone too far.”

“But Simon—” Michael interjected.

“I don’t question him.”

Silence once again filled the cab of the van. It was an uncomfortable silence punctuated with that nagging idea in both men’s minds. There was more to this than either of them had initially realized. It was something more than just trying to apprehend suspects, even preternatural ones, and bring them to justice. Eric couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

But soon, he knew he would have to find out what this was really all about.

Chapter Eleven

The clock on the wall told the hour to be half past ten. Its annoying ticking had gradually increased in volume all night and it was just the thing to cause Simon to snap. He had been on the verge of it all day.

Things had gone from bad to worse in a matter of a few hours. Marcus was dead, the wolves were on the run, and Simon was forced to wait.

But waiting was something he could handle

However, Simon, for perhaps the first time ever, had to recognize his defeat. Instead of flying off the handle, he kept his cool, thankful he had self-control enough for that. He wasn't sure just how long it would last though.

He lit up yet another cigarette and breathed in the acrid smoke. The blue-grey haze circled around him as he refocused his attention on the screen before him. No one had responded to his messages yet. That was upsetting as well, but Simon held it within. He exhaled a deep breath and gave a grim shake of his head. Things had better start turning around.

There had been too many setbacks and too many rules disobeyed, and he felt much farther from his goal than when they first started. They were taking one step forward and two steps back each time something presented itself.

But no matter. He knew where they were going, and he would be there soon enough to meet up with them. This was the only thing that really kept him going. He knew they were there, in the room beside them.

He recognized the bike, among other things. He didn't want to kill them, yet. He had other plans in mind.

A smile moved over his face at the thought of encountering them. It would be perhaps the single most satisfying experience in his life to date, but he was sure many more would follow. Many, many more...

How long ago had it been? Years, months... Time all blended together, and he was not certain just when he had begun concocting this plan. But he had a plan, and it was flawless. It was going to work. Despite the mess Marcus and Davis had created, Simon was confident in that. He would just have to...work around things.

A sigh from behind him momentarily brought him out of his thoughts, and he looked behind him. Claire was seated there, her legs crossed over one another in the chair, her back hunched. Her hands held her forehead. She appeared deep in concentration, or frustrated.

Simon ignored her. She hadn't done anything except fund his adventure, and the technology provided had been sufficient. Now, she was a constant source of nagging. He didn't really need her any more but it wasn't like he could just let her go...

So, here Claire remained, and Simon kept a vigilant watch on her. She would be the one who would cause the most trouble, he knew. Davis was too stupid to do anything else.

Having thought of Davis, Simon looked over toward the bed where he had passed out. The man was sprawled out, bottle of pain killers clutched loosely in one hand. Simon gave a slight sneer.

Mistakes had been made. They wouldn't happen again.

Davis would have to go. He had fucked up enough. Simon would think of the proper way to dispose of him later. All he could do right now was to wait for Michael and Eric to arrive.

Simon shifted his position where he sat on the bed and stretched out one leg. His arm rested on his knee, cigarette precariously balanced between two fingers. He stared out at the window, waiting for any headlights to pull into the drive. His eyes focused on nothing and he took another drag from his cigarette.

His thoughts began to drift away once again, to a different time, and a different place...back to when things had been simpler.

* * *

The Paranormal Research and Development Institute's main building was, for the most part, dark the night he went there. A few solitary lights burned in a few of the upstairs rooms, but Simon didn't concern himself with them. What he wanted was on the ground level.

Stealthily, Simon made his way across the lawn. The PRDI was behind the times. The place didn't have a very high-tech security, and he knew getting in would be a cinch. Getting out without being noticed would be the hard part. Clad all in black, a backpack firmly fit across his shoulders, he easily blended into the shadows and moved quickly around the back of the building.

A ground level window was his entrance point, and lucky for him, the window was unlocked. Perhaps a student had unlocked it earlier in the day, to open it for some fresh air, but had forgotten to lock it back when it was shut, or perhaps the lock was faulty. Simon could think of a hundred scenarios, but it didn't matter.

The window's opening was just large enough for him to slide within. Once he was in the dark room, he cautiously shut the window. He observed his surroundings, making out the shapes of furniture and discerning just what, if anything, was lurking in the shadows. His eyes adjusted quickly.

Simon used caution to move through this room and found the door he was looking for. The "Restricted" sign on the door caught the light that filtered in through the window and glinted brightly. And just as he had figured, it was locked.

It was a simple matter of removing the lock picking kit from his pack and fiddling with the lock. After all, Simon knew how to get from one place to another, even when the place seemed virtually impenetrable.

It was what made him such a good hunter.

He was here for the files. It was common knowledge that the PRDI kept files on many known werewolves and other supernatural creatures, and kept them fairly up-to-date. The files included a detailed history of the subject, phone numbers, and last known residential addresses. It was exactly what Simon had been looking for.

He cursed himself for not thinking of this option sooner, but that didn't matter now. What mattered was he was here, and he had a task to do.

The filing system was rather complex, Simon soon found out. They were not categorized by species or affiliation, as Simon had expected, nor were they classified by alphabetical order. They were classified by dates.

Simon cursed under his breath at this discovery and held himself back from tearing all the files into confetti. Instead, he took a deep breath and began sifting through the files, starting with the most recent.

It was a few files later before he finally came to a few that contained werewolves as the subject. That's just what he wanted. These folders were set aside, ready to be taken back with him once he had finished his search here.

He knew the PRDI would become suspicious of the missing files, but Simon didn't care. By the time they found out, he would have all the information he needed. He smirked to himself at the thought.

He continued his search in a better mood. After his initial findings, he ran into a dead end. There was nothing else there. Fervently, he tore through the files. He removed one, only to have its contents spill upon the floor.

Holding back another curse, he bent to pick up the spilled papers and photographs and found himself staring at a picture of a stunning figure. He blinked once or twice, transfixed for a moment by the woman whose photograph he was looking at.

Immediately, he glanced through her papers. He had to know who she was. There was something about her. Written on the very first page of her file was the topic he had been searching for all night.

Werewolf.

He slowly replaced the information back into the folder and stared at the smiling woman in the photograph. Already a plan formulated in his mind, and a grin spread across his face.

Forget the usual hunt. This was going to be something more. Something he could toy with for a while, something to test his skills with. It would be the hunt of a lifetime. It was just what he was looking for.

And Simon knew for sure he would deeply enjoy it.

The folders he had found so far were placed in his pack, and he was ready to go. Forget these other werewolves. There would be time enough later to find them. This was a once in a lifetime event.

And he wasn't going to pass it up.

He retraced his steps expertly, closed and relocked the door, and exited through the same window. He left nothing to show he had been there. And once he was away from the Paranormal Research and Development Institute, he let out a small chuckle.

"Well, Rose Sullivan..." He spoke softly to himself. "I don't know where or who you are, but I am going to find you. You can count on that."

* * *

The file sat next to him on the bed, and Simon realized he was looking through it with a sense of nostalgia. Quickly, he closed the file and moved to turn back to the computer. Claire sat upright and watched him.

Her face was more pale than usual. Her lips were nearly white. Simon refrained from smiling cruelly. Claire had no idea what was truly going on. No one really did.

She was ready to open her mouth and speak, but she must've thought better of it because she turned her head away and glanced toward the window. Simon followed her gaze and noted a pair of headlights gleaming in the parking lot.

"That had better be Eric," he growled and stood up from his seat on the bed. He made his way to the window and peered out of the blinds. The familiar white van pulled into a parking place beside their car.

"Is it them?" Claire spoke up finally. She lifted herself a few inches off her seat and strained to get a view.

"Yeah, it's them." Simon threw a contemptuous glance over at Davis and rolled his eyes.

"Can you believe this dumbass?" he asked as he looked over to Claire. He walked the few steps toward the other side of the room, leaned close to Davis' face and yelled. "Wake up, asshole!"

With a sudden jerk, Davis sat upright. His hands immediately went for his head. He grasped it between his palms and moaned loudly.

"Fuck! Simon, what the fuck?" He tightened his eyes shut and grimaced in pain.

"Get your ass up. Eric and Michael are here," Simon instructed. He reached and took the pill bottle that had dropped onto the bed. "And take it easy with these. I want you at least coherent enough to understand me." He pelted the bottle at Davis, and it bounced off the swollen lump at the back of his head.

"Ow!" Davis exclaimed. He doubled over on the bed and grabbed his precious medication. "Don't be such a dick."

"Fuck you." Simon cast one last glare at Davis as he walked toward the door. He threw it open. Eric and Michael both stood by the van. Smoke curled from the cigarette in Eric's hand.

"Hey, Simon." Michael was the first to greet their leader. Simon gave him a harsh look, and he fell silent.

"Don't 'hey' me. Get your sorry ass in there and help them with the stuff. I want to be out of here in ten minutes."

Eric raised one dark eyebrow at Simon as Michael quickly hurried off to help, only too eager to comply to avoid the wrath of Simon. Claire stood in the doorway and watched with her arms crossed.

"Bad night?" Eric said with just a hint of mirth evident in his voice.

“Oh don’t you fucking start acting cute, too. I have enough of that shit from Davis.” Simon roughly opened the sliding door of the van and climbed inside. An array of technical junk lined the vans walls and the seats. Annoyed, Simon tossed stuff aside.

“Where is that sniveling scumbag?” Eric asked, drawing on his cigarette.

“Inside, high on pain meds. Where else do you think he would be?”

Eric gave a short laugh. “Right...”

Michael’s voice interrupted the conversation. “Simon! Simon!”

Simon growled under his breath. “What is it now?” he muttered to himself as he climbed out of the van. He walked around to the front, to see Michael standing in the door to the room.

“What?”

“You’ve got a message,” Michael reported. He lugged one of the heavy suitcases out to the van. “You better check it out.”

“About damn time,” Simon answered in a low voice. He made his way back inside the hotel room. Eric followed not too far behind and crushed his cigarette on the sidewalk with the toe of his boot. He paused in the doorway.

Simon was already at the computer. He sat and peered down at the flashing screen. Davis was still on the bed, sitting instead of lying down. He rubbed the back of his head. His hateful gaze went unnoticed by Simon.

Claire chose to ignore the proceedings and took her time replacing things in the other suitcase. The folders from the PRDI went into a special compartment and she planned on getting a closer look at them later. Maybe she could anticipate Simon’s next move. She highly doubted it, but she wasn’t without hope.

“What the hell happened to you?” Michael asked Davis. The injured man’s hateful stare left Simon and focused now on Michael. His expression was sour, lips curled into a frown.

“That’s none of your fucking business.”

“He had a run in with a werewolf,” Eric said from his place in the doorway. One beefy hand rested on the frame, and his massive body blocked all exit to the outside.

Michael let out a laugh. “You’re a pussy.”

Just as Simon had ordered, he had brought the first aid kit. It was already open upon the bed and Michael gathered the necessary items to treat Davis’ many gashes.

“Fuck you, man. Just...fuck you.” Davis glowered. He could think of nothing really good to retort with.

Michael laughed more, even as he began doctoring the place on Davis’ forehead. The man winced loudly as the antiseptic swab stung. He shoved Michael’s arm and hand away from him.

“Leave me the fuck alone, you asshole.”

“Take it easy, man. I’m just trying to help.” Michael made a move with his arm once more, and Davis once again pushed him away.

“I said leave me the fuck alone!” He shouted this time, his voice considerably louder. It cracked under the strain.

“Hey!” Simon interrupted. His eyes burned with an untamed fury as he stared at Davis. “I suggest you shut your fucking mouth, before I do it for you.”

Eric, in the doorway, only chuckled.

“Fuck you, Simon. Fuck you and your fucking plan,” Davis muttered. But it was just loud enough for Simon to hear. What happened next happened in only a matter of a few seconds. Claire took a few steps toward the door, a foreboding feeling prompting her to make her exit. She stood next to Eric, who had moved from the doorframe and had taken a couple more steps inside. Simon lunged forward, across the room at a very quick rate and grabbed Davis by the throat. Michael fell over when Simon brushed past him. Medical bandages and packets of ointment spilled onto the floor.

Simon's fingers tightened around Davis' throat. The young man's eyes bulged widely in fear, and he had lost control of his bladder. Urine now stained the front of his pants.

"What did you say?" Simon asked in a low voice.

Davis tried to speak, but his voice was blocked. He couldn't breathe. His hands wrapped around Simon's wrist and arm and tried to pry him away. He felt like he was going to pass out.

There really wasn't much of a struggle.

Horried, Claire backed up against the wall and watched with wide eyes. Eric took point and stepped forward in order to break Simon's grip from Davis. Michael remained where he was. He could only stare

"Simon, just let him go. He's not worth it," Eric told him. Simon made a frustrated sound.

"But he's cost me everything so far! He's nothing more than a cockroach. I could crush him right here and now." He spoke through clenched teeth. Davis teetered on the edge of consciousness.

"There's still time to work things out. Just let him go. He's not worth it," Eric implored.

Claire wasn't sure whether it was Eric's words, or if it was Simon's own reasoning, but he finally let go. He shoved Davis back, and the man was sprawled across the bed once more. He began coughing loudly.

"Don't ever...say that about me again." Simon gave his warning. His dark eyes moved over everyone in the room in turn, and he let out a deep breath. He began again as if nothing had happened.

"The message was from Sean. He's ready to meet us whenever we're ready to head out, but he doesn't know the location."

"And where exactly is this location?" Claire spoke up finally. She shivered when Simon's gaze fell on her. He appeared thoughtful for the moment.

"It's an old PRDI place. They call them safe houses, but this particular one hasn't been used in quite some time," Simon explained. "They shut it down after they ran out of funding to keep it up." He shut

the laptop off and closed it. He began to put it back in his bag. Michael cleaned up the medical supplies.

“How do you know that’s where they are heading?” Eric asked the question that had just popped into Claire’s mind. Expectant eyes turned to Simon. He sighed, annoyed at this interrogation.

“The phone number of the person last called on the boyfriend’s cell phone was her cousin. He works with the PRDI and lives not too far from the safe house. It would be the closest place, and the one they think to be the safest. They will go there.”

Though the answer satisfied the question, it still didn’t explain to Claire just how he knew it. Was all this information in those files? She would have to check into that.

Instead of speaking her suspicions out loud, she simply nodded in understanding and headed out the door. The suitcase she carried went into the back of the van, and she climbed in. She found a seat near the back and prepared her laptop.

Eric remained in the room with Simon and Michael. Davis had already made himself scarce and had joined Claire in the van. It was probably for the best.

“So, we’re taking them by surprise?” Eric lifted one eyebrow.

Simon shrugged. “Basically.”

His attention turned to Michael. “I need you to take the car and head to where Sean and the others are located. I need you to take them to this address.” He handed Michael a piece of paper with an address scribbled on it.

“Got it,” Michael answered. He furrowed his eyebrows together for a moment. “Wouldn’t it be easier to call them on the phone and tell them, instead of me driving all those miles?”

Simon shook his head. “From now on, we use no phones. We don’t know if they are tracking us, and we don’t want any potential foul-ups like before.” He glanced toward the van where Davis was.

“No phones.” He turned his eyes to Michael. “Besides, someone has to get rid of the car.”

Simon tossed the keys at Michael, who caught them with a grin.

“I’m giving you eight hours. That should be plenty of time to get to Sean’s, and back to the rendezvous. Is that clear?”

“Crystal.”

“Good, now get your ass out of my sight.”

Michael disappeared out of the room. A few moments later, the car’s engine started, the headlights lit up, and he backed out of the parking place. Soon, he was on the road, heading the opposite direction than the ones the wolves had taken. Simon turned his gaze upon Eric.

“Why can’t things be simple anymore?” he asked, mostly to himself.

Eric gave a slight chuckle. “Couldn’t tell you, boss. No one has any respect any more. No one understands what we are trying to do.”

A smile spread across Simon’s face at Eric’s words. That was true. No one really understood what they were trying to do, much less what he was trying to do, secretly. He preferred to keep it that way.

Things always had a way of working out for him, though. He wasn’t too worried about that. After all, what were a few screw ups when the big picture was just within his grasp?

Chapter Twelve

Jason fidgeted. It was a nervous habit they both possessed, but for one reason or another, it was more apparent in him tonight. He just couldn't sit still.

Every five minutes or so, or whenever the little bell would chime as another customer entered the tiny diner, he would turn his head. His eyes followed every person who came in, every person who walked by, and everyone who gave them a suspicious glance. Rose was becoming more tense than she already felt.

And it had been her idea to stop here. Her arms had been aching from holding onto him for so long, her face felt numb with cold, and her stomach was gurgling loudly. She was hungry.

She allowed herself to thaw out under the warm lights and heat of the diner. Jason did not focus on his menu, his eyes constantly on someone.

"Love, stop being so obvious," Rose finally whispered to him. "People are going to think we're up to something with your eyes wandering all over the place. We don't want that."

Jason ran a hand over the top of his head and smoothed down strands of hair that had flown loose.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I just...don't want to make the same mistake again."

He lowered his eyes down to the table and toyed with the corner of a napkin. His face was grim and a line of worry had already set between his eyebrows. Rose attempted a smile, and took his hand from across the table. It ceased his fidgeting fingers.

“Love...” she said as she leaned across the table. She lowered her voice. “We’ll be fine.” She couldn’t believe the words coming out of her mouth. Was she, Rose Sullivan, actually suggesting they weren’t in danger any more? Or was she just trying to reassure him with a false sense of hope? She prayed it wasn’t the latter.

She peered into his eyes. Those normally bright blue orbs had taken on a sullen grey shade, and red lined the whites of his eyes. He couldn’t lie about being tired. This rest was just what they needed.

Jason sighed and slid his hand out from under hers. He didn’t say anything, and a silence grew between them. Neither knew what to say.

The scent of fresh bacon wafted from the kitchen across the room, and Rose’s mouth began to water. Even Jason couldn’t disagree with a good meal. After all, they hadn’t eaten in nearly twenty-four hours, and they needed to keep their strength up. Just a quick bite, then a bathroom break and they’d be on their way again.

Jason inclined his head slightly toward the door as another patron entered. He studied the young man, but finding him not to be one of the individuals he feared would enter, he allowed his attention to direct itself elsewhere. Rose watched him, concerned.

She wanted so desperately to say something to him, to get him out of this mind set, but she could think of nothing. She remained silent as she glanced down at the menu and scanned the items. It seemed to be the right cue for the waitress who arrived a mere second later.

“Hi, my name’s Rachel, and I’ll be your server today. What can I get ya’ll?” the brunette drawled. She poised her pen on her notepad. Her lips smacked together as she chomped on a piece of chewing gum.

Rose did a quick glance over the menu, trying to decide quickly. “Um...”

Jason went ahead with his order. “I’ll take the country breakfast, eggs over easy, bacon. Coffee.” That was all there was to it.

“All right, hon.” Rachel beamed and scribbled down. “And you, darling?” she asked. Her attention turned to Rose.

"Same, but I want the eggs scrambled and I want orange juice instead of coffee."

Rachel nodded and took the menus. "All right. Be right back with your drinks." And she was off to wait on another table. Once the waitress was out of earshot, Rose sighed.

"Love, please just snap out of this," she pleaded. Jason appeared to not hear her. He studied the dessert menu on the table before him. Rose gently moved it away from him so he was forced to look at her.

"Please...just listen to me. Things are bad, I know this. You know this. But it's not the end. We're going to be fine. Once we get to where Glen is, everything will be fine."

Jason studied her face. He moistened his lips, apparently going over what he wished to say in his mind.

"Who are you trying to reassure? Me, or yourself, Rose?"

Rose let out a breath and lowered her eyes. She studied her hands, at the long fingernails, the slender fingers, and allowed them to become a blur to her vision. She wasn't sure just what to say.

Thankfully, she was delayed in responding anyway when Rachel appeared with their drinks. She placed them on the table, smiled, and once more walked away. Jason watched until she was gone.

"Well?" Jason prompted, awaiting Rose's response.

"I guess..." Rose began, and then paused. Her eyes lifted and stared at him from across the table. He added cream and sugar to his coffee, but his eyes were intent upon her. The severe look on his face remained, and his eyes had become somehow hardened. It almost scared her.

"I guess," she began once more, "I guess I'm trying to reassure myself." Her voice was hardly a whisper. "I mean...I'm the cause of all this. I never wanted this to happen. Now we're on the run."

A familiar stinging feeling began in her eyes and nose, and the urge to cry became overwhelming. She was determined not to let it happen this time.

Jason paused in the stirring of his coffee and stared at her. He reached out one hand and clasped hers.

"I don't want to hear that from you ever again. Do you understand, Rose? It is not your fault, none of this is. It's their fault. Their views on us are wrong, love. They don't know what they are doing. They are sick and twisted."

Rose sniffled and wiped at her eye, where a single tear had been threatening to fall.

"I guess you're right," she finally admitted. She took a sip of her juice.

"There's no guessing, love. You know I'm right."

"Yeah..."

He smiled just a bit at Rose. He glanced behind her and Rose turned her head. The waitress was heading their way, carrying a tray laden with food.

"Let's put these depressing thoughts out of our head and try to enjoy our food. What do you say?"

Rose had to admit it was the best idea she had heard in ages.

Jason had fully enjoyed his meal. While he was always stereotypical in "wolfing" down his food, he had savored it none the less. Rose was still busy with her own plate when he excused himself and went to the restroom.

Instead of disappearing into the men's room, he hung a right and entered the hall where the diner's payphones were located. He inserted the necessary quarters and made his call.

He leaned against the wall, out of view from Rose and from most patrons of the place, and held the phone up to his ear. He dialed the number and waited as the phone began to ring. His heart was pounding within his chest.

"Hello?"

"Glen. It's Jason—"

"What the fuck are you doing calling me?"

"I'm not using the cell," Jason explained. He kept his eyes open for anyone walking into the diner, or directly past him. He spoke in a hushed tone. "I'm using the payphone at some diner."

"Oh," Glen answered. "What's going on?" His concern was evident in his tone.

"We are in more deep shit. The hunters were following us. They were at the same motel we were, and we barely got away from them."

"Shit. Did they follow you again?"

Jason could hear voices in the background, but he didn't ask. He sighed.

"I don't think so."

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit, *shit!*" Glen cursed into his phone. He exhaled a deep breath and composed himself. "Listen to me carefully, Jason: don't hang around for too long. Take back roads, take the long way around, do anything to cover your tracks and lose them. Don't lead them here."

"One step ahead of you there, man," Jason answered. He had already taken an alternate route, and while they were farther from their destination than he had originally planned, the hunters were not on the same path. He had guessed the hunters would stick to the most direct route, but he wasn't going to count on that.

"Good. Also, I'm not sure what technology they have, so check your bike for tracking devices. That would be a good way to find you guys."

Jason hadn't thought of that before. "Okay. I'll do that."

"You better go. I'll give you some extra time to get here...but you better get here soon. Be careful, Jason."

"Don't worry about us. We'll be there."

Jason hung the phone up, and the payphone collected the money he had deposited. With a new vigor, he returned to the table.

"We gotta go."

Rose looked up at him, confused for a moment. "What, now?" She, luckily, had just finished her meal and now stared up at him with eyebrows knotted together.

"Yes, now."

Rose didn't argue and immediately got to her feet. Jason was already removing his wallet and taking out the necessary cash. He tossed it on the table. It would be enough to cover the cost of the meal and leave a generous tip.

They left the diner in a hurry. Rose had to jog to catch up with him at his quick pace, throwing on her jacket as she did so.

"Why are we leaving so quickly?" A look of fear crossed her face. "Are they here?"

"No," Jason answered simply. "But if we stay here any longer, they could be." He was already on the bike, the engine running. He gunned it loudly a few times. Rose climbed on behind him and wrapped her arms around him tightly.

As always, Jason tore out of the parking lot with style. A few heads turned to watch them depart, and Rose hid her face against Jason's back. Her hair flew wildly about.

The highway at this time of the early morning was nearly empty. A few cars passed now and again, and Jason took full advantage of the empty road. He accelerated and pushed the motorcycle to its limit.

The dangerous speeds were almost enough to make Rose cry out in fright, but it was also exhilarating. She held on even tighter, and closed her eyes from the sting of the wind. The chill in the night air penetrated her skin, lightly dampening it with the air's moisture.

As they drove on, Rose fell into usual musings. Were they doing the right thing? A fear quaked at her very core. What if the hunters caught them in the end? What would happen then?

So many possible scenarios played in her mind, each one more horrible than the last. Scenes of torture, death and other unspeakable acts dominated her rationality. Now she was just being paranoid.

Rose let out a shuddering breath and adjusted her hold on Jason. She could almost imagine bruises lining his waist from her tight grip on him, but he never complained. She wasn't about to let go, even if he did.

The moisture in the air grew heavier, and the scent of it became strong. The weather was about to change, and Rose feared a downfall of stinging rain wasn't too far away. She lowered her head against the rough surface of Jason's leather clad back.

Drowsiness soon overcame her, as it usually did when she rode with him. She fought the sleepiness, but a yawn still broke through her defenses. She stifled it by clenching her jaw.

No, she couldn't fall asleep now, not while she was precariously perched on the back of a speeding motorcycle. She wasn't stupid. But she was tired. And although Rose fought the drowsy feeling that overcame her, her eyelids still became heavy and began to droop.

Before she sank into slumber, her fingers tightened in the folds of Jason's shirt as her last defense.

Chapter Thirteen

It was a scent that first drew her back into her right frame of thinking. The scent was faint, but musky and very familiar. The scent of a male, combined with the distinct perfume that distinguished the werekin from any other creature. Commercial cologne lingered on the air.

She took a deep sniff, and the smell flooded her nostrils and sent her senses reeling. At first, her half sleeping mind could not comprehend to whom this scent belonged, but another breath of it awakened her awareness and Rose knew.

It was Jason's scent. It was his distinct odor. She had inhaled it a million times before. When they coupled with one another or when she embraced him. She knew that scent. How could she have mistaken it for anything else? But Rose could not allow herself to be troubled with that thought. There was something more going on here.

Suddenly feeling a wave of panic, Rose scanned the tree line just ahead of her. The trees were dark and menacing, their branches swooping down like claws. Using the gifts she had been born with, Rose once more sniffed the air, trying to gain a sense of direction.

Unfortunately for her, the thought that bothered her was an actuality. She was right. His scent seemed to point in the direction of those trees.

Taking a deep breath and collecting her resolve, Rose set out at a quick pace. She wasn't quite running, but not quite walking either. Her destination was the tree line, praying Jason was no farther than that. The menacing shadows haunted her, cold chills had already begun upon her arms, and she wasn't even near it yet.

The path was old, and overgrown so it was hardly a walkway at all. The tall weeds clung to the legs of her jeans, and Rose had to give a definite pull of her leg to shake loose the briars. She continually searched the ground, looking for any signs that he had passed. The earth was hard packed, but moist from the dew that was now making her shoes and pants wet, and she hoped to find at least a half a footprint there.

Or a paw print.

There was a distinct increase in the odors of the forest, but just Jason's scent held her attention. Even when combined with the scent of the fresh earth and the woodsy smell the trees brought forth, a werewolf's sense of smell was greatly accurate in honing in on one particular odor, especially if that odor belonged to one of their own.

Rose had reached the edge of the forest, but to her dismay, Jason was nowhere in sight and the faint scent had become stronger. She could definitely tell he was somewhere close.

Panic still clung to her every fiber, and her heart pounded within her throat. She swallowed it back down. The darkness clouded around her, and she had to admit for the first time ever in her life, she was afraid of the dark.

Never before had she encountered darkness so cold and unfriendly. It had an evil air about it and made Rose uneasy. But her mate was somewhere within that cold lightless place. And she wasn't going to get to him by just standing here, and certainly not as a human. This would require a wolf's prowess.

Rose leaned down, her breathing increasing as she unlaced her shoes and slipped out of them. The socks came off too and soon her bare feet were resting upon the cold earth. Its chill went all through her body.

Goosebumps had long since started on her arms as she slipped off her jacket and lifted off her shirt. She took in a ragged breath as the air bit at her exposed skin. For a moment, she thought about not forgoing the risk and putting her clothes back on, but she was soon reminded that her wolfen fur would be more than adequate for warmth.

Her fingers trembled as she undid the button to her jeans and finally slid them down her legs. Lastly, her underwear met the pile of clothes resting at the forest's edge, and she was ready.

Thankful she was far enough away from prying eyes to parade around in the nude, Rose plunged headlong into the dense thickness of trees. Her breath came out in gasps of fog. The branches threatened her with menacing claws and scratched at her bare skin, but she gave it no mind. Any wounds inflicted here would heal quickly.

