

Loose Id

# RIDING THE WOLF

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# *Riding the Wolf*

*Jessica Quinn & Mary Winter*



## **Riding the Wolf**

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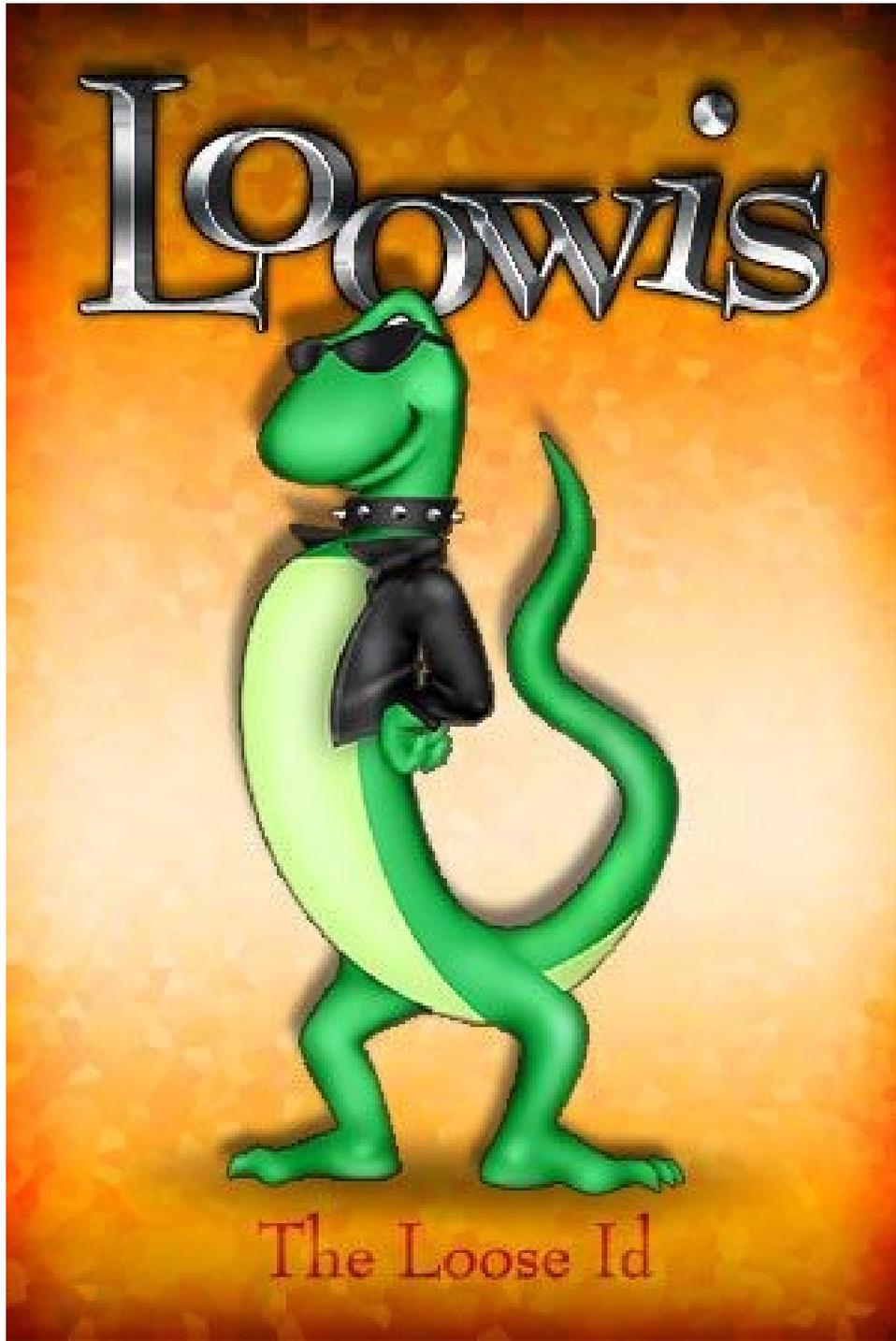
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## Chapter One

Red made it halfway up the stairs before the bruise-colored clouds that had been piling up all afternoon opened with a roar. A squeal escaped her lips as she dashed up the remaining three steps, fumbled with her keys, and tried to get the door open. The lock yielded to the keys; she shoved the door open with her hip and darted inside as the three soaked brown paper grocery bags in her arms began to disintegrate. She cursed under her breath, set them down on the floor, and then shut the door behind her. Water trickled down her long braid of fire-bright hair to drip down the back of her shirt and into her jeans.

