

A man with short dark hair and a light beard is shown from the chest up, looking upwards with his mouth slightly open, revealing small fangs. His eyes are closed. He is shirtless. Two hands with dark nail polish are placed on his chest. In the background, a large, bright full moon is visible against a dark sky. The overall color palette is dark blue and black.

THE WOLFPACT

ENDANGERED LOVE

JO ATKINSON

ra^venous
romance

The Wolfpact: Endangered Love

A Ravenous Romance™ Green Love™ Original Publication

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

Milla was keenly aware of everything around her, even the smallest details: the oily smell of the camouflage face paint, the itch of the black sweater where it rubbed the skin of her right elbow, the way her sneakers left her with the sensation of dragging her feet when, just hours earlier, she'd glided down the runway dressed in designer heels and one of Byxbee's creations. She was especially conscious of her heartbeat pounding in her ears. It drained the moisture from her mouth and made her gloved hands shake.

She inserted the card key into the security lock, then nothing seemed clear. An eclipse dropped over her senses after the door clicked open and a high-pitched whine clawed at Milla's ears, attempting to rob her of her hearing. She didn't realize she'd stopped breathing until the last shallow sip of air she'd taken in the corridor began to boil in her lungs.

Milla blinked the eclipse into black dots and sucked in a deep breath. A shiver tickled the nape of her neck. She fought it, but failed. The ghostly chill tumbled the length of her spine, conjuring gooseflesh on her arms in spite of the wool sweater. Steeling herself, Milla pushed through the door and into a scene worse than any glimpse of hell she'd taken in her three years with the Cause. Those few seconds spent staring at the bloodshed imprinted indelibly on her psyche. The images would haunt her, she feared, for the rest of her life.

The whine in her ears crackled out. She heard a plaintive yelp, an angry swear from one of the two men struggling to control the creature, and her own startled gasp. A noxious cocktail of rubbing alcohol and fresh blood burned in her nostrils.

The last of the black dots rippling in front of Milla's eyes evaporated, leaving the sinister laboratory starkly clear before her: perhaps twenty feet long and wide, sitting under the cold white glow of six fluorescent lights. The room was outfitted with stainless steel tray tables and a full assortment of scalpels, knives, and instruments of

pain. An empty wire cage filled one corner, with the door open. A metal autopsy table was at farthest half of the room. It was the kind, Milla noticed, her stomach pulling into knots, with a trough down the center, leading to a stainless steel bucket suspended by a hook underneath designed to catch spilled blood.

And there *was* blood. A great crimson spatter stained the wall adjacent to the empty cage, where the two men, dressed in blue hospital scrubs and sneakers, had cornered the creature. Some unaffected sliver of Milla's racing mind locked onto a pile of discarded clothes – men's clothes – lying in a heap atop the cage: a beat-up pair of motorcycle boots, blue jeans, a white T-shirt and seersucker button-down, black leather jacket. There was blood on some of the clothing, too.

One of the men had the magnificent creature by the throat in the merciless clutches of a long metal pole ending in a noose of wire that could be tightened or released by a button at the handle.

A fucking rabies pole, shrieked Milla's inner critic – the loud, usually sassy voice that observed details and took control when the rest of her froze up.

The man holding the pole was leaning on it, adding his weight to the deadly force of the noose. The second, shorter man taunted the creature from a safe distance by swiping a lethal, long-handled knife through the air, near its throat. The blade, Milla saw, glistened with fresh blood.

“Trouble breathing, you hairy fuck?” the Blade chuckled. “We ain't scared of you, not since we took the gene.”

“Yeah, and because we know you won't fight back,” the Pole added.

The creature yelped again, its weak invocation of a wolf's howl choked off by the rabies pole's noose.

Rage surged through Milla's blood, smothering her fear. She reached for her phone and snapped a photo. She would need evidence when it came time to lower the hammer on Byxbee. “Sons of bitches,” she growled.

The Pole turned toward her, alerted to the camera's flash and the sound of

Milla's voice. "Who the hell are you?"

The man with the bloody knife aimed the blade at her. "It's another one of them. *The Brotherhood!*"

Milla pocketed her phone as the Blade charged toward her. A jolt of adrenaline surged through her blood, transforming her muscles into living stone. The Blade swung at her throat. Milla fell back, narrowly avoiding the swipe. In one fluid motion, she threw a fist at the man's arm. The knife flew out of his hand and clattered across the nearest of the instrument trays, taking its contents to the floor. A fast elbow jab to the ribs knocked the air out of his lungs. The Blade's legs buckled, taking the rest of him, like his weapon, down to the floor. As he fell, Milla launched a kick at his head. The Blade flew backwards, into the wall.

"You little bitch," the Pole said.

He tightened the noose. The creature snapped at empty air and screamed in pain, only the sound that emerged from its mouth was almost silent, barely a wheeze. The magnificent animal bucked on its hind legs, clawed at the bloody wall, and began to thrash. In that moment, Milla realized the depth of green in its eyes – not a muddy hazel, but the vibrant color of emeralds.

"Let it go," Milla demanded.

A frigid smile spread across the Pole's face. "Sure," he said, pulling the noose to its tightest setting and locking the release control. The creature crashed onto its side, gasping for breaths.

The Pole stood. She guessed his height at somewhere in the six-two, six-three range – almost a half-foot taller than her and easily twice her weight. But, her enraged inner voice reminded her, Camilla Cavanaugh had not only gotten past the security door and this far into the building, she'd tackled bigger dragons. Compared to her father and supermodel/super bitch Zora Thurston, this adversary was nothing.

The Pole dropped the pole after giving it another sharp foist upward, an action that hanged the creature by forcing it to the tops of its hind legs. It ceased fighting and

instead began to paddle in the defeated movement of the dying.

“Oh, you’re so going to pay for that,” Milla spat, marching toward them.

The Pole met her halfway.

From the corner of her eye, Milla caught a flash of silver as he grabbed a scalpel off the nearest tray. He slashed at her. Milla ducked, avoiding the strike. But on the next attack, she took the tip of the blade across her upper right arm. A searing itch erupted from her flesh and the surrounding muscles.

Milla recovered and aimed a punch into the meat of her attacker’s stomach. The Pole staggered, but recovered quickly with a level of strength she hadn’t expected, even from a man of his height. Two more jabs accomplished what the first had not. He doubled over, and she nailed him with another just to be sure, driving it into his cheek. The Pole collapsed in a tangle of flailing limbs.

The creature kicked and rolled. The rabies pole clanked in concert with it, a jarring counterpoint whose beat was quickly winding down, signaling it was slipping into unconsciousness. Or worse, death.

The burning itch in Milla’s upper arm intensified. She shook out her hand, sending drops of her own blood into the spatter already clumping on the walls and floor. Ignoring the pulsating agony that came with it, she raced over to the gore-soaked corner where the creature made its final kick.

“No,” Milla cried. Dry tears stung at her eyes as she reached for the rabies pole, which had ceased gonging and clanging.

Fresh agony erupted up her arm. Without looking, she got her first inkling of the wound’s depth. Her own hand initially betrayed her, refusing to do as she bid it. The left obeyed. Milla seized hold of the pole, anchored the device under her arm, and stabbed the release with the fingers of her right hand, which was waking from its shock. The noose went slack.

An instant before the Blade body-slammed Milla against the wall, she heard a jingle of metal and saw the small saint’s prayer medallion hanging from a silver chain

around the wolf's neck. The man's full weight collided into her spine. Milla managed to shield her face with her uninjured arm; even so, the impact with the wall knocked the air out of her lungs. She and the green-eyed wolf had both been strangled of their life's breath by a couple of thugs.

As her consciousness waned and shadows ate at the edges of her vision, Milla heard the Blade's insult, calling her a disgusting word for a woman's most beautiful, sacred flesh. Unconsciousness retreated for another second, long enough for her to see the Blade tromping forward, the knife again clutched in hand.

"The Maiden's going to enjoy meeting you, bitch," he said. Then he spit out whatever was gathered on his tongue.

Blood dripped down his chin from his split lip. Milla grinned at the image of having inflicted pain on this lame excuse for a cock. But there was something else visible in the space between his legs and, for a sliver of a second, she wondered if she wasn't hallucinating, if she hadn't suffered a concussion along with the bad cut to her upper arm.

The creature the two men were trying to kill, to strip of its fur – a big animal, the size of an Irish Wolfhound but with the muscle of a Newfoundland or Saint Bernard dog. Black fur, green eyes, such a handsome and majestic beast. A wolf.

It wasn't a wolf any more.

A man with slightly-spiked cowlicks and penetrating emerald eyes greeted her gaze. His mouth, scruffy with a day's worth of stubble, pulled back in a snarl, revealing a length of perfect white teeth. Not just handsome but painfully so, he was completely naked except for the talisman hanging from the silver chain around his neck.

Impossible.

Then the Blade loomed over her, the bloodlust in his eyes far more rabid than anything she'd seen in the green gaze of his intended victim.

"The Maiden, she'll take you apart, bitch," the Blade huffed.

Behind him, the naked man answered, "Don't count on it, bastard."

Now on his feet, he swung the rabies pole with the grace and power of a Major League slugger. The whip-crack of metal against skull echoed through the confines of the room. Milla's slide toward unconsciousness halted. She scrambled up as the Blade fell and faced the naked man, who stood in the classic pose of a baseball god, hands choking up on the bat. Only the bat wasn't really a bat and the slugger had forgotten his cleats, his team socks – the entire uniform.

In their bottled gaze, it sank in just how handsome. Tall, hairy chest, with legs that matched. Strong hands, arms. Even his bare feet, big and perfect-looking, were strangely attractive in a way she'd never thought that part of a man's body capable of being. Milla stole a glance at the rest of him, too. Big hands, big feet – that rumor regarding the corresponding size of a man's cock was, in his case, true.

But then she glanced up and saw his wound, near his collarbone. Fresh blood trickled down his chest.

"You're bleeding," she said.

The man's hairy throat knotted as he choked down a swallow. He started to sway. Milla moved on instinct to steady him. She touched his waist, cursing the glove on her hand for preventing her from feeling his skin, his muscles.

The man she was attempting to help shoved her back against the wall. Growling, his angry face pressed close to hers. With the ripple of his lips, Milla caught a hint of the minty scent of his breath through the powerful smell of blood mixed with fresh sweat hanging over the room. Fear gripped her. Her body tensed, readying to fight back if necessary. The wound on Milla's arm sang out in exquisite agony.

The man sniffed at her. His snarl relaxed. "You, too," he said, his deep voice cracked with pain.

Turning, he strutted over to one of the tray tables and fished through the instruments of pain, knocking several onto the floor. Milla's eyes dropped guiltily to his butt, which looked firmly-muscled and undeniably *fine*.

He returned with a roll of surgical tape and tore off a hunk using his teeth. "Lift

it up,” he ordered.

“Huh?” Milla stammered.

“Your sweater.”

Milla did as instructed, trying her best not to wince. The man smoothed the patch over her arm with a gentleness she hadn’t expected.

“You’re pretty tough,” he said.

Milla worked the sweater back into place. “I can hold my own.”

“Good, because that’s gonna hurt like a bitch to peel off, but it should do the trick until you get a real doctor to look at it.” He handed her the roll of tape. “You mind?”

He leaned his shoulder toward her. The wound wasn’t deep, just bloody. The smell of copper burned in her lungs as Milla tore off a strip of tape and laid it over the wound. His body trembled. She applied another, her mind a tempest of confused emotion. The freckles on his shoulders...Inner Milla wondered what it might be like to play a game of connect-the-dots with caresses while he ground into her. But what about the bruises rising on his neck? And where was the wolf?

She glanced at the prayer medallion and instantly recognized the saint it honored, Francis of Assisi.

“We can’t stay here,” the man said, breaking the spell of thoughts Milla had fallen prey to. “No telling how many men are in on this.”

“Or *maidens*.”

He flexed the arm corresponding to his wound, then hurried over to the pile of clothes atop the cage. Milla watched as he pulled on the blue jeans commando-style, the boots, T-shirt, finally the leather jacket. A trace of masculine-smelling soap and his last slap of deodorant carried in the air with him as he knelt down to check the Blade’s pulse.

“Who do you work for?” the man demanded.

“Work?”

He gruffly repeated the question.

“Saint Francis, I suppose,” Milla said. “Mother Earth. *Marshmallow*.”

“Marshmallow?”

“Yeah, the newest of my rescue cats. She’s white and fluffy and very sweet.”

The man didn’t smile en route to the Pole. “They’re alive. Not that they deserve it. But they’ll be knocking back aspirin for a while. Wish I’d learned how to glammar. I’d see to it they never hurt another living soul again.”

“*Glammar*?”

“Get in somebody’s head, hypnotize them.”

“How glamorous.” She pulled out the camera and started to record the imagery in the room. “What’s this ‘Brotherhood’ that creep mentioned?”

The man grabbed Milla’s phone and tore it into two, smashing the pieces beneath his booted feet. Before the anger could rise fully on Milla’s cheeks, he gripped her good arm and marched her toward the door.

“Are you crazy?” she protested.

“Maybe.”

Milla dug in her heels and shook free. “Okay, then answer me this.”

“Answer you *what*?”

“How when I broke into this chamber of horrors, those two scumbags were trying to skin a live animal. A big, beautiful wolf. Then, in the middle of our little tango—”

She fired off a kick at the Blade’s groin. He groaned.

“Then I look up and guess what? No wolf, just a very naked you.”

The man moved closer. Milla backed a step away. Saying the words put clarity to her confusion. Wolf, then man.

“Oh my God,” Milla gasped.

The redness around his throat – it was the brutal telltale brand of the rabies pole. The man tugged at the collar of his T-shirt, but there was no use now in trying to

disguise the truth.

“You,” she said. “You’re the wolf!”

“Look,” he growled. “I appreciate what you did, so thank you for saving my life. But we don’t have time to stand here getting to know each other better. You can either hang around and wait for more of those men to show up or you can come with me.”

Before she could talk herself out of it, Milla followed him out of the room.

Chapter Two

Earlier

The moment she donned the fur shrug, Milla felt different.

The shoes were exquisite, black slingbacks made in Milan, the vamps and tops dotted with genuine garnets. Michael Byxbee's shoes. The dress, charmeuse in a startling shade of raspberry, empire-waisted with a cascade of garnets spilling down the collar, was one of the finest she'd ever modeled. The fit could not have been more perfect, as though created only for her. A dress she would wear to London or Paris or to an event in New York City, one of those parties she attended looking all smiles on the outside while silently, inwardly, cursing and hating every moment. All done in honor of the Cause. She'd do anything for those depending upon her, even wear fur.

The shrug was a soft black with threads of silver woven through the pattern. She stroked it, fighting back tears. Milla refused to cry in front of the other models, especially Zora Thurston. And not in front of Byxbee, who, she thought without an inner chuckle because it wasn't funny and probably true, would stitch live kittens together for fabric if he thought he could turn a profit and get away with such brutality.

Milla's fingers slipped into the fur. An unexpected sensation, like a tiny jolt of electricity, rocketed up her arm. The feeling it unleashed was rabid, primal. Without warning, she found herself struggling to breathe, sweating across her hairline and forehead, but chilled beneath her skin. Deeper, into her gut, her most-sensitive flesh reacted. Milla's nipples tightened into hard points beneath the dress. She stole a glimpse of her reflection in the nearest mirror and for a moment, the image of the plunging neckline covered in garnets made her ill. It looked as if her throat had been slit and was bleeding crimson drops down her chest.

The unpleasant arousal worked lower. To her shock, Milla felt her pussy swell. If she touched her seam, it wouldn't have surprised her to find it tingling, growing wet, her clit as erect as her nipples.

The shiver passed. The flicker of arousal turned sour, leaving nausea in its place. The fur had come from a living, feeling creature – a creature Byxbee had ordered killed, skinned, and stitched together. The kitten analogy returned to the forefront of Milla's thoughts. The concept wasn't that far from the truth. The punch to the guts she'd taken from an invisible fist struck again.

Milla heard Byxbee barking orders, snapping his fingers before she actually saw his cruel, sour face appear in a corner of the mirror.

"Fifteen minutes, people," he huffed.

Byxbee wasn't alone. The man walking beside him, the newest member of the designer's entourage, stood a good foot taller. Milla wasn't surprised by his good looks: dark hair neatly clipped in an athlete's cut, a bit of day-old scruff on his cheeks, chin, and neck, muscular body. A man with presence, he was dressed in jeans, loafers minus socks, and a simple black T-shirt under a wine-colored blazer – mirroring Byxbee's attire, only his jacket was basic black over gray.

What did surprise Milla came when he turned to face her, noticing her hesitation at donning the fur shrug, and she caught the cold blue reflection of his eyes in the mirror. A shudder tumbled down her spine. The man's gaze narrowed. She didn't recognize him, but could it be he recognized her? Not in the conventional, expected way. Milla Cavanaugh graced billboards, magazine covers, and TV commercials everywhere you turned. Byxbee had booked her very recognizable face at ten thousand dollars an hour to promote his new collection, *The Maiden*. Of course, the man with the spooky eyes and wolfish looks knew who she was.

But did he also know her because of Milla's Cause? Did he suspect what she had planned for tonight?

It had taken her weeks to get so close to uncovering the truth. The people shadowing Byxbee's comings and goings, the small network of devoted souls waiting for the show to end – she already knew from where she'd snip the sample of fur. Not from the shrug she'd be wearing, but the full-length coat on Zora Thurston, the bitch

hired to close out the show with Byxbee's final and strongest piece. She'd cut, bag, and tag it. If Byxbee noticed the tear in the coat, he'd immediately place blame on Zora, making it a win-win situation all the way around.

And if he was sourcing his materials from an endangered species, the Cause's lawyers would see to it that Byxbee got strung up by his shriveled raisins of balls. But if it was silverback gorilla or a big cat's fur, Milla's inner warrior proclaimed, she'd cut out the lawyer and settle the score herself.

"Is there a problem?" Byxbee asked.

Milla forced a smile, planted her elegantly-manicured nails on her hips, and tossed back her head, feigning love for what she saw.

"I meant with the shrug. We're on the clock, lady."

Milla glanced at the designer's reflection before revolving to face Byxbee directly. His face was sallow from too much tan-in-a-can. He wore a flat-top haircut that would have looked macho on anybody else. He had a piggy nose and a taut mouth that looked more like an asshole. She despised him.

"Fur? Me? No, not a problem."

Byxbee sighed, tsked, and helped Milla on with the shrug.

The irony briefly struck her how last year in Rome, a group of Italian environmental zealots had doused her, Thurston, and three other girls in fake blood right as they were entering an after party. With that job, Milla had secretly raised enough money to pay off the farmhouse in upstate New York, presently home to nearly a thousand rescue cats, dogs, rehabbed wildlife, a growing herd of horses, and farm animals saved from slaughter. The farm had nearly become self sufficient by growing organic herbs and vegetables. Even the humans who lived and worked there were rescues, most homeless before meeting her in the Cause's pet- and family-friendly shelter in the city.

Byxbee brushed the fur atop her shoulder. Milla worried she might start crying but the tears, curiously, never threatened. Instead, the rabid sensation that had coursed

through her blood at touching the shrug surged back twice as powerfully: hot, like anger personified, and the kind of sweaty, unforgettable sex a woman remembers in private when she's alone and stimulating her own pleasure.

Milla fought the urge to gasp. Not far away, Zora Thurston stood admiring her reflection in a mirror. Her pomegranate-red upper lip was raised in a snarl, her wide-eyed expression striking Milla as feral, verging on madness.

Was Zora, too, feeling the power of the animal skins? Milla's mind flashed back to something she'd either watched on TV or heard in a high school history class in that other life, pre-modeling, pre-Cause. About how normal, everyday men in Nazi Germany were transformed into ruthless sadists the instant they donned their uniforms. The power of clothes.

Milla wanted to fire a strike at Byxbee, tear his throat out, then gouge at Zora with her talons. She wanted to fuck, to feel the girth of a man's cock inside her. Milla wanted...

She blinked and the rawness of the emotion passed. She was wearing Byxbee's fur shrug, something that appalled her. But, for not the first time in the service of the cause so close to her heart, Milla remained silent and walked the walk.

* * * *

Milla took her place at the head of the line, the first of the twelve models dressed in Michael Byxbee's latest evening wear collection. The girl behind her wore a stunning reverse-pleated, origami-inspired top in the same raspberry charmeuse fabric and black trousers with thick fur cuffs that spilled over the tops of her jeweled shoes. The third wore a royal purple babydoll dress with a sweetheart of fur along the bustline that dripped amethysts. The show culminated with Zora, clad in cobalt blue and a stunning sapphire necklace and the full-length fur coat.

The music Byxbee selected was mysterious, almost jarring. Music from a far-away land instead of the usual energetic, bubbly club beat.

Steeling herself, Milla waited for the signal. When she got it from the stage

director, she put on her mask and started the high-legged march around the scrim.

Two thousand faceless apparitions hovered out of focus at the periphery. Milla was aware of their eyes upon her, of the sweep and glide of the dress and the glitter of the garnets. The mysterious music drifted over the stage, carried on a riff of flute and drum. She reached the end of the runway, her mind a million light years away, her heart aching for the beast whose skin she wore, and performed a graceful turn back in the direction of the scrim.

On the return march, as the black slacks with the fur cuffs appeared and a round of applause competed with the music, Milla felt one set of eyes in particular lock onto her, from the crowd. She glanced to her right. There in the front row sat the handsome man with the cold blue gaze she'd seen backstage with Byxbee. His eyes were locked unblinkingly upon her, tracking her course. She was struck by his wolfishness.

She'd wrongly pegged him as being Byxbee's latest lay *du jour*, perhaps even the designer's boyfriend. But Michael Byxbee couldn't possibly be involved in anything so warm and healthy as a same-sex relationship. The designer, Milla's inner voice commented, was asexual. The kind whose ego prevented him from taking anyone to his bed other than himself because a head that swollen and in love with its own musk didn't leave room for two on the pillows.

No, that wolf wasn't Byxbee's lover.

It's his partner in crime, thought Milla. She tried to forget the bodies – one dumped in the Hudson, another found in the trash near Amsterdam Ave., skinned down to the muscle. The fur stolen from those innocent lives – she was sure some of it was draped across her shoulders.

She sensed the man's eyes tracking her until she was off the stage.

The models made their final parade around the runway after Zora Thurston brought everybody in the audience to their feet and the applause grew deafening. Though at the head of the line, Milla imagined Byxbee strutting hand in hand with Zora at the back of the procession. Wolf-eyes wasn't in his front row seat on the second

pass.

The Maiden, Milla wondered. What was the story Byxbee was trying to tell with this collection?

* * * *

The chance came after Milla slipped out of the garment.

“Michael, I need you.”

She recognized the voice. Rory, the stage manager. Perfect timing, right on schedule.

“I’m a little busy,” Byxbee hissed in response.

“This can’t wait. Can you come here, please?”

Byxbee swore under his breath, and left Milla alone behind the dressing screen. She glanced over to the stool and saw the designer’s little black sketch book/organizer sitting where he’d left it, abandoned by the “crisis” she and Rory had concocted before the show.

“Good work, my friend,” Milla whispered.

She grabbed the book, stuffed and sealed by a leather clasp, and opened it. Inside were sketches, notes, a few fabric samples. Milla found the electronic card key tucked in the business card organizer. It had the words *451 Waverly Street* written across the paper sleeve in black marker. Waverly was where one of the Cause’s spies had tracked Byxbee on a recent shadowing recky.

Naked from the waist up, Milla pocketed the card in the only manner possible, sliding it into the scant, lacy triangle of her thong.

The page beneath the plastic business card inserts caught her eyes. She flipped to it and read: *Alpha will be disposed of tonight after moonrise. The Maiden assures us victory is within reach!*

The scrawl was dated in the same unmistakable handwriting as the signature logo on the label stitched into the back of Byxbee’s garments.

“Tonight,” Milla whispered. She shot a look at the clock. Moonrise loomed,

too close to call in reinforcements. She would have to do this alone. The Alpha? The fur didn't feel exactly like a wolf's or fox's. Could it be canine, some exquisite, rare breed's? What if Byxbee was breeding dogs for their fur?

Milla's mind raced. She started to close the book, only to nearly drop it when the page after the note flipped into view and she saw what he'd sketched. A wolf's head, the eyes shaded in, in green pencil. Even more curious was the talisman hanging on a chain around the animal's neck.

Byxbee had drawn a red circle around the wolf's head, with a line through that, theoretically slaying "the Alpha" with two quick strokes of his poison pencil.

She returned the book to the stool and hurried out of the building.

Along with a collapsible cage for wildlife rescues, Milla kept a backpack in the hybrid parked in the garage near Bryant Park. She hastily changed into her dark clothes and tucked her auburn locks under the cap. By the time she reached Waverly, her heart was galloping and the face in the rearview mirror no longer looked like her own.

* * * *

In the rush to escape the Blade and the Pole, Milla didn't realize they were running hand in hand, or how much she enjoyed his touch, even through her glove, until the door rose up to block their way and he released her to open it.

Thunder roared through the tight press of the walls. A bullet sailed between them, striking the metal door. The sparks shocked Milla out of her trance and back to the very serious danger she and the man still faced.

"Damn," she gasped.

She started to turn toward the person holding the gun, hands forming fists, but the man pulled her through the door and into the alleyway outside. She felt the rush of the next bullet as it passed by her face close enough to dispel the molecules of air.

"Not now," he said. "We barely won the battle – those men put up more of a fight than they should have. They've been changed. *Enhanced*."

They turned and ran through the same back alley she'd snuck down after

parking her car. The street loomed beyond a dumpster and a wall of air foul with the stink of rotting food.

“This way, my car,” she said, indicating the sidewalk at their right.

“No, this way. My bike’s closer.”

The fast-moving clomp of multiple footsteps behind them sealed the deal. The two men were back on their feet again. She and the handsome man turned left.

“Bike?”

“Yeah, motorcycle.”

Milla remembered the motorcycle boots, presently racing one length ahead of her.

“I’ve never ridden—” she began.

“Don’t worry, I’m a pro.”

They rounded the next corner and emerged on a side street sitting under a pall of darkness that owed to an absence of streetlamps and lit windows. This entire section of Waverly felt abandoned.

“Over there,” the man said, indicating a line of trash cans.

Among the shadows, Milla made out the sleek contours of a crotch rocket.

“Hell, no,” she said. “I’m not getting on that death machine.”

“You’ll do fine,” he said, fishing his keys out of his pants pocket. “And we don’t have a choice.” He tossed the helmet to her. “Put this on.”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

The man hopped onto the seat, turned the key, and balanced the bike’s weight between his legs. The explosion of noise among the deserted buildings came at her like a clap of thunder, even through the helmet. The man tipped his chin at her, indicating the seat. There wasn’t much of one to occupy, considering where his perfect, jeans-clad ass now sat, bent forward.

From the corner of her eye, Milla caught a flash of shadowy movement. She kicked a leg over the seat of the bike, maneuvered into place behind him and, without

asking for permission but sensing she didn't need to, she wrapped her arms around his waist and held on for her life.

Chapter Three

They raced up roads and through neighborhoods she didn't recognize. North of the city, he pulled into a gas station and shut the motor off. Milla unwillingly released her grip on the muscles of the man's abdomen. During their escape from Waverly, Milla had gotten intimately familiar with the topography of that part of his body. The wind had carried his scent to her, the clean maleness of his sweat and a hint of the soap he'd last used to bathe with.

Milla had also unintentionally humped her front into his back. Her sensitive flesh was aware of the separation when she slipped free of the bike and her feet were again on solid ground.

He propped the kickstand and jumped down. The glow of the station's lights instantly reminded Milla just how handsome he was.

"Okay," he grumbled, pointing a finger at her. "How about you tell me who you are and what you were doing back there?"

"What did it look like I was doing? And don't point at me."

The man shuffled in place, pulled his finger back into a fist, and got into her face. "I don't have time to screw around with you."

"You don't? Pity," Milla said, flashing a cocky smile.

The man made a throaty growl. Milla knew she was dealing with someone who was more than capable of threatening her and carrying out said threat but she didn't fear him. Not one bit. Perhaps because of the Saint Francis prayer medallion hanging visibly out of his T-shirt. She sensed that was part of it, but also there was something deeper than a symbol of faith. His heart. His soul.

Neither, however, stopped an irritated, angry scowl from crossing his face. "So you're *what*? Batgirl?"

"And who are you, the Wolfman?" Milla countered.

The question deflated some of his anger, though not all of it. "Draper."

“What’s a Draper?”

“It’s my name. John Draper.”

“Oh,” she said, softening. “Camilla. *Milla*.”

“Okay, Milla,” he said, stressing her name in a way that proved he didn’t completely trust her. “Why were you in that lab if you’re not from the Brotherhood?”

“Do I look like a monk?”

Draper’s emerald gaze traveled the length of her body, starting at her face and falling lower, lingering on her breasts for an extra beat, just long enough to reignite the spark that teased her flesh with tiny electric pinpricks. She watched his hairy throat knot under the influence of a swallow and suffered for it in silence.

“No, you don’t,” Draper said. “So refresh my memory. Who are you, Milla?”

Milla performed a one-eighty, scanned their surroundings and, without words, answered by aiming a pointer finger at the largest of the three billboards on the far side of the street. Draper followed her lead, narrowed his eyes, and did a double-take.

“That’s...”

“Me, Milla Cavanaugh, supermodel – according to the entertainment industry. And secret defender and champion of animal rights.” Milla extended her hand.

Draper accepted the gesture and shook. “Pleased to meet you, Milla.”

He could have snapped finger bones with that powerful hand. But Draper shook gently, with just enough strength to tease the pinpricks into tingles. She secretly wondered what it might take to stir the tingles into concentric waves of pleasure, crashing through her core. Not much, if the ache inside her was an indication.

“You came—” He caught himself in mid-speech.

Bad choice of words, Milla thought.

“So you were there because...?” he tried again.

“I had intelligence that indicated Byxbee—”

“Michael Byxbee?”

“Fashion designer and fur murderer extraordinaire, yes. Byxbee was planning

to source materials.”

“Is that what they call ‘slaughter’ in your profession?”

“Hey, just so you understand the score, a lot of good people are risking their necks to figure out what’s going on behind the scenes with Byxbee, many of them in my profession. Where he’s getting his materials from, if there’s any legal or, quite frankly, illegal way to put a stop to it, short of killing the prick.”

The man exhaled through flared nostrils as he absorbed the intelligence. “What he’s doing *is* criminal.”

“I know. The bodies —”

She drew in a breath before explaining about the rash of grisly discoveries: the bodies of large canines found skinned and dumped around the city.

“The police can’t commit resources to an investigation on a killer preying on animals because it’s not a priority when they have nutcases killing people. We suspected Byxbee might be behind it. Tonight, my network — my people doing what the cops can’t or won’t — helped me track his operation to Waverly, where I found *you*.”

Draper went silent. Under the cold white glare, his handsomeness took on an even more wolfish appearance than the blue-eyed man she’s seen earlier parading beside Byxbee backstage at the runway show.

Milla glanced higher. Above the rooftops and billboards, a decent wedge of silver moon floated among the clouds. “It’s true,” she said. “I wasn’t hallucinating what I saw in there.”

“What do you think you saw?”

“The wolf,” she whispered. “You.”

“It’s not what you think,” Draper said. He strutted closer.

Milla matched his advance with a step in retreat. The sparkle of green color in his gaze glittered preternaturally, but the Saint Francis medallion reflected a flash of the moon’s silver, stilling her brief flicker of doubt. “Then what is it?”

“Not here,” Draper said. He tipped his chin at the motorcycle. “There’s a safe

place, a ways upstate.”