Her pace increased the deeper she moved into the impenetrable darkness. Soon, Rose was running fast. Her night vision was excellent, but she did not have the advantage just yet. The cold wind rushed past her and tangled her hair. It burned arctic against her flesh.

And then it began. The shift was happening before Rose even realized it. Her body was bending, conforming to a new shape. Bones popped and twisted with a disgusting sound, and a pain unlike any other consumed her. It slowed her down.

But Rose did not stop the shift. Instead, she held onto it. She closed her eyes tightly as even her skull became more wolfen than human. Blood began to drip from her nostrils as the bones elongated and lengthened her face into a muzzle. Beyond just the half shift now, she was becoming completely and totally wolf.

The hard part was over. Rose bent to all fours, stopping her quest long enough for this. A cry of pain erupted from her as her leg and arm bones popped and re-grew. Her body took on the shape and form of a wolf's. Her back curved, and a tail sprouted from the base of her spine. A dark pelt of the deepest silver covered her entire body, lighter on her underbelly and legs.

She was wolf. When the pain had subsided, and she had licked the blood from her nose and muzzle, she was ready. Now she had the advantage.

Her long canine legs stretched out as she bounded through the trees. The thick underbrush barely met with her paws as her determination

increased. Her speed was ten times what it had been in her human form, and all her senses took on a new level of acuteness.

Jason's scent was mingled with the scent of earth and decaying leaves, but it was the driving force that pushed her onward. The previously freezing wind was now a gentle caress against her fur. She kept following the trail.

Her mind was no longer dominated with thoughts. Instead, her way of thinking was punctuated with wordless images and emotions. They pulsed through her, and the familiar twinge she had called panic before presented itself to her wolfen form.

It was all instinct.

The trees were become sparser, and new scents mingled in the air. Other animals that lived within this forest and its trees did well to stay hidden. They knew what she was, but she was not here for them tonight. Nevertheless, they shied back into their homes until she had long passed.

Tonight, she was on a search mission, not a hunt. The scent of water became very strong suddenly, and the wolf stopped where she was and sniffed at the air. The water also followed the direction Jason's scent had taken.

Her tongue lolled from the side of her jaws and the animal eyes searched. There was a creek, and the water washed in its own fashion, slow with Mother Earth's bearing. Her paws stepped lightly, silently, and she bent until her nose nearly touched the wet earth. She sniffed in the scent of Jason. This was the right path.

But stranger smells combined with his. It was the smell of an unwashed human male. Sweat and natural body odors filled the air. The wolf snorted, and she refrained from growling at the new scent. It definitely was a cause for alarm.

Edging closer to the water, she lifted her head. The earth was very moist and cool where she stood, at the creek's edge. Her claws sank into the mud and the water licked at her paws. It moistened the lighter colored fur of her legs. The scents had reached this point.

They were gone.

Her heart fell. All the hope she had gained seemed to wash away with the current of the river. But she couldn't stop here. She had to go on. She would not let the hurting win.

She crossed the water and relished the cool feel of it against the pads of her paws. Once on the other side, she sniffed the ground and tried desperately to find his scent upon the earth.

Pacing along the river bank, nose pressed to the cold earth, she soon found it. Her heart leapt once more, then immediately fell when she made a harsh discovery.

His scent was no longer as strong. Another scent had overpowered it. It wasn't the unwashed human scent. That scent had grown weaker until it had finally faded away. No, it was something much worse.

It was blood.

A renewed panic overcame the wolf, and her senses ran rampant. Her once subdued fear came back tenfold, reality more horrifying than she could've possibly imagined.

The blood was strong, and unfortunately it flooded all her senses. Jason's scent became so faint she could barely detect it over the rich and overpowering blood scent. Her heart beat wildly.

But she forced herself to calm down. This could be anything. This could be the blood of an animal, freshly killed by a predator. It couldn't be him.

Even as the wolf tried to rid herself of her anxiety with reassurances of Jason's safety, a sinking feeling echoed in the pit of her stomach. The blood smelled too much like that of a werewoman.

This could not be happening. The wolf lowered her head once more and sniffed at the cool ground. She could not see the blood, but she could certainly smell it. It had been swallowed up by the earth.

The forest continued past the water source, and the wolf quickly made her way into the dense trees and underbrush once more. Whether it was her paranoia acting up or not, she was determined to find her mate.

His scent led this way, though, even more faint now. Her nose was keen and she stuck to the overgrown trail. Thistles and brambles clung to her fur, but she ignored the minor discomfort. Blood dotted along the trail, leaves spotted with the crimson dots.

This could not be happening.

Once more, the wolf set out in a fast lope and quickly left the stream behind her as she covered more ground. Sunlight penetrated the thick trees up ahead and she could see the warm rays streaming through the open places between the leaves. She hurried to escape the cold and unyielding darkness here.

This forest was a bad place, and the wolf knew it. If it hadn't been for her hunt for her mate, she never would've stepped paw into this place.

The blood was stronger here, and more and more droplets were showing upon the leaves. More than just droplets, large puddles of the red life force stained the green leaves and shrubbery of the path. The wolf's fur once more stood on the back of her neck.

Her run now became a slow paced walk as she made her way out of the forest. Caution was desperately needed. Something didn't feel right. The wolf considered for a moment issuing a low howl to call her mate, but the idea left her imageless thoughts. It would be too risky. After all, what if whatever had caused this blood shed was still within these woods?

Instead, she moved forward cautiously. There was a clearing ahead, just beyond the border of trees in front of her, but dark shadows still haunted the ground. The wolf's ears flattened against the back of her skull.

As her silent paws brought her forward, the shadows became less and less dark, and began to take on a human shape. The naked form lay on its side, back toward the wolf, and unmoving.

She kept her gaze steady upon the form as she moved forward. Her nose touched the earth, once more picking up the very familiar scent of her mate. It was much stronger than it ever had been. It caused her heart to drop, and her breath to catch in her throat.

No wonder the figure on the ground look so familiar. Blood pooled from beneath a gaping wound in the chest. The blue eyes were open and staring at nothing.

She couldn't remember just how it happened, but one moment, she was in her wolfen form, on all fours, staring down at the lifeless form of her mate and in the next, she was human once again. She cradled his head in her arms.

Tears dropped from Rose's golden eyes, and her cheeks were soon wet and salty. Blood now stained her hands, and she rested her forehead against Jason's cold face. She pulled his heavy, cold body toward her naked form and held him one last time in her arms

Every animal had fallen silent to listen to the mournful cries of a heartbroken werewolf as she lamented the loss of her only love.

* * *

The dream ended there, and Rose shuddered. A gasp issued from her lips, and she trembled in shock. Her eyes flew open, and the frosty air that greeted her snapped all grogginess from her.

She was lying on her back, staring up at the night sky. The roar of cars speeding down the highway alerted her to the fact she wasn't far from the road. She was laying on something sharp, little bits and pieces cutting into her backside. She realized it was gravel when she heard the crunching of boots not far from her head. A thousand glittering stars winked mockingly at her from above.

She felt so foolish. The dream had caught her once more, unaware. No matter how many times she had had it, it always shocked her. This time had been no different. But she was felt more foolish and confused than ever before.

Rose blinked and started to lift her heavy head, but a throbbing pain screamed at her. She winced and moved one hand to gingerly feel the back of her neck. A lump had formed there.

The last thing she had remembered before this moment and before the dream was clinging to Jason as they raced down the nighttime highway on the back of his bike. It was then, lying on the side of the road amid the gravel of the shoulder, that she realized what had transpired. She had fallen from the bike. The pain in the back of her head did not lessen as she pulled herself to sit up and look around her.

The crunching of gravel underfoot sounded louder and quicker as a pair of feet moved toward her. His voice rang out.

“What the hell were you thinking?”

Tears burned Rose’s eyes and they started to cascade down her face. She had blacked out and had let the dream take control of her. She looked up at her mate. He stood above her and stared. For a moment, he was illuminated in the headlights of a passing vehicle, a vehicle which thankfully continued on their way without stopping. He became a darkened shadow once the car had passed.

His eyes blazed golden, and Rose looked away, hating that he was angry with her. She opened her mouth to speak, but he began before she could get a word out.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he repeated. “Were you trying to get yourself killed?” He gestured with one arm toward the highway.

Rose choked back a sob.

“I had to grab you, Rose. I had to grab you before you hit the pavement. I had to single-handedly bring the bike to the side of the road so you could at least fall while it was not in motion... If I hadn’t grabbed you when I did--”

His rant would’ve gone on for another hour if Rose hadn’t taken it upon herself to interrupt. She found her voice, shaking though it was.

“I’m sorry!” she answered. She lifted herself to her feet, and her head spun with dizziness. Jason reached out a hand to steady her.

She gripped his upper arm to keep from stumbling, thankful for the little bit of support from him. Once she had gained her footing however, and was sure she wouldn’t fall, she pulled away from him. His gleaming eyes burned down upon her tear streaked face.

"I'm sorry," Rose began again. "I'm sorry, love..." Fresh tears once again threatened, and her eyes began to burn with them. She blinked, and one or two droplets slipped from her lashes. She didn't know what else to say to explain it. There was no good excuse.

Jason didn't seem so forgiving. He stood and towered above her, glaring, but once it dawned on him that she was truly sorry, the harsh look on his face softened.

"Come here," he told her. He opened his arms and brought her into them. He embraced her there on the side of the road. He rested one hand against her silky hair. He calmed his angry emotions.

"You blacked out, didn't you?" Jason asked softly. Rose nodded against his chest, sniffing away her tears. He closed his eyes tightly. He had already guessed that, and he suddenly hated himself once again for hurting her. No matter what he did, he never seemed to do it right.

He pulled back from her just enough to look at her face. With a gentle smile and a soft touch, he began to brush away her tears. Her cheeks and nose were red from crying.

"Rose," he said softly. "I didn't mean to yell at you, but you scared me." Jason gave a soft little chuckle. "I just wish we could figure out why you do that..."

"I'm just special." Rose pouted. She was feeling less than chipper at the present moment, and Jason didn't blame her. Still, it broke his heart to see her like this.

"You think you'll be okay now?" he asked. One hand rubbed her shoulder in a comforting manner. Rose gave an uncertain shrug and made a waving gesture with one hand.

"I guess."

Jason tried a reassuring smile, but felt it was too forced. Instead, he embraced her once more, briefly this time.

"We should go then. We've already wasted enough time."

Rose nodded in agreement and followed Jason in climbing back onto the crotch rocket. This time, she made sure to hold him tightly. All tiredness left her, and she was more alert now than she had been in a long while. The aftereffects of the dream disturbed her greatly and she could still feel herself there, holding his blood soaked body close to her.

Just like she held onto him now.

More tears stung her eyes, but she wouldn't let them fall. Instead, Rose blinked them back, renewed her grip upon him and settled once more for a long ride. Grim determination set within her. She had cried enough.

The motorcycle shot out from the shoulder and back onto the long and nearly endless highway. The cold stung at her wet face, but she didn't flinch.

The sky was barely beginning to become lighter. Dawn was nearing, and Rose wondered if they would reach their destination before its streaming colors signaled the beginning of the day.

Chapter Fourteen

The drone of the van's engine had become the lullaby that had sent Claire into a deep sleep. In the cramped space, among the many suitcases and assorted computer equipment, there weren't many comfortable places, but Claire had managed to find a suitable one. Her head was propped against the side of the van, her neck positioned to the side.

It had a great disadvantage however, and it was at that moment it was proved so. A jolt to the van caused her head to smack hard against where she had it rested. It was more than enough to wake her up.

"Fuck!" she exclaimed, eyes wide open and a hand going for the back of her head. A throbbing pain began there and yet another in the curve of her neck. She winced. A collective chuckle arose from the men in the van, and Claire wasn't sure just who to glare at first.

Davis was the closest, seated in the back with her. A dopey grin was on his face, and he leered at her. Claire ignored him and glanced toward the front of the van.

Simon was driving, occasionally glancing in the rearview mirror at her. He was smirking. Eric was in the passenger seat, uninterested in what was going on. The tip of his cigarette burned brightly, and smoke drifted around him.

"So, Sleepy Beauty's finally awake," Simon said sarcastically. One eyebrow lifted and Claire caught sight of his dark gaze from the reflection of the mirror. She decided to glare at him. She knew he had intentionally swerved the van to make her hit her head.

"You did that on purpose." Claire narrowed her eyes as she stared at him. She rubbed at the lump forming on the back of her head. It was tender and would probably leave a bruise. Simon let out a scoff and glanced at her again.

"And your point would be...?"

"You're an asshole," she muttered.

Simon merely glared at her, but left it at that. His eyes soon returned to the road. Davis chuckled and shook his head. A wide grin was on his face. He shook the medicine bottle and the pills within rattled loudly.

"Looks like I'm not the only one on the wrong side of Simon tonight," he stated. He offered the pill bottle to her. "You will probably need these before the night is over."

Claire rolled her eyes at him and refused with a shake of her head.

"No, keep them." She stared coldly at him. "I'm not a dope-head, like you."

This received more chuckles from the front seat. For a moment, a mean look came across Davis' face, but he said nothing. Instead, he pocketed the pill bottle and turned his head away.

"Not like I need them now anyway... It doesn't hurt anymore," he muttered, barely audible to Claire.

With any thought of sleep gone from her now, Claire wondered just what to do in the stifling silence of the van. No one was speaking now, and it made her feel more than a bit uncomfortable. Then, someone switched on a radio and static filled the van. Eric turned the knobs as he searched for a station.

"Goddamn reception," he said to himself. Simon didn't order him to stop. He soon found a talk radio station, and they all listened without much interest to the topic discussed. Claire took advantage of the noise from the radio to ask Davis a question she had been longing to ask, but not within earshot of Simon. She looked at him and waited until he turned his not so glazed eyes to her. He looked slightly confused by her sudden attention on him.

"What the hell do you want?"

"Listen, dumbass, I just want to ask you something." Claire kept her voice low, and Davis leaned forward. The scent of urine was strong around him.

"What is it?" Davis asked with his voice still as loud as before. He couldn't take the hint that Claire's whispered tones might've meant something.

"Keep your voice down," she said. She wrinkled her nose at the unpleasant smell coming from him. "You smell like piss."

Davis' face reddened with embarrassment. He played it off with a cool air.

"Well, it's not like Simon told us to pack extra clothes."

"I know. I don't need any excuses, it's just....man..." She shook her head with disgust. The embarrassment burned more on Davis' face. Claire quickly changed the topic back. She too, for some reason, had begun to blush.

"That's not what I wanted to talk about." Claire glanced toward the front. Was Simon checking the rearview mirror more often than necessary? Claire swallowed before she began in the softest tone she could manage while still being heard clearly by the man across from her.

"Do you really believe this nonsense about werewolves? I mean, do you actually believe Simon and Marcus have *actually* seen them?"

His face lost the blush entirely and was now just as white as before, perhaps even a little more so. He knotted his eyebrows together, as if he couldn't make up his mind what to say.

"There's some weird shit out there, I'll tell you that much."

"Yes, but do you really *believe* them?"

There was a moment of silence before Davis sighed.

"I believe them, yes." Davis was sure this time to keep his voice down. "But have I ever actually seen a werewolf, in the wolf form? No. I haven't."

"I've seen them before, in their human form. I know what they can do. I've witnessed preternatural speed and strength, firsthand." He indicated his recent encounter with the werewolf, Jason.

"Like I told you before, there's too much unexplained shit out there for it to not be true," he said.

Claire hated to admit it, but he was right, up to a certain point. Weird stuff happened every day, things she couldn't explain or even begin to understand, but as far as werewolves being real...

"I don't believe him," she answered, with a slight shake of her head. Her gaze drifted toward the front of the van. Simon's eyes were focused on the road ahead. "I question a lot of the things he does. I mean, why is he after these people? What have they done?"

"Besides killing a lot of people?" Davis shot back at her, lifting an eyebrow. "A hell of a lot of shit has happened, Claire, if you haven't realized."

"How do you know they've killed anyone?" She immediately regretted bringing it up. Marcus and Davis had been colleagues, even though Marcus was several years older and didn't seem the type of man to associate with a deadbeat like Davis. She wondered if he was still trying to get over his death. Davis stared at her, an annoyed look on his face.

"Sorry" she said quietly. "But, you know what I mean. Why is Simon trying to find them? How does he know they killed those people? Why is he doing this? Is he serious?"

Davis wasn't listening to her anymore. He was looking away, a brooding look on his face. He was being his usual stubborn self. She wasn't going to get any answers from him.

"If you don't want to talk to me, fine," she said and crossed her arms. She could be stubborn too. She leaned back in her seat and rested her head against the side of the van. This time, she wouldn't fall asleep.

Instead, Claire stared at the roof of the van and pondered what she had just said to Davis. The young man had seemed uncertain with his answers. Did he really believe Simon, or was he just playing along? Claire figured she would probably never know.

Her ears tuned in to the local weather forecast as it came from the radio, but Claire soon tuned it out. She didn't care what the weather would be. She had more important things to think on.

Claire glanced forward. She watched the illuminating beam of their own headlights upon the black pavement as they continued on their way.

Simon's eyes flickered from the road to the rearview and caught her stare for a long moment. She felt those dark orbs staring straight through her, accusingly, and quickly she dropped her gaze.

The back of her head throbbed with pain, but she ignored it. She busied herself trying to look useful. A laptop rested nearby and she took it into her lap and switched it on. She could at least make a log of what was going on.

Then maybe later Claire could go back and find out just what it was that went wrong with everything. The electrical hum brought the machine quickly to life and Claire accessed the word processing program and began to type.

Simon had heard the entire conversation from his place in the driver's seat. Even over the drone of the engine and the talk on the radio, he had heard Claire's whispered uncertainties. It was taking a great deal of his self-control to keep from snapping at her.

He gripped the steering wheel just a little too tightly. Indentations of his finger placement were now a permanent part of the steering wheel. He took a deep breath and tried to quell his anger as he exhaled.

It wasn't working too well.

Simon's mind ran in overtime. Claire was quickly becoming a problem. She was too smart for her own good, and not entirely as gullible as he had hoped. All his recruits couldn't be like Davis, after all.

Davis was another story entirely. He had nearly fucked everything up, and Simon wasn't too forgiving about that. He had finally thought of an idea to fully use Davis for his plan. Davis hadn't lived up to Simon's other standards, so he had to improvise.

Simon smiled to himself and concentrated on the road. At the speed they were going, they would get there sometime during the day. They would wait until night, wait until no one was suspecting. He loved giving people a false sense of security.

If only he could keep from hurting anyone before then. Claire was grating on his nerves, and a momentary worry entered his mind. What if she found out what he was really all about? What if she turned the others against him? Then Simon's loyal followers would be no more, and his plan would crumble before him.

And he worked too hard to let the plan fall apart now. He'd have to have a little conversation with Claire once they reached their destination, but for now, he would decide just what to say to her. And perhaps what the most effective threat would be in order to get his point across.

He glanced once more in the rearview as she typed away on the keyboard. He wondered what she was doing, but didn't ask. At least she wasn't asking nosy questions right now, and he wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible.

Eric shifted his weight in the seat beside him and tossed what was left of his cigarette butt out the window. A fresh one was lit up. Simon thought about doing likewise, but didn't bother. He was thinking too heavily on something. He relaxed his grip on the steering wheel, and he looked at Eric. A smirk distorted Eric's face.

"You think Marcus saw it coming?" Simon casually asked the man. He personally had never liked the ex-detective, but he had connections and that was all that mattered to Simon. Eric chuckled. He never liked Marcus much either.

"Doubt it." The dark-skinned man's deep voice drowned out the sounds coming from the radio. "Marcus was stupid. Just what was he doing?"

Simon gave something akin to a one shoulder shrug and glanced back. Davis glared at him from his seat.

"Fucking up. Ask Davis. He'll give us more details, I'm sure."

Simon had wanted to interrogate Davis about Marcus's unwanted involvement with Rose, but the young man had been too out of it for straight answers. Now that his eyes were without the glazed look, Simon hoped he would give him what he wanted.

“Fuck you, Simon,” Davis answered. Claire looked up from her laptop. Her gaze moved from Davis to Simon. She watched with apparent interest.

Simon kept his eyes on the road. When he spoke, his voice clearly demonstrated his anger.

“I would carefully be choosing my words if I were you, Davis. I thought you learned that from our last argument. Don’t feed me this bullshit about ‘investigating’.”

Davis glared at Simon, but couldn’t find the words to retort. Claire waited. Davis seemed to want to say something. He wet his lips, taking Simon’s advice to heart as he began to think on what to say.

“I’m tired of your bullying, Simon. I’m tired of you fucking telling me what to do, who to kill... I’m fucking sick of it. Leave me the fuck alone.”

Simon let out a raucous laugh. Claire was suddenly confused. She looked at Davis for clarification, but his eyes had not left the visage of Simon in the rearview. Davis had killed someone on Simon’s orders?

“What did you think would happen, Davis? You think you would be on your own? Remember, without me, you wouldn’t even be sitting back there. You’d be dead. You’re involved, Davis, and have been from the moment you met me. If you don’t like following orders from me, then too bad.”

There was a pause as Simon looked back to the highway.

“Find someone else to whine to. I’m tired of your constant bitching. You’re nothing but a fucking, cowering pussy.”

Silence filled the van once more. Davis once more had lost any desire to speak. He stared heatedly at the back of Simon’s head. It didn’t take a smart person to realize Davis was pissed.

Claire was even more confused about things then she had been a few minutes ago. She stared blankly at Davis for a moment, glanced to Simon briefly, and then returned to her log.

Davis didn't seem like the type to kill anyone. He seemed too cowardly, too fearful. He would rather run than pull the trigger. Davis wasn't a killer. She decided it wasn't possible. He soon interrupted her thoughts as he had found something he wanted to say.

"That was a long time ago, Simon, and I'm not proud of it. Can we drop it?" His voice was low, almost taking on a scary Simon-like quality.

Simon chuckled again while Eric raised an eyebrow.

"It wasn't a long time ago, Davis. It was last year, but yes...I'll drop it. Don't worry. That secret is safe with me. " His voice was too sarcastic, and he let out a long, fake sigh.

Glad to end the conversation there, Davis finally turned his gaze to Claire. He was still pissed, and his face showed it.

"What the fuck are you looking at?" he demanded.

"Nothing," Claire quickly answered and returned her gaze to the laptop. There was so much secrecy going on, so much uncertainty and mistrust. Everything was just wrong. Werewolves, murder and lies. It was definitely not what she had expected or wanted, and here she was in the middle of it all.

Davis seemed just as reluctant a participant as she. He leaned forward in his seat, face in his hands, fingers locked in his hair. She almost felt sorry for him, but then quickly asked herself, how could she feel pity for someone when she didn't know why she felt sorry for them in the first place?

Hopefully, things would reveal themselves soon, and Claire could rest without a sense of urgency and doom clouding over her. But, for now, she would have to endure everything. And she would do so in silence, obeying commands and waiting for the day when she could just get out.

Chapter Fifteen

The early morning had passed in a speedy blur on the highway. The sunset had been lost in the sky behind them. The chill in the air had lifted when the sun's rays finally peeked through the clouds and upon the earth. It was uncomfortable against Rose's back. They only had a few more miles to go before they reached their destination. She would endure it. She kept a tight hold around Jason's waist.

They hadn't spoken two words to one another after they had stopped the last time at a gas station to fill up the tank. Jason had been grim-faced and silent as he pumped the gas and Rose took the opportunity to take a much needed bathroom break.

It was in the dingy, enclosed restroom that she took stock of the situation fully. The harsh light cast weird and ugly shadows across her face and illuminated the dark circles under her eyes. She looked like shit.

Her long brown hair was a tangled mass from the constant wind rushing through it, and the snarls would need a good comb through. Her face was pale, as it had been for the past couple of days. If she wasn't so definite on what she was, Rose would've guessed she was staring at a ghost.

Quickly, she averted her eyes from her reflection. She didn't really want to see just how horrible she looked. This whole situation had left her feeling awful, and she didn't really need to see the outer effect.

Rose washed her hands in the cold water from the faucet and used the sweet smelling pink soap from the dispenser on her right. More water was splashed onto her face, and the initial chill of it ran like a shock

through her system. She dried her face and hands with a rough paper towel and left the suffocating place.

Jason had finished pumping the gas, had paid for it, and was now seated on the Interceptor. The engine roared when Rose stepped out. It drew attention from a passing couple who glanced in their direction.

For once, Rose wished Jason would cut it out with the need for such dramatic flair. She didn't want the unnecessary attention. She said nothing however and climbed onto the back of the bike. She ignored the stares of the man and woman. Her sigh was drowned out by the pulsing engine.

They left the parking lot, a morning haze covering the fields and roadways. It was still chilly enough that Rose shivered and she shifted her weight slightly so she was closer to the warmth of Jason's back. If he noticed, he didn't indicate so. The heat on Rose's back was no longer uncomfortable, but soothing. She let the sun's rays warm her backside. She had been too cold for too long.

She held tight to him for the rest of the drive, continuing to do so even when he slowed to the posted speeds in the residential areas. The morning people hardly regarded them. A few of the more friendly ones gave smiles and waves, but Rose didn't feel like returning the gestures. She watched them with an indifferent stare.

Jason brought the bike to a halt as required at a stop sign, but did not pause longer than a few seconds. He was soon on the main road, moving onward.

She brushed a strand of hair away from her eyes and focused her attention on the area where they were. It was a familiar town, but the neighborhood in which they traveled was one she had not been too in a very long time. A small smile began to spread across her face.

The stone building up ahead was a welcome sight and Rose loosened her grip on Jason. She'd had no clue this was the place he had been talking about, the place that he had been taking her to all along. If she had known, she would've been more anxious about getting there.

And perhaps that was why he hadn't. In any case, they were here now, just a few feet from the curb of the PRDI safe house, one of the few places Rose knew like the back of her hand.

It had been a second home to her, a place where she, Glen and a few others had traveled occasionally as children during hard times at the Paranormal Research and Development Institute. One memory came to mind, in light of recent events. And Rose wasn't too keen on remembering it just now.

Her smile faded as Jason shut the engine off and silence reached her ears, but her mind was already far away, more than ten years into the past...

* * *

It was perhaps the most memorable summer of Rose's childhood. It was two weeks before Glen's twelfth birthday, a week after the death of his parents, and the PRDI had sent them here three days before.

No one had told them exactly what had happened, just how they had died, and it had left the two children confused and scared. But the PRDI was there for them. They would take care of them now.

For Rose, the loss of her guardians had hit her a second time in this life. Her parents had been taken from her in a car accident when she was four, and now, a little more than four years later, her aunt and uncle had been taken as well. She didn't feel much emotion this time. It had happened one too many times and she was numb.

And she had thought, finally, she had a family to take care of her.

There was a growing sadness circling around the two children as they sat quietly in the gaming room, not really feeling like playing. Rose was curled up on the window seat, staring out at the dark clouded sky, watching rain drops as they hit the window. Occasionally lightning would strike across the sky and cause her to jump.

Glen was seated in an armchair, facing the television. Its screen was black and empty, but he continued to stare at it. It had been suggested

maybe television would get their mind off things, but neither had made the move to switch it on.

He was overdue for a haircut, and black wisps fell across his forehead and into his brown eyes. His lips were turned into a frown, and his willowy frame was swallowed up by the massive cushions of the chair. His thin arms were crossed over his chest.

For Glen, the loss of his parents had been horrible. For the first few days, he was inconsolable. He had torn through the PRDI's main building, shattering glass and throwing furniture and things. Tears continually streamed down his face.

They dutifully attended the funerals. Everyone approached them with condolences Rose was sure they didn't feel. They had expected the kids to cry, to pour their little hearts out, but that didn't happen.

Once the truth had sunk in, Glen went strangely silent. He threw no more fits, shed no more tears and said nothing to anyone but Rose, and only then it was hushed whispers about possibilities late at night when everyone else had been asleep.

And they still didn't know just why they had died. No one would tell them. Glen felt there was a mystery behind it all. He wanted to know, but their new guardians wouldn't divulge that information to them.

One such guardian was Gavin Newark. He was an older man and of the werekin kind, a werewolf, just like them. He was the one who had brought them here, and the one who had shown the most kindness to them. He was a tall man, with brown hair that was only slightly graying at the temples, and always dressed nicely. He had the noticeable were-scent both children were learning to identify and find comfort in.

And of all the other PRDI associates there, Rose liked him the best.

Gavin didn't push them to do things they didn't want to do. While the others were trying to get them interested in activities and television, Gavin had them back off.

"Give them time," he had said to the others. "It'll take some time before they're ready to do things. Let them sit around. They'll soon realize what they're missing."

And Gavin was right. Rose was becoming bored here. Her initial mourning had ended and she was ready to move on with other things. She was sympathetic, however, to her cousin who was not quite ready to begin life all over again.

A thunderclap sounded loudly overhead and Rose jumped yet again. She turned to regard Glen. The boy no longer stared at the TV. He looked out the window. Rain splattered more on the pane, and Rose followed his stare.

They were on the second floor, and she could see the sidewalk between the swaying branches of the oak tree in the front lawn. Though Glen did not have the viewpoint she did, somehow he had seen the car approach and stop in front of the building before she had.

She sat up to get a better view, and Glen moved out of the armchair to stand beside her. His dark eyebrows touched as he thought hard about something. He stared down at the car.

The car was unrecognizable, black and fancy looking. Perhaps it was another PRDI member, come to stay here or to teach them. Or maybe it was someone with some news about the untimely deaths of Glen's parents.

A surge of hope washed through the young girl's entire body, and she spoke softly.

"Who is it?"

Glen merely shook his head and watched as the car door opened. A figure stepped out, and stumbled up the curb. Glen moved closer to the window, his face almost pressed against the glass. His breath made fog against the cold pane.

Rose broke her gaze from the person below to briefly glance at her cousin. When she turned her gaze back, the person was making their way slowly to the front door. Rose, like Glen, furrowed her eyebrows and moved closer to the glass.

The person, a man, was moving funny. Rose blinked a few times.

"Something's wrong," Glen suddenly said. He looked down at her.

“What is it?” she asked. He was using a tone that scared her. She licked her lips.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.”

Before she had a chance to react, Glen pulled himself from the window and ran out of the room. He paused only to throw open the heavy door. His footfalls echoed as he ran down the hall toward the stairs.

“Glen! Wait!” Rose called after him and scrambled to her feet. She started after him. Her sandals slapped against the hardwood floor loudly. She soon caught up with him.

Glen crouched at the top of the stairs and peered through the banister spokes. The front door was open. The sound of the rainfall echoed loudly in the spacious front hall. Water had formed a dark puddle on the floor.

Rose held her breath as she crouched down beside him. Her small hands held onto the bars, and she pressed her face between them. She watched closely.

Gavin was at the door. He ushered the man inside. Rose had learned to distinguish many different scents here. Gavin’s werewolf scent, the scent of the humans and the everyday scents of the safe house, but there were new scents that lingered in the air, and she didn’t know what they could be.

Rose pressed her face closer. Glen now lay prone on the floor, flat on his stomach so he could peer down at them better. She tried to figure out just what the smell was.

“Do you smell that?” she whispered.

Glen was silent for a moment. Both blessed with preternatural hearing, they tried to listen in, but as of yet heard nothing said. Gavin supported the man with an arm around his waist. More water dripped on the floor.

“I think its blood...” Glen answered in a scared voice. Rose swallowed a hard lump in her throat. It wasn’t water that dripped onto the floor and formed a puddle. It was blood. The man was injured.

“That’s why he was walking funny...” She breathed. “But that’s not what I meant...” She wanted to remove herself from her spot and slink back to her room, but found herself plastered there, staring. Her cousin didn’t answer. His eyes were wide.

Gavin turned and regarded them on the second floor. His gaze indicated he had known all along they were lingering on the top of the staircase. He didn’t address them just yet. Instead, his eyes turned elsewhere, seeking assistance.

“Someone help!” Gavin’s voice boomed through the place. It sent shivers down Rose’s spine. Glen’s knuckles had turned white where he gripped the bars.

Rose sniffed the air again. She knew now that the scent was blood, but what was the other scent? She licked her lips again and adjusted her position, sitting back on her haunches. Her dark bangs were a little too long and stung when they touched her eyes. Annoyed, Rose brushed them aside.

The scent reminded her of their kind. It was a kind of musky scent. Often, she imagined she could feel the scent, and this scent was warm, like hers, and like Glen’s. Just like Gavin’s scent, and like her aunt and uncle’s, it comforted her and reminded her they were not always truly alone.

But it was too faint. It wasn’t strong like she had grown used to. Maybe she had mistaken it.

A groan sounded from below them, and the man collapsed against Gavin. More blood pooled beneath him. By now a couple of other people had arrived and eased the injured man away from Gavin. With a combined effort, the young man was taken into one of the first floor bedrooms.

Gavin remained in the hall. He stared down at his hands at first, then at the floor. He wiped the blood stains from his hands onto his pants and drew his gaze up. For a long while he simply stared at the two children as they watched from the top of the stairs.

It was Glen who stood and moved to the staircase to descend.

“What’s going on, Mr. Newark?”

“Nothing you should be concerned with as of yet.” Gavin sighed. He wiped his hands once more on his now ruined suit and started to step away from the door.

“Just stay where you are,” he warned as he disappeared down the hall and into the room where they had taken the injured man.

At the top of the steps, Glen and Rose exchanged significant looks. In an instant, both children raced down the stairs. They skidded past the pool of blood in the hall and stopped just outside the door.

Glen got there first and pressed his ear to the door. Rose shoved her way beneath him to get at the door.

“Watch it,” he whispered to her, but they both fell silent as they listened.

Gavin’s voice was the loudest. “What happened?”

There was a sickening wet cough that sounded next, and Rose could imagine it was blood caught in the man’s throat. She felt sick suddenly, but her curiosity held her there.

There was a sound of a woman whispering, but neither could hear what was said. The man choked out the words.

“Hunters...three of them...took me off guard...wasn’t ready...” There was another loud cough and Rose closed her eyes. “I didn’t know where else to go...”

“You came to the right place. Just hang on.” Gavin spoke. “Let us look at the wounds...”

“No!” the man screamed. There was a slight growl to his voice. “No, it hurts...”

“Just calm down.” Gavin’s voice had taken on a soothing quality. There was a sudden crash, as if something had been thrown onto the floor and Rose jumped within her skin. Her ear remained fastened to the door.

“No!” the man yelled again, the growl more evident and scary.

“Calm down!” Gavin’s soothing tones had not worked and he had developed a more stern quality. He continued in a hushed whisper. “There are children here, and we don’t want them exposed to this...”

Someone laughed suddenly. Rose felt cold at hearing it.

“They’re already exposed! All of us, all of you are exposed...they’re gonna kill us...just give it time...they’re...gonna...” The man’s heated voice fell quiet.

“We’re losing him,” the female from before said. “The bullets hit too many vital organs. He’s not healing quickly enough.”

Gavin cursed and then was silent for a moment. After a while, he spoke. “Of course not. He’s only a half-blood.” There was a sadness Rose had never heard in his voice before.

Footsteps reached the door, and both kids tried to scramble away, but it was too late. They tripped over one another and hit the floor.

The door opened and Gavin stood. He stared at the two sprawled before him. Rose caught a glimpse of the man inside the room. His clothing was blood drenched. His shirt had been ripped away, and blood was still pooling from the many wounds in his chest. The door closed before Rose could get a closer look, and she was glad it had. She felt very sick now.

“We’re sorry, Mr. Newark,” Glen apologized. He was on his feet now, having grabbed Rose and pulled her up with him. “We only wanted to know what was going on...”

They both expected Gavin to yell at them, but his eyes showed no fury. Instead, he regarded the children with a pitiful gaze. The blood scent was strong around him, and it stained his nice suit. He didn’t seem to notice, or care. He gave a bit of a frown as he spoke.

“I know, Glen. I didn’t expect you to stay there on the staircase.” There was a pause and he looked over his shoulder as the other two PRDI associates left the room. Rose recognized one of them as Anna, an older human woman who always wore a smile, but now, her smile was replaced with a worried look. Again, they only caught a glimpse of what

was inside, but the man's body had been covered with a sheet that was slowly beginning to soak up blood from the wounds.

"He's gone, Gavin," Anna said softly. Gavin nodded, and she walked away. The blood scent followed her. When Gavin looked back to the children, his face still held the serious look. He placed a hand on each of their shoulders and steered them away from the room.

"We need to have a long talk about a few things...things we wanted to protect you from, but it seems...in light of...new events...it seems necessary."

There was silence as Glen and Rose exchanged nervous glances and continued down the long corridor. An ancient sword and weapon collection lined the walls on either side of them, and Rose found herself staring at them as she tried to get her mind off of things.

What had happened to that man? What were hunters? What was going to happen? So many unanswered questions plagued her young mind.

And when the questions were answered, Rose and Glen had their first lessons in werekin and werewolf hostility.

* * *

That was the night Gavin Newark taught Rose Sullivan and Glen Cole about hunters and the hostility they would one day most likely face. It was depressing news for children so young, children whose family had just been brutally murdered by hunters.

It was also the first time half-bloods had been mentioned to Rose. Never had it crossed her young mind that there were others who were half-human and half-wolf, so like her and yet not. They shared the same hostility.

To the full-blooded werewolf, a half-blood was easily distinguished. They possessed a scent on a lesser degree than a full-blood, but stronger than that of a human. They could heal faster than a human, in fact, they

could see, smell and hear better too. They could change form, with practice and a lot more pain than full-bloods, to that of a wolf.

There were other disadvantages to being a half-blood, as the children came to soon understand. They were unable to detect other half-bloods. Full-bloods were no problem, as their scent was so strong, but a half-blood, where the blood was half-wolf or less, was a little more difficult to distinguish. And even with some full-bloods the scent was off, but it was the best indication of the werekin the PRDI and their kind had come across yet, and it worked so far.

The young man who had died so many years ago had been a half-blood. Rose had encountered only a few half-bloods in her lifetime since then, and one such was seated on the motorcycle ahead of her.

Jason never spoke of it to anyone. He knew he was less than full-blood and made up his lack of strengths with determination and stubbornness, considering himself no less a werewolf than Rose, or Glen, or any other full-blood out there. It was just something he didn't divulge to others, unless it was necessary.

Rose was first to climb off the bike and begin her approach of the building. Before she reached the front door, it opened and a very familiar figure emerged. Glen stood in the doorway, clad in a black T-shirt and blue jeans. A wide grin spread over his face.

"Rose!" he called, and Jason couldn't help but smile at the reunion as Rose practically leapt into her cousin's arms.

"Glen. Oh my God, it's so good to see you!" She hugged him tightly. She dangled a few inches from the ground in the powerful embrace from her cousin.

Glen's black hair had grown more since the last time they had seen him, and little ringlets of it fell nearly to his shoulders. His goatee was neatly trimmed and surrounded his boyish grin perfectly. It had been a long time since they had seen each other last, and he hardly looked like he had just turned twenty-nine.

"I know. I'm glad you got here safe. Have any more problems?" His brown eyes softened as he released Rose and looked down at her from his tall height.

She gave a shake of her head, unable to hide a genuine smile of happiness on her face. "Not really, no."

Jason reached the two and he extended a hand formally to Glen. "Hey, man. Good to see you again," he said, stiffly.

Glen raised an eyebrow and cast a glance at Rose, who was trying not to laugh.

"Is this guy for real?" Glen asked. Before Jason could react, Glen had given him a one armed hug. "We're practically family, man. Cut out the serious shit for once."

"Jason's been under a lot of stress lately. In fact, we both have," Rose explained. She looked up at Glen. "Thanks for helping us, Glen."

Glen gave something like a shrug. "Hey, don't mention it. Would I miss the opportunity to hang out with my favorite cousin?"

"You mean your only cousin," Rose shot back, jokingly.

"That too." Glen smiled. He turned back to glance over his shoulder at the doorway. "Oh, there's someone else here that wants to say hello."

Before Rose could ask who, another familiar male figure stepped out from the doorway. His hair held considerably more grey in it now, and there were more lines on his face, but those were the same kind green eyes that had taught her during her childhood.

"Mr. Newark!" Rose shrieked. She wrapped her arms around his neck and embraced him as well. Gavin chuckled.

"You certainly sprouted. I haven't seen you in years!" he answered when they had pulled back. "I've kept track of you through your novels though. It's really good to see you again. Just wish it could've been under better circumstances." His face had a grave demeanor all of a sudden.

Gavin finally turned his gaze upon Jason and gave him a professional smile. He extended his hand.

“You must be Jason. It’s a pleasure to finally meet the man who captured Rose’s generous heart. I’m Gavin Newark, former mentor and teacher of these hellions.”

Jason coldly stared at the outstretched hand, but did not take it in his own. Rose gave him a pleading look. She silently begged him not to appear stoic toward her former mentor.

Instead of complying, Jason merely nodded his head. “Likewise, Gavin.”

Gavin lifted an eyebrow and lowered his hand. He still appeared to regard Jason kindly. “Well...now that the introductions are out of the way...”

“Yeah. Let’s head inside. We’ve got a lot to talk about,” Glen continued. “There are others here, waiting for you guys. We’ll start the meeting whenever you’re ready.”

Rose nodded and reached for Jason’s hand. She squeezed it once for comfort. Now that they were here, she was already feeling better, but she had noticed the look in Jason’s eyes and she knew he felt otherwise.

“Please try to be nice, love. These people are here to help us.”

“Rose, I know,” Jason said impatiently as he closed the door behind him. “But I can’t help but to be on my guard and you know that.”

“I know.” Rose sighed. She watched Gavin and Glen disappear down the hall. “Just, please...”

“No guarantees, Rose, but I’ll try.”

Satisfied by the answer, Rose gave his hand another squeeze.

Chapter Sixteen

Gas station and convenience store food always made Davis sick. Not physically ill, but it made him lose all desire to eat. But Simon was frugal and it was the only food he had eaten in the past few days. The reheated hamburger went down without argument or complaint.

Claire shared his sentiment toward the food and picked at her burger distastefully. Eric and Simon said nothing to anyone and devoured their food in silence.

They had arrived at the right town, around the middle of the day. The sun was overhead, but it was doing little to warm the atmosphere. In fact, Davis was sure it had gotten a lot colder.

Or maybe that was just Simon projecting his icy aura.

Davis threw the man a contemptuous glance as he took the last few bites of his burger. *Simon has really gone too far this time*, he mused. Simon always went too far, but Davis was about to draw the line. He wasn't going to let Simon control him forever. He was going to stand up to him and show him a thing or two...

Despite the flaring anger he felt, he was trembling. Simon was an inferno of instability, and Davis had crossed the threshold one too many times. He was almost afraid to do it again.

Almost.

He turned his attention toward the road and watched motorists speed by. Idly, he lifted a hand and felt at the bandage on his forehead. It wasn't hurting anymore, and the lump had nearly disappeared. Guess he didn't have a concussion after all.

Davis couldn't explain it, but it had always been that way for him. Even when he was young, going from foster home to foster home, getting into all kinds of shit. There was one time when he had jumped out of a tree and had thought he had broken his leg. The doctors at the emergency room said it was fine, just a little sprain, but Davis was so sure he had heard it crack.

And why was it that the medication he took always seemed to hinder his recovery? He did so much better without meds, and he always found that odd...

His reminiscences were interrupted when Eric coughed gruffly. Davis turned his attention to the dark skinned man and raised an eyebrow. Eric looked at him with an amused expression.

"You didn't bruise your brain when he threw you through the window, did you?" he asked with laughter in his voice. Simon watched and waited for Davis' expression.

Davis scowled and rolled his eyes. He chose to ignore it, but Simon continued the jest.

"He can't bruise what he never had, Eric." He wadded up the foil wrapper to the burger and tossed it toward a nearby garbage can. It landed perfectly inside.

Simon resumed his spot, his back against the side of the van. The sliding back door was open, and Claire was seated on the step. She looked like she was about to laugh. Eric chuckled.

Davis was mortified and felt the heat rise into his cheeks again. Simon's favorite pastime lately was giving him a hard time. Once more, Davis didn't rise to the challenge. Instead, he pulled his knees up further, situated his bottom so it was seated on the curb, and rested his elbows on his knees. His head soon found a place in the palms of his hands.

The laughter continued, but Claire's wasn't among them. And he found himself wondering just why he was thankful for that.

Claire watched Davis' face redden and then disappear as he hid it between his hands. She sighed and looked down at her half-eaten sandwich in disgust. She had lost her appetite long before they had even stopped at this run down gas station.

Carefully, she wrapped the burger back into the foil and set it beside her in the van. She swung her legs as she looked around the nearly empty parking lot. Simon talked in low tones to Eric, and occasionally he would cast a glance in her direction. Like Davis, Claire chose to ignore it.

A few moments later, Eric began to saunter away. He grabbed Davis by the back of the shirt and hoisted him up.

"What the fuck!?" Davis protested. He jerked himself away from Eric's vice-like grip.

"Make yourself scarce, jackass," he answered. He looked over his shoulder first at Simon, then at Claire. A sardonic look crossed Eric's face.

"Fine. Fuck it. I hate you guys." Davis tore away from Eric and entered the gas station first. The two men disappeared inside.

For the second time since they had begun on this endeavor, Claire was alone with Simon. She felt the fear begin to rise within her.

Simon smirked as he paced back and forth in front of the door. He wasn't giving Claire a chance to run, if she so chose to do. But Claire wasn't stupid. She sat where she was, looked at him and waited.

"Claire...I want to talk to you about a few things."

"All right." Claire wrapped her arms around her waist nervously, and waited for him to continue.

Simon gave something akin to a dark chuckle, with a brief shake of his head. He seemed to really ponder his words before he opened his mouth.

"I don't want you causing any trouble."

Claire blinked, wondering just what had suggested she would. She was just about to voice it when Simon lifted a finger to indicate he wasn't finished.

“Let me finish, Claire. You may get some radical ideas. You may decide you don’t want to be a part of this or you may decide you would rather see my plan fall through.” Simon paused, looming over her. He became a massive shadow and blocked out the sun. Claire continued to stare at him, unable to think of words to say now.

“I never wanted you to know what was going on, in fact, that was part of the plan. I wanted you to sit, oblivious to everything, typing away at your programs, handing over money when needed. I never questioned your intelligence, Claire. Don’t get me wrong. You’re brilliant...but too brilliant.”

It was here his face and voice turned dark. His eyes seemed to blaze as he stared down at her. Claire felt intimidated, and her eyes went wide with fear.

“My warning to you, Claire, don’t get stupid. Don’t do anything stupid. In fact, don’t even *think* stupid.” A malicious grin spread across his face. Claire swallowed hard.

“I’ve not come this far for some uppity snobbish valley girl with daddy’s money to ruin it for me.” There was another pause, and Simon lowered his voice. “There’s only one way out, sweetheart, and it’s not pretty. You’re involved, like it or not, and you’re not going anywhere unless you’re in a body bag. Do you understand me?”

Claire was at a loss for words. The verbal threat hurt a million times more than the barrel of a gun she had stared down earlier in their mission. She swallowed once more. Her mouth had gone dry.

“Do you understand?” Simon repeated, through clenched teeth this time. His eyes were beginning to scare her.

“Yes,” she said hoarsely, then, “Yes” louder.

Seemingly satisfied with her answer, Simon chuckled.

“Good. I’ve got to take a piss.” He sternly looked at her. He gave her a last warning. “Keep what I said in mind, will you?”

With that, he left her alone there and entered the gas station. Claire let out a breath she didn’t even realize she had been holding. All of her

hopes for getting out of this mess were now dashed. She closed her eyes and fought back tears that hurt behind her lids.

What am I going to do now? A tear leaked from the corner of her eye and fell hot against her cheek. She brushed it away, annoyed at herself for crying.

The chiming bell on the gas station door rang and Claire opened her eyes. She quickly wiped them with the sleeve of her jacket. It was only Davis.

"I swear Simon is the biggest asshole I have ever met," Davis said. He paused and looked down at Claire. "Hey...you okay?"

"I'm fine." Claire answered. She wiped her eyes once more for good measure. Her gaze was focused on the door of the gas station. "I agree. He is the biggest asshole I have ever met."

Davis sat down beside her. "You're lucky. You've only known him a short time. I've had to put up with his shit for more than a year. It feels like forever though." He gave a faint shake of his head.

Claire looked over at him, a slightly confused look on her face. "Why do you stick around? Did he give you the same lecture about 'the only way out is in a body bag'?"

Davis' face blanched a moment, and he didn't look at Claire right away.

"Not exactly." He took a deep breath.

"Oh?" Claire said. She lifted an eyebrow. Her sarcastic tone fell when she saw the true seriousness of his face. She blinked a few times. She remembered Simon's words, "That secret is safe with me." She opened her mouth to ask about it, when he interrupted.

"If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone...ever?" His grey eyes turned to her and Claire found herself staring at him, not exactly sure how to answer. She was afraid of what he might tell her. Maybe she didn't want to know. On the other hand, she began to think there was something more to Davis than just a sniveling scumbag. And she was curious.

"I promise," she said.

Davis hesitated a moment, but when he did speak, he did so in a low whisper, almost so low that Claire couldn't hear him well. She leaned closer.

"Last year, when I first joined with Simon, he made me do something. He had me do a...initiation of sorts. He wanted me to prove just how serious I was about the whole werewolf thing and just how far I was willing to go. I was so stupid."

Claire listened. Her mouth went dry and her throat locked up.

"He had me track down a werewolf family. I still remember where they lived. I still remember the names..." He paused, as if he was just remembering something else, but soon continued.

"He went with me, to make sure I'd do it. He had me kill the woman. I didn't know it, but she was a mom, and her kid was watching as I killed her. He was about sixteen, or seventeen, I don't know. I never wanted to kill anyone..."

His voice sounded pained, and Claire was suddenly aware of the new tears starting in her eyes. She blinked them back and continued to listen even though she wanted nothing more than to cover her ears.

"I didn't want to. I wasn't going to kill the kid, but Simon started shooting and the boy ran and got away. I've never killed anyone since then. I can't do it."

There was silence now, and Claire felt uncomfortable. Davis had been an unwilling participant in some sick game of Simon's. She closed her eyes and let out a deep breath.

"Wow." It was all she could say. The shock of it had been too much.

Davis pulled away from her and stood up. He moved a few steps away from the van. He faced the road and silently stared out at the cars. His face had grown hard set and grim. Claire felt it best to give him the space, and so she didn't approach him.

But now, she had a lot more thinking to do. Simon was worse than she could ever have thought. He had made Davis kill someone, in front of a kid no less, and apparently was still holding it over his head. A renewed hatred for Simon grew within her.

And the worst part of it all was she could do nothing about it.

Davis returned to the van, but didn't resume his seat. Instead, he stood and stared toward the glass doors of the gas station. Simon and Eric were at the checkout. He narrowed his eyes.

"They'll be out here soon." He gave the warning. He didn't look away, but continued to speak to her.

"I never told anyone about what happened that night. I'm not proud of it. I hate myself for it."

Claire looked up at him and squinted when the light hit her eyes.

"So, that's why you turn to the drugs, huh?"

Davis gave a slight shrug. "Mostly, I guess. I just want to forget about it. I want to dull the pain. I just..." He fell silent. The ringing bell signaled the approach of Eric and Simon.

"I know," Claire said, lowering her voice. "We can talk about it later."

"Yeah," Davis agreed. He stepped up into the van and resumed his seat. Claire finished cleaning up her mess and got up to throw the stuff in the trash. Eric's cigarette smoke swirled around her.

"What were you and the jackass talking about?" he asked. He had an eyebrow lifted, and Claire was under the impression that Simon had put him up to the interrogation.

She played it off with a shrug. "Not much. Just about how much he hates the werewolves and can't wait to get his revenge." Claire winced inside. She was a horrible liar.

Eric apparently thought so too, because he chuckled and said, "I don't believe you."

"Well, believe what you will, big man," she retorted and returned to the van. She took her place and returned to the blue screen of the laptop in front of her. The log was nearly complete...or rather, her journal was nearly complete. The log idea had become botched with Claire's own personal musings and feelings. She had a lot more to add now.

Eric crushed out his cigarette and took over the job of driving. He glanced behind him at Claire, then at Simon beside him. He spoke in a hushed tone.

“You sure you got through to her?”

Simon clenched his jaw as Eric started the engine and began to back out of the parking place. He watched Claire in the review mirror. He didn’t even have to ask. He knew she had been talking with Davis about something.

“Apparently not,” he muttered.

He would have to figure out a better way to get his point across. Claire was very hardheaded it seemed.

But then again, so was he.

Davis occupied himself with removing the bandage from his forehead. Claire glanced up just in time to see him remove the bloodstained rag. The place where the gash had been was bruised a faint green and purple, and the cut didn’t look so bad. The swelling had gone down. It was finally healing now he had ignored the drugs.

“It doesn’t look so bad,” Claire said, and Davis looked at her with an eyebrow raised.

“Yeah, it doesn’t hurt much either. Guess I was just overreacting about it.”

Claire laughed softly, and then stopped as it sounded unfamiliar and hollow in the presence of Simon.

“Yeah...you tend to do that...”

“Shut up, both of you.” Simon’s voice boomed from the front.

“Yeah,” Davis said, but he gave Claire a significant glance that probably meant “I really hate that guy”.

And Claire found herself nodding in agreement.

Chapter Seventeen

The collective footfalls echoed loudly in the spacious hall, and Jason had to pause to get his bearings. The place was huge! He hadn't thought it would be so spacious from an outside glance, and it was fancy. It was not at all what he had expected. And to think Rose spent most of her childhood here.

Gavin and Rose were deep in conversation ahead of him, but Jason lingered back. Glen watched him with a close stare.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

Jason shrugged and looked up toward the second floor landing. He hung back and Glen stopped with him. Gavin and Rose disappeared into another room. He took the opportunity to inquire something in a quiet tone.

"Were you followed?" He looked at Jason, his brown eyes held a touch of concern.

Jason shook his head. "Not that I know of. I did everything you said. I guess I'm just uneasy."

"Yeah," Glen agreed. He stared at Jason as if he wished to say something more. Jason lifted an eyebrow.

"What?"

Glen exhaled. "Rose. She's not looking so great. What happened?"

Jason closed his eyes. He hadn't realized they would have to recount all of the events of the past few days. He wasn't looking forward to it.

"You don't want to know, Glen. It would just piss you off."

"Try me. She's my cousin. She's like a little sister to me, in fact. I have a right to know."

“Glen—”

“Jason, tell me.” Glen’s eyes had taken on a slight golden hue. Jason stared at him. He could see there would be no arguing the point. He took a deep breath before he began.

“She was shot, twice. Once in the shoulder, and a second time through the side. Luckily, it missed any internal organs and she only suffered an extreme blood loss.”

A very low growl sounded from Glen, and he turned his head away. He closed his eyes and took a calming breath.

“Fucking hunters.” He barely breathed.

Jason gave something like a soft chuckle. “Yeah, my thoughts exactly.”

It was then that Jason noticed Glen’s clenched fists, how his extra long fingernails were digging into his palms. Blood had been drawn and it had begun to drip to the floor. The smell of it started to fill the air.

“Glen...” He spoke quietly and reached out a hand. “This is why I didn’t want to tell you. I knew how it would affect you.”

Glen didn’t exactly seem to hear him, but he had opened his eyes and stared down at his bloody palm. Even now the tiny sliced wounds began to heal. The blood was very fresh, and very red. Jason tried again.

“All that matters is that we are here now, and we’re safe. Everything will be okay.” Even as he spoke these reassurances, he couldn’t feel them inside his own heart. They sounded cold and hollow coming from him.

Glen had calmed down enough now and he even gave a bit of a chuckle. He looked up at Jason.

“I don’t exactly believe you.”

All Jason could do was grin, because Glen was doing just the same.

“I don’t quite believe myself on that one either,” Jason admitted.

Glen’s face turned serious for a moment. He wiped his bloody hands on his jeans and left smears down his hips. His eyes still had that golden blaze to them.

"Hunters have taken everything away from me. They took my parents, years ago, and when they did that, I lost all respect for humanity. And now, they threaten what's left of my family. I will not stand for that."

Jason nodded. For once, he was playing the rational mind. Glen was always so levelheaded and cool, and here he was, the angry one. Jason didn't know exactly what to do. He spoke words that felt strange.

"Let's not think or talk about getting personal just yet. I think the first thing we need to do is find out just who these guys are, and why they are after us."

"That's the first bit of good advice I think I've heard all day," Glen remarked. He looked down once more at his bloodstained hands.

"I should get cleaned up first, though."

"Good idea."

* * *

The meeting was delayed for a short while. Glen's quick departure to freshen up had taken more than just a few minutes. And then Rose had complained of hunger. A quick trip to the kitchen was in order.

Jason sat at the counter, seated on one of the barstools and watched as Rose began moving about and finding the necessary items to fix a quick meal. She was quickly booted out of the way by an older woman with salt and pepper colored hair. She wore a friendly smile and dangling earrings bobbed just past her short haircut.

"No, Rose dear, you've had a long journey. There's no sense in you waiting on everyone else. Sit down, rest... I'll take care of this." She patted Rose on the back, and with a slight look of uncertainty, Rose sat down beside Jason.

The older woman smiled at him and introduced herself.

"The name's Anna Williams. I'm one of the researchers here at the PRDI. I've known Rose since she was a girl. Helped her through a bit of

hard times more than once before.” She gave a wink to Rose, who smiled politely. She regarded Jason with the same soft smile. “And it’s a pleasure to meet you finally, Jason.” Jason merely lifted an eyebrow.

“She’s a researcher?” Jason asked when the woman turned her back and was out of earshot. She didn’t carry the were-scent, and he was pretty sure she wasn’t a half-blood. “She looks more like a grandmother.”

Rose gave him a sharp jab in the ribs to make him shut up, but he could see laughter playing in her eyes. Something had changed in Rose’s demeanor since they had set foot on PRDI property. She seemed happier, like she was back home again.

And it made Jason feel better to know she wasn’t afraid for their lives anymore. Still...he would keep up his guard. Something about this place unsettled him...

“It’s haunted,” Anna said suddenly and broke the silence of the room. Jason, startled, glanced at Rose in disbelief. She fought back a smile.

“What? Haunted? What do you mean?”

Anna turned about halfway from the stove where she stood, stirring something in a pot. She gave a wistful, knowing smile, but said nothing and turned back.

“Wait, what do you mean?” He turned to Rose. “What does she mean?”

Rose laughed. “Anna is telepathic. She can read thoughts at times. Just what were you thinking?”

Jason felt a flush come to his face. He had almost forgotten the PRDI was full of people with unusual powers. Not just werewolves populated their files and rooms here.

“It was nothing,” he quickly answered. He wished the food would be done, because then they could eat and get out of here. He didn’t like the thought of someone inside his head.

Anna chuckled. “He was thinking this place seemed unsettling. I just simply told him it was haunted. There are spirits moving about these walls.”

She glanced at Jason. Her blue eyes sparkled. "And don't worry. I won't read your mind any more, if it makes you uncomfortable."

As she spoke these words, Jason felt a chill run up his spine and he chose to ignore it. He was thankful when the door opened and someone entered to veer the course of the conversation. He had hoped it to be Glen, or even Gavin, but it was a young boy that entered.

He was no more than seventeen or eighteen years old, and his unkempt blonde hair fell across his face in a shaggy style fashionable in many bands and on television. He regarded them at first with suspicion. Rose stared at him with wide eyes. He looked familiar to her.

"Uh...hi," he said as he lingered in the doorway. He gave a shake of his head, as if trying to gather his thoughts, then remembered what he had come for. He turned to Anna.

"Mr. Newark says after you finish in the kitchen, he wants to talk to you about something. Then, we can start the meeting." His gaze left the older woman, and he turned back to Jason and Rose. He looked at them as if he had never seen anything like them before.

Anna nodded her head "All right. Thank you, Aidan."

She lifted her eyes to the boy, smiled and gestured toward Rose and Jason with a slight inclination of her head. "Have you met our guests? This is Rose, the young woman I was telling you about earlier. And this is her fiancé, Jason."

Anna smiled reassuringly at the boy, and then addressed Rose. "This is Aidan Marks. You never got to meet him before you left the PRDI. This is Lisa's boy."

Aidan looked down at the floor, and Rose's throat locked up. No wonder he had seemed so familiar. He looked just like Lisa.

Anna went on. "There was so much mystery surrounding his mother's death. He's been staying at the main PRDI building until it can all be worked out." She turned to check on the food.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room, and it was Aidan who spoke and broke the silence.

“So you guys are werewolves, right?”

“Right.” Jason finally spoke up. His voice was harsh and cold.

Aidan looked as if he regretted having said anything. He quickly found something to cover it up with. “Well, that’s cool... I’m not a werewolf. I’m a precog.”

“Precog?” Jason said in that same cold tone. He raised both eyebrows.

“Precognitive. It means he can see the future, on occasion,” Anna explained. She looked over at Rose. Rose felt nervous. She fidgeted with the hem of her shirt. Here was the son of someone she was suspected to have killed. She didn’t know how to react, but finally, for the sake of being polite, she spoke.

“It’s nice to meet you, Aidan.” She finally choked out.

“Right...” the young boy said, nodding. Rose’s tension eased only slightly. He looked at her, curiously, but not accusingly. She was grateful for that.

Anna had taken the pot off the stove and the scent of fresh beef stew drifted through the air. Rose’s stomach gurgled loudly.

“It’s out of a can, but still good stuff,” Anna said as she placed bowls and spoons on the table in front of them. “Enjoy. I’ll leave you two. I had better see what Gavin wants. See you shortly.”

She left with a smile. Aidan lingered a moment, as if debating on something. He soon turned and left. Jason and Rose were once more alone.

“And you lived with these people?” he asked incredulously. He ladled out a huge helping of the beef stew into Rose’s bowl, and then into his own. “How the fuck did you survive here?”

“It wasn’t all that bad.” Rose answered. She let the thoughts of Aidan drift away, for now. She toyed with her food at first, then waited for it to cool. She watched Jason as he had already started to devour his meal.

“What exactly do you have against the PRDI, anyway? Every time I bring it up, you act with incredible hostility toward them. Why is that?”

Jason let out a sound like a scoff, but his mouth was full. He chewed his food and swallowed before he answered. His tone was scornful and questioning.

“Maybe because I don’t like the idea of anyone keeping tabs on our kind?”

“Oh don’t be so sarcastic, love,” Rose pleaded.

Jason was amid another bite of his stew, and he dropped his spoon back into the bowl. He turned his gaze to her.

“Ever think maybe it’s not such a good idea have such detailed files, stored away where any jackass can find them?”

“Jason, it’s not like that...”

“Rose, listen to me... These are good people, in their own way. They helped you, and I am thankful for that. Without them, you wouldn’t be here now...but I look at it on another side as well. If it hadn’t been for them, you probably would’ve never been attacked.”

Rose felt her appetite waning away. She set her jaw and forced herself to stare into his eyes. “You make it sound as if they organized the attack.”

Jason finished another bite of food, then pushed the bowl back with such force that it almost toppled off the counter.

“Maybe they did,” he answered coldly as he stood. “Maybe they didn’t exactly pull the trigger and maybe they aren’t the ones following us, but they are the reason for it all. They did it.” He was out of the room a moment later, and Rose was alone.

Tears stung at her eyes and she fought to hold them back. She stared at the steaming bowl of stew in front of her without really seeing it, without really wanting it. She pushed it away and folded her arms on the counter. Her head rested in the crook of her elbow.

Why did Jason always have to be like this? Always so cold, and distant, and always quick to point the fingers of blame. The PRDI was not the blame. They would never have organized something like this. It wasn’t their fault.

Some members of the PRDI were less than credible, she had to admit that. A few members in the past had even gone as far as to hurt students, but Rose knew Gavin and Anna were not among those. They were legitimate...but what if it had been someone else?

Quickly her mind raced to search out those from her past that might've had a grudge against her. None came to mind. Rose closed her eyes and let out a sigh.

She didn't know what to do. Jason was being impossible, and her one moment of happiness had been shattered when he had opened his wounding mouth. She resigned, finally, to give him some time to cool off. After a while, he would see things differently and he wouldn't be so hard to deal with.

At least she hoped.

Rose pulled her bowl forward and forced herself to eat a few bites of the stew, though it tasted rubbery and unappetizing in her mouth. She couldn't face them all and recount her tale on an empty stomach, after all.

* * *

It was late afternoon. The sun was setting, and its light shone through the large window panes of the meeting room. The room had once been a library, back when Rose and Glen had stayed here, but now it had been refurnished and all the old books had been moved to another part of the house.

In their place was a long table, made out of a beautiful red cedar that gleamed from the overhead lights. A few armchairs rested here and there, with fat cushions ready to swallow one's body.

Jason found the room with little problem, and upon entering found the others were already there and waiting. Glen was seated closest to the door, dressed now in a black sleeveless shirt and jeans. Much to Jason's appreciation, Glen had several different guns and rifles laid out upon the table. Jason resisted the urge to inspect them.

Gavin was there, seated at what Jason was sure was the head of the table. The older man had his hands folded in front of him, and he had been deep in conversation with the woman, Anna. They had gone silent when he had entered.

The boy, Aidan, sat across from Glen and held a gun Jason recognized as a Highpoint 380. Another woman was in the room, but Jason hadn't had the pleasure of being introduced to her just yet. Her dirty blonde hair was long and straight and hung down to the middle of her back, and she was gaunt and thin. Her eyes held a sunken look to them. Jason thought she almost looked like a skeleton. Of all the people in the room, she was the only one near the window, smoking a cigarette. She looked at Jason briefly as he entered, then nonchalantly looked back to the outside world.

"That didn't take long," Anna remarked, smiling gently at Jason.

"I wasn't as hungry as I had thought," he lied, for a moment forgetting the woman could read minds. He immediately wished he had not stretched the truth, but Anna didn't appear to notice anything amiss.

"Rose will be along soon," he added as he took his seat.

"Good," Gavin answered and stood up. He gestured toward the blonde woman. "I don't think you've run into Mary just yet. Mary Robbins, this is Jason."

Her eyes turned back once again, and she nodded in silent greeting.

"You'll have to forgive her." Gavin spoke with a smile that almost made Jason sick. "She's not very social."

"I can relate," Jason said under his breath, but Gavin continued.

"She's the head of our research department, going on five years now. She's the best there is at organizing and finding out what we need to know. Very much into her work."

"I have nothing else to do with my life," she said. Her tone was just a little bitter. She moved away from the brightness of the sun and took a place at the table.

Jason scanned each person in turn as they all took their places. Silence once more went through the room. It was an uncomfortable

silence, and Jason felt eyes boring into him. He lowered his gaze to the table. He wished a hole would just open up in the floor and devour him.

Unfortunately, his wish didn't come true, and he was forced to endure the stares. He took a deep breath, ready to say something when the door opened.

It was Rose. She paused in the doorway, much like Aidan had earlier that evening. All eyes turned to her, and Jason was briefly thankful they were no longer gaping at him. But he felt for Rose. Her cheeks flushed, and she looked incredibly nervous.

"Hello, everyone. I'm sorry I kept you waiting..." She spoke with a confidence Jason knew she didn't feel. She forced a smile and deliberately avoided eyes with him. Jason turned to Gavin as he began to speak.

"It's quite all right, Rose. Please, take a seat." He gestured with one hand and indicated the empty chair next to Jason. She took it and nervously sat.

"Everyone knows the gist of why we are here, but not everyone knows the details," Gavin explained. His eyes roamed over each person in turn. His face was stern and serious.

"Jason and Rose were attacked a short time ago by several unknown hunters."

Rose lowered her gaze as everyone once more looked toward them. However, there were no uncertain whispers or accusatory glances. There were no pitying stares. Everyone seemed very direct and businesslike. Mary had even taken out a notebook and pen and was jotting notes.

"Rose, I want you to recount the events of the past few days to everyone here so we can begin our investigation." Gavin turned his kind eyes to her and offered a reassuring smile. "Take your time and try to be as detailed as possible."

Rose nodded and glanced at Jason for perhaps the first time since entering the room. He didn't offer her any smiles of reassurance, but she knew his support was there.

And then she began...

Chapter Eighteen

It took Rose more than a half hour to recount all the events of the past few days. A few times, Jason had to take over when Rose was overcome with too much emotion. But very soon, every one in the room was caught up to speed on what had happened.

“And that’s basically how we ended up here,” Rose finally finished. The room was filled with a stunned silence.

Tears glistened in Anna’s eyes, and she wiped away one of them with a handkerchief. Gavin’s face showed a deep amount of seriousness and a line was creased between his eyebrows. Glen’s gaze rested on the twin Berettas in front of him while Aidan stared with rapt interest.

Mary had been and still was taking notes. She had taken down the names of Marcus Brown and Davis Miller, with every intention of doing a fair amount of background searching before the night was out. Her cold eyes returned to stare at Rose.

“Is that everything?” she asked in a matter-of-fact tone. Rose nodded and Mary scribbled a few final notes. She stood.

“I’ll get started on this right away.” She nodded to Gavin and the others and was the first to disappear out of the room. Rose was stunned by her brashness.

Anna gave a wave of her hand. “You have to forgive her. She literally lives to work. It keeps her occupied.”

Rose felt a slight bit of resentment for having her thoughts read just then, but she didn’t protest. She wasn’t entirely sure if Anna had picked up on her thoughts. In any case, she nodded.

“I know, Anna, I know.”

The older woman once more dabbed at the tears as she stood. "I can't believe poor Tiffany Clark. She was a wonderful student, a wonderful and gifted young woman. I don't blame you for what you did," she added to Rose. Rose didn't want to smile at the comment. She wasn't proud of what she had done. Instead, she lowered her gaze, and stared at the dark table top beneath her hands.

There was a murmur of agreement throughout the room. Anna turned to Gavin.

"You think it could be possible to set up a memorial service for her soon, like the one we did for Lisa?" she inquired. Aidan shifted uncomfortably at the mention of his mother's name.

Gavin scratched his chin with one long fingernail. "Perhaps. We should give things about a week or so to settle down before we start with anything like that. Let us find out more about these men and who they may be affiliated with."

Anna sighed and patted Rose on the shoulder as she passed by her on her way to the door. "It's a shame. Things like that should never happen..."

Anna left the room without saying much else. She was shortly followed by Glen and Aidan, who had packed up most of the guns and toted them out of the room.

Glen paused where Jason sat and handed him over one of the shiny black Berettas.

"It's fully loaded," he said, and handed over an extra clip. He flashed a grin when Jason gave him a puzzled look.

"I figured you needed something. Better to have it and not need it, than to not have it and need it," he explained.

"Thanks, man." Jason placed the gun on the table before him.

"Hey, don't mention it. I just hope you use it to kick some ass if the need calls for it." Glen shrugged and helped Aidan with the rest of the heavy weapons.

"Night, Rose, Gavin." He nodded at them as he began to exit. Aidan propped the door open with one foot. Rose looked up at them.

“Goodnight, Glen.” She gave him a small smile. He disappeared out the door.

Soon, it was just Rose, Jason and Gavin who remained. The older man leaned back in his seat and folded his hands on the table. He shook his head a bit and looked very grim. His gaze was fixed on the table.

Rose looked over at Jason. For some reason, though she wanted to leave and find the warmth of a nice bed, she lingered here. There was something that felt tense in the air. She didn’t want to leave it without knowing just why she felt that way.

Jason stood and pulled out the chair for her. She opened her mouth to say something, to ask him a question, but Gavin had already broken the silence.

“Jason Barnett...” His tone held a bit of wonder. He smiled as he leaned forward, examining Jason.

Jason didn’t like it, and he showed his displeasure by giving Gavin a glare. Rose didn’t even get a chance to reprimand him for the look.

“That’s my name.” he said callously.

Gavin didn’t seem to give notice to the tone and continued. “I know. I don’t seem to recall ever having come across any files with your name in the PRDI’s system.”

“No, I suppose you wouldn’t. I’m not listed in the PRDI’s system at all.”

“Love...” Rose tried to step in. She knew this was about to steer into dangerous waters, and she didn’t want that to happen. Gavin interrupted her.

“I see. Why is that?” Gavin smiled at him. The next words he spoke demonstrated his dislike for Gavin, this place and the Paranormal Research and Development Institute.

“Like I told Rose before, I don’t like any place keeping tabs on our kind. It’s like painting a big red bull’s eye right in the middle of one’s forehead. And that is precisely the reason why I hate the PRDI. I didn’t even want to come here, and if it hadn’t been for Rose...” Jason trailed off. He stood just behind her chair, and his hands gripped it very tightly.

“Love, please,” Rose tried again.

“Oh, painting a bull’s eye? That’s how you see it?” Gavin laughed. Both men chose to ignore her pleas.

“Jason, I’m afraid you don’t understand just what the PRDI is about. We are here to help others like us. We help to understand. We, in no way, act with hostility toward those we help. It would contradict our purpose. If you would allow us, we would gladly like to help you. Half-bloods are considered werewolves by PRDI standards.”

His glare increased as he stared at Gavin “How did you know that?” he asked.

Gavin chuckled softly and tapped the end of his nose. “Full-bloods can sniff out half-bloods. It’s something we are capable of. Sadly, though, half-bloods can’t smell other half-bloods. Something to do with a weak strand of the wolf gene.” There was a tone in Gavin’s voice Jason couldn’t quite place. Was it sarcasm?

He let out a scoff.

“Listen, I don’t fucking want a history lesson and I don’t fucking care if you know what I am. I’m just as much a werewolf as you or Rose or Glen. And thank you for the invitation, but I would rather not have that bull’s eye we talked about earlier being painted brightly on my forehead.”

Jason paused a moment, then got back on track with what he wanted to point out. “Perhaps most of your members nowadays don’t act with hostility, but what about outsiders? What about in the older days? The PRDI doesn’t exactly have great security measures if someone were to break in. And what if all along it had been an inside job?”

There was a moment of silence. Gavin appeared to be thinking heavily on something, as if he were taking Jason’s words to heart. Rose felt her nervousness of the situation deepen. She wanted to just get up and leave, but both men seemed too involved in their conversation now to back out now.

Jason’s eyes blazed, nearing the deadly golden they so often took when he was upset. Rose held her breath. She lifted a hand to brush hair from her face and found that she was trembling.

Gavin finally spoke, after the awkward silence. He had finally found the words he wished to say.

“Due to some...recent events, the PRDI has started implementing security measurements, perimeter cameras and the like on every safe house still in use, and at the main building—”

Jason was more than just a little caught off guard. “Wait, what do you mean by ‘recent events’?”

It had struck Rose strange as well. She looked at Gavin and blinked a few times. Gavin heaved a great sigh.

“It’s something we’ve been keeping quiet over the past year. Only the founders and heads of departments know of it. We didn’t want cause for concern to aggravate panic in everyone...”

“Whoa, wait...what the hell’s been going on? What haven’t you been telling anyone?” Jason demanded. His eyes had now gone fully golden. He was glaring and he had lifted his voice a few decibels.

Rose closed her eyes. She didn’t like where this was going, and it would be of no use for her to interrupt them yet again. They didn’t want to be interrupted.

Gavin glared back, though his eyes were without the harsh golden stare of Jason. “If you will please let me finish...”

“By all means,” Jason said between clenched teeth. He removed his hands from the back of the chair, and crossed his arms over his chest. An eyebrow lifted as he waited for Gavin’s answer.

His response came in a quiet and frank manner.

“A little more than a year ago, the PRDI began to have members on file disappear. Many were gone without trace, others were found dead...murdered.” He lifted one hand to stop Jason from interrupting. He wanted to finish what he was saying.

“This trend had gone on before, in the past, but it was very scattered. Occasionally, a werewolf family would be targeted and the parents would end up dead. It’s this reason why many of those werewolves in adulthood now have grown up without parents. Murder was not always the case.

Sometimes, there were accidents. Sometimes, people died of natural causes. We called it 'The Bad Generation'."

"Do you have a point to this?" Jason interrupted. His nostrils flared as he fought to contain his anger.

Gavin looked angrily at Jason, but did not say anything about being interrupted. He went on.

"The thing is...these attacks started becoming more frequent. Two or three werewolves were found dead each month, and none by natural causes. Some had been made to look like accidents, but it was not the case. They had been killed, pure and simple. They were being targeted."

A soft gasp exited from Rose's lips. She stared at Gavin in disbelief. Jason did likewise, but his disbelief was quickly overcome by his rage.

"This was happening more than a year ago? And you weren't doing shit about it?"

Gavin closed his eyes to avoid Jason's burning gaze.

"Yes, we knew, but we saw no cause to alarm others. We were afraid it would set out a panic. We were afraid it would get out to the media, and, if you haven't realized yet, the PRDI is undergoing a serious shortage of funds as of late. They want to close us down—"

"And they fucking should!" Jason exploded. He took several steps forward, so he was near Gavin's chair. The man slid his seat back to compensate for the loss of distance between them. He stared at Jason with matching yellow eyes. He allowed Jason to continue.

"You could've been warning people! You could've been telling them! You could've saved lives...but keeping your organization in business is more important than the people you try to help, apparently."

Tears streaked down Rose's cheeks. She was frightened. She stood up as well. Her trembling hand rested on the back of her chair. She kept her distance from the angry men.

"Please, Jason..." She spoke in a small timid voice. Jason did not hear her.

“Jason, we were trying to help people without getting involved. We don’t jump into conflicts. We are here to resolve them.”

“You seem to be doing a damn good job of it.” Jason answered sarcastically as he advanced a few more steps.

“Stop it!” Rose shouted. Jason stopped where he was, and both men looked at her.

“Please, both of you, stop fighting. It’s not worth it. Mistakes were made...things happen...”

Jason took a deep breath, but he would not be calmed.

“Rose, I’ve been telling you all along. The PRDI is not a safe place to be associated with. Anyone can have access to their files. Anyone could be sneaking in. Anyone can be behind this.”

Then Gavin did something surprising. He agreed with him

“He’s right, Rose.” His eyes had changed back from yellow to their normal green. “I’m sorry we—I mean, I—kept this from you ...”

“Kept what from me?” Rose sniffed back her tears. She was just as confused as Jason was at the moment. He stood his ground, and both waited for Gavin to go on.

“With all the things that had been going on, we didn’t take it seriously...” Gavin received an angry snort from Jason at this comment, but he ignored him and continued. “But a few months ago...someone did break into the PRDI’s main building.”

“I fucking knew it!” He stared at Gavin, coldly.

“What happened?” she said in barely a whisper.

“Whoever it was...they took several files, all targeted on werewolves.” Gavin paused, and lifted his eyes to stare into her eyes. “Yours was among them.”

Rose felt like she did when Marcus had kicked her. She had lost the ability to breath. She gasped and felt suddenly weak in the knees. She was glad she had a hold of the table, so that she had support if she collapsed.

Jason was silent for a moment. His eyes had never left Gavin.

“What...did...you...say?” He spoke the words slowly, through clenched teeth. His jaw was tightened.

Gavin had no need to repeat himself because Jason had heard perfectly well.

“You knew this,” he growled, “and you didn’t think to warn us? To warn Rose?”

Gavin stood up from his seat, but he did so slowly enough that he made no sudden movements to spark Jason to lunge at him. He appeared calm, but his hands shook as he ran them down the front of his neat suit.

“At the moment, we had no idea it was a serious problem. The PRDI made mistakes and we learn from them.”

“But not the right lessons.” Jason closed the distance between them, and now stood face to face with Gavin. The older man stared at him with very little fear in his eyes.

Rose wanted to bolt for the door. She didn’t want to see what she was sure was about to happen here. More tears spilled from her.

“What happened is done and over with. You are here now, and safe... I would be thankful for that if I were you...” Gavin said calmly.

“When morning comes, we are out of here,” Jason said. His voice was low now. And it was dark, like Rose had heard earlier. It was even scarier now that Jason had the opportunity to use it to the fullest extent. “We are leaving as soon as possible. It was a mistake for me to bring us here.”

“So be it...” Gavin replied. “Would you be so kind as to get out of my face now?”

“Gladly. I’m sick of looking at you, and sick of this fucking place.”

With that, Jason turned and grabbed the loaded gun and extra clip from the table. As he did so, his golden eyes fell upon the crying Rose. There was no compassion in his eyes, no resemblance of the man she had fallen in love with. He was something dark and something dangerous now, and if he wasn’t stopped...

Rose shuddered to think what he would do.

But he exited the room with flair. The wooden door behind him slammed hard enough so that the paintings and wall fixtures jarred with the force. His footfalls echoed as he stomped down the hall.

Rose turned her teary eyes onto Gavin. His eyes were now apologetic.

“I’m sorry that you had to endure that, Rose. If it’s any consolation, it was mostly my fault. I egged him on.”

But she had no answer to give him. Instead, she nodded once and exited through the door. She barely saw where she was going through blurred eyes. The hall was empty. Jason had already disappeared.

And Rose prayed he was not about to do what she feared. She raced down the hall, in vain hopes of finding him before it was too late...

Chapter Nineteen

The room had recently been renovated and it smelled of sawdust. No outside light penetrated through the thick curtains hanging over the huge windows. The sun had already set outside anyway, and the only light that could've even begun to seep into the room would be the yellow street lamp outside.

But Jason was thankful for the darkness. In the darkness, he could be alone. In the darkness, he could expand his anger. In the darkness, he was safe.

He remembered faintly a time when he was a child. The darkness had always been a comfort for him. His foster families had never truly wanted him, and kind words were never said to him. His solace had been found in the darkest hiding places in the house. A closet was a favorite choice.

Jason was too old now for such childish things, but seated alone in the darkness, with the lights off and the curtains closed, he was comforted. His eyes always adjusted so easily to the darkness, and he could make out the shapes simply. However, he closed his eyes and allowed even more of the darkness to enclose around him. He breathed it in.

His anger pulsed within. It was a deep-seated rage, rarely brought out and it was a dangerous part of him. He fought to control it...

He was having much difficulty doing so.

There was a small part of Jason that longed for this release. A part of him craved the tearing feeling his muscles would take on, the new and animalistic power that would race through him. He wanted the strength his wolfen side allowed him to borrow, even if for a brief time.

He wanted so much to let the caged wolf free.

But a rage shift was a dangerous and powerful shift. It was one hardly controlled because it was fueled by anger, by hate, and without thought. Sometimes, it was the human's anger that caused it, but this time he knew it wasn't the human. The wolf felt threatened.

Silently, Jason tried to quell the angered wolf within by taking deep breaths, but soon, his breaths became harder and more labored. A pain had begun to form in his ribcage, and he wrapped his arms tightly around himself as he groaned.

It was beginning.

"No..." Jason choked out, as if the verbal command could stop it.

It hurt him a lot. It was an unnatural pain, and unaccustomed to his body. Jason, for a moment, cursed the fact that it hurt. It had always caused him pain, and from what Rose had told him, that was normal for a half-blood.

It took longer, and nearly paralyzed him. He cursed it. Jason's concentration became totally and completely consumed in trying to stop the shift.

He could not let it happen here and now. There were too many people around, and Jason knew that once it happened, he would not be able to control what he would do, or who he would hurt.

And Rose could very likely be one of his targets.

With the image of his mate in his mind, he continued to fight the desire to let the wolf take over him completely. Rose seemed to be the only thing quelling this monstrous change. He saw her smiling face, her brown hair falling across her moonlit shoulder. He could almost smell her warm scent as he tried to calm down.

Jason remained where he was, crouched in one corner of the room, the farthest from the door he could get. He lowered his head. Loose strands of his hair fell into his eyes, and while he could not see a reflection of himself anywhere in the room, he was certain his eyes were golden, a sure sign of the change about to occur.

He had never have imagined the PRDI could be so careless. He had known they kept records of all werewolves, and to him, it was a bad idea. But he hadn't realized that attacks had occurred and nothing had been done.

Nothing at all.

And Rose's file had been stolen. They hadn't had the slightest inkling of a warning. No heads up of any kind...

The hunters were following them all because of something the PRDI had failed to do.

This is what had triggered so much anger within him. To think, the PRDI, the one place Rose felt safe and protected, was the cause of all their misery. It was contradictory. It was ironic.

It was irritating.

Jason hated the PRDI even more now, and he hated himself for bringing Rose here. He would stay true to his word. They would leave once the sun was up, and he would take his chances out there. The PRDI had "helped" them enough.

His thoughts of the PRDI added more fuel to the fire, and Jason found it more difficult with each passing minute to hang on to any resemblance of humanity. His control was quickly waning. The wolf was taking over.

Footsteps sounded outside the door and Jason, still hindered by the human form, leapt to his feet at the sound. He was quickly on guard and stared at the door. A very faint line shone at the crack beneath the door, and his wolfen gaze fixated on it for a long while.

A shadow moved to pass, but stood there and blocked the light from filtering in. A low growl issued from his human throat. He stood in an attack stance, ready to spring at whoever it may be.

It was the scent that alerted him to her presence, and it was soon coupled with the visage of her standing in the lighted doorway.

"Jason?" Rose softly inquired. She took a cautious step inside. Her form became shadowed by the brilliant light behind her.

Jason's growl softened and he finally went silent. His blazing eyes stared at her. He crouched once more, with his back hunched and a hand on the floor. The other still held the loaded Beretta and clip. He had forgotten to put them down. She had no trouble finding him in the darkness once she closed the door.

"Love?" She tried once more. Jason could smell the slight fear scent as it mingled with her personal odor. There was a hint of blood as well, and he breathed them all in.

And came to find he enjoyed it. He enjoyed the fear he caused.

Quickly, what was left of the human within him pushed that notion away. He didn't want to hurt her. Somehow, he found himself able to release the gun and its extra clip. They clattered to the floor.

The sound in itself was startling and Rose jumped. She faced him but kept her distance across the room. The fear scent became stronger.

Normally, Jason was not aggressive, even in wolf form, but he felt provoked. And now, his angry feelings manifested in such a way that he didn't care who he hurt, just as long as he could cause some pain.

No! The human part of him screamed, now trapped within where the wolf had once dominated. This could not be happening. He was going to hurt someone and he didn't want to.

Rose took a couple more steps closer and stared at him. "Jason..." she began, her voice remained low. "Please don't give into this." She knew as well as he did what would happen. Neither of them wanted it.

"Calm down," she continued and took one more step forward.

Rose wasn't his target and he knew. His target was the PRDI. His target was the hunters. He hated them. God, how he hated them.

The consuming feeling began to slowly fade. Perhaps the human logic was finally reaching him, or it was Rose's presence that was comforting. Whatever it was, he became calm. He let out a soft whimper and Rose was almost immediately at his side. She knelt upon the hard floor. Her arms embraced him tightly.

For the first time ever in their relationship, Jason began to cry. Rose became his shoulder to cry on and he buried his face against her neck.

His tears wet her skin. Rose remained silent, with her head bent over his. Her hands smoothed down his back. Her hair fell over him as if to create some shield to protect him from this place.

All the accumulated stress, fear and worry now came from him in salty tears. He sniffed once or twice and pulled back from her to wipe his blurry eyes. When his still golden eyes locked onto hers, there was a silent understanding, a wordless exchange of thoughts.

“It’s been so long since that’s happened...” He looked and sounded tired, and Rose knew he wouldn’t readily admit it. She gave a bleak smile.

“It’s okay.”

Those two words were all it took to make him fall silent. As he looked at her, his eyes began to change and became their normal, brilliant blue. They were bloodshot, however, and swollen around the eyelids from the crying. It had tired him out.

Jason stood to his feet, Rose rising along with him. He towered over her in the darkness. He felt dazed and Rose gently took his upper arm and led him to the bed. He complied by sitting there.

He watched her for a moment as she removed his boots and placed them on the floor beside the bed. He fell back against the clean coverlet and closed his eyes. He was tired, sleepy, and his near shift had taken a lot of his energy. He wanted to sleep.

Jason let out a sigh as Rose removed his socks, and then removed her own footwear. He lay there in silence and listened to the rapid beating of his own heart. It had been a close call.

His thoughts were interrupted when Rose climbed over him and into the bed. He could feel her soft hair brush across his neck and face as she moved her hands along his sides and lifted his shirt up. It was discarded on the floor with his socks and boots.

Jason opened his eyes and stared up at her. She leaned over him, looked at him. Her eyes sparkled.

“What are you doing?” he asked softly. Rose smiled gently and gave something of a shrug.

“Nothing.”

Jason fell back against the bed again. His eyes once more closed. Rose’s warm body pressed against him. He didn’t know what she was doing because he fell in and out of consciousness. When she leaned down, bare flesh touched his naked chest. Her ring necklace was warm from her body when it brushed light across his nipple. He opened his eyes with a slight start and began to sit up. Rose pressed against his shoulders, pushing him back.

“What—” he started to ask, but Rose silenced him with a kiss. He kissed back, regardless of the slight confusion hovering over him.

When she pulled back, Jason stared up at her, bewildered. She smiled but it was a different smile. It was gloomy.

“We’ve had so many bad things happening to us lately, love...” she whispered, one of her hands softly brushed pieces of his hair away from his face. Her smile faded, and she tilted her head so her hair fell down past her shoulder and against her bare breast. Wisps barely reached her pink nipple. Jason was transfixed.

“I know...” he said softly, but she silenced him again, this time by placing one finger against his lips.

“I want something good to happen to us, even if it’s only for a moment. There’s been too much stress and too much pain...” Her eyes matched her previous smile. They too were gloomy, and no longer sparkled. They had become a sullen grey, and she stared down at him, as if pleading silently for something.

“Rose, you don’t have to,” Jason protested. He tried to rise from the bed, but Rose prevented him from doing so.

“But I *want* to,” she stressed. “Even if it’s only for one moment.”

“What are you talking about?” Jason asked vaguely. He was still disoriented from the close call. Rose moved her hands along his chest. She curled her fingers just lightly in the dark hair there. She said nothing more and began planting the smallest of kisses along his exposed throat.

Jason let out a deep breath and did not argue anymore. Her touch was soft and gentle, so very complimenting to her personality. He allowed her to do what she wished.

Her fingers trailed slowly down his sides, tickling just along his ribs. He let out a short laugh, which, in turn, caused Rose to smile happily for a brief moment. Her kisses continued to trail lower, along his chest, and her hands moved across his stomach to the button of his jeans. Soon, his jeans and underwear had joined the pile of clothes growing on the floor.

Jason let out a guttural moan as Rose's slender hand circled around his hardness. It glided effortlessly along it. He took in a deep breath and held it as she teased him. When he looked down at her, she was still smiling.

She removed her hand from him so she could undo her own pants. As she did, Jason watched her. He sat up on his elbows. He lifted an eyebrow.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked again. Of all the things they should be doing, preparing for an attack, keeping on guard, and Rose was attempting to seduce him.

Not attempting, Jason had to tell himself, *but succeeding*.

Rose paused when she had removed her pants. Now she stood in just her panties, looking at him. Her hair was already a tangled mess but it framed her face beautifully. She bit on her lip a moment, uncertainly.

"Why must you question me?" she asked softly. She sounded a little hurt. "I love you, Jason. I want to make love to you. I want to share a moment with you. Tomorrow, we may not have this chance. Tomorrow could be the end." Tears glistened in her eyes and he sat up more.

"Don't cry..." he whispered. "That's not true. Nothing is going to happen, Rose. Tomorrow, we'll go. We'll get out of here and find another safe place."

Rose sighed and she closed her eyes. "There are no safe places, Jason. This was our only option. Where will we go?"

Jason thought on it while he watched her. She slipped off the panties and Jason searched her nude form. Her hair was dark above her womanhood, curling very slightly. He knew it was soft to the touch and longed to feel it suddenly.

"I don't know," he was able to say. Rose tilted her head as she looked at him. "I'll keep you safe Rose, I promise."

"You've already promised that," she said, forcing a little smile onto her face. "Please keep it..."

A bare sheen of sweat already glistened on her body. She climbed over him and pressed against him as another kiss began. It was a deep and passionate kiss, so like the ones they had when first dating. He gave into it and his hands ran along her back and sides. He loved the feel of her smooth skin against his palms and fingertips.

Her womanhood pressed against him, already wet and hot, and Jason once more let out a moan. Throbbing against her, he lifted his hips up and pressed himself to her in a silent but not so subtle hint of his desire. It was Rose's turn to moan.

She broke the kiss and gave him a playful and tender nip to the bottom lip.

"Watch it, you." She grinned down at him. "I'm in charge for now."

He grinned back. His hands snaked behind her and ran along her ass. The kiss quickly resumed with more passion and desire than before.

The teasing went on for a while and Jason enjoyed every moment. He liked it when she was in charge every once in a while. He smiled to himself, eyes closed.

Now and again, he did something to take Rose off guard, to cause her to moan or gasp, and when he did, he grinned at her. He wasn't afraid of any reprimands. And besides, she was enjoying as much as he was.

When finally, he entered her and she began the grinding dance, moving her hips in just the right rhythm, the worries and fears of the past few days started to melt away. Jason's hands supported the small of her back. Her long hair just barely reached his fingertips as she leaned

her head back. A sigh of ecstasy passed her lips. Her head tilted back, the necklace at her throat glinted softly.

The movements continued. Pleasure grew then ebbed as she prolonged it for a little while longer. Jason leaned his head back as the final wave of passion overcame him. He let out a groan and pulled Rose closer to him. A moment later, she came. Her body shuddered, and her fingernails dug into the flesh of Jason's shoulder. She bit hard on her bottom lip to suppress her moan. A small trickle of blood dripped down her lip. He panted heavily and stared as she licked it away.

It was over almost too quickly. They lay there, sticky with sweat and fluid from one another. Rose rested her head against his shoulder and a sigh left her. It wasn't a content sigh and Jason sat up on his elbow to look at her.

"What is it?" he said softly. His hand smoothed wet strands of her hair away from her face. Rose shrugged and rolled onto her back. She stared at the ceiling. She sighed again, deeper this time. She fully exhaled so her chest lifted and fell quite visibly. Jason watched her breasts rise and fall and then returned his attention to her face. She looked quite sad.

"I don't know," she finally said after a short period of silence. She glanced at him. He could see the uncertainty in her eyes, but also drowsiness. She wanted to sleep more than talk.

Something was bothering her, but she didn't want to, or could not say just what it was. Jason really didn't want to push the issue further. He lay on his side and pulled her close. One arm wrapped around her waist and this time his head rested against her shoulder. A white scar lined her shoulder. It had not yet fully disappeared, but Jason knew it eventually would. He forced himself not to look at it.

"Okay, love. Let's go to sleep then."

Jason felt drowsiness lingering on his consciousness as well and he started to drift. He made himself snap awake and he looked at Rose. Her eyes were closed, and her breathing was slow. She was already asleep.

A soft smile tugged on the corners of Jason's lips, but it went away as his thoughts began to drift. As he stared at her sleeping form, he realized the potential danger of what could've happened. He felt a sting of regret and anger at himself.

He looked down at the hand that rested on Rose's stomach, at the perfectly formed human limb. To think, it could've become something deadly and razor sharp with claws. Ruin could've come so easily to her, and the others here.

Jason hadn't voiced it, but he was thankful she had entered when she did. It seemed she was the only thing that could've stopped him. He closed his eyes and sighed. He didn't know just what he would do without her.

As sleep began to overtake him, Jason made a silent vow: He would not risk hurting anyone else unless it was the goddamn hunters following them. He would not risk losing his mate, his whole world. He would not risk becoming the mindless beast Hollywood and fiction played their kind to be. He would not sink to that level.

With that thought in his mind, Jason slipped off into an actual sleep, for the first time in days, but it was hardly content.

Chapter Twenty

He hated the neighborhood with a passion. The pristine sidewalks and perfectly expensive looking houses on the block made Davis feel sick. Anger and jealousy curled within him. How quickly he was reminded of the drudgery and poverty stricken upbringing he had endured. He avoided looking out the windshield.

He hated the people who lived in these places. All snobs. They never had to want for anything. He tried not to grimace. It didn't look like a place the wolves would run to.

It didn't make much sense.

"We traveled all the way here, for what? This? Are you sure this is the right place, Simon? It looks too..." He was at a loss for the final word, but he was sure it would be understandable what he was talking about.

Simon sat in the passenger seat of the nonmoving van, and he was silent for now. Eric remained in the driver's seat and it was his large hands the encompassed the steering wheel now. Both stared out the window.

Claire still sat across from Davis. He watched her as she looked toward the front, out the window. She stared out at the neighborhood as if it didn't bother her. Davis quickly reminded himself they were from different backgrounds; she was probably used to places like this.

"Davis, you, of all people, should know their...kind," Simon spoke the last word with a bitter distaste, "can be anyone, anywhere. They can be middle class factory workers, poor drunken slob on the street, or rich and debonair aristocrats. It doesn't matter."

Davis rolled his eyes, thankful Simon didn't look back at him at that moment. Claire watched him out of the corner of her eye, but resumed her typing, apparently trying to not seem interested. Eric continued to smoke on his half gone cigarette.

"But why here?" Davis asked. He lifted an eyebrow just a bit. The Beretta in his hand felt warm because he had been holding it a long while. He looked down at it as he waited for Simon's reply.

"The PRDI safe house is just there." Simon pointed it out. It was a large stone two-story building, about a half a block down and across the street from them. Its vast front lawn was illuminated by a few spotlights. The grass looked freshly mowed and the sidewalk out front well cared for.

Davis had to sit up and strain his head to get a clear view of it. His eyes did not go wide, but instead narrowed a bit. He sat back down and resumed playing with his gun.

Claire too had looked at the house, and she had to admit she was impressed. She had been reading the files Simon had thrown at her, and she had gathered that the PRDI was an under-funded institute, quickly become obsolete in this day and age. People had lost faith in it apparently. Claire could understand why.

She didn't believe much about the supernatural. She still had not been given any proof to support anyone's claims on werewolves. But, nevertheless, she was involved here, and it couldn't be helped. It wasn't like she could exactly get out. As Simon had illustrated earlier, she would have to be dead to do so.

This shit was seriously wrong.

Claire gave a glance at Davis, who didn't notice her, and shook her head. She resumed her typing on the word processing program. She had a few more things to add to her journal.

It was without a doubt incomplete, and Claire had a feeling she would be adding to it for a very, very long time.

As Claire continued her journaling, she pretended not to listen in on the conversation. The words idly left her fingertips. Her eyes never really focused on the screen.

“Just how are we supposed to get in there? A place like that has got to have security systems...” Davis said.

A chuckle sounded from Simon. Eric grinned and threw a couple of disapproving glares at Davis now and again, but he never said a word. His dark eyes now focused on the building down the street.

“We’re going to open the door and step in. It’s as simple as that.”

There was a pause and Davis opened his mouth to object. Claire even glanced at Simon with a disbelieving look. He continued before either of them could say anything.

“The PRDI doesn’t deal much with security,” he explained. “They’ll probably have a few cameras and the like and possibly alarms, but nothing more. They’re under-funded, as you well know, and these things aren’t within their budget.” A grin spread across his face. “It makes things a hell of a lot easier for us.”

Davis scoffed and spoke under his breath. “No shit.” He resumed ejecting his clip and snapped it back into the gun. He had done this over and over again, and it was becoming annoying to Claire.

No one said anything else for a long while, and Claire was actually thankful for the break in arguments. She watched Simon as he stared out the window and through the haze of his cigarette smoke, she could see a few lights on in the upper floors of the building. A few shadows moved into the light now and again, but that was all she could see.

Davis’ clip slipped out from the pistol again and it went back into the slot with an audible click. Claire threw a glance in his direction, but she said nothing. She knew he, just like her, did not want to be here. This was not the situation either of them had thought they were getting into. Claire was grateful that she hadn’t gone through what he did. She couldn’t even imagine what that must be like, murdering someone unwillingly, because someone made them, so they could fit in.

Davis paused in his nervous tick to smooth back his dark hair from the wound on his forehead. Hair stuck to the remaining adhesive left behind from when he removed the bandage. He noticed her stare and he lifted an eyebrow. His grey eyes stared coldly at her. It was as if he was daring her to say something. It was almost as if he knew what was on her mind and silently egged her to challenge him with some smartass remark.

Claire didn't say anything, but removed her gaze from him. She now focused on Simon and her stare became icy cold as she glared at the back of his head.

She was really beginning to hate him. Simon was a cold-hearted bastard. He was manipulative, abusive and deceitful. Claire had not yet forgotten the threat he made earlier, and she had to admit, she was scared. He was unstable, anyone could see that.

But why? Why was he doing this? Claire couldn't figure it out, no matter how much she racked her brain. She couldn't figure it out.

"It's all fucking stupid," Davis said suddenly. All eyes in the van turned toward him. He replaced the magazine into the Beretta one last time with a hard slam and set it aside roughly. His gaze was locked onto Simon.

"You have something to say, Davis?" Simon inquired. There was a touch of humor in his voice.

"Yeah, I have something to say. I think this is all fucking stupid. We could've killed them back at the hotel, but no, you don't want them dead. Why the *fuck* not, Simon? It's what you're good at, isn't it? Killing others, hurting people? It seems right up your alley. I'm surprised you passed up the opportunity."

No one spoke, and Davis was allowed his rant. Simon watched with an amused expression, whereas Claire was shocked at his sudden outburst. He went on.

"Why do you want them alive? You've been staring at those files for the past few weeks, talking of nothing else but your 'plan'. What fucking

plan? Why don't you fucking clue us all in on it? Maybe then we can have a tiny bit of insight into that complicated mind of yours."

Davis stopped there. He had become red in the face, and his eyes shone brightly at Simon. Claire noticed flecks of brown and gold mixed in with the grey hue. She blinked a few times. She expected Simon to explode, to become angry and try to hurt someone. She even braced herself for it and her body tensed.

But Simon's face contorted into a smile. It surprised Davis, and he narrowed his eyes. Simon licked his lips before speaking. He twisted around in his seat with his gaze keen on Davis.

"Do you really want inside my head, Davis?" he asked, but did not wait for a response. Instead, he remarked in a cool voice, "I was beginning to wonder when you were going to grow a backbone and join the rest of the vertebrates."

He said nothing more and turned his attention back to staring out the window. Eric did likewise, but not before shaking his head at Davis. Davis was at a loss for words. He turned to Claire as if to ask, "what the fuck just happened there?"

Claire could only answer with a shrug. Simon had made a very valid point. Did they really want to know what he was thinking? Partly yes, Claire figured. She wondered what he was up to, why he did things the way he did. Another part of her screamed *no!* She was afraid Simon's mind was some deep, dank cavern which upon entering, they would never return unscathed.

Davis took a deep breath, grabbed his gun and began once more to nervously remove the clip. For the first time, she noticed his hands were shaking. She looked away and back down at the computer screen before her.

Eric and Simon talked quietly in the front but she tuned out the conversation. It was tedious waiting, and Claire knew this was the calm before the storm. It frightened her when she thought that.

What was going to happen next? What was the next step in Simon's plan?

Quickly, she began typing, to make herself look incredibly busy. Hopefully, they wouldn't bother or question her. She just wanted to be alone right now with her thoughts.

Davis stared at the gun in his hand, but not really seeing it. It had become a blurred thing of plastic and metal in his hands. He was aware of his shaking hands, but he couldn't stop them. Ever since that night, whenever he held a firearm, his hands would shake...

The drugs had played a part in consoling him in the months after it had happened, but they could never really take it all away. Something fought at his will, and no matter how many of the pain numbing pills he took, they never seemed to dull it out. By now, he should've been dead, overdosed months ago.

I was lucky, Davis guessed with a slight sneer. He wondered when Sean and Michael were going to get here. He hated waiting. He would much rather get it over and done with.

Davis pushed more of his hair away from his face and threw the gun aside, now annoyed at the device. He leaned forward, his face in his hands and took a stifling breath of stale air.

Simon was one fucked up guy, there was no denying that. Eric seemed to be an ass kisser, always there to follow orders obediently and back up Simon if necessary. Claire was the only person in the van that seemed normal to him. She was okay. She hadn't laughed at him when he had told her his secret, and for that, Davis was grateful.

He watched her through the spaces between his fingers and wondered just what she was doing all that time on the laptop. He caught her once or twice looking at him, and he noticed her dark eyes were sad and her face was pale. Her golden bangs framed her forehead and tangled tendrils of it fell by her ears. She looked about like he felt.

Davis took comfort in at least one thought: He wasn't alone in his pain and misery, and at least he had someone to share his thoughts with, if she would allow him.

He thought on it more. After all this was over and done with, maybe he would ask her out and talk to her more about what happened.

For now, it was impossible. But maybe one day...

Maybe...

* * *

Something was not right. Whatever it was woke Jason from his slumber. When he opened his eyes, he was greeted once more by the comforting darkness. The room was silent.

He did not wake up with a cold sweat, his heart was not racing, and he wasn't anxious, like he had just suffered through a nightmare. Something was not right. Jason sat up in the bed. Rose shifted her weight and got comfortable with the pillow next to him. He watched her a moment. The shadows played on her white skin and gave it an unnatural pallor. He glanced around the room.

Something had woken him and it was something unpleasant. Jason exhaled and let his eyes continue their search of the room. Nothing was amiss. He breathed in the cool air. Nothing smelled different.

So what was it? He had no clue, but he was awake now and sleep was not going to come back anytime soon.

There was no clock in the room to tell him how long he had been asleep. He could've been asleep for a few minutes, or a few hours. Languidly, he dressed in just his jeans. His bare toes flexed upon the carpet. His eyes followed the movements of his pale shadow on the wall. Everything seemed all right, but it wasn't.

He could feel it.

Jason was sometimes given to these strange premonitions, but he had always put them aside, considering them just paranoia on his part. This time, it felt different. It was like the feeling he had gotten when he felt Rose was in trouble. It was just as intense.

He didn't dismiss it as he normally would have, but he kept it fresh in his mind. Jason slipped out into the dimly lit hallway and closed the door softly behind him. The hardwood floor in the hall was cold upon his feet, but Jason didn't mind. He moved quietly along the corridor.

A grandfather clock told him the time to be close to midnight. They had been asleep for quite some time. And he was hungry. His stomach growled at him and hunger pangs hit him quite suddenly.

Was that what woke me? Jason thought about it a moment as he descended the staircase and turned toward the hall leading to the spacious kitchen. No, it couldn't have been simply hunger. It was something more.

It was unsettling.

Jason pushed open the door to the kitchen and found it blissfully empty. He flipped on the switch and the room was flooded with ugly fluorescent light. It made his eyes burn a moment, and he closed them briefly so he could adjust.

He opened the door to the fridge and began to snoop around. He was impressed by what he found. The refrigerator was full of different sorts of foods. Fruits and vegetables filled the bottom crisper while cans of sodas and bottles of water lined the door. The other shelves had milk, lunchmeat, cheeses, assortments of all sorts of different foods...and meats!

Jason reached for the package of thawed steak and stared down at the juicy red t-bone in the plastic packaging and his mouth watered. He had found what he wanted and shut the door. His stomach growled louder.

He soon found a frying pan after banging around in the bottom of a few cabinets and the top of another. He had it on the stove at full heat in a matter of seconds. The steak sizzled as it began to warm. The juices filled the skillet and the smell drifted. Jason flipped it over once, and watched it brown around the edges. He couldn't take it anymore.

He didn't wait for the steak to cool but devoured it, extra rare as it was. It was heaven, and Jason even closed his eyes as he savored the

bloody meat. The steak was soon gone with nothing left but a cleaned bone and a warm, full feeling in Jason's stomach.

The dishes went into the sink for someone else to clean up. He stepped out of the kitchen, shutting the light off. The house was silent and it disturbed him. The halls were too cold, and for a brief moment, he wondered if Anna had been right about spirits inhabiting this place. Even as he moved silently as possible, the soft pattering of his feet echoed loudly, and he found himself glancing over his shoulders now and again.

This is foolish, he thought suddenly as he turned down a hallway near where the meeting happened earlier. He paused and turned his head in the faint light to the furnishings on the wall. So far, he had only glimpsed a few paintings here and there of PRDI founders and well-to-do members. A few landscape paintings sometimes caught his eye but nothing of real interest, but this hall was different.

Ancient weapons covered the wall. It was a vast collection of swords from several centuries and several continents. There were daggers, axes, crossbows and so much more. Ancient suits of armor stood guard near the wall. Jason's mouth dropped open.

How could I have missed this?

He took a step forward, his hand ready to reach out and grasp one of the black handled katanas. It looked ready to be removed from its wall mount, and Jason only wanted to hold it, feel its weight and admire the sharpened blade. It was beautiful.

"I wouldn't touch those." A voice sounded behind him, loud and powerful in the suffocating silence. Jason jumped and withdrew his hand, like a young child caught in the act of reaching into the cookie jar. He spun around and stood face to face with Gavin.

Gavin stood a few feet behind him, his hands behind his back. There was a smile on his face as he studied the swords as well. Jason looked him up and down and took one step away from the collection.

"You would be surprised how many times we've had to instill that rule into our younger students. They are always fascinated by weapons of destruction, aren't they? The rule still applies to the other non-

members as well.” His eyes flashed for a moment from the collection to Jason. “They are not to be touched.”

Jason lifted one eyebrow and changed the subject. “How did you find me?” His voice was tense.

Gavin laughed softly and the sound reverberated. “Young man, are you forgetting what I am? What you are? I simply had to follow my nose to find you. It wasn’t that difficult.” He spoke with such a calm air that it made Jason want to punch him all the more. He felt his face burn again. He hadn’t exactly considered that. He was always forgetting the little things.

“Well, you found me. You accomplished what you want, I assume?” Jason said back, mocking Gavin’s sickening sweet tone.

The other man went silent a moment. He moved his hands from behind his back and stared down at them for a moment. “No, actually. I wanted to apologize.”

Jason scoffed. “For what? For the PRDI being a bunch of incompetent assholes? You don’t have to apologize for that. I understand.” Again, that mocking and sarcastic tone sounded out his words.

Gavin’s temple throbbed as he clenched his teeth together. He seemed to be composing himself, thinking of just what to say. After a brief moment, he spoke. This time, he held out a hand.

“I want to start over. We got off on the wrong foot, and I want to set things right. Perhaps you were correct in the PRDI’s mistakes, but they are mistakes which we are learning from. Let us reconcile our differences for the time being and focus on the real issue here.”

Jason stared at Gavin’s open hand with a look of distaste. He didn’t extend his own, but merely stared. After a moment, he looked up and into Gavin’s eyes.

“I’ve resolved to get through this issue of the hunters before Rose and I move on,” Jason said. “But I have a few conditions.”

Gavin nodded and withdrew his hand. “Name them.”

A grin spread across Jason's face. "We'll let you get involved as much as you have to. I'll let you do your research on them and find out what you can. I don't want anything to do with the PRDI."

Gavin considered a moment and then nodded. Jason continued.

"My last condition...when it's time to confront the hunters, I want to do it. I want to be the one to give them hell for what they've done. I want no PRDI involvement there."

Gavin opened his mouth to protest and wet his lips. "You do realize that you may be outnumbered?"

"Of course I realize this, but I'm not afraid. This is personal, Gavin. I would rather fight a hundred hunters and die for what's right, than to sit aside and let someone do the fighting for me. It's personal. I want revenge."

Again, a look of concentration crossed Gavin's face and he seemed to consider. A long moment passed as Gavin moved forward. His eyes were not only fixated on Jason but on the weapon collection before him. When he did speak, his voice sounded tired, and a sigh exhaled with his words.

"What good is fighting for what's right, if you die in doing so?"

Jason stared at Gavin in shock. "People die for this country in times of war, isn't this the same thing?" The anger he had felt earlier quickly rose within him once more.

"We're not at war, Jason," Gavin said, and turned his green eyes upon him. "This fight isn't a war."

Jason's hands balled into fists and turned white under his rage. He felt a tightening in his muscles and his eyes burned. He knew they were golden with upset. He feared another close call coming on soon, and he didn't want to risk it. So in a very low voice, he said his final words to Gavin.

"It is to me."

And he turned and continued down the hall and away from the stunned man who stood there.

Chapter Twenty-One

A pair of headlights signaled an oncoming vehicle's approach at the end of the block and Simon was the first to notice. He opened the door, climbed out of the cab of the van and stood there, waiting. The vehicle was unfamiliar and unrecognizable and the occupants could not be seen clearly yet due to the blinding light.

They pulled to the curb opposite of the van. Eric stepped out and made his way around to open the sliding door to the van. A cold gust of air flew in and Claire shivered as she reached for her jacket.

The car was another luxury sedan, much like the one Davis had been driving earlier, but this one was much less flashy. The headlights and engine went off and the doors opened. Michael was the first to step out, doing so from the driver's seat. Several other men exited from the back and one from the passenger's seat. Claire didn't recognize any of them, but she watched them closely as she climbed out of the van.

Simon took a long drag from his cigarette, then dropped it to the asphalt under his boot and crushed it as he strode forward. His expression was unreadable.

Davis was the last to get out of the van. He stood with his back resting against the van and his arms crossed. He watched the others with a cold stare.

Simon met them halfway across the street.

"You're late," he said, addressing Michael. The young blond man blanched, and was about to stammer some sort of reply when one of his companions spoke up.

"That would be my fault, Simon," he answered. He was nearly as tall as Simon, with sandy brown hair combed back in a pretty boy style. He had no expression upon his face. Simon stared at him.

"Well, explain, Sean."

Davis's eyes moved over the other men gathered there. He knew none of them, but they looked like an unfavorable lot. They were all dressed in drab attire and several different weapons were held in their gloved hands. Just looking at them made Davis feel nervous. He shifted his gaze back to the two men talking, but not before catching a glimpse of Claire. She looked nervous as well.

"We were waiting for the other men, but they were on another...excursion." He spoke the last word with a grin, and much to Davis' and Claire's surprise, Simon grinned back.

"I was wondering where the rest of the party happened to be. No matter. I think we have enough." He thoughtfully rubbed his chin a moment. "Where are they now?"

"The last we heard they were tailing a group of them out of town."

Simon nodded. "And Alana?"

Claire gave a shake of her head and crossed her arms over her chest. It was cold out, and fast moving clouds blocked out the half moon and any stars that had been out. It looked like it was going to rain.

Sean chuckled. "You know her. She probably had a manicure appointment she didn't want to miss."

Simon didn't find much humor in it, but Sean quickly continued, "She's setting up the next rendezvous point. After we're done here, we'll call her up."

"All right." Simon didn't sound very pleased, but there was nothing he could do now. The plan was in motion. The setbacks would just have to be overlooked for now. "That'll have to do."

There was a tense air as everyone gathered themselves closer to Simon. He was about to go over their procedure for entering the place. Claire hung back, but Davis went forward, though unwillingly. They listened.

“This is how we’re going to do this: There will be two units. One will take the front entrance, the other takes the back. Once inside, we split up. We take the first floor. We check every room, every closet—”

It was Sean that interrupted. “What do we do if we run into one of them?”

Simon turned a deadly glare upon the man. “All your years of doing this and you have to ask what to do? Are you fucking stupid?”

Sean hesitated as he stared into Simon’s burning eyes. The others looked at him expectantly. He wet his lips.

“I only ask, Simon, because the PRDI doesn’t have just werewolves there. I should’ve asked, what do we do when we run into someone that’s NOT one of them? ”

Simon narrowed his eyes. “Perhaps,” he began in a low voice, “you should’ve made yourself clear on the matter.”

“Simon...” Eric spoke up next. “We’ve got things we have to do. Don’t waste your time messing with this punk.” He looked at Sean with contempt for a moment. Davis raised an eyebrow.

Sean had taken one step back, but he didn’t look away from Simon. Simon took a deep breath and began to explain.

“When we go in there, we kill everyone and everything who gets in the way, regardless of what they are. We leave no witnesses. If possible, take captives. They may have information for us. There is only one exception.”

Claire stared at him. Her mouth gaped open in shock.

“There is one important reason why we are going in there, and it’s not just to kill them.” Simon removed the photograph that had previously occupied a space in the PRDI folder. He circulated the picture among the men. “Get a good look at it. This woman must be captured alive. Use force if necessary, but if she’s dead, you’ll quickly join her.”

A murmur of understanding ran through the men. They all took note of the woman’s appearance. The photo made it back to Simon and he pocketed it.

“What’s so important about her?” someone asked from the back of the crowd. Simon grinned evilly.

“She has something that’s very important to our mission. Capture her alive. Everyone else you can kill. They don’t matter.”

Claire stared at Simon. Hate burned in her eyes as she stared at the back of his head. She wanted to yell at him, to hurt him.

Innocents! There were innocent people in there, people who weren’t targets, people who had done nothing wrong...and he going to kill them regardless.

“You can’t do that.” The voice that spoke did not sound like it was coming from her mouth, but it had. The voice was angry and cold, full of hate. Tears glistened in her eyes.

A chuckle arose from a few of the men. Davis was silent, but he turned to regard her. He almost shared her look of anger, but he said nothing. Simon was last to turn around to face her, and when he did so, he moved slowly. His movements were deliberate.

His face was mocking when he looked at her. He lifted an eyebrow, curious by her outburst. He grinned slowly. He held out an arm in her direction and gestured toward her as he spoke to the other men.

“This is Claire Hennessy, our morality expert. She thinks everything is wrong. We can’t do a lot of things, according to her, but we do anyway.”

A few more of the men got a good laugh out of it. Claire ignored them, her gaze focused on Simon. Her face burned red with embarrassment and anger for having been singled out by him.

“You’re horrible,” she said to him. “You’re going to kill innocent people. None of those people in there deserve to die.” Claire pointed at the building. Tears had already begun to fall upon her reddened cheeks.

“Perhaps not, Claire,” Simon said in a fake soothing voice. Then he began to laugh. “It doesn’t matter if they did anything or not. It doesn’t change the fact they’ve got to die sometime. Why not now? Why not have them die protecting what they’ve spent their whole lives protecting?”

Some of them deserve to die. They're criminals. None of it matters, Claire. It's all for a good cause."

He took a step forward and towered over her. She stared up at him with her tear streaked face and blurry eyes. She didn't blink.

"You're an asshole," she whispered to him.

"Such harsh words, Claire. Your mommy and daddy are rolling over in their graves, hearing such profanity coming from their little girl's mouth." He grinned down at her, and there was a flash of something evil in his eyes, something that frightened Claire. She looked at him as if she had never seen him before.

Some of the men behind Simon shifted their weight uncomfortably. Some were still laughing. Eric watched with a grin and Davis looked ready to jump on Simon. His hand was already on the grip of his gun. It would only take a moment.

"I would remember our conversation, Claire. Remember what I told you. Behave yourself, like the good little girl you are, and leave us to our discussion." He spoke like a father would to an unruly child, but there was a sick tone in his voice. He enjoyed belittling her.

"Fuck you," Claire spat at him.

"I'd rather not, Claire." Simon smiled and then turned back to the men. It was all a joke to him. Several pairs of eyes, however, still rested on Claire. She endured the embarrassment, but took a seat on the step of the van and turned her head away from them. The hot tears continued to roll down her face. She didn't care. She hated them all.

Davis watched her. He felt compelled to comfort her suddenly, but Simon threw him a glare and started with his attack plan once again.

"Where were we before we were so rudely interrupted? Ah, yes. We split up once inside. We storm the lower level first. We go into each room. A few of us will head upstairs. Hopefully, it'll be a quick in-and-out event, but be prepared for some struggle. As far as I know there are three werewolves in that building, but I could be wrong. Find the woman and bring her out alive."

Several heads nodded.

“Davis, you’re with me. You two,” he pointed at a few of Sean’s men, “you are with me as well. The rest go through the back. Davis will take the upper floor, but everyone else needs to secure the bottom floor before heading up top. Got it?”

A murmur of agreement went through the crowd. Simon had a smug look on his face, and he checked his watch.

“We’ll head for there in about twenty minutes. That’s enough time for everyone to gather their stuff and get ready. Be prepared.”

With that, the men from Sean’s group headed back to their car and began to get around. Michael joined Davis at the van.

“You look pissed,” he said as he reached inside a suitcase and removed a radio from the casing.

Davis gave a shrug and glanced at the cab of the van. Claire moved away from the step and was now seated in the driver’s seat of the van. She watched them with red and wet eyes. She wasn’t crying anymore.

“I’m always pissed when it comes to Simon,” he said under his breath. Simon stood just behind him. He spoke in hushed tones with Eric and Sean.

Michael gave a sharp laugh as he began to load an extra magazine. “Yeah, I know the feeling. I think he hates everyone.”

“And everyone hates him,” Davis added. He looked down at the silver bullets he held in his hand. He didn’t want to do this, but he had no choice in the matter. He was stuck here. He turned to look at Simon and narrowed his eyes. If he listened hard enough, he could hear what he was telling Eric.

“I don’t trust these jerk-offs so I’m entrusting you two with these.” There was something small and cylindrical, made of metal and glass in the palm of Simon’s hand.

Eric and Sean each took one from him and studied it. They were capped syringes, filled with some sort of colored liquid. Davis quickly averted his eyes when Simon glanced toward him. He busied himself with loading another magazine.

"It's a tranquilizer. Use it on the woman if you have to. One dose will knock her out for an hour or so. You two seem the most capable of following orders. Find her first, before these overzealous amateurs riddle her full of bullets. Can you do that?"

"Yeah, boss," Eric replied in his deep voice.

"Sure." Sean followed. Davis risked another glance over his shoulder. Simon had moved toward him, but he had caught a glimpse of the other two pocketing the syringes. He jerked his head away just as Simon stepped behind him. The taller man reached over him and grabbed a silencer for his gun.

As he withdrew, Simon whispered harshly. "Ready to go again? Here," he handed Davis another silencer, "you might want this. Don't want to make any mistakes this time."

Davis closed his eyes and exhaled. Simon chuckled and never waited for a reply. Davis glared at him as Simon moved away to the side of the van and then began to fix the silencer to his gun without a word.

Claire rolled her window down and leaned partly out of it. She stared down at Simon.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked. She vainly hoped he would tell her she could go home, but she had no such luck. Simon laughed. He seemed in good spirits now. Things were getting down to the wire. His plan had almost reached the finish line.

"You think I want you handling a gun and going in there with all your decent and moral values? You might get your hands dirty. We don't want that." He spoke with his usual sarcasm.

Claire glared at him. "Well, what am I supposed to do?"

"Look pretty, I suppose. The crying, red-faced look really suits you."

"Fuck you."

"I told you once, Claire, I'm not interested. If it makes you feel important, you can drive the van for us and keep it running while we're inside."

Claire stared down at him, coldly. She hated him. She hated his mocking tone, the way he looked at her, the way his lips curled around the freshly lit cigarette. She wanted to hurt him somehow, but what could she do. After a moment, she leaned back against the seat. Simon's laughter echoed in her ears.

"He'll pay for being the dick he is." A voice sounded from behind her. It was Davis. He sat in the back of the van, tuning his own radio to the correct frequency. The others waited near the curb where Sean's car awaited. They were almost ready to go.

Claire looked at Davis through the rearview mirror. He looked pale and upset.

"He'll pay," Davis repeated. "I probably won't be the one to do it, but he'll get what's coming to him in the end. Every good deed is rewarded, and every bad deed is punished. He'll get what's coming to him."

Claire shook her head. "I don't really believe in that, but I hope to God you're right."

Davis chuckled, but it was a forced chuckle. His eyes met Claire's in the reflection. "I don't really believe in God."

"I wish we weren't here," she said softly and looked away from his eyes. She stared forward at the PRDI building in the distance and then closed her eyes.

"I know," Davis answered. A voice from outside called his name and he let out a sigh. He slipped out of the van, slammed the sliding door and started toward the others on the pavement.

Claire reopened her eyes and watched the group of men as they trekked toward the building. She watched as they divided into groups of four, and one started around the back of the place and out of her sight.

Her vision became blurred once more, and she couldn't see them any more. She began to cry once again, the tears free-falling and no one was there now to laugh and judge her. The sobs racked from her chest, and she made ugly choking noises.

But she couldn't cry for long.

She tried to silence her crying and brush the wetness away from her eyes so she could see clearly. She started the engine of the van and let it move at a slow crawl toward the PRDI building.

Simon, Davis and a couple of the men Claire didn't know were at the front doors. She stopped at the curb and let the engine idle. She wouldn't watch.

She turned her head away and closed her eyes as one by one they entered the PRDI building. Despite Claire's determination not to cry, the salty tears touched her cheeks once again and fell upon her lips so she could taste the bitterness.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Simon paused just long enough to watch Eric, Sean and two of the cronies disappear around the back of the house. He watched them and noted the stealthy way in which they moved, and he smiled smugly to himself.

At least they have sense enough to do that. So far, so good.

There was another pause when he turned to watch the van creep along the street. It came to a stop in front of the building, and he spied Claire in the driver's seat, looking red-faced and teary-eyed.

Simon didn't have time to worry about her. She was too sensitive for this sort of thing. A small part of him thought perhaps he should've let her go, but no, she was too involved. She knew too much. He couldn't just let her go.

Besides, he wasn't *that* nice.

He narrowed his eyes at her a moment, then turned back. The front door was obviously locked, but it wouldn't be for long. One of his men had already begun picking it. Simon quickly scanned the porch with his eyes.

"There's got to be a camera someplace," he said in a quiet voice. Davis stood next to him, and he too began searching for any signs of a camera.

"What makes you so sure of that? I'm not seeing anything," he answered after a moment's searching.

"I know this place." Simon gave him a harsh look and pointed upwards. When Davis turned his head, he could see a small opening in

the roof of the porch, much smaller than he had thought possible for a security camera.

It was a quick matter of aiming the gun and shielding one's eyes from the debris. With the sound muffled somewhat by the silencer, sparks shattered and glittered down around them. Bits and pieces of wood from the ceiling above them along with metal and glass from the camera left their fragments on the front porch.

Davis had just enough time to look away before the debris fell onto his exposed face. When he looked up to glare at Simon, the man was smirking. Davis wanted to punch him.

The other guy was still picking with the lock, and Simon stood there, gun in hand, as he waited for the door to open.

"They'll have been watching and they know we're here," he said in a low voice. "We have to move fast once inside. Remember what I said. Kill everyone but the woman."

Davis nodded once, and then inclined his head toward the van. Claire had chosen a spot behind that damn crotch rocket and Davis bitterly thought of the werewolf that had thrown him through the window of his car. It made his head hurt just thinking about it.

He hoped to run into that guy again, but this time with the upper hand. Maybe he could prove something to Simon once and for all.

Or maybe not.

On second thought, he wished he didn't even have to be here at this exact moment. He didn't want to face anyone. He wanted to turn and run, and make a break for it while Simon was occupied. It would've been so easy...

He didn't want to have to kill anyone, even if it was that damn werewolf. Davis was not a murderer, not in the least. His hand still shook when he held the gun. He couldn't even fire straight. His aim was poor.

Simon interrupted his musings. "Come on, let's go." The door was open now, and they were starting to head inside. Davis hung back.

“It’s now or never, Davis,” Simon said to him as he started across the threshold. His smirk was sardonic, as always. “You remember how it went last time?”

Davis could only leer back at him as he brought up the rear.

* * *

Rose awoke to a strange and completely unfamiliar sound. She sat up in the empty bed, glancing around in the darkness. She blinked a few times to adjust her eyes and listened. She couldn’t hear anything now, but something had woken her.

She ran a hand through her tousled hair and swung her legs over the side of the bed. The air was cold, and she shivered slightly. Her eyes roamed over the empty place next to her.

Jason was gone.

She didn’t know where he had gone, but it couldn’t have been too far. After all, with a scare like he had experienced earlier, he wouldn’t be too quick to roam far. He didn’t want to leave her here alone.

At least, that’s what she was hoping.

She closed her eyes tightly and took a few deep breaths. Rose again ran her fingers through her hair. They became snagged on a few snarls and she gave up on loosening them. They didn’t matter now. She stood up slowly and searched for her clothes among the pile in the floor. She began to dress.

Once more, a strange feeling hit her, that feeling she had had before falling asleep. Something was going to happen, but she had no idea what. Rose couldn’t place it. She hated all these cryptic feelings and premonitions. She wasn’t psychic, at least, not to the degree of anyone else at the PRDI, but how was it she was feeling this? *Instinct, perhaps?* the wolf mused in her head. Rose gave a slight chuckle.

“Some hell of an instinct,” Rose answered aloud, and was thankful no one was in here to hear her talking to herself.

She stifled a yawn as she slipped on her final garment, her T-shirt, and started for the bathroom. Something sounded from downstairs, and it sounded quite familiar. It made her stop where she was with her hand resting on the light switch. She had heard the sound before.

It sounded like a gunshot, but muted.

A few moments later, the sound of shattering glass rang quite audibly from somewhere on the bottom floor. Her heart pounded and she strained to listen over the thumping in her ears. More sounds rang, and Rose knew exactly what they were now.

They were silenced gunshots. Even with her advanced hearing abilities she could discern that.

They are here. The hunters are here.

Panic gripped her tightly by the throat, and for a moment, she felt she wouldn't be able to breath. Shouting soon followed, and Rose snapped out of it.

"Fuck." She cursed beneath her breath and turned from the door to the bathroom.

* * *

"We're in deep shit!" Glen shouted to Aidan.

The boy had been halfway asleep at his post and was startled awake by the yell. The many monitors in front of him had gone snowy, and he started when he saw that. Glen stood in the doorway, in just his blue jeans. A light sheen of sweat shone on his bare chest.

He had gone to take a short nap in hopes that seventeen-year-old Aidan could take over the watch guard duties. He had been sorely mistaken. The young boy had dozed where he was supposed to be watching the monitors and now there wasn't sufficient warning for what was happening now.

The hunters were here. They were inside, and they didn't have much time to act.

"Fuck!" Aidan exclaimed. He grabbed his 380 from the table in front of him and cocked it, holding it ready. His eyes had become wide with fear. Glen regarded him with a serious gaze.

"They've just now entered," he whispered. His back was against the wall, but his head was turned toward the door. He listened. "They didn't see me, but I saw them. There are four of them through the front entrance. I don't think there are any more, but I'm not sure. They're moving fast. We've got to warn the others."

Aidan's hands shook as he stood on the other side of the door. He closed his eyes a moment. Sweat had already begun on his brow. Glen could smell the strong fear scent emanating from him. His heart pounded loudly, but he forced it to calm down.

At the same time the very familiar sound of a silenced gun found its way to Glen's sensitive ears, and the man balked in the doorway. The sound of something shattering reached him next. He felt as if his heart had been ripped from his chest.

Someone had just been shot, he was absolutely sure of it. A quick succession of muffled gunfire confirmed it.

Quickly, the werewolf sought to control his temper and he threw a meaningful glance at the boy across from him. His young face was pale, and his large eyes were even wider with terror. His hand shook.

"Aidan..." Glen spoke in a low whisper. "I want you to head for the top floor. Warn Jason and Rose, and then stick with them, okay? Take the back stairs. Rose knows how to get out from up there."

The boy nodded his head. He shook so much he could barely get his words out. "What if I run into one of them?"

"Shoot first, ask questions later. I'll hold them off long enough for you to get upstairs...got it?" Glen stared at the boy, waiting for some sort of acknowledgement.

"Got it?" he repeated, more fiercely this time, when Aidan didn't move. The boy jumped and then nodded nervously.

"Okay. Go!"

The boy took off at a quick run and rushed down the hall. His footfalls echoed loudly on the wood floor.

Some precog, Glen thought bitterly for a moment and then put the thought aside. After all, it wasn't Aidan's fault he hadn't received some sort of warning. He was still young and just learning his abilities and Glen was under the impression Aidan was still grieving over the death of his mother. He couldn't really blame him; after all, he had gone through something similar. There wasn't time to think about that at the moment.

The damn hunters were storming into his home.

Glen cocked his Beretta and stepped out from where he had been hiding. He spied two of the hunters standing near the door as they began to move down the large corridor toward the kitchen.

He took aim, but not before he was spotted. Bullets ripped past him and hit the wall just behind him as he ducked for cover.

"We've got one!" one of the men shouted, and his buddy soon joined him in firing at Glen.

Glen was quick as he moved away from the men. Somehow he dodged the barrage of bullets raining at him. Splintered wood and dry wall flew into the air and obscured his view. He clenched his teeth together, lowered his head and turned a corner.

He was fucked.

Glen found a place to hide behind a grandfather clock, but it wouldn't conceal him for long. He turned himself sideways, so he could get a clear shot when the time came, cocked his gun and listened.

"Don't let him get away!" A commanding voice called. "Find him! You! Finish checking the rooms!"

"Yes, sir!"

"On it!" someone answered and there were sounds of footfalls racing toward him.

Glen shifted his position and leaned down until he was almost prone against the floor and took aim. His un-silenced gun let out a loud, thunderous bang as the bullet erupted and lodged itself perfectly in the

man's upper body. Blood sprayed into the air. Its scent combined with fear and sweat.

It wasn't a fatal shot, and the man was still able to swing his gun. Glen had just given away his position. If he didn't do something quick, the man would have him. He fired again and this time the bullet sunk into a spot in the chest.

The man let out a cry of pain and crumpled to the floor. His free hand rested on the gaping wound in the chest. His vest and shirt quickly became red with blood. He looked shocked. His gun fell from his hand.

Glen stood and watched as the man fell face first into the floor. The blood began to pool beneath him and stained the once beautiful hardwood flooring. He curled his lip in distaste.

But he wasn't out of danger yet.

A tall man stood at the end of the hall and faced Glen, and the werewolf found himself frozen in his spot as he stared at him. His eyes narrowed.

* * *

The men's shouts did little to startle Jason. He listened from his spot in the hallway and knew just what was going on. He had just started to move back to the stairs when they had entered and he quickly found a place to hide and observe.

There were four of them and Davis was among them. Jason recognized him first by the bandaged head. They carried about them the scent of fear and sweat, but also something else, but he couldn't place it. They were nervous. He ducked out of sight and composed himself. He had to think of some sort of plan.

Then the gunshots had started and not too far from where he stood. They were using silencers and the shots were only slightly muffled to him. When Jason turned his head to see the commotion, he noticed the door to a room was wide open.

Something broke and the tinkling sound of shattered glass falling against a hard surface prompted him to move. He tightened his grip on the black handle of the katana he had swiped from the wall display and moved forward, swiftly and silently on his bare feet.

The others were busy moving away. There was a scuffle, Jason heard, of someone running down a hall opposite of him, but he didn't concentrate on that. Men were shouting from somewhere else in the house, and gunfire started again.

Jason didn't have time to think. He waited by the open door of the room. The scent of freshly spilled blood knocked him nearly senseless for a brief moment, but he soon composed himself.

Once the heavy gunfire had begun elsewhere, the hunter inside the room stepped out to join his comrades. He never got past Jason.

The steel blade of the sword sunk deep within the man's gut and exited through the middle of the back. The hunter, a man looking to be about Jason's age, gasped and dropped the weapon he had been poised to use.

Jason's face was close to the man's and he stared at the hunter's face. Blood was warm and sticky as it seeped out from the stomach wound. It bled so much, but Jason held the katana in place, pushing it in more.

The man groaned and blood had begun to drip from his mouth. He tried in vain to grab at Jason, but his hold was slack, and his hand soon fell useless to the side.

Jason's breath was hot against the man's face. His hands were covered in the warm and sticky blood. It stained them red. It covered the front of his chest now and dripped onto the floor at his feet.

But he would not let go of the katana. He would not remove it from the man until he was satisfied. The man was transfixed with fear.

And Jason's satisfaction came shortly. The man's eyes lolled in his head and Jason withdrew the sword with a sharp jerk. The man dropped to his knees, once more trying to grab at Jason. He stepped back. The man fell forward, dead.

The katana dripped blood onto the floor. Jason stared at it and at the fallen hunter. His eyes narrowed. He had little time to savor his victory. The men were shouting and footfalls were coming this way. Jason quickly grabbed the man's fallen gun and an extra clip. He put both into the waistband of his jeans.

He heard more gunshots and then a woman's scream. It was quickly silenced with another shot. The female scream prompted something within him. Horror gripped Jason, as an image from a dreadful dream entered his mind, Rose, lying dead, and blood pooling from her lifeless form. Silver bullets sparkled around her.

He had to get to her and fast. He couldn't let that happen.

Ignoring the dead hunter at his feet, Jason turned back toward the staircase. He exercised caution as always. His feet were silent as he crept along the floor. The only sounds coming from him were his fast paced breathing and the soft pattering of blood as it dripped onto the floor.

He stood stationary a moment and listened to see if the coast was clear. It was. He headed up the front staircase, taking the steps two at a time, completely unaware that a pair of grey eyes followed his every move.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Beretta lay on the floor, in the darkness, in the corner where Jason had been during his close rage shift. Rose quickly swiped it up and as she did, she remembered briefly the last time she had held a gun. She had killed a man with it, and she had a sinking feeling she was going to have to do it once more. She didn't want to.

She was barefoot, but it was an advantage. During times in her childhood, she and Glen would sneak down the hardwood corridors in their sock-clad feet, or in the bare skin, to avoid being heard by others there. This time, it was more serious than a child's curiosity of sneaking around after bedtime. This was dangerous. This was serious.

A woman's scream jerked Rose out of her state of shocked stupor, and her heart once more pounded loudly. The scream fell silent, and she feared the worst.

Who was it? Mary? Anna? Rose had no idea. It had happened too suddenly.

She held the Beretta tightly and continued toward the door. Any second now, she was sure it would burst open. She thought about it and held the gun out at arm's length. She wanted to be ready.

Fear held tightly to her and Rose felt the beating of her heart jump into her throat, restricting her ability to swallow. Her mouth had suddenly gone dry.

The Beretta was a foreign thing in her hands and she held it as steadily as she could with trembling hands. Her aim was focused shakily on the door. She edged toward it.

A strand of her tangled hair fell across her face. She blew it out of the way with heated breath. She tried to soften her breathing. It sounded loud and she was sure someone could hear her. Rose finally was able to swallow, but there was a strange aftertaste in her mouth. It was too dry and bitter.

The sound of heavy footfalls came to a stop outside her door. Rose took two steps back and cocked the gun back. She tried to steady the Beretta, but it was shaking too badly. She would be lucky if she could even fire in the right direction. She wasn't ready.

The doorknob jiggled, turned, and light flooded in. For a moment, she was blinded, but she had the gun raised. Her finger began to ease back on the trigger. She couldn't see who it was.

It was the dark shadow of someone, someone who stank of fear and sweat, and she immediately recognized the scent. She lowered the Beretta and let out a breath. She could see him now.

Aidan stared at her, his eyes like huge saucers. He held his own gun aimed at her. Rose found that his hands shook just as badly as hers were.

"Oh God, I almost shot you," she breathed. Aidan lowered his weapon and threw a wary glance over his shoulder.

"Glen told me to warn you. Where's Jason?" He looked around, bewildered. Once more, he glanced behind him at the door. His blue-green eyes turned to her.

"I don't know," Rose answered. "What's going on down there?"

Aidan shook his head. "Hunters. We have to get out. Glen said you knew a way out."

Rose nodded and then furrowed her brow in thought. It had been so long since she had been here, but she remembered the pathway like the back of her hand. It wasn't too far.

"Let's go. We can't waste time." Rose picked up her pace and moved at a quick walk. She stopped at the door, just long enough to check outside. It was clear. She motioned Aidan forward, and they started down

the hall, toward the front staircase. They'd have to pass it in order to get around the back.

Once more, she felt some pangs of guilt as she looked back at the boy following behind her, but there was too much shit going on for her to apologize or to talk about what had happened with his mother. There was no time. They moved fast.

Gunfire still issued from downstairs and Rose didn't look to see what was going on. She could smell blood and she felt sick at the scent. It was too much. Rose bent low and ducked behind the banisters as she moved.

A figure was coming up the steps, covered in blood, and Rose, for a moment, thought she would die of shock. She uttered a soft gasp. Aidan had already grabbed his gun and aimed it at the individual. Quickly, Rose grabbed Aidan's pistol and lowered it before he had a chance to discharge it.

It was Jason. He stood at the top of the steps. He regarded her with his wolfen gaze. He was covered in fresh blood and the smell of it was thick. Rose once more felt the wave of nausea pass her. It wasn't his blood. Thankful that the blood wasn't from any injury he had sustained, she placed a hand on her chest, over her heart, as if to still its heavy beating.

"What happened to you?" She hardly whispered the words.

Jason didn't look like himself. The katana he held in his left hand dripped a steady stream of fresh blood onto the step. His hair was wild looking. He looked like something from a cheap horror movie.

"There were four of them that came in the front way," he said. He ignored her inquiry. He offered a hand to her. It was bloody and wet, but Rose took it and stood.

"I killed one of them. I don't know where the others are."

"Where is everyone?" she asked. Aidan glanced over the banister at the foyer below them. Jason knew she was asking about the PRDI researchers but he looked callous and gave a shake of his head.

"I don't know. I heard a woman scream. I thought, for a moment, it was you..."

“We’ve got company!” Aidan said suddenly. Rose spun around and looked over the banister railing. She could see a man making his way toward the stairs.

He looked slightly familiar. His black hair fell limply into his eyes. She had seen him before, at the hotel, and she wrinkled her nose as she tried to catch his scent. It was overpowered by the stench of blood, but something was off...

Jason glared at him.

“Davis,” he muttered. He turned to Rose. “You two go on without me. I have some unfinished business to attend to.” His eyes were still golden but they continued to hold a slight resemblance of humanity. They pleaded silently with her. “Go!”

Rose ignored Davis and didn’t hesitate. She pressed herself close to her mate. She didn’t care about the blood, or the dangerous gleam in his eye. She knew this was the deciding moment. Everything from here on would be sketchy. Nothing was certain any more. Their very lives could end here and now.

She pressed her lips to his in a deep kiss and he pulled her back. He stared at her, confused.

“Go, Rose,” he said in a softer tone. His face was unreadable when Rose looked upon it. Tears blurred her vision. “You don’t have much time. I’ll catch up with you soon. Just go!” His hand was gripping her upper arm tightly, staining her T-shirt red, and he released her. He pushed her away from him.

Rose hesitated a moment. A wave of hurt stung her, but her eyes shifted to the man who climbed the steps quickly. All thought of uncertainty left her.

“Come on,” she said to Aidan, and together the two of them began to run down the hall. Aidan’s boots made loud, clunking footfalls, and Rose’s bare feet barely made any sound at all.

Jason gave a flick of the katana and a line of red spilled across the floor as he turned to face the approaching hunter. A cynical grin spread across his face.

* * *

Glen's eyes narrowed and they seemed to glow in the surrounding darkness. The wolfen gaze hardly penetrated the man who stood down the hall from him. The man only stood there, staring.

And something about him caused the hairs on the back of Glen's neck to stand straight up. It was something about his scent, something about the way he held himself...

It was like a cowboy showdown Glen had watched one time on television when he was a kid. The good guy and the bad guy faced each other in the middle of an empty street. Their fingers itched at their sides, ready at any second to draw a gun. The fastest draw always won.

And for some reason, Glen felt he wasn't going to beat this guy, even with a gun already drawn.

The man's face was cold and his lips curled into an unforgiving smile. His black hair reflected the dim hall light. He would've blended into the shadows well. He was clad in black, save for his face and even his hands were covered in black leather gloves. A pistol was in a holster at his side. Glen recognized the firearm as a SIG P220. He narrowed his eyes more.

"You killed one of my men." The hunter's low voice rang out through the hall.

"Kill or be killed," Glen answered. "It's one of the laws of nature." His voice held just a slight tremor. His grip tightened on the Beretta. "I just did what I had to do."

A ringing laugh echoed. "It's never *that* simple. I could kill you right now, with no worry of you harming me. You may be a werewolf, but you're not that fast. You're not that quick."

"Is that a challenge?" Glen growled. He took one step forward. He sniffed the air. There was a scent there that shouldn't have belonged. He narrowed his eyes further.

"What are you?" he demanded, shifting his footing.

The man laughed once more. Its echoes sent shivers down Glen's spine and he issued a warning growl.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" the hunter responded cockily.

Years of repressed anger at hunters had already begun to swell within him, but he was doing well to calm it. For years, he had dreamed of enacting revenge on the deaths of his parents. The hunter standing before him was too young to have been the murderer, but to Glen Cole, it didn't matter.

He was a hunter, no matter what he was, and Glen wanted him to pay.

He lifted the gun and aimed it with direct precision at the gloating man. His white face shone perfectly lined in his sight. All he had to do was pull the trigger.

A human scent caught his attention and Glen turned his head to the side. Someone was trying to sneak up on him. He could hear the quiet footfalls and smell the man as he neared.

It was just the distraction the hunter needed. His gun came out of the holster, it fired. The bullet cut through the air and hit Glen in the right arm. He let out a cry of pain and dropped the gun, a fatal error on his part. The pain seared through his body. His fang-like teeth clenched tightly together. Blood dripped between his fingers and poured down his naked arm.

A gun cocked behind him. Glen ducked at the moment it fired. The bullet passed him. He prayed it would hit the hunter down the hall, but no such luck. The hunter was no longer standing there. He had disappeared.

Glen had no time to ponder the strangeness of it. The man behind him cocked his gun again. This time he was prepared. He lunged at the man and hit him full in the stomach with the force of his good shoulder. The man doubled over, but not before bringing the gun across Glen's face. He felt his nose snap, and his sense of smell was overwhelmed with that of blood. It spurted down his face and chest.

Caught off balance, Glen felt the man's arm lift the gun to shoot him. He moved fast, ignoring the blood. An uppercut to the face disoriented the hunter and Glen pushed at him until the man stumbled and fell back. He heard voices from the back of the hall, but the broken nose and blood subdued his normally acute sense of smell. He cupped his hand to his nose, staring. They were coming from the back of the house.

From the back of the house...

Glen stared at the moving shadows in horror. He had just sent Aidan, Jason and Rose to the back of the house. There were more than four here. They were surrounding them.

He didn't have a chance to even curse. The shadows and voices were moving closer. He would have to make a run for it.

Glen called upon the wolf for speed and endurance. He allowed him to take over his human senses. He began to run down the hall. He moved swiftly, almost silently but it didn't matter. They had already spotted him.

Gunshots sounded once more as one of attackers ran forward, and after him. The front doors were just ahead and open to him. Glen had reached the lawn, long before the bullets tore through the wooden door. More bullets rang, but they missed him again.

Then it began. His body began to contort to a new shape. In the darkness, it was a shaded event as black fur began to spread across his body. His jeans tore as his new and more powerful legs struggled to get free.

Within a few moments, he was a black wolf. He bounded across the lawn and away from the PRDI. He met the shadows and vanished in them.

* * *

Bullets hit the side of the van and Claire instinctively crouched down into the seat and out of the line of fire. There was a sharp hiss, and the sound of escaping air alerted her.

The tires are shot out, she thought at first, and she sat up. The gunfire had died down. But no, the tires on the van were fine. It was the front tire of the motorcycle in front of her that had suffered the damage. The front end of the bike leaned forward more as the air deflated.

Claire wet her lips and watched the man run across the lawn. She blinked. She feared he would run for the van, throw her out and take it, but he did nothing of the sort.

Instead, he did something she could not believe.

Right before her eyes, he began to change. At first, she wasn't sure what was going on, but she watched, wide-eyed and unable to turn away as his body seemed to grow. The shape of his legs became wrong. His spine curved. A tail jutted from his naked backside. His clothes had become shredded and left scattered upon the green lawn. Hair sprouted over his white skin, darkening his features. Hands and feet became powerful paws with sharpened claws.

His face contorted grotesquely. The skull changed. The ears became longer, now placed more at the top of his head, and his jaw was no longer human. It had become far too long.

Claire watched, horrified. "Oh God..." She could hardly breathe. A hand went to her mouth, covering her quivering bottom lip. She felt sick suddenly, very sick.

He's becoming a werewolf. A real fucking werewolf.

"Oh God," Claire repeated. "Oh God, oh God, oh God." It was all she could manage to say, as if she was praying to Him for deliverance from what she had just witnessed.

The man-wolf disappeared behind a house across the street, and there was nothing more of him. He was gone. Claire felt like she was suffocating.

Quickly, she opened the door to the van, leaned out and vomited on the sidewalk.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“So, Davis... We meet again.”

Davis stood several steps down from Jason and he eyed the bloody katana apprehensively. He held his weapon at his side, in a tight fisted grip.

He flexed his grip on the handle of the sword. Blood had dried on his fingers and hand and caked around his wrists. Small flecks peeled off as he moved his fingers around the black hilt. A small pool of blood had formed where the katana pointed downward, but it was no longer dripping.

“I wanted you to leave us alone. Apparently, you didn’t listen to my...advice.” Jason spoke in a tone that was angry and accusing. His empty hand hung at his side, balled into a tight fist. “Marcus didn’t leave her alone.”

Davis was at a loss for what to say or do. Any moment now the blade in Jason’s hand could take a deadly swing and seal his fate. He tried not to focus on the sharpened edge of the blade and searched Jason's face, as if looking for some sort of compassion. He found nothing but a pair of enraged golden eyes.

He tried not to let his gaze waiver, but now and again, Davis found himself looking side to side and over his shoulder. It was as if he expected someone to sneak up on him. He swallowed nervously.

Before Davis had a chance to speak, a gunshot rang out. Though silenced, its sound echoed in the foyer. Davis flinched, but Jason did not. His gaze flickered from Davis, to the front door, then back again. More shots were fired. From where Davis stood, he had a perfect view of the

hall just under the stair's landing. From the corner of his eye, he could just see Simon slipping from one hall, and turning into another.

What is he up to? Davis didn't allow his gaze to stray too far. Jason had taken a step toward him. He hadn't seen Simon slip away. For all Davis knew, he was completely unaware of him.

"I didn't come here to pick a fight," Davis finally said.

Jason scoffed loudly. "No, really? You came here to slaughter everyone in their sleep." He sniffed the air and lifted an eyebrow. "You smell like piss," Jason deftly added.

Heat rose within Davis and he felt his face begin to glow red with indignation. He said nothing.

"Where are the others?" Jason demanded. He seemed cool and collected, but there was an untamed rage flaming in his gaze. He spoke tersely, "Well?"

"I don't know. They've split up." There was a quiver in his voice. Jason narrowed his eyes at him.

"What do you mean, they've split up?"

"They've split up," Davis repeated. Sweat dripped down his temple and his neck. It saturated his shirt. "They're everywhere."

Davis suddenly knew why Jason hadn't killed him yet and it was evident in the way Jason scrutinized him with his narrowed eyes. He wanted him alive, to give him answers.

He looked at this as an advantage and decided to play it for all he could. He would have to be careful. Davis thought a moment as he stared up at Jason's dark face. He opened his mouth to say something. The next events interrupted his train of thought. In fact, it had derailed completely.

Gunfire had erupted yet again. Still silenced, the guns were muffled enough not to cause a deafening blast, but nevertheless, it still echoed in the hall. The familiar form of Glen raced through the hall below them,

and both men on the steps turned to watch him flee. Bullets sang in the air behind him.

Jason grew more angered and his hand moved to the waistband of his pants. His fingers locked around the silenced handgun.

Davis stared as one of Sean's men raced forward, shooting madly at the open door. He hit the woodwork, but missed the man he had been aiming for. He was already gone.

There was an exclamation of *Shit!* which reverberated off the walls. Then the man turned and saw the two on the steps. He raised his gun.

Jason was the quicker. He drew his pistol, aimed and fired a deadly clean shot. It hit the man's head and exited through the back of his shattered skull. *So they're using hollow-points.* The man slumped against the wall, blood and grey matter splattered against the bullet riddled door.

Davis started, the look of fear escalating over his face and the scent of fear heavy in the air. He began to scramble down the steps, but stumbled. Jason took advantage of the situation and went to fire. The magazine was empty. He uttered a small curse under his breath and ejected the clip. He snapped the new one into place just as Davis scrambled to leave. The gun discharged and buried a bullet in his upper thigh.

Davis let out a scream of pain and immediately crumpled on the step. Blood oozed through the fabric of his blue jeans and mingled with the faint discoloration around his crotch from the urine stain. He clutched at the wound. His gun pressed against his thigh.

"You fucker!" Davis cried out. His eyes glistened with unshed tears, and his teeth clenched against the pain. His face burned red in places, pale in others. Jason was sorry the bullets in this clip weren't hollow points, but he lifted the gun anyway to deal another blow.

"Hey!" someone from the foyer called and before Jason had a moment to turn and look, a bullet hit his left arm. The katana clattered to the floor as the bullet tore through the flesh just above the elbow.

Jason's cry of pain was a scream and became muffled by a clenched teeth grimace. Fresh blood covered his body, sticky and wet. His gaze

flew to the one who had fired the shot, totally forgetting the whimpering Davis on the steps below him.

Davis craned his head, finally able to see beyond the hurt and his tear-blurred eyes. Blond-haired Michael stood near the foot of the steps. His expression was undeniably furious.

“No!” Davis tried to scream at Michael, to warn him, but all he got out was a choked whisper.

Simultaneously, the men lifted their guns. Michael’s aim was off and missed Jason by less than a foot. The bullet hit the wall behind him and splintered the wood and spilled drywall from within.

Davis moved back, away from the gunfight, holding his injured leg. His Beretta fell useless and clattered down a few steps. He couldn’t stand. Instead, he forced himself to crawl up the steps. The landing was just a hand’s reach away.

Jason was preoccupied. The man advanced as Jason’s own bullet missed him and joined the other bullet holes in the blood splotched door behind Michael. Jason snarled loudly and ignored the searing pain burning throughout his arm. He grabbed the banister with his empty hand and ignored the pressure on his injured arm as he hoisted himself.

Davis watched with a combination of disbelief and awe as Jason leapt over the railing and landed, unharmed, in the front foyer. The look on Michael’s face could only be described as sheer shock.

Jason approached Michael swiftly. The man overcame his shock and fired once more, but even at close range, the bullet missed. Jason couldn’t believe the guy’s incredibly bad luck and aim. Jason hurled himself at the man and threw him off balance. The handgun fell out of his hand and hit the floor. It slid across the hardwood and far out of reach.

Davis managed to move himself out of sight on the landing, behind a wall where a dark corridor begun. He listened to the commotion and turned his head just enough to catch a side view of what was going on. He vaguely, for a moment, wondered if Simon was standing somewhere

in the shadows, like some sort of demon, watching the fight take place. It seemed the kind of thing that would excite him. Davis head swam with the pain.

Jason pulled him by the collar of his shirt and hoisted Michael to his feet with one bloody hand. Their faces were inches from one another, and Michael's scared blue eyes were caught by the yellow of Jason's gaze. He was trapped.

"You shot me." He spoke slowly and accusingly, his voice dark and deep. His grip crushed against Michael's throat. The man tried to stammer something, but Jason didn't wait for an answer. He needed no answer and with one swing of his arm, he threw Michael back. The young man's head hit the wall near the door and bounced back. A look of pain spread across his face.

The pain in Jason's arm increased as he leaned forward and pulled Michael back to him. His right hand still held the silenced pistol. He brought it up and fired three rounds into the hunter's chest.

The young hunter's eyes went wide and fluttered a moment as if they were going to shut. He staggered back and stared down at the gaping wound in his chest. His hands went up to touch the wetness on his shirt. He let out something like a laugh.

Jason, meanwhile, watched him. He felt no compassion, no forgiveness for the man in front of him. The hunter staggered back a few more steps.

Michael laughed again, a horrible and hysterical laugh. He sank back against the wall. A stain of blood spanned downward as he sank to the floor. One of the bullets had gone clean through.

"You...shot...me," he said, with a chuckle, a bit surprised. Blood spurted from his mouth, and Jason took a step back. He watched him with disgust. Michael was dead a second later. His eyes stared at nothing.

"It was no more than you deserved." He said to the dead man and turned his gaze elsewhere. He heard voices from the kitchen and he

narrowed his eyes toward the hall. He would have to make himself scarce.

He stared back up the steps. Davis was no longer there and Jason grumbled silently to himself. No matter. He'd track him down sooner or later and give him his dues. A crackle ran through the radio on the man's waist. Jason eyed it angrily.

"Eric? Sean? Where in the *fuck* are you? Eric?" The voice blared, lividly. Jason looked at the man's belt with distaste and one more shot from the gun silenced it.

A sadistic sneer spread across his face as Jason turned down the nearest hall and turned into a darkened room. The body of a slain hunter lay face down outside the door, and bare footprints in his blood were scattered everywhere.

* * *

"Wait." Rose's arm shot out and prevented Aidan from moving forward. She concentrated hard as she listened. She thought she had heard a noise, but wasn't sure. She was glad when Aidan obeyed and stood where he was.

"What is it?" the boy said. His voice was still loud and Rose flashed him a warning look. She held a finger to her lips in a motion for silence.

"I hear something" she whispered. "Stay here." She crept forward a few steps down the corridor. Her bare feet were silent.

Rose held her breath and kept her eyes open as she peered around the corner. She had heard footsteps and had heard voices, but she saw nothing. She waited, and when it seemed that she had been wrong and moved to motion Aidan forward, a silenced gunshot sounded and she jumped back. She ducked down, her back to the wall.

Who is it this time? Rose wondered. She stopped the tears from burning in her eyes and she listened. Someone stepped out of the room and Rose heard the door shut. The musky scent of man wafted toward her, combined with that of the sick and all too familiar scent of fresh

blood. She sniffed again and this time could smell a feminine scent she immediately recognized as Mary.

Rose exhaled and closed her eyes. How many more were going to die before it was all over? She turned her head so she didn't have to face toward them and glanced toward Aidan. The boy stared at her and mouthed, "What is it?"

Rose waved him silent then checked the handgun she still carried. It was already cocked and the safety was still off. She held it close to her chest as she waited. Male voices sounded very clear to her advanced hearing. She listened carefully.

A deep voice spoke first. "Any sign of her there?"

A man spoke in a quiet voice. "No. No, it wasn't her."

"Damn it," the deep voice said and there was a pause. She heard a gun cock back. Rose inched away, down the wall. Her palm was sweaty and the grip of the gun was wet.

"We haven't finished the entire upper floor yet. Davis was supposed to do it, but you know him," Quiet Voice said.

Deep Voice laughed. "Yeah, I know him too well."

"Guys!" A voice called suddenly from somewhere down the steps. It echoed up the stairwell and reverberated through the hall. Shadows moved as someone else joined the two. Rose shifted uncomfortably where she was and Aidan watched. Fear stunk around him.

"Keep your voice down," Deep Voice said rather angrily at the new arrival. Footfalls sounded as New Arrival approached the other two. His voice soon joined theirs.

"Sorry. Simon sent me this way. He tried to contact you by radio, but you have them turned off," he said in a softer voice.

"What does Simon want?" Deep Voice asked. He lowered his voice. "I left the radio off for a reason. I didn't want our position given away by Simon's calls. He tells us to be stealthy, and then he blows our cover by radioing us. It happened once before." He sounded very pissed.

“Well...maybe you should tell him that yourself.” The man sounded nervous. He continued in a small voice. “He wants to know if you’ve found her yet. He’s heading after one of those...creatures now. Michael’s been killed.”

There was a deep breath of air taken in by someone, and then Deep Voice spoke again.

“Fuck.”

Rose turned her attention back to Aidan, but the young man was no longer against the opposite wall. He had moved toward her and was now seated a few feet from her. Rose thought to reprimand him, but she decided against it. They would hear her.

Instead, she slowly and carefully peeked around the corner. Two of the men stood with their backs to her. The tallest of the three was a black man, and he was turned enough so she could see the profile of his face. He was speaking to a young man whose back was to Rose. The black man was Deep Voice.

She couldn’t listen in to what they were saying now. Aidan whispered harshly in her ear.

“Come on!” he urged and grabbed her by the arm. He tried to pull her away. “We have to go!” His face was chalk white and very frightened.

“Shh!” She hissed at him and moved to a crouching position. She could barely see the third man. She moved the Beretta and took aim at the guy closest to her. There was a clear shot at the back of his head, but her hands shook so much.

“No!” Aidan said, and his voice sounded like a shout to her ears. He grabbed her suddenly, pulled with much strength and she fell back onto the floor. She glared at him but she soon realized why he had done that. A moment later, a bullet hit the corner of the wall where her head had been only seconds ago.

“What the fuck are you doing, Sean?” Deep Voice yelled. “Are you insane? He said not to kill her!”

“I didn’t know it was her!”

“Fuck! After them!”

“Shit!” Rose said and scrambled to her feet, dragging Aidan with her. The boy stumbled over his own two feet and his knees hit the floor. He was quickly hoisted up by the back of his shirt. She had no time to wonder what Deep Voice’s words meant.

“I saw it happening,” Aidan told her as they ran. “I saw the bullet hit you.”

“Don’t worry about that now.” Rose knew he was referring to his precognitive abilities, and she had to admit she was thankful he had seen that. Now was not the time for relief or thanks.

She glanced behind her. All three of the men were following her, the youngest one ahead of the rest. A shot fired, and it thankfully missed both of them. She and Aidan instinctively ducked just the same, covering their heads as more gunfire began.

“Go!” Rose yelled at Aidan. She pushed him forward. He continued to race down the hall. Rose stopped and aimed the gun. The backfire of it nearly caught her off guard, and the shot was off.

“Fuck!” she said and she lifted the gun to try again. It had seemed so easy before when she used one on Marcus. This time, the bullet struck the man in the chest and he went down. The other two hunters still pursued.

Rose turned to run, but they were there before she had the chance. They jumped over the body of their fallen comrade and the dark-skinned man had a hold of Rose with a tight, two armed grip. She struggled against him and tried to turn the gun to fire at him, but he wrenched it free from her hand. The Beretta fell across the floor and hit the wall.

“After the boy!” he shouted at the other man. Rose kicked at him, but it was to no use. For all her werewolf strength, this man was doing well to hold her down. Rose snarled. She called on all her strength to pull him off her. He held her fast, but he knew he couldn’t for long.

“Hurry!” he shouted at the man running down the hall. He fumbled for something in his jacket pocket and had to release his two-armed hold on her. One hand now gripped her upper arm painfully.

Rose tore herself free from his grasp with a sharp elbow jab to his stomach. The man was taken off guard and Rose made a break for it. She ducked down and stumbled as she started forward down the hall. Just ahead, she could see Aidan, turning to fire his 380. He couldn't pull the trigger and the hunter was on him instantly.

Something shone in the very dim light of the hallway, something thin and sharp. It jabbed into Aidan's arm. The young boy didn't even have time to struggle. Rose froze where she was momentarily, staring as Aidan stumbled, then finally fell to the floor.

No! Is he dead? She wasn't sure, but they had injected him with something. She was sure of it. She became so lost in her shock for a moment, that she forgot she was being followed. She turned to see Deep Voice chasing after her. She took off again and veered down a hallway to her left. The front staircase would be coming into view shortly and it was her only choice of escape now.

The man following her didn't fire his gun, and his words once more rang in her thoughts.

He said not to kill her! What did that mean? Who was *he*? Why weren't they going to kill her?

Suddenly, Rose knew she had the advantage. They wouldn't risk hurting her, and maybe there was a small chance she could get out alive. She would have to play her cards smart.

But the man gained on her. The front hall landing was right there. She was almost there. Rose skidded to take the corner, and she started down the steps. She turned to see the man behind her do the same. She turned her attention back just in time to catch the heavy scent of blood, and the familiar were-scent she easily could recognize and that was all she had time for.

Unable to stop herself before reaching him, Rose tripped over the very much alive Davis sprawled near the steps and tumbled down the staircase to the very bottom.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The room was menacingly dark and the smell of blood was very strong. Jason walked carefully through the darkness, and his sight adjusted accordingly. He could see better now.

His feet had become wet with the blood from outside of the room and he was aware of the bloody footsteps he was leaving. One hand was held over the wound in his arm, adding pressure to stop the flow. It would take a while to heal, a couple of hours at the most, but if he could just get the bleeding to stop, he'd be all right.

Jason's eyes moved to take in the room. It was a bedroom, fully furnished with a few arm chairs, dresser and wardrobe, desk, and a huge four poster bed in the center. Everything would've looked charming if hadn't been for the air of death covering the place.

Blood covered the bed, and was dark as it pooled on the floor. It sank into the once plush and beautiful carpet. A vase Jason guessed had once occupied a place on the nightstand was shattered on the floor next to the wall. The hangings from the bed had been ripped down and surrounded the dead body slumped to the floor beside the bed.

It was Gavin. Jason recognized him immediately by the were-scent. His green eyes were open and vacant. A look of shock and disbelief remained on his dead face. Gaping wounds covered his body and Jason knew they had been made with the hollow-points. Nearly the entire clip had been emptied into him. The old man hadn't stood a chance.

Rage once more began to consume Jason. Although Gavin had not been on favorable terms with him, he was still a werewolf and it had been an injustice that death had found him in this way. Jason's bloody hand gripped the gun tightly.

He narrowed his eyes as he again searched the room. The hunter who had done this had met the end of Jason's katana. He was sure this was the room he had stepped out of. His body outside the door was proof of that.

Well, he's dead now.

Jason moved forward and took a clean piece of the bed hanging and ripped it. It neatly split in two, and he fashioned a makeshift tourniquet for his arm. He pulled the cloth together tight using his teeth. The bleeding would stop soon.

He was beginning to feel dizzy, but he shook it off. He couldn't pass out now. He had to fight. The hunters were still there. Rose and Aidan had gotten out and he had seen Glen run for it. He was the only one left, and the hunters were still there.

Well, they wouldn't be for long, Jason mused darkly.

The sound of footfalls approached the door and Jason ducked down behind an armchair, his gun out. He lowered his head and his eyes became glued to the door.

The knob turned and the door opened. Light flooded Jason's vision a moment or so, but he could see the figure standing in the doorway was most assuredly male. Whoever it was stood tall and entered the room with deliberately slow steps. The door shut behind him, and Jason could see once more as clear as he had before.

The man held a SIG P220. The gun rested in a relaxed grip at his side. His eyes searched the darkness. He regarded Gavin with a cold stare and a smirk moved over his face. He turned to where Jason was crouched behind the chair.

"I know you're there," the man called out. He had stopped in the center of the room, at the foot of the bed. He seemed casual as he looked around. There was something about him...

Jason shifted his weight. He wouldn't be stupid and answer. He wouldn't reveal his position. For all he knew, the guy had no clue where he was hiding. He could be bluffing. Jason lifted his firearm and took aim.

The gun went off with a sharp blast. It hit nothing. Jason was aghast. He stared at the place where moments earlier the hunter had stood.

“Bad move.” A voice sounded from somewhere beside him. Jason was on his feet in an instant, but a punch across his face threw him off balance. He stumbled backwards, over the chair, and slumped onto the floor. The man stared at him, grinning evilly. Jason could only stare up at him, in shock.

“You really have no fucking clue, do you?” the man asked. A kick to Jason’s side followed his statement. Jason’s gun had become lost somewhere on the floor in the dark.

Jason doubled over and gasped for air. His hand vainly scratched at the bloody carpet as he searched for his fallen gun.

How did he do that? How did he best me? Jason tried to rise to his feet, but his vision was cloudy and he stumbled again. His hand gripped one of the posts on the bed and held himself up.

The hunter laughed at him. Jason couldn’t understand it.

Another punch to the jaw once more threw him back and over the bed. The force of it had impacted a tooth and fresh blood spilled into his mouth. He could taste the coppery essence and he spat it and the broken tooth out upon the bed.

“How?” he tried to say. His head spun. Pain caused him to hardly focus on the laughing man. *This isn’t possible! I’m faster, stronger. I’m a werewolf. This guy can’t overpower me. I’m not that far gone yet.*

“You don’t know anything, do you, half-blood?” The man spoke somewhere in the darkness, his tone mocking. Jason lifted his head, trying to find him.

“Fuck you!” Jason yelled. He spit out a mouthful of blood as he did so.

“I’ve heard that before.”

A hand pulled him back from the bed and tossed him aside. Jason’s back slammed into the corner of the wardrobe and the large chest wobbled as if ready to topple onto him. Jason winced in pain. He felt that surely his back had to be broken. He steadied the wardrobe.

His eyes finally focused and he stared at the man. He stood a few feet from Jason and although he stood in the shadows, Jason knew he was smirking. A chuckle issued from the hunter.

“You aren’t so powerful. And I thought you’d be a challenge. I’m a little disappointed actually.”

Jason stood.

“Well...” he tried to say. His mouth was full of blood again. He spat once again in the direction of the hunter. “You should know my kind isn’t that easy to kill.”

There was another laugh. “I know that, all too well actually.”

Jason was sick of this banter and he moved forward. His fist found the side of the man’s face and he staggered back a few steps. An uppercut to the chin finished the effect and the man fell backwards. He stumbled over the same chair Jason had.

He scanned the floor and searched for his fallen weapon, but with no luck. He moved back a few paces and stood in a ready stance. The hunter regained his footing and rubbed his jaw. Jason couldn’t see his face, but he could sense the anger emanating from him. He wasn’t surprised to find it matched his own.

A sarcastic scoffing chuckle sounded from the hunter, and he gave a shake of head. Jason narrowed his burning eyes at him. They cut through the darkness, staring lividly at him.

“I guess I...underestimated you,” the hunter answered.

“You guess correctly.”

A woman’s scream sounded from somewhere not far from them, and Jason immediately recognized it. He started. His eyes left the hunter and stared at the door.

It was then the man took his advantage and used his gun. The firearm went off, but the bullet missed Jason. He had ducked just in time and it struck the wall behind him. More gunshots were fired. Jason was quick to avoid them. He moved, crouched and took cover behind a dresser.

The entire clip was soon empty and another was quickly reloaded. The hunter spoke loudly in the darkness.

“You can’t hide from me, you know this, right? I’m a hunter! This is what I do best! I’ll find you!”

Jason rested his head against the back of the dresser and took a deep breath. He was totally fucked. There was nothing he could do.

Unless he called on the wolf and shifted...

Even as he thought of it, Jason knew it would be a terrible attempt. After all, he was only half-blood. The shift would disable him for too long. It would leave him vulnerable. His only choice was to distract the hunter enough so he could shift, and then finish it here and now.

Because if he didn’t, Jason knew he would die.

“Come out and fight, you pussy wolf!” the man yelled. He walked around the room, his footfalls slow. He neared Jason.

With a snarl, Jason summoned up all the strength he could and pounced at the man. His body weight hit him full on, and the gun was lost from his hand. The hunter got a good grip on Jason’s shoulders and shoved him.

Jason fell back, stumbled, but was able to stand. His hands were balled into fists. He saw nothing but red. His rage once more began to devour him, and he knew his eyes were blazing with the golden hue of the wolf. He growled.

“Come on!” the man challenged. He made a gesture for Jason to attack. “I can wait all night if I have to!”

Then, Jason lunged at him.

* * *

Rose’s head hit the bottom step hard and she groaned. The man she had tripped over was covered in blood and he clutched his leg. Davis grimaced horribly and let out a cry of pain. She had fallen over his injured leg.

“Grab her!” the black hunter shouted at him from the top of the steps.

“I fucking can’t, man. I think I’m dead.” He spat out a mouthful of blood where he had been biting on his lip and shook his head.

“Fucking pussy,” the dark-skinned man muttered. Rose tried to climb to her feet, but he moved quickly.

The dark-skinned man was smarter than Rose had been. Instead of heading down the staircase gung-ho as she had, he took a few steps and then vaulted over the railing. Rose had just sat up when he approached her, a syringe in hand.

“Hold still, bitch. I promise this won’t hurt,” he said in a cold voice. Rose was roughly pulled to her feet. A pain throbbed in the back of her head. It circulated through her body and she felt lightheaded. He held her arm out, ready to prick her with the two-inch long needle.

The needle touched her skin and sent an electric shock throughout her body. It snapped her awake, and she moved swiftly. She stepped back and hooked one leg around his, her free hand and arm locking onto the wrist that poised the needle.

She pulled his arm back and increased the pressure on his wrist. The needle fell from his hand and he let out a cry of pain as she pulled it back and away. While his concentration was caught on the bending of his wrist, she elbowed him once again in the stomach, sweeping his leg with her own.

Releasing his arm, Rose allowed him to fall back. He released his hold on her and she pulled away from him. She swiped the blunt end of the syringe with the side of her bare foot and it went skidding across the hall and out of sight. She started to make a break for the open front door.

Dead bodies littered the front hall. The scent of blood and werewolves were strong. Rose held her breath as she started forward.

A firm hand grabbed hold of her ankle and she fell hard to the floor. The floor beneath her had done little to soften the blow and her fingernails scratched across the surface as she tried to claw her way from the tight grip.

She glanced back in time to see the black man's dark eyes glaring at her. He grabbed her by her hair and pulled her up. Rose let out a scream and grabbed his wrist to ease the pain on her scalp.

Silenced gunshots sounded from somewhere near, and Rose, for one split second, thought she had been shot. She had felt no pain, and the sound had been too far away for that.

So who's firing at whom and where had it come from?

There was no time for relief and the questions were left unanswered as his beefy arm wrapped around her neck, blocking her airway. She couldn't breathe. She tried to pry his massive forearm away from her throat.

Rose immediately recognized his tactic. If he couldn't knock her out with the damn drug, then he'd knock her unconscious by cutting off her air supply. She couldn't let that happen. She was a werewolf after all. She was much stronger than this. She had survived much more than this.

She called upon the wolf.

She closed her eyes as she drew her strength from within. A low growl rose in her throat. Throwing her hips back to get him off balance, Rose grabbed the hunter's arm and flipped him forward over her shoulder.

Taken off guard, the man's broad backside hit the hard floor. A sound that might've been a chuckle came from the injured man on the steps behind them, but Rose paid it no mind.

"Fucker!" Rose growled and the heel of her foot crashed down on his face. Blood spurted as the toughened heel jammed the man's nose into his face. It broke with an audible snap. He let out a cry of pain and clutched at the broken appendage. Blood poured from his face.

It was at that exact moment gunshots sounded once more, coming from down the hall. Rose froze where she was, torn between running out the door and to freedom, and running to assist.

She felt she would regret it in the end, but the safety of her friends and family were more important to her than getting away. And if Rose was right, they wouldn't kill her anyway. Not just yet.

Her blood splattered feet slid across the floor as she made her way to the room the sounds were coming from. A dead hunter lay on the floor near her, his body leaking blood all over the floor. Various footprints were smeared in it.

Rose felt sick once again, but she reached for the knob and turned it.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The shift hit him in mid-lunge. He collided with the man, but this time, the hunter was expecting it. He blocked, but Jason hit him with enough force to cause him to step back.

Jason doubled over in pain. His ribs began to crack as they took on a new form, and he let out a horrible cry of pain. He couldn't let this happen now. He had to stall it.

Ignoring the pain that had spread to his stomach, he stood to his full height, just one or two inches shorter than the man in front of him. His fingernails had already begun the necessary change and were now deadly razor sharp claws. He raised his hand and drew it across the hunter's chest.

It sliced through the dark fabric of his shirt and sank into the skin. Red lines swelled and the scent of fresh blood once more dominated the air. The man let out a hiss of pain.

Jason threw all his weight into the man's chest as he tried to get the upper hand, but the man was solid. He would hardly budge. Jason let out an angered growl.

The back of the hunter's hand swept across his jaw and he fell to the floor. More of his bones popped out of place. They began to conform to a new shape. Muscles grew taut and his clothes could barely contain the wolf. The seams of his jeans started to tear and ripped along the sides. Pain erupted throughout him. Jason let out a cry.

The hunter stood and watched him. A slow smile moved over his face.

"I knew you would try this," he said. His voice was quiet, almost a whisper. Jason could barely hear him over the hurt. He held in his

screams by clenching his teeth. White fur started sprouting along his skin, punctuated with the darkness of his human body hair. His pelt spread across him.

“I knew you would.” The hunter laughed now.

This isn't how it's supposed to happen, Jason thought frantically. *I'm supposed to get the guy down, get him injured...then shift. Not now. Not like this. What's happening?*

He was too vulnerable. Vainly, Jason tried to stop the shift, but his mental commands did not work.

“No!” he said aloud, but it didn't help either.

His claws dug into the carpet, gripping to it tightly. His face elongated and soon, human words were lost. He uttered a growl, a snarl, and his hate-filled eyes locked on the hunter.

The man moved through the room and never turned his head from the partially shifted werewolf. He lowered himself to a crouching position and reached for something. It was the gun Jason had dropped earlier. The hunter stared down at it and cocked it back.

Jason's muzzle tried to form the words, but it was useless. All that sounded from him was a low growl. He moved to spring. The gun erupted in a thunderous bang, and the bullet ripped through him. In an instant, all thought of shifting left him. This new pain drowned out everything else. The wolf returned to his hiding place within the human body and left Jason to whimper.

Shifting back was just as painful, but it was quicker. Soon, he was once more in a familiar human body. Tears spilled from his eyes, and his human cries of pain were almost screams of agony. Blood spilled from the torso wound. He grabbed at it, helplessly, and fell onto his back. It hurt so much.

“No...” he whispered.

“It was no trouble at all,” the hunter said. “I thought I would have at least had a fight. *This is pathetic.*”

He approached Jason and threw a kick. It hit Jason's chest, where the fresh wound was opened and gaping. Jason wouldn't scream. He

couldn't give him the satisfaction. He shut his mouth. His lips were tight over his teeth as he held it in.

He can't be doing this to me. He can't... Jason couldn't figure it out. The man's foot moved down with another kick, and this time, he couldn't hold in his cries. They erupted from him, and tears washed down his face.

Simon laughed loudly as he stared down at the hapless werewolf before him. Blood spurted from the chest wound. It hadn't been fatal enough, but he didn't care. He was having fun torturing him. He smirked down at Jason and drew his foot back for another kick.

The seemingly helpless werewolf sat up, grabbed his foot and pulled him. Simon lost his balance and hit the floor hard. His head cracked against the floor, the plush carpet doing little to cover the impact of the hardwood beneath it.

Then, the werewolf was on him. His weight held him down as he threw punches at his face. Simon, enraged, was able to bend his knees and hoist Jason off of him. Jason fell back and hit the dresser square in the back.

Simon tasted blood and when he wiped his bottom lip with the back of his hand, a red smear shone there. He glared at him.

"So, you *can* fight," he said, coldly.

Jason didn't banter back. Instead, he pounced, grabbing hold of Simon's shoulders. They sunk in and the man let out a cry of pain. He gripped Jason's powerful arms and lifted him up.

"How in the *fuck* are you doing this?" Jason demanded, his words sounded garbled and wet from the blood in his mouth.

"There are *a lot* of things you don't know!" Simon shouted. His knee hit Jason's gut and his grip was suddenly loosened on him. His eyes had gone wide, and he gasped for air that wouldn't come.

Simon was quickly growing tired of his game and released Jason. The werewolf fell to the floor and was met with another kick to the stomach. Then another and another.

Jason lay on the floor, gasping for breath. He doubled over. Simon stepped back and smirked.

“Goodbye, Jason.” Simon said coldly as he grabbed for the gun that had once again fallen. He pulled the trigger and the final shot echoed throughout the PRDI.

* * *

The gunshot exploded just as the door opened. Rose stood there as the light spilled into the room. A tall man turned to regard her. Blood covered his torn chest, and dribbled from a cut on his lip. His dark hair was messy.

He held a gun in his hand, pointed downwards toward the floor. His eyes blazed golden as he stared into hers, and a slow smile spread across his face. Her breath caught in her throat, and she found herself frozen in the doorway.

Golden eyes...

The room was covered in blood. The bed was covered in it. It was on the floor. It surrounded the body of Gavin. Rose let out a cry. Her hand flew to her mouth. Gavin! Her mentor, her teacher, a man who had been like a father to her was lying dead against the bed.

Her screams couldn't exit her quickly enough. Her hands trembled. Tears stung her eyes. The were-scent was strong in this room, but the blood scent was even stronger. Rose felt a wave of nausea hit her, but she couldn't move. She couldn't do anything but shake and cry and scream.

The man smirked more as he turned his gaze away from her. The toe of his boot kicked lightly at a body lying just at his feet, a body Rose had not noticed yet.

She didn't want to see it. She didn't want to be anywhere near this room. She had taken a step back and no longer stood in the doorway. Her knees felt as if they would buckle under her weight.

The man lay upon his side, naked back covered in blood. Dark hair spilled across his shoulder, onto the carpet, and Rose could see it was matted with dark blood. She shook her head. She didn't want to see any more.

The hunter pushed again with the toe of his boot and the body fell over, and Rose could see the familiar face. The lifeless cold eyes stared up at the ceiling. The blood still ran in trickles down his naked chest, from the two cavernous bullet wounds.

A fresh scream erupted from her.

"Jason!" Her knees gave out, and she hit the hard floor. Disbelief and grief washed over her and devoured her. She screamed. Tears fell down her face in a river of pain.

She was aware that the man was walking out of the room, aware that someone from behind her hoisted her up, but she couldn't fight. She had nothing left to fight for.

Her gaze had become glued to Jason's lifeless body. The door to the room closed, and yellow eyes regarded her.

Yellow eyes...

Anger surged in her suddenly. Anger, confusion, grief, and pain tore through Rose and she knew her own rage shift was not far off. *This isn't right!* She kept screaming.

The man holding her couldn't silence her, and suddenly, Rose gave into a fit. She began kicking, clawing, fighting her way out of his arms, but she was held fast.

"No!" she screamed, even as she was forced and held against the wall to keep her struggling under control. "No! Jason!"

Then something sharp pierced her side. Something flooded her bloodstream, and blackness began to surround her. Her screams were silenced. Her arms suddenly felt heavy, and she couldn't move. Rose could barely keep her tear rimmed eyes open.

As they began to droop, she stared at him. The man with the gun stared at her from across the hall. He no longer grinned. And his eyes were no longer yellow, but had become a deep brown. She almost

expected a triumphant look to move over his face, but there was nothing of the sort.

He looked almost...sad.

And then everything went dark.

* * *

Davis watched the shrieking woman from his place on the steps, and he was overcome with something. Compassion? He wasn't sure what it was called, but he knew what it was. It was the feeling he had felt once before, when he looked into the eyes of the young boy whose mother he had just murdered.

The woman screamed and cried. Her face was red and her eyes golden. Davis pressed his back against the wall.

Eric did his best to hold her still as the syringe was injected. The tranquilizer soon took effect and she was out. She slumped against Eric and he easily hefted her over his shoulder.

Simon stared at her and blinked a few times. He let out something like a long and tired sigh.

"That's it, men," he said. "We got what we came for. Let's head out."

"What do you want to do with him?" Sean asked. He held the useless lump of some kid they had stumbled across. Simon looked the boy over and shrugged.

"If you think he might prove useful later, bring him along."

One by one, they began to leave the PRDI building. They all milled around the van, throwing the drugged bodies of Rose and the boy into the back. Davis occupied himself with trying to stand. The pain in his leg was unbearable.

"Simon, I need a little help." Davis hoisted himself to his feet, but could hardly move. He tried a few gingerly steps and held onto the banister with a death grip. Simon stood in the doorway and turned slowly to look at Davis.

"*Help?* You want *me*, to help *you*?" Simon scoffed and looked the young man over as if he were nothing more than a cockroach needing to be squashed.

"Yeah..." Davis answered. He had taken another step, but the pain was too much. He felt as if his leg would buckle at any second. Simon let out something like a laugh.

"I don't want to help you, Davis. You've been a constant disappointment to me. I recruited you, thinking you capable of what I wanted. Guess I was wrong."

Davis looked at Simon. A look of confusion and disbelief covered his face.

"What are you talking about, Simon?"

"I'm talking about this."

Simon lifted the gun, and the bullet pierced through the lower part of Davis' leg. It ripped through the flesh and out the back of his calf.

Davis let out a scream and crumpled to the next step. He lost his balance and tumbled the next few steps down. He hit the floor, two gaping wounds now in the same leg. Fresh tears streamed down his face. He couldn't even question why.

"That was for fucking up all I had worked for, you twat. Have fun in prison." Simon leered at him.

And with that, he turned and stepped out the door, across the lawn and into the van.

Davis clutched his wounds. His head fell back on the floor. He clenched his teeth tightly, his anger and hurt erupted from him and he out a frustrated cry, but it did nothing to change the situation.

With his eyes tightly closed, he listened to the sound of the van starting up and then the squeal of tires as it pulled away from the curb. The engine's rumbling soon fell silent as they left the neighborhood, and him behind.

And a new sound filled the air, and Davis listened to it instead. The low rumble of thunder began in the distance, and scent of fresh rain was

heavy in the air. There was a drop in temperature as the clouds moved over the early morning sky. Soon, the pitter-patter of rain drops became a torrential downpour.

He closed his eyes once more.

* * *

Somewhere in the darkness, he stirred and lifted a bloody hand. Her voice was left ringing in her ears. She had been screaming. She was hurt. His hand closed into a fist. He clutched desperately at something that wasn't there. And then it fell limply back to the wet carpet.

He was aware of pain and aware of the darkness. Then he parted his lips and mouthed her name into the dark.

"Rose..." His voice cracked. But she did not answer. He remembered the face of the man that had done this to him, that leering sadistic grin on his face and the mocking eyes. He knew that man was going to pay...

And then Jason fell silent and slack, the pain finally too much for him to remain conscious any longer.

About the Author

From a very young age, Rose Marie Wolf was interested in things that weren't quite normal, so it was no surprise when she grabbed her crayon and started scribbling out short stories about vampires, werewolves, ghosts, fairies, elves and all manner of paranormal creatures.

Her combined love of writing and the supernatural grew and, in 2002, she began writing on her first serious work, a short story about werewolves she called "Sweet Moon Dreams". A few years later, with the help of her fiancé, she developed the story into a novel-sized manuscript.

Rose Marie lives in Indiana, with menagerie of pets, not including her fiancé and his mother. She is currently working on the final books in her werewolf series, The Moon Series, and she encourages readers and fans to join her discussion group on Yahoo! to chat about books, writing, publishing and her upcoming releases.

Website: www.rosemariewolf.com

Yahoo Group: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/rosemariewolf>

Look for these titles by Rose Marie Wolf

Coming Soon:

Blood Moon
Hunter's Moon

Books burned, adulterers stoned, gays attacked, government leaders and institutions controlled by a religious hierarchy, visions of a worldwide holy war—is it happening in the Middle East...or in the United States?

Acts of the Saints

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Available in ebook and paperback from Samhain Publishing

Paragenesis is a coalition formed by ultraconservative religious leaders and their devout followers. A man known only as the Summoner, never seen in public, is its leader. As this juggernaut gains momentum, cherished rights and freedoms are swept aside, and the United States becomes a theocracy as fierce and unforgiving as any within the Islamic world.

Two ordinary citizens—Catherine, a divorced woman, and Theodore, her alcohol-dependent former parish priest—set out to find the coalition’s secret nerve-center, the Citadel, gathering whatever information they can by traveling the “Devil’s Railroad” from one resistance group to another. In St. Louis they meet Martin Sovalle, a bisexual man of startling beauty with whom Catherine falls in love and who disappears following a vicious vigilante attack.

Unbeknownst to Catherine and Theo, the Summoner has in fact been luring them to his headquarters for the purpose of playing out an End Time drama he believes God has relayed to him in a series of visions. And Martin Sovalle has become his bait.

What happens once the lives of these four people collide at the Citadel is something none of them—except perhaps the unlikely mystic, Theo—could have foreseen...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Acts of the Saints*:

The Chevy’s odometer rolled to 150,000. Catherine was too immersed in her thoughts to notice. She broke from them only occasionally—to

check her speed, to wipe the sweat from beneath her eyes, to glance at Theo and his newspaper. Just to the east the Mississippi River lazed, a dun-green serpent spangled with sunlight.

“Beginning January First of next year, brothers and sisters, you will notice a difference in the withholding categories on your payroll checks. The Social Security tax is being phased out and the FCEA or Federal Church Enhancement Act will be phased in. It will require a ten percent tithe of each employee, based on his monthly income. This anointed act will ensure the vitality of the Church of the Living God in these United States. And the Church, in turn, will oversee the care of our indigent, regardless of age. No more—”

Theo turned down the volume, and the disruption made Catherine look at him. “You must try to stop thinking about Marty,” he said gently.

“I can’t. I keep seeing...” Catherine drew her lips between her teeth. She couldn’t put words to the images.

“Well,” Theo said, patting her knee, “we both have to refocus now, redirect our energy. Marty’s in good hands. The doctor attending him was a sympathizer.”

“The doctor in the E.R.,” Catherine corrected.

“He assured us he’d follow up, look after Marty. Besides, Marty’s regular physician might very well be a resister, too.”

“Sure,” Catherine snorted. “And when Marty’s discharged, *if* he’s discharged, who’ll look after him? Who’ll keep him out of rehab? Who’ll protect him on the streets if he manages to avoid rehab? You can bet it won’t be some doctor, safely ensconced in his Lafayette Square townhouse.”

She’d never before examined the multitude of paths toward one human being’s destruction, or the ineluctability of suffering along each one, or the potential for repetition of pain and loss. Breathless, she rolled the window down farther. The river smelled of oil and decay.

Theo searched her face. “It’s not just Marty, is it.”

Catherine filled her lungs with air and held it until she felt lightheaded. “No.” She looked beseechingly at Theo, unsure what it was she was asking of him. “I’m so damned sick of leaving people behind. And this time...this time somebody really needed me. I could’ve stayed in St. Louis and seen Marty every day, done whatever was in my power to help him.”

“He has friends,” Theo said. “They’re every bit as capable and caring as you. Damn it, Cat, each enclave has to look out for its own. We have business—”

“Mankind is my business!” she said stridently, quoting the forlorn ghost of Jacob Marley. Then she shook her head and gave a sour laugh. “Has it ever occurred to you, Theo, that we might be turning our backs on very real lives and deaths to pursue a phantom?”

Theo kept his eyes on hers for a moment, and Catherine discerned a dam going up behind them. It is enough, he seemed to be saying, to concern ourselves with Great Causes and Higher Purposes; please don’t expect us to champion individual welfare.

He turned his eyes to the road. “Has it ever occurred to *you*, Caty, that we might improve many lives and prevent many deaths by finding this ‘phantom’? Don’t you realize that ‘the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few...or the one’?”

Catherine couldn’t help but chuckle. “I weigh in with Dickens and you counter with Mr. Spock. Apparently we’re deadlocked.”

In fact, she knew they were. There was simply no arguing the point with Theo. He believed too firmly in the Summoner’s existence and impact. This was neither phantom nor furbelow, this madman. He was the supreme functionary, the insurer of impetus, the linchpin of the Juggernaut. And Theo was determined to find him.

She said to the priest, “*Star Trek* wisdom aside, if you really think the Summoner’s influence is so wide-ranging—”

“Incalculable,” Theo broke in. His gaze was still on the road, but more distantly so. “Religious, political, social. Even cultural.”

“That’s the extent of Paragenesis’ influence, not one man’s.”

"*You are wrong!*" Theo immediately looked ashamed at having raised his voice. He blinked self-consciously as he turned his eyes from Catherine. "I just read in *Choice*"—his fingers glided over the underground newspaper in his lap—"that hundreds of art treasures have been removed from the National Gallery. Three people were killed and seventy-eight injured protesting the atrocity. We hear or read this kind of thing every day now. Paragenesis has always been lax in its respect for the secular, always eager to overstep its constitutional bounds, but it hasn't always been so flagrant in its scorn and outrageous in its condemnations...and so effective in transforming scorn and condemnation into accepted action. And when did the change take place, Cat?"

She shrugged. The era of persecution seemed to stretch back forever. When she looked into the past she saw only fewer layers of it, less accumulation.

"Think," Theo prompted. "There *was* a turning point, and you'll remember it if you give it some thought. How and when did this extremist faction turn the corner and become America's Hezbollah?"

Catherine traced Paragenesis to its origins. Every step she took into the past led to another step, still further back. True, there was a time when it was merely a loose alliance of fundamentalist ministries, zealously eager to Christianize the depraved American Way of Life but largely ignored by mainstream citizens. It wasn't, however, ignored by conservative politicians, who had always been sensitively responsive to its demands.

At first, the growth of the sleeping giant took place in small increments. Paragenesis was fed by changes in state laws, then national laws, then Supreme Court decisions, some of which had no direct connection to or historical link with the alliance but strengthened it nonetheless. Books began disappearing from schools and public libraries; stem cell research was banned; "gay rights" and "abortion rights" became oxymorons; the high court supported the integration of church and state through a series of seemingly innocuous decisions favoring religion. Ironically, Islamic fundamentalists proved the greatest

allies of their Christian counterparts by prompting the passage of “anti-terrorism” laws that increasingly eroded civil liberties in the United States. Radical Islam also provided a model for organized repression under theocratic rule.

Paragenesis’ greatest achievement was getting one of their own nominated for the vice presidency on what turned out to be a winning Republican ticket. More political victories, mostly state and local, followed, but soon Paragenesis was suffering from a canker of infighting: evangelicals versus reconstructionists, charismatics versus Calvinists, Baptists versus other Baptists. Each ministry so cherished its own “inerrant” interpretation of Scripture that it was loath to compromise on application, no matter how small the nit of disagreement. It wasn’t until...

“The March,” Catherine said. “I guess the March really got the ball rolling.”

Theo brightened and pointed a finger at her. “Right! ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’, that nationwide extravaganza that had every pol waving his baptismal certificate. And how do you suppose Paragenesis, splintered as it was, managed to become unified enough to pull off such an incredibly well organized and visible show of solidarity? Because it had an *orchestrator*, Cat. Because for months in advance some brilliant, monomaniacal tactician was pulling all the factions together and schooling those purblind Pharisees on how to bring Moral America’s simmering indignation to a uniform rolling boil.”

“And it was right after that,” Catherine said, still piecing together the memories, “that we started hearing about the Summoner. But the secular media only mentioned him on rare occasions, in passing. They seemed bemused by the term. And *I* just assumed it was a euphemism for Christ or the Holy Spirit.”

“As I did,” Theo confessed. “As probably all of the ‘Unsaved’ did, if they bothered to think about it at all. And then we quite easily and stupidly forgot about the March and the subsequent Message to Washington campaign. And we forgot about whatever voice had ‘summoned’ millions of fearful, frustrated, furious people to rally around

Goodness. But elected officials didn't forget. And those millions of marchers and callers and letter-writers certainly didn't. Only we complacent non-followers"—Theo patted his chest—"were foolish enough to put that blast of fervor out of our minds."

"Until the shit hit the fan," Catherine said.

Theo laughed. "Until then. And while we were ducking and looking for cover and wondering how the hell it could've happened—the constitutional amendments, the institutionalized conformity, the camps and codes and new curricula—that name began surfacing again, on wondering whispers: *the Summoner*."

In space, no one can hear you scream...but don't let that stop you.

Tethers

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Available in ebook and paperback from Samhain Publishing

Survivor Kathryn Emmette must decide who is friend and who is foe when her cargo vessel, the Daedalus, explodes under mysterious circumstances. Many among her crew are killed and the rest are left helpless and stranded on a terra-farming colony moon of Jupiter called X-1226. They have no means of communicating with Earth or even the nearest stellar platform for aid.

Kat soon learns that the detonations aboard the Daedalus and the deaths of her fellow crewmates may not have been as accidental or incidental as they first appeared. She begins to suspect that one among the survivors may be operating on a hidden, sinister agenda—and that she and her young daughter, Jerica, could be the next victims.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Tethers*:

“Do you think this place will ever be like Earth?” Jerica asked as they bounced along in the HUM-V. “Full of people and cities and stuff?”

“Eventually,” Eric said. “You’ll probably be around to see it.”

As a future terra-farming colony, X-1226 had an artificial atmosphere designed to make its surface optimal for harboring life. The little moon, once a desolate chunk of rock hovering between the outermost edge of an asteroid belt in Jupiter’s massive gravitational field, was now a sub-tropical paradise, replete with weather patterns, precipitation and lush, dense vegetation. This was the result of more than ten years of deliberate, concentrated cultivation. Like a cake baking in a temperamental oven, X-1226 had been monitored day in and day out, by

numerous computers both at the nearby stellar platform and on earth, and scientists had insured that the right amount of elements and gases were maintained. There was more science to it than Kat had ever understood. *Playing God* is what Alex had always called it.

The HUM-V grazed a tree and jostled over a fallen log. The equipment in the back hatch slid precariously.

“What have you got up on screen, Jerica?” Kat asked.

“We’ve come a little more than ten miles,” Jerica said. “We won’t be able to keep going much further. It gets really rough up ahead.”

Eric shifted the HUM-V into a lower gear, and it growled as it clambered over more fallen trees and large, rocky knolls.

“The box should be just up ahead.” Jerica frowned. “There’s something there. Something big, but not part of the terrain.”

“It’s got to be part of the ship,” Kat said. “Something that didn’t burn in the atmosphere.”

“Stop, Eric!” Jerica leaned forward excitedly. “Stop here.”

The little HUM-V rumbled to a halt. Kat swung her door open and hopped out. The grass was tall, almost to her knees. She could hear insects buzzing and chirping, transplanted from Earth. “Where, Jerica?”

“Over there, past the trees.”

Eric and Frank climbed out of the vehicle, too.

“Wait for me!” Jerica opened her door and swung her legs around.

“No, pup, you stay there.” Kat looked back at her daughter.

“But, Mommy—”

“Jerica, I said stay in the HUM-V.”

Jerica huffed and puffed, but stayed put.

Kat, Eric and Frank made their way through the grass. It whispered against their pant legs and folded under their boots. They carefully worked through the trees and thick foliage until they reached a spot that had been gouged through the woods.

The trees lay knocked aside, snapped in two like toothpicks. Some had been burned. The earth was churned up as if cleaved by an enormous plow. There was a pungent, scorched stink in the air.

A towering metal cone laying on its side in the trench. It had been seared black. It was as wide as at least four HUM-Vs and nearly as tall as the outer wall of the colony compound.

A cable sprouted from the top. It draped across the ground before coming to a burned stump a few feet away from them.

“What is it, Mom?” Jerica whispered in Kat’s headset.

“It’s part of the tether,” Kat replied quietly. “The gravitational tether.”

“The black box is inside it,” Eric said. “We’ll need the equipment out of the truck to get to it.”

Kat walked toward the cone. She stared at it, transfixed.

How many times did I see this swing slowly past the window in my quarters? Watching it after Alex and I made love...we always just took it for granted...

She remembered her first space mission. Nothing had prepared her for the strange, alien gravity of the oscillating tether. She had been sick from the moment she’d come out of cryostasis. She had eventually gotten used to it, and anymore, Kat would find herself feeling nauseous on Earth, where the gravitational pull was stronger, more insistent.

“You okay, Kat?” Eric’s voice, low and kind in her earphone.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I was just thinking...”

“Well, you know better than that,” he told her, and she laughed.

“Just hurry up and get the equipment we need,” she said. “I want to get this over with. The sooner the better.”

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