“Great. At least I wasn’t wearing my uniform,” she muttered, carefully bringing the grocery bags into the kitchen. Once silk got wet, it was just about impossible to get the stains out, and jockey jerseys weren’t cheap.

The house was quiet, and she knew Daniel wouldn’t be home from work for at least another thirty minutes. If she was lucky, if he was working on a particularly complex set of papers, he might end up staying at the law office until seven or later, giving her plenty of time to put dinner together.

She turned on the stereo and put on one of Daniel’s Beatles CDs before going to put the groceries away. The music synchronized with the thrumming sound of the rain on the roof, and when the groceries were done, she put out the rump roast she had picked up to cook for that night’s dinner.

Rain was lovely to listen to when she was inside, curled up with a good cup of hot cocoa, with sweet-scented candles burning everywhere and an interesting book to read, but it made for hell down at the racetrack. Even a fifteen-minute shower turned the track to mud, and the hooves of the horses churned it up into a sea of muck that was impossible to work in. At least the storm held off until after she was done working with Grandma’s Goodies. The horse was well-behaved

most of the time, but nothing put her tail up like a muddy track. Red hoped the rain would stop soon so it would be dry enough to practice tomorrow.

She put the pot roast into the oven and listened for the rain to slacken. When it finally began to taper off half an hour later, she went to the front door and ducked her head out far enough to pull that day's mail out of the mailbox. Everything would have been soaked if she had tried to get it when she first got home. There were the usual litter of bills, unwanted credit card offers, sale circulars, and a padded yellow mailer she thought was paperwork for Daniel until she saw her own name on the front.

The strains of "Here Comes the Sun" drifted from the stereo as Red tossed most of the mail onto her desk next to the computer, grabbed her letter opener, and slit the yellow mailer open along its top. She tilted the envelope, and a flood of photographs spilled out, tumbling over her outstretched fingers to hit the floor. She swore under her breath as she knelt to pick them up. Then she froze.

The picture on top was an abomination—a woman's body hideously mutilated, her arms and legs removed bloodily, her intestines spilling out. Red could not look away from the image. Her hands shook as she shoved the photo aside, not wanting to see, but the picture directly under it—and all the others, she now saw—were the same, photo after photo showing dead women who had been horrifically tortured before they were murdered.

Worst of all was the little slip of paper that must have drifted out of the envelope last and fluttered to the side. The words drawn on it in permanent marker were clear and unmistakable: *You're next.*

She wanted to scream, but her lungs didn't cooperate. They wouldn't draw air in, no matter how hard she tried; cold, icy fingers extended through her as she stared numbly down at the awful pictures, the envelope having fallen from her hand. She flinched at the sound of a key in the front door lock, almost screaming at Daniel's cheery voice.

"Honey, I'm home!"

The mundane and welcome words broke the spell, and she began to sob.

He came around the corner of the front porch into the office at breakneck speed, umbrella in hand, short blond hair perfectly dry. His chiseled features were tense with worry. "What's wrong?"

She wanted to tell him, but she could only gasp incoherently as she waved a hand at the pictures and the note.

“Jesus Christ,” Daniel breathed, pulling her up into his arms. “What sort of insane fuckjob would do such a thing?” He hugged her tightly. “They have to be fakes.”

“I...don’t think so,” Red finally said, her voice watery with tears. “I think you should call the police.”

He pressed a kiss on her forehead, and she closed her eyes, burrowing into the warm, strong circle of his arms. The feel of his hard, lean body against hers sent a shiver—the good kind—through her, and for a moment she felt safe. She could smell the clean, sharp, woody scent of his aftershave, and a tingle that danced through her small, delicate frame made her nipples harden and sent a rush of wet warmth through her pussy. But the thought that he had probably forgotten to lock the front door, as he always did, intruded. She pushed out of his arms reluctantly, taking a deep breath and trying to get herself under control.

“All right,” he said, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. “Don’t touch anything else. Maybe I’m not very familiar with criminal law, but they’re going to want to fingerprint the envelope and the note and the pictures, and the less of our prints that are on those, the better.” He started to dial. She stepped around him and went to the front porch to lock the door.

It made her feel only a *little* better.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I’m a cop, Captain, not a damned bodyguard,” Jack spat as the older man waited for his answer. “If you’re going to assign me to this case, fine, but let me get out there and see if I can find some evidence that’ll lead us to the Axman; don’t stick me with babysitting duty for some airhead cheerleader.”

Captain Milliken looked at Jack with something approaching amusement. “There are already a number of men working the Axman case, Jack. The bastard has sent a new batch of photos to the woman he’s picked as his latest victim—a young woman by the name of Red Taylor. I could assign Waxman or Hurst to look over her...but look how well they did with Rita Venniman and the Williams girl.”

Jack scowled, but he knew Milliken had a point. Lieutenant Waxman and Bill Hurst were good cops, but Jack was better...just not for the reason they thought. He sighed. “I really don’t

think I'm the best choice for watching over some panicky kid. Her parents aren't going to want me hanging around as closely as I'm going to need to in order to keep her safe."

"Ms. Taylor is an adult; she's a local jockey training for the Kentucky Derby, and she has her own home over on Cassidy Street. I'm quite sure she won't mind putting you up on her couch, given the circumstances."

Jack opened his mouth to say something else, but Captain Milliken cut him off with a wave of his hand. "The answer is no, *Detective Kennedy*. In my opinion, you're the best man for the assignment. Now get your ass over to her house; there's a patrol car with a pair of uniformed officers already on their way over to collect the evidence and take a statement from her, and I don't want them to have to wait for you. I spoke to her personally when the call came in, and I've promised her protection. I don't want the Axman to kill her while you're wasting time standing here arguing with me."

Jack stifled a growl and nodded curtly. He turned on one foot and marched out the door. He ran one hand through his dark hair and sighed, stopping at his desk long enough to grab his trench coat and the latest stack of paperwork waiting to be signed. He shot a glance through the open window at the early evening sky. Although the moon was unseen through the veils of pouring rain, Jack knew it hung close to the horizon, nearly full and heading toward its silver-dollar phase. Jack was already tense as it approached, his muscles twitching in anticipation. *There's no way this situation is going to end well. I haven't been with a woman in three years, and now...*

If it were just sex that he couldn't have, he knew he would have gotten used to being celibate in time. But sex was just the smallest part of what he had been missing, and all other human contact was the rest. He knew he couldn't play football with any of the other guys in the precinct in case he got tackled and bled on someone. He couldn't sign up for the precinct blood drives for the Red Cross like he used to, and the captain certainly wanted to know why not. Jack had deliberately stayed away from visiting his parents since the attack that had changed him, knowing that any little thing—even his mother finishing the last bite of his pie with the fork he had used—might be enough to infect them as he had been infected.

It made for a very solitary and lonely existence, and nothing that could remotely be considered a normal life.

The scar on his hand throbbed as he went down the precinct front steps and headed around the side of the building to the department parking lot. It took a moment's angry concentration to shove away the memory of how he had gotten the scar and lock it into a tiny corner of his mind. He hadn't been human for three years now. Dwelling on the werewolf's attack wouldn't help him now, no more than it had then. His car, a refurbished 1972 Buick 225, was parked right where he had left it, under the overhanging branches of an old maple tree. He unlocked the driver's-side door to let himself in, and then paused.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose in response to an unseen but almost tangible pressure. He stopped, frowning, and slowly turned, looking all around. There was no one in sight, but it sure as hell felt as if someone was watching him. It hadn't been the first time he'd felt that way. Seldom a week passed without him feeling the prickling at the back of his neck, the slow creep of heaviness over every inch of skin, as if someone were about to reach out and tap him on the shoulder. Suspicion carved heavy lines into his brow as he turned at a glacial pace, nostrils flaring with deep, repeated sniffs. But the rain-washed air only brought the smell of wet earth, the soaked garbage in the dumpster behind the police station, and the oily scents of the cars in the parking lot. Even the smells of other humans—the police who worked here, the civilians coming in to talk to them, and the bystanders passing by on the sidewalk—had been rinsed away until they were barely perceptible. Nothing, he thought, frustrated. The same as he had come up with in the past. If someone was watching him, he or she was damned good.

Then again, maybe it was nothing. Between work and his own unrequited needs, he knew he'd been more edgy than usual of late. He didn't like to admit it to himself, but it was probably unwarranted.

With a snort, he slid behind the wheel. The enticing scent of the seats, real leather, rose to his nostrils and brought a growl from his stomach. *Hell. I'd better at least run through a drive-through before I go over to Taylor's house. It's not going to do my temper any good to meet her on an empty stomach.*

He backed out of his parking space, then pulled out of the parking lot, heading for the drive-in on Canton Street that sold steak-burgers and thick-cut fries with the potato skins still on them. There were no old fast-food bags littering the floor of the classic car, and he preferred it that way. While life as a cop seldom left time for elegant dining or long, involved dates at gourmet restaurants, he hated riding around in a dirty car. The stale aromas of old food and

greasy paper were one of the things that could affect his keen sense of smell and make it much more difficult to notice subtle aromatic clues in his line of work.

Even the trained dogs the department brought in from time to time to search for drugs, explosives, or corpses didn't have noses as sensitive as Jack's. But then, if he had to be stuck with the curse of a werewolf's rage, it was only fair to balance it out with the monster's benefits. It had become very easy to tell from a person's scent if he or she was nervous, angry, drunk, lying, stoned, or sick with HIV or another disease, and he had come to rely on that extra tool when dealing with both suspects and witnesses.

He pulled his car into the drive-in's parking lot as the rain began to taper off. After he steered it into a space, he glanced up and groaned as one of the waitresses came out to take his order. The restaurant's management had apparently decided to make the waitresses start wearing uniforms since the last time he had stopped there; a blue shirt stretched taut over the woman's full breasts, and the short-shorts she wore looked painted on.

She reached the side of his car, bent over, and smiled as he rolled down his window. Jack was quite sure she had leaned over deliberately to give him a better view of her cleavage. He felt his cock jerk to life in his pants, throbbing as it hardened.

"What can I get you, hon?" the girl asked sweetly, pen and notepad in hand.

"Three steak-burgers, an order of fries, and a large chocolate milkshake," he muttered, in a hurry to get the conversation over with. "To go."

She brought out the bag seven minutes later, and he paid her, nose twitching at the mingled smells of food and horny female. She grinned at the big tip he gave her and turned to go, her ass twitching lasciviously from side to side as he backed out of his parking space. He headed toward the Taylor house, eating as he drove.

\* \* \* \* \*

Red watched the uniformed patrolmen try to dust her mailbox for fingerprints in the pouring rain. The onslaught of water washed away the fingerprint powder even as they applied it; she knew they were fighting a futile battle. But she was glad for their attempt. They'd already dusted the padded mailer, and collected the photos and the note in latex-gloved hands. They stored the items in sealed plastic bags with her name, the date, her address, and a case number written on the outside in black permanent marker.

“No unusual phone calls or voice mail lately?” the older of the officers, a man named Wilson, asked.

“Not that I remember,” Red answered. “Daniel, you?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

“No packages, no vandalism? Noticed any unfamiliar cars in the neighborhood lately?”

She shrugged helplessly. “No packages or vandalism, and I really don’t pay attention to who comes and goes around here. We’re just a few blocks from the highway, so we get a lot of traffic on this street.”

Wilson nodded, noting her words down, and flipped his notepad shut. “The department is sending a detective over who’s been assigned to protect you. He should be here shortly. We’ll wait until he arrives.”

“Protect me... You mean he’ll be staying?” Red asked, startled.

“That’s right, ma’am.”

Red exchanged a glance with Daniel. While the house they shared had a guest bedroom, the thought of having a total stranger living with them until the case was closed was disturbing. “I see.”

The other officer, Dayton, nodded as well. “We’re going to step outside the house and have a look around the side and back, make sure there aren’t any broken or unlocked windows, check to make sure the phone lines haven’t been tampered with...that sort of thing.”

“All right.” Red sighed. She waited until they left and shut the front door behind them before locking it again. Then she turned back toward Daniel. “So much for anything more exciting tonight than sitting on the couch and watching TV...”

“Screw that,” Daniel snorted, pulling her into his arms and bending down to nibble at her ear. “If they’re making us put up with a cop in the house, then whoever they send can just bring earplugs.” He trailed his tongue down along the line of her throat to swirl it over her collarbone. She shivered, hot tendrils of lust radiating outward from the path his mouth traced, down to her breasts, and beyond. “Besides, we’d better practice being quiet.”

A delicious shiver wound its way down Red’s spine. Closing her eyes, she leaned against Daniel’s warmth. His arms tightened around her in a vise of comfort and security that she never

wanted to be without. She nestled her head against his chest, knowing she shouldn't be thinking about sex at that moment. But the only thing she could think about was living. Feeling Daniel's cock plunging into her, his lips and hands on her breasts—*that* would make her feel alive.

She tilted her head toward his, finding an answering glint in his eyes when their gazes clashed. Daniel dipped his mouth to hers. The gentle kiss quickly deepened as his tongue swept across her lower lip. His erection pressed against her stomach, and she curled her fingers against his back.

“Yes,” she breathed when the need for air parted them. The desire to let him know how much she wanted—no, *needed* him—made her vocalize her thoughts.

Daniel stepped back, once, twice, until they moved down the short hall to their bedroom. He pulled her inside, closing the door after him. “You sure? I could just hold you,” he said.

Red's heart melted. Her Daniel, always so thoughtful and caring, gentle to the point of tenderness. Sometimes the only thing that could cure her was a good, hard fuck. Right now was one of those times, and she knew if she provoked him enough, Daniel would be the man to give it to her. Her channel tightened just thinking about it.

She flattened her palm on his chest and shoved him toward the bed. Putting muscle behind it, she made him tumble backward. He landed on his ass on the comforter. Red grinned.

She crawled over him, pulling at her T-shirt as she went, half-afraid he'd go all lovey-dovey on her. “Make me forget.” Her breasts threatened to spill out of the demi-cup bra she wore. After showering and changing after work, she always tried to put on feminine lingerie. Something to counteract the one-of-the-guys attitude she usually had at the track. Now she was glad she did, because Daniel's gaze dropped to where her nipples pressed against the lace. He reached for her and curled his fingers around her slim waist. She wriggled against the erection she felt through his jeans and dropped her hands to her waistband. A quick flick released the button. The slow slide of her zipper was torture for both of them. She pulled her jeans down, revealing the matching high-cut bikini briefs.

“Red,” Daniel groaned. His fingers slid from her waist to cup her mound through the pale green silk. He stroked her, the material and his finger sliding along her folds to draw even more wetness from her.

She ground against his fingers, torn between sliding off of him long enough to strip and staying right where she was.

Daniel flipped her onto her back. He pulled off her sneakers, then dragged her jeans and panties from her, leaving her naked but for her demi-bra. A second later, even that hit the floor, as well. A few quick motions divested him of his clothing.

Red watched as he returned to the bed. He climbed up to straddle her, each lean, muscled thigh braced on either side of her hips. He grabbed her hands and hauled them above her head before bending down and taking one of her nipples into his mouth.

Red pressed her lips together. She arched into him as he drew the tight bead deeper. He laved it with his tongue, alternating quick flicks with long, slow sweeps. Curling her fingers into fists, Red battled her rising need to come. Not yet. Not so soon. She held back her whimpers.

Daniel transferred her wrists into one hand, the other sweeping down her side. He palmed her breast. The thick ridge of his cock pressed against her stomach. Red moved against it, trying to tell him how much she needed him inside her. Her pussy ached, her clit swollen and throbbing. "Please," she whimpered.

He released her nipple with a pop. "Please what?" he whispered, his voice little more than a harsh growl.

"Fuck me," Red demanded. Distantly, she thought she heard a rustling, but the fact that police officers were on the other side of the wall only enhanced her pleasure. There was nothing better than putting on a good show. She reared up and nipped his shoulder. Instantly, she softened, drawing the skin between her teeth and sucking. She left a good, large red mark. Her brand. Better than the lip tattoo on a Thoroughbred.

Daniel moved between her thighs. The head of his cock nudged her folds.

Red spread her legs, inviting him inside.

Daniel released her wrists and braced his weight on his arms. He claimed her mouth, his tongue and cock thrusting inside her. Red wrapped her legs around him and locked her ankles behind the small of his back. Tilting her hips, she invited him so deep, the head of his cock brushed against her cervix.

Quick, hard strokes took her to the edge. She hovered there, on the brink of a bone-shattering release. The pounding of flesh against flesh drove everything from her mind except

Daniel, and that was exactly how it was supposed to be. She caught tight hold of his shoulders, her short nails leaving furrows. Biting her lip to keep from crying out, she rode the gathering waves of her orgasm the same way she crossed the finish line at the track, keeping her mount between hands and knees and finding that place where they merged into a single being.

In that Zen-like moment, she came. Hard and fast, her channel rippling along the length of his cock, wave after wave of her release pounding through her. She clung to it, her hands trying to find some purchase in the hard muscles of Daniel's shoulders, the taut globes of his buttocks flexing beneath her heels. His harsh breathing echoed around her, and the musky odor of sex hung in the room.

*Alive.* Forcing her eyes open to stare at her lover's face, she reveled in the sensations of being alive. The aftershocks twitching through her pussy, the slight strain in her muscles from a hard day's work and a good ride once she got home, the way sweat rolled down her face. She savored every sensation.

Daniel stiffened above her. His cock twitched inside her as he came with a rough growl. Hot splashes of his seed triggered another mini-orgasm as she trembled beneath him. *Alive.* The weight of another body pinning her down, protecting her. Outside one of the officers shouted something to his comrade, and Red jumped.

"I got you," Daniel crooned. Tucking his arms beneath her, he then pulled her onto her side. They lay there, nestled together, her head nestled beneath his chin, his cock still buried deep inside her. Red threw her leg over his thigh and pulled him closer. Her heart pounded; even in the aftermath of sex, her body hummed with adrenaline and lust, and she knew she was alive.

But in the back of her mind, she couldn't help but wonder...for how long?

## Chapter Two

“Damn rain.” Jack glared at the offending thunderheads as he parked in front of the cozy-looking house and climbed out of his car. He had given his umbrella away months ago to someone who needed it, and he had forgotten to buy a new one. The two uniformed patrolmen were waiting for him by the base of the steps as he stalked up the sidewalk toward the house. Water dripped off his hair and down into his collar to soak through his shirt underneath the long tan trench coat.

“Detective Kennedy. Hi,” one of the officers said with a nod. “We’re pretty much through here. We’ve collected the photos and other evidence, dusted the mailbox for prints, and taken a statement from both Ms. Taylor and her friend. We also had a look around the perimeter of the house, and nothing appears to have been disturbed; the windows haven’t been cut, and they and the back door are all still locked. The phone and electrical lines haven’t been tampered with either.”

“Friend? The captain didn’t mention a friend, just said she wasn’t living with her parents.” *Former college roommate? Hot sister?* He knew better. *Lover, most likely.* The Axman always chose young, pretty, sexually active women as victims. It was as if the killer thought he was the bad guy in a slasher flick. “Might as well go introduce myself, then.”

The other patrolman, a much younger man who’d just joined the force a month ago, chuckled. “Who’d you piss off to get stuck with babysitting duty?”

Jack glared at him, and the hapless man took a step back, not flinching but definitely startled by the ire in Jack’s eyes. “Er...sorry,” the younger man muttered, his cheeks going crimson.

“Uh...we’ll just go, then,” the first officer said. Jack suppressed a snort as he heard the rookie mutter under his breath on the way to the car, “Asshole.” They headed down the walk to

where their patrol car was parked, and Jack climbed the front stairs. He fished out his wallet and badge as he knocked on the door.

It opened a moment later. The rain still splattered down all around him, but the constant drenching cold was suddenly forgotten as he stared at the small woman standing in front of him, tying the belt of her plush forest green bathrobe. The robe covered the essentials, but he didn't need to see bare flesh to know she'd just tumbled out of bed. Warm light shone from the lamp on the foyer table behind her, framing her in golden radiance. The smells that flooded into his nostrils from the open door were a delicious mix of roasting meat and raw, primal lust...but only the lust really registered.

"Must be dinnertime," he muttered, but the part of his brain that usually dealt with food was completely derailed by his rapidly stiffening cock. He could smell her, the wet musk of her pussy mingled with another man's seed. The faint scents of sweat and shampoo and deodorant and soap were all overwhelmed by the odors of lust and need and exhausted, blissful satiation.

Suspicion flickered darkly in her eyes. "Yes?" she asked, clutching the robe a little more tightly around her, clearly ready to slam the door in his face. He realized he had been standing there gaping at her for at least a minute without saying a word, and he wondered where the hell his professional facade had gone.

"Sorry. I'm, uh, Lieutenant Jack Kennedy." He lifted the wallet with the attached badge and held it out for her to get a better look at. "Captain Milliken spoke to you on the phone and said he'd arrange to have you protected. The department sent me over. I'm here to keep an eye on things until the person who sent those photos is caught. Hopefully that won't take very long."

He tried not to fidget, though he badly needed to shift his weight from one foot to the other to ease the pounding in his groin. He knew in that second that he'd never met a woman who turned him on as much before in his life. How the hell was he supposed to keep a clear head and watch out for the psycho stalking her when all he wanted to do was rip that robe off, throw her to the ground, and fuck her until she screamed his name?

She examined the badge and his driver's license for a moment and then finally sighed. "Oh, all right," she murmured, stepping aside. "Come on in."

With a nod, he followed her inside.

Red hid a frown as she turned her back on the detective, listening for the sound of the door closing behind him and the lock being turned. The warm waves of afterglow were still washing through her, but unshowered and dressed only in her bathrobe, she felt almost naked in front of the cop. “I’ve set up the guest room for you. We’ll be eating dinