



The Christmas Kiss

Mikala Ash

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As a security guard, accidents can't be tolerated, but accident-prone Gilly's latest mishap results in her demotion: to the Dog Squad. Too bad she's deathly afraid of dogs.

Jarrold the dog handler is instantly attracted to her, but the last thing he needs is a distraction, for he and his brother plan to steal the world's largest opal statue, the Rakshasi -- the mythological goddess of shape shifters.

Gilly impresses Jarrold with her courage in overcoming her fears of Satan, his vicious Doberman Pinscher. Her bravery fuels Jarrold's hopes of her overlooking a little defect of his own and accepting him for what he is.

Gilly would never believe that she'd ever be attracted to a dog handler, but that's not the only surprise Christmas has in store for her...

Chapter One

Just five more minutes.

Gillian Stone, Gilly to the few who knew her, checked the front doors of Digital Electronics and, satisfied they were secure, lodged her Triple A Security calling card in between the sliding doors as evidence of her visit.

It had been a long, slow night and the store was her last call for the morning. She was keen to get behind her own front door and snuggle beneath warm blankets. She desperately needed to relax after her twelve-hour shift.

She hurried back to her white Triple A Security van and contemplated getting inside to finish her paperwork, but decided she needed to push herself just a little bit more. Doctor Nab's instructions were that whenever she felt the urge to get into a safe and secure place she should delay for a few minutes to gradually extend her endurance.

Okay, Doctor, just for you.

Gilly rested the leather-bound logbook and set of keys on the roof of her van. She fished a beautiful opal encrusted fountain pen, a present from her father, out of her breast pocket and, after confirming the time on her similarly opal encrusted wristwatch, initialed the appropriate box on the shift report.

Thank Shiva I can go home now.

As she snapped the logbook closed and reached for her keys an agonized moan, as if from a wounded animal, came from out of the shadows.

Dog!

A frisson of fear lanced through her and she instinctively fingered the missing pinkie of her right hand. Suddenly a short skinny man, dressed in a great overcoat, stumbled onto the sidewalk, clutching at his left arm and grimacing in pain. "My heart!" he groaned and fell to the footpath.

Gilly reacted instantly. Resisting her natural disinclination to be near a stranger, she rushed to his side while mentally rehearsing her first aid training.

His breathing was shallow and there was alcohol on his breath. Thank goodness she didn't have to give him CPR. He moaned with every labored breath, his grizzled features contorting in pain.

Gilly activated her collar radio. "Stone to base. I need an ambulance to Digital Electronics, corner of Kendall and Thornhill streets. Pedestrian with suspected heart attack."

Mandy, Triple A's taciturn radio operator, responded with a clipped, "'Kay."

"Help is on its way," Gilly said to the man as she rolled him onto his side. "Just stay calm."

Gilly slowed her own breathing and pulled her heartbeat back to normal when suddenly the man's body erupted in a series of powerful convulsions. His legs jerked wildly and his heels struck a staccato beat on the pavement.

A dog barked in the distance and the sound of footsteps behind her raised the hackles at the back of her neck. She was too occupied holding the convulsing man down to worry about bystanders.

"Can you help?" she shouted over her shoulder.

Silence. A quick glance revealed no bystander. The fluttering pages of her logbook, which was now lying on the pavement, gave her a stab of anxiety. There was no time for dealing with that; the man's shuddering body needed her full attention.

Where is that ambulance?

Close by a security alarm wailed and the man ceased his convulsions, opened his eyes wide, gave her a broad smile and pushed himself onto his knees. "Thanks, love," he said and sprang to his feet. "Merry Christmas!"

"Wait!"

He laughed cruelly and sprinted to the door of Digital Electronics where he was met by a younger version of himself carrying a cash register.

"Shit!" she cried and launched herself after them.

As she gained on the fleeing criminals she wondered what the hell she was going to do with them once she caught up. Her radio beeped in her ear. That would be Mandy calling to advise her that the alarm at Digital Electronics had been activated.

Just great!

From out of the shadows appeared a tall man dressed in the pale blue Triple A uniform and with surprisingly little effort, he grasped the crooks by the arms and pulled them up sharp.

The cash register crashed to the ground, spilling coins and bills onto the pavement. The tall newcomer lifted the squealing men off the ground so high they had to balance on their tiptoes.

"Friends of yours?" the stranger asked. His smooth and cultured voice sent a tremor cascading along her body from chest to her feet.

"Not really," Gilly answered, her voice suddenly dry and husky.

Her radio beeped. "It's okay, Mandy. Two perpetrators apprehended by..."

"Jarrod," the uniformed man offered. He stepped into the light so she could finally see his face. She caught her breath. Bright amber eyes shone from a finely sculpted face. His high cheekbones and strong jaw line gave him the appearance of a classical god. "Let's get 'em back to the van."

"Apprehended by Jarrod," Gilly reported. "Can you call the cops?"

"Done."

Gilly scooped up the register and loose change and followed Jarrod who, seemingly unaffected by the frantic struggles of the two men, led the way back to her van. She was in awe at this demonstration of raw strength. There was something economical and feral in his movements that reminded her of a wild beast. She admired the bulging biceps straining inside the tight fitting shirtsleeves of his uniform, not to mention the backs of his bare legs and the way his uniform shorts stretched across his taut ass.

Gilly opened the back of the van, deposited the register and grabbed the hand of the heart attack "victim" and cuffed him to the door. Jarrod cuffed the younger man to

the opposite door and without warning grabbed him by the shirt front in a menacing manner. He clicked his fingers. Understanding dawned on the fearful man's face and he rummaged in his pocket to produce a set of keys.

Jarrold handed them over to Gilly. "These yours?"

"Yeah, thanks," she said and a flush of embarrassment swept through her. She returned to the Digital Electronics premises and after a thorough check to ensure the building was secure she reset the alarm and locked the doors behind her.

She returned to the van and retrieved her fallen logbook. She met Jarrold's questioning glance and considered explaining herself, but was saved by the flashing blue light of a police car. Gilly sighed and prepared herself for the coming ordeal of exposing her unbelievable gullibility and stupidity to the police.

The only positive was Jarrold's sympathetic expression which set alight a flutter of desire in her belly.

* * *

Jarrold's first impression of Gilly was she was way too short for a security guard. She stood barely five feet two. She had curves in all the right places though, and appeared to be athletic without being hard. Her tight uniform supported generous breasts and hugged a tiny waist. Her slightly flaring hips gave way to fantastic legs.

She was very attractive, he thought, and thanked fate for leading him to her. He'd finished his shift and was on his way home when he'd heard the call for an ambulance. A short detour took him past her van where he saw her assisting a fallen man. She seemed to have everything under control and he'd considered continuing on to the museum when he noticed another guy sneaking behind her van and grabbing something off the roof.

By the time he'd parked the van the shop alarm was sounding. Sizing up the situation he raced across the street and positioned himself in a shadowy doorway and waited. Snatching them was no trouble; his preternatural senses told him exactly the right moment to strike. They were typical humans, weak and easily surprised.

At first he was angry at Gilly. Such a basic mistake could cost her life, but when Gilly reached him and he'd noted her delicate features, her striking blue eyes and soft blonde curls, he felt only profound embarrassment for her.

As she made her statement to the smirking cop he wished he could have said something to cover for her but security officers should not fall for such elementary tricks. Those two jokers could have killed her had they been actual bad guys. Tonight's lesson might actually save her life in the future.

The Digital Electronics owner turned up, furious at how easily she'd been duped. He called Gilly "a stupid, bloody woman," and threatened to take his business elsewhere. When Jarrod warned him to be polite to the lady who'd risked her life to save his precious cash register he became instantly contrite, though the subconscious threat Jarrod made to break both his legs if he made a complaint might have had something to do with his sudden change of attitude.

"Want a cup of coffee?" Jarrod asked her when the cops were finished.

For a moment he thought she might decline, that she was considering hitting the hay before facing the music the next morning. He considered giving her a mental nudge but decided he'd rather she come to him of her own free will.

He read the conflict in her eyes before she gave a brief nod. "I could definitely use something," she said.

"Good, you know the all-nighter on the highway?"

As he drove to the diner he kept her lights in view in the rear vision as if trying to convince himself that she was actually following. He recalled noticing Gilly at work a couple of weeks ago and being impressed by her sensual beauty. Every time he visited the main office he'd look out for her and had caught sight of her only a few times.

Each time he'd been captivated by her poise and grace. She moved with a kind of feral efficiency. With such elegance he thought she'd be at ease on the fashion catwalks of Europe or even some royal ballroom. Every night since that first glimpse she'd possessed his dreams, waking him with throbbing erections.

Since their assignments rarely dovetailed and he'd been concentrating so heavily on his own plans he'd not taken the step to talk to her. A mistake he realized as now that he'd seen her up close and listened to her gentle voice he regretted the time he'd lost.

In the diner car park she touched his elbow with an electric graze of her fingertips. "I just wanted to thank you again. If they had gotten away with the cash the boss would've strung me up."

"Well then, no real harm done."

"And thanks for standing up to the store manager for me. He was right though, wasn't he? I was stupid to fall for it."

"Don't beat yourself up over it. You let compassion take over. You went to the aid of someone you thought needed help. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I guess that's one way to look at it."

His senses were alive with the warmth that radiated from her body. She reminded him of an open furnace. He breathed in her hot scent and with his preternatural senses he could hear the thudding beat of her heart and almost feel the blood rushing through her veins. He could not help himself and he explored her body further. The finger-like tendrils of his psychic touch traced the taut sinews of her flesh, luxuriating in the warmth of her blood and, deeper down, the heat of her sex...

"Jarrod?"

He cleared his throat. "We better get that coffee."

"I'm not usually so gullible," she said after they'd ordered their cappuccinos.

"These things happen to the best of us."

"Not to you I bet." She waited till the waitress had deposited their coffees onto the table. "What do you do for Triple A?"

"Dog handler."

She virtually jumped out of her chair. "Dogs?"

He didn't need to use his heightened senses to detect the increase in heart rate or the adrenaline coursing through her veins. The wave of fear that swept across her face was clear enough. "You don't like dogs?"

"Not really."

She was rubbing the stump of the little finger of her right hand furiously and he guessed the reason.

Her demeanor changed abruptly. She leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath. "I'm more tired than I thought." She stood up. "I better get home now."

"I understand," he said and followed her to her car.

"Thanks again."

He wanted to say something to make her stay but she abruptly turned and kissed him on the lips. He stood in shocked silence as she climbed into her car, started it and drove away. The warmth of her lips tingled on his lips.

When the lights of her car had disappeared from sight he climbed into his van. He needed some sleep too but wanted to drive by the museum once more and scope it out. He knew it was a pointless surrender to paranoia, but he wanted to make sure Christmas Eve went off without a hitch.

Pieter had laughed at him of course and he'd sent him home. Twin brother or not, Pieter shared little of his attention to detail and he was sick of his jibes. Had they not been identical, Jarrod would have believed his brother had been adopted.

Thinking of Pieter opened up their psychic connection and he was instantly assaulted by erotic images of Cynthia as his brother energetically fucked her. Jarrod tried to shield his mind from the assault but his brother kept it open. Once a connection was established it was impossible to close it unless both sides agreed.

Hey, bro, stay tuned and see what you're missing!

Jarrod saw it all from Pieter's viewpoint. Not just through his eyes either, but felt every reaction of his brother's body. It was almost like he was performing the act himself, though he was ten kilometers away on the other side of town. He could smell Cynthia through Pieter's nostrils, taste her on his tongue and feel her on his cock.

Damn. His own cock was swelling. He parked the van on the side of the road. He didn't want to have an accident while he was in the throes of Pieter's climax.

Pieter, grow up.

Loosen up, bro. You haven't had any action for a while. I'll give you a treat.

I'm warning you.

Pieter laughed and locked his arms around Cynthia's thin waist. He rolled her onto her back and bunched up the silk blouse at her throat. With a single pull, he ripped it open, sending buttons ricocheting off the walls like machine gun bullets. Her full breasts tumbled out of her blouse. He fixed his teeth around an erect nipple and bit -- hard.

She cried out in pleasure/pain and clamped both hands to the sides of Pieter's head. With a cackling laugh she thrust his face further into the firm roundness of her breasts.

Her flesh was ripe with lust. Her scent filled Jarrod's nostrils and coursed through his veins. She was eternally horny and her libido was set at outrageous heights.

Jarrod was catching up fast. His cock was straining against his pants. He tried to blot out the images by thinking of Gilly, imagining her naked in his arms. *Fuck!*

Pieter's mouth was dry with lust, his heart thudding in his chest and his blood filling his erection, which pressed insistently into the firm flesh of her thigh. Pieter raised his head to gaze into her wide, saffron eyes which held him with a look of... could it have been boredom?

"Fuck me," she hissed, her breath redolent in sex attractant. "Fuck me hard."

Pieter's body ached and bore the bruises of her idea of sex play. "You should run a discipline dungeon," he muttered and moved his hips above her closed legs.

She squirmed in mock resistance. She liked to fight, a practice Pieter was beginning to enjoy. He forced her thighs apart with his knees and let the head of his cock find her open slit. Cynthia's swollen and wet pussy lips welcomed Pieter's cock. He slid easily inside. The walls of her hot cunt clenched around his shaft and he drove it

home with all his power. She grunted and wrapped her legs around his hips so tightly he had to work at withdrawing just a centimeter so he could thrust back into her.

She howled with pleasure as he pushed his cock home again and then nipped his neck. Pieter reciprocated and bit into her nipple, not enough to draw blood, but the mark of his canines would be a reminder for her in the days to come.

With a yelp she turned him over onto his back without letting his cock out of her possessive cunt. She ground down on his swollen cock, forcing it deep inside so she could rub her clit across the hardness of his pelvic bone.

She came, throwing her head back and howling to the heavens. Her mane of jet-black hair flowed around her head like a pool of oil. She flicked the glossy tresses from her face and peered at him like a demented harriidan. "Fuck me, damn it!"

She's a great fuck! You should do her, bro, and give me an idea what it's like to fuck second hand.

Stop this now!

Not till I come.

Cynthia arched her back as she came again. Pieter tried to come with her, but he was a long way off. Always a slow comer, his staying power had once been a hit with the girls, but with Cynthia, it was a curse. She'd fuck him till he was rubbed raw and bleeding.

While her cunt clenched at his shaft he gripped her by the waist and, swinging his legs off the bed, hoisted her up onto his hips and fucked her standing up.

"Ooh," she gasped between thrusts. She clutched at his shoulders for leverage and drove her hips downward to meet his thrusting cock. "I like that."

"Then how's this for something extra?" he said and walked her into the bedroom wall. He slammed her against it, cracking the plaster and rattling the paintings.

"Oh, baby," she grunted into his neck between thrusts. Then she bit him. Every time she nipped his flesh he would thrust into her, slamming her into the wall.

"Fuck you," he cursed and slammed her into the wall again. His thighs screamed in fatigue. He dropped her back onto the bed, broke the lock of her ankles around his

waist and withdrew. In a tumble of breasts and black hair he flipped her onto her stomach and positioned himself behind her. Before she had time to react, Pieter grasped her hips and brought her backward so she was on her knees.

Pieter separated her buttocks with his fingers and drove his cock into her open pussy. The sound of his balls slapping against her spurred him on. He spread the cheeks of her ass with his palms and with his thumbs massaged the crinkled flesh around her asshole.

"Oh, yeah," she growled and pushed back onto his cock, forcing his thumb to open up her ass.

Pieter...

Sit back and enjoy, bro.

Pieter dribbled saliva onto her asshole and worked it into the tightly puckered flesh with his thumb.

"Agh," she grunted. "Deeper, deeper."

Pieter pushed his thumb knuckle deep inside the tight, hot flesh and Jarrod felt her sphincter tighten around him.

"Fuck my ass, you cunt," she commanded.

He withdrew his cock from her pussy and, after resting the head against her ass for a tantalizing moment, thrust full into her.

Cynthia collapsed under him as he drove his shaft deep into her tight ass. She screamed into the pillows, her fists clutching at the bed sheets, in spasms of absolute pleasure. She came again and he felt her pussy go into another round of spasms.

He thrust two fingers into her cunt and, through the thin membrane separating pussy from ass, he could feel the shaft of his cock. *Like that, bro?*

Get out of my head!

Almost finished.

The tingling started in Jarrod's cock head and spread upward along his shaft to his balls. Pieter was going to come. He drove deep until his balls were hard up against

her pussy lips. He gave a long howl as his cock jerked and pumped his come into her ass, his shaft contracting in long powerful spasms.

Finally, when his cock stilled, he rolled off her and lay panting, his body cooled by the breeze from the open window. *See what you've been missing, bro?*

Nothing I want, Pieter. She's bad news.

But a good fuck, don't you think?

I shouldn't have brought her home.

I'm glad you did, bro. I'm glad you did.

Let me go.

I don't think she's finished with us.

Pieter was right. Cynthia wasn't finished. She straddled him and, with deft fingers, coaxed his shaft into another erection. She smiled in triumph and lowered her ass onto his cock. With her face shrouded by a halo of jet-black hair, she rode him, her fingers working inside her insatiable cunt, caressing his shaft as she fucked him. Cynthia was totally lost to the serial orgasms that rocked her body. She was out of control, manic. She was truly scary.

Cynthia came again, screaming obscenities, before collapsing over him, her body racked with spasms. She was still for a moment, then she started moving her hips again. She moaned into his neck and bit him.

"Ouch!" Pieter yelped and pushed her off him. "Enough."

Enough is right, Pieter. Get out of my head!

Too much for you, bro?

Wait till I get home.

Catch me if you can!

Pieter laughed and the image of Cynthia's sweat covered body abruptly disappeared. Jarrod wiped the sweat from his own forehead and cursed loudly. He loved his brother, but sometimes he just took things too far.

A flashing blue light appeared beside his van. "Great, just great."

"You okay?" the cop asked.

Jarrold lowered his window. "I'm fine, just taking a phone call."

"Should get a hands free," the cop suggested.

"I will. Thanks for stopping."

"No problems. We guys should stick together."

"I'm all for that."

Jarrold watched the patrol car pull away and wondered if the cop's good intentions were wasted on him. Come Christmas Eve, if everything didn't go right, they'd be on opposite sides.

Chapter Two

Cynthia nipped Jarrod's left nipple.

He opened his eyes in pained surprise to find Cynthia straddling him, blood on her lips. "Bitch." Jarrod hated being bitten.

Cynthia laughed.

He'd been dreaming of Gilly again, dreaming of last night's kiss, though his dream had taken it far beyond a grateful kiss in a car park. They'd been in his bed, enveloped in each other's arms, flesh to flesh. She'd been making love to him with a feral energy that seemed to come so naturally to her.

The erotic dream had then crazily morphed into that old fearful nightmare. It angered him that the fear haunted him still. That mind-numbing, bowel-voiding fear that rose up in the night, a shadow of hell -- black fur, red eyes and flashing teeth. And then Cynthia had actually bit him.

"Get off me!"

Cynthia rolled off, opening her legs and fanning them with her hand as if to cool her oversexed pussy. He smelled Pieter on her. They'd been noisily fucking when he'd come home and, obviously unsatisfied, she wanted more. She whimpered and, pouting her sexy mouth, she ran her razor-like nails down his side.

Jarrold sighed in irritation. She'd been trying to get him to fuck her for the last few months. She was in heat 24/7 and while the rough and tumble of werewolf sex was an interesting diversion, he longed for the before times, when he would spend hours exploring his partner's body, learning every spot that would send her into delirious pleasure.

Werewolves had no time for that. They wanted wham bam, and they wanted it often, which seemed to suit Pieter. Werewolves were insatiable, but quantity was never

Jarrold's thing. Quality was the important thing, as was tenderness and affection. Above all things he missed that the most.

"Cynthia," he said softly, not wanting to hurt her feelings. "I want to make sure you realize that you aren't beholden to me to stay."

Her big yellow eyes widened. "But you killed Stani."

Stanislaus, the wolf who'd turned her, had been a drug addicted moron who got off on the alpha male thing. Jarrod hadn't been looking for a fight that night in the underground jazz bar, but Cynthia had given him the look, twice. Stanislaus saw, as she intended, got jealous and attacked Jarrod without warning.

He'd been a big bugger. The drugs had a dual effect, they made him stronger for sure, but they also slowed his reactions and Jarrod had managed to survive long enough to get the upper hand. Stanislaus was too brain addled to know that he'd been beaten and hadn't submitted. Jarrod had let him go twice only to be attacked from behind. The third time he'd torn out the Russian émigré's throat.

"You don't find me sexy?" Cynthia asked, her voice edged with disbelief.

"Of course, but you know, I'm going through a lot of stuff at the moment," he lied. He didn't want to hurt her, even though she was a bitch. Besides, it hadn't been her fault Stanislaus had turned her into a beast. "I don't think it fair that you stay somewhere if you don't want to. Stani is dead. You are your own mistress now."

Those saffron eyes gazed at him for a long moment. "You mean I don't belong to you?"

"Not to me, not to anyone."

"Well then," she said and climbed off the bed.

He considered her with some surprise. He hadn't expected her to take the hint so easily. He'd expected her to beg to stay because she was afraid to go out into the big bad world on her own. He had to admit, his pride was a little dented. "Where will you go?"

She gave a noncommittal shrug of her shoulders while she searched for her clothes. "Dunno. But I'll figure something out. Maybe Pieter's idea of a discipline dungeon wasn't so stupid."

"What about Pieter?"

"I figured if I couldn't have you then I'd have him. You look so alike. Tonight was my idea, wanted to show you what you were missing."

Thanks a lot. "Well, take care of yourself. Cynthia, I do like you but..."

"Yeah, well, Jarrod, you gotta learn to lighten up, ya know?"

"Oh?"

"Be more like Pieter."

His jaw dropped in astonishment.

"You're way too square."

"What do you mean?"

She paused in her search for her panties and looked down at him, a pitying expression on her pretty face. "Well, for starters, making him get a job like you? That's crazy. Wolves can take what they want. We don't have to work."

Lightning fast he grasped her wrist.

She responded to his bruising strength with a wry smile. "Now that's more like it."

"Pieter told you about his job?"

"You're weird, ya know?"

"What did he tell you?"

"Nothin', all right? Shit. I'm outta here." She wrenched her arm free. "See ya 'round."

Jarrod watched her tight ass skitter out the door. He had to let her go. What else could he do? Short of chaining her up, he had no way to control her, and having a yelping bitch chained in the house was sure to draw too much attention. Besides, he knew he could never do something like that.

No damage done, he consoled himself. She had no one to tell, and besides, she'd quickly forget about two odd wolves like Jarrod and Pieter. He'd have to have a few words with his brother about security.

Later he found his brother lounging in front of the TV watching the cricket on cable. Jarrod sat opposite and considered his brother. They were fundamentally identical but Pieter looked perpetually under threat. When not glued to the TV or video games his eyes would dart about like a skittish sparrow, looking for danger.

Jarrod knew that Pieter was morbidly dependent on him, the result of schoolyard bullying Jarrod had rescued him from. Pieter had not left his side since. It had never been a normal relationship, Jarrod knew, and it had been worsened by their current situation.

Pieter noticed him staring at him. "Where's Cyn?" he asked.

"You told her."

Pieter shifted in his seat. "Huh? Told her what?"

"The job, damn it."

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah, oh shit. What did you tell her?"

"Where is she? You haven't..."

"Don't be ridiculous. She's gone. What did you tell her?"

"What did she say?"

"No games, Pieter. What the hell did you tell her?"

He licked his lips nervously. "She wanted to go shopping, shoplifting rather, and I said I couldn't go. She asked why not and I just said that working was the pits. She asked me what I meant and I told her you got me a job. You should've heard her laugh."

Pieter had lied to him so often Jarrod knew the signs without knowing what the signs actually were. "You didn't tell her what sort of job?"

"Just that it's the pits. I mean, we don't have to work."

Pieter was a fool and too easily led. He could easily imagine him following Cynthia like a puppy. Jarrod fixed his twin with an ice cold gaze and settled back into the couch.

"What?" Pieter asked defensively.

"Cynthia's not someone we can trust."

"She's okay."

Jarrod shook his head in despair. "Just be careful of Cynthia."

Pieter pretended to watch the cricket.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah. She's bad for me. I got it."

"And last night's joke. Never do that to me again. You understand?"

"Sure. Never again."

Jarrod picked up the remote and found the History Channel.

"Hey! I was watching that."

Jarrod ignored him, hoping his anger would subside before they had to leave for work. Tonight was their first shift at the museum. He had to be able to concentrate.

The images on the screen grabbed his attention immediately. He soon forgot about Pieter's lapse in judgment. Seeing again the sanguine moonscape that was Coober Pedy brought back a flood of unpleasant memories.

It had been there, and with a similar lapse, that Pieter had got them into this mess. He just couldn't keep his mouth shut. Pieter noticed what was on screen and immediately let out a sorrowful moan. "Turn it off!"

Jarrod turned the TV's volume up. "I want to hear."

The attractive presenter, with the crimson desert stretching out behind her, continued her introduction. "The Christmas Kiss, the world's largest opal, was discovered on Christmas Day 1985 in Coober Pedy, the opal center of the world. The South Australian mining town was thrown into turmoil two hours after this image was taken when the monster gemstone was stolen from the two young miners who'd

unearthed it -- Jarrod and Pieter De Groot. The young men were believed killed by the thieves, their bodies never recovered."

"Turn it off!" Pieter whined, clutching a sofa pillow around his head. Jarrod couldn't take his eyes off the scene. The camera panned to show the entrance to their underground home.

"Miners in Coober Pedy live in subterranean houses carved out of solid rock. They dig rooms as needed and discover untold wealth as they do. The Christmas Kiss, estimated at the time to be worth over ten million dollars, was so named after the newspaper photograph of the two young miners depicted them kissing it. Two hours later, they were dead and the opal was gone." The grainy newspaper photograph lingered on the screen.

"Turn it off!" Pieter whined. "Please..."

Jarrod did as his brother asked. The image of their two ecstatic faces kissing the enormous lump of opal, the bifurcated strings of gemstone gleaming through the dirt, was just too much. "Sorry, mate," he murmured into the silence.

The presenter had been wrong, of course. They weren't dead. Death would've been so much more desirable. On Christmas Day twenty-five years ago, they'd been given something far worse than death.

* * *

Jarrod.

He'd kept Gilly awake all night. In a frenzy of sensual fantasy she'd tossed and turned, twisting in the sheets, caught up in a maelstrom of erotic arousal with Jarrod at its vortex. With her aching nipples and the sultry heat of her pussy screaming for release she'd resorted to her favorite dildo; a centuries old ivory cock that had been given as a gift by a thoughtful East India Company man to his wife. Apparently he'd been a close confidant to a beauteous Maharani and so absent from the marital bed most of the time.

Gilly had fingered the intricate carvings of voluptuous females and their well-endowed mates coupling in fantastical poses as she ran the tip of the shaft along the moist flesh of her pussy.

Her lips still tingled with the warmth of Jarrod's mouth. She'd been possessed with an urgent desire to kiss him not simply in gratitude for saving her from disaster but being so close to him had stirred something deep within her. A strange arousal had gripped her, not simply sexual desire but something more ancient, something wild and innate. Jarrod, she thought, was not an average man. His nature transcended any semblance of normality. What that nature was she had no idea but it was not completely unknown to her. It was a wildness which mirrored her own and bordered on something bestial, a restlessness she'd kept leashed deep inside.

When he'd mentioned he handled dogs a frisson of fear had swept through her with the force of a hurricane but for the first time in her life, however, fear had not overwhelmed her desire, and she had to touch him, to taste that half familiar inner wildness.

Gilly had been in the middle of that lingering dream kiss when her orgasm gripped her. Her pussy had pulsed and clenched around the ivory cock embedded deep within...

"Gilly, are you listening?"

Bert Gotweib was a particularly odious little man. Gilly detested him even though he was an old friend of her father's. Bert owned and ruled Triple A Security like a petty dictator. She regretted the day she'd taken her father's advice to ask him for a job.

"This is your last chance, Gilly. Being your father's daughter only earns you three chances with me."

Gilly nervously stroked the stub of her little finger. She gave a slight nod and turned to go to the staff room.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To get ready for my shift."

"Not today, no way. I'm transferring you to the Dog Squad."

Oh, no! "Not that, Bert, please." Her body had dropped straight into panic mode. Her heart had jumped into a rapid irregular beat and beads of sweat broke out on her lip. She went into damage control mode. *Relax. Deep slow breaths. There are no dogs here. No reason to panic. Take a deep breath, think of a tropical island, a safe beautiful place...*

"Gilly!"

She jumped and her pleasant visualization, guaranteed to lower her heart rate and anxiety levels, dissolved in a black cloud of fear. She clenched her sweaty palms. "I don't want to work with dogs," she said, slowly gaining command of her tongue.

"Don't argue. You think you can louse up a job, get me in a shit-load of trouble, ruin our reputation and then carry on as normal? No way. You do as you're told and keep out of trouble."

"But I hate dogs," she said, locking onto his eyes, focusing on them to combat the rising tide of fear. "I have cynophobia. I told you..."

"Don't be stupid. It's all in the head. All you have to do is hold the leash and walk around the perimeter fence."

Oh, my God. "But they're vicious!"

"Which is sort of the idea, since they *are* guard dogs."

"Bert, I promise to be more careful. I won't let you down again. Give me one more chance."

"Gilly, I've never seen anyone so clumsy, or so forgetful. You left the shop's keys sitting on the damn roof of your patrol car, for God's sake."

"But I explained. There was a reason. A citizen was having a heart attack."

"Citizen? Nifty Nev a citizen? Gilly, Nifty's a petty criminal with a record as long as my arm. He saw you coming a mile off."

"But I thought he was dying."

"Gilly, how many times have I told you, being a Good Samaritan is not in your job description. You guard things. That's all. Stray cats and thespian crooks you don't touch, okay?"

"But..."

"No buts about it. Go down to the kennel and Jarrod will introduce you to your new friends."

Jarrod. "I don't understand."

"Jarrod needs a hand. Terry called in sick, his gall bladder again, so he'll be off for a week. I just need you to help Jarrod look after the new dog. Get Satan familiar with the site."

"Satan?"

"Yeah, cute name, eh?"

Really cute. Gilly's heart thudded out of control. She had to get her mind off the dog or she'd puke right here on Bert's floor. "What's the job?"

"The museum. All you do is take them on patrol, walk around the premises for six hours, bring 'em back to the kennel and go home, simple. It's an important job. So no fuck ups, okay? The new exhibit arrives next Friday night."

Friday night. "But that's Christmas Eve!"

Bert cocked a bushy eyebrow. "So? You're taking over Terry's roster. You want to stay on the roster, don't you?" There was something challenging in the way he posed the question that set off alarm bells. He'd like nothing better than for her to quit. "Do you want to stay on the roster or not?"

His beady eyes gleamed and Gilly could almost smell his anticipation. "Yeah, but..."

He wagged his forefinger at her. "Your job is to scare the thieves away. That's all. Don't talk to anyone and, for God's sake, don't help anyone. I don't care if it is Christmas Eve. Do not help anyone. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Bert."

"Good. Shifts start at twenty-one hundred hours every night this week, and then on Friday the statue arrives. As soon as the gems are safely locked up, the *real* security guards will look after them."

Now that really stung. "But..."

"What did I tell you about butts? Don't make me tell your father. It would break his old heart. I'd hate to hear that he had a coronary. Medical facilities aren't up to scratch where he is."

"Yes, Bert."

"So, get down to the kennel, get to know Satan. Take him for a walk in the park then have the afternoon off."

Gilly swallowed noisily. *Get to know Satan. Take him for a walk. Get to know him?*

How was she going to do that for God's sake? How was she going to stop freezing in her boots?

"Jarrod will be your supervisor. He's an experienced dog handler. You'll be fine."

Her heart was knocking on her ribs, trying to escape her chest, threatening to take out Bert's office, Triple A Security and the good state of South Australia in one single explosion of blood and gristle. She stroked her hands frenetically, compulsively rubbing the stub of her little finger.

"Gilly? You still here?"

"Yes." She looked up from the missing finger and met his shiny little porcine eyes. "It may take me some time."

"Take all the time you want, just be on site with Satan at twenty-one hundred hours. Got that?"

She nodded and left his office, slamming the door as she went.

Dogs! She leaned against the doorpost, breathing deep slow breaths, fighting the urge to hyperventilate. She shut her eyes to avoid the bemused expression on Mandy's heavily made up face.

Come on tropical island! My safe sandy beach with the palm tree that sways in the breeze. The smell of jasmine in the air... Where the hell's my island?

Chapter Three

"You okay?" Mandy asked, her thin lips curling into a barely contained smirk.

Gilly set her jaw and pushed off from the doorjamb. "Yes. I'm perfectly well, thank you." She squared her shoulders and, though her legs were quivering like her Mum's lemon meringue, she walked determinedly to the steps that led down to the garage. She walked past the patrol vans and the bemused guards filling in their time sheets, out the side door and to the lunch tables set out on the grass.

Gilly purposely faced west so she didn't have to look down the path to the dog kennel. Her heart thudded like a drum and her whole body prickled with a cold heat. She had to get her heart rate back to normal. She tried again for her island but it was elusively out to sea.

Gilly counted to ten, then twenty then went for the flat hundred. By three hundred and fifty-seven she noticed her heart was somewhere near normal and she stopped counting, took a deep breath and opened her eyes.

Over the last twenty years Gilly had seen over a dozen psychiatrists who had attempted to cure her of her dog phobia. She knew all the terminology; systematic and contact desensitization, visualization therapy, emotive imagery, flooding and implosion, operant conditioning and cognitive behavioral therapy. So far all had failed her. She still was petrified by dogs.

I'm afraid of dogs. It's a fact, get over it and get on with life.

That was easier said than attempted. Sure, get on with it sounded good in theory, but what about her job? Bert wanted her to run screaming home so he could tell Dad she'd messed up again. Not his fault, he'd say. She's too far gone, he'd say. Just trying to help, he'd say. *Bastard.*

Gilly clenched her fists and took a deep breath. The decision came suddenly and emphatically. She could easily quit and make Bert a very happy man, or, she could prove to herself that she was better than her fears. That she could conquer this. *Here and now.*

"I am more than my fear," she whispered between clenched teeth. "I am more than my fear."

She stood up and, with knuckles white at her sides, she turned robot-like and strode toward the kennel. *I can't botch this up. I have to prove that I'm not a total fuck-up.*

She *was* accident prone, it was true, as was her mother.

For Gilly, her luck soured early in life. She was barely five and she'd been starting her first day at school. Her mother and she were hand in hand walking down a tree-lined avenue. She was very excited, she remembered. She'd been jabbering on about childish things, she couldn't remember exactly what. Then her whole world had collapsed in on her. With a menacing growl a big black shape appeared out of nowhere. Then sharp pain in her hand. She'd screamed and fallen.

Gilly shuddered. She was standing perfectly still in the middle of the path leading to the kennel, her heart thumping in her breast like a mad thing. "For God's sake," she breathed through gritted teeth. "Get a grip. Do this and do it now. Just walk in the door and say 'hi' to Jarrod. Do it."

She picked up her foot and mechanically put it forward. She followed it with the other. Her progress was awkward and puppet-like. Her mouth was painfully dry. Sweat trickled down her back.

Ahead of her the door of the kennel was closed. She'd have to reach out and grasp the handle to open it. She rehearsed the movements while she stepped slowly toward it.

There are dogs inside, her fearful brain told her.

My sanity is in there, her rational mind replied.

But they'll rip me apart.

That's just untrue and you know it.

How do you know?

Jarrood will protect me.

Her fearful brain, for a change, was silent.

Fear had controlled her ever since that awful first, and last, day of school. The nightmares, twenty years later, were so horrific she was afraid, some nights, to even close her eyes. "Gilly, you need to take the world on, not be scared of it," her father said on the telephone from Sri Lanka after a recent pilgrimage to the Ganges. "Go to Bert, he'll give you a job. He owes me a big favor. He'll give you a cushy job and you'll be fine."

The cushy job turned out to be fieldwork. After some basic training to get her security certificate of competency, she was let loose driving the patrol van and checking that buildings, mostly small shops and domestic premises, were secure.

A simple job, yet she'd failed. Damn you, Nifty, you bastard.

Gilly suddenly realized she was at the kennel door. She froze. Her nose was full of the scent of dog. Since the attack she always knew dogs were close way before she saw them. She could hear them too, from great distances. Now she could hear them breathing, their muffled barks, the scrape of claws on cement, and sensed their frustrated boredom.

She rubbed her pinkie furiously. Her heart was trying to escape her chest again. *Damn you, don't be such a coward!* She gritted her teeth and reached out for the doorknob. *It's now or never.*

Just as her hand closed on the door handle the door was flung open and a tall figure in motion plowed into her. Gilly was propelled backward into the rose garden. She landed on her ass, but momentum took her further till her head was lying on the soft soil under the thorny roses.

"Fuck! I'm sorry."

The tall figure was bending over her. She shaded her eyes from the sun and gazed into the most beautiful amber eyes she'd ever seen. *Jarrood!* She caught her breath. The thunder of her heart, so strong in her ears, faded as she lost herself in his gaze. It

was as if she were in a whirlpool, sinking into the depths of his eyes. Manic butterflies fluttered in her stomach.

"Careful of the roses," Jarrod said, his voice like syrup, dripping into her ears, drowning her senses. As he lifted the branches away from her arms his fingertips grazed hers and left a trail of fire. "Are you hurt?"

"Only my dignity," she stammered.

With his other hand he grasped her by the hand and effortlessly lifted her out. She stood on wobbly feet looking into his tawny eyes.

He was still holding her hand. She glanced down to them, noticing how long and graceful his fingers were. She wondered at their elegance and how they would feel caressing her flesh... Self-consciously, she pulled her hand away, but his grasp lingered for a moment. She lifted her eyes to his and she started to drown all over again in those amber depths.

"Okay?"

"Yes, thank you."

"That door should have a window in it," he said.

Gilly nodded. "It would help."

"What are you doing down this way?"

What, indeed.

She dropped her eyes to the ground, but his boots were there and her gaze instinctively traveled up his socks to his naked shin, golden brown with curly dark hair. Then his well shaped knees and powerful thighs. She held her breath when her inspection settled on his groin. Even though he was covered by his tight blue uniform shorts she could tell there was something big in there.

She stepped back.

Jarrod in daylight, she'd later describe to herself, was simply sublime. Athletic and toned and once her eyes had traveled above his groin, she noted he had a narrow waist and flat stomach. He wore a short sleeved shirt that exposed powerful biceps and covered a broad, muscled chest.

"Gilly?" Jarrod asked. "Sure you're okay? Did you bump your head?"

"Just a little."

"Well, come inside and I'll fix you a cup of tea."

"Um, thanks."

"Guess we better fill out the paperwork."

"Paperwork?"

"Workplace accident. You never know, you might have a concussion."

"No, we don't need to." An accident report would be the last straw for Bert.

"Well, we'll note it in the incident book anyway. Hate to see you miss out on any worker's compensation if something develops."

"It won't."

"Well, a cup of tea at least."

He held the door open for her and she was halfway through it before she remembered where she was. She stopped dead. Jarrod careered into her back. Despite her rapidly rising fear, she was still compos mentis enough to feel the hard lump that pressed against her rear end.

He stood there for a moment, pressed against her, his hot breath on her neck. His hands had gone, she supposed, automatically to her hips. He pushed himself away so at least that part of his body wasn't pressed against her, but left his hands on her hips. "Sorry about that. Didn't see your brake lights."

She was teetering on the brink of two worlds. One of sublime excitement, the feel of his strong hands, the memory of his breath on her neck, the burning pressure at her ass, and the mortifying fear that was lurking in the shadows of the kennel.

"What's up?"

"Um... are the dogs... um..."

"Secured?"

"Yeah."

"They're in their runs."

"Uh?"

"The grassed areas at the back of their cages. They're okay."

"Um... good."

"Still want that cup of tea?"

"Sure."

"Gilly?"

"What?"

"The tea is in there. We'll have to go inside."

"Oh."

Her eyes had adjusted to the relative darkness of the office. Of course, the dogs' area was to the back behind a partition. She took a deep breath and forced herself to take a step inside.

"Take a seat," Jarrod said and motioned to a bench seat beside a white enamel table. He busied himself in the tiny kitchenette.

She sat onto a plastic chair, clasping her hands in her lap, stroking her little pinkie.

"Milk, sugar?"

"Yes, please."

"One or two?"

"Two, please."

She watched him spoon two sugars into a mug. "Only have tea bags, I'm afraid."

"That's okay. Bert's reassigned me to take over for Terry this week."

"Oh? He hadn't mentioned it." He looked at her kindly. "So, you'll be grabbing Satan."

"I guess."

"Have you been around dogs much?"

"Not at all."

"The jug will take a minute to boil. Come here for a second."

He held out his hand. Reluctantly she took it and stood up. He led her around the partition to a set of four cages that each opened onto a grassy area with a tree.

Jarrold pointed to two Dobermans lazing beneath their respective trees. One was a giant and jet-black, the other had a bluish hue to its fur. Both dogs jumped up and trotted happily toward them, their tails wagging in excitement.

Gilly stepped back, but Jarrold was standing behind her and his bulk prevented her from going any further. There was that hardness pressing against her ass again.

The black Doberman growled menacingly at her. Gilly spun around to flee but found herself confronted by Jarrold's wide chest. She barely resisted the urge to bury her face against him.

"That's Diablo," he said into her ear. "He's the noisiest of the pair."

She risked turning her head and gazed at the medium-sized dog's powerful frame. It had a wedge-shaped head with rust markings above his eyes and on his muzzle and throat.

"I thought they used German Shepherds for guard work."

"They usually do, but I prefer Dobes, and Diablo is the best, worked with him a long time now. Terry found Satan somewhere, didn't tell me where, but he said he was pretty smart."

Gilly glanced at the two slaving beasts. "They look vicious."

"They are, to the bad guys, but are very loyal to the good guys. They're smarter than they look."

That earned Jarrold a tirade of angry barking from Diablo. "See what I mean?" Jarrold laughed. "But Satan is smart, I'll give him that. For an old dog he has picked up his lessons real quick, even before Terry finished his routines."

"Had he been trained before?"

"Terry thought so."

"I'm glad. I'm with you on the museum job on Christmas Eve."

Gilly couldn't define the look that passed across his face. It was a mixture of surprise, anger and frustration. He recovered quickly and blessed her with one of his brilliant smiles. "Ah, the big one. Better get Satan familiar with you then."

"What do you mean, 'the big one'?"

Jarrood leaned back on the wire netting. "The opal statue coming from India. It made quite a splash in the papers."

"I must have missed it."

"It's made completely out of a single opal. I see you like opal."

She fingered her opal bracelet. "I love them."

The black Doberman, Diablo -- she might as well get used to his name -- growled at her. She jumped back again so that her back hit Jarrood's broad frame and she rebounded off him. Trying to regain her balance she slipped on the wet floor and fell. That brought her to her knees, face hard up against the wire, eye to eye with Satan.

She gasped in terror.

"Go easy, Gilly," Jarrood said.

Then the most surprising thing happened. Satan examined her closely, almost intelligently, and before she knew it, the rough pink tongue snaked between the wire and stroked her chin.

She fell back on her haunches.

"Well, I'll be buggered," Jarrood muttered. "You've found a friend there, Gilly. I think he likes you."

Gilly was too flustered to respond. Once the initial revulsion at the idea of the slavering animal licking her face had passed, she was mesmerized by the dark eyes that stared intelligently back at her.

Diablo snarled and Satan snapped at him with a savage bark. Satan then returned his gaze to her, his expression softening, she thought.

"Up you come," Jarrood said, extending his hand to her. She took it and climbed to her feet. "Well, that's something. Look at his tail go."

Satan's long tail was swinging back and forth, striking the wire of the cage with every sweep. Diablo gave an irritated harrumph and wandered back to his basket and blanket. Satan however stood at the wire, his gaze constant and captivating.

"What should I do?" Gilly asked.

Satan tilted his head and let out a mournful whimper.

"If I didn't know any better," Jarrod said, "I'd say he wants to go for a walk."

Satan tilted his head the other way and Gilly suddenly felt faint. Something like a summer breeze had flowed through her head. *Take us for a walk* the breeze seemed to whisper.

"There's no reason to be afraid," Jarrod was saying. "Here, I'll get some dog treats from the fridge and they'll be your friends for life."

"I thought they were taught not to accept food from strangers."

"They are, but you're with me," Jarrod said. "It'll be okay. Besides, you'll be Satan's handler for the next week or so."

He went over to the fridge and extracted some meaty dog biscuits. "They love the beef ones," he explained.

She stared down at the proffered treats and shook her head, rubbing her pinkie furiously. There was absolutely no way she was going to feed these monsters.

"Go on, Gilly. He already likes you and now that he's seen the food, he's hungry."

It was true. The look in Satan's eye was hungry, very hungry.

"If you don't feed him, he'll remember and won't like you."

"Then you feed him."

"I'm not the one he'll be dragging around a museum in the middle of the night. If I were you, Gilly, I'd feed him and get over your fear. He won't take off your fingers or anything."

"Wanna bet?" She glanced at him to see he was watching her keenly. "How did you know I was afraid?" she said defensively.

Jarrod looked at her. "It's a bit obvious, Gilly. You have perspiration on your lip, you're shaking like a leaf and you're as white as a sheet."

"I don't like dogs."

"I noticed. That will have to change. Satan likes you, Gilly. Give him a treat."

Jarrod grasped her hand. "Listen," he said with a knowing smile on his lips. "I'll do you a deal. Feed him and I'll take you and Satan for a walk."

Diablo yelped.

"Okay, Diablo, I'll take you too."

She laughed at the way Satan and Diablo wagged their tails at the mention of a walk. It softened some of her fear. He held out the biscuits. She took one and stared at it for a long moment.

"Go on," Jarrod urged.

"Why are you doing this, Jarrod?"

His handsome face darkened. "In my opinion Bert's trying to get rid of you. He doesn't want to sack you, yeah? But if you were to leave of your own accord..."

Gilly's jaw set and her face flushed with anger. She clenched her fists around the biscuits.

"Bert knows you hate dogs, why else would he transfer you here?"

"I've stuffed up a few times, but..." Gilly began and stopped herself. She would not whine about it.

"There's no right or wrong to it, Gilly. He's the boss and he wants to get rid of you. What I'm saying is, don't let the fat bastard win like that. You'd make me very happy if you'd beat him at his own game."

Satan gazed up at her.

Her anger at Bert was immeasurable. She hated the way he thought she was pathetic and weak. She wasn't weak at all. She knew that. She tried to prove it to herself every day. Not many people start giving total strangers CPR without a second thought, or climb twenty meters up a tree to save a kitten. She wasn't a coward, she was just...

I'm a walking disaster area, that's what I am. Totally dysfunctional. A total...

Stop it. Just give me the damn biscuit.

"Gilly, are you all right?"

"Did you hear that?"

"What?"

Jarrold was looking at her like she was a mad woman, caution in his glowing amber eyes. She didn't want to see his expression when she told him that Satan had just talked to her.

Oh, my God. I'm going insane.

Satan tilted his head and licked his lips impatiently, his eyes fixed on the biscuit in her hand. Her little pinkie was itching furiously. Her face was flushed and she felt hot all over, her flesh prickly with it. She licked her dry lips.

Slowly she extended her hand, her fingers gripping the biscuit by its very edge. Diablo rushed at the wire and Satan snapped at him. Diablo yelped back, eyes focused on the biscuits. Jarrold gave him one through the wire. "See how easy it is?"

Satan looked at her, those piercing black eyes almost apologetic, as if he felt her pain.

Gilly took a step forward again and held out the biscuit.

"Wait for it, Satan," Jarrold whispered.

Satan licked his lips and waited for her to push it between the wire before he deftly plucked it from her grasp and swallowed it like a breath of air.

"There, wasn't that easy?"

Gilly let out the breath she'd been holding. Her fingers were shaking and a fire was pulsing in the stub of her little finger. It hadn't been easy at all. It was the hardest bloody thing she'd ever done.

She glared at Jarrold. His smiling face was distorted by the tears that were flooding her eyes.

She wanted to say thank you, but her throat was clogged and all she could do was blink away the tears.

Thank you.

Don't mention it.

Chapter Four

In the rose garden Jarrod's heart had given a jump when she looked into his eyes. Those brilliant opalescent orbs glowed like the purest gemstone. They were a brilliant azure with flecks of gold that caught the light and shimmered electrically. He had to remember to breathe.

It was her delicate face that held his attention. She was absolutely gorgeous. Her strawberry blonde hair was tied up in a ponytail that wagged behind her head. Delicate wisps of hair had escaped the elastic tie and curled around her ears. Her creamy complexion glowed in the light of the overhead tubes.

Her lips, which had kissed him last night, were naturally full with tiny dimples at the corners and he had a sudden image of licking them until he made her smile. Her face was pixie-like, though somehow sensual, holding a naiveté that intrigued him. Her scent was hot, her hormones shedding like dandelion seeds in the wind. There was something feral about her though, he'd detected a hint of it last night. Today, with her exposure to the dogs, it seemed to be much more pronounced.

She was exquisite and was certainly getting his hormones flowing. He was holding her right hand and when he released it she began stroking the stump of her little finger. Like a tic, it betrayed her fear.

Wanting to focus on something pleasant, he remembered she had a penchant for opals.

She had a watch with an opal encrusted band, an opal pendant, two opal rings and an opal bracelet. All were high quality gems in expensive settings. The small earrings caught the light and were a perfect complement to her eyes.

He had a sudden desire to learn everything there was to know about her. Once the mission was disposed of, he thought, he wouldn't mind meeting her socially. She

was easily the most desirable woman he'd ever seen and getting to know her better was now on top of his list of things to do.

While he made her a cup of tea he considered her through the corner of his eye. She was staring at the stub of her little finger. From within the kennel Diablo barked. She started at the noise and jumped backward in the chair, her creamy face draining of color until it was clear alabaster.

Her fear of dogs could prove awkward, he thought, smiling inwardly at the thrill of excitement. He suddenly felt like Richard the Third. Oh "if a woman in this mood could be wooed?"

He licked his lips. She'd certainly be a challenge, with him being a werewolf and all.

Where's Terry? Pieter's unspoken question drew his eyes away from the girl. *He's never late.*

I convinced him he was sick so he'd take the week off.

Fancy her, do you?

Jarrold ignored Pieter's laughter and concentrated on Gilly. So, she was to be a new handler? Bert was a real bastard. He'd thought as much when he'd first applied for a job with him. He was obviously setting Gilly up to fail, hoping she'd run away with her tail between her legs.

He saw her cheeks color with rage as she processed that possibility. He was right. She did have a determined streak in her. His estimation of Gilly increased. He definitely would like to get to know her better. She was his kind of girl.

He'd watched her face as Satan wolfed down the treat. There had been a fleeting glimpse of triumph before her eyes had become teary, emphasizing their strange opalescence. He wanted to take her in his arms and hold her and take away her fear.

He held himself back, only just. Let her bask in her own triumph for a few moments. The victory was hers. She deserved it all.

"Let's take them for a walk, eh?" he asked after she'd fed Satan another treat. It was important, he thought, that she quickly go onto the next step.

"I'm not sure."

"Come on. Satan needs his exercise. He likes you, and he'll be forever grateful." He leaned toward her, breathing in her scent as he did so. "I reckon it would really shake Bert up to see you walking Satan past the office windows."

A slight smile of mischief creased those luscious lips. She had a sense of play as well, he thought. What a pity it had been smothered by her fears.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I mean, I have no experience walking a dog. What if..."

"It's easy. Just one thing. Make sure Satan knows you're the boss. You've fed him, he likes you, but he'll be like a child, he'll push the limits. So, whenever you speak to him, put some authority in your voice."

"I don't know if I can."

"You'll be fine."

He glanced at Satan and gave him a command. Satan was a smart dog. He bowed his head and lowered his tail in acceptance of Jarrod's dominance. He'd give Gilly no trouble.

"He looks very strong. I'm not sure I could hold him if, you know, he wanted to go anywhere on his own accord."

"There are a few simple commands that he knows already."

She listened intently, her beautiful eyes fixed on his, as he had her practice the commands.

"Lower your voice just a tad," he suggested. "Satan will love your voice, but he has to know that he shouldn't mess with you. What you say goes."

She lowered her voice and said the commands again.

"Very good. Okay. Now to go out in public we'll put their muzzle guards on." She gave a shudder. "They're nothing and the boys are used to them."

Diablo gave a brief snarl.

"Well, Diablo's not that keen, but that's because he has altogether too much to say sometimes."

Diablo barked at him. Jarrod noticed that Gilly had noted the exchange. Despite all the emotions she must be feeling right now, she was still observant. That was another thing to like about her. "Diablo and I have known each other a long time. I think he can read my mind sometimes. I know I can read his."

Gilly gave him a smile that lit his heart. "Can't I just get to know them around here?"

"Sure, if you like, but they do need exercise, otherwise they get a little antsy. I take 'em to the park, a good long run, chase a ball."

"You let them off?"

"If there aren't too many people around." Jarrod pulled a leash off the wall. "Look, it's easy. They have this harness on with a quick release. So if you want to set 'em onto a no-good crook, you just let it go, like so."

"Oh."

While Jarrod showed her the leash and how it worked he studied her reactions. She was quick on the uptake. She asked all the right questions, though her voice was still a little tremulous. She was combating her fear of the unknown by gaining knowledge. Knowledge was power, and she was using it to curb her anxiety.

He admired that. If she went the next step and actually came into the cage with him then she'd be the most courageous person he had ever met.

Her hands trembled as she held the leash and harness. Jarrod stood at the door of Diablo's cage. "Ready?"

She took a deep breath as if summoning up her strength and gave a slight nod. Jarrod gave Diablo a warning glare and unlatched the door and pushed it open. Diablo did as he was bid and sat back.

"See how he waits to be harnessed?"

He handed her the harness. She hesitated for only a moment, then took it out of his hands and, standing a little too far away to be natural, draped the harness around Diablo's head and shoulders.

She quickly buckled it, only fumbling once. Diablo waited, his shoulders drooped in boredom.

"Well done. Now for Satan."

Gilly repeated the process, this time with much more assuredness. Satan behaved himself. Jarrod liked the dog, which had quickly gotten used to the fact that Jarrod was no ordinary human and obeyed him in all things.

"Okay, to the park."

Jarrold grasped her elbow and, together, the four of them strode out into the sunshine.

They took their time walking past the office and Gilly glanced more than once to the upstairs windows to see if Bert was watching. Diablo had barked loudly once or twice at Jarrod's command just to attract some attention.

Gilly had a hard time believing what she was doing. Satan trotted comfortably by her side. He had only strained at the leash once, and her command in her firmest voice had brought him back.

"Well done," Jarrod said and her heart soared.

The walk down a pleasant tree-lined avenue to the park took about fifteen minutes. The dogs were well behaved and Gilly took the time to get used to having the enormous beast by her side. He occasionally looked up at her, but mostly he occupied himself with doggy things. Gilly was ever mindful of Jarrod's tall frame beside her and wondered about his kindness.

This morning when she'd climbed reluctantly out of bed, the last thing she would have dreamed of happening would be feeding a giant Doberman Pinscher and walking it in the park beside a man who sent her blood rushing and her heart thumping.

Gilly also felt the flutter deep between her thighs. She was acutely aware of the sultry heat building down there. Jarrod seemed to exude an aura of strength and protectiveness. His voice was deep and commanding yet so gentle. Curiously, when he spoke she seemed to hear his words not only through her ears, but strangely in her head

as well. It must be her overwrought imagination she figured, like that silly notion that Satan had spoken to her. Yet, that was how Jarrod's words sounded to her. It was like he was inside her.

She giggled at the outrageous double meaning that phrase had and her pussy pulsed in response. Beneath her uniform her nipples hardened and pressed urgently against her bra. Sneaking a peek she saw them pressing out through the material of her shirt. She cleared her throat uncomfortably.

"We've been walking for fifteen minutes," Jarrod said. "There's no one about. Want to let the guys loose?"

"Is that safe?"

He sat down on a park bench beneath a spreading Moreton Bay Fig. "The guys are well behaved."

She sat down beside him. Satan sat without prompting, his gaze flitting between Diablo, Jarrod and herself.

"Now, unleash Satan first. Tell him to stay as you do."

"All right, if you're sure."

"Unclip his muzzle first."

"Are you sure about this?"

"They can't chase a ball with a muzzle on."

With shaking fingers she unclipped the muzzle. Satan seemed to know what she was doing and sat perfectly still. Then she unclipped his harness. "Stay."

Satan licked her face before she could escape. Jarrod laughed and caught her as she flung herself backwards out of Satan's reach. "See, I told you he liked you."

"I don't kiss on first dates," she muttered and then blushed.

"I'll keep that in mind," Jarrod said as he released Diablo. Both dogs quivered with excitement as he produced a well-chewed tennis ball from his pocket.

"Satan is taking commands from you now. Say 'chase' when I throw it."

She did as instructed and Satan tore after the ball. Diablo waited patiently while Jarrod produced another ball and tossed it in the other direction.

"They get possessive over the balls, sometimes," he explained. "I'll keep them apart for a minute."

Satan had retrieved the ball and was bounding back toward her. He sat before her, the saliva covered ball gripped in his mouth.

"Say drop and he'll drop it for you."

"Then what do I do?"

"Throw it again if you want."

She told him to drop it and tentatively picked it up between thumb and forefinger, avoiding the icky saliva that dripped off it. Then she threw it. Satan watched it but didn't move.

"Don't forget to say 'chase'."

"Oh, sorry, Satan. Chase!"

Satan tore after the ball like lightning on legs. She watched him with a sense of achievement she could not possibly describe to herself. Satan was a graceful animal and she watched the sleek musculature of his legs as he bounded after the ball.

"Having fun?" Jarrod asked after a while.

She'd been aware that he'd been watching her watch Satan. She felt a little uneasy to be under such scrutiny. She wasn't creeped out, just surprised that someone like Jarrod would watch her so intently.

"I am having fun, thank you."

"I'm glad. I have to tell you, you've done a remarkable thing today."

"I have?"

"Certainly. Not many people would jump into such close contact with an animal such as Satan and do it so easily."

"He's been well trained."

"He is a good dog, I'll grant you. But this is the first time you've been around a dog in a long time. Want to tell me about it?"

"Not really." Her voice had come out too sharp and she regretted it immediately.

"I'm sorry to pry. I was just interested."

"It's just..."

Just what? She wanted to tell him everything about her. Why would she feel that way? "I don't like talking about it."

"It would probably help."

"That's what my therapist tells me, and it hasn't."

"I'm sorry, forgive me."

She regretted rebuffing him. "That's all right. It's just a bad memory and I don't like thinking about it."

"I understand. Maybe you'll tell me in a day or so."

"Maybe."

He gave her a smile that sent a thrill of delight cascading through her chest.

Satan returned with the ball and she threw it again and sent him careering after it. Then she noticed Diablo wasn't around and hadn't been for some time. She asked Jarrod where he was.

"He went into those trees. He gets bored with balls after a while."

"Aren't we going to search for him?"

"He's a big boy." Though he said it lightheartedly, Gilly detected a touch of irritation in his voice.

She tossed the ball again. Satan seemed to have boundless energy. "Do you like working for Triple A?" she asked.

"Do you?"

"Absolutely not!"

"Same answer," he said. "It's just a way station for me and Pi... Diablo."

"Oh. You're not staying?"

He glanced at her, his brown eyes shining. "For a while," he said. "How long are you staying?"

"Until I figure out what I want to do when I grow up."

"Me too," he said. He held out his hand. "How about while we are at Triple A, we'll join forces to foil the dreaded Bert."

She took his hand. It was warm and firm and she imagined his aura of calmness and self-assuredness enveloped her too. She felt suddenly bigger than she'd ever felt before.

He released her hand, reluctantly, she thought and looked at his fingers for a while.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

"I was just thinking, it's a lonely time of year, Christmas."

"I know."

"Lucky we work in jobs where it doesn't matter."

She gazed at him. "I like to be alone on Christmas Eve."

"So do I. Well, I guess we better find Diablo."

"Hey, mate," a high-pitched voice came from behind them.

She turned around to see a tall guy of about twenty-five in a pair of jeans a size too big for him stride toward them. He was Jarrod's double.

He sat down beside Gilly. "Aren't you going to introduce us?"

"This is Pieter," Jarrod said coldly. "Pieter, this is Gilly."

"Nice to meet you," he said, shaking her hand.

"You may have noticed a family resemblance," Jarrod said icily.

Pieter gave her a smile. "We both have a talent for stating the obvious."

Brother or not, Gilly didn't like Pieter. He had a wily, cunning sense about him. He was a wild one, she thought, but more like a rebellious teenager than an adult.

Satan returned with the ball. He dropped it and growled at the newcomer and Pieter actually growled back. Satan held his ground, his eyes fixed on Pieter, his lips curling back over his teeth.

"Pieter, don't aggravate the dog. He'll bite."

He gave Gilly a smile. "No, he won't." He gave Jarrod a wink. "So, where's Diablo?"

"Didn't you see him?" Jarrod answered, his tone of voice sarcastic.

"Nope. You go look. I'll keep Gilly company."

"We were just going back to work," Jarrod said. "Diablo will follow." He said it not as a statement, but in the tone of a command.

Gilly watched the exchange, not knowing exactly what to make of it. Jarrod was obviously defensive and his body was noticeably tense. Pieter was an oily, unlikable man who she disliked intensely. She wondered how two brothers could be so dissimilar in personality.

Wanting to break the uneasy silence between them she asked, "Where do you work, Pieter?"

"Here and there. Mostly night work. I'm Jarrod's general dog's body, you might say." He laughed at her perplexed expression. "Ah, Jarrod didn't tell you. We are, how do you say, flat mates?"

"We share a house."

Pieter laughed. "Well. Better go. See ya 'round, Gilly." He started walking toward a copse of trees. Gilly watched him, thinking he was the strangest man she'd ever met.

"Pieter's a strange one," Jarrod said eventually. "We're identical twins but I can't help thinking he was adopted."

Gilly laughed.

"He's harmless, but prone to making silly mistakes."

"A bit like me," Gilly said.

"No," Jarrod said. "Nothing like you."

A young couple came running up to them. Satan gave a low protective growl. The man clutched a picnic blanket to his middle.

"How come you aren't wearing trousers?" Jarrod asked.

The guy's face blanched. "Doesn't matter," he said and, grabbing his girlfriend's hand, ran off.

"How strange," Gilly murmured.

The silence was thickening and she wanted to break it somehow. "I'm worried about Diablo."

"Let's find him." For twenty minutes they walked the tree-lined groves talking easily about nothing in particular. "What a pleasant way to spend the day," Jarrod said.

The anger caused by Pieter's appearance had lifted and he was his normal self again. Gilly caught herself. She'd only known him a couple of hours. For all she knew, the angry surly Jarrod was the normal one.

Eventually Diablo appeared from the undergrowth and sauntered unhurriedly toward them. She had the strong impression that Diablo was not the cooperative and obedient dog he first appeared to be, unlike Satan, who was the epitome of good behavior.

They harnessed the dogs and walked them back to the kennel.

"What time do you want me tonight?"

"So, you'll stay with us?"

"Of course," she said emphatically. She'd responded without thinking.

"Excellent. I was hopeful you'd stay."

"You doubted me?"

"Not at all."

"I must admit, I've surprised myself this afternoon. I'd never have dreamed I'd spend such a pleasant day in the company of two great beasts and..."

He grinned. "And?"

Words dried up on her tongue. "I don't know how I can thank you."

"Have dinner with me. Tonight, before work."

Gilly gazed into his big brown eyes and melted. "Okay."

"I'll pick you up at six. We'll have dinner and then start our shift."

"Okay."

"Where do you live?"

She'd told him before she realized she'd just given a virtual stranger something she'd never told anyone before.

Chapter Five

Gilly stepped out of the shower humming a nameless tune her father had taught her as a child. She'd never been so happy in her life.

Leaving Jarrod that afternoon had been so hard. She'd had to tear herself away before her body, her erect nipples to be precise, betrayed her. She'd sung all the way home, went shopping, bought a great little dress with a plunging neckline, new perfume, new shoes and stockings.

At five thirty she paraded in front of the mirror, considered the plunging neckline, screwed her nose in disappointment and changed into her favorite sari, a gorgeous saffron silk number which her father had given her on his last visit. It once belonged to a princess, he'd said. She didn't believe him of course, but it was one of the most beautiful outfits she owned. It was of the finest silk and even though it was nine meters in length, it was so fine it could be passed through a finger-ring.

At five to six the doorbell chimed. With butterflies battering about in her stomach she opened the door.

"Hi," Jarrod said. Then, with eyes wide open he said, "Wow!" She pirouetted, letting the ends of the sari whirl about her like gossamer wings. "Double wow," he said. "How did you know?"

"Know what?"

He studied her face a long moment and she felt her face warming under his steady gaze. "You'll find out."

The Maharaja was a small Indian restaurant on the outskirts of Adelaide. Jarrod knew the owner who gave him a table by the window through which they could see the distant lights of the city.

"You're a fan of India too," she said once seated.

"I have become so, yes."

"And what draws you to it?"

"Many things," he said simply.

Gilly had never been to a proper restaurant before, let alone an Indian one. She recognized the items on the menu; she cooked Indian for herself at home. She let Jarrod order the wine, but only one glass each.

"We're on duty in three hours," he explained with a grin. "Now, tell me about yourself."

"Let's talk about India," she said quickly. She saw the disappointment in his face and added self-consciously, "I don't like talking about myself."

"But I want to know everything about you."

"There's not much to tell."

"I'll do a deal with you. I'll tell you a bit about myself and then I'll tell you what I know about you and then you can add to it. Okay?"

She shrugged, intrigued by the game. What could he possibly know about her? "I guess."

"Okay, what would you like to know about me?"

Her face brightened. "Everything."

"Well, I was born, went to school, bummed around not knowing what I wanted to do when I grew up, accidentally ran out of money in Coober Pedy, did some opal mining, ended up in Adelaide and then did some traveling overseas."

"Where did you go?"

"Europe and India."

"And then what happened?"

"Well we, Pieter and I, ended up back here and got a job." He took a sip of wine. "Now, your turn."

"Wait, I still don't know anything about you. Who are you?"

"I just told you."

"Those things could apply to thousands of people. I want to know something about you."

"Well, we can leave that for later. But to put you totally at ease, I am not, nor ever have been, an axe murderer."

"But all axe murderers say that."

"Well, you got me there. But believe me," he put his hand over his heart, "I've never been in trouble with the police, never been in league with the Mafia or any of their subsidiaries, I buy my groceries ethically and I don't litter."

"Well then," she said and laughed.

"So, now you know much more about me than I know about you."

Her expression warmed. "I'll let you off the hook then, for now."

"Okay, this is what I know about you. I must warn you it's mostly guesswork. First, you adore opals."

"That's not too hard to guess."

"Why opals?"

She shrugged. "These are my mother's. I inherited them."

"I'm sorry. When did she die?"

"Well, she didn't die, as such."

"What do you mean?"

"She ran off."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't remember much about her, really. She was sort of distant. Then my Dad went on his pilgrimage."

"His pilgrimage?"

"He became mystical and hops from ashram to ashram in India, visits the monks in Thailand and Burma. He gave me everything, the house, the family jewels."

"So, I've met a Lady of Property, have I?"

"I guess."

"So why do you work at Triple A?"

"I have to prove to myself that I can hold down a job."

"Why would you believe you couldn't?"

"You want a list?"

"It must be a short one. Try me."

"I'm a klutz for starters."

He laughed. "Well, so am I. The first opal mine Pieter and I dug collapsed. I was too headstrong to ask the experts how to do it properly. Now, that makes me a klutz of the highest order. You, you're just unlucky."

"That's number two on the list."

"Luck and un-luck is just coincidence. Good things happen to you too, don't they?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Well, yeah, like meeting you today."

"See, I was going to say the same thing, so Miss Unlucky meets Mr. Klutz... mmmm, that doesn't bode so well for the future, does it?"

She laughed and threw her napkin at him. He caught it, his hands moving so fast she didn't see them. He handed it back to her with a smile. "So what else is wrong with you?"

"I'm afraid of dogs," she said finally.

"Still?"

"Well, today has been so peculiar."

"So, how did the dog thing happen?"

She held up her little pinkie. "I was attacked."

"I guessed that. But how?"

"Mum was walking me to school. She was holding my hand. It was my first day and I was so happy, talking to my mother about what I was going to do at school, even though I had no idea what school was. Then suddenly my mother was gone and I was standing alone on the footpath. Then this dog came along, a big monster. It was taller than I was. The monster stood over me. All I could see was its red eyes and teeth, so big and white. Its drool was flung into my face as it bit into my hand. Next thing, I was on

the ground, blood, hot blood was everywhere, its breath hot and stinky on my face. Then there was the pain..."

"Where was your mother?"

"I don't know. Next thing I know she was holding me. Her dress was torn. She told Dad the dog had torn it when she came to save me."

"Why did she leave you?"

"She said a friend called to her for help to get a stroller out of a car. She heard my scream, came back to me and fought the dog, dragged it away from me."

Jarrold's eyes were intense. "Did they find the dog?"

"No. They didn't find my finger either. I guess the dog swallowed it."

"You have such detailed memories."

"Thanks to hundreds of hours of therapy. You get used to telling it."

"What happened to your mother then?"

"She became distant. She and Dad fought a lot. She left us soon after."

"I'm sorry."

"So that's why I hate dogs. They took my finger and drove my mother away."

He gazed back at her in admiration. "Given your story I'll say it again. What you did today, getting close to Satan, was extraordinary. You're a remarkable person, Gilly."

"I don't feel it. I see every day little children playing with their pets. I think they're the courageous ones."

He gave her a smile and her whole body warmed. "But they haven't gone through what you have."

"You don't think I'm whacko?"

"Why would I think that?"

"Because of all my... less than attractive qualities."

"Again, I don't understand you at all. All evening I've been building you up and still you won't take the hint that I'm kind of impressed with you and everything about you."

"That's what I don't understand," she said. "How someone like you, handsome, smart, with it in every way, why are you working for Triple A and trying to get me into bed?"

He blushed. "Well, I think the latter is quite obvious. I'm quite infatuated by you. As to the former, well, let's just say it is kismet, or better still, serendipity."

"That's how they described the accidental discovery of Sri Lanka, serendipity, a fortuitous accident."

He took a sip of wine. "I bet you were born in October."

"How did you know?"

"Your birthstone is opal."

"You're right," she said.

"I know a story about the creation of opal if you want to hear it."

Her father had told her the origin of opal. She wondered if Jarrod's story was the same. "Tell me."

"Long ago, three Hindu gods, Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu, loved a human girl. She was very beautiful and they fought over her. The Eternal, the god of all things, was angry because they loved this girl more than him, so he transformed her into a woman of mist. Brahma and the rest were peeved and agreed to interfere with the Eternal's plan. So they could recognize her, each god gave her a color. Blue from Brahma, gold from Vishnu and red from Shiva. They intended to continue to dally with her, but she left them, borne away on the wind. After a while, the Eternal felt bad about his capriciousness and turned her into a beautiful and precious stone."

"I've heard the story," she said. "I think it was very unfair. It wasn't her fault that the gods loved her. Why should she be punished?"

"Men," he said. "Go figure. The Romans on the other hand believed opal was the symbol of hope, and love. Arabs believe it offers the gift of invisibility."

"That's more like it."

"Indigenous Australians, however, see the opal as half man and half serpent, luring men to their destruction. These myths are part of the same story, just different

facets, like on a gem. As you turn it about your fingers you see something different, but it's still the same gem."

"You love opal too. Is that why you mined it in Coober Pedy?"

"Before we started mining I had no idea how beautiful opal was. Then I looked at the myths and legends behind it." He studied her face for a moment. "Have you ever been to Coober Pedy?"

"As a child, why?"

"How old were you?"

"Just a toddler."

"Was it in 1985?"

"I guess, yes it was, why?"

His expression became pensive and reserved. "No reason." He drove her back home to change for work.

Her body was abuzz with desire. Though her experience of men was not extensive, limited to the usual adolescent experiments and broken hearts, it seemed to her that men were all bland and empty inside. They lacked something she could never define as if the vibes they gave her were as robust as snowflakes.

Jarrod was alive with energy. The air around him vibrated with a wild restlessness that caused her skin to tingle.

She wanted him. Her normal reserve had dropped away despite her not knowing much about him. Not that he had deliberately hidden anything from her at dinner, she was sure, there was just so much more to know about him.

She asked him to come inside and had shown him to her living room when she suddenly found herself in his arms. When she thought about it later she couldn't decide who had initiated the embrace or if they both came together with an urgency and need which astonished her.

Without separating their lips they undressed each other in a frenzy, dropping their clothes to a heap at their feet. His lips burned a passage from her lips to her throat. She threw her head back, exposing her neck and breasts to him.

Jarrold's lips delivered delicate butterfly kisses along the sensitive flesh of her cleavage. With delicious deliberateness he slid his tongue across the fullness of breast toward a straining nipple. His tongue circled the areola, gradually approaching the center in ever diminishing circles. The expectation and anticipation was exquisite and Gilly whimpered in pleasure as he at last drew her nipple into his hot mouth, flicking it with the tip of his tongue and sending electric tingles scorching through her flesh.

His hardness pressed against her thigh. She opened her legs and he hoisted her onto his hips. As she locked her ankles behind his back his cock naturally found its way into her pussy and she gasped as the head slid easily between the velvety lips of her pussy.

His hot shaft filled her completely. His flesh seemed to blend into hers as if they were melting together. That wildness she'd felt in him triggered something inside her and she wanted nothing more in life than to keep his body in hers forever.

She clung to him as he walked to the dining table and sat her on her buttocks. Now he began to fuck her with long powerful strokes. There was something bestial in the way he thrust into her willing body and something equally feral about the way she thrust back with her hips. It seemed to her, before she drowned in sensation, that they were two animals mating in the wild.

While his tongue mirrored the relentless thrusting of his cock his hands massaged her breasts, his thumbs and forefingers rolling her nipples into agonizing hardness. Her own fingers raked his back, strumming the hard musculature beneath his taut flesh, and her feet, still locked behind his back, urged him ever deeper into her body.

She came and her pussy clenched around his shaft as if milking him and in a moment he howled into her mouth as his come filled her. She came again and her whole body clenched in orgasm after orgasm until she released him and fell back onto the table. He rolled away from her and lay on the table gasping for breath.

Something primitive took possession of her then. In a moment she had grasped his hand and pulled him onto the floor. There, with his amber eyes gazing up at her, she pounced.

His semi-erect cock tasted of her pussy juices. With her lips and tongue she brought him back to throbbing hardness and, once his shaft had regained his steel-like rigidity, she straddled his hips and fed him into her hot pulsing cunt.

Riding him savagely she was only dimly aware of her actions. She ground down on his groin so that he was embedded to the hilt inside her. The room revolved around her as she flung her head from side to side till she came with a loud cry. She tumbled, exhausted, onto his chest.

Still hard within her, Jarrod continued thrusting. As another orgasm built within her she felt his cock expanding inside her and again he howled as he filled her with hot come.

* * *

They drove to work in warm, companionable silence. Gilly felt wonderful. She was still somewhat shocked by the way she'd shamelessly attacked him and used his body for the greatest sex she'd ever had. He hadn't complained, of course, though he tried to apologize for going too far, as if it was his fault. She'd silenced him with a kiss.

She wondered at the power of her own desire and how it had manifested itself in total sexual abandon, how her body had taken possession of her and like a tidal wave had dashed her against the shore of his body until she'd been exhausted and emptied.

Realizing their lovemaking had made them late, she'd roused herself from the bed of his chest and hurriedly showered and changed into her uniform and, curiously, said no more about it as they drove through the deepening night.

Satan was glad to see her. His tail wagged expansively and when Jarrod opened the cage, Gilly didn't hesitate to put out her hand to let him lick her fingers before she patted his head. She couldn't believe how relaxed she felt.

Jarrood showered and changed in the locker room. Though tempted to go into the shower and have him again, Gilly tempered her lust and stayed with the dogs. She hadn't felt so happy in her life. Her body was still buzzing from their lovemaking.

Not only was Jarrood handsome, he was intelligent and sensitive and the fact that he'd been to India, on a sort of pilgrimage like her father, just made the whole thing so beautiful.

She caught sight of herself in the mirror. She looked good in uniform and tried to gather what was left of her professionalism and focus on the job. She was nervous about the first shift at the museum, and though Jarrood had briefed her over dinner, her anxiety was building.

Nothing will go wrong. Please, nothing go wrong.

Jarrood and the dogs were quiet during the short drive to the museum. They were old hands at this, she told herself. All she had to do was walk around and follow Jarrood's lead. She grasped his hand and he gave it a squeeze.

They reported to the gate guard who directed Jarrood to the car park. The sandstone edifice of the new Adelaide Museum was impressive in size and classical design. Grandiose sandstone pillars supported great arches and high windows. It was a beautiful building standing golden in the spotlights against the black velvet sky.

Working with quiet efficiency they harnessed the dogs, confirmed the security protocols, walking once together along the perimeter fence.

"As much as I don't want to," Jarrood said, "now we must separate. You go clockwise and I'll go counter. The idea is to vary our routine so any bad guy watching can't predict our actions," Jarrood explained. "Forget those old war movies where they timed the guards' routines. We're going random."

She took a deep breath. "Satan and I are ready."

"Good stuff. Well, have fun and I'll see you on the other side."

He gave her a light touch on the shoulder and then was gone. She shivered at the void that filled her chest as Jarrood disappeared into the darkness.

"Come on, Satan. Let's earn our money."

The shift was long and boring. Satan, however, was calm and unperturbed. The only excitement was when they were approaching Jarrod and Diablo, his tail would start wagging and she'd reach down and give him a pat on the head.

It was the early hours when the museum's own replacement security detail arrived. Jarrod made his final report to the gate guard, piled the dogs into the van and instead of driving back to work to return the dogs he drove to Gilly's house.

She was disappointed. She'd anticipated dropping off the dogs and taking him back to her place for a reprise of their lovemaking. He was strangely quiet and she wondered if she'd done or said something wrong but didn't know how to ask what it was.

He parked outside her house. "I'll put the boys to bed," he said.

"I want to help," she said, not wanting to let Jarrod go.

"I'll be fine," he said. "Go to bed and I'll tell you a secret tomorrow."

He held her hand. Her nipples ached inside her shirt and her belly gave a wanton pulse of desire. "Are you free tomorrow?" she blurted out. "Before work, I mean."

"Sure."

"I can make us dinner here, if you'd like."

"I'd like very much."

She looked into his big amber eyes, melting as she always did.

"Goodnight, Gilly," he said.

"Goodnight."

Chapter Six

Jarrood had had a troubled day. When he finally reached home in the early hours he could not get to sleep. Making love with her had been sublime. She was so beautiful in so many ways. His body remembered the heat of her skin, the caress of her fingers, the touch of her lips on his mouth, his cock.

He touched himself as he thought of her, how he had taken her so roughly, as if his body had been possessed. And then she had reversed the role and taken him so ruthlessly, riding herself to a wild climax and him to a powerful orgasm as she collapsed exhausted over his convulsing body. It was as if they were reflections of each other, sharing at a primeval level the same feral lust that drew them together.

His cock swelled at the memory of her lips and he stroked the pulsing shaft, remembering the wet heat of her mouth, the caress of her pussy lips enveloping the head of his cock.

His shuddering climax silenced his thoughts and sleep finally claimed his consciousness though his dreams were populated by images of sanguine deserts, crumbling mine shafts and flashing teeth. He jerked awake doused in sweat.

Red deserts and mountains of rubble signified Coober Pedy and reminded him of Gilly's naïve description of her childhood visit on the very day he lost his humanity.

It was one coincidence of many, too many; her obsession with opals, the dog attack, her mother's odd behavior and her father's mysterious journey to India. There was something odd going on and he didn't like it one bit.

He felt he had been drawn into a spider's web and was blindly entangling himself in the sticky strands. At the center of those enveloping strands was Gilly. She was the focus, but how she impacted on his plans, he couldn't guess.

* * *

Gilly met him at the door with a generous kiss. He couldn't help but respond. His hands went straight to her hips and he drew her close. She tasted so sweet and her body yielded to his hard caress.

She was dressed in another one of her beautiful saris. She was absolutely gorgeous. Her opalescent eyes glowed and her strawberry blonde hair fell wantonly on her shoulders. The way the sari wrapped around her slim form and its almost-transparency gave him thoughts his body could not disguise. She was naked underneath he suspected. She'd pulled a thin veil across her lower face so that only her eyes showed, bright as a gazelle's.

"Welcome," she said as she gave a slight bow.

"I've never seen a blonde Indian, but are you sure you're not from there?"

She giggled. "I'm afraid not. It would be nice. I think their clothes are exquisite."

"The way you wear them I can only agree."

Gilly blushed. "I hope my cooking is as good."

She led him into the living room and by the time they'd reached the couch he had unraveled her sari and was kneeling before her, his tongue parting the moist lips of her pussy and probing deep inside. She'd braced her buttocks against the back of the couch and parted her legs, her fingers flexing in his hair, massaging his scalp and sending tingles of electricity rippling through his skin.

Her salty juices filled his mouth as he massaged her inner flesh. He slid his tongue to the hood of her clit and pressed hard while slipping two fingers into her open cunt. She shuddered against him and cried out.

Her pussy gave a spasm and clenched around his fingers. He climbed to his feet and possessed her mouth with his. She whimpered as a second climax overtook her. Keeping his fingers working inside her cunt, he one-handedly released his cock from his pants.

He bent her backwards over the couch and fed his swollen cock into her inflamed pussy. Gripping her hips, he drove into her with relentless urgency, plunging

deep inside her and pulling out so the head of his cock bounced on her clit before plunging in again.

She came again, her body convulsing beneath him. The sight was enough to send him over the edge and he cried out as his cock gave a mighty spasm and emptied his come inside her.

Later, after they'd showered, made love again in her giant bed and showered once more they were back in the dining room, talking casually as if they were longtime lovers. He commented on the room's dazzling range of Indian furnishings and decorations. It was as if he were sitting in the set of a Bollywood movie.

"My father sends me things all the time," she said. "I don't know where to put it all."

"Have you traveled there yourself?"

"No."

"Do you wish to?"

"One day, perhaps I'll be able to. But I've only just conquered my agoraphobia and cynophobia; overseas travel might be a little way off yet."

"You'll get there," he said.

"I better see to the kitchen. Make yourself at home."

Jarrold wandered around the living room. Every available space had photographs of her father somewhere in India. There were a couple of her mother, a strikingly beautiful woman, who he guessed was Indian by her dress and appearance. There was even a photograph of her father and mother at Coober Pedy. Beside it sat a raw opal still enclosed in its hand-sized chunk of rock. Jarrod felt the energy pulsing inside.

"Does that bring back memories?" she said from close behind him.

He put the rock back down onto the table. "It reminded me how beautiful it is in its natural form."

She picked it up. "When I hold it I can feel its inner heat."

He wrapped her hand and the opal inside his own hand. "It is the beautiful girl's heartbeat," he said.

She gazed up at him, her lips slightly parted. He felt an almost overpowering urge to kiss her. Holding the opal and her hand at the same time he sensed something about her that was not quite human. But what?

He released her hand and picked up a photograph of her father standing outside a familiar ashram.

"Do you recognize it?" she asked.

"I've been there."

"And the other temples?"

"Most of them," he said.

"Were you on a pilgrimage too?"

He replaced the photograph. "Not really. I like to meet as many people as I can and learn about their cultures."

"I like their myths and legends."

"They can be very bloody, some of them." He decided to steer her to the museum job. "Indian myths concern us too. We're protecting the arrival of an opal statue from India."

"Really? What is the statue of?"

"A manushya." She raised an eyebrow. "A werewolf, sort of."

"Really?"

"Or were-tiger, whatever, the myths vary. The owner of the statue is from India, home of the Rakshasas."

"Who are they?"

"Indian shapeshifters, cannibals that can change into any animal they want."

"How horrible."

"The female of the species is called rakshasi and in their human form they are called manushya rakshasi." Her expression did not betray any emotion at his words. He didn't know what he had expected to see, but her lack of response intrigued him. "You've heard of these myths and legends, yes?"

She nodded. "I have. Father told me when I was little."

"Gruesome tales for a little girl. Why exactly did your father go to India?"

"After Mother left he wanted peace of mind. He said he was going crazy and needed to find the answers to his fears in India. He's been searching for twenty years."

"Has he found peace yet?"

"Why are you so interested in my father?"

He searched her mind but found no artifice. She was innocent of any knowledge of her father's true motives.

What was it then? What was going on here?

* * *

"Last night you said you were going to tell me a secret."

"It's not much of one," he said.

She gazed up at him inquiringly. His face was shadowed and behind him the stars powdered the sky with glittering shards of light. Dinner had been wonderful. He'd complimented her on her cooking and they'd chatted about India, its customs and habits, his journeys and, of course, opals. He seemed to share her love of them, something she'd inherited from her mother. "Well? What is this secret?"

"It's this," he said and undid Diablo's harness. Diablo gave a happy bark and shot off into the darkness.

She was immediately worried. "Is that allowed?"

"Triple A's standard operating procedure is that the dogs should be harnessed at all times except when in pursuit of an intruder. However, Diablo likes to run around in the dark and I figure that anyone casing the joint will see a guard dog roaming around free and think twice about climbing the fence."

There was something in his eye that told her there was more. "And?" she prompted.

He smiled and her heart fluttered. "It gives me a chance to walk with you while Diablo does my share of the patrol."

She giggled. "Well, okay then."

"You seem much more comfortable with Satan today."

"I do?"

"Absolutely. You've taken control, leading him with confidence and without hesitation. You're a natural dog handler."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"I'd never do that, Gilly. I'm an upfront sort of guy."

"I've noticed. Thanks for giving me the heads up about Bert's intentions. I felt the same, but hearing it from another impartial person stopped me thinking I was paranoid."

"You showed him and in the best way possible. Succeeding is the best revenge you can have."

"I couldn't have done it without you. Why did you think I could do it?"

"You're a strong, determined woman. A weaker person would have not walked down the path to the kennel. They would have gone straight to their car and hightailed it out. But you, despite your fears, you took that long walk to Satan."

"You make it sound far more important than what it was."

"I don't think so. I could tell the extent of your fear. I can only imagine what was going through your mind, but you held your ground. And here you are, in the dark leading a dog that weighs almost as much as you do. That takes guts."

Gilly's body warmed at his praise. She had been feeling inordinately proud of herself since leaving the kennel yesterday. To have him say it out loud again gave her a self-satisfied glow that she thought could be seen from the orbiting space station.

"I don't think I have guts," she said at last. "I am very pleased with myself to have gotten to this stage. I tell you, it feels very strange to have Satan walk beside me like this. I feel so liberated, if that makes sense. The fear that I've carried around covered not only dogs, but the whole world. I think I can take on anything right now."

"I don't doubt it. You have an inner strength I've not seen before."

She stopped and Satan obeyed instantly. He gazed patiently at her and she gave him a pat on the head. "Why do you say such things?" she asked.

She was so aware of his presence. They were standing so close. She looked into his shadowed face. His eyes glowed and she felt a flutter of desire. His masculine bulk overwhelmed her and she had a sudden desire to get up on her tiptoes and kiss him.

Her sudden confidence astounded her. She'd always been so shy of men. But with Jarrod that shyness had melted away completely. He seemed to bring the adventurer out in her.

The only shadow from the night before had been his silence when they drove home. The thought that he was displeased with her had haunted her sleep. She'd replayed the whole evening in her mind but could detect no reason for his disapproval. He'd been deep in some secret thought. Not knowing gnawed at her.

Jarrod had put his arm on her elbow and drew her close. He bent his head as if he was about to kiss her. She raised her face and closed her eyes, ready to feel his lips on hers. He spoke instead. "I say these things because you have made a profound impression on me."

Her heart fell. She opened her eyes and tried to mask the disappointment and embarrassment she was sure her expression displayed. She was glad that it was dark and he probably hadn't seen her close her eyes.

"Gilly. I'm an honest man. You'll have to trust me on that, I know. We've only just met and really, you don't know me from a bar of soap."

"I trust you," she replied without thinking.

"So, being honest I have to tell you that I am very attracted to you. You're beautiful, intelligent, courageous and funny." His voice had softened almost to a whisper.

She sensed the inevitable *but*.

"The problem is," he said and stopped.

"You're married?"

"God, no."

"You have a terminal illness and don't want to form an attachment because it will hurt the one you love?"

"No."

"You have a girlfriend already."

"No."

"Um, you're an axe murderer, after all."

"No," he said with a chuckle. "I'm sorry. I must sound like an idiot."

Yes, as a matter of fact.

"Just tell me."

"We all have secrets," he said with resignation. "We all have agendas."

"If you won't tell me your secret then tell me your agenda?"

"That has nothing to do with what I want to tell you. "

"Oh."

"Jesus, I've made a mess of this. All I wanted to say was I am very attracted to you. I want to learn more about you, get to know you in every possible way, but..."

There it was at last, the inevitable "but."

She refused to say it, so she said, "And?"

"Well, I don't think we should, um, go to that sort of level until after Christmas."

She struggled to figure out what he meant. If he realized he'd made a mistake and wanted to crush her now, why not just do it? She could feel the tears forming in her eyes. "I haven't a clue about what you're talking about."

Damn it! Why didn't he just shut up? Everything was going so well. He let go of her arm. "Well, maybe that's better. Can we forget that I said anything?"

She looked away to blink back the tears. Then, across the grounds she saw something totally unexpected. "Did you see that?"

Jarrood shook his head. "What?"

"There's a naked man on the grounds."

"What?"

"I swear I saw a naked man behind the loading dock."

"Diablo hasn't barked, nor Satan for that matter," he said doubtfully. "The alarms haven't gone off."

She was peeved he didn't believe her. Then again she hardly believed her own eyes. "We should investigate."

"Absolutely. Which way was he heading?"

Before she answered she released Satan from his leash. "Go, boy," she said and Satan tore off into the darkness. "Come on," she called to Jarrod.

They followed Satan around the corner of the back dock only to find Diablo and Satan playing with each other. Both were excited but not about any intruder.

Gilly looked around in frustration. "I'm sure I saw a naked man."

"A trick of the light perhaps," Jarrod said and attached the leash to Diablo's collar. Gilly attached her leash to Satan's collar.

"We better get back to work," Jarrod said. "I'll go clockwise."

"Okay," she said, glad to be by herself. She set off into the darkness, cursing. She was sure she'd seen a naked man darting between the shadows. She was certain of it.

* * *

Jarrod kicked himself. He'd buggered that up completely. He wanted to tell Gilly she'd really made an impact on him, more than anyone in his life, and he wanted to get to know her better, to discover the secrets that lay within her forgotten past, but that he couldn't do anything until after Christmas passed and even then, it depended on whether or not he survived the ordeal to come.

After he'd rounded the corner and traveled a hundred or so meters into the shadows he released Diablo. The Doberman instantly transformed into a naked Pieter. His brother stretched his neck until his bones gave a hollow crack.

"Well?" Jarrod said impatiently. "Is it done?"

"Yep. All neat and tidy. What's up your ass?"

"She saw you."

"So? What difference does it make? You're wound up tighter than a fucking elastic band. What's happened?" Jarrod broke Pieter's challenging gaze. "Ah, little Miss Anxiety turned you down."

"Don't be stupid. I turned her down."

Pieter shook his head. "You really should unwind a bit. Have some fun. She's hot for it. I might take a crack at her myself."

Jarrold moved lightning fast, grabbing Pieter by the neck. "Don't you touch her. Ever. Is that clear?"

Pieter's eyes flared red. He shook off Jarrold's hand. "What's wrong with you?"

"We can't risk anything getting in the way of our plans. This is dangerous, Pieter. You know that. We can't risk the slightest hiccup."

"Jesus, settle down."

"You're still seeing Cynthia," Jarrold said suddenly. "I can smell her on you. She's trouble, Pieter. Set her aside till after Christmas."

"Fuck you. What is this? You don't want her so I can't have her either?"

"It's not like that at all. Cynthia is a loose cannon," Jarrold said. "She looks after herself and no one else. She gets wind of what we're doing, who can tell what she'll do to fuck it up for us." Jarrold scanned his brother's face. "Listen, we have only a couple of days. Keep it in your pants till Boxing Day when we have this thing under control and you can marry her if you want. But not till then, okay?"

Pieter pulled a face. "Marry her? Jesus. Are you crazy?"

Jarrold laughed and slapped his brother on the shoulder. "Come on, Diablo. Let's get back to work. If everything is ready, all we have to do is sit tight till tomorrow."

"So you've broken it off with little miss?"

"There was nothing to break off. I stopped it before it started," Jarrold said. "I don't want to see her mixed up in this."

"Too late now."

"I've got to figure some way to get her off duty on Christmas Eve."

"Well, if you hadn't done such a good job restoring her confidence, it would've been easy."

"I know it."

"Well, I'm holding up my end."

"I know, I know."

“Remember that,” he said enigmatically and transformed back into Diablo. Jarrod leashed him.

“Come on, boy, let’s find Gilly.”

Diablo simply growled.

Chapter Seven

Jarrold was dreaming of Gilly. She was kissing him, his face, his lips, his neck... A tongue lapped at his neck, traced the line of his jaw, moving slowly toward his mouth. "Gilly."

"No, Cyn."

Jarrold's eyes snapped open.

Above him, straddling his hips, was a very naked Cynthia. She was cupping her full breasts and smiling at him with a provocative curl in her lips. He went to push her off but she batted away his hands.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"What does it look like, sugar? I'm going to fuck the shit out of you."

Despite his anger his dream-induced erection pressed into her inner thigh. She tilted her hips to allow him access to her cunt. The head of his cock slipped toward the glistening folds of her slit. She grasped the shaft of his penis and tilted her hips so she could insert his length into her.

Jarrold growled and grasped her slim waist with both hands. He plucked her off his hips and pushed her roughly away. "No, Cyn. Never."

He hopped off the bed and rummaged around for his shorts. "Where's Pieter?"

"I've worn him out. No stamina. I'm hoping you'll go the distance," she purred, her eyes devouring his toned body. "I've realized I was wrong, so I've come back." She dropped to her knees and crawled across the bed toward him. "I promise I'll be good from now on." She ran her fingernail down his stomach to the band of his shorts. His cock reacted instantly, tenting his boxers.

Jarrold stepped away from the bed. "Cyn, stop. I'm not free to fool around."

"I'm sure this Gilly girl won't mind."

His blood froze in his veins. "What do you know of her?"

"You've been mumbling about her all morning. Turned me on, if you must know. Do you think she'd like a threesome?"

The doorbell rang and Jarrod heard Pieter stumbling about. He sensed who it was even before Pieter opened the door.

"Hey, Jarrod. Someone's here to see you."

He pointed to Cynthia. "Behave yourself."

She smiled coquettishly. "I might."

He gave her a menacing scowl and went to his bedroom door and opened it just enough so he could slide out without giving Gilly a view into his room.

"Gilly."

"Sorry to disturb you, Jarrod," she said, staring openly at his groin. He realized he was naked from the waist up, his penis still semi erect, shamelessly pushing out his boxers.

He slammed the door behind him and strode into the living room, falling gratefully onto the couch so he could cross his legs. "Grab a seat."

"No, I won't be long. I just wanted to talk about last night."

"I'm sorry, Gilly. I know I sounded silly and mysterious."

"I didn't know what to make of what you said. I wanted to..."

Behind him the door to his bedroom opened and Cynthia, in all her nakedness, padded out. She gave a not so innocent wave to Gilly and Jarrod before joining Pieter in the kitchen.

He gazed helplessly at Gilly, desperately trying to marshal his thoughts, when Gilly, her face flushed with emotion, said, "I understand completely," before striding from the flat.

"Gilly!"

He found her in the park sitting beneath a weeping willow. He sat on the far side of the bench. "Yes," he said finally. "It looks bad. A naked girl left my bedroom five minutes after I did. But there was no sex."

"Leaving this morning aside, I still don't know what last night meant and I'm not sure I care so much now."

"Believe me. There is nothing going on with Cynthia and me. Anyway, I don't want to talk about her. I want to talk about us."

"There is no us," she said.

He winced inside. "Well, I guess I have no answer to that. I'm sorry this has happened, truly I am, and I'm sorry if this has hurt you. Goodbye, Gilly." He stood up, gazed down at her for a moment, hoping she'd look at him. But she didn't. She was too occupied with furiously rubbing the stump of her little finger.

He walked away, and with every step he prayed she'd call out his name.

But she didn't.

* * *

"Jarrod," she said as she entered the kennel.

"Gilly?"

"I decided I couldn't let Bert down by not turning up."

"I would've covered for you," Jarrod said. "Had Pieter fill in."

"No, I have responsibilities. I missed Satan, anyway."

"Of course. I think he missed you too."

She opened Satan's pen and walked in without thinking about what she was doing. She knelt down beside him and ruffled his ears. He licked her hand. "I've done a lot of thinking since this morning," she said.

"And what did you decide?"

"That this morning hurt me very badly. It was my own fault. You tried to tell me last night, but I guess I can understand why you couldn't finish what you started. It was my own misunderstanding, my own needs and wants that clouded my thinking, tricked me into thinking something existed when it didn't."

He took a step toward her. "Gilly."

She stood up and held Satan between them. "Let me finish. Whether you're seeing Cynthia or not is none of my business. We've only just met. My

misunderstanding shouldn't destroy what I'd like to keep as a friendship. You see, I still owe you a great deal. I don't recognize myself. I've changed so much in just these few days and I owe it to you. I'd like to stay friends, if you're agreeable, and we'll forget my foolishness."

Jarrold stared at her blankly. She gazed at him through tearing eyes. She'd been rehearsing that little speech all morning. Now that it was out she wished she had just forgotten what she'd seen this morning and just fallen into his arms and let him make love to her.

He just stared at her.

"Well? Say something. Put me out of my misery."

"I realize I'll have to regain your trust. I'm willing, Gilly. I thought I'd never see you again."

She shrugged. "Like I said, I missed Satan."

"Then Satan is my friend forever."

He took a step closer. His hands somehow found hers. Had she reached out to him too? "Gilly. I have so much to tell you but first I have to assure you, I am not seeing Cynthia or anyone else."

She silenced him with a kiss. His lips were firm and warm against hers. At the insistent pressure of her own lips, he opened them, allowing her to thrust her tongue into his mouth. His arms wrapped around her waist and drew her to his broad chest. She pressed her thighs against his and felt the responding hardness within his shorts.

When he'd walked away from her in the park she'd felt the cold void returning to a dark space in her chest. All her life that space had been filled by her fear. Jarrold had banished that icy void and filled it with his light. As he walked away, the seeping coldness touched something inside her and she resolved never to let it back.

He pulled her more tightly into him and pushed his thigh between hers. Suddenly he dropped a hand to her shorts. Unbuttoned and unzipped them with one deft movement.

He hooked his fingers around her belt and pulled her shorts and panties down with a single yank. She fumbled with his belt and buttons and zips. She shucked off her uniform shirt and bra and they were both naked, their flesh burning.

He lifted her up onto the staff room table. He parted her thighs and stepped between them. Without breaking the kiss he cupped her breasts and rasped her nipples between thumb and forefinger. She arched her back and thrust her breasts into his palms, wanting more of his touch, and he obliged, his fingers massaging her breasts with uncontrolled urgency.

She was on fire. The icy void dissolved once more in the warmth of his hands, the touch of his fingers, as he slid them down to her waist. The juncture of her thighs was so hot and she pushed her hips forward so her pussy came into contact with his swelling cock.

A pulse of raw energy flowed upward into her chest. With their lips locked together, their tongues entwined, he slid into her moist pussy with ease and as the length of his shaft filled her, she gasped into his mouth.

A flash of primal energy rushed through her. She clung to him as she shuddered in sudden climax. Her pussy possessed him, clenching around the steel-like shaft. He howled as his cock contracted in mighty spasms and she felt the heat inflame the void within her, dispelling it forever.

* * *

"I think we scared the dogs," Gilly said.

"I hope they'll forgive us," he said and picked up Gilly's shorts. "We better get dressed, darling, or we'll be late for work."

She looked up at him so sweetly his heart melted. He kissed her sweet lips. "Come on."

"Okay, though it's going to be unbearable to be in the dark museum grounds wanting to do that again."

"I know the feeling. But we're professionals." He watched her pull her shorts over the swell of her hips and wondered how professional he could remain. His cock pulsed. He wanted her again.

I have to tell her. I owe it to her. As he drove to the museum he considered what she would do once she knew he was a werewolf. *Run away screaming, like any normal person.*

He'd have to give her the full story so she'd understand. He made his decision as he parked the van in the museum car park. "Gilly, before we start, I have something to tell you." He winced as a shadow of dread passed over her face. "You said you'd been to Cooper Pedy in 1985?"

"When I was very young."

"Pieter and I were there too. Christmas 1985."

"Was it a family holiday like ours?"

"We worked there."

"Worked? Come off it. You would've been too young to work."

He gazed at her for a long moment, not wanting to blunder through the next few minutes. "Are you familiar with Jung's theory of synchronicity?"

"What's that?"

"When coincidental events occur, but they aren't really coincidences at all. They're linked somehow in the cosmic scheme of things. They seem only coincidences to us at first because we don't know the full story."

"I haven't really thought about it."

"Think about these events: your childhood encounter with a vicious dog creates a fear of dogs, your mother's injuries, her strange behavior, the breakup of your family, your father's journey into Indian mysticism, your being assigned to look after a guard dog, your task to guard the arrival of a certain opal statue from India..."

"How does meeting you come into this synchronicity?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. When Pieter and I were tunnelling, jackhammers and picks in those days, not the industrial pneumatic equipment they have today, it was like we were led to it."

"Led to what?"

"The Christmas Kiss. The largest single piece of opal ever discovered. I know what you're thinking. Pieter and I could not have been the ones who found it. We would have been too young, as you say. But we are the discoverers of the Christmas Kiss."

"I don't understand. You're frightening me."

"It's a frightening story."

"You're saying you're what?" He glanced at her and saw her face screwed up in concentration. "Fifty-five years old?"

"Fifty-six."

"Well, you're aging very well." Her laugh was forced, uncertain and tinged with fear.

"Let me tell you what happened. We were at the end of our road money-wise. We hadn't found anything at all for all the digging we did. I remember making a dog leg in the diggings. Instead of just going straight ahead I veered to the right. I don't know why I did it. It just felt right and it led to..."

"Led to what? Tell me, for God's sake."

"The Manushya, the Opal Woman. Locked up for thousands of years in the biggest lump of opal that's ever existed."

He let that sink in for a moment. "She was calling her kind, shape shifters from all over the world."

"Shape shifters?"

"Werewolves."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"Remember the stories your father told you about Indian mythology? Why did he tell you those stories, do you think?"

"What are you saying?"

"He told you these stories after you were attacked, didn't he?"

"Well, what of it?"

"Don't you think it odd that a father would scare his traumatized daughter with stories of werewolves?"

Her expression slid into anger and he could see she was struggling to control it. "Why do you think he was telling me?"

"He was warning you. He was telling you to be prepared for something. Why did he go to India?"

"For his own peace of mind."

"He went for the same reasons I did. I wanted to discover what had happened to me and Pieter."

"And what did happen? I expect you're going to tell me you're a werewolf?"

He nodded. "We found the Manushya. We dug her out and set her free. Of course, at the time we just thought we'd found the biggest damn opal in the world. Then we were attacked by a wolf."

"A wolf? In Australia? We don't have wolves."

"There had been stories circulating about the diggings for months of a big dog taking pets, but no one ever got a good look at it. The Manushya was calling the beasts to her. She sensed we were getting close and she wanted one of her own to claim her. As we were celebrating our good fortune, thinking all our problems were over, it attacked us."

"A wolf attacked you?" she said incredulously.

"Ripped us apart and left us for dead."

"Oh, Jarrod. I find it so hard to believe."

He got out of the van. "Gilly, whatever happens in the next few minutes, I want you to know that you are perfectly safe. Stay in the van. Nothing will hurt you. Okay? Do you promise to remember that?"

She nodded uncertainly. He walked around to her side. He hated himself for what he was about to do to her. He prayed he wouldn't traumatise her dreadfully. Inside the van Pieter barked angrily.

"Do you promise, darling? Not to be frightened?"

Her azure eyes glistened in the car park lighting. *God help me, she's terrified already.*

"Okay," she said. "I promise."

Chapter Eight

Promise or not, she wanted to run away.

Jarrood had unbuttoned his shirt, laid it over the roof of the van, kicked off his shoes and pulled off his socks. He unbelted and unbuttoned his shorts and slipped them down his thighs. All the while his amber eyes had been fixed on hers.

"Ready?" he said.

She glanced about them furtively. "You're naked," she managed to say.

Then the most remarkable thing happened. She blinked as if to clear the impossible images from her sight. In the matter of a moment, Jarrood's body had changed from the tall musculature of a man to the sleek form of a black and grey wolf, with a long coat and the most beautiful amber eyes she'd ever seen.

The wolf, Jarrood, barked softly and took a step toward her. Surprisingly she felt little fear. It was Jarrood who'd just made love to her. She opened the van door and stepped outside.

Despite her furiously itching pinkie she held out her hand. The wolf sniffed at her hand then in the space of a blinking eye, Jarrood was standing before her once again. He smiled sheepishly as he rotated his shoulder as if to put his bones back into place.

"You didn't run away," he said.

"No, I didn't, did I?"

"I'm a werewolf," he said.

"So I see." Impulsively she leaned toward him and planted a kiss on his lips. "As crazy as this sounds," she said, "I don't care that you're... different."

"You don't?"

"I sensed, right from the beginning, that you weren't normal. I mean, I knew there was something profoundly different about you. I think that's why you're so magnetic. I'm drawn to that difference. I don't know why. But I just am."

He returned the kiss.

"I want you now," she said, caressing his bare shoulders with her fingertips.

"I want you too," he said. "But we're at work."

"So?" She unbuttoned her shirt and opened her shorts, pulling them and her panties down. With a wanton smile she leaned back across the hood and opened her legs. "Fuck me," she said.

Jarrold obviously needed no more encouragement, for a moment later the head of his cock nudged open her moist pussy. He landed a brief kiss on her lips then his hands found her breasts. Cupping their fullness in his palms, he squeezed them together and gently tweaked her swollen nipples between thumb and forefinger. With an enthusiastic growl he buried his face in her cleavage and licked her burning flesh. Gilly threw back her head as his mouth slid across her breast and claimed a straining nipple.

As good as his mouth felt she needed him inside her. Taking his head between her hands, she lifted him away from her breast. "Fuck me."

He kissed her fiercely then drove his swollen cock into her.

Gilly grunted in pleasure at the sheer power of his desire. Feeling perversely free she adjusted her hips to accommodate his frenetic thrusting. So much had changed for her these last few days. Apart from handling dogs the idea of fucking in the open would have been laughable a few days ago, but fucking a werewolf would've been delusional.

Yet here she was.

His cock was so big and his thrusts so powerful she felt her body tensing. Every muscle was contracting so tightly she thought she would surely crumble into pieces.

She locked her ankles behind his hips and urged him on. Grasping his shoulders, she pulled him down to her. Hungrily she possessed his mouth, devouring his lips, consuming him.

Her belly gave a spasm as she came, then she came again and her tightly held muscles released an explosion of energy that had her crying out in sheer ecstasy as her pussy clenched his shaft.

"Fuck!" He stepped away from the van as his cock pumped a plume of come high into the air. Gasping for breath he fell against the van. "I guess you really don't mind me being a werewolf."

She sat up and as she buttoned her shirt she laughed. "I'm as surprised as you are." She watched him dress, wondering what it was about him that felt so right and how she could accept it so easily.

"I know you're probably figuring out what's best for you to do. I understand that. There is something very important Pieter and I have to do tonight. I don't want you to get involved."

"I think I'm involved already."

"Innocently," he said. "What your part is I don't know, but I do know that it's as big a mystery to you as it is to me."

"Hardly. At least you intend to do something tonight. I don't. I just get to guard... You're going to steal the statue, aren't you?"

He nodded. "It is Manushya. She needed to escape her prison beneath the Earth where the Eternal placed her, but I believe, when she left, she left something behind. A part of herself. That's why she's being returned here. Her servant, the wolf, took Pieter's and my lives when he attacked us. We fought back and his blood mixed with ours, making us into werewolves. We've led tortured lives for twenty-five years."

"What are you hoping for?"

"That we can trade, her missing part for our humanity."

"What missing part?"

He opened the door and reached into the van, producing a piece of rock with a bifurcated stream of opal from the glove compartment. She recognized it instantly.

"I took it from your house," he said. "This is Manushya's heart. With this she can be complete and she'll give us back our lives."

Gilly saw at once the flaw in his plan. "If she commands powerful werewolves, why won't she just take it?"

"I learned how to destroy it in India. I didn't realize how such knowledge would be useful to me until last night when I saw the rock in your house."

"But you've been planning to steal the statue for longer than last night."

"We have, but we were going to steal it, then try and do a deal."

"A pretty big risk going against her."

"It was all we had."

"Is being a werewolf so difficult?"

"Some days it's unbearable."

His expression was so sad her heart skipped a beat and hot tears trickled from her eyes. She stepped toward him with arms outstretched. "Then how can I help? Tell me your plan."

"I don't want you involved."

"Like I said, I'm involved already."

"The armored truck with the statue arrives at eleven thirty precisely and the gate guard will let it through as normal. It will then proceed to the receiving dock. Your job is to stand guard around the truck with Satan. Meanwhile Pieter and I slip inside the museum when the guard opens the delivery dock doors. They bring in the statue, we exchange it for a duplicate one we've had made up. We slip the real one back out to our van and drive it home."

"As simple as that?"

"Not really. We've taken months to infiltrate both the museum security and Triple A. The fake statue is already in a broom cupboard. We're able to cloud the minds of the guards so they won't notice us very much."

"You can do that?"

"For a short while. We still need to sneak around and avoid security cameras."

Gazing into his beautiful eyes, she realized what had happened the other night. "It was Pieter I saw the other night, wasn't it? Running naked through the museum grounds?"

He nodded. "Final preparations."

Diablo was Pieter. It was hard to believe, but some of the oddities she'd seen over the last few days were beginning to make sense. She took a deep breath and made her decision. "I'll help as much as I can."

"Oh, Gilly. I'm sorry you've ended up in this. I should have protected you."

"I've been protected all my life. It's time I run a risk."

"No risk. Just work as normal with Satan. Pieter and I will do the rest."

Jarrold released the two dogs and Gilly looked closely at Diablo. He yapped at her. She patted him on the head and took hold of Satan's lead. "You are a dog, aren't you?"

Satan just licked her hand and, satisfied he was in fact a dog, she led him to the perimeter. Twenty minutes later she met Jarrod back at the loading dock just as the delivery truck arrived.

It all went according to plan. She watched as Jarrod, accompanied by two museum guards, processed the documentation at the receiving dock and supervised the securing of the crate in the special cage in the storeroom.

She saw Pieter, a naked man again, slip in and with a duplicate key unlock the cage, open the crate and replace it with an identical statue from the broom closet. He carried the statue into the car park and brought it to the van. Gilly was surprised at how small it was, barely two feet tall but of exquisite workmanship. Its opalescent beauty shone in the car park lights. It was so alluring that she drew closer to inspect it.

She gasped in surprise and reached out to touch it. A strange warmth radiated from it and when her fingers made contact, a spark of energy zinged through her, numbing her fingers. She couldn't help it. She picked it up. The face of the statue was striking. It was her mother's staring serenely back at her.

Suddenly the silence of the night was shattered by alarm bells. Jarrod snatched the statue from her and, after wrapping it up in a cloth, placed it carefully in a hidden compartment in the floor of the van.

Satan strained at the leash, pulling it out of her hand. With a yelp he tore off into the darkness. Jarrod called to him.

"I can't leave him," Gilly said and set off after him.

"Gilly, no!"

She ignored him and a moment later Jarrod joined her and they followed Satan round the museum building as he tore across the lawn. He was pursuing a pack of dogs that looked more like wolves until they did a complete circuit of the museum and returned to Jarrod's van where a naked woman with a spectacular body stood holding the statue.

Cynthia!

The four wolves suddenly transformed themselves, mid stride, into naked men.

Satan stopped dead, a low growl rumbling from his chest.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"Bastards, that's what."

She glanced at Jarrod. The bitterness in his voice was clear. "You know them?"

"Only Cynthia, but I can guess who the others are."

From behind the van another familiar figure emerged, Pieter.

"What's Pieter doing?" she said. "They'll attack him."

Jarrod motioned to her to keep out of sight. He put his hand over Satan's muzzle. "Whatever you do, don't let Satan go. They'll kill him."

"What are we going to do?"

"I'll try and get closer. Don't do anything."

Jarrod crept along the shadows of the building till she lost sight of him.

* * *

The voices were hushed but Cynthia's was crystal clear. Jarrod could make out the other voices as Russian. These guys were part of Stanislov's gang.

"Okay, Pieter," Jarrod said, stepping into the light. "What the fuck's going on?"

Pieter smiled. "Jarrod. Aren't you supposed to be keeping Gilly out of the way?"

"What's going on?"

"Lighten up, Jarrod," Cynthia smirked. "We're here to help. We couldn't leave you and Pieter to handle this job all by yourselves. It's much too big for you."

"You've come up in the world," Jarrod said to Cynthia. He motioned toward her thugs. "Surely you could do better than Stani's leavings."

She shrugged. "You should join us."

"I don't think so. I want you to leave now."

She laughed coldly. "You don't own me," she said.

"I killed your maker," Jarrod said.

"You lost your hold over me when you chucked me out. I'm my own woman, you bastard."

"You don't know what you're dealing with."

"Twenty million dollars is what I'm dealing with," Cynthia said.

"It's not the money. Pieter, didn't you tell her?"

Pieter shrugged.

"The one that turned us wants this statue more than all of us put together," he said. "It's more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

"Don't give me that voodoo shit. We've got the statue." She put her arm around Pieter's waist and licked his ear with her tongue. "You're the one that has to leave now."

"Pieter," Jarrod said. "You're not so cunt drunk that you'll follow her, are you?"

"I'm sick of doing what you want to do all the time," Pieter said petulantly.

"You can't trust her, Pieter. She'll chew you up and spit you out."

"I'm not as stupid as you think, Jarrod. I can look after myself."

Jarrod gave him a baleful scowl and turned back to Cynthia. "You don't know what you're getting yourself into."

"I think I do," she said.

* * *

Satan growled and Gilly ruffled his head.

Let me go, Gilly.

She jumped away from him. The voice inside her head was somehow familiar. It had a warm comforting aura.

The leash, Gilly. Release me. Jarrod needs my help.

With trembling fingers Gilly released the leash. "Father?"

Satan suddenly transformed into her white-haired father. "Gilly, my girl," he whispered.

Stunned, she could only look into his blazing amber eyes and try to gather her wildly galloping thoughts. "What's going on?"

"A bit too much to explain right now. We have to help Jarrod and get the heart."

"You know all about this?"

"Jarrod's outnumbered. I have to even it up for him. While I draw them away from the van you grab the heart and run like hell. Can you do it?"

"But..."

"No time for buts."

Her father became Satan again and bounded out into the car park. Shaking her head in disbelief at her father's reappearance, she crept around the edge of the car park, keeping to the shadows of the grevilleas and bottle brush trees.

Satan, her father, growled and pounced on one of the nearest of the naked men. They rolled in a flash of teeth and blood. The other wolves rounded on the fighting pair. She watched Jarrod as he quickly shed his own clothes and changed into a wolf.

He growled and leaped onto one of the werewolves. Cynthia transformed herself and joined the fray. While they tumbled onto the asphalt Gilly crept up to the van and, grasping the opal heart, clutched it to her breast as she took off running into the bushes. Behind her the fight raged, her father and Jarrod struggling against overwhelming odds. She had to help them. She decided the best thing to do would be to take the van.

Crouching low, keeping to the shadows, she ran back to the van and opened the driver side door.

"What do you think you're up to?" It was Cynthia.

"I gotta go," Gilly said and before she knew she was going to do it, hit Cynthia in the face with the opal rock.

Cynthia fell away in surprise and Gilly started the van. She reversed fast toward the brawling wolves. She flung open the passenger door. "Dad! Jarrod! Climb in!"

Two wolves extricated themselves from the fight and leaped in and Gilly tore out of the car park and into the night. In the passenger seat her father transformed into human form. He was covered in cuts and bites.

"Are you all right?"

"I will be. We werewolves heal quickly."

Chapter Nine

Christmas Day found them standing in a moonscape. The predawn sky was pink, draping the desolate landscape in a lurid blood red hue.

They'd driven through the night, nine hours straight, and covered eight hundred and fifty kilometers. Her father had directed them to the outskirts of Coober Pedy. The piles of red rock brought back memories to Gilly, of the visit when she'd been so very young. Her father had directed her to park beside a pile of rubble. They stood around a deep, vertical shaft.

"This is my mine," Jarrod said. "There are more mines about than there were back in my day, but this is definitely where we were." He pointed to a rusty piece of machinery. "That was the crusher I bought from old Jerry Rasmussen."

"It still works," her father said. "It's my mine now," her father added. "When you died the mining lease reverted to the government's mines department. I bought it when it came up for auction."

"Why?"

"You left a piece of the Manushya in the ground. I've left it there undisturbed until recently."

"What did we leave?"

"A *chakra*, a small piece, but necessary for her. It provides animation energy. With it, she can exert absolute control over her minions, your mother among them," he said to Gilly. "With this and her heart, the Manushya can become whole and walk in the world of men, bringing about our destruction. Come on, we must prepare for her."

Her father climbed down a ladder into the shaft. Gilly glanced at Jarrod and shrugged. It was all going too fast for her.

Jarrood gave her a hug. She let his arms wrap around her. For the first time in hours she felt safe. "That was good driving back there," Jarrood said.

"I was so scared."

"You really are full of surprises. There isn't a person I know who would have coped with all that's gone on in the last few hours."

"She's her father's daughter," the old man chuckled from below. "Come on, we don't have much time till dawn."

When Jarrood helped Gilly onto the solid ground at the bottom of the shaft he grasped her father by the elbow. "Would you please explain what the hell is going on?"

"I certainly owe you that," her father began. "It's a difficult story to tell, and what we have to do in the next hour is going to be harder."

"I'm ready, Dad. I've been shocked already tonight. A couple more surprises won't do any more harm."

"That's my girl."

"So, what's really going on?"

"I'm here to save your mother."

"Mum?"

"Gilly, your mother is not normal."

"I already know that."

"You'll find what I'm going to say hard to believe..."

"What, harder than my father is a werewolf and so is the man I want? What can be harder than that?"

"Your mother is a Rakshasi. She eats human flesh."

Gilly choked back a gasp. "Mum?"

"In the scheme of things, she has become a rather important Rakshasi, it seems. Not that that surprises me; she is a capable woman."

"How do we save her, Dad?"

"First I have to tell you that your mother and I became werewolves in India. You were only a few months old at the time. I won't go into the details, but we blundered

into the middle of a dispute between some normal werewolves and Rakshasi devotees. Unfortunately your mother was turned by a Rakshasi. I was turned by a normal werewolf. I love India, but your mother insisted we come back to Australia. It seemed a logical thing to do, to get you away from the Indian werewolf culture we'd been thrown into. However, your mother was acting under orders, you see."

"Whose orders?" Jarrod asked.

"The Manushya. In due course we ended up here in 1985. The Manushya was calling her to come here to release her. She'd fatally wounded the miners, who I now know were Jarrod and his brother. I was horrified at what she'd done and I took the liberty of giving them my blood."

"You made us into werewolves?"

"It was all I could do. I'm sorry. Fearing what the Manushya might do if she was released from the rock, I stole the opal from your mother and fled to India with it."

Jarrod had raised a quizzical eyebrow. She gripped his arm. "I'm sorry for what my mother did to you."

"Your mother was a little crazy by this stage," her father continued. "It wasn't a dog that attacked you, it was your mother. She'd tried to turn you, but she had an attack of conscience and couldn't deprive you of your humanity."

"I can't believe it."

"She was acting under the orders of the opal woman. She paid the price, of course. She couldn't trust herself with you, or me. She left us that night at Coober Pedy after she killed Jarrod and Pieter. She hid the gem in our campervan."

"What did you do?"

"I buried it while your mother went hunting."

"Why have you brought it back?"

"My research in India has given me hope that I can release your mother from the Manushya's spell."

"Can you make her normal again?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but once a werewolf, always a werewolf, for all time."

"You mean you're immortal?"

"Yes, I am. So is Jarrod and his brother and... what's wrong?"

Gilly's heart had snapped. "Jarrod, you're immortal?"

"Yes, I am."

His expression told her he'd read her thoughts. He would live forever and she would die. "A lifetime," he said, reading her thoughts. "Gilly, as much as I want you, I will not condemn you to this feral life I lead."

She flew into his arms.

"That won't be necessary," her father said. "Gilly is immortal already."

"What? I'm a werewolf?"

He grasped her hand and with his thumb and forefinger massaged her little pinkie. "You are a shape shifter, my darling. Remember you were attacked by a wolf, your mother. You've been a werewolf since childhood."

Part of her didn't want that to be true, but in her heart she knew it was. She'd always known there was something else about dogs, apart from her phobia. She had this affinity with all animals, dogs especially. She could smell them, sense their presence even when they weren't visible.

"It's a lot to get used to," she said finally.

"We don't have much time," her father continued. "I made the statue to attract your mother. The Manushya will order her to steal it. When she comes I will release her."

"Mother will come here?"

"I expect her. It is a prize too valuable to resist. I have had the statue under a spell, a cloak if you will, so she could not find it. The only way I could get it back into the country since border protection has become so tight, was to donate it to the museum. I intended to steal it back so I arranged with Bert to take Satan. He didn't know I was Satan, of course, and what do I find? Jarrod and Pieter planning to steal it themselves."

"So you just tagged along?"

"I sensed a higher purpose involved. There were just too many coincidences falling around me."

"I know that feeling," Jarrod said. "We didn't suspect you at all."

"I'm a little bit older and more experienced as a werewolf. You'll learn the art of cloaking too."

Gilly laughed. "I'm guessing that Bert transferring me to the dog squad was part of the plan as well?"

Her father nodded enthusiastically. "That way we could all be together at the same time. I didn't anticipate Pieter trying to steal the statue for himself."

"That's Cynthia's influence," Jarrod muttered. "She's after the money."

"We'll have to disappoint her and Pieter."

"What's the plan?"

Her father grabbed a torch hanging from a post bolted to the rock wall. "Follow me."

The mine was a straight tunnel that seemed to go on forever. Finally they came to a sharp bend.

"This is where I changed direction," Jarrod said.

"Little did you know the Manushya was leading you to her, just as it was calling Gilly's mother."

Her father suddenly dropped to his knees and rummaged about in the dirt beside a boulder. "Ah, here it is."

He'd extricated a dusty ball of rock. He spat on it and polished it on his shirt. A faint dot of color showed. "The chakra."

"What now?"

"We crush it."

"That's it?"

"Hardly. I have to say a few special words, magic, don't you know. I need Gilly's mother to be near so I can tend to her. Otherwise she'll dissolve into dust herself. Come on, back to the surface."

They hurried back along the tunnel and up the ladder. On the surface Gilly shivered in the chilled air. The sun had not yet risen. "Now what?"

"We wait. Power up the crusher, dear boy."

Gilly watched Jarrod start the diesel motor that powered the great pneumatic crusher, a confusion of pipes, rollers and conveyer belts. It roared into life with a cloud of black smoke then the noise settled down to a loud thrumming.

Jarrold threw some rocks onto the belt and pulled the lever. The rocks fell into the bucket of the crusher and were pulverized, ending up as dust spewing into the air at the other end.

When Jarrod put the belt in neutral her father placed the chakra onto it. "Gilly," he shouted. "Help me get the statue and its heart from the van. We need to put them on the conveyor belt as far from the chakra as we can manage. They mustn't touch each other before they are crushed."

Gilly opened the van door and lifted up the blanket. The statue glowed with its own natural aura. She handed it to her father who gazed longingly at the face. "She was very brave, you know. It broke my heart when she left us."

"Mine too, Dad."

"She told me to tell you she loved you always. You were too young to tell the full story. I wanted to, but you would not have understood."

"I do now, that's what counts."

"And today, Christmas Day, we'll get her back."

She gave him a hug.

"You like Jarrod, don't you?"

"Very much. He had confidence in me when I'd lost belief in myself."

"I almost saw."

Gilly's face reddened as she remembered Satan yelping when Jarrod had first kissed her at the kennel. "Oh."

"Never mind, I'm broadminded. If he hurt you I would have put him in his place soon enough, don't you worry about that."

Halfway back to the crusher her father stopped and sniffed the air. "I sense they are near. Quickly now, I must prepare."

They hurried back to where Jarrod was standing by the crusher, his hand on the lever that would set the conveyer belt in motion and take the chakra to its destruction.

"They're coming," her father warned.

"Who, exactly?" Jarrod asked.

"Everyone. Your brother and his gang and Gilly's mother."

Her father placed the statue at the end of the conveyor and the heart in the middle between it and the chakra.

"I released the chakra from its cloaking spell only a few minutes ago. When I first found it, and placed it under my spell, your mother became dormant. She has now awakened, and as I suspected, she was close by."

"She's been out here alone, all this time?"

"I could never find her. The one thing I could not allow was her to find the chakra. With that power she would have become as powerful as the Manushya herself. I didn't want to leave her the temptation of absolute power."

As the saffron limb of the sun peaked above the ruddy horizon a figure materialized as if out of the air itself. Her mother was hauntingly beautiful and had not aged at all since she'd last seen her.

"Sarah," her father muttered. "Oh, Sarah."

Her mother hissed at him, baring long white canines, shattering the beautiful image.

"Forgive your mother," her father muttered. "She was always a little prickly in the mornings."

A car slammed to a rattling halt and werewolves piled out into the red dust. They circled her, snarling uncertainly. Sarah transformed not into a wolf, but into a beastly looking thing, half human half animal. With lightning speed she lunged at the werewolves. Gilly watched in horror as her mother killed two of the werewolves in a red wash of blood and sinew.

Jarrold rushed toward them. "Pieter, no. She's too powerful."

With a flick of her long clawed arm, Sarah hit him, flinging him away as if he didn't exist.

"She's too powerful for physical force," her father shouted at him. "Get back to the crusher."

Her father began reciting a magic spell in a melodious and hauntingly beautiful Indian dialect. Sarah hissed at Jarrold then sniffed the air. She turned in the direction of the conveyor belt.

Gilly stepped between them. "Mother! No!"

Sarah hissed, her cruel red mouth an ugly gash across a countenance of pure hatred.

"I don't know if you recognize me. I'm Gilly, your daughter. I know you can destroy me. I know you're following orders that conflict with your own desires. You didn't destroy me before. You disobeyed once before."

Sarah cried out as if in pain.

"She tortured you, I bet," Gilly said. "I'm sorry for that. She uses fear to control you. Doesn't she? Fear of the pain she can cause you. But love is more powerful than fear, Mother. I used to think fear was all there was, but I know there is a more powerful force in the world than fear. Mother, it's love. Daddy loves you, I love you, and I know that somewhere, in your breast, you love us too."

Sarah's cruel eyes centred on Gilly's face and seemed to flicker in uncertainty. Suddenly Sarah lifted her face to the sky and howled in such utter and complete despair.

Gilly realized then her mother wasn't strong enough to fight against the orders of the Manushya. Her father's incantations seemed to go on forever, and Gilly wondered how long she'd be able to keep her mother occupied.

A werewolf, one of Cynthia's, rushed toward the conveyor belt, its eyes intent on the statue. Sarah, with frightening casualness, picked it up and with her great jaws crushed his skull and flung his twitching carcass into the dust. With a malevolent glare

she turned to Jarrod who stood bleeding at the controls, waiting for her father's instructions. She took a step toward him, bent her head over him and opened her jaws.

"Mr. Stone," Jarrod said, holding his ground and looking up into the jaws of death. "Quickly now."

"Mother," Gilly cried. "Look to me!"

Sarah turned her head away from Jarrod and gazed at her malevolently.

"Mother, please, look at me. Don't hurt him. I love him, Mother, like you love Father, like we love you. Please don't hurt him."

Sarah hissed at her, but it was, Gilly thought, weaker than before. Sarah turned her head and glared at her husband. His eyes were closed, concentrating on chanting the magic spell.

On the conveyer belt the statue glowed, the heart of rock started beating and the chakra started to sing, a vibration of pure sound that seeped out into the reddening light of dawn.

"Now, Jarrod, now!"

Jarrod fell onto the lever and the conveyor belt rolled. The chakra fell first into the crusher. There was a crash of thunder. The crusher vibrated, rocked back and forth and then spewed a fine rainbow mist of dust into the sky. A powerful wind roared out of the east and carried the dust high into the heavens.

All eyes, Sarah's included, were on the opalescent cloud as it dissipated into the sky. All eyes except Cynthia's. She nudged Pieter and he rushed between the monster and the belt to snatch the statue just as the heart fell into the crusher.

Pieter and Cynthia climbed into their car and sped off as Gilly, her father and Jarrod watched as the opal heart fell into the crusher and was bled into the clear violet sky.

High above the desolation it seemed as if wispy white clouds swirled into existence and a pair of smiling eyes looked down upon them. It was the Eternal, Gilly guessed, the primal force of the universe. She wondered if he approved of them fixing his mistake.

Sarah let out an agonized howl and crumpled to the ground.

"Mother!"

"She'll be all right now," he father said, cradling his wife's head in his lap. He pushed a wisp of hair from her eyes. "She'll not be herself for quite a while, but in the long run, she'll be as good as new."

"Oh, Dad."

Jarrold put his arms around her waist. Gilly leaned back into the warm safety of his chest.

"Are you okay?"

She snuggled deeper against him. "I feel complete. I have my mother, and my father and I have you."

"Forever," Jarrold whispered in her ear.

"Now I know that everything that's happened to me was for a reason, that I'm not the victim of random bad luck, or that I caused it. I blamed myself for so long for Mother leaving, yet she did the bravest thing of all, defying the Manushya and leaving me behind."

He kissed her deeply. "You know, I started all this to end my life as a werewolf. Now I want to be a werewolf for the rest of eternity."

Her father looked up at them. "We'll have to find the statue," he said. "Otherwise the Manushya will find a way to come back."

"If I know Cynthia, she'll break it up and sell all the pieces."

Her father shook his head. "The question is will the Manushya let her. She still has power. We've weakened her, but she still exists as long as there is opal in the world."

The sun had peaked above the horizon and bathed the lurid landscape in bright yellow light.

Gilly clasped Jarrold's head between her hands. "Merry Christmas," she said.

"I think we've earned this," he said and kissed her.

"Our own Christmas Kiss."

Mikala Ash

Mikala Ash wakes up every morning to the sound of the crashing surf and has her first coffee of the day on her verandah overlooking the wide Pacific Ocean. It's a double-edged blessing, she says:

I have to drag myself away to do anything at all -- like work. I'm a Management Consultant and I don't think Ricky (my beautiful Border Collie) fully understands the economic necessity of me working to keep him in the lifestyle he's become accustomed to (typical male). He just wants me to run with him along the beach all day chasing those pesky sea gulls. He's good company though and, if there are shape shifters in the world, I think I'd like him to be one -- loyal, trustworthy, obedient and protective. A voracious reader, I've been writing in one form or another since I was little. I'm so lucky that I've found a way of sharing my passion for spicy romance and the more fantastical realms that hover just beyond our grasp.