“I’m not going upstate on that missile with you.”

Draper placed his hands on his hips and shot her an exasperated look.

“Not when my place is right over there.” She tipped her chin in the imagined direction of the penthouse overlooking Central Park.

“I can’t risk it. The rogue most likely has people looking for me.”

“Rogue? Rogue...*wolf*?”

“Let’s just put it this way – when you walked into that building on Waverly, you crossed paths with something much bigger than you can imagine. I’m heading up north to where I know it’s safe. You’d be smart to walk away now and go back to your place, right over there.”

The humid night’s temperature plummeted as Milla remembered the man in the front row: Byxbee’s pal, his eyes so blue, so cold, they had sliced clear through her. The mission to bring them to justice had not gone as planned and was far from over.

“This safe house,” Milla said. “Does it have a shower?”

“More like one of those antique claw-foot tub deals. But yeah, it’s got real running water and everything,” Draper said, a sardonic grin curling at one corner of his mouth.

Werewolves, Milla thought while taking a long, contemplative look at him. To her surprise, she still didn’t feel terror at the sight of this man, only sympathy and a burning attraction that made saying no to him impossible.

* * * *

The last sign Milla saw before the car ran them off the road was for a town called Friday Harbor. *Town* might have been an exaggeration; village or hamlet might have been a more appropriate term given that they’d traveled through the lush greenbelt for untold miles after leaving the highway. Manhattan seemed part of another, distant continent, its smoggy summer smell replaced by the intoxicating fragrance of meadows and pines.

The cut on Milla's upper arm stung only when she thought about it or the fact that she needed stitches – and, likely, a plastic surgeon to deal with scarring if she ever wanted to model swimsuits or anything backless or strapless again. She depended on the income modeling provided to fund the Cause's numerous and expanding projects around the globe.

Somewhere near Friday Harbor, Milla noticed the headlights of a vehicle strobing across their lane. Tense seconds later, the SUV was bearing down on them. She patted Draper's midriff.

"Yeah?" he called above the wind and roaring engine.

Draper tipped a look at the other lane. Milla followed his glance to see the lights bouncing at their backs slice across the pavement, at their left. The black SUV pulled its front bumper to within a yard of their rear wheel. The SUV sped faster. When its hood was even with them, it charged into their lane.

The ground beneath Milla seemed to dissolve and she felt like she was falling. But the road continued to race beneath her and she was holding onto Draper's waist, both of them still aloft, atop the bike, which Draper had maneuvered out of the path of the oncoming vehicle, right to the edge of the road. He accelerated but the extra distance of a few yards was short-lived. The SUV quickly caught up to them.

Milla faced the vehicle, hoping to get a look at their attackers. The passenger window was tinted but the moon, visible from the far side of the road, pierced the glass, revealing two shapes. As her focus lingered, the head of the man in the passenger's seat altered its shape. Preternaturally blue eyes locked onto her from the other side of the glass.

"Rogue wolf," Milla said, tensing.

Draper turned in time to see the same image and it became clear their situation wasn't random road rage.

"Hold on," Draper bellowed, the wind tearing his voice past her ears, like a scream.

Milla did as ordered. He accelerated. She saw the speedometer surge past ninety. The winding country road and the lush greenery bracing its sides blurred, as if a cyclone had opened up ahead of them, with a dollop of liquid silver moonlight tossed into the palette of gray color. The noise inside the helmet grew deafening. Through it all, Milla was aware of her heartbeat.

No, not hers – she realized the galloping cadence belonged to Draper.

She clutched at his waist, one hand close enough to his heart that she could feel its pulsations. She opened her eyes – not the physical pair, aimed unblinkingly ahead at the road, but her internal ones.

There exists a rare moment when the creature's mind is neither wholly man's nor fully wolf's, but equal parts both, a voice drifted through her thoughts. His voice.

The wolf was hungry, its belly empty, its blood on fire. The moisture drained from Milla's mouth. She was aware of the real world, the trees lining the road, the next swipe of the SUV, but she was also witness to a shared vision that had come from Draper. She hugged him tighter. Her stomach ached – she was the wolf now, reliving what Draper had already lived, through his memory.

Hungry, but the part of the wolf that remained human even after transformation knew the rules, the promise the man had made to the higher powers. In this regard, the man ruled. The man had led them to this dark, foul place deep in the city.

The man. As part of him, the wolf remembered how he had walked away from the mechanical device he rode into territory that smelled of decaying meat and standing water, shedding his skins because they fit miserably after the transformation and hindered the wolf's ability to function. The details came in a disembodied, disconnected way, as though the creature were seeing the event rather than actually remembering it. The man, here in search of answers, had been lured through lies, the wolf now knew. Lies that could cost the wolf its life.

Two men ambushed him, brutalized him, and dragged him inside the silver cave. They were stronger than they should have been. Though formidable, the wolf

could have destroyed them. Hungry, yes, it could have torn at their throats and feasted on fresh, hot blood. A maddening rush of lust and rage embraced the wolf.

But it had made a promise. It would never feed as wolf, only man. Its belly must remain empty, and it would not harm its attackers. The odor of death hung around them, born of a source that terrified the wolf. It did not recognize the name, but knew it was the ancient evil's latest incarnation when one of the men spoke it.

"The Maiden..."

The angry red stain before the wolf's eyes evaporated. Its only option was to escape.

The wolf sprinted away, but the men cornered it, overpowered it, as if knowing it would not harm them. Using their instruments of pain, the men taunted the wolf, hurt it, drew its blood. They moved in for the kill. Then, as the wolf faced death, the woman appeared.

She was the most beautiful creature the wolf had ever seen, and she left it hungry in different ways. He wasn't wholly wolf any more; he was man.

The vision faded. Milla gasped and pressed her head against Draper's shoulders. The strength of his body, the heat of his closeness, shielded her from the insanity of what happened next.

The SUV made another charge and nearly launched them into the trees at ninety-six miles per hour. Draper maneuvered the motorcycle out of the way at the last second, but on the pass Milla stole another look at the vehicle's nearest passenger and met those eyes, glinting blue, cold and mean: eyes of a predator, locked on its prey. Hungry to rend flesh and sip blood.

"Milla," Draper growled.

"Yes?"

"I need you to hold on tightly. Don't let go. And trust me."

Ahead of them at the right side of the road, the woods broke in a vast chasm. Milla saw the bridge and the drop down to a river whose water had transformed into

liquid silver beneath the moon's glow.

"Oh no," she gasped. "Draper, don't..."

"Just trust me."

She didn't have a choice though, if given one, Milla still would have taken a leap of faith. "Yes," she promised.

Draper turned the bike toward the break. Milla held on and whispered her favorite prayer, the only one she knew by heart, the novena to Saint Francis of Assisi. The words emerged against a sharp squeal brakes as the SUV tried to follow.

"Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love..."

The bike's tires left pavement and hit sand and gravel, but was rocketing so fast, she barely sensed the change.

"Where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope..."

Gravel became grass. Branches clawed at them from the roadside.

"Where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy..."

Draper put on one final burst of speed right as the ground gave way beneath them. The bike sailed across the chasm and, for a moment, they were flying. But the illusion quickly vanished and the bike's momentum dipped as gravity exerted its pull.

Eyes wide, still holding onto Draper's waist, Milla screamed. Then he transformed.

A tingle of electricity rippled through her gloves, her wrists, her stomach, and nipples – everywhere Milla's body was connected to Draper's. The rush of air swept the scent of his skin, the mossy fragrance of the night woods, and another smell, primal and exciting, to her senses. Like the crackle of ozone during a thunderstorm, she thought. Or a breath of ocean air, sipped at the precise instant when the tides change. It was the smell of energy, creation, life.

The body beneath her hands altered, stretching out around her, shortening in

some places while solidifying, hunching, in others.

Milla held onto Draper as promised, only it wasn't Draper the man she was clutching to any more. It was a wolf.

The bike began to drop.

Milla unintentionally glanced at the chasm, in time to see the wolf's feet slip free of Draper's motorcycle boots, which plummeted into a freefall toward the river bed far below. Then she shot a look ahead of them toward the opposite bank. The tree-studded hillside looked a hundred miles away.

The magnificent wolf faced Milla, its eyes glowing a vibrant green in the moonlight, assuring her that her trust would be rewarded. Then the creature scrambled its hind paws onto the seat of the falling bike and, with Milla holding on around its midsection, it kicked, propelling them both off the bike, trampoline-fashion.

The wolf soared the remainder of the distance. The hillside came rushing up. Leaves and needles slapped at the visor. For a terrible instant, Milla lost her grip. She struck the ground hard enough to see stars, yet was grateful for solid earth, *terra firma* that felt more like *terra sancta*.

Milla tore off the helmet and checked herself. Her arms worked. Her legs, too, along with the rest of her. She was about to call Draper's name when a crash of thunder exploded at her back. Orange flame and oily black smoke rose in a mushroom cloud from the base of the chasm.

"Damn it," Draper grumbled. "I loved that bike."

Milla turned to see him sprawled across his stomach a body length ahead of her, dirt on his face and the soles of big, bare feet. His clothes had an awkward, dressed-in-the-dark fit. She jumped up and helped him to stand.

A wide smile broke on Milla's face as the rush of emotions overwhelmed her. They'd made it. They were alive. She threw her arms around Draper and hugged him almost as tightly as during their brief flirtation with flight across the river's banks.

"That was amazing!"

“Glad you think so,” Draper grumbled.

Milla felt him tense, heard him clear his throat and choke down a swallow. He broke their embrace and started to adjust his clothes, which seemed a convenient excuse because if the thickness pressing into her waist wasn’t fully hard, he’d at the very least gotten semi-erect while hugging her.

They carefully skirted the edge of the precipice, holding onto branches. The blaze had burned down to embers, enough to see the charred remains of Draper’s bike among an outcrop of river-smoothed rock jutting up from the water.

Draper swore again and turned away from the carnage.

The giddy rush of Milla’s emotions vanished. “Byxbee,” she sighed. “And that rogue you mentioned...I think I saw him tonight, in the audience. We need to talk.”

“My place is a bit of a hike from here, but we can make it on foot.” Draper started walking but didn’t get far before dancing in place. “*Ow!*”

“What’s wrong?”

Draper picked up his right foot and cradled it in his hands. “Stubbed my damn toe.”

Milla cast a last look behind them. On the far side of the chasm, a pair of blue dots appeared low among the shadow-cloaked brush, only to wink out when she called Draper over.

Chapter Four

They were lost, she was sure of it.

Milla's inner voice taunted her with the irony. Here she was, traversing the dark, lush forest like some scene out of a grownup version of a child's fable, with John Draper, who was both the handsome, heroic woodsman *and* the big, not-so-bad wolf.

Draper forged on through the trees, silent except for the occasional grunted swear when he stepped over what she guessed was a stick or stone. A few times, Milla heard him sniffing at the air and thought about asking him why. In the end, she accepted that the scents in the air were aiding Draper to find the correct path to the safe house.

She also realized with a degree of shock how instantly comfortable she had become with the chain of events that had led her to this place following Byxbee's runway show and mentally chastised herself – werewolves, woodsmen, and all. The truth of the situation was that Milla, one of the highest-paid fashion models in the industry, was wandering through the wilderness with a complete stranger.

She stole another glimpse at his denim-clad ass in the moonlight. A painfully handsome stranger, sure. Perhaps the sexiest man she'd ever crossed paths with, which was saying a lot given her interactions with Hollywood A-listers, professional athletes, and the cream of the male model crop.

Draper's heart, which she'd felt beating beneath her fingers, was what made her suspension of disbelief possible. She knew the man as well as the wolf. She did trust him.

A small, unlit house pulled free of the surrounding woods ahead of them, built on a slight bluff above a winding dirt drive that disappeared into the trees. Draper started toward the front door. He was halfway up the few stairs when Milla grabbed hold of his arm.

“Wait.”

Draper turned, a glint of moonlight reflecting in his gaze.

“The house, are you sure it’s safe?”

“I’m sure.”

“But what about the other...” Milla choked down a swallow. “The other one we saw back there on the road?”

“There was only one other person who knew how to find this place and she would never betray the Brotherhood.”

She, Milla thought. Jealousy flickered through her. “What about—”

“Just spit it out,” Draper said.

“I’m bleeding. You’re bleeding. How do we know that other *wolf* isn’t tracking us right now, following our scent? Can he do that?”

“There are different limitations between wolves, but our trail pretty much died over that stream. And I’ve taken precautions. The house is hidden.”

“Hidden?” Milla asked.

“Let’s not stand out here and make it easier for whoever was in that truck to find us if he *is* on our trail. After you.”

Draper opened the door and extended a hand, bidding her to enter. Milla briefly hesitated. After what she’d been through that night, walking into Draper’s safe house seemed the easiest of all the dangerous choices she’d made.

But passing him and breathing in the intoxicating scent of the sweat on his skin, she worried that stepping through the threshold would lead to a different type of danger. The kind that would place her heart in mortal jeopardy.

* * * *

Milla had been linked romantically to a Hollywood A-list actor who was all smiles and charisma for the paparazzi, but had apparently received a personality bypass only obvious during those few times they weren’t in front of a camera. Then there was the handsome football quarterback with the dimple on his chin from the big team who only dated supermodels – it didn’t matter which ones. He and Milla hadn’t been an

item long and that relationship, too, had been a farce. She only allowed for it to happen because that's what she was expected to do. Wear fur. Date the football hero with the bulging biceps and two brain cells while she worked the jobs that secretly paid for the projects of Milla's Cause.

Draper's hand touched Milla's shoulder, forcing her to bite back a moan.

"You okay?" he asked, his breath teasing her ear.

A shiver tumbled down Milla's spine, conjuring gooseflesh across her naked arms, legs, and breasts. "Yes."

"You're sure?"

She sat in a huddle in the claw-foot bathtub, her arms covering her chest. "Just do it."

Milla narrowed her eyes and ground her teeth in an attempt to bite back the pain. The needle's sting, however, didn't distract her from her arousal as much as she'd hoped. His nearness, his scent, the movement of his fingers over her flesh were all too wondrous to ignore.

"This is gonna hurt," Draper said. And it did.

"I'm good," Milla sighed through clenched teeth.

"Yes, you are."

The deep, masculine baritone of his voice tempted her imagination and made her pussy tingle. She shifted her arms and flinched – not from the pressure of the sponge as Draper cleaned the wound, but the scrape of her erect nipples against her wrists.

"Sorry," Draper said.

"It wasn't you," Milla lied.

The cadence of his breaths, the deft movements of his fingers as he sutured her wound, hypnotized her. Even without the local anesthetic, she would have been numbed of the pain, levitating internally due to more powerful sensations from other body parts.

Bare from the waist up and the ankles down, Draper closed her wound. Milla stole a glance at his expression – those emerald eyes so completely focused on healing her – and her ache for him doubled.

“I thought you said I needed a doctor,” she whispered, hoping the words would distract her craving in a way the needle’s sting hadn’t.

“No, what I said was you needed a *real* doctor.”

“So you’re a doctor?”

“Sort of. I’ve got D.V.M. after my initials. That’s—”

“*Doctoris Veterinariae Medicinae*,” Milla said.

“Impressive.”

“You’re a vet.”

Draper grunted in response. “So I can’t guarantee you won’t have a scar after this heals.”

“If there is, I’ll deal with it. Plastic surgery or I’ll just wear long sleeves and not do bikini work anymore,” she said.

“That would be a shame.”

Draper’s hairy mouth formed a cocky smile and Milla did gasp for a breath that refused to come easily on its own. He looked so handsome, so pure of heart, she wanted to cup that smile and press her own lips over it.

“A vet,” she said. “I knew I liked you.”

Draper’s smile turned mischievous. “Let me guess, the big, famous fashion model’s always dreamed of dating a simple country vet?”

Was he mocking her? “The big, famous fashion model,” she parroted, “respects any man who cares for the innocents of this world.” Arms still clasped around her breasts, Milla pointed a finger at the medallion around his neck. “Saint Francis is a personal favorite of mine.”

Draper turned away. “Mine, too.”

He stood, stretched, and Milla was again possessed by the image of his body:

his naked back, muscled ass in his old blue jeans, even his bare feet, dirty from the woods, were male perfection, to be sculpted in marble or written about in sonnets, to have love songs sung over and endless love made to.

“When you’re done, you can help me. I’ll talk you through it.”

Not sure why, Milla uncrossed her arms. “Whenever you’re ready, I’ll run fresh water and you can hop in. I know a thing or three about emergency first aid myself, Draper.”

He revolved and faced her, his eyes dropping down to wander over her breasts, lingering without blinking on her nipples before dipping lower toward the shaved pink seam of her opening. Draper coughed to clear his throat.

With his gaze drinking in the details of her body, Milla indulged in a quick glance down his, stopping at his groin. The crotch of Draper’s blue jeans sat full and tented, his arousal obvious.

“Um,” he grumbled.

“There, now we’re even,” Milla said, taking the bath towel he’d draped over the brushed nickel bar. “Or did you forget I’ve already seen you naked?”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right.”

She dried off before wrapping the luxurious bath towel around her torso and cinching it on the side. She’d drained the tub and was running fresh water before Draper so much as unzipped his jeans. Milla turned to see his eyes narrowed, embarrassment staining his injured neck and face a deep shade of crimson. His hesitation charmed her even more.

“I can leave you alone,” she teased.

“No, I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of.”

Draper unzipped his pants and pushed them down to his ankles. He straightened and his erect cock jutted up proudly, magnificently, from a thatch of dark hair. No, he certainly didn’t.

He strutted over to the tub, his cock tick-tocking ahead of him. Stepping in,

Draper performed that little dance people do when the water is a few degrees too hot. He adjusted the temperature by running cold from the faucet, then settled down and assumed the male version of Milla's huddle, with his knees locked and an arm cast over his crotch.

Draper eyed her warily as she took a clean cloth from the shelf and the bar of soap and dunked them into the water beside his leg. "So you love animals?"

"That is correct," Milla said. She brushed the cloth over Draper's naked back, carefully avoiding the gouge of his wound and the bruises at his neck.

"And that's why you were in that lab tonight?"

"Also correct. I heard a rumor, decided it was time to shut down that chamber of horrors permanently. Only I didn't find quite what I expected to."

"I guess not."

"What were you doing there?"

Draper's eyes tightened. "I was lured there. It was a trap."

She swept the cloth down Draper's back, almost to the top of his buttocks, and felt him shiver. His right flank was tattooed with pale scars, what looked like bite marks. "Feel like elaborating on that?"

"Maybe," said Draper. "How about you go first? Tell me who you work for." He again tipped a look at her bosom. "Tit for tat, if you don't mind the expression."

Milla ceased washing Draper's back. "Funny. I worked Byxbee's show tonight, his new collection, *The Maiden*. Maiden...one of those goons said something about that. A maiden." She focused and continued. "I modeled one of the pieces on the runway. It had a fur component, but it wasn't a type of fur I recognized. I've had people tracking him secretly."

"From your entourage?"

"Yes," she said, gliding the cloth over his uninjured shoulder and across the impressive muscles of his upper arm. "But they're not the kind of entourage you're thinking of. A small group of devoted souls, good people with huge hearts. We're

doing what we can to protect the innocents, to save the planet one creature and one acre at a time.”

“A secret society?”

Milla shrugged. “I guess. I’m doing this privately, quietly, because I don’t want anybody trying to screw it up. And there are people who would try to fuck up all of my hard work if they knew.”

“I myself know something about turncoats and underground societies.”

“The rogue wolf and this Vidimus Brotherhood?”

“That’s what we used to be called, way back at the start. *We*, like I was there,” he sighed. “I mean the ones who started it all, back at the beginning. Our grandparents and, to some of us, our great-grandparents.”

Milla dunked the cloth before tracing it down Draper’s arm, to his elbow. From there, she dabbed a line across his chest, brushing him from nipple to nipple. Draper’s, too, had toughened into dime-sized hard points. On the next pass, he caught her wrist and held her hand in place.

“Vidimus is a small village in the Carpathians.”

“Huh?”

“Carpathian Mountains. Transylvania. Most legends have a basis in truth. Deep, dark woods, werewolves prowling the countryside, that much of it is true. But it’s not what you think. There used to be a small monastery in the woods near Vidimus, hidden out of sight, the way I hid this house. I always was good at hiding things.” He chuckled, but the statement lacked humor. “You just can’t walk up to the front door and knock, because I made the place mostly invisible.”

His grip on her hand wrist softened. Milla placed her palm against his heart. She heard herself gasp in response to the rapid-fire succession of images that filled her mind.

The monks at Vidimus followed the devotions of Saint Francis and, like him, had a close connection to the natural world, the forest, dating back to the middle ages.

During Hitler's Final Solution, they created an underground railroad, a way to safely get the persecuted out of danger. The same one their predecessors used throughout the Reformation and the Inquisition. The monks knew many secrets, those that some tribes of Native Americans and Aborigines in Australia and African mystics had mastered before them. The ability to change shape into animals. They taught it to the people they hid, got them to move at night with the moon, across Europe, forming packs, strength in numbers. Some went through Russia so they could island-hop across the Aleutians. Others—

“—like my grandparents, made it east and swam the English Channel.”

“Amazing,” Milla sighed. “If I hadn't seen it...”

Her hand lingered over his heart, and Milla felt its beat beneath the hair and skin and a thin layer of bubbles. This brought them eye to eye. The intense emerald color of his gaze held her transfixed, but Milla was beyond thinking he'd hypnotized her — *glamored* her, Inner Milla reminded — or feeling fear. She moved her hand a few inches lower, to the top of his six-pack. His hand followed, forcing it down even more. Her fingertips brushed the line of fur cutting across the muscled terrain of his abdomen. Lower yet, they walked through the patch of coarse hair lining his pubis. Draper relaxed his arm, baring his erection. Milla gripped his thickness. His cock pulsed, like his heart.

Draper settled back against the tub's incline. In a daze, Milla found the soap and lathered his erection, pumping it up and down, establishing a speedy rhythm.

“Yes,” he moaned.

She leaned forward. Unable to resist, Milla kissed him. Draper reached up and cupped her cheek, holding her mouth against his. His kisses were more wonderful than she'd imagined: full, with just the right amount of wetness. After several, he tested her willingness with the probing tip of his tongue. On the next press, she opened wider. His tongue darted in.

Draper released her from the bath towel. Then his touch wandered over her

breasts, pinching and tugging at her nipples. Milla's breath hitched in her throat as she masturbated him and his fingers searched lower, seeking her pussy.

"Oh, fuck," she moaned around his lips.

Draper did precisely that with his pointer finger, which entered her opening. Her grip on his cock tightened. Draper's thumb teased her clit as a second finger joined the first inside her. His movements increased in sync with Milla's strokes.

Untimed minutes later, he growled, "Fuck, I'm coming!"

Draper's voice rose to a howl. Hot wetness exploded across Milla's fingertips. Before he finished coming, his fingers and the raw excitement of his touch pushed her over the edge. Kneeling beside the tub, Milla tossed back her head and howled, too.

Draper removed his fingers and brought them to his nose, then his lips. He smiled while tasting her wetness. Fresh sweat beaded his forehead. Milla released her grip on his cock and kissed him again, savoring her own sweetness on his smile.

"Let me rinse off," Draper said. "Then you can patch me up."

"Okay," Milla agreed.

Not long after that, she had a fresh syringe in one hand and an ampule of lidocaine in the other, and was ready to suture the wolf-man's wound.

Chapter Five

“Excellent job,” Draper said, staring into the mirror. “You’re a natural.”

“The stitch job?” Milla asked, leaning over his shoulder. Her naked mound pressed against the muscles of his ass.

“Yeah, that, too.”

She saw the curl on Draper’s lips in his reflection, a look halfway between a snarl and a smile. The closeness excited her – and him as well, if the reawakened swell of his cock in the mirror was to be interpreted.

Draper revolved. He cupped Milla’s face in his hands and drew her mouth to his, crushing their lips together. The taste of his lips, the smell of the fine-milled soap on his skin, possessed her. She was barely conscious of his steps forward, forcing her backwards toward the door, only the tick-tock of his erection, the ache in her core for him, and a sense of desire for another human being Milla had never before experienced, not even as a teenage girl whose heart and mind were prone to dreaming of romance, before the world came crashing down.

A man who could shapeshift into a wolf maneuvered her out of the little bathroom with the antique claw-foot tub, into the moonlit bedroom beyond. In a daze, she allowed him to.

Milla reached the brass bed and settled, somewhat ungracefully, on the edge of the cozy patchwork quilt. The scent of flowers – freesia – teased her senses. A woman’s kind of fragrance. Perfume? Then Draper pressed his sexual advance and she momentarily forgot all about the delicate scent and the chirr of crickets drifting in through the open windows.

Draper gripped the back of Milla’s head and guided her forward. She accepted his length between her lips. Draper moaned at the contact, and again when she tickled his balls. Growling an expletive under his breath, he pulled away from her, dropped to his knees, and spread her legs. He feasted upon her pussy, the wet warmth of his

tongue and the teasing scrape of his stubble quickly working her into a frenzied state. If not for his other hand over her stomach holding her in place, Milla would have levitated off the bed. Doctor John Draper, she thought, made the few men she'd dated, and the fewer she'd slept, with seem pale in comparison.

He rose up from between her legs and repositioned her on the bed, on all fours. Then he licked her again, from behind, attending to her ass as well as her pussy. Milla tensed. Never before had a man shown her such affection. Ironical, when you considered she was one of the most-sought after models in the business, but not so unthinkable when one factored in the actual men she'd dated. Men who were too enamored of their own asses to take special notice of hers.

"Is this okay?" Draper asked.

"Oh, yes," Milla answered. She spoke his name as though it were an incantation before nestling her head onto one of the sweetly-scented pillows. *Freesia*, she again thought. But then Draper inserted his tongue into her ass and a finger into her slit and the thought of flowers once more evaporated in a cannonade exploding completely inside her own mind.

Slowly, hungrily, Draper licked her, working her wetness with his finger. How had Milla existed without this kind of physical passion? More so, she wondered, how would she ever be able to live without it again?

He withdrew the finger in her seam, licked it, and eased it into her ass. Milla gasped into the pillow. Draper's appeased sigh from the silvery shadows behind her enhanced the sensation. He pulled out of her and she heard him fumbling in the dark, opening the nightstand's drawer. The sound of a foil packet tearing. The slick, seductive roll of the condom down his length. She waited in breathless anticipation.

The tip of his cock entered her. Milla willed herself to open and accepted him. Draper matched her, pushing in fully.

The intensity overwhelmed her. Though Milla knew Draper was riding her from behind, the crackle of energy from his thrusts left her feeling out of body, waltzing

on the soft breeze toward the ceiling. Her consciousness disconnected from her flesh.

The scent of flowers, from the pillow.

The eruption of icy-hot flickers from deep within Milla's most sacred place.

She ordered her mind and body back into synchronicity – not an easy thing to pull off, given the pleasure rocketing through her blood, turning every inch of her flesh erotic. Not only Milla's nipples and the firm point of her clit had ignited, but also her earlobes, her throat, her toes, behind her knees, her abdomen, and places she couldn't easily identify in the rush of excitement joined in.

"Draper," she moaned.

"Yes, Milla."

Hearing his voice propelled her into what felt like an endless succession of shivers. With Draper's cock still inside her and his body pushing against hers, Milla rolled over. She needed to see him.

Draper's eyes glowed brighter than normal, a vibrant, preternatural shade of emerald green, as though lit from within. Milla gasped and the illusion faded. He was a man again, complex but real, ensconced in a cascade of moonlight.

The orgasm rolled through her. Milla's muscles clamped down on Draper's cock, which seemed to double in size inside her pussy. He groaned a blue streak of expletives, leaned forward to kiss her, and for the second time that long, strange night, they came in unison. One's sex hard, the other's soft, like yin and yang. Man and woman, Draper and Milla, she thought before drifting asleep beside him, wondering if so perfect a fit was humanly possible.

* * * *

Milla woke to a serenade of birdsong. She instantly recognized some of the twittering singers. Chickadees, and the squawk of a red-winged blackbird, meaning there must be a lake or swamp somewhere nearby. The gentle, sad coo of a mourning dove joined the chorus.

Summer insects, too. The eerie, faraway drone of the beetle her grandmother

used to call the Sizzling-Hot Bug – so named because you only hear it on lazy, sizzling-hot summer days – rippled through the air.

Draper, she thought dreamily.

Milla sat up, aware of the ache in her core from their lovemaking even more than the sting of her injury from the thug's blade. Then she remembered Byxbee, the wolf, the blood. A rush of images piled on top of her, dulling the pleasant ache and magnifying the pain in her arm. The wound hadn't hurt anywhere near as much, even when Draper inserted a needle into it, but it positively throbbed now.

The bed sat empty, the bas relief of Draper's body still pressed into the pillow and sheets beside her, where he'd lain. Panic gripped Milla. Then she detected the aroma of coffee and the warm, buttery smell of eggs in the air. Her stomach clenched, reminding her how long it had been since she'd eaten anything.

A salad with toasted almonds, yesterday afternoon, she remembered. *Or was that yester-yesterday?*

Milla slipped out of bed and was struck by details she hadn't noticed in the previous night's haste to bathe, heal, and fuck. A beautiful watercolor of *Daucus carota* – Queen Anne's Lace – hung above the bed. Like the flowers, the curtains were a delicate white lace, probably hand-stitched, with pineapples and rosettes woven into the tapestry. The wall color was a cheery, creamy caramel, reminding Milla of coffee with a splash of cream. Her stomach rumbled again at the analogy.

She spied a stack of clothes, neatly folded on top of the dresser, and realized she was still quite nude. A single-cut red rose, the bloom only partially open, lay across them.

Milla found a simple short-sleeved top in a pale pistachio color, soft gray gauze slacks, a new pair of cotton socks, and a lacy thong. Sitting beside the clothes, atop a round mirror, were various perfume bottles. Milla tested the prettiest. Freesia. That explained the scent on the pillows.

She wondered if Draper was the kind of guy who often took unsuspecting

women to his “safe house.” After all, what man could instantly produce a woman’s clothes, close enough in her size that she was able to wear them comfortably? Was Draper just another prick with a model fetish? Anger crept through Milla’s insides, but the flicker quickly cooled. He hadn’t recognized her until she’d pointed out her likeness on the billboard, and there was no way he could have known she would be coming to his rescue at Byxbee’s chop-shop. There was something else at work here.

Milla opened the dresser’s drawers in sequence. In the top, she found a few pairs of underwear, men and women’s alike. An unopened bag of white crew socks, definitely a man’s, a few pairs of ladies’ socks, one a lovely shade of mulberry dyed wool. In the next, T-shirts, athletic shorts – his and hers. In the bottom drawer, beneath a few pairs of blue jeans, she discovered a picture frame, upside down.

She heard footsteps coming from the hall and closed the drawer without turning the frame over. Milla straightened and picked up the rose just as Draper entered the room. He was bare-chested and barefoot, dressed in blue jeans. The Saint Francis medallion hung around his neck. He’d shaved.

That fact, coupled with the mosaic of morning light scattered around the room, allowed her to fully appreciate his lips, the lower of the two slightly plumper than its topside twin. How those lips had pleased her – and, hopefully, would again. Soon.

“You’re awake, sleepyhead.”

“I’m usually an early riser,” she said, bringing the flower to her nose. Inhaling the rose’s sweetness added to her excitement at seeing him.

Draper pulled open the top drawer and grabbed a pair of socks, then fished out a shirt bearing the logo of a major league baseball team. “I thought all you fashion model types liked to sleep in until sunset.”

“You mean like vampires? Was that an insult you just lobbed in my direction?”

Draper plunked his butt on the edge of the unmade bed. “No, not at all. It’s got to be sunset somewhere.”

Milla watched Draper pull on his socks from behind the rose so it wouldn’t

appear obvious she was staring, secretly aroused by his closeness, his warmth, his clean, masculine scent. “I’ll have you know, I’ve never slept until sunset. Too much to do. Besides, have you ever tried to sleep past *sunrise* in a house full of hungry cats? You’re a vet. You should know that’s impossible.”

Draper chuckled in response.

“And you should also know that these manicured nails have milked cows, mucked out stalls, and changed plenty of litter trays, so cut the sleeping-until-sunset shit. Love the rose, by the way.”

She playfully tickled his chin with it.

Draper flashed a crooked smile, exposing a length of white teeth. “I’m glad. Sorry if the clothes aren’t what you’re used to.”

“What did I just tell you? Do you think I pitch hay in high heels? That I sit in an alley trying to coax a stray cat out from behind a Dumpster wearing a bias-cut cocktail dress or a big, poofy organza gown?”

“Do you?” he taunted.

“No, away from the runway and spotlights, I’m more jeans and T-shirts than you, buddy. This is overdressed.” She performed a graceful twirl.

“It’s the best I could come up with on short notice.”

“You did well.” Milla sniffed the flower again. “Thanks. You seemed to think of everything in your secret house.”

“I thought of breakfast. Hungry?”

“Starved.”

“I don’t eat meat, so be forewarned. No bacon, no sausage.”

“Perfect, because I haven’t eaten meat since...” Milla stopped herself from revealing more. “Well, it’s not good breakfast conversation. I don’t eat meat or anything that had eyeballs or parents. I’ll eat eggs, cheese, honey, but that’s it.”

“Lacto-Ovo. Same here.” Draper stood and pulled on the shirt. “So how about we stop talking about food and actually eat some.”

“Lead the way.”

Milla followed Draper through the sunny house, noticing the details along the way: a bookcase in the hallway filled with novels, nature guides, and cookbooks, all neatly stacked; geode bookends with sparkling blue crystals; a glass lamp, forest green, not quite the color of Draper’s eyes but close, sitting on a rustic pine table.

The walls were a bright butter color, most covered in landscape watercolors. One canvas sat half-completed on an easel in the living room, showing a stand of white birch trees along a length of farmer’s wall.

The kitchen opened onto a deck. Beyond that was a patch of green more meadow than actual lawn, several well-attended bird feeders, and the wood line. Much closer, a bistro table with a tile top and two wrought-iron chairs, a glass carafe filled with coffee, sugar bowl and creamer and a pair of stoneware mugs greeted her arrival. There was also a pill bottle.

“Antibiotics, same as last night,” Draper said, holding out her chair. “Have a seat.”

Milla liked that bit of chivalry, the simple yet elegant table setting, complete with sterling silverware and linen napkins. She poured both mugs full of the robust blend. Draper maneuvered into the kitchen and soon returned with matching stoneware plates layered in fluffy spinach and cheddar omelets, rustic buttered toast, and fresh blackberries that tasted juicy, sweet, and warm from the sun. Picked that very morning from the bushes along the tree line, he told her.

He sure knows how to please a woman, Inner Milla said, while Outer Milla beamed. *Handsome and cooks*.

Draper asked, “What?”

Milla glanced to the other side of the carafe to see him studying her. His foot brushed hers beneath the table. She flinched and drifted away on instinct, but walked her toes back even closer once the surprise passed.

“It’s just nice.”

“Being here with me?”

Still smiling, Milla raised her fork to her lips. The eggs were light, the crunch of the rustic toast perfect in contrast. “This might be the best meal I’ve eaten in years.”

“You’re just saying that.”

Draper raised his mug, his long fingers wrapped around it in that classic man’s sort of way. Even how he held his fork and dug at his breakfast was, her inner voice declared, pure dude-ness.

“It’s not champagne and caviar.”

“I rarely drink,” Milla said. “Alcoholism runs in the blood, sad to say. And as for fish eggs, I told you, I don’t eat anything with parents. Even fish parents.”

Draper tapped his plate. “You’re eating chicken eggs.”

“Yes, but I’m assuming these ones were candled first and there weren’t any actual live chick in them.”

“Okay, so I guess I am playing to stereotypes. I have this image of models being shallow, egotistical harpies.”

“Some are quite the divas, without doubt. But you’ll just have to trust your instincts where I’m concerned.” Milla took another bite of omelet scooped onto toast. “After all, I’ve opened up my mind to your profession. Most vets I’ve worked with can’t do half the tricks you can.”

Draper glanced toward the bird feeder and whistled. As Milla watched, mystified, a colorful finch swooped onto his shoulder.

“No way,” Milla gasped.

“Way,” Draper said.

He offered the tiny bird a bit of crust from his toast. The finch chirped, grabbed the morsel in its beak, and darted away.

“You didn’t just call that bird over, did you?”

“Maybe,” Draper said, sipping his coffee. “I’ve been doing that since I was a kid. And not just birds. There’s coyotes around here, bobcats, too. We’re all on a first-

name basis.”

“Does it have anything to do with your ability, you know, to shift your shape?”

Draper’s mood darkened, and he looked away. The finch flitted back to the feeder. “We don’t talk about it.”

“You don’t? You started to, last night, before...”

His eyes narrowed angrily. “That was different.”

The admonishment, like his change in mood, caught Milla by surprise. “It was?” Silence. “Fine. So what about this place? Is your safe house part of this secret society of yours?”

“Yes and no.”

“Well, can you at least tell me the parts that aren’t classified? Specifically, whose clothes am I wearing?”

Draper dropped his fork. The loud clatter carried in the air with the power of a thunderclap. Milla jumped.

“There are some things I don’t want to discuss right now. Can we leave it at that?”

Milla ceased eating and set down her silverware, grateful she’d devoured the berries and most of what was on her plate because she didn’t feel much like eating anymore. “If, after everything we’ve been through, you still don’t trust me...”

“What you and I did last night was good, yeah.”

“I wasn’t talking about the sex. And just so you know where I stand on that, it was better than good. It was great, thank you very much. But I was referring to what we proved to one another at Michael Byxbee’s little shop of horrors. If you haven’t figured out that we’re both on the same side by now, nothing we did in bed matters much, does it?”

He didn’t answer, just continued to eat.

Anger surged through Milla’s blood. She rose from her chair and marched into the house, pulling off the pistachio pastel shirt in the kitchen. In the living room, she

stepped out of the gauze slacks, leaving them in the middle of the floor. She wiggled free of the panties in the hallway. The socks came off while crossing the bedroom.

“Milla, wait,” Draper called, several rooms and articles of clothing behind her.

What she’d been wearing when they arrived would suit her fine until she got back to the city or one of her people in the Cause could collect her. The bathroom – that’s where she’d last seen her black duds.

Milla passed the dresser, stopped in place, doubled back. She pulled open the bottom drawer, fished out the framed photograph, and turned it over.

And couldn’t believe her eyes.

Chapter Six

It was Draper, a younger version by a couple of years in the physical sense, but far longer in terms of the soul. In the photo, he was smiling. The stray, sexy cowlicks were neatly trimmed and combed. He was dressed in a crisp black and white tuxedo. The woman standing beside him was a vision dressed in delicate champagne silk, lace, and flowers. Freesia flowers, Milla noted. A wedding photo.

Naked, right before she glanced up to see Draper standing in the doorway holding her discarded clothes, her eyes settled on the golden locket around the bride's neck. That, too, had a flower pattern.

"You're married?" Draper slowly shook his head. "Divorced?"

"Widowed. She's dead."

Guilt, caustic and painful, smothered the fire in Milla's gut. Her rage evaporated completely. "I'm so sorry."

"So am I. Kathryn was a good woman."

Draper faced her, but Milla couldn't meet his eyes. From the edge of her sight, she watched him enter the room and place the clothes on the bed.

"Draper?"

Saying nothing more, he exited the room, leaving her alone with the ghost of his dead wife. Suddenly, the pretty decorations everywhere she turned made sense – the floral paintings, the comfortable quilts and high thread count towels. All of it amounted to a woman's touch. *A dead woman's*, Inner Milla reminded.

Draper still looked sexy in the wedding photo, she thought, running her eyes over it, though not fully formed, like he was now. The slight crow's feet around his eyes and the scruffy, seasoned presence of a man who'd matured suited him. But that earlier incarnation seemed to possess something his contemporary self did not: happiness.

The younger version of John Draper looked genuinely happy.

The woman was beautiful. Not in the way people in the fashion industry would have appreciated. She wasn't five-eleven, a freak of nature in terms of cheekbones, body type, and supermodel genes. She had a sunny smile, chestnut hair, hazel eyes. Her husband would have towered over her had he not leaned down to meet her as equal in a one-armed embrace, just above the waist.

Jealousy briefly flared through Milla's blood. Kathryn was pretty. Draper had taken Milla to his bed, but his wife still owned his heart, if the gloom hanging heavily around those emerald eyes was to be believed.

Jealous of a dead woman? The emotion passed. Milla returned the photograph to the drawer. A chill teased gooseflesh into rising across her arms and legs. She felt silly. Worse, stupid. She pulled on the dead woman's clothes and exited the room.

Draper was washing plates in the kitchen.

"She was beautiful," Milla said.

Not making eye contact, he answered, "She sure was. She was a painter. Most of these were hers." He tipped his chin toward the sunny watercolors of meadow flowers. "She was working on the one on the easel when—" Draper didn't finish the sentence.

"Her work is very polished."

"She would have gone far with it. Farther than she did, if she'd had the time."

Milla studied his body language. Tense, hesitant to reveal too much. Still, she asked the question. "How did she...?"

Draper spun around, his eyes wide and angry. Milla backed away on instinct.

"If I could speak about this, don't you think I would?" He stormed past her, only to dig in his heels and revolve. "What do you want from me?"

Milla shrugged. A phone? She cursed him for destroying her direct link to the outside world. In doing that, nagged her inner voice, Draper had not only put Milla's life in jeopardy but those who depended upon her. The information on that phone could have sent Byxbee's creepy, tanned ass away. Of course, it might also have created new

problems for Draper and his mysterious Brotherhood.

“I couldn’t save her when she needed me the most,” he said. “I can’t protect you, even with my powers.”

“Do I look like I need you to protect me?” Milla folded her arms and stepped closer. “I can take care of myself.”

Draper smiled, but there was little humor in the expression. “You think that, and I gotta admit, you kicked serious ass back there. But it’s reality-check time, big famous supermodel-superhero: You’re now dealing with powers bigger than anything you’ve ever faced off against before. You have no idea the sacrifices that have been made, the promises betrayed, the blood spilled.”

“I’ve worked with Zora Thurston,” Milla said. “Don’t talk to me about blood.”

“You just don’t get it.”

“How can I when you keep spinning all this mumbo jumbo instead of just being honest with me? I need answers, not riddles.”

Draper shook his head. “Fine. Here’s an answer for you, lady. I’ll take you back to the city and your life. And once you’re there, close your eyes, put it all out of your thoughts, and you stay as far away from Michael Byxbee and his people as you possibly can. Turn your back on all of this, especially me.”

“I can’t—”

“You have to, because you have no clue as to how deep the danger runs. It’s not only what you uncovered in that lab. If only it was.”

Milla reached for him. Draper pulled away.

“Just forget me, Milla. Before what happened to my wife happens to you.”

* * * *

The sound of the screen door banging into place broke the spell of thoughts Milla had fallen victim to.

We’ll travel at dark, when there’s a moon, in case I need to shift shape. Draper’s voice looped one final time through her mind. Her own inner critic couldn’t embrace

the pledge he'd forced her to make: to ignore the secrets she'd learned and forget him.

Milla padded to the front door and glanced out to see Draper stretching in a spotlight of sunshine. He'd changed into a pair of loose-fit black cotton shorts and an old pair of sneakers, no socks. The image of his legs in the sunshine as he jogged in place made her ache for his body. Muscular and hairy, they were the legs of an athlete.

I'll drive you back to the city. Relax until then. I'm going for a jog.

Milla tingled on the inside as well as out while watching him stretch and trot in place. He turned toward the woods, oblivious that she was watching; the deep, dark woods of his wife's paintings, secret woods that had protected the two strangers from capture at the hands – and claws – of whoever had chased them along that desolate stretch of country asphalt.

Her mind ran through a mental inventory of the clothes she'd found in the dresser on her way to the bedroom. Women's shorts, a man's T-shirt and the black sneakers she'd worn the previous night. Perfect.

* * * *

Milla saw him through the trees at least twenty yards ahead of her, on the forest path. The terrain looked vaguely familiar, leading Milla to believe she and Draper had walked out of the woods on part of the same trail. A trace of his sweat reached her, carried on the humid breeze. Milla put on an extra burst of speed and cut the distance between them in half.

He jogged at a metered pace. Pulling closer, Milla focused on the damp stain on the back of his shirt, his perfect butt, those amazing legs. He could tell her to forget him – not that she thought she'd be able to – but she wasn't going to be ordered to, especially not by a man who'd only given her half the truth and part of the story. At the very least, she had proven herself worthy of a full explanation.

Draper cast a glance over his shoulder. Once Milla bridged the last of the distance, she slowed, matching his pace through the woods.

"You jog?" he asked.

“Let me tell you a little story, a little truth,” she said, not answering the question. With her eyes aimed straight ahead of her to track the course of the trail, she added, “This wicked witch named Zora. You’d recognize her if you’ve ever spent any time in front of a TV and seen commercials for chocolates or lingerie. She’s the woman in the sports bra and a cowboy hat hanging onto the two big football dudes in that beer commercial. ‘Less calories doesn’t mean less sexy.’ And then—”

“She slaps the quarterback’s ass,” Draper said.

“Ah, so you’re a pigskin fan.”

“Sure, I like football.”

A familiar length of farmer’s wall and a stand of paper-white birch trees rose at her right – the view from the unfinished canvas on the easel in the living room.

“So Zora, bless her bony ass and vacant heart, she’s pretty big. Among the Top Five supermodels. Me, I got discovered in a coffee shop – and I was pouring coffee at the time. Zora, she was groomed for this. She comes from money. Lots of money. She’s never gone without a meal or expensive clothes or, hell, electricity. But all her daddy’s deep pockets can’t buy sanity or class.”

She paused long enough to suck in a deep breath, aware she’d gotten his attention. “Zora is threatened by anybody she perceives as having something bigger or better than she does. I used to date the himbo whose ass she smacks in that commercial.”

“Tom Tucker?”

“The one and only. She wanted to date him, not because she was really interested but because he and I were seeing each other. Trust me, it wasn’t all that great of a loss on my part, except for the pathos of it. I mean, here’s this beautiful if spiritually corrupt woman with tons of money, a banging career, like a dozen houses and apartments all over the world. But because she views me as some sort of threat, she got our mutual agent to book her the beer commercial. By the end of the shoot, I get a text message and a camera phone photo of the two of them playing tongue-football.

They lasted two weeks, which is about thirteen days longer than Zora expected it to.

“She did the same thing to an actor I used to date. And a fireman – one of the first responders on 9-11. Sweet guy, really nice, but she preyed upon that and she lied to him about me before I got wise to her and, well, so much for that.”

“What a nasty bitch,” Draper said.

“So I don’t date anymore, because I don’t need the aggravation.”

Draper’s expression hardened. “She wouldn’t break us up. She wouldn’t take me away from you.”

“We’re not a couple, remember?” Milla challenged.

“Yeah, but I’m just saying.”

“What are we?”

Draper shot her a scowl. “I don’t know.”

“So I was just a lay to you, right?”

“I—”

“So don’t you worry about protecting me, because it’s obvious what happened last night was sex, lust, instinct. Nothing more. And it’s not like there’s going to be a repeat performance.”

Milla revved it up and sprinted ahead of him, the wicked smirk on her face hidden from view.

“Hey,” Draper called. “There isn’t? Wait up!”

Milla didn’t. She heard the slap of his big feet behind her on the trail as he struggled to keep up, sucked in a deep breath, and sprinted onward. The mossy scent of the woods, the trace of Draper’s sweat that she could still detect, so clean and exciting, filled her with renewed energy. She raced even faster, the branches streaking past her on either side blurring into shades of liquid green.

Was this grace and speed like what a bird experienced when soaring above the trees, or what a wolf felt when racing through the forest at a gallop? Was it what Draper felt when he shifted shape?

Milla spied the meadow through breaks in the trees. The chirr of crickets and the sweet smell of the acres of wildflowers sitting in sunlight teased her senses. Then her foot snagged on a root, and Milla tripped.

For a paltry few seconds, she felt like a bird, a wolf; like she'd transformed from a modern human being into a more elegant primitive form of life. The sensation was fleeting. She hit the ground and saw stars. Milla huffed a swear and rolled onto her back. Draper appeared above her, beneath the trees and sky, concern written across his face. His scent washed over her, raw and exciting. His concern aroused her even more.

"Milla," he said, hurrying down to her side.

"You lied," she said, smiling.

"I did?"

"Not with words so much, but that whole trying to make me think you didn't care routine."

Draper grumbled and checked her out. "Anything hurt?"

"You mean apart from my bruised ass and ego?"

"Yeah. Come on, carefully."

He helped her back to her feet. Nothing felt too tender.

"Can you put weight on both feet?"

She could.

"Good. Now stop trying to prove your point before you get seriously hurt."

He had that wounded, broody look again, and his admonishment started to fuel Milla's rage. But to her surprise, Draper slapped her on the ass, just like in the commercial, and that mischievous smirk formed on his lips.

"You do like me," Milla said.

Draper shrugged. "What guy wouldn't?"

"No, you really, really like me."

Draper lifted the bottom of his sweaty T-shirt, baring his midriff, and mopped

his forehead. Milla's desire for him soared.

"No," he said. "I think *you* really, really like me."

"You?" she snorted.

Draper folded his arms. His smirk persisted. "Yup, me."

"Oh, please."

"You love animals. I'm a veterinarian."

"I also love chocolate éclairs, but they're bad for me. Bad for my ass."

Draper spanked her a second time.

"Stop it," Milla protested, unconvincingly.

"No," Draper said, whacking her again. "After last night, I think you like me being bad for your ass."

"I'm warning you," she said, and laughed while backpedaling away from him, shuffling past the same root that had tripped her.

"Or what?" Draper challenged.

"I'll kick your ass, Doc Draper – and you know I'm capable of doing it."

"I'm so scared."

"You should be."

He charged and Milla squealed, turned, and raced away.

Draper overtook her just as the trail cut along the edge of the meadow. He scooped her into his arms. "You're a bad girl. A very bad girl."

Milla pretended to struggle as Draper yanked down her shorts. He delivered several sharp spanks, then massaged her reddening buttocks.

"Maybe I am," she said, giggling.

Because the badder she was, the more Draper seemed to enjoy it.

Chapter Seven

On her knees in front of him, Milla held Draper's cock by its root. She kissed him, licked, suckled. She stroked his shaft up and down, her forefinger and thumb clamped like a ring, applying firm pressure at some points while alternating with teasing lightness during others. His skin tasted so salty. Draper's sweat and the sweet fragrance of the timothy grass were a combination perfect for summer afternoon lovemaking.

The lazy song of a mourning dove floated across the meadow. While tasting Draper, the birdsong again reminded Milla of how beautiful the natural world could be, and why she was so devoted to protecting it. Her cause. Her life's purpose.

That particular mental door opened a fraction of an inch wider. She clamped down on the memories before they tumbled out in an avalanche and ruined the moment. She didn't want to think back to that time or relive any of it. She only wanted Draper and the sunlit beauty of a day she wished would never end.

She tugged at his balls with her free hand. Draper groaned and pushed into her stroking hand and wet mouth. Then she released him completely, reached behind him, and raked her nails along his ass cheeks, applying gentle pressure. Draper soon climaxed.

Pulling her back to her feet, he kissed her roughly, tasting himself on her lips without shame or hesitation. His tongue tested her willingness and when Milla opened to accept, he entered. Draper's hands wandered across her ass. His pointer finger teased her seam from behind.

"Condoms are back at the house," she whispered around his lips.

"We can still have a hell of a time without fucking," he answered, running an arm around her lower back.

Draper eased her onto the grass. Crawling between her legs, he made good on that promise, using his fingers and tongue instead of his cock to pleasure her.

Milla watched him work, his handsome face pressed against her pussy, until the excitement proved too much. She fell back against the timothy grass and her half-closed eyes drifted up to the sky.

“Draper,” she sighed.

His tongue brought her to the edge and his fingers accomplished the rest. After coaxing her howls, Draper scooted up and lay beside her. Together, they watched the clouds drift overhead.

The sky steadily grew darker. The first drops of rain were pelting the leaves by the time they reached the tree line. A vibrant flash of lightning crackled in the distance. Thunder followed. The heavens soon opened up, forcing them to return to the secret cottage the same way they’d left it: running.

Milla hurried into the house, soaking wet. The screen door banged shut behind Draper. He was on her instantly, holding her and showering her with kisses. Milla loved the taste of the rain on his lips.

They maneuvered closer to the bedroom, shedding sweaty clothes along the way. At the bed, a faint ghost of freesia perfume teased Milla’s senses and the reality struck home fully: She was Draper’s first since his wife’s death. Kathryn’s scent was still on the pillows. No wonder he’d acted so distant. The man was only starting to come out of mourning.

She saw that he was fully hard again and retrieved a condom from the drawer, rolling it down his length. He entered her from behind. Armed with her new information about Draper’s inner workings, Milla decided to take a little extra initiative.

“Stay still,” she said.

“Huh?” He was deep inside her.

“Freeze, right where you are.”

Draper did as she requested. Milla cast a smile over her shoulder and began to rock her hips back and forth.

“Nice,” he growled.

Milla worked his cock in that position, surprising both of them with her little trick. She did like Draper. A great deal, in fact. And by the time Draper came, standing fixed while she milked his erection with her pussy, she was convinced he felt the same way about her.

* * * *

The thunder's cannonade subsided, leaving only the melancholy patter of rain beyond the bedroom windows.

Milla slowly stroked Draper's chest, hypnotized by the scent in the air – flowers and summer storms and the heady trace of masculine sweat. She had no idea how many minutes passed between words. Without a television or radio jabbering in the house, the outside world seemed light years away. It was only the two of them, here in their sweet little cottage in the woods.

But it wasn't really their place, was it? Milla remembered this was Kathryn's house, not hers. The illusion of togetherness began to splinter.

"I need to take you back to the city," Draper said, as though reading her thoughts.

Milla wondered if telepathy was another of his powers. Part of her wanted to stay, though another knew she needed to get home to her life and the Cause. "Who's the Alpha?" she asked.

Draper unhooked his arm and went to his elbow. His eyes drilled into her through the lengthening shadows.

"The note I found in Byxbee's organizer, the one that led me to the fur lab, it said the Alpha had been captured."

"I'm the Alpha," Draper said.

"The leader of the Vidimus Brotherhood?"

Draper nodded.

There was so much she wanted to ask and to know, but she sensed him building walls again. To drive home the point, he cast the top sheet aside and stood.

“It’s getting late,” he said on his way to the bathroom.

She heard the sound of the water running in the tub. The desire to join him overwhelmed her. Milla left the bed and padded across the floor, only to stop herself from following him the rest of the way. Confusion equally as powerful smothered her hope. Two days ago, her life, her mission, had seemed so clear. But meeting Draper had thrown everything she thought she knew to be real up in the air, and the pieces were still settling.

Milla’s tough inner critic said, *You don’t know this man, so why would you want to get involved in his problems? He may be the king of the pack – and look at the six-pack on him! – but the dude’s got issues.*

The image of the Saint Francis medallion around his neck, those hands – the hands of a true healer – fought against her doubt.

“No,” she whispered. “Whatever’s going on with him, whatever darkness is chasing him, the things he won’t tell me, share with me...John Draper’s worth my faith, my trust, my...”

Love?

Milla clamped down on that notion without needing any help from her conscience. “No,” she said. “Oh, hell no.”

Milla snuck into the bathroom and grabbed her old clothes, those relics of her life B.D.: Before Draper.

He had secrets, but so did she, the biggest of which was that Camilla Cavanaugh had plenty of love to give to the rest of the world, though precious little for herself. Love flowed in one direction – outward, and she refused to open up her heart to the possibility of allowing it to be broken.

* * * *

They walked down the meandering dirt drive for what felt like a very long time. Hands tucked into her pockets and huddled against the rain, Milla spied statues of stone saints spaced at intervals among the trees. The image of Francis of Assisi was

duplicated in stone at least a half-dozen times.

“A precaution?”

“Mostly,” Draper said. “But also as a reminder of who we are. The pact I made.”

A bird cried out from somewhere in the dark trees. Milla eyed a little grotto among the pines. She shivered in spite of the warmth. A sense of the mysterious surrounded her. Ancient pacts, secret societies. A rogue wolf. A powerful, noble saint. And especially the Alpha male at the heart of it all, walking at her side.

A bungalow with a gabled roof appeared at her left, recessed among the trees. It was a garage. A truck was housed inside, a shiny new black hybrid, along with motorcycle parts and a plow.

Milla climbed into the passenger’s seat and buckled in, fearing she wouldn’t be with the Alpha much longer.

They drove mostly in silence. The sweep of the wiper blades bewitched her, but the closer they got to the city, the faster Milla’s heart raced. She’d never felt this level of anxiety at the image of the skyline, hovering out of focus in the fog.

The streets took on a frightening familiarity. A block away from Byxbee’s lab in the abandoned section of Waverly, Draper pulled over and killed the engine.

“So what now?” she asked.

“We get you to your car. You drive away after I make sure it’s safe.”

“And then we do what? Go our separate ways?”

“I want you to be safe, Milla,” he said, avoiding her eyes. “I do like you. A hell of a lot. But it’s too dangerous for you. I wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to you.”

“What if I don’t want anything bad to happen to *you*?” she countered. “I’m worried about the danger to you, Draper.”

“It’s way too late for me to get out of this, and that’s why you have to forget me. Move on. Live your life. Ignore everything else you’ve learned and seen.”

She reached for Draper's face, cupped him from cheek to chin and, for a moment, he leaned into her hand, reveling in her touch. But then he pulled away. Her hope that he might change his mind died as he slipped out of the truck and into the night.

Milla followed him onto the sidewalk. The unmistakable smell of the city, the acrid sting in the air from car exhaust and decades of people walking their dogs, hurrying to get from one street to another, and living too close to neighbors that were often strangers, burned in her lungs. It hit Milla harder than it normally did after being in the country. Her next breath came with difficulty, but she realized it had less to do with New York City and more with her anxiety about returning to the crime scene.

Draper sniffed the air. "Come on."

They continued forward, turned at the corner and hurried between two rows of brownstones.

"Where did you park?" he asked.

"On a side street, up ahead."

Draper waved her toward the nearest brownstone's staircase. "Over here, out of sight."

Milla stepped into the shadows. Draper scanned the street, then began to undress.

"What are you doing?"

Draper yanked the shirt over his head while kicking off his sneakers. He shot her a look and the answer hit home without words. Milla gasped a breathless swear. Draper was about to shift shape. He unzipped his jeans and pushed them and his underwear down, leaving him dressed only in his Saint Francis medallion. He began to remove that, too. "Take this," he said.

Milla's breath hitched with a sob. "What?" She reached a shaking hand across the distance and accepted the talisman. "I thought you wanted me to forget you."

"I want you to be safe."

She clutched Draper's gift in her hand, not sure what else to say. Mercifully, what happened next spared her having to find the right words. Milla covered her heart with the hand holding the medallion. Some unaffected part of her consciousness realized her nipples had stiffened under her shirt.

Draper's focus wandered down her body and she sensed he was perhaps stealing a last look, one final glance at what might have been. His eyes were the first thing to shift, taking on a preternatural glow. Milla was so bewitched, she nearly missed the rest. Draper leaned forward, his arms extended before him. As he dropped to all fours, his flesh grew dark with fur and parts of his body, especially his chest, expanded. Other regions like his muscular legs and arms contracted.

The creature padded toward her, shook its head, and sniffed at the air.

"Wow," Milla said.

The wolf growled, but she didn't feel threatened by the sound. Milla extended the hand holding the Saint Francis medallion toward it. The wolf sniffed at her fingers and licked the back of her hand. Then it trotted away, taking off down the sidewalk, leaving her alone in the shadows.

* * * *

Without a watch, it was difficult to judge the amount of time that passed. What felt like an hour later but was likely only minutes, Milla heard the patter of footsteps on the wet sidewalk. She moved out of the shadows and into sight and saw the wolf standing across the street. Milla knew instantly by the color of its eyes that it wasn't Draper. The new wolf's gaze was a vibrant blue. She remembered the creature in the SUV that had driven them off the road and cold fear embraced her.

"The rogue wolf," she whispered.

The creature on the other side of the street sniffed at the air before taking a tentative step closer. An ominous growl worked through the background traffic noise. Milla's first instinct was to call out for Draper. Her next was to protect him, to run just as fast as she could and keep running to lead this other wolf away.

“Hey, you, over here!” Milla shouted.

She spun around and hurried down the sidewalk. The wolf gave chase.

In order to save Draper, she would have to leave him. But wasn’t that exactly what he wanted? She ran to the corner and turned left instead of right. Fighting tears, she ran, aware of the scrabble of claws on the sidewalk. Her heartbeat drummed in her ears. Another corner, and one more after that, and she was on Amsterdam Avenue.

She hailed a yellow cab and got in. Fighting tears, Milla barked, “Central Park West. The Blayne Building. Hurry!”

The cab driver, an older man with a tired face, did a double-take in the rearview mirror. “Hey, ain’t you that model from the big billboard over there? Mylie something-or-other?”

“No,” Milla said. She shot a look out the window, expecting a pair of glowing blue eyes to come rushing at the glass. But all she saw was the sidewalk and street.

“That isn’t me.”

“Just another pretty face then,” he said, pulling back into traffic and activating the meter. “I thought you were someone there for a minute.”

* * * *

The cab pulled up to the curb. The Blayne’s elegantly attired doorman hurried over and opened the door. “Ms. Cavanaugh?”

“I’m okay, Jasper,” Milla said. “But I don’t have any money on me. Can you pay the driver until we’re upstairs?”

“Of course.”

Jasper withdrew his wallet and leaned down into the open front passenger’s window. “How much, sir?”

The cabbie told him. “And are you telling me that’s really Mylie Cavanaugh, the underwear model?”

“It’s *Milla*, and the proper term is lingerie. Now take this and kindly go.”

From the corner of her eye, Milla watched Jasper shove several bills at the cab

driver.

“Whatever, fruitcake.”

“This *fruitcake* is a black belt in martial arts, so be gone, lest I show you some of my favorite moves.”

The driver laid on the horn as the cab pulled away.

“Philistine,” Jasper huffed before turning back to Milla. “Now, would you mind explaining where you’ve been?”

“It’s complicated, Sensei. I don’t have my house keys.”

“Fear not, I’ve got the extra set.”

Feeling lost and nauseous and glancing over her shoulder every few steps, Milla followed Jasper through the elegant brass and glass revolving door and into the Blayne Building’s lobby. He called for the elevator. Once they were inside, he keyed the security lock beside the button for PH 4. They began to ascend.

“The cats have all been fed and I gave Marshmallow extra attention. She actually crawled out from beneath the bed.”

“Excellent work, Jasper, as always.”

His narrowed eyes locked with her. “Anything you want to tell me?”

Milla shook her head. She couldn’t put into words what she was feeling.

“Are you in trouble?”

“Not anymore. I think I’m out of it.” She reached toward her throat, touched the chain, and shivered. *But that means being away from him.*

The elevator came to a stop and the doors opened, revealing another set guarded by security locks. Jasper inserted the correct key and punched in the code. The doors trundled aside, revealing the familiar confines of Milla’s lavish penthouse home overlooking Central Park. Familiar soil, even though the soil was forty stories above the ground.

“Please call poor Karalynne before she sends out the troops, then promise me you’ll get some sleep,” Jasper said. “You can give me the full report in the morning

over coffee.”

Milla hurried across the white marble floor. “You wait right there, Jasper.”

She returned from the master suite with a single bill. “Here, for the taxi.”

Jasper examined the money. “A Benjamin, miss?”

“Consider the rest a tip.”

“That’s a hell of a tip, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“You’re a hell of a doorman. And self-defense teacher. And friend. Take it, Sensei.”

“No.”

“If you don’t, I’m going to show you some of *my* new moves.”

Reluctantly, Jasper accepted the money. “There was one other thing, miss. A man called for you earlier today.”

The doorman’s voice trailed to a whisper. His eyes took on a distant, glazed look.

“Jasper?”

Jasper blinked. “Sorry, but for a moment I almost forgot. So not like me.”

“You were saying, about this man?”

“He wouldn’t leave his name, but he had the strangest blue eyes.”

Jasper shuddered. Then, so did Milla.

Chapter Eight

Returning to her real life wasn't as easy as Milla hoped. There were dozens of voice mails waiting for her on the house phone.

"All right, I give up. Where the hell are you?" shrieked Stella, her agent.

Milla abandoned listening to the rest in order to focus on the trio of orphans she'd rescued from the city's alleys and underpasses. All three cats were delighted to see her.

"My babies," she said while cuddling Duck, the fluffy black female she'd found soaking wet and shivering near the Gapstow Bridge at Central Park South. She'd been doing a cover shoot with Hubert Wells on a miserable, gloomy day in miserable, gloomy clothes – a black satin cocktail dress with a modified bateau neckline. *Morticia chic*, the designer claimed to be aiming for. He'd gotten it, for sure.

But there had been an even greater distraction tugging at her throughout the course of that day, more so than the clothes. It had teased the corner of her eye. Perhaps her soul.

* * * *

"What the hell is the problem?" Hubert snapped. "Milla, *babe*, would you please pay attention?"

"Sorry," Milla said.

The sense of dread rose within her again, tempting her eyes to turn right. An innocent soul was in jeopardy. "Can we take five, please?"

Hubert hissed a rosary of expletives in response. "Five, and if you don't pull it together, I'm going to drown you in that pond, love."

Milla blew him a kiss. Over the years, she'd learned to wear masks when needed, to pluck the necessary face out of her inner performer's bag of tricks as required. In heels that pinched her feet and a dress that was torture to wear, she hurried over to her assistant.

“What’s going on?” asked Karalynne from the corner of her mouth.

“The Cause,” Milla answered. “Near the bridge.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. Create a distraction.”

Karalynne’s eyes shot fully open. “What kind of distraction?”

“Whatever kind it takes.”

The lousy weather had kept foot traffic in the park thin, which helped. After Milla slipped into the small tent under the pretense of freshening up, Karalynne took point. She already knew what Hubert Wells and his collection of highly paid assistants were thinking about: freshening up with a line or two of nose candy. Milla waited. The moment she heard Karalynne’s shouts, she ran out of the tent and down the path.

“Oh my God, *oh my God!*”

Milla tipped a glance over her shoulder to see Karalynne clutching at her stomach with one hand and wildly waving at the trees with the other. Every eye at the shoot was upon Milla’s assistant, and none had noticed her escape. Karalynne was the best.

“What the bloody hell?” Hubert demanded.

“Did you see that? Over there!”

“There” was the polar opposite of the footbridge.

Milla wasted no time sprinting to the Gapstow Bridge in the torturous heels, but slowed her speed on the final leg. If there was a lost cat or kitten or injured wildlife in the reeds near the footbridge, the last thing she wanted to do was scare it away – easy enough to do, given that she was dressed like a roiling black thunderhead with a white face and blood-red lips.

Carefully, she wandered around one side of the footbridge, checking the grass and cattails for any sign of a life in need. A small flock of ducks drifted farther out on the water, excited by the rainfall, but the orphan she expected to find wasn’t waiting to be rescued, like the feeling in her chest warned her it would be.

Milla had never been wrong about these things. Since the defining incident that set her life on this course, she'd become hypersensitive to the lost and the innocent. She heard their voices sometimes, often when they weren't speaking out loud. Stockbrokers and bankers could smell a sweet deal, even when the terms weren't particularly scrupulous. Often, Milla could hear those in need crying out for help, like now.

She moved to the other side of the footbridge, where somebody had tossed a bag of empty fast food wrappers. Among the garbage sat the little soul, soaked through its threadbare coat. Pathetic and bedraggled, a small black cat, not quite a kitten, stared up at her.

"Oh, hello, little one," Milla said in her most soothing voice.

The cat glanced up and issued a soundless mewl. Tears welled in Milla's eyes. She couldn't remember if the mascara they'd applied in the makeup chair was waterproof. If it ran, Inner Milla snarked, it might enhance the look Hubert was hoping to attain for the shoot.

"You poor thing."

She reached down and picked up the cat. Its fur was cold and rough beneath her fingertips, and a foul smell emanated from the animal's mouth when it mewled again. The lost soul's nails dug into her chest as Milla cuddled it to her bosom. The sound of punctured satin, however, didn't stop her from offering warmth and comfort.

"It's okay," she soothed. "Don't you worry, my little duck."

Milla checked to make sure there were no other stragglers from a litter before hurrying back to the tent, where Wells was lashing out at Karalynne.

"I think you need to lay off the coke, you crazy bitch."

"I swear, it was a...*and for the record*," Karalynne fired back, "I never touch the carbonated stuff."

"Jesus Christ, Milla, what the buggery-bollocks are you—"

Hubert Wells cut himself off in mid-speech.

“Hold it right there. It’s perfect.” Then, to his cadre, he barked, “Get the light on her.”

“And be quiet about it,” Milla said. “She’s scared enough as it is.”

Hubert photographed her holding the cat, in the rain, her dress partially shredded by nails that desperately needed trimming and with Milla bleeding from a scratch to the neck, thanks to a clutching front paw when the camera flashed.

“Brilliant,” Hubert said after the first round of photographs.

Milla called Karalynne over, knowing without asking that her assistant had the collapsible cat carrier stored in her tote, ready and waiting. While handing the cat over, she repeated the litany she’d spoken hundreds of times. “Tell Doc Jennifer to spare no expense. She can call me on the private number. Make sure all is well and that this little one gets whatever she needs.”

Karalynne accepted the cat from Milla. The little soul’s fishhooks tore more threads out of the gothic black cocktail dress, but the result was better than Hubert Wells dreamed once the issue hit the newsstands, even if it did result in a shitstorm of drama from the dress’s designer after the garments were returned to her studio in shreds.

Milla named her Duck. The new cat was loaded with ear mites, intestinal parasites, and a nasty upper respiratory infection that took two weeks of quarantine and an entire pharmacy of meds to eradicate. When that was achieved, her gradual transformation from a street urchin to a glamorous diva began.

She was certified free of feline AIDS and leukemia, which would not have dissuaded Milla from offering her the best life imaginable. Two of the catteries at the Cause’s farm in upstate New York were designated specifically for the needs of infected cats, with big, open playrooms and organic potted grasses to graze and networks of custom-designed condos and scratching posts to enjoy.

* * * *

Duck had been the first to join Milla at the new penthouse. Furball, her second,

was missing part of his tail. Marshmallow, the latest, had come to her from a back alley Dumpster, but only after a week of staking out the place with food and plenty of patience. Upon arrival, she wasn't so much white as a filthy shade of gray, the color of snow in springtime, which was appropriate given the time of year Milla rescued her.

Duck, looking luxurious with her silky coat and black mane with its white medallion, followed Milla around the penthouse, warbling in a happy voice at her return. Duck hadn't been the cuddliest of cats when it came to being handled at the start, but on this night she allowed Milla to pick her up and hold her like a baby more than usual. Furball was his typical self, a monkey – she wore him around her neck like a stole on her way to the kitchen. True to Jasper's claim, the latest addition to the small family in Penthouse 4 came walking up to her while Milla was nosing around in the fridge in search of fruit and fresh water.

"Well hello there, little powder puff," she cooed, leaning down and offering her hand.

After warily eyeballing the cat draped around her neck, Marshmallow gave Milla's fingers a gentle bonk with the side of her head.

"Under the bed getting too lonely for you?"

Milla patted Marshmallow, thinking that the top of the bed tonight wouldn't be much better.

A man with strange blue eyes.

Jasper had followed up the statement with, "Probably one of your fans."

"Or stalkers," Milla had countered.

"He impressed me as the sort of man used to getting what he wants."

With the hour now growing late, she remembered Byxbee's associate from the runway show and gasped aloud the words she hadn't dared think earlier. "The rogue wolf."

But that was impossible. She'd given Byxbee nothing that could be tracked

back to her, no clue to link her to John Draper. *Draper*. Sadness and guilt weighed heavily upon her shoulders. The concept of never seeing him again terrified her worse than thinking the rogue wolf had come knocking on her front door.

She told herself it wasn't Byxbee's blue-eyed partner in crime that Jasper had turned away, and even if it was, what would he do? Drag her off to be skinned alive and worn as a high-waisted gown?

Milla took a swig of water and bit into one of the giant, succulent organic strawberries sent down from the farm. The chilly, sweet explosion across her taste buds helped her to focus. She set Furball down and returned to scanning her voice mails. "It's me, *again*."

"Christ, Stella – I'm not pulling an Agatha Christie on you," Milla said, deleting the next six messages. Most of the information would already be logged and processed through Karalynne – a new photo shoot, a commercial offer, a reminder that she was booked with Byxbee again in a few days for a spread to advertise his new line.

"The Maiden," Milla whispered, rolling her eyes.

There was a message from Karalynne, expressing concern that Milla hadn't checked in and one from Doctor Jennifer about the upcoming black-tie charity event in support of the practice's no-kill shelter.

Another from Stella. "I'm sending out the sled dogs, Milla."

"Sled *wolves*," Milla said.

She hung up the phone and padded into the master suite's bathroom. Draper's out-of-focus face hovered no matter where she turned. She ran the water and stepped into the steamy spray.

Early the next morning, Milla rolled over and imagined he was in the bed, sleeping beside her. She reached for his face, only to encounter the cool bedclothes instead of a warm shoulder.

* * * *

"Hey, it's me," Milla said.

“Where are you?” Karalynne demanded.

“Hustling my butt over to Stella’s before she has me strung up and tortured. Status?”

“Everything’s good,” Karalynne answered. “No problems here or north – except for our leading lady going missing on us. Where have you been? And why are you on the backup phone?”

Milla waved for a taxi. One pulled out of the line of traffic and up to the curb in front of the Blayne Building. Milla hopped in and directed the driver to Madison Avenue. “It’s complicated. No time for novellas. I need you to follow up on my car. It’s gone missing.”

“No, it’s not – it’s been impounded. In police custody, you could say. Didn’t you get my messages?”

“All six thousand of the ones you left on my land line. None on my old cell.”

“I’m sure that’s part of the explanation, and I only left five thousand.”

Milla sighed, “The police. Thank God for that.”

“Who did you think towed it?”

“You don’t want to know.”

“I’ve got it all right here. Some detective named Kane, and his phone number. He wants you to get in touch with him.”

“Kara, do whatever you need to but get it back and stay on top of Cause business today while I put on a happy face and deal with putting out fires.”

“Will do. Just don’t go silent on me again.”

“I won’t. Don’t let me down.”

“Do I ever?”

Milla smiled. “No, you don’t, girl. I’ll check in after I check out of the crazy farm. Later.”

She hung up and tried her best to forget John Draper.

* * * *

Walking into the offices of Stella Patterson usually filled Milla with conflicting emotions. Today, the malaise was worse. She experienced the rush of excitement at the sense of power in the place, the giant framed ads, many of them graced with her likeness. Milla wielded part of that power, and the young girl that was still inside of her after so many years, the one who'd gone without, who'd found herself homeless, relished the largesse. But the real Milla, the one who secretly hated dressing up and marching down runways or posing for temperamental photographers, dreamed of the day she would no longer have to come here, to face the silver-haired viper whose manicured talons clutched at her soul, unwilling to relinquish their grip until every last ounce of coin had been squeezed out of her.

A beautiful young receptionist greeted Milla at the front desk. "She just stepped out but she said you could go in and wait."

"Thanks," Milla said.

"Can I get you a coffee or some water?"

"I'm good."

Milla resumed walking toward the distant set of frosted glass doors, passing offices on both sides. *It was one more strut down the runway when you came right down to it*, Inner Milla said. Milla quietly tossed back her head and walked the walk.

She glided past the conference room with its high-backed chairs, did a double-take, and retraced her steps until she was even with the open door. Zora Thurston sat on the edge of the big table, her long legs crossed and dangling above the floor. She was dressed in jeans and a flattering top with a pleated collar. She toyed with her necklace. "Oh, will you look at what the stray cat dragged in?"

Milla poked her head in and forced a smile. "I thought I felt something sucking the life out of the place. If it isn't the human black hole – who sucks so bad, not even light can escape her gravitational pull. Hello, Zora."

Zora snorted an unladylike laugh. "Camilla, dear, the only thing I want to pull on you is your hair. Hard enough to yank out scalp."

“You just try.”

“Maybe I will.”

A third voice joined the conversation, a grumble of laughter, male, from the seat nearest to Zora whose back was turned to the door. Until that point, Milla hadn’t realized anyone was sitting there.

“So, everyone’s been worried about you,” Zora continued. “Mind letting the world know where you’ve been?”

“Yes, Milla, where have you been?” the man asked.

A ripple of fear cooled Milla’s rising anger as he turned around in the chair and she identified the person behind the voice. It was the blue-eyed man from Byxbee’s runway show, the one she associated with Draper’s warning.

The rogue wolf.

“Who –?” she gasped. Then Inner Milla took over, wiping the panic off her face and replacing it with a cocky smirk. “And who the hell are you?”

Zora rubbed her ankle against the man’s leg. “Phelps? He’s with me. Aren’t you, Phelps?”

“Don’t tell me you managed to land one on your own this time,” Milla said. “I’m impressed.”

“You’ve stopped making it so easy for me. And enjoyable, sadly.”

Milla felt the man’s eyes lock upon her. A shiver teased the nape of her neck. Was he attempting to glamour her?

“You still haven’t answered the question, Milla,” he said, though she couldn’t be sure if the words were delivered by his lips or his mind.

Milla blinked and stepped closer. “I don’t answer to Zora’s playthings. And to be clear, I’m not afraid of you.”

“You’re not?” The man Zora called Phelps adjusted his jacket and cleared his throat.

“You should be,” Milla heard the other woman growl, her voice barely above a

whisper.

Zora stopped playing with her necklace. A glint of gold drew Milla's gaze. It was a locket, engraved with flowers. Kathryn Draper's locket.

The man in the seat licked his lips, baring perfect white teeth and for an instant, Milla thought he was going to rip out her throat.

Chapter Nine

“*Boo!*” the man said, making a theatrical lunge at Milla.

Milla held her ground. “Pathetic,” she said.

The cocky smirk vanished off the man’s face. His cold blue gaze sized her up.

“You’re right, Zora. She’s everything you said she was, and less.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Milla said.

“Take this,” he fired back. “A warning. I’ve got my eye on you, Camilla-Milla.”

“Hopefully, not the one in your pants,” she said. “Unlike her, I’m not interested in leftovers.”

Milla turned, giving the duo her back. It wasn’t a smart move. You never showed your back to an opponent, which was one of the first things Jasper had taught her. But Inner Milla was in charge now and the same tough girl who’d carried her through the worst and most dangerous moments of her life reminded her that it was the middle of the day, and members of the Vidimus Brotherhood couldn’t shift their shapes when the sun was out.

Resuming her march to Stella’s office, Milla wondered, *Could they?*

* * * *

“Michael Byxbee,” Stella said. She crossed her legs and tugged at the string of pearls around her neck, rolling them like rosary beads through her sharp fingertips. It was an action Milla had seen numerous times before, as if Stella were praying to the deity who had created her bank account instead of to a saint or martyr.

“A problem?” Milla shook her head. “No.”

“Good, see that there isn’t. Michael was very impressed with both your and Zora’s work at the runway show, but he’s chosen you for his print campaign. The upcoming shoot at his studio is for a lot of money. I expect professional behavior out of both of you from this point forward. I’ve already spoken with your archenemy.”

“Stella. Who’s the tool hanging out in the conference room with my archenemy?”

Stella stopped praying and aimed a talon at Milla’s face. “Don’t go there.”

“Where would that be?”

“If I have to say the word *revenge* out loud, you’d better convince me I’m wrong.”

Milla shrugged. Stella resumed her novena to the patron saint of Dollars and Cents.

“After the runway show,” Milla said, “I thought he was Byxbee’s special friend. Only now he’s out there attached to Zora’s forked tongue.”

“He’s a Byxbee discovery. Absolutely gorgeous, as you’ve probably noticed. Jason Phelps. I’m doing my best to lure him away from the Byxbee camp. Subtly, of course. We can’t allow lucrative business relations to sour. Speaking of business, payment was made to your account an hour ago. It’s big, so earn it.”

Stella pulled an envelope from the desk’s top drawer and handed Milla her pay stub.

“I always earn it,” she countered.

Stella shot her an icy look, one Milla only saw from her repertoire on rare occasions. “Where were you?”

A shiver tickled the nape of Milla’s neck. “Private problem. I was unavailable.”

“You live in the public eye. You’re never unavailable. I have you booked well into the autumn. Do we understand one another?”

To Milla’s surprise, no sharp comeback materialized, no snappy response to Stella’s veiled threat. “Of course.”

“Make sure we do, because I don’t need anything coming back to bite me on the ass.”

* * * *

It was the last line that convinced her.

Stella knows. She's in on it. Even if she doesn't have all the details, she's got enough information to sense the danger.

The taxi was in front of the building and idling. Milla blinked. She paid the driver and exited the vehicle. Jasper wasn't on duty. She entered the empty elevator.

A strikingly handsome man seemed to materialize out of thin air beside her.
“Milla Cavanaugh?”

She turned toward the sound of his voice and, for an instant, she thought Draper had returned. The resemblance was shocking. He was handsome, painfully so, dressed well in a suit and shiny black loafers. His eyes were a lustrous blue, like Phelps's.

Milla fell back, her muscles tensing, as the years of self-defense training with Jasper took over. “Who are you?” she demanded, her hands forming fists that were ready to strike.

The man reached into his suit jacket. Milla saw the shoulder holster and gun before she saw his police shield.

“My name is Kane Draper. I'm here to talk to you about my brother, John.”

* * * *

Marshmallow was all over the man, rubbing against his legs and leaving white threads on his pants.

“She likes you – she's never done this before.”

“She's a good judge of character,” the man said.

“Something to drink?”

“I'm on duty.”

“I wasn't offering booze. Coffee or juice, water?”

“No, just the information.”

Milla's stomach churned. She didn't have an easy way of knowing the guy was legit. He resembled Draper enough that she could believe his claim, even though his eyes were blue, unlike Draper's vibrant twin emeralds.

“We're half-brothers, in case you were wondering about the eyes,” he said,

aiming a pair of sexy fingers at his face. “We have the same dad, different moms. Though my mother always considered Johnny her own. He’s the older brother, by the way. Got our dad’s brooding personality. Me, I got dad’s looks and my mom’s sense of humor.”

He said this lightly, adding a snort of laughter. Milla didn’t respond.

“What do you know about Johnny’s whereabouts?”

“What do *you* know?” she countered.

Kane Draper raised an eyebrow and nodded. It struck her how wolfishly handsome he was, making it difficult to think. The brothers looked so much alike.

“That whole ‘we don’t talk about it’ thing. What happens in Vidimus stays in Vidimus. Only we’ve never been to the place, and the place, by all signs and portents, isn’t even there anymore. Vanished off the face of the planet.”

“What?” Milla asked.

“They hid it during all that ugly trouble in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the ’90s. Anybody who’s gone back looking for it just finds a road with an unmarked mailbox and this old chicken coop. You head down the road and come to a stream. Try crossing the stream and you end up standing on the same bank you started out on, only with wet feet. Follow the stream in the opposite direction and after a while you’re back where you started, near the mailbox. That’s the chatter on the message board, at least.”

“Message board?” she parroted.

“Sure. It’s not easy to find. You have to go digging for it, unless you know where to look. Like Vidimus, they’ve hidden it. That’s one of the talents. To keep you walking in circles, whether you’re looking for the monastery or a Web site. There are ways to hide people and places. Like my brother’s place, that safe house he created back when the chatter on the Web site started that he was going to become the Alpha. I’d bet you’ve been there, to his house.”

Milla sank onto the nearest chair and caught herself fingering the necklace chain. “How did you know?”

“That you’ve been to Johnny’s safe house? I didn’t, until now.” He flashed a cocky smirk, so like Draper, only far more galling because he wasn’t. “I impounded a car registered in your name near where I believe Johnny went in search of information. So either you’re part of the solution, or a key player behind the problem.”

All friendliness evaporated from the man’s features. Staring at her through narrowed eyelids was a man who looked adversarial, dangerous.

“I’m not...” she stammered.

“You work for Michael Byxbee, the clothes guy.”

“I booked a gig for his latest collection. I don’t work for him.”

“So you’re some kind of double agent?”

Milla shook her head and started to rise from the chair. Kane’s eyes possessed her. The periphery of the room phased out of focus around her.

He’s trying to hypnotize me, her inner voice shouted. What Draper calls “glammaring.”

“What did you do to my brother?”

Milla chuckled. “I don’t kiss and tell. And I bet that trick comes in handy in the police interrogation room.” She closed her eyes. Kane Draper’s piercing twin sapphires hovered inside her eyelids, superimposed over shadows.

“I’ve got one of the best conviction rates in my department.”

“I’ll just bet,” Milla said, facing him again. “But if you don’t turn off the light show, I’m going to fly across this room and knock you flat on your ass. If your brother was here, he’d tell you that I’m more than capable of doing it.”

Kane’s smirk returned as he pinched the inner corners of his eyes. “Doing that trick always gives me a bitch of a headache, anyways. Okay, so you’re immune. The innocent can usually resist a wolf-eye glammar.”

“I saved Draper’s life,” Milla said. “They were waiting for him when he showed up on Waverly.”

She relayed the story in bare-bones detail, leaving out the personal aspects and

everything after her arrival to the secret cottage.

“You don’t know where he is?”

Sadness pressed down upon her. “No.” *And it’s killing me*, she thought.

“You haven’t seen him since last night?”

Milla shook her head. Then it dawned on her. “That was you, not the rogue wolf?”

“I wanted to see if you came back for your car, so I staked the place out. Was Johnny with you?”

Milla angrily knocked back a swig of water from her glass before responding. “You...” She forced herself to take a mental timeout before continuing. “I thought you were the rogue and I tried to lead you away, to protect him. I need to know Draper’s all right.”

“He isn’t. Hate to rain on your parade if you’re sweet on Johnny, but did you know he was married?”

“Widowed.”

Kane glanced around the room, opened his mouth, obviously intending to speak, but the seconds dragged on in silence and Milla wondered if he’d accidentally glammared himself.

“What did Johnny tell you about the Brotherhood?”

“Less in two days than you have in ten minutes.”

“A few years ago, right before our dad took sick, it never occurred to any of us that there might be someone out there trying to make a power grab, to seize control of the Brotherhood and take over. It had been so long since the individual members came together, forming a legitimate pack. Keeping the promise to harm none, the pact part of it.” He drew in a deep breath. “They got to Dad somehow. Some rare, exotic plant-based poison. That, in and of itself, broke the pact on the most basic level. We’re not supposed to use the powers to injure or kill.”

“So why do you have them?”

“To heal and protect. Dad was a doctor, Johnny a vet. Me, I’m a cop. We can use them to when we need to, but they’re really there for when the world needs us. Times of global crisis. But just imagine the things you could do if you used the same powers to get ahead financially or politically, to take out your rivals or to rule. The Alpha, he gets to do more parlor tricks than the rest of us. He gets...”

“Yes?”

Kane rolled his eyes. “Okay, I know this sounds crazy. Something Dad said when we were kids and we didn’t need to buy Halloween costumes. The Alpha, according to the legend, supposedly can control the entire planet when he needs to. I don’t know the rest of it, or how it’s supposed to work. The answer’s supposed to be in Vidimus, but that road leads in circles and ends in wet feet, remember?”

“So what’s the Alpha supposed to do with this gift?”

“Lead, of course, when the world is in jeopardy.”

“Defender of the Earth,” Milla said. “No wonder I like your brother so much. He and I have more in common than you think.”

Kane’s eyes wandered down Milla’s chest to her legs before going back up again. A smile, lusty around the edges, crept over his lips. “What I think is that my brother has great taste in women. But that the lady needs to know about what happened to the first Mrs. Draper.”

* * * *

The temperature in the air plummeted. Milla hugged Furball, her reliable cuddler, in an attempt to ward off the chill.

“They found her blood in one of the exam rooms at Johnny’s practice. Lots of it,” Kane said. “Some of his veterinary instruments were used. They had his fingerprints on them.”

Milla shook her head. “You know he didn’t kill her.”

“I know that, and we’re not even sure she’s dead, because her body still hasn’t been recovered. But it doesn’t help his case that right after the discovery, Johnny took

off. I know he's been trying to find her killer – or her. Though, after the amount of blood we found, it's pretty clear..."

"I get the point. Now you get this: I'd bet my closet full of designer originals that poor Kathryn Draper wore a locket. Gold. And that her locket hasn't been seen since she vanished."

Kane tipped his head at a curious angle. "How did you know?"

"I think I just saw that same locket hanging around the neck of this miserable piece of work I know. A fellow model. She's been hanging around with this guy. Eyes like yours."

"Blue?"

"*Spooky* blue," she said. "Glammar-ous. He tried to pull the same hocus focus on me that you did. Well, I have a power or two of my own. I know people and souls. That creepy guy – Jason Phelps – he's got a stain on his. Draper said something about a rogue wolf. I'm sure he's the one."

"And this model, the one with Kathryn's locket?"

"Zora Thurston."

"The chick in that football commercial, the one who slaps the dude's ass?"

"The one and only."

Kane Draper studied her again with his hypnotic gaze. This time, Milla allowed it.

"Satisfied I'm telling you the truth?"

"Yes, and thank you."

Milla blinked. Suddenly, Kane wasn't in the sitting room, but strutting over to the elevator. He turned and extended his hand. A business card was clutched between his long, sexy fingers.

"Thank you for being honest. If you remember anything else or you hear from my brother—"

Holding Furball, Milla hurried over to the elevator and accepted the card. "I'll

have him call. You do the same. I really need to see him.”

Kane stabbed the button. The doors trundled open. He started to enter, only to turn around. The preternatural glow of his eyes shocked her. In that moment, he seemed less human, more wolf-like.

“This situation you’ve come across, the events taking place around us, I’m worried there’s a bigger picture. It’s happened before. It could be happening again. Be careful, Milla.”

The doors rolled shut, leaving Milla alone in an eerie silence.

* * * *

She stared out at the park from her rooftop terrace. The rain soaking Manhattan had transformed the line of buildings beyond into gray phantoms whose lights glowed out of focus with a smoky shimmer.

The rational voice in Milla’s thoughts wanted to pack up the cats in their carriers, grab hold of Jasper, and head north to the farm where she knew they would all be safe, protected by sheer numbers. Then the same voice that had readily accepted a much larger universe inhabited by handsome men who could transform into wolves and ancient promises to pious saints reminded her that the only truly safe place was Draper’s little cottage, but there was no way she’d find her way back there without him.

Or could she?

“Follow your heart, Milla,” she whispered out loud.

So, grabbing her purse, she did.

Chapter Ten

She drove north, following the trail by memory until the trail vanished. After she reached the bridge, Milla pulled her little hybrid car over to the side of the road and got out. Her heart raced as she relived the memory of those glowing blue eyes, shining clearly while the rest of the world raced past at breakneck speed.

It was a deceptively calm night, perfumed by falling rain. The roadside still bore scars from the chase – upturned sod and the skid marks made by the vehicle pursuing them when the driver had slammed on the brakes.

Milla trudged through the field and as close to the chasm as she dared. Seeing how far away the opposite side of the river was sent a shudder down her spine. Without the moon's light, the wreckage of Draper's motorcycle had blended into the shadows below. Milla returned to the car, whispering his name.

If he could hide the house from view and Kane could hypnotize people with a glance, wasn't it also possible that Milla's heart could locate lost souls? It had happened before with Duck and Marshmallow and so many others. Steeling herself, she marched back to the car and drove forward. The bridge clacked beneath her wheels.

"I'm coming back to you, Draper," she said.

The bridge fell behind her. The road beyond stretched forward, into a mist-soaked landscape. Milla drove on blindly, not knowing where she was or where she was going.

Until—

She turned right when the pavement forked, not sure why but also not questioning the decision. Five miles farther up the road, she turned right again and passed beneath a cathedral of towering pines.

Plunged in darkness, Milla slowed the car. She applied more pressure to the brake until she came to a dead stop. The car idled. Its headlights drilled into the

shadows. Syrupy soft rock poured out of the radio.

A rush of intense emotion cycloned through her, teasing her nipples, her toes. Milla gasped. The electric shiver traveled fully through her flesh, ending at her core. Releasing one hand from the wheel, she reached down and touched the warm denim above her pussy. She ran her hand in a clockwise circle and gasped again. She was close to Draper, she knew it. So very close!

Milla released the brake, hit the gas, and traveled for another mile before slowing again. The giddy rush of emotion went cold inside her, so she pulled a U-turn and retraced her steps back in the direction she'd come from. A jolt of icy hotness tickled her core. Milla bit back a moan. She eased her fingers into her pants, beneath the scant lace of her thong, and teased her pussy. She had grown wet from the ghostly arousal.

Beyond the windshield, the roadsides were solid stretches of brush and trees, not so much as a footpath visible.

"It's here," Milla said. "I know it is. I feel it."

She pulled over to the side of the road and turned down the radio's volume. The lazy chirr of insects and the sound of the raindrops serenaded her. Before she could talk herself out of it, Milla resumed playing with her pussy. She spread her outer lips and inserted a finger, applying pressure with her palm to her stimulated clit. Images of Draper formed before her half-closed eyes.

Draper, standing naked, so magnificent, his cock hard. Hard, over her. He was a force of nature. Milla remembered the skill in which he licked her, his strong yet gentle touch, and how alive he'd made her feel during their brief time together. His taste ignited on her tongue. Milla's pussy tingled. Bringing herself pleasure behind the wheel of the car, in the middle of nowhere – the madness of it all threatened to stop her. She ignored the rational voice in her thoughts and kept masturbating. Energy rippled through her body. A rousing wave of pleasure. There, to her left—

Milla resisted the urge to open her eyes. To do so, she sensed, would be to lose

the vision completely. It hovered out of focus, superimposed in her mind's eye like a masturbation fantasy. If she looked, there would be two tall pines on the other side of the road, perhaps a hundred feet ahead. Only in her mind, with Milla continuing to bring herself closer to orgasm, what she really saw was a dirt road, an entrance. The tall pines were there, and yet they weren't.

"Don't look," Milla said. "Don't think. *Feel*."

She rubbed her pussy almost to the verge of climaxing, withdrew her hand, and placed it on the wheel. Then, doing one of the craziest moves of a night already teetering on the brink of insanity, she turned the car onto the road and aimed it toward what she knew to be the entrance to Draper's secret cottage and drove on memory. The pines loomed directly in front of her. She aimed the car toward them, prayed, and swore. The crash of metal colliding against trunks never happened.

Instead, the car traveled off asphalt and over dirt, and for the next few minutes, Milla found herself bouncing up and down in sync with the ruts. She'd found the way back to Draper's safe house.

And to Draper.

* * * *

The landmarks she remembered like certain trees and the statues of Saint Francis staring out from the woods appeared, fresh and vivid in her thoughts. They were images that had gone fuzzy and out of focus in her memory, like a dream. Milla wondered if that, too, was part of the magic protecting the house's secret location, like the movable forest.

The statues and trees rose clearly at the sides of the dirt road. A lazy moon drifted above the treetops, a lone silver eye tracking her course through breaks in the storm clouds. Milla's heart raced. Her core pulsed in response, her pussy electrified from being pleased, both organs drumming in anticipation of seeing him again. Milla could feel Draper, somewhere close by in the night.

The car's headlights strobed the road. Twin emeralds glowed directly ahead

of her, the night eyes of a large animal. Milla slowed the car to a stop. The creature stepped into view.

The wolf was as amazing as she remembered. It studied her through the windshield, sniffing at the air, the fur of its hackles standing in response to her invasion. Based on its size, it likely could have torn apart Byxbee's men in the lab if it had wanted to. She caught sight of a length of white teeth through its snarl. The image would have terrified her if not for one so comical, she started to giggle: a lone crew sock, riding up one of the creature's hind legs.

Milla put the car in park and opened the door. She exited the vehicle to a solo performance of growls and snaps.

"Draper, it's me," she said.

Recognition dawned in the creature's eyes. One moment, they were all pupil, glowing a luminous green. Then the creature blinked, and Milla saw whites surrounding a gentle, wounded gaze. The wolf yelped.

Milla stepped closer. "Draper, that is you, isn't it?"

The creature reared back on its haunches, and a sound like the whispering of the wind swept past Milla's ears. As she watched, fighting to breathe, the creature transformed. Hair drew back into skin, skin pigment lightened, and some muscles shrank while most puffed up. For a sliver of a second, the creature standing in the road was mostly Draper, only with a mouth full of sharp teeth. Then it was completely him again, in human form and as naked as the first time she'd seen him, apart from one lone sock on his foot.

The two faced one another. At first, neither spoke.

Draper broke the silence. "Milla?"

Milla choked down a swallow and found her voice. "Hi."

"How – ?" Draper asked. He extended his arms. "How did you find me?"

"I followed my heart," she said.

She started toward him. Draper met her halfway, pulling her into his arms.

In the sensory rush – the scent of his sweat, the warmth of his naked skin – she realized his cock had hardened fully. Then their lips crushed together and she lost that perception as others surged.

Draper cupped her face, kissed her, growling out his approval as she held on and kissed back. Milla's heart pulsed in tune with the sound of music. A melody, lilting and sweet, carried over the road. At first, she thought it was only in her mind. Then she remembered leaving the radio volume on low in the car.

Draper's cock stirred, and Milla's desire overwhelmed her. She reached for him while whispering his name. Draper growled again and grabbed hold of Milla's ass.

"Let's go up to the house. You can park near my truck. I left my clothes somewhere." Draper's eyebrows knitted together. "Somewhere," he repeated. He released her, did a circle, and picked a T-shirt off the ground. "The whole clothing issue thing is a real pain in the ass sometimes."

He struggled the shirt over his head and found a pair of cargo shorts at the tree line. While he bent over to retrieve them, Milla playfully smacked his butt. Draper grumbled a swear beneath his breath and zipped up the shorts.

"Now, where's my other sock?"

The simple clothes fit his body to perfection, clearly showcasing his muscular chest and legs. Even so, Milla preferred his former state of undress.

"Come on," Draper said, pointing up the road.

Milla nodded. After parking the car, she followed him to the house.

* * * *

"There's so much I want to tell you," she said, fighting the sting of tears, her return to the secret cottage affecting her more than she'd imagined. "Things I need to tell you."

Draper studied her through narrowed eyes. "I came back for you, like I promised. But you were gone."

"I know," Milla said. "Another wolf showed up. I tried to lead it away from

you. I thought it was the rogue wolf. Turns out it was your brother, Kane.”

Draper’s eyes widened. “Kane?”

“He came to see me today. He explained everything, told me to have you contact him the moment I found you.”

“Did Kane know you were coming to look for me? Did he follow you?”

“I don’t think so,” Milla said.

Draper seized her by the arm, an action that jarred Milla out of the pleasant illusions surrounding their reunion. “You’re sure?”

“Yes, why?”

“Because my brother Kane might be the real rogue wolf, Milla.”

* * * *

The revelation followed them through the kitchen and down the hallway with its beautiful watercolor paintings. It hovered in the shadows of the bedroom, a physical presence, tangible among the moonlight. Milla did her best to ignore it. They would, Draper promised, talk. About everything.

But now was a chance to love. Draper peeled off his shirt and pulled her toward him. Their lips met with kisses that were remarkably tender, given the urgency of the ones that preceded them. Milla was aware of his shallow breaths, his excited heartbeat, the fullness and heat of his cock pressing against her. While they kissed, he freed her of her top and bra. Draper smiled at the sight of the talisman hanging around her neck.

He worked her jeans off her ass, leaving Milla only in her lace thong. Draper laid her on her back across the bed. Some unaffected part of Milla’s senses detected the trace of freesia perfume, but it had grown distant in the room, one more ghost lingering among the scent of pine forest and meadow and the fragrance of the rain spiriting in through the open windows.

When his tongue brushed her clit, all of the phantoms vanished. Milla seized in place beneath him.

“*Beautiful*,” he growled. The warmth of his breath over her pussy filled the

space above her eyes with a supernova of exploding stars that only she could see.

She sensed his quiet study of her nakedness, a man's silent appreciation for a woman's most-sacred flesh. Icy hot pinpricks teased the rest of Milla's skin as she waited for his tongue to reconnect. Once it did, she worried she might go mad from the scintillation.

Draper feasted, and not only on her slit. The hungry revolutions of his tongue and lips worked lower, into the sensitive territory of her ass, leaving Milla clutching at the bedclothes. Eventually, he released her and resumed his worship of her pussy. Then Draper rose up from between her legs, his mouth glistened in the moonlight, wet with her nectar.

Working in perfect choreography with him, Milla took her cue. She sat up and took his cock between her lips. His scent, a mix of fresh perspiration and the woods, intoxicated her. She gave his balls a playful tug, licked the wetness crowning the head of his cock, and then sucked as much of him down as possible without gagging. Milla gently ran her nails along one of Draper's legs. She applied the same motion to his thatch of pubic curls. Draper gave a happy growl.

She helped him with a condom. He lined up the head of his cock with her seam, tested her willingness. Milla relaxed and accepted his thickness into her. Cupping his face and drawing him closer helped to seal their connection.

"I missed you," Milla said.

Draper kissed her, mixing traces of both their wetness on their lips. "Yeah, me, too."

It wasn't a pledge of undying love, but it still carried considerable value, and was more than enough. She circled his back with one arm, placed her other hand over his heart, and marveled at the feel of its cadence beneath her fingers.

Draper kissed her again while easing back, withdrawing his cock until only the head and an inch or so of shaft was still lodged inside her. Then he slammed in and Milla's soul briefly left her body.

“Yes,” she heard her physical self moan. “Oh, yes, Draper!”

He loomed over her, a magnificent, powerful man. Milla reached her other hand up to caress his face and, for the first time, she accepted the fact that she loved him. She loved John Draper, only it was an emotion so new, so wonderful and yet so terrifying at the same time, the words escaped her lips before she could full process them.

“I love you.”

Draper pinned her in his sight. His wounded emerald gaze intensified. His mouth trembled, as if seeking the right words in response. They were so close to emerging, and in her panic, Milla needed to hear them. If he didn’t answer in like, she would vanish, *die*. She just knew it.

Draper’s lips hardened. The words began to recede. At the last instant, Milla released his face and covered his heart, and she felt the words instead, the pledge of love he hadn’t been able to speak. He did love her. She knew it now.

A scintillating cascade of warmth and happiness rolled through her, teasing her core into orgasming. As had happened so often when they made love, Draper’s cock seemed to double in size inside her before her climax powered down, and they came together. Yin and yang, perfectly in sync.

Draper and Milla.

Chapter Eleven

For the second time that morning, she caught him staring at her. The first time, he'd pretended to be asleep. But in their brief hours together, she'd come to know the difference. Draper didn't snore. His chest, so muscled and hairy, rose and fell with a cadence of breaths that Milla found reassuring, hypnotic, one that helped her fall asleep beside him with ease. So when he snorted out a snore to disguise the fact that he was studying her, a grin on his lips verging on actual happiness, she knew he was faking.

"Charlatan," she whispered.

Draper roused theatrically, with a cough and a lazy smack of his lips. "Huh?"

"Stop pretending to be asleep."

He chuckled. It was good to hear him laugh, because that kind of expression, she sensed, had been a rarity in his world. "So you caught me."

"I sure did," Milla said. She reached between his legs to find his cock wasn't sleeping either, and had swelled to its fullest form.

Draper yelped at the contact. "Hey, now!"

She circled his cock with her fingers and gave it a squeeze, silencing his protest. Milla stroked him upward, from root to tip. Draper moaned his appreciation. He stretched out on his back and extended his legs. A wicked grin fixing on his lips, he tossed both arms behind his neck and growled, the full, male sound of it starting in his chest, like the noise of his sleep that wasn't a snore.

Milla eyed his body. With his bare feet and hairy ankles poking out from the end of the blanket, the pose of his arms, and his cock tenting the center of the bedclothes, he looked only slightly less comical than sexy. Sexy trumped funny by a degree, however. Again, she wondered how she could ever live without him, even knowing the danger.

She pushed that part of the whole out of her head for the moment. For now, she wanted him – and she would have him. Models of her celebrity were supposed to

be spoiled adult brats who got whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted it. She laughed beneath her breath while sliding under the covers. Milla wrapped her lips around the straining head of Draper's cock. Her entire career had been devoted to the welfare of others. Just this once, she would be the one whose needs mattered the most.

Giving herself that privilege sent a rush of giddy energy through her insides and teased her skin with pinpricks. She sucked downward, taking Draper's thickness almost to the root. She ran her manicured fingertips over the sensitive flesh of his balls and noticed with amusement how the action made his toes curl. After tickling, she tugged and sucked, savoring his masculine scent and taste.

At one point, she caught him watching her. Not with that goofy look of a man getting the greatest blow job of his life, but one of contemplation. He was, she realized finally able to peer beyond the revetments he'd erected around his heart and see her clearly.

Milla whispered his name while straddling him. He choked down a heavy swallow and nodded. Milla guided his cock into her pussy and was aware of each inch of him as he traveled into her. She leaned forward and kissed him. The willingness of Draper's tongue and the rise of his hips in response to her downward thrusts all worked at arousing her further.

She didn't know exactly what it was they had together – just that it was good.

* * * *

Draper emerged from the kitchen dressed only in blue jeans. His hair was still wet from the shower. Milla wore the same clothes she'd had on during her quest to find the safe house. They hadn't been on her long enough to feel sweaty or dirty.

She lowered her coffee cup and admired him as he padded over to join her at the deck's rail. Draper laid an elbow on the rough wood beside her. His upper arm muscles puffed in response. The faded denim fit his ass perfectly. Even his big feet, the toes so classic – the second ones slightly longer than the big ones, like those on marble statues – were sexy, an integral component of the whole.

“Are you staring at me?” Draper asked, the barest hint of a smirk on his unshaved lips. Mischief glinted in his emerald eyes.

“It’s my turn to be the silent voyeur,” Milla said. She smacked his ass. The muscles of that butt were wonderfully solid.

Draper drew in a deep breath of morning air, but allowed the aggressive display of affection without comment or complaint. Making love with him that morning had been near violent in its intensity. She was sore in all the right places, and also in the right ways. Their latest session, conducted in the claw-foot bathtub, had been nothing short of a circus act.

“So, Milla,” he asked, bringing her back to the present.

“Yes, Draper?”

“John. My first name is John.”

“So we’re on a first-name basis now, are we?” she coyly fired back.

“First names after third base.”

Milla giggled and placed a hand on his naked back, loving the feel of his skin, his muscles, and mentally recording the light spatter of freckles across his shoulders. She walked her hand up to the nape of his neck and lost her fingers in his dark cowlicks.

Draper straightened. He grabbed her hand and kissed its palm. The mischievous glint in his gaze softened but his smile, to her surprise, widened. Their eyes met and a sense of raw, powerful emotions – the love she felt for him – gripped her.

Draper took the cup of coffee from her other hand and sipped. The ease of that simple act, sharing coffee with him the way they might share dessert in an upscale restaurant, warmed Milla’s insides. Seeing his unshaved throat knot as he swallowed, his jaunty pose against the deck rail, and his long fingers wrapped around the cup threatened to arouse her if she looked too long.

“So tell me,” Draper said.

“What do you want to know?”

“What’s your story?”

Milla took back her coffee cup and sipped. “You know my story.”

“Not the press release. The real one.”

“I’ll tell you, but I’m going to expect something in return.”

Draper’s face darkened. “What?”

“The truth. All of it.”

* * * *

Instead of jogging, this time they walked along the trail at a leisurely pace. Draper had donned white socks and sneakers, a T-shirt and baseball cap. He looked as much a natural part of the country landscape as the pines and birch, and the cottony gray clouds visible through breaks in the canopy of branches. Add a blade of timothy grass between his lips and teeth and she would have fucked him again on the spot.

“Like you, I’ve always had this gift, only it’s different,” she explained. “The ability to feel another person’s pain, especially that of animals. I know how crazy it sounds, but I’ve had this...*empathy* dating back to when I was a little girl. I think my grandmother had it, too. She was the coolest. Tough, beautiful, a woman ahead of her time. She was always taking in stray pets. We had this dove, once. It was missing a wing. She kept that bird for—”

Milla realized she was rambling, but not because Draper said so. She glanced up to see amusement on his handsome face.

“Like I said, it’s always been part of me. When I was little, I wanted to be a veterinarian. But what kid doesn’t, right?”

“I think you’d make a great vet,” Draper said.

Milla set a hand on his arm, appreciating the strength of his muscles, only to release him. She needed to finish this and the feel of his body, the scent of his skin, was a distraction, albeit a heavenly one.

“So we lived in this house that my grandmother owned. Sweet little place. In

fact...” She glanced behind them. “Your cottage in the woods reminds me of it. Me, Grandma, my father, and all of our pets. Grandma died when I was in high school, sophomore year.”

“I’m sorry,” Draper said.

“Yeah. She left us the house, free and clear of debt, which was this amazing legacy. There was even money in the bank – enough that I could have gone to college, maybe even vet school if I got the grades and the scholarships. My dad had a drinking problem, but he also had a gambling addiction none of us knew about. I never suspected he was siphoning off funds from the bank account from the moment Grandma was gone.”

Draper’s eyes tracked her as they walked.

“My grades suffered after she died, and my father wasn’t exactly the kind of dad who helped you with your homework or took an active interest in your day-to-day travails to begin with. Imagine the nosedive they took when I came home one day to find the house sealed up tight, taken by the bank to be auctioned off. The bastard had re-mortgaged it to the teeth and used the money on a bunch of sure bets, the kind you couldn’t possibly lose on. Oh, and did I mention that, while cleaning out our savings, he also sold off anything of value in the house? My grandmother had antique silver, which we used every Christmas. She had an Asscher-cut emerald ring with two diamonds on either side. My grandfather bought it for her. It was supposed to be mine, but he pawned it away.”

“If he was here,” Draper said, “I’d knock him into the next time zone.”

“Oh, I’d get in a strike or two myself. I was homeless for a while. Actually lived outside in the woods for a while, me and all our pets.” Tears invaded Milla’s eyes. She blinked, sending the tears rolling down her cheeks.

Draper wrapped an arm around her shoulder. Milla surrendered to his warmth and leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Sometimes I crashed with one friend or another, me and my cats. It was hardly

ideal or a free ride, so I got a job at a coffee shop. Lucky for me, I was covering an extra shift when I should have been doing geometry problems when a photographer working for a high fashion shoot stopped in looking for a cappuccino. He told me I was perfect. No tits and these gangly, awkward limbs, go figure.”

She waved her arms. Draper dug in his heels. Milla continued walking another few steps, falling out of his protection. She turned to face him and saw that his eyes weren’t on her breasts as a result of her self-deprecating remark, but still locked with her gaze.

“And the rest of it?” Draper asked. “That superhero that showed up at Byxbee’s lab and kicked serious ass?”

Milla flashed a sad smile. “After what I went through, I promised myself I’d never let anybody hurt me again. I’ve learned to defend myself – and others. When I got discovered and started making money, I tried to buy back Grandma’s house, only it wasn’t there anymore. They’d knocked it down to put up something the size of a battleship. So I found a working farm upstate, set up various trusts, environmental and social. I call it Milla’s Cause. Animal rescue and people rescue, the homeless and the hopeless. So there it is, all of it.”

Draper pulled her close. Milla felt the wall he’d kept between them crumbling further.

“You’re amazing.” He kissed the top of her head. “Truly amazing. And just for the record, I think you have great tits.”

Milla laughed and hugged him back.

* * * *

They sat together in the meadow, not far from the same disturbed patch of grass and flowers where they’d made love. Draper’s face was grim as he relived the events.

“I could feel it creeping around me like this second shadow, constantly there,” he said. “The feeling that I was being watched, monitored. I’d get calls late at night, either at home or through my answering service. Hang-ups, mostly. A few where

somebody asked for me and as soon as I answered, the line went dead. Like I was being tracked. There's this Web site..."

"The secret one that's been hidden, unless you know how to get there," she cut in.

Draper narrowed an eye on her. "That's right. It's like a clearinghouse for information, only you have to know where to look for it. It's a way for the descendents of the Vidimus Brotherhood to check in and connect from all over the world. Before the Internet, they used to do it through ciphers in the personal ads of three big-city newspapers."

Milla listened, aware of his words, set against the rising breeze and humidity, and the clouds growing darker over the treetops. She set a hand over his heart and Draper's voice took on a distant, dreamy echo, just like in the bathtub that first night. Suddenly, Milla wasn't merely hearing him speak, but reliving the memory in an empathic way. She saw those past events, superimposed over the present.

There had been disturbing chatter on the message board about individuals who'd gone missing; older members calling for a meeting, saying that it was time for the Brotherhood to reorganize. To name a new leader – a new Alpha – to investigate the rumors. With Draper's dad dead, the consensus was that his oldest son would be the perfect choice to take his place. Milla sensed Draper's reluctance to become the figurehead. Scattered throughout this vision, she sensed the rising beat of his heart, but Milla couldn't tell if the cadence belonged to the past or the now.

"New York," he said aloud.

But she was already with him in the memory, traveling down the street, past faceless apparitions and honking horns and canyons of brick.

"Twelve of us, the ones I trusted the most and some who were only names on a computer screen. My brother Kane was supposed to be there. I went to meet him at a place we both knew, this café and bookstore in the Village where our dad sometimes took us when we were kids."

Milla knew the place. The rich aroma of coffee invaded the vision, igniting her taste buds. The sensory experience intensified. She smelled newsprint and the glossy pages of magazines, warm cinnamon, the sharp odor of a marker as it squeaked across a sandwich board. Red ink. The color, seemingly more liquid than it should have been, sent her heart racing in counterpoint against his.

“Only he never showed up.”

Milla saw Kathryn through Draper’s shared memory and was unable to suppress a twinge of jealousy, red and harsh around the edges, like the marker or a fresh cut. She was pretty, normal, the simple wife of country veterinarian. She was also the tragic victim who had vanished from the world, leaving only bloodshed and mystery behind. “I told her to pack what she needed and go to the safe house. She’d been there before so she knew what to look for, how to find the stone saints. We’d spent so many weekends at the house. She loved to paint there...”

But the phantom image that rose up in shades of gray and sepia over the present wasn’t a happy one. They were arguing. Milla grudgingly respected the woman’s defiance at being told what to do, even as her stomach ached in anticipation of the inevitable.

“Later, I went to the safe house but Kathryn wasn’t there. She never made it.”

The dark emotion in Draper’s voice added an extra layer of shadow to the image. Milla realized it was the night, and he seemed to have shrunk in size. The ground was closer, the canyons of brick made by buildings so much taller. She heard him pant – she was now living through his thoughts as a wolf!

Milla heard her real self gasp. The primitive energy coursing through her psyche invigorated her.

“Meeting at an underground bar...”

The clarity of the sensations rushed over her as her consciousness traveled along the street. The musty stink of the sidewalk. The smell of animals – a cat, a rat. Another...

“Wolf,” she heard Draper say as, together, they shared the prickling sensation of raised hackles. She heard a throaty growl and turned to see numerous eyes glowing in the shadows.

With that sense of second sight, Milla felt a chill crawl over her real flesh in real time. Because she knew that Draper had been led into a trap.

Chapter Twelve

The moon peered down from the distant rooftops. The face in the craters seemed to regard her with a sad look. Milla viewed the world, embossed in silver light, with a kind of clarity she had never experienced, even though the memory was Draper's and not her own.

She focused on the alley, growled, and flashed a length of teeth. Three wolves appeared, two directly in front of her and one behind. They were unfamiliar wolves, with unfamiliar scents. But she was their chosen Alpha. The imagery came so clearly to her, Milla almost forgot the real Alpha was Draper. He was the wolf sending a warning to stand down and offer up throats, which the Alpha would place his teeth upon, growling, applying pressure, his stamp of leadership, but not drawing blood. Showing mercy and earning loyalty was an ages-old ritual among wolves. His pack would form and Draper would lead, and together they would serve the planet, as was their pact with the noble saint. They would uncover that which was taking place in the shadows and bring light to the darkness as humans.

The wolves circled him. This, certainly, was not a good sign. Fear slithered over Draper's bristling fur; panic gripped Milla's insides, chilling blood into ice.

Blue eyes shimmered at the edge of their shared sight. One of the two wolves blocking Draper's path advanced. Draper spun around lightning-quick and delivered a nip. The interloper yelped. Milla felt the pressure in her jaws, hard enough to break the skin. Sour copper exploded across her tongue. Milla tasted blood and heard herself gasp at the rush of sensory images. Lust and rage, primal excitement, hatred. Her nipples stiffened, and her pussy swelled as electricity cascaded over her core. The urge to clamp down and tear, to gorge at the enemy wolf's throat, possessed her. But at the last instant, she stopped herself. The desire to show mercy to the foe reminded her that these were Draper's teeth, not hers, releasing the other wolf's flesh.

Draper adhered to the pact. Not so, these other wolves.

One of the three turned on him. She felt its fangs sink into Draper's side. The pain, white-hot and exquisite, almost masked the scrabble of claws on the pavement. Draper threw his weight into his opponent, shaking the wolf loose and launching it against the nearest brick wall.

Another was quickly upon him. They rolled into the street. Draper snapped at the wolf's face, an action that kept his attacker's mouth occupied. The scent on the other wolf choked in his desperate breaths, a mix of primal musk and modern human smells from cologne and deodorant. Recognizing the latter helped Draper to focus, to hold back from harming the other creature, even as instinct told him to bite and draw blood, to kill.

He got both hind legs under the barrel of his opponent's chest and kicked. The wolf did two awkward tumbles before regaining its footing. It and the first attacker regrouped, growling, and closed in. The third, some unaffected part of Milla noticed, seemed content to hang back and observe. Something about that wolf lurking at the periphery seemed both familiar and alien. Before Draper could get a clean scent of it through the blood and musk and the city's odors, the two closest wolves lunged.

For several terrifying seconds, the space in front of Milla's eyes was a rapid-fire montage of snapping teeth and blood. She seized in place, felt explosions of fresh pain along her right leg and spine. Then the vision shorted out, and Milla found herself staring into Draper's emerald gaze, listening to his deep, musical voice, struggling to make sense of one final bit of sensory information.

"...could smell it on the third wolf. It must have been the one that did it. The one who killed her, before she could get to the safe house."

"Freesia," Milla whispered.

Thunder rumbled somewhere in the distance, an ominous portent that would have sounded normal on most lazy, late summer days. Milla reached instinctively for him, felt the tenseness in his muscles beneath his shirt, steely from the fight-or-flight rush of adrenaline surging through his blood. Draper, it turned out, had done both that

night.

“I fought back, but two more showed up. It was just me, alone against five of them. I barely got out of there,” he said. “I made it to the safe house. She wasn’t there. So I went back to our place, then the clinic. The blood...”

Milla raised up and kissed his lips, stopping him from going further with his explanation. At first, Draper remained frozen, warm flesh transformed into a block of stone by the Medusa living inside his own memory. Soon after, Milla’s lips brought him back from the dead, warming his blood, freeing him from the curse. He cupped her cheek. Milla’s hands wandered under his shirt and traveled over the impressive topography of his muscles. When her fingertips met the raised flesh of his scar, she recoiled, feeling the phantom burn of the pain on her own flesh. The sensation passed. She placed her hand on his skin lightly.

Breaking the kiss, Draper said, “I still love her. I love my wife.”

Milla nodded. “I’d lose my respect for you if you didn’t.”

“But she’s dead, and I will bring her killer to justice and clear my name.”

Milla nodded. “I know how hard this is for you, letting somebody else in, even to help.”

Draper’s eyes met hers. “Yeah, but you’re making it easier and easier.”

Milla had rescued the man from the stone. His heart had thawed.

“You’re something, Camilla,” he said, a smile tugging at his scowl.

“I am? What kind of something?”

“You’re insanely hot,” he said, stealing another kiss.

Milla held up a hand, blocking his lips. “That sounds vaguely familiar, like something that both an actor and a football quarterback have said before you. Like a press release about their trophy girlfriend, the hot model.”

“I wasn’t talking about your ass, babe,” Draper growled as he moved in for a forceful kiss, full on the lips. “I was referring to your heart. Though the rest is pretty amazing as well...”

Milla allowed his kiss, then pulled him toward her.

* * * *

He lay beside her, one leg arched, his cock half-hard across his stomach. For not the first time, Milla found herself admiring the magnificence of his naked body. She loved the way he looked, the way he smelled, the way he tasted. And she loved how Draper, a man who obviously savored having his own sexual needs satisfied, was so unselfish when it came to fulfilling hers. He had quietly committed all of Milla's sensitive spots to memory. Without giving voice to it, he even seemed to understand where she was feeling tender following their lovemaking marathons.

But for the first time, she also saw the possibility of a tomorrow with Draper, despite everything she'd learned about his situation and what she already knew about her own. The Inner Milla who refused to let men past a certain point was shifting shape, too, after a fashion.

"I have resources and money," she said while caressing the patch of dark hair around his belly button. Draper's cock jumped. "I have an excellent legal staff. I can help."

Draper covered Milla's fingers with his much larger hand just as she was walking toward his reawakened erection. "It's gone beyond that." He glanced toward the dark clouds gathering overhead. "Byxbee and the rogue wolf are part of something bigger. The way those men at the lab were able to put up such a superhuman fight, this Maiden..."

A sinking feeling possessed Milla. His words and the focus of his gaze made her feel like she was the apparition, a face superimposed over the real world. To Milla's relief, Draper turned toward her and she knew by his expression that she wasn't an afterthought.

"I appreciate the offer," he said.

"I can help you, Draper."

"You already have."

He released his hold on her hand and nudged her fingers closer to his cock. Thunder rumbled again, only this time closer to the meadow. The first warm splatter of raindrops struck Milla's chest and legs. She ceased fondling Draper's erection as the heavens opened up.

"Oh, no," she giggled.

They jumped to their feet and hastily pulled on clothes, the reverse of that awkward display when Draper transformed from man to wolf. Still, Draper looked great in clothes, whether he wore jeans or shorts or if there was a sock hanging off the end of his foot or a baseball cap at a goofy angle on his head. Unable to resist, Milla grabbed the cheeks of his ass, one in each hand. Draper jumped and turned the tables on her.

"What am I, just some piece of meat to you?"

Milla squealed when he effortlessly picked her up in his arms and spanked her ass. She loved the grin on his face, and how his eyes glowed green against the gray palette of the woods and meadow once the rain began to fall. He walked onto the trail, looking, she thought, like a modern caveman, with her as his conquest. Milla playfully kicked her legs, silently loving his warmth and closeness.

They were almost to the line of birch trees when the low, throaty growl slithered through the woods.

Draper froze. Milla saw him sniff the air right as he released her and she returned to standing on two legs. Then he assumed a protective stance and shuffled her behind him.

The predator slinked just beyond the tree line, in the gray-green wash of meadow. The wolf was a muscular, lean creature, impressive to behold. With the rain soaking its dark fur, it moved with liquid grace, a wisp of smoke, a phantom.

"Draper," Milla whispered.

"Impossible," he said, his voice not much louder. "They're not allowed to transform during the daylight, only at night, with the moon. That's the rule. The pact."

The wolf glanced up and tasted the air, searching the woods with preternaturally blue eyes.

“Is that your brother?”

“I’m not sure – I’d have to transform to be able to tell. Whoever it is broke the rules,” Draper answered, his words ending in a menacing growl. “They have defied the pact made with Saint Francis and the Earth.”

He flexed his arms. Milla glanced down to see that his hands had become fists.

“How did it find us?” she asked.

“I’m not sure it has. Not yet.”

The wolf lowered its head into the grass and resumed rooting through the meadow. It continued forward, out of sight.

“We can’t stay here,” Draper added. “The spell must be breaking down. They’re getting closer to me.”

“How did they even know where to look? Like the other night, on the highway?”

But as soon as the words were out of her mouth, Milla regretted them. She’d smelled Kathryn’s freesia perfume on the murderer’s fur through Draper’s shared vision. The rogue wolf had gotten the information out of her right before killing her.

“We have to leave,” Draper said. Taking her hand, he marched her down the path and they headed toward the cottage. Eyes darting, he scanned the way ahead. “There could be others out there, searching for the right way to get around the spell.”

Milla’s heart galloped. Every snapping branch or spatter of raindrop on a leaf in the storm’s tabernacle became another potential monster, readying to spring and bite and rend flesh from her bones. Milla tried to silence her imagination but failed. She held her breath, prepared to strike out at any attacker, utilizing the skills she’d honed with Jasper. Skills meant to fell human opponents, not humans capable of changing shape into wolves.

The trail ahead broke and she could again see the little cottage, which had strangely begun feeling more like home than her penthouse overlooking the park.

“We can take my car,” she whispered.

“Yeah, and go where? Back to New York City? It’s not safe there.”

“I know exactly where we’re going. Where we’ll be safe. Where we won’t be alone and will find plenty of help.”

* * * *

He was on the balcony overlooking the park. Draper stood naked in the gray atmosphere of the overcast morning. He leaned on one arm over the metal guardrail in the same pose she’d admired him in at the safe house, holding one of her favorite, deep coffee cups in his hand. Draper’s free set of fingers absently tugged on his balls and ogled his thickening cock. This image of him was so magnificent, from the spiky tips of his hair down to his scruffy, devil-may-care smile to his big feet, that Milla’s concern about public exposure vanished. She glided over to him, playfully reaching for the coffee cup – the reverse body language of their most recent breakfast together. Glancing down, she saw that she, too, was naked.

Embarrassment slithered over her skin, but the excitement pulsing through her insides trumped it. Milla’s nipples stiffened into mildly painful hard points. A chill teased her stomach in the face of the morning’s humidity. Milla’s pussy ignited with tingles as she moved closer to him. The sensation made her gasp. What she felt surpassed mere arousal; it verged on rabid.

Milla’s fingertips slipped free of the coffee cup, as though sliding off of polished glass instead of ceramic. “Draper,” she attempted to say. The sound that emerged was a wolf’s growl.

Milla leaned against the rail guarding her little garden patio, where more than one person was rumored to have jumped or been pushed in decades long since past. The Blayne Building was almost as infamous as the Dakota in that regard. Draper spoke her name, though his voice, too, sounded more wolf than human.

She glanced up to see his happy morning smile was gone. In its place was a snarl, one that showed sharp white teeth. Incisors, the teeth of a predator, a wolf. *What the hell?* Milla thought.

Draper dropped the coffee cup. It shattered on the slate pavers beneath their feet. The cup had not contained coffee, but blood. A vibrant stroke of red lit among the gray, staining the crushed white stones between the pavers.

Milla's gaze fell into the blood and at first, she was unable to glance away. But then she caught a ripple of movement from the corner of her eye. Draper had cast a leg over the rail. His cock bounced, full and thick. His muscles flexed. The image was as breathtaking as it was terrifying. Draper shot Milla a look before clearing the rail. She recognized what it was: desperation, the need to run. To run and keep on running.

No, you can't leave, she thought, unable to form the words. *You aren't alone any more, Draper!*

He jumped and fell. Milla followed him over the rail.

The transformation happened quickly. One instant, she was running, digging in her heels, barely aware of the cool slate beneath her soles. The next, she was sailing gracefully over the edge of the building. Wind screamed into her ears and slapped her face. Then she was falling.

Milla's blood froze. The flesh at her throat and ass seemed to pull away from her bones, chilling her to her deepest level. Spiraling out of control, she cast a glance toward the street below, a landscape she'd gazed at often from her coveted penthouse garden. The ground came rushing up.

Then, Milla wasn't falling, but flying. She reached the earth elegantly, painlessly. She shot across the sidewalk, crossed the street with ease, and entered the cool green shade of the park. A shadow kept pace beside her. Milla tipped a glance to her right and saw the wolf, powerful and handsome. She was running on four legs beside this magnificent creature. Running beside Draper.

A pleasant chill rippled through Milla's core. She called his name again. This

time, the word found its way past her lips.

“Draper.”

Milla jolted awake in the passenger’s seat of her car.

“Right here, babe,” he said. His voice, from her left, reestablished her location.

Draper was behind the wheel. The radio was on low. The wiper blades swept back and forth, the cadence hypnotic.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“Almost there,” Draper answered. “We’re coming up on your secret safe house.”

Chapter Thirteen

On the final leg of the drive to Milla's Cause, it struck her how similar the approach to her stronghold mirrored Draper's. Per her instructions, he turned at the break in the stone wall rambling along a line of towering pines, through which a single-lane dirt road meandered. If a driver didn't know where to look, it would have been easy to blow right past it, never realizing it was there. It wasn't quite the same as Draper's house, a secret cottage concealed within an optical illusion, but close enough.

The road wandered through a dense greenbelt before straightening out for the rest of the distance to the large farmhouse, barn, and numerous outbuildings. Cottages ran in a line around half of the shore of a country pond. Solar panels capped every rooftop. Various paddocks and pens dotted the compound. Hay meadows, vast gardens of vegetables and flowers, orchards, and berry patches stretched well into the distance.

There were also three bungalow-style houses completely surrounded by mesh enclosures that encompassed the surrounding trees and lawn.

"Those are the catteries," Milla said. "We have one house for the healthy rescues that are social. The other two are devoted to rescues with special needs, like feline leukemia and AIDS."

"Impressive," he said.

"It gets better," Milla said, fighting the flush of pride rising within her. "We're raising several different kinds of endangered heritage breed farm animals. We've rescued more than two dozen horses, most previously from racetracks, numerous awesome dogs – we've even rehabbed wildlife up here."

"How many people live here?"

"At last count, eighty-three. We send the kids to the best schools in the area and most of their parents are going to the local college. Sustainable agriculture, green technology. It's a start."

"It's amazing. And you grow all of your own food?"

“Most of it. We’re aiming to do better over the next year, but the numbers of mouths to feed keeps going up.”

“Nobody knows about this, about you?”

Milla shrugged. “The right people do. The ones I trust who help make it work. I’ve set up so many corporations, between me and the Cause...anyway, it’s never been about getting attention. It was all to save lives. To save the Earth.”

Draper slowed the hybrid to a stop. He faced her from the driver’s seat and smiled. Milla was relieved to see human teeth between those unshaved and supremely kissable lips.

“What?” she asked when his smile and stare persisted.

“Nothing,” he said.

But it was obvious by his expression that there was something. There was *Milla*. The warm, proud emotions threatened to put a grin on her face. Milla fought it, only to decide that this once, she’d cut herself some slack and indulge.

* * * *

The rain fell in torrents. Milla and Draper hurried across the crushed gravel drive, past a section of rustic wooden fence and tall pampas grass, and up the flagstone walk to the main house. She used her key to unlock the front door and punched a code into a security keypad after it opened. Beyond the English panes, the foyer was dry and welcoming.

“That’s quite the high-tech alarm system,” Draper said. He did a one-eighty and drank in their surroundings: a soaring staircase along the right wall; paintings and framed artwork, some of it obviously created by young hands; woven rugs, comfortable wing chairs upholstered in merlot-colored velvet, a striking cobalt blue vase filled with an arrangement of wildflowers set on an antique piecrust table.

The sound of footsteps across the floor drew Milla’s gaze into the heart of the farmhouse. A short, well-dressed woman with blond hair, plus-sized and beautiful, greeted them. Milla saw Karalynne steal a second glance at Draper before embracing

her and delivering the expected Hollywood kiss.

“Draper, this is my assistant, Karalynne,” Milla said. “The first line of defense. And Kara, this is John Draper.”

Karalynne extended her hand. Draper shook it. “Delighted.”

“Likewise.”

Then it was down to business. “Status?” Milla asked.

Karalynne shot her an exasperated look. “The first line of defense needs to remind you about your next three appointments. I’ve been putting off Stella. You’ve got that gig with Hieronymus Block for Michael Byxbee, remember?”

Draper folded his arms. “Byxbee?”

“Yes, I’m scheduled to do a shoot with Block. He’s one of the biggest fashion photographers in the business. It’s for Byxbee’s everyday line.”

“You can’t,” Draper protested. “If he suspects—”

“We can talk about this later,” Milla said, facing him. “When we’re alone.”

“No we can’t. We won’t. You,” he snapped at Karalynne. “First line of defense – *defend*, would you?”

“Mr. Draper,” Karalynne said.

“Do you know the danger?”

Milla nodded. Karalynne cleared her throat. Three rugged men appeared on the staircase. Two more rose like ghosts from behind the wing chairs. Milla sensed even more lurking in positions throughout the farmhouse. Draper’s eyes widened.

“The danger?” Karalynne parroted. “From the moment you were spotted behind the wheel of Ms. Cavanaugh’s car coming up the road, we’ve had a dozen men in position, all of them black belts. Thirteen if you count me.”

Draper’s scowl grudgingly curled into a smile. “Hell of a defense, Karalynne.”

“I do my best.”

Milla clapped a hand to the other woman’s shoulder. “Come on, Draper. There’s plenty of food in the kitchen.”

“Do you want me to ready one of our guest suites?” asked Karalynne.

Milla tipped a glance from her assistant to Draper and back again. “No, that won’t be necessary. He’ll be staying in my room.”

“Understood.”

Milla hooked an arm around Draper’s and led him down the hall, to the kitchen at the back of the house. Karalynne’s voice stopped her halfway to their intended destination.

“And about those other commitments?”

“Later,” Milla said.

As part of a house-wide, green renovation the previous year, the kitchen had been expanded to the size of a small restaurant, with energy efficient appliances and what looked like an acre of tiled floor. Fresh produce sat in a myriad of glass and stoneware bowls along the main counter. The images of these gemstones, the little and the large, reminded Milla how much time had passed since their last meal at Draper’s secret cottage. The tomatoes and snap beans tempted her. The berries – plump strawberries, indigo blueberries, and gigantic blackberries – made her salivate.

“We have a rule around here: Nobody goes hungry,” she said, crossing to one of three industrial-sized refrigerators. She found the shelves stocked with cheeses and salsas, herb breads, salads, and pitchers of juice, water, and iced coffee. In short time, she’d assembled quite the feast across a section of granite countertop.

Draper took one of the barstools. “So most of your human rescues have been recruited as ninjas?”

“No, most of them earn their paychecks, room, and board working the farm or caring for the animals. But we give them the opportunity to learn self-defense and martial arts. I learned my moves from the best.”

“Karalynne?”

Milla popped a strawberry between her lips and rolled her eyes, moaning as she bit down. The sweet flesh was still slightly warm from ripening in the fields beneath

the summer sun. “No, from my good friend Jasper.”

“Jasper, huh? Set me up with some of that,” Draper said, indicating the berries.

Milla grinned, picked another strawberry out of the bowl, and handed it over, by the stem. Draper took the hint and opened wide. Milla fed him the berry. Draper bit. Juice flowed down his chin. Milla tried to ignore her dream in the car.

Draper cupped his face. Milla reached for a cloth, but when she turned back, he was leaning over her, and his sweet, stained lips pressed against hers.

* * * *

A steady procession of faces, the old and the young, filtered through the kitchen for dinner. Milla knew all of them by name and was pleased to see everyone looking healthy, well fed, and happy.

Alejandro, the farm’s head chef, and his kitchen staff set out two different types of vegetable salad, cold pasta salad, and roasted red pepper quiche that was as exquisite as the food served at the most upscale parties she attended in the other facet of her life.

She caught Draper studying her from a corner of the room, watching her as she helped to set out the nightly spread to feed the masses or spooned food onto a plate for one of the children. He grew increasingly more unsettled, a big man in his little corner of the room. Wrongly, she assumed it was the social element of the meal. He was, the voice in her thoughts reminded, a man living alone and on the run. Sweat beaded across his forehead and she saw him taking heavy gulps from his water glass.

Milla handed kitchen duties over to Augustine, one of Alejandro’s trusted staff, and glided over to him. “Hey.” Draper nodded. “Fresh air?”

She led him through the French doors at the back of the house to the patio area that faced the orchards. Picnic tables were scattered among the ornamental plantings and garden nooks, which included wild, weedy beds of herbs. Many of the Cause’s residents were enjoying their meals at the tables, despite the threat of more rain. The storm was taking a break but was expected to make a ferocious return by sunset.

They wandered through the herb beds. A mélange of smells – pungent basil,

robust chives, spicy dill, all of it full and ripe in the summer's heat – seduced Milla's senses. Antique roses, all rare, all endangered, grew in lush rows between the herbs and the orchards. Draper remained silent until they reached the first of the pear trees.

“What's wrong?”

Draper faced her. “So what am I doing here, Camilla?”

“Right now? Giving me that look. The one that usually leads to us having an argument.”

“I'm not one of your rescues,” he said.

“I didn't...”

“Maybe not consciously, but yeah, here I am with the rest of the lost souls you've saved.”

Draper's tone lacked the gruffness she expected, though the words were still infused with power. Had she brought him here to rescue him, to keep him safe like any other deserving soul?

Milla shrugged. “We can always use another good veterinarian around here.”

“You shouldn't try to protect me,” Draper growled. “I'm the one who's responsible for protecting *you*. Only my last attempt to protect the woman I loved tanked.”

“Draper, don't,” she began.

“So it's not like I blame you. Hell, I wouldn't trust me to protect anyone.”

Milla reached up and gently caressed the fruit-laden branch. Eyes narrowed, she said, “Back it up a bit. You said, ‘last attempt to protect the woman I loved.’”

Draper's defensive stance toughened. “So?”

“So does that mean?”

“That I love you? Who wouldn't, Camilla? You're the best – though I'm pissed as hell at you for treating me like some stray dog that nobody else wanted.”

“Shut up,” Milla said, reaching for him. The declaration wasn't exactly what she wanted to hear, but it was enough.

Draper met her halfway. Their lips connected and she fell into the strength of his embrace. Though not in so many words, what he'd said cut to the heart of the matter, and there would be no taking it back.

"Thanks, babe," he growled around kisses.

"For what?"

Draper nuzzled against the side of her head. The gesture was wolfish and wonderful. "For wanting to rescue me."

* * * *

Milla hovered in the shadows, just beyond the lights filtering through the kitchen doors. Finding privacy at a place as big as Milla's Cause wasn't as easy as it sounded, but she was reasonably certain the shade of the grape arbor above the wrought iron bench provided her with the illusion as well as the reality.

Tiny electric-green flashes lit the darkness. Lightning bugs. Milla smiled. The species as a whole, like so many others, had declined globally, but here they were, thriving. Earlier in the evening, she'd watched a great blue heron stride through the cattails at the edge of the pond. The calls of three different types of owls periodically joined the chorus of insects. At Milla's Cause, man and Earth coexisted in harmony.

The cadence of rain on the canopy of grape leaves and the warm, sweet fragrance of the night were a temporary reprieve her troubles. The illusion of privacy ended. Karalynne calmly approached and took a seat. She clutched a folder against her bosom.

"Status?"

"We have spotters in the woods with night vision goggles and key people throughout the compound just in case anything else comes walking up the road," Karalynne said, delivering the information with obvious sarcasm. She reclined, crossed her legs. She rested the folder on her knee.

"Is that the information?"

"Yes."

“Who the hell is this Phelps prick?” Milla asked.

“This prick, I figure, is more of your type. He’s the son of a noted wildlife biologist. Anton Phelps. The guy devoted his life to cataloging endangered species. Until one of them ate him.”

Milla absorbed the information. Karalynne exhaled a frustrated sigh.

“Something on your mind?”

“What have you gotten yourself – and the rest of us – into?”

“So suddenly we don’t take chances to help out the innocents who need us?”

“What makes you think he’s innocent?”

“And what makes you think he’s guilty?” Milla countered, fighting to keep her voice from rising.

Karalynne tapped a pudgy pointer against the folder. “It’s all right here. Everything I could dig up on John Draper and the case of his wife’s disappearance.”

She slid the folder over. Milla reluctantly accepted the intelligence. “Have you looked it over?”

“What do you think?”

“That explains the attitude. I trust him.”

“You’re sleeping with him. If it’s one thing you should have learned by now, it’s that sex is a forum for lies and betrayal.”

“That didn’t stop you from noticing how—”

“Cute he is? Yes, he’s that. So’s the brother, according to Jasper. He called for you again today at the Blayne.”

Milla’s eyes narrowed. “I trust Draper.”

“Which one, Kane or the Draper you brought into our home?”

“My Draper. John. He’s different. As for the other one, I’m not so sure yet.”

“I’ll give you this. The man’s fine. But handsome faces and hot bodies aren’t enough.”

“No, he’s really different,” Milla said. The irony struck her and she had to

cover her mouth to contain an outburst of hysterical laughter. “This is classified, so I don’t expect you to repeat it to anyone. John Draper...he’s a werewolf.”

Karalynne’s eyes widened. “A...”

“*Werewolf*. Shape shifter. Changes form by the light of the moon. Four legs, a tail, all of it. Most of it. It’s not like the movies, though. He only does it to save lives and help the planet.”

“Okay,” Karalynne said dryly. She rose from the bench. “I’m going to check in with security and have myself a drink. It’s the first time I wish there was something stronger than grape juice in the kitchen.”

Karalynne turned toward the French doors. Milla grabbed her wrist, momentarily stopping her from leaving. “You trust me. You trust my judgment.”

“Most times.”

“Then trust me this time. John Draper didn’t kill his wife. He’s a good man. He’s one of us now, and we will help him.”

“You might want to read what’s in there before you give yourself over completely to this dude.”

“I love him. I know him, and I trust him.”

A half-hour later, after reading the documents, Milla wasn’t so sure.

Chapter Fourteen

Gambling debts. Drug abuse. One photo that had imprinted itself on her psyche with indelible strokes showed the blood.

The information pulled from Internet and library archives didn't match the man Milla had fallen so completely in love with – and had fucked repeatedly. The man now kneeling on the main cattery's floor, petting a talkative black-and-white domestic shorthaired cat while a female tiger with black boots head-butted the side of his leg. Two other residents lay on their sides, performing comical, happy flip-flops for him.

Draper talked to the cats in a gentle voice. Earlier in the night, Milla had watched him charm the rescue dogs in the kennel in a similar manner. She remembered the little finch at the secret cottage, how it had visited his shoulder without fear. Glancing around, she saw how many of the cats were focused on him, with obvious love in their wide eyes. Cats, Inner Milla reminded, were rarely fooled by charlatans. Cats knew the score where humans were concerned. Unlike most dogs, who gave love freely, you had to earn their affection. The residents at the state-of-the-art cattery had given theirs to him.

Draper didn't look like a man who'd run up more than a hundred thousand dollars in gambling debt; who had fallen into cocaine and other medical drug abuses, addictions made possible by the initials after his name; who had, through direct or indirect action, brought harm to his presumed-dead wife.

According to the articles she read and the police report Karalynne had pulled through one of their silent allies in a city precinct, drug paraphernalia was found at the crime scene. There were large amounts of money missing from their bank accounts. All of it looked damning.

But if it was one thing Milla knew about the media, it was that they could crucify anyone before a jury delivered a verdict. Evidence could be planted, signatures on checks or prescription pads forged. Milla's inner voice reminded her that Draper

had been targeted by the rogue wolf and his associates. And who could pull off planting incriminating evidence at a crime scene better than a cop himself? Maybe there was something to Draper's claim about his brother.

None of what I read about him is true, Milla thought. A sliver of doubt persisted. The rest of her knew that the man kneeling on a section of clean bamboo plank flooring, surrounded by adoring cats, the little gardens of feline-friendly grass and the network of scratching posts, branches, and cozy recessed nooks perfect for hiding, most certainly had not killed his wife. He had never harmed a living soul, aside from himself. John Draper was a good and gentle man.

He saw her studying him from across the room. "Amazing," he said. "I've never seen anything like this on this sort of scale before."

Draper rose. Milla forced a smile past her scowl and crossed the room. A half-dozen cats met her with chirps and bonks en route. "I want them all to have the best lives possible."

"Do you microchip them?"

"Every single one. We name them. Some, like Willow, know their names." Milla leaned down and scritchd the black-and-white cat. "All spayed, up to date on their shots and, at all times throughout the day, there are two or three people in here brushing them, giving them attention. Same with the dog kennels. The dogs get walked and have play time in that huge pen near the orchard."

She didn't tell him that presently there were six workers, all proficient in self-defense, waiting outside, armed with Tasers. Karalynne had insisted. Until seeing Draper with the cats, Milla hadn't questioned the precaution.

"Draper, I need you to tell me something. I need to hear it. Tell me, and I'll never ask you again."

Draper's smile sagged. "Ask me what?"

Milla moved closer and placed a hand over his heart. Through the thin layer of cotton T-shirt, she felt the beat of his heart. "Did you kill Kathryn?"

She half-expected him to pull away, to fly into a rage, to storm out of the cattery, perhaps in wolf form. He didn't.

Draper stood his ground and settled one of his much-larger hands over hers. "No, I did not."

And instantly, Milla knew he hadn't.

Saying nothing, she leaned up and kissed him. Draper kissed back. Willow rubbed against her leg, and one of the rescues meowed.

"Now that we've cleared that up," she said.

Taking his hand in hers, she started toward the door. Draper remained rooted to the spot and reeled her back to him.

"Mind if we stay a while?"

"No, why?"

"I want to spend more time in here with the cats, that's all."

Milla's smile returned. "I'd like that."

* * * *

She excused herself and delivered the news to Karalynne.

"You're sure?"

"One hundred percent, and then some. You're not to question Draper's goodness again. I want everybody to know he's on our side – and we're on his."

"Understood," Karalynne said, the edge in her voice gone.

"And call Jasper. Put him on alert. Tell him that, unlike his brother, this Kane guy isn't to be trusted."

Milla hurried up the staircase to the smaller room at the back of the house she used when she slept over at the farm. As tired as she was and in spite of the multitude of chaotic thoughts swirling through her mind, Milla felt curiously at peace. Her empathic powers had never been wrong before, and they weren't now where John Draper was concerned.

She entered the dark room. Draper stood at the window, staring out at the

storm.

“Is that the river?” he asked.

Milla closed the door. “Yes, you should see it, it’s beautiful.”

“I can see it.”

“There’s a landing and a dock for boats down there. The farmer used to take his cattle down river to auction. Needless to say, those days are long over.”

Milla stepped into the room. Opening and closing the door stirred the air. Carried on the gentle breeze was a wonderful trace of Draper’s clean sweat. The pleasant hum and chirr of insects played in the background.

She hesitated from approaching him, not out of fear but the need to record the moment, perhaps to access it at some future date when she wanted to remember what it was like to be happy. Because she was.

Silhouetted by the night’s gray glow, she saw he was naked apart from his boxer-briefs. The muscular topography of his chest, arms, and legs hovered out of focus in the shadows. Milla imagined his eyes, glowing in that preternatural shade of emerald green, the same color as the lightning bugs. Proof of goodness, of life, of Earth. The last of her doubts had been removed and, since coming to Milla’s Cause, Draper’s resistance to opening his heart seemed to have vanished. She loved him. She knew he loved her, even if he hadn’t exactly spoken the words in their proper order.

“Camilla,” he growled.

The way he said her name sent the warmth bottled inside her stomach rippling outward in concentric waves, teasing her nipples and toes, tickling the nape of her neck as well as her clit.

“Yes, Draper?”

“Stay where you are. Right there.”

A shiver tripped down Milla’s spine, enhancing the tease of arousal with a scintillating rush. She tried to swallow, only to realize her mouth had gone completely dry. “Yes,” she sighed.

“Take off your shirt.”

A second shiver possessed her before she could free the top button. Milla’s next breath came with difficulty. After drawing it in, she heard herself gasp. The scent of summer, of *Draper*, was intoxicating.

“Keep going,” he commanded.

Milla’s fingers moved lower. Finally, she reached the last button. The shirt opened, baring her stomach. She caressed her belly and bit back a moan when her wrist brushed a nipple.

“Now the rest of it. Slowly.”

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness and Milla realized what Draper was doing at the window. He dipped a hand beneath the elastic waistband of his boxer-briefs, the scrape of hair beneath his fingers and his audible gasp a sexual symphony urging her onward. Milla stepped out of her shoes, unzipped her jeans, and dropped them to the floor. The meager rectangle of lace covering her sex soon followed. Milla straightened, naked.

“Touch it,” Draper said. “I want to watch you play with that pretty pussy.”

Milla swept one hand down, between her legs. The fingers of the other caressed her chest, seeking one nipple and then the other. Pinching them unleashed powerful electric jolts through her body. Counterpointing the sensation, she eased two fingers onto her clit, pressed down, and began to pleasure herself. Her pinkie worked between her outer lips and into her slit. She quickly grew wet.

“Keep going,” Draper said.

Through a veil of shadows and excitement, Milla saw Draper yank aside his underwear, baring his balls. His erection followed. A space of a few yards separated them but, at that moment, the distance seemed more like the chasm they’d jumped on his motorcycle. Excitement raced up Milla’s back, over her shoulders, and down her bosom. Most of her body was on fire. Curiously, other regions felt icy.

“Draper, please,” Milla gasped.

“No, I want to see you touch yourself.”

Milla sucked in a lungful of air. The notion of masturbating for his pleasure while he stroked his cock at the same time both aroused and infuriated her. Her pussy ached for his fingers, his tongue, his thickness. His masculine scent, the sound of his hand gliding up and down his slick erection, made going forward almost unbearable. What he demanded of her next brought a blue streak of angry swears from her lips.

“Turn around. Bend over and touch that sweet pussy.”

Milla resisted.

“Do it for me, babe,” he said.

Reluctantly, she revolved, leaned down, and spread her legs. Reaching one hand between her inner thighs and the other around her ass, she gave him what he wanted and was rewarded with what she needed. The air in the room seemed to double in weight around her, growing impossible to breathe. The position opened her pussy to two fingers with ease. Wetness cascaded down the insides of her legs. Her fingertips brushed that amazing spot deep inside her core, threatening to make her come furiously.

“Aw, fuck,” he huffed, a disembodied voice in the darkness.

Milla felt the brush of his mouth, tasting her from behind. Licking between her legs, he cleaned her wetness from her inner thigh all the way to the source. His tongue savored her pussy before detouring north to her ass. Milla seized in place, moaned. Draper’s tongue dipped back down to join her fingers inside her opening. Milla barely contained the howl in her throat.

Tears filled her eyes, conjured by that intense happiness she hadn’t believed possible. The orgasm overwhelmed her. She backed against his face and Draper matched her by pressing forward, licking her, sniffing at her, holding onto her. Milla climaxed against his mouth, convinced she would pass out before the shudders ceased.

“I love your taste,” he growled in the darkness, before she came down.

She loved his and told him so. Then she proved it, on her knees in front of him.

They lay together in the shadows, Milla's spine pressed against Draper's front. The warmth of his breath over her bare shoulders lulled her to a place that wasn't quite sleep, but more of a contemplative state of awareness in which she planned her next step.

The locket around Zora Thurston's neck – Milla was sure it was the same one that had belonged to Kathryn Draper. Phelps, son of a famous nature biologist – had his father uncovered the Vidimus Brotherhood's secret in his quest to catalog endangered species? Where did Michael Byxbee fit in with all of it? Byxbee, and his Maiden.

In the muddy glow before dawn, Milla slipped free of Draper's arm. She eased off the bed, turned, and saw him roll onto his back in response. The flimsy top sheet they'd sweated under had fallen beneath his waist to the line of crisp curls along his pubis. His swollen cock tented the sheet. She'd felt its excitement pulsing against her throughout the night. Still fast asleep, Draper stretched. One of his legs and a foot slipped into view.

It shocked her how desperately she wanted more of him. They'd fucked seemingly nonstop since she found her way back to his cottage, more sex than Milla had ever known in her life and better than she'd ever dreamed possible.

She touched herself and found her nipples hard, as well as mildly sore after numerous pinchings between Draper's forefinger and thumb. She gently spread her pussy's outer lips and encountered a similar paradox. Her flesh sang with both pleasure and pain, though more of the former. The gentle sough of his breaths, the image of his body, pushed her one step closer to waking him. Kissing him. Fucking him. Sex with John Draper, a wanted man, a *wolfman*, was nothing short of supernatural. He had ruined her for other men, because any man from this point forward would pale in comparison in too many ways.

Then she recalled how passionately he'd acted toward her, how he'd admitted in actions and almost in words his love for her, and the guilty poison of jealousy toward

his missing wife died. Draper did love her. Perhaps, she mused, she had ruined him, too – something her predecessor hasn't managed to accomplish.

She quietly dressed, picked up her shoes, and padded barefoot out of the room and down the stairs.

Four pots of organic, cruelty-free coffee sat on burners in the kitchen. Another chilled in a pitcher of ice inside one of the fridges. Karalynne sat on a barstool, nursing a cup of tea.

“Good morning,” Milla said.

Karalynne nodded. “And?”

Milla poured coffee into a mug, added fresh cream from the farm's herds, and downed a sip before answering. “I'm going. I have to learn more about Byxbee and what's happening behind the scenes.”

“And him?”

“I'm doing this for him as well as our Mother.”

“I'd still like to take certain precautions,” Karalynne said. “Regarding your werewolf.”

“The werewolf's okay. Better than okay. Draper's the best. And when he asks where I am?”

“I'm telling him you're on assignment. After all, you are *the* Camilla Cavanaugh.”

“That's me,” she said, taking another sip of her coffee. “Supermodel, secret agent, and spy. Christ.”

She started to giggle. Karalynne, who had been a block of ice since their arrival to the farm, began laughing with her. The glacier melted and Milla gravitated toward her with arms extended. They hugged.

“Thanks for everything.”

Karalynne pushed her away. “Think nothing of it. And take a damn shower – you smell like sex.”

Milla flipped her middle finger at the other woman. “Jealous?”

“More than you can imagine. It’s been so long since the last time, I think my virginity grew back. I can hear it squeak when I walk.”

* * * *

The drive to the city passed in a blur of thoughts about John Draper. She was aware of the Taconic and its landmarks, but at some point in the drive, the coffee in her big travel mug turned cold and she found herself wondering where the hours went. Had she been hypnotized? No, she realized; this was what real happiness felt like, real love.

She parked the car and thought about hopping a taxi to the Blayne Building, but decided to walk the few blocks. The day had started out overcast. Humidity lay rotten over the city, an effect that worsened after the sun broke through the clouds. Still, Milla’s happiness persisted. Draper was safe at Milla’s Cause, along with the other souls she’s rescued. That was what mattered most.

She signed a half-dozen autographs between the garage and the Blayne’s revolving door.

“Hello, my dear,” she said to Jasper.

“Ms. Cavanaugh.”

She greeted him with a Hollywood kiss. As her lips passed his ear, she whispered, “Report.”

“All’s well up top. Your kitties have been well looked after.”

“That was never a concern, Sensei,” Milla said. “Though I understand we had a return visitor. All okay on this front?”

“Of course. And if it hadn’t been, I would have knocked him all the way to Hoboken, badge or no badge.”

“You’re the man,” Milla said, patting the doorman’s chest.

Inside the penthouse, she greeted Furball first, Marshmallow second and finally Duck, who sat in an angry pose with her tail snapping. Milla scooped the fluffy black cat into her arms, ignoring her yowls, and kissed her. Duck quickly ceased resisting

and began to purr.

“Momma’s back, and she’s so happy.”

Milla crossed to the balcony, careful not to let any of the cats out, and drank in the view. Music drifted up from somewhere far below in Central Park. She took a deep breath of the muggy air and exhaled his name. In the shower, she masturbated, reliving the previous night’s incredible sexual adventures.

Milla was happy, blissfully so.

As she readied for her gig at Michael Byxbee’s studios, a cloud fell over her mood and she wondered how long it would be before she was happy again, if ever.

Chapter Fifteen

She didn't want it to happen, but Michael Byxbee seduced her.

The trip to his studios on Forty-Second Street seemed to take forever. Milla was aware of the gonging weight of every second. Traffic stood still; Milla swore that the grimy digital numbers on the taxi's dashboard clock did as well. The final few dragging steps beneath the elegant archway, through the art deco lobby of the Verona Building and into the elevator, were like trying to run through the waist-deep waters of a nightmare.

She emerged in the reception area of Byxbee's vast Manhattan headquarters with a smile fixed on her face and her veneer in place, knowing she had breached the enemy's stronghold. One of Byxbee's many minions offered her coffee. Milla declined. Another asked her if she wanted water while walking her through the vast showroom whose walls were comprised of glass display cabinets filled with elegant original garments, accessories, and shoes, all of them bearing Byxbee's signature mark.

Milla's heartbeat pounded in her ears on that final stretch of the journey, past the offices and conference room to the dressing area, where the designer's latest creations hung on racks, awaiting Milla's body to infuse them with life. To transform them.

"You know the story I'm trying to tell," Byxbee said, after delivering a fake kiss that made Milla's flesh crawl. "We are dressing this upscale, successful maiden through every part of her day – for her career, for play after work, and for evening."

Her smile persisting, Milla drank in the image of him, mean and sour and petty. The cologne he exuded was exotic and smelled expensive, no doubt Byxbee's own signature scent, though Milla knew it disguised rottenness beneath. Byxbee had spilled blood and had stripped fur from flesh. It took all of her focus to maintain the façade and not strike out at him, attack him for all the pain he had caused Draper and the Vidimus Brotherhood.

"Where's your little assistant?" Byxbee asked while setting one of the garments

over the back of a chair.

“Why, do I need her?”

“No, it’s just that we never get to see her,” he continued in a casual tone, though she sensed he was fishing for information. “Not much of an assistant, is she?”

“Don’t you have assistants?”

“Several.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“No problem, dear,” Byxbee said. “And I hope there won’t be one.”

“Then we’re all on the same page, aren’t we?”

She watched Byxbee pick up his organizer, the same fat book she’d stolen the electronic key from on the night she met John Draper. He clutched it to his chest. The tension between them grew, and Milla was sure her guilt could be read on her face. His was certainly obvious, the way it hung around him, clotted and shadowy, doused in cologne to cover it up. If her empathic powers were detecting Byxbee’s darkness, was it possible he, in return, could perceive her involvement with Draper? The smile on Milla’s face was phony, but the love she felt for the man Byxbee was so desperate to destroy might be tangible and showing through her mask.

“One of my assistants will be in with you. Do you need anything?”

“Nothing,” Milla lied. What she needed was knowledge: the truth about Byxbee’s role in the broader picture.

Milla wasn’t leaving his studio until she had it.

But his clothes seduced her. She hadn’t intended to allow their beauty to beguile her, but there was no escaping it. While Hieronymus Block and his team set up in their corner of the studio, Milla walked through the different outfits. The first was a chic set of separates: a fluffy knit sweater over a luxurious platinum silk button-down and a bouncing black skirt, meant to represent the girl during her casual moments.

The stylist teased Milla’s hair into a wild tornado of auburn locks that made it look like her head was exploding.

For the work study, she was given a severe style and outfitted in a woman's-cut, pinstriped suit and a gorgeous feminine top along with horn rims that Milla twirled in several jaunty poses. Her character, so the story went in pictures instead of words, was a fabric buyer for a world-famous house of design. The fiction wasn't that much of a stretch; for that segment of the shoot, the action shifted to Byxbee's own textiles room, where bolts of the lush fabrics used to create the runway show were draped. Dress forms stood around the room. Though meant as props for the shoot, they loomed ominously at the periphery, like silent soldiers pulling guard duty.

The silks and organza, so bright and colorful, so lavishly high-end, bewitched her. Milla's eyes fell into the pull of the cobalt and raspberry charmeuse, the houndstooth and herringbone patterns, and one print in particular that looked more like soft, pale feathers than actual fabric.

Hieronymus called for another model to enter the frame – the mysterious girl's handsome male assistant. The girl, Milla, turned around to see her new partner was Zora Thurston's latest boy toy, the man with the blue wolf's eyes.

"Jason Phelps, meet Milla Cavanaugh," Hieronymus said. "Milla, meet Jason Phelps."

"We've met," Milla said.

"Yes, we have."

Phelps moved closer, out of the periphery where he had blended in with the dress forms, and into the frame. He carried a stack of pelts in his arm. Milla's façade almost shattered, but she managed to remain cool on the outside, even when one of the photographs required her to caress the fur, and a jolt of raw sexual energy gripped her as a result.

In one suggestive pose, Milla was directed to lean over the cutting table where the wolf pelts and fabric were laid out. Phelps moved close enough to raise all of her self-defense warning flags. He placed a hand around her shoulder and pressed his body against hers at the photographer's instruction.

“We want to infer that she and her assistant have sexual chemistry,” Hieronymus said. “It’s there, whether or not they act on it and actually have sex.”

Milla’s skin, already tingling from contact with the fur, crawled after Keith leaned closer and she felt the fullness of his cock against her hip.

“Milla,” he growled in her ear. His breath gusted over her throat.

Her coy smile somehow survived intact. “Hello,” she cooed.

“Good chilling with you again.”

The click of the camera drummed in counterpoint against Milla’s heartbeat.

“Likewise. I’m sure my dear friend Zora would love to know that you’re so thrilled to chill with me.”

From the corner of her eye, Milla saw him adjust his erection. “Oh, that. It can’t be helped. I always throw one around something beautiful.”

“You flatter me.”

“Not at all,” he said, and Milla wondered if she was the source of his excitement. It was more likely he’d gotten hard over touching the animal skins, aroused in the same primal way as her own pussy.

She tipped a glance up at his eyes. Phelps’s handsomeness at such close range struck her fully, enough to elicit a gasp. His eyes, so blue, held her under their spell until Milla blinked herself free and stepped away from him, aware of the hot slither of his cock as it slipped off her lap.

“Let’s try something really provocative,” Hieronymus said. “Milla, love, lie on your back.”

“What?” Milla protested.

“On top of the table. Phelps, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

Phelps gripped Milla by the hips and boosted her onto the table, atop the pelts and textiles. The feel of his fingertips worked heat through her garment and the powerful skins beneath her ass sent shivers through her body. Milla trembled. Phelps

leaned in. The smirk on his face widened at her obvious discomfort.

“You really are magnificent,” he growled. “I know why Zora hates you so much. She’s jealous.”

“Jealous, really? It’s not because I dumped a plate of salad and a gallon of creamy Italian on her lap at Planet Hollywood, or that time when she got drunk before a show and tripped on the runway and I walked over her?”

“Icing on the cake, girl.”

“Now lie back completely, Milla, and you, Phelps, you lean over her.”

Milla shot a threatening look at her adversary. His smile died.

“Come on, let’s make love for the audience,” Hieronymus said.

Milla’s eyes remained locked. Phelps blinked first. Reluctantly, she eased back onto the pelts.

Then the visions consumed her.

In her mind’s eye, as her fingers clutched at fur and her physical eyes rolled back in their sockets, she saw a man, Draper’s age, only bald. The man crouched naked in an alley. He transformed, becoming a wolf. He was a wolf when they killed him.

“Yes, that’s great, love,” she heard Hieronymus drone in real time, his voice distant, set against a violent chorus of howls and grunts.

Another man, heavyset, with blond hair. Backed into a dark corner. Under the overhang of a metal building – a diner? He transformed. Because of his weight as a man, he was slower as a wolf, slower than the two predators that had pinned him down. He was still alive and fully aware of the exquisite pain when they began to strip the fur from his flesh.

Searing agony tore across Milla’s neck and spine. She screamed, sure she was about to pass out. Blood poured down her throat. It wasn’t until the photographer spoke her name that she realized the blood was only in her mind, another creature’s sacrament.

Milla sucked in a deep breath. The air stunk of Phelps’s cologne, Michael

Byxbee's designer scent. Her fingers clutched at the pelts. Materials sourced from living, beautiful human-wolf creatures. The bodies found dumped around the city in recent weeks.

The visions faded. Per Hieronymus's instructions, Phelps pressed against her, in a stance that mirrored the missionary fuck position. Milla felt the weight of his cock against her, separated from her only by the clothes they wore. She hated his handsome, brutal face. His soul was stained.

"Beautiful," the photographer sighed.

"I agree," said Phelps.

Milla hauled back and swung. She struck him across the cheek hard enough to leave a mark and remove his smirk. The camera captured the moment perfectly.

For the last vignette, Milla donned one of Byxbee's evening creations, a burgundy Bordeaux silk gown, bare at the shoulders, with heels. The vamps on the shoes were decorated with garnet gemstones, creating an image she couldn't shake – drops of blood. The visual was made manifest when Byxbee presented her with a stunning black and silver stole to drape across her shoulders. Milla hurriedly put it on, concealing the sutures on her arm from prying eyes.

Byxbee stood back and admired the results. "Stunning."

The photographer shot her standing before an ornate mirror, her heartbroken expression clearly displayed in the reflection as she relived the murder of the creature that had once owned the pelt.

"Excellent, as always," Byxbee said.

He took the fur stole from Milla's shoulder and handed it over to one of the assistants. Milla mouthed a thank-you and hastily turned away. The assistant helped her out of the gown. Byxbee took the exquisite shoes. Standing only in panties with her arms crossed over her breasts, Milla experienced the terrible memory of being skinned alive through the eyes of the dead wolf. The tops of her exposed arms and legs prickled with gooseflesh.

“Get dressed,” Byxbee snapped, walking away. The assistant held court beside him.

When she was again alone, Milla drew in a cleansing breath and willed her nerves to steady. She pulled on her jeans and top. She’d come here for answers and had found at least some of them. Byxbee was directly responsible for the deaths of the Vidimus shape shifters. With that realization, Milla also knew her own life was in jeopardy.

She reached for her bag. A low, throaty growl sounded behind her. Milla turned. The punch sent her flying backwards. Before crashing into one of the clothes racks, her inner voice noted that she seemed to be airborne for an impressive amount of time.

Her attacker had crept right up to her with feline grace. Milla picked herself off the floor and spun around. Her instincts activated, and she barely avoided a strike by talons the color of fresh blood. Milla bent backwards, grabbed the metal rail, and pulled, driving it into her attacker’s hand. Her adversary howled in pain.

Milla rounded a table covered in bolts of expensive fabric, glass apothecary jars filled with beads and buttons, and a row of headless dress forms. Her attacker swam into view on the other side. Those sharp, painted talons belonged to Zora Thurston.

“You,” Milla said.

Kathryn Draper’s locket dangled around the other woman’s neck. Zora rounded the table, a snarl on her lips. “I’ve been waiting to kick your ass for a very long time.”

Fresh adrenaline surged through Milla’s blood. “Don’t convince yourself the wait is over – you haven’t kicked it yet.”

“A minor detail,” Zora cackled. “We know about you and the sad, tragic, deposed king of the Vidimus crown.”

Milla flexed both of her hands into fists. “I don’t know what language you’re babbling in, bitch.”

“Draper,” Zora said. “Soon, we’ll have him in custody. It’s just a matter of

time until he's dead and the fur is ripped off his bones, like all the others. Maybe I'll only paralyze you tonight. Let you live long enough to see it happen."

Milla straightened, extended her arms, and wagged her fingers. "Bring it on."

She said it calmly, but the invitation spurred Zora into charging at her with the force of an angry bull. The collision knocked Milla backward onto the top of the nearest cutting table and forced the air out of her lungs. Struggling to breathe, she rolled to the floor, somehow landing on both feet as Zora leaped onto the table. The glint in Zora's eyes and the ease and fluidity in her movements was unnatural, mirroring that of the two thugs she'd squared off against on Waverly.

The snarling creature, hunched and salivating, readying to strike, *was* Zora Thurston, but a new, improved version. A Zora that was woman on the outside and equal parts animal within. A predator.

A wolf.

"I think I'll start by disfiguring that face of yours," Zora giggled.

She dug in her heels, hauled back, and jumped.

Milla grabbed one of the dress forms and thrust. The impact deflected Zora into the wall. Zora met the bare bricks with both hands, flipped heels over head, and kicked out again. She sailed across the distance and slammed into Milla with enough force to send them both into a roll. They struck a counter. Glass shattered, and metal beads flew across the floor in every direction.

The disconnected inner voice yelling in Milla's thoughts compared Zora's strength to one of the difficult rescued horses at the Cause – Freddie, a mare she'd saved from slaughter. Or one of the heritage cows during routine veterinary care. Milla had done her share of field work at the farm. Under normal circumstances, thanks to Jasper's training, she could have snapped Zora Thurston in half.

The other woman threw a swipe. Milla narrowly avoided taking Zora's claws across her lips and cheek. Instead, they sliced through her top and drew fine lines of blood across her shoulder.

Milla bit back a howl as time-delayed pain seared her flesh. Zora sprang at her again. Milla reached for a bolt of grape silk. Zora's claws easily tore through the fabric and knocked the roll out of her hands. She lunged.

Milla sidestepped and launched a fist into Zora's guts when she spun around. The counterattack worked better than Milla hoped. She heard the agonizing wheeze, proof that her jab had transformed Zora's lungs into vacuums. Zora then doubled over, clutching at her stomach. Milla grabbed the nearest apothecary jar off the counter and brought it crashing down on top of the other woman's skull. Zora, along with a few hundred elegant buttons, dropped to the floor.

Applause sounded from across the room. "Bravo," Byxbee said.

Milla turned to see the designer, Phelps, and the two men from the fur lab had entered the room.

Phelps said, "Take her."

The men advanced.

Chapter Sixteen

Though her heart raced and she was painfully aware of her fresh wounds, Milla flashed a cool smile at the two men. The taller, the Pole, had two black eyes. The shorter man's face was a patchwork of bruises around a swollen nose, split at the bridge. She had inflicted most of those wounds and planned to deliver even more.

"If it isn't the Lee brothers again," she said. "'Home' and 'Ugh.'"

The Pole swiped a thumb across his bruised lips. "I knew it was her, at Waverly. I seen that underwear ad she did for you. I'd never forget those tits and that ass."

"These tits and this ass wiped the floor with you both once before," Milla said, tossing up both fists protectively before her face. "Give it your best shot."

"Two against one," the Blade said, stepping closer.

"Sorry about those unfair odds, boys," Milla fired back.

Despite her bravado, she knew the odds were stacked against her. Just how much became clear after taking bragging rights to the first round, when something standing on two legs that wasn't fully human nor wolf but parts of both lumbered into the room.

* * * *

"Where is he?"

Milla reached for her head, which seemed to pound in rhythm to the dance number cycling through her thoughts. Her wrist didn't get far before snapping back down. The metallic clink of handcuffs greeted her ears through the pain and the music.

"Where is who?" she asked, tasting blood.

"Let's not play coy, Milla," the man asked.

She came out of the fog enough to recognize that the voice belonged to Byxbee.

"I would prefer that my men don't damage you any worse than they already have."

"Men?" Milla parroted. "What was that thing with the pointy ears and snout?"

Byxbee ignored the question. “Of course, you unleashed plenty of damage on them in that scrum, which was breathtaking to watch. Color me impressed.”

A shadowy vision briefly teased the forefront of Milla’s thoughts, of her body-flipping the Pole right before sending the Blade headfirst into a window. The music of breaking glass trumped the dance beat bouncing around inside her skull.

“John Draper. Where is he?”

Milla rattled the cuffs. She was imprisoned against a chair. A metal chair. “He’s with your mother, bitch,” she answered. “With your bitch of a mother.”

Byxbee struck her. The sting of his backhand paled in comparison to what she’d suffered during her brief engagement with his wolf-man.

“Does Stella know that your fuse is so short?”

Byxbee tisked. “Stella knows what I want her to, as does everybody in this empire that I’ve created.”

“You’ve had her glammared?”

“You’re familiar with the process?”

“Intimately, and it doesn’t work on me. And as for an empire?” Milla laughed.

“You have no idea the power I possess. I warn you not to push me. Just tell me where John Draper is.”

Milla hacked up a cocktail of blood and spit and let it fly. Unladylike, true, but the gesture made it easier to think, to focus. The room stabilized fully once more around her. Byxbee sat with his round ass planted against his desk.

“Let me guess. If I don’t give you the location of the Alpha, you’ll turn me over to your spooky-looking werewolf again. Or worse, Zora, right?”

“Zora?”

“I assume Zora Thurston is this ‘maiden’ you and the rest of your boys are so wet over. And I understand why. I thought she was scary even before our little tango in there. What a hellcat. If I didn’t know better, I’d guess she goes through a ton of electrolysis every full moon. She’s Vidimus, right?”

Byxbee's puckered smile tightened. "Not quite. Zora is a recent augment."

"You don't say."

"The empire we're building here, this is just one facet of it," Byxbee said, sweeping a hand theatrically to indicate the studio. "There are far more lucrative divisions. Biotech, for instance. Our people have isolated the Vidimus gene that allowed the Brotherhood to shape shift."

Milla came fully out of the fog at the revelation. "I thought the ability to transform required training and a commitment to the pact?"

Byxbee snorted a laugh. "That arcane foolishness no longer applies. We've almost perfected an artificial means, now that we've identified the gene and cloned it. No prayers to a dead, docile saint required. The gene can be anybody's now, for the right price. Presidents, kings, CEOs. We control it."

"Is that what that thing with the face was, an augment?"

"The process is still being tweaked, but it works."

"Funny, I kicked Zora's augmented ass."

"You, my dear, are extraordinary, which is why I want you to consider coming over to our side. Joining the organization."

Milla blinked rapidly. "Me? *You*? Are you high on the Vidimus gene, dude?"

"I'm completely serious. The world is about to change, Milla. A transformation. Call it what you want – the Apocalypse, Revelations. Though not the kind you or the religious nuts waiting to spread their arms and ascend into Heaven are expecting. A restructuring of society and life on a planetary scale. A manufactured Apocalypse, if you will."

Milla narrowed her eyes. "Let me guess, with you and your empire in control of it all?"

"You don't yet realize this, and how could you, but we're about to become invincible."

"Because of..."

“The Maiden,” Byxbee said.

“Oh yes, this mysterious figurehead. If she’s so powerful, why is she so terrified of John Draper?”

“She’s not afraid of him,” Byxbee snapped. “She simply wants to avoid any misunderstanding. He could be an annoyance as the time of reckoning draws closer.”

Milla rattled her cuffs. “Sucks to be her.”

Byxbee’s impatience grew obvious. “Milla, this offer does have a shelf life. I’m not going to ask you again.”

“Then it also sucks to be you.”

“Is that your final decision?”

Milla coughed to clear her throat and beckoned Byxbee over with a tilt of her head. Byxbee leaned closer. Milla spat at him, nailing him in the eye.

“That’s my answer, Byxbee.”

The designer drew in an audible breath, straightened, and wiped his face. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“Go fuck one of your dress forms,” Milla said. “Which is probably the only way you ever get any.”

“Even sorrier for what’s in store for you now,” he calmly said. “The Maiden is merciless to her enemies.”

“I’m terrified,” Milla said. She was, but Inner Milla made it possible for her not to show any outward sign of fear. “Bring it on.”

“It takes a while to dress the Maiden,” Byxbee said. “As a model, I’m sure you can appreciate that she likes to look her best. She can be somewhat meticulous about the process. Difficult, even. Just like you and your ilk, from time to time. In the meanwhile...”

Byxbee glanced at the door and nodded. Phelps entered the office.

“Take her to the sitting room and get her ready to meet the Maiden,” Byxbee said.

Phelps nodded. "Sure."

Milla didn't like the look on his face.

"Here's how it's gonna go down," Phelps said. "I unlock the cuffs. You do as you're told and they stay off. You so much as look at me funny or worse, I'm afraid you're going to see some ugly stuff up close and personal."

The man with the cold blue gaze delivered this threat while marching her through Byxbee's studio. Milla noticed that the few windows she passed showed a dark sky lit by the city's glare. It was later in the night than she'd thought. Certainly by now, Karalynne knew something had gone terribly wrong. She would send help.

Phelps halted in place abruptly, shocking Milla out of her wishful thoughts. "Are you listening?"

"Yes, sorry, thought there was a gnat buzzing around my ears."

Phelps gave her a shove forward. "It's too bad the Maiden's going to rip that tongue out of your mouth. I'd love to put it to better use."

"This Maiden of yours..."

Phelps gripped Milla's bound wrists and pushed her toward the proper door. "Over there, and don't worry – you'll be meeting her soon enough."

The door opened on a little room with a vignette of leather club chairs and a camelback sofa. Another door at the far end sat ajar, revealing a bathroom crafted in stark white subway tiles.

"You'll want to wash up and change out of these rags," Phelps said. "Michael has left you some new clothes."

"I'm good in these, thanks."

"Shower and change," he said, "or I'll do it for you. Are you hungry?"

"Are you offering me my last meal?"

"I'm offering to make this as painless as possible."

"Painless?" Milla's cavalier attitude vanished. All serious, she said, "Is that how it was for Kathryn Draper? Painless?"

Phelps pinned her in his blue gaze. “I’m going to release you. Remember what I said. You don’t want to do anything stupid.”

He fished a key out of his pockets and inserted it into the cuffs. Milla tensed. The instant he unlocked her, she would strike.

The cuffs released Milla’s wrists. She turned and fired a punch at Phelps’s face, at eye level. Her hand sliced through air.

Milla revolved fully, only to stagger back, gasping, at the image that greeted her eyes. Standing in the space where Phelps had been seconds earlier was a wolf, large and muscular, with glowing blue eyes and a snarl on its trembling, wet lips. The wolf advanced. Milla retreated. A throaty growl slithered through the air.

Milla held up both hands. “Heel, I get it.”

The wolf altered back into Phelps, who rose up to stand on two legs. His clothes, a tailored men’s suit, materialized out of his fur. He didn’t even need to adjust his tie, though he gave his crotch a tug.

“Your clothes,” Milla said.

“That? Just another of the new advancements. No more of that awkward strip-and-shift shit anymore.”

“But how?”

“Michael Byxbee is the best fashion designer in the business,” Phelps said.

“Now get ready. I’ll be back for you soon enough.”

Then he was gone. Milla heard the door latch shut behind him and the click of the lock. Getting her chaotic thoughts to focus proved nearly impossible. Her heart hammered in her ears. Her side sang in agony from where Byxbee’s wolf-man had pummeled her and when she lifted her top, a giant inflamed spot had blossomed over her kidney, red that would be deep purple by morning.

If she lived to the morning, the wise voice in her thoughts reminded.

It was the wake-up call she desperately needed. Going on automatic, Milla shook out of her paralysis and hurried toward the bathroom. The pain inflicted upon

her from numerous attackers vanished into the background, expelled by greater imperatives.

She pushed the bathroom door fully open. The walls were solid, no windows. An exquisite gown in pale silk, fitted on top yet flowing on the sides to resemble a rare orchid, hung from a hook. There were new undergarments, a pair of heels.

“Son of a bitch,” Milla grumbled.

She checked the cabinets, but apart from a bar of soap and the expected toiletries, there was nothing to help her mount any kind of effective defense.

“No silver bullets, no garlic or crucifixes,” she mumbled.

But she still had her hands, her feet, and her determination. And there was one other thing. Milla reached for her throat and followed the simple silver chain down to the Saint Francis medallion.

In a daze, Milla peeled off the clothes that had become bloody rags. She ran cold water in the shower and stepped in. The chill hit her skin with a sting of fresh pain. Milla cranked the knob all the way, suppressed a yelp, and soaped her body beneath the frigid cascade. The icy water made her teeth chatter, but it also brought her fully alive, to the rawest edge possible. She would need her senses to be at their sharpest for what was to come.

“Saint Francis,” she whispered through trembling lips, “by your example, you have inspired me to become an instrument of peace. Where there has been hatred, I’ve tried to sow love. Where I’ve found injury, pardon; when I had doubt, I swiftly kicked my own fanny to remind myself of faith...”

She rubbed the bar of soap over her body and rinsed, holding in a scream when the water burned her wounds.

“I’ve tried to create more light on this Earth than darkness, more joy than sadness, and I’ve consoled more souls than I’ve sought to be consoled, to understand more than I’ve needed to be understood, to give more love than I’ve demanded love. And please know how much I appreciate that irony. I do love John Draper, and I need

him, Saint Francis. Oh, how I need him now.”

Clearing her throat, Milla straightened beneath the brutal spray.

“I’ve tried to give more than receive, and to pardon more than I’ve sought pardon. And please remember that, in addition to all the rest, I’ve tried to keep my carbon footprint down, somewhere in the size three range – American shoe size, not European. So, for the first time in a long time, I’m asking for your help. Please watch over me, Francis. And Jude and Anthony and Saint Theresa and Mother Earth and God the Father and God the Son and the Goddess and the Universe and anybody else up there who’s listening to me.”

Milla turned off the water and towed dry. The chill on her skin lingered even after she dressed in the elegant clothes Byxbee had provided. She was slipping into her heels when the sitting room door again opened.

Phelps entered the room, dragging another shackled body with him.

A large, male body.

“We found this sniffing around your apartment building,” Phelps said.

Milla had pledged her love to Draper and had prayed for rescue. Whatever responding saint or supernatural powers had gotten the request at least partially right. It had sent her the wrong brother by mistake.

Chapter Seventeen

Kane Draper spilled across the floor in a heap.

Phelps shook out his hands and cracked his neck. “You even think about transforming your way out of those cuffs, I’ve got bone saws ready to carve you into a fur coat.”

Kane raised his head. He was bleeding from his lips and a gash to the side of his face, near one eye. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he said, pain infusing his voice.

Phelps’s eyes shifted to Milla. “You look fly, girl.”

Milla answered with both middle fingers.

“Shame,” Phelps said. “I’ll be back. She’s almost ready for you.”

The door closed. Kane rolled his wounded blue gaze at Milla. “Who the fuck is he talking about?”

Milla shrugged. “You tell me.”

Kane lifted his torso the best he could. The handcuffs cinched around his wrists had dug deep enough into his flesh to draw blood. “How the fuck would I know?”

“Your brother doesn’t think you’re as innocent in all of this as you claim.”

Kane’s eyes widened. “What? News flash, Milla – take a look at me. These welts look like hickeys to you?”

Milla shook out of her defensive stance and moved to assist him. “Since you put it so delicately.”

With Milla’s help, Kane settled into one of the club chairs. She rinsed a face cloth and ran it over his mouth. Kane hawked up a wad of blood and spat it onto the floor.

“Byxbee’s men, I assume,” he said, wincing when she dabbed at the cut near his eye. “Only some of them were—”

“Wolf-men,” Milla interjected. “They’re taking some kind of gene therapy. Not always as effective as the Vidimus Brotherhood method, but still impressive. One of

them knocked me unconscious.”

“That explains how the dickweed who jumped me near your place got back on his hairy clodhoppers so fast after I clocked him.” He winced again and shot her a look. “Johnny really thinks I helped these fashion-forward fucks?”

“He does. As I heard it, you missed that important family meeting.”

Guilt weighed upon his eyes. “I fucked up.”

“How, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Not how, *who*.”

“A girl?”

“No, two.”

Milla recoiled. “You’re disgusting.”

“No doubt, but do you think I’d work against my own brother?”

Milla checked Kane’s wrists. If this was another elaborate deception, Kane Draper was paying for it in plenty of blood and pain. Appearances alone, Milla knew, weren’t reason enough to trust him. She placed a hand over Kane’s heart.

“Oh, baby,” he huffed in a voice that contained zero sex appeal.

“Shut up,” Milla said. “You asked for an answer. I’m giving it to you.”

She found his heartbeat beneath his dress shirt and tie, and a sheen of sweat and blood. This close to him and minus the distraction of his attempt to glamor her, Milla realized how much Kane Draper resembled his older brother. Younger, but not by much, and those eyes, so startlingly blue instead of green, he nonetheless triggered certain buttons and receptors. The scent of his sweat mixed with the metallic odor of his blood added to her confusion.

Kane, unlike his older brother, was used to these sorts of reactions from women, she was convinced. She knew without asking him that he’d often used his magnetism to bed women, had probably taken advantage of more than one, and had loved and left behind a long line of bodies with broken hearts. But those bodies, she sensed, had never stopped breathing as a result. He wasn’t the most honorable man Milla had ever

met, especially since Draper set the bar so high, but Kane was no killer.

“I believe you,” she said, withdrawing her hand. “And if I do, so will Draper. Now hurry up and transform so we can get the hell out of here.”

“Glad you’re on my side, but we’ve got one problem.”

“Only one?”

Kane flashed a defeated look. “The cuffs behind my back, that’s not random placement, you know. If I shift, I’ll end up ripping my limbs out of their sockets.”

Milla huffed a swear beneath her breath. “Who knows you’re here?”

“Just you now, I’m sorry to report.”

“Well, that only means we’ve got them right where they want us,” Milla sighed. “What Byxbee said to me has implications that reach a lot farther than any of us thought.”

“Such as?”

“That by direct action, they’re manufacturing the Apocalypse and getting set up to take over whatever’s still standing once the ash settles.”

“Michael Byxbee’s in the rag trade.”

“That rag trader’s managed to solve the wardrobe malfunction problem when you people shift shape, and he’s isolated the Vidimus gene.”

Milla’s eyes widened. She clapped a hand against Kane’s shoulder.

“Ow,” he grouched. “What?”

“Can you partially transform?”

“Say what?”

“When you shift shape, can you change only certain parts, even if it’s just for a few seconds? Like long enough to free one hand from a cuff?”

“I don’t know,” Kane said. “It doesn’t really work that way.”

“You’re not supposed to use your powers for violence, either, but they sure don’t mind the bloodshed,” she countered. “And if we’re going to get out of here, you’d better plan on cracking at least a few skulls. I don’t think Saint Francis would

mind, if it means stopping these people from trashing the entire planet.”

“It’ll still do a number on my arm.”

“So you’ll be down to one fist instead of two,” she snapped. “Come on, man up. Or *wolf up*. Whatever it takes – we need all the muscle we can get.”

She gave him a smack. The grouchy scowl he responded with, again so like Draper, lived too briefly on his face. The door opened. Phelps entered the room, brandishing a gun. The Pole hovered inside the threshold, slaying her with his glare.

“Come on,” Phelps said

From the corner of her eye, Milla caught Kane’s cocky smirk, aimed at Phelps’s wingman. “Hah, dude, you let a girl kick your ass!”

The Pole hauled back and struck Kane across the face hard enough to spill him out of the club chair.

“No, stop it,” Milla said.

“Yeah,” Kane growled through clenched teeth, “unless you want to un-cuff me and try that swing again.”

“How about I swing the next one at your nuts, tough guy?”

The Pole made a threatening move closer, but Phelps stopped him.

“Enough. We have other business now,” he said, indicating Milla. “Come with me, or the Alpha’s kid brother dies.” Phelps aimed the gun at Kane’s head.

Milla stepped forward. “Take me to her.”

She glanced at Kane and flashed a weak smile before following Phelps out of the room.

* * * *

Her steps down the corridor toward Byxbee’s office seemed to draw out. No more than a few dozen total, it felt as though Milla were being marched across a football field. Adding to the distortion of time and space, she heard whispered voices coming from every corner and door she passed; only when she turned to face them, nobody was there. The air thickened, darkened. Milla gazed at one of the elegant

overhead lights to see that it had dimmed noticeably, as though a shroud had been cast over everything.

They entered Byxbee's office. The heaviness in the air, the disembodied whispers, intensified. Then Phelps closed the door behind her, sealing her in, and the illusions shorted out completely.

The moon hovered in a cloudy sky, full now, beyond the windows. The rest of the room was mostly the way she remembered it from her earlier visit: long desk, elegant and heavy, with a shiny top that reflected the light from the moon and Manhattan, numerous awards and framed photographs showing Byxbee with A-list celebrities and royalty. Two additions had been made to the landscape.

The first was a jar, ancient looking, made of pottery flecked with blue stone. *Lapis*, Milla thought. Her immediate impression, which she couldn't shake, was that the jar, set on the desk beneath the August moon, looked of the sort that grieving family members use to store the ashes of a cremated loved one. An urn, with a lid.

The second was a garment draped across the high-backed chair behind Byxbee's desk. The basic silhouette seemed to be constructed from a gauzy fabric. Around it was a more luxurious, exotic material – a coat stitched from different wolf pelts, some solid black in color, others edged with threads of silver or fawn.

Byxbee sat at an angle in one of the chairs along the wall.

"So you're really the Maiden?" Milla said. "I should have guessed, given your girlish figure."

"You don't understand," Byxbee said, avoiding her eyes.

"You sure have me there, bitch."

"I met her on a buying trip overseas. Exquisite high-end textiles, some of them vintage. Others were much older, so delicate but beautiful. The most-amazing fabrics I had ever encountered. Dyes and furs and materials from the rarest sources. Pigments from plants that have since gone extinct. And yes, the wolf fur. She was swaddled in those furs. As I've told you, she needs to be dressed in order to interact with us on this

plane of existence.”

Milla shook her head. The man was completely unhinged, which made him even more dangerous. “Byxbee,” she said. “It’s just the two of us, you and me.”

He faced her directly. Then he laughed, shook his head, and insulted her with that most vulgar of slang for a woman’s sex.

Byxbee stood and wordlessly marched toward the door. He opened it, closed it. Milla reached for the doorknob, only to recoil as the temperature in the room plummeted noticeably, enough to see the gray ghost of her next exhale.

Clink.

The sound of stone rubbing against pottery followed, then a hollow clatter, grating and repetitive, like a spinning coin revolving to a standstill, only louder. In her mind’s eye, Milla imagined the urn’s lid coming to rest on the top of Byxbee’s desk.

A wet slither. Something dragging itself out of the urn. No, not an urn, she thought, too paralyzed to turn around. A canopic jar. A container used to store gutted organs. Something plopped onto the desk top, shocking her back to the moment. A shiver tripped down Milla’s spine. Her arms broke in gooseflesh.

There *had* been something inside the lapis urn. It had oozed onto the desk and was scrabbling across its surface on multiple legs, judging by the clack of claws. A low, throaty burble joined in. Disgust as deeply rooted and primitive as the fear holding Milla immobilized possessed her. A smell she equated with dead flowers assailed her nostrils.

The worst observation came next, a long, dry exhale from behind her in the direction of the desk, where nobody had been seconds before, and where someone or something was now.

Slowly, Milla revolved. She stole another breath en route. The stink of rotted blossoms vanished, and in its place, the hypnotic fragrance of fresh flowers filled the room, subtle, familiar.

Freesia, thought Milla, as she came face to face with Kathryn Draper.

It was her, but not entirely. The woman writhed, gasped. Her eyes, liquid white and lacking pupils, stared blankly overhead. Her fingers, wrapped in gauze, were clutched into claws. Gray veins stood out on her neck. Her chest heaved for breath. The gauze garment fit her more like the bandages wrapped around a mummy than actual clothing.

Some unaffected register in Milla's terrified thoughts noticed the lid lay upside down on the desk. A viscous trail led from the open lapis jar to the writhing body in the chair.

"Kathryn," Milla whispered.

The woman's head snapped awkwardly to attention. Her blanched eyeballs rolled, showing pulsating gray capillaries. Pupils appeared from the white, gray behind a milky film. Those cataract-riddled pupils locked onto Milla. A sharp smile blossomed on the woman's pallid lips.

"And you must be Camilla," the woman said, her voice strangely sweet and bewitching, like the fragrance in the air. "I've heard so much about you. Finally, we meet."

The woman leaned forward. The action released a dry, leathery cracking of skin and joints.

"The Maiden, I presume?"

The woman smiled. "I suppose, yes. That's the name they like to use when they summon me."

"You have other names?"

"Oh, many," she said, waving the gauze-covered fingers of one hand with theatrical flourish.

"So, you're...what? *Legion*?"

"Oh, that tired old title. True enough, though. You can address me in whatever manner you choose to. The important matter is John. Yes, John Draper, my husband. Have you seen him, dear?"

The woman's smile, the sweetness in the air coupled with her dulcet voice, instantly seduced her. Milla felt her eyelids growing heavy. Her mouth went dry. To her horror, she realized her nipples had stiffened beneath the garment. The panties she'd donned in the sitting room seemed to caress the folds of her pussy. The chill in the room evaporated, and heat filled her, tickling her skin with gentle caresses.

"Draper," she sighed.

"Yes," the Maiden said. "Where is he?"

The answer formed in Milla's thoughts. She envisioned it tumbling down through her sinuses, landing on her tongue, and then her tongue curling, her mouth opening, the words forming just inside her lips.

"Our handsome John. I need to see him again."

John. Milla never called him that. He was Draper. John was a stranger, a husband to a wife who had vanished, leaving only a trail of blood behind. And this creature in the room with her, it surely wasn't that wife, not completely.

It takes a while to dress the Maiden, Byxbee had said. Dress her in gauze, in the pelts of the murdered wolves. Dress her in whatever remained of Kathryn Draper.

Farm. He's at Milla's Cause, upstate...

She clamped down on the words, bit them back, grinding her teeth together until it hurt.

"Don't fight it, my dear. I can make the end painless – or terribly painful. And there is the matter of what will soon happen, after you tell me where he is and I bring you into the urn with me, with all of the others. Would you prefer to suffer for all time or to be spared, given an eternity of peace and serenity?"

Farmhouse...

Milla's jaw unlocked. Her lips parted. A shiver teased her clit, but the sensation was hollow, feeling more like rape. Draper had given her the best sex of her life, because she loved him. There was no way this demon bitch was going to manipulate her into betraying him.

“F...” she said.

“Yes, Camilla. Where is John?”

“...*uck you*,” Milla spat.

She clamped down and shook free of the Maiden’s dark enchantment. The shift in energy struck her with a physical blow. Milla’s legs threatened to buckle, but she focused and regained her footing. The warmth lying thickly over her skin plummeted, turning to ice. The dead fetor in the air surged back, becoming twice as repugnant.

The thing in the chair surged up, and the illusion of beauty it had never completely attained vanished. In its place stood a mummified horror held together by gauze and fur; a nightmare with rheumy eyes and a mouth filled with sharp teeth.

“You’ll tell us,” the Maiden hissed in a jarring chorus of voices, numerous tongues all speaking together at the same time. “Then, once we have what we want, you will bleed. Oh, dear Camilla, the pain you are soon going to suffer.”

The Maiden spread her bony arms and floated over the desk, carried on a nonexistent breeze. She glided effortlessly forward, releasing a dry slither, like the sound of dead leaves scattering in an angry autumn wind. She aimed her withered claws at Milla and lunged.

Chapter Eighteen

Milla avoided the swipe. The demon whipped around in a crackling of joints and desiccated flesh, stirring the fetor of dead flowers. Fabric brushed her cheek, unleashing an unpleasant sensation similar to walking into a cobweb. As much as that repelled her, it also fortified Milla's resolve. The thing that had slithered out of the canopic jar and into Michael Byxbee's garment was physical and could be taken down.

She pivoted, clasped her hands together, and swung, striking the Maiden at the shoulder with both fists. Cold, brittle flesh shattered beneath the cover of fur and gauze.

"Disgusting," Milla gasped.

"I agree," the Maiden hissed in a phlegm-choked voice. Then she landed a savage punch into Milla's cheek.

The impact sent Milla backwards, into Byxbee's desk. The space before Milla's eyes turned red before filling with a galaxy of exploding stars. She tasted more blood and wondered how much she had left in her veins to spill.

The Maiden leaned over her, and the rest of Milla's thoughts after that came in a disconnected way, hazy around the edges.

* * * *

She was with Draper again, in the upstairs room at the back of the farmhouse. They watched the sun rise, an event they had never before witnessed together in the real world. It broke gloriously red across the woods, promising a summer day best experienced at a lazy pace. A day perfect for making love.

Draper's breath fell warmly across her bare shoulders. He kissed her neck, and the prickle of his unshaved cheek sent a chill tumbling down her spine, in spite of the morning's heat.

"I wish it could always be summer," she whispered, turning into his kisses.

Draper traveled up her throat, to Milla's lips. She caught a hint of his clean sweat on her next gasp for breath, along with something else. An exotic fragrance.

Flowers. One of Milla's favorite memories of the farm in summertime was the bewitching headiness of the meadows and woods when the flora sat baking in the heat. This scent wasn't like the flowers she knew and could easily identify; it was more robust than Queen Anne's Lace or buttercups or the wild chicory growing in lush clumps around the paddock fences.

"Draper," she sighed around his kisses. "I love you so much."

He growled a similar pledge and backed his words with actions. Draper circled one arm around her waist, teasing her nipples on the way, and drew her on top of him. While the one hand plucked at her hard points with firm tugs, the other worked down, between her legs, settling on her pussy. Milla moaned as fresh excitement lit inside her.

Draper's groan's stirred in her hair. His fingers spread her outer lips, conjuring the image of flower petals gently opening. *Flowers*. The heavy fragrance filled her lungs while his pointer entered her. She was wet and growing wetter. The sucking sound his finger made as it slid in and out of her pussy carried to her ears with an unsettling clarity. So did the feel of his hardness, pressing into her ass. She reached behind to massage Draper's cock, only to recoil in disgust. The hard, misshapen knob in her hand was icy, lifeless.

"What's wrong, Camilla?" Draper asked, his voice cracked and phlegmy around the edges.

She turned her head and was unable to stifle a gasp at the sight of his eyes, which burned a deep red color, reflecting the sunlight.

"You're not..."

"Draper?" the thing with his face said. "No, but now I have an idea of where he is, thanks to you."

The Draper-thing smiled, revealing a mouth filled with sharp teeth.

Milla jolted out of the vision. The stink of dead flowers came clearly, as did the image of the horror hunched over her, licking at the cut on her cheek. It was lapping up her blood, its tongue an icicle.

“No,” Milla shouted.

She knocked it away, brought up both fists, and swung. The demon’s head shattered under the onslaught, discharging a cloud of dust. Milla kicked out and jumped back to her feet. As she watched, the Maiden’s head reformed, and the husk fluttered will-o’-the-wisp toward her, its gray lips glistening with a fresh stain of red.

“It’s too late,” the demon cackled, its mouth a hideous clown’s grin.

“Is it?”

Milla turned toward the desk and the lapis urn. She made a lunge for it, grabbed it in both hands, and pitched it as hard as she could at the wall. A thunder-crack of breaking stone rocked the room. Only later did Milla realize it was the wall’s bricks she heard shattering, not the lapis jar.

The thing dressed in fur and gauze reached for Milla, even as it began to disintegrate. A cloud of ashes polluted the air. The garments collapsed at her feet, abandoned by their human form, but not entirely emptied. The thing that skittered out of the collar, gray-skinned and hard-shelled, raced across the floor on multiple legs. It disappeared into the urn, which had dumped its contents across the floor.

Disgusted, Milla searched the room for anything to use as a weapon. When she failed to find one, she unhooked a shoe and brandished it in front of her. She used its heel to sift through a tangle of desiccated flowers and stems. Closer to the wall, she found the remains of a mummified human heart.

Milla carefully reached for the urn and righted it. It was empty.

She fought her rising gorge by clutching at the Saint Francis talisman. “Protect me,” she whispered on her way to the office door. The door was unlocked. Milla shuffled her foot back into the heel and turned the knob.

Zora stood guard in the corridor outside.

“What – ?” the other woman growled. She raised her talons and readied to strike.

Inner Milla took over. She rolled her eyes as far back into their sockets as

possible. “It is I, the Maiden.”

The ploy worked. Zora smiled and relaxed her defensive posture. “Yes, your highness.”

“Stupid bitch.” Milla tsked.

She threw all her strength into a punch and slammed an uppercut into Zora’s chin. Zora tumbled backwards and hit the floor and this time, she didn’t get back up.

Milla turned in the direction of the sitting room and ran. This distance passed quickly. Too quickly. A wolf-man rose up to block her way. It lumbered toward her. Though depleted, she raised her fists. But then the wolf collapsed. Standing in the space behind it was Draper. He was holding a Taser.

“Milla?”

She shook her head. “Is it really you?”

Draper stowed the weapon and seized hold of her, pulling her close, and she instantly knew it was.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was going to ask you the same. Of all the stupid...”

“Does Karalynne know?”

Draper nodded. “I was not about to let anything happen to you. Besides, I’m the Alpha. She takes her orders from me now.”

Milla smiled and crushed her lips against his, but the rush of happiness was short-lived. “Kane!”

“My brother’s here, too?”

“Yes, but the good news is he’s innocent and completely on our side. Trust me.”

The corridor outside the sitting room was empty. The shadows of bodies in motion tattooed the open door. The sounds of a fierce struggle filtered out.

Draper raced into the room a step ahead of her, right as the tall man fell. Kane had clouted the Pole hard enough to drop him. Handcuffs dangled from Kane’s right wrist. As for the left –

In the breathless few seconds that followed during which the two brothers faced off, neither speaking, exactly what Milla was looking at became clear. The wrist and the surrounding length of Kane's left forearm was skinnier and mottled. The corresponding fingers looked longer, hairier, not quite human nor wolf, but trapped somewhere in between.

Draper hastily examined his brother's arm. "How does that feel?"

"Like I've turned into a piece of rawhide from the shoulder down. Is it gonna be okay?"

"I don't know for sure, but it already looks like it's healing. You haven't suffered any circulation or nerve damage, as far as I can tell. Have you tried transforming again?"

"Twice. *Dude.*"

Draper faced his brother unapologetically. "I had to find her killer. I couldn't do that locked in a cage."

"I tried to help you."

The tension in the air thickened. Milla moved between them. "We know who did this and they're going to pay. First, *you*," she said, tugging on Kane's sleeve. "There are two more for you to work your glamour magic on. One of them is Zora Thurston and I'd love it if you planted a psychic prompt in her head to jump off the nearest skyscraper the next time she harbors an evil thought."

"Zora? The chick who models underwear from that football commercial?"

"Something like that, yeah."

A smirk spread across Kane's face. They headed back to Byxbee's office, but the only body in the corridor belonged to the unconscious wolf-man. Zora was gone. So was the lapis canopic jar and all trace of the remains it contained.

"What if they're headed to my penthouse?"

Draper said, "I've already been there. I sent Jasper up to Milla's Cause, just in case." She started to speak, but he continued, "And he took the cats with him, so don't

worry.”

“But that’s where Byxbee and the rogue wolf must be headed, too.”

Draper drew in a deep breath. “And that’s where we’re going.”

“There isn’t enough time,” Milla said.

Kane clenched and unclenched his damaged fist. “We’ll make time.”

Less than an hour later, they were at the heliport.

“You Draper brothers are full of surprises,” Milla said.

* * * *

Kane had learned to fly in the military and had maintained his private pilot’s license, he told her. After quickly running through his pre-flight checklist, he brought the bird to life.

The deafening chop of the helicopter’s blades kept Milla’s heart racing. Adrenaline, sour and heavy, pulsed through her blood. Her entire body felt like one massive bruise. Worsening her discomfort was the fear that they wouldn’t reach home in time.

Milla’s Cause had become her reason for living, and she had put everyone who depended upon her in mortal danger.

“That thing in the jar,” Draper said. “The Maiden—”

“I think it ate Kathryn.”

His grip on her arm tightened. “What?”

“The reason there wasn’t a body, just blood. The Maiden had Kathryn’s face, but it wasn’t her. And Draper...”

“Yes?”

“You have to know, even at the end, she never betrayed you. The Maiden never got the real location of your safe house out of her.” She covered his hand with hers.

“Christ, Johnny,” Kane sighed from the pilot’s seat.

From the co-pilot’s, Milla watched him handle the collective controls and the foot pedals. The weight of everything pressing down on her seemed to double, dark

emotion mixing with gravity. Then gravity abated and they began to hover. The helicopter rose steadily. They flew nap-of-the-earth along the ground for a distance, and Milla's anxiety worsened.

But at some point, the labor to ascend vanished, and they were flying high above the world.

Holding Draper's hand, she choked down a heavy swallow and the pressure throbbing in her ears relaxed. She turned toward the window at her right. The light of the moon cast a wide silvery swath across the neighborhoods and forest, the lakes and rivers. Milla gazed ahead at the dense, dark woods north of their location and the beauty of the Earth at night stole her breath.

War was coming, but the view reminded her what they were fighting for. Milla's tears never fell. The pain wracking her body dulled. She was ready to fight.

* * * *

The kitchen had been transformed into a military command post. The small army's green soldiers were outfitted with an unconventional arsenal – several Tasers and a pair of tranquilizer-equipped guns lay on the counter.

"It sure did help to have a vet around here," Karalynne said, picking up one of the dart guns and handing it to Milla. "Acepromazine. This should knock them on their rogue butts."

Draper took his cue. "What's the situation?"

"We've got two dozen armed men spread out in a perimeter around the property, and extra spotters along the road and the river," Karalynne said. "All the kids have been moved to the basement safe room, and we've posted extra men around the barn and outbuildings."

"That's quite the little response team you've assembled," Kane said.

"This is our home. We're going to defend it," Milla said, all business.

She faced Draper. In their bottled gaze, what passed between them didn't require words.

“I like your family,” Kane said, breaking Milla’s focus.

Milla glanced over to see him ogling Karalynne with a stare, a smirk on his mouth that was growing cockier with the seconds. “She’s not interested.”

“I’m not?” Karalynne said.

“And don’t you dare glammar her.”

Kane blinked. “Wouldn’t think of it, because there isn’t time.”

Time.

Evidence that the minutes were running down surrounded her.

They walked outside.

“They’ll come while the moon is still out,” Draper said. “To mock the pact. And I can’t shake that whole thing about the Maiden. Dressing her in wolf skin.”

“She wants your fur,” Milla said. “I picked up psychic vibes from the others they murdered when I touched their pelts. Something lingers, an energy residue. She wants the Alpha’s energy.”

“But why?” Draper asked. “Being the Alpha is purely symbolic.”

Milla gazed at the voluptuous full moon drifting so far above them, yet looking close enough to touch. “Is it?”

Draper moved closer. His handsome face, embossed in silver, made her ache for his touch. “From what you told me about Kathryn –” His hairy throat knotted under the influence of swallow. “The Maiden, that thing, it needs to inhabit a human vessel in order to exist here.”

“Yes, but maybe it’s more than that. Your brother told me about the Alpha legend, that he or she had the power to control the planet.”

Draper placed a hand on the small of Milla’s waist and faced her. “I’m only one man, Milla. But this man is going to do everything in his power to protect this place, these people and creatures. And above all, *you*.”

She cupped his cheek and whispered his name.

“I love you, Milla.”

Hearing the words spoken overwhelmed her. Tears filled Milla's eyes, plunging the forest beneath a tidal wave of liquid silver.

"I love you, John Draper."

He crushed his mouth over hers and the clock briefly stopped ticking. The moon froze in the sky, the crickets ceased their melody, and the summer breeze stilled.

Draper's hand wandered from Milla's waist to her ass. The other walked over her chest and beneath her top. She felt the press of his hard cock against her thigh and reached for it. Draper growled between kisses.

Time had slowed, but Milla was aware of every detail: the mint on his breath, the scent of his skin, the wetness of his tongue working its way into her mouth first before tasting her ears, her throat; lower, into her cleavage. Draper lifted the top, exposing her breasts to the moon's light. He playfully tugged at one nipple while suckling the other.

Milla moaned. Her eyes drifted above the trees, to the moon. In that instant, before Draper eased her onto her back on the meadow grass, she swore she could see all of the other planets circling far beyond the Earth, constellations and star clusters, whole galaxies, the entire universe beyond. All of creation.

He helped her out of her blue jeans and reverently kissed her belly. Draper's fingers brushed the triangle of lace covering her seam. Milla bit back a howl. His touch worked her arousal and made her nectar flow. He spread her legs and tasted her through her panties. Easing them aside, he feasted. In the distortion of time, Milla's body came alive by extra degrees with every counterclockwise revolution of his tongue, each thrust of a finger. His warm exhales and growls were prayers to the Divine.

Draper rose up. Milla helped him out of his shorts. She took his cock between her lips, paying him the same reverence. The masculine scent and taste of his flesh enhanced the intense emotions going supernova within her; a starburst raining light through desolate space. It was the creation of the universe all over again, only on a smaller scale, confined only to within her being. She loved him, and he loved her.

They were invincible. Saints and deities and planets and galaxies were on their side.

Draper loomed over her. The full moon towered above them both, its cratered face reflecting the light of the sun. He entered her for the first time without a condom. Draper was the Alpha, but so was Milla because she was his, and they belonged to one another. They belonged to the Earth.

Time.

It seemed to rush back into clarity without warning before Milla's climax fully subsided. Draper kissed her and Milla wanted to cry, knowing that time had run out for them. Her heartbeat tolled the seconds. The radio chirped, confirming her fear.

"Milla, we've got men on the road. Only..."

"Only what?" she called into the mic.

"Some of them don't look human."

Milla pulled on her shirt and checked her gun. "On our way."

The radio squawked again. "It's Kane. I'm down near the dock with Jasper. They're coming in on two fronts. We've got activity on the river as well."

The choppy hum of a powerful motor sounded in the distance.

Saints preserve us, thought Milla. The enemy had arrived, and the battle was about to begin.

Chapter Nineteen

Some of the things lumbering off the deck of the luxury boat parked at the river dock stood on two legs. Like the creature Milla had engaged back at Byxbee's studio, their facial features were more wolf than human.

"Well, I've seen everything now," Jasper said.

Milla handed her night vision goggles to Kane. "Genetic enhancements. Byxbee isolated the Vidimus gene, but they're still refining it. It works fully better in some people than others."

Milla, Draper, Jasper, and Kane stood at the wood line, watching in disbelief as the last of the Maiden's troops came ashore. The rogue wolf stood in the clearing, in human form, Byxbee at his right. A dozen others fanned out around the two men, a mix of full wolves, enhanced wolf-men, and one soldier Milla recognized without needing the goggles. The Blade.

"John Draper," Phelps bellowed. "Show yourself!"

Draper answered the challenge and moved out of cover to stand tall in the moonlight.

"It's over, Draper," Phelps continued.

Milla moved beside him. "No, it isn't."

Draper faced her, his eyes taking on their preternatural green glow. "No, Milla."

"Well, look who's joined the party," Byxbee chimed in. "We'd hoped you were no longer a problem, but you won't be for much longer."

An angry chorus of grunts and growls rose up from the wolf soldiers and wolves. Phelps stilled them with a harsh snarl.

"As we speak, the Maiden's forces are moving into position. The bloodshed you are about to suffer will be absolute, unless you surrender to her, Draper. Come with us willingly and we'll leave this place and everyone here unharmed. If you refuse, the ground will run red."

“Draper is the rightful Alpha of the Vidimus Brotherhood,” Kane shouted. “You will surrender to him.”

Phelps snorted. “We reject the pact. I will be the new Alpha before the sun rises. *You*,” he said, tipping his chin at Draper. “Who are you? Just a nobody, an insignificant man bound to a ridiculous promise to a dead saint. You are nothing. You are alone.”

Milla absorbed the words. Nothing? Draper was a man capable of feats no other man could accomplish. He could speak with the animals; a link between humans and the rest of the planet’s life forms. For a man who was nothing, the level of fear he unleashed in his enemies was significant.

Milla’s eyes widened. “You’re not alone.”

“Yeah, we’re here with you,” Kane chimed in.

“No, Draper, that’s it. The thing they want from you. They don’t just want to rule the human race – they plan to rule over *all* the races.”

“What?”

“That Doc Doolittle trick of yours. You’re not just an Alpha to the Brotherhood – you’re master of all the animals as well.”

Draper’s emerald gaze burned brighter.

“This is it, Draper,” Phelps said. “Come with us or we’ll take you by force.”

“I don’t think so,” Draper said. Then he tossed back his head and howled.

The clarion echoed through the tense night air, up into the sky, seemingly all the way to the moon itself. Milla heard it with her ears but felt it on a spiritual level, in her cells, down to molecules and atoms. As his battle cry faded, she knew that she and Draper had created a life within her womb, because that tiny life reacted, too.

From the direction of the kennels, a hundred canine voices rose up in response.

“Destroy them,” Phelps roared. “Show no mercy!”

He threw forth his arms and transformed as he fell. The rogue wolf dug in his claws and sprinted ahead of his troops, racing toward Draper.

Draper tore off his shirt and shifted shape. From the corner of her eye, Milla watched Kane join him. The two brothers galloped ahead to engage the enemy.

“Be careful, Sensei,” Milla said.

Jasper readied to fight. “You, too, dear girl.”

Steeling herself, Milla raised the gun and aimed. She saw the dart sail out of the muzzle as a pencil-thin beam of silver in the moonlight and strike its target. The enhanced wolf-man slapped at its neck and staggered forward, then dropped. One down, Milla thought. So many left to go. Too many.

The distance separating the opponents quickly ran out. The few of them, against such overwhelming odds.

Milla took aim and fired. The next dart slammed into the hide of one of the wolves. The shot was perfect. The wolf cartwheeled out of its graceful gallop and came to a rest in a tangle of limbs.

An enhanced wolf-man lunged toward her. Milla brought the gun up, intending to fire, but the creature swung, knocking the weapon out of her grasp. It threw a punch at her face. She bent back, avoided the swipe, dug in and launched a fist at its cheek. Pain flared across her knuckles, though it was nothing compared to the agony that followed when the wolf-man knocked her off her feet with a backhanded strike.

She hit the ground hard. The roar of angry predators fought with the ringing whine in her skull. Time again fell off its track, plunging the world around her into slow motion. Far across the battlefield, Milla saw Draper and the rogue wolf locked in violent combat, and the elegant creature Kane had transformed into cornered by a trio of wolf-men. Closer, Jasper was engaged in a standoff with what she at first thought were a pair of the enhanced horrors. Then one of the wolf-men, her latest adversary, plodded toward her, its hands extended, ready to rip out her throat. All around her, inhuman screams tore through the night.

The wolf-man reached for her.

Something large and dark, screaming in one of those many inhuman tongues,

surged protectively between Milla and her attacker. It stood taller than the wolf-man and was more than twice its width. It drew back an enormous clawed hand and swung. Milla's attacker staggered. The newcomer pressed its attack, and the wolf-man went down.

Several large, powerful shapes raced past her and engaged the Maiden's troops. The lumbering colossus that had taken out Milla's opponent knocked another of the full wolves aside with the ease of tossing a rag doll, shattering its bones against a tree trunk. Her defender was a bear, the largest she'd ever seen.

Bobcats, fox, coyotes, and fisher cats had answered Draper's call to arms.

The air filled with a sonic undercurrent and an undulation of flapping wings. She glanced up as a vast shadow cut off the light of the moon.

Bats, shrieked Milla's inner voice.

The swarm arced upwards, thousands of individuals deep, before collectively diving back toward the Earth. The bats surged down, turning the air black, and fresh screams emerged.

Milla's breaths filled with a terrible odor, hot and musky, sanguine. She covered her face and braced the ground. A cyclone tugged at her spine. Electricity pulsed. One at a time, the battle cries stilled, all save two.

The air lightened and the sonic undercurrent shorted out. When Milla dared open her eyes, she saw their new allies standing at the edge of the clearing, the bear and the fox, coyote and bobcat and the other forest animals. The swarm of bats began to disperse. All but one of the Maiden's soldiers lay sprawled across the ground, most in pieces, fulfilling the rogue wolf's prophecy of bloodshed. Byxbee was among the casualties.

The bear lumbered away. The bobcats and foxes slinked back into the trees.

Milla helped Jasper back to his feet. Though bleeding from several wounds, he was alive.

One final battle continued to be waged at the center of the clearing. The two

wolves locked in mortal combat snapped, bit. One beat the other down with a powerful lunge. To Milla's relief, she saw that the champion had vibrant emerald eyes.

The other wolf, put in a submissive sprawl, altered back into human form. Phelps raised his hands in surrender.

Draper, still shifted to wolf, moved in for the kill, growling menacingly. As Milla watched, the green glint in his eyes became the color of fresh blood, red and liquid.

"Draper, no," Milla cried.

The wolf turned to face her, and she clearly saw its rage, its hatred. Draper was about to break the most sacred tenant of the pact.

"Don't do it, Draper," Milla pleaded.

The wolf's snarling lips settled. It tossed back its head and howled. The red glow in its eyes shifted back to green, and the wolf became a man.

Chest heaving, bloodied, Draper backed away. His transformation to the true Alpha was complete, Milla thought, because he had chosen to be merciful.

Phelps snorted a laugh that sprayed blood. A cocky smirk broke on his lips. "This changes nothing."

"On your feet," Draper ordered.

Phelps started to stand. "You couldn't save your wife. What makes you think—"

The other surviving wolf on the battlefield tore out his throat before he could finish.

"Oh my God," Draper said. "Kane, what have you done?"

* * * *

"Status?" Milla asked.

"Everybody's fine. We've cornered and subdued the last of them," Karalynne's voice crackled over the radio. "Not many of Byxbee's creeps left alive after those bats dive-bombed the hell out of them. I've never seen anything like that before!"

“We’re on our way,” Milla said.

She glanced at Draper. Dressed only in his shorts and sneakers, the rest of his magnificent physique showed the bloody welts and bite wounds he’d suffered in the battle. But he had prevailed. Milla moved toward him, arms extended. Draper pulled her close.

“We’re gonna need help with our wounded, Doc,” she said.

“I’ll do what I can.”

She tipped a glance at Kane, who had collapsed to one knee on the grass, his eyes cast at the ground. “Kane?”

“Yeah?”

“The ones who survived are going to need to be glammed.”

Kane didn’t respond. In a lower voice, Draper said, “Let me speak with him. We’ll join you shortly.”

“Okay,” Milla said.

She turned in the direction of the main house and started through the woods, sore and numb outside, elated within. The sense of disbelief she’d barely kept ahead of for days finally overtook her. Tears flooded Milla’s eyes. She wiped them away.

“Thank you,” she whispered aloud. “Merciful Mother Earth. Saint Francis. God, Goddess...whoever, whatever you are. Thank you for protecting the Cause and for watching over us.”

Warmth surged through Milla’s blood, but the sensation lasted too briefly.

Coldness clawed at her back. A branch snapped somewhere in the shadows behind her. Milla spun around, toward the source of the sound. A shudder tumbled down her spine and the world went spinning out of focus.

Between the concentric waves, she saw a figure standing among the trees, tall and blond.

“Zora,” Milla whispered.

The other woman held an object against her bosom. Blue, made of stone, Milla

recognized it instantly. It was the Maiden's urn.

Milla blinked and Zora vanished. The sound of lightning-fast footsteps carried through the forest before vanishing, replaced by the chirr of crickets and the sough of the wind.

* * * *

"It's done," Kane said. "Those men will never bother us or anyone else again."

Milla started to speak, but Kane held up his disfigured hand.

"No, I didn't kill them, too. I glammared them, just like Johnny asked."

Milla saw that Kane refused to meet his brother's eyes directly and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Those things came here to kill all of us. It's better than they deserve."

"I broke the pact. There will be consequences. In any event, I'm out of here."

Kane pulled away and started toward the kitchen door.

"Wait," Draper said.

Kane didn't stop until Milla stepped in front of him.

"That bitch is still out there," Kane said. "She's the only one who can clear your name now, Johnny. And she's got that thing in the jar with her."

"We know," Milla said. "But we still can't let you go after her alone. That's not how this whole pact thing works, as I understand it."

"The Vidimus Brotherhood?" Kane huffed sarcastically. "There is no Brotherhood anymore. Byxbee saw to that."

"We've recreated the pact and the Brotherhood here, at Milla's Cause," Draper said. "This is the new Vidimus Brotherhood."

"And *Sisterhood*," Milla said.

An hour later, Kane left the farm in the helicopter. Karalynne was with him.

* * * *

"The Sisterhood?" Draper asked.

He gently brushed a thumb across Milla's cheek. His other hand gripped the

side of her waist, a tender yet clear indication that she was his and his alone.

“We made a stand here for what was right,” she said. “For the innocents. For the Earth.”

“And we sent a very clear message.”

Milla cupped Draper’s chin. “It’s a new beginning.”

“I’m glad you were with me at the start.”

He pressed his lips to hers and pulled her into a tight embrace. Milla hugged back, knowing that in protecting life, they had also created it.

“Draper,” she said.

But before she could tell him about the baby she knew they had conceived, Draper bowed to one knee in front of her. “I didn’t really prepare for this.”

Milla’s eyes shot fully open. She spoke his name again.

“Milla Cavanaugh, would you marry me?”

“Yes,” she managed.

Draper smiled, the kind of wide, genuine smile she’d never seen on his face before that moment.

He stood and hugged her. As they kissed, morning dawned in the distance. The sun rained golden light across the countryside, signaling, Milla thought while safe in John Draper’s arms, the most beautiful day in the history of creation.

THE END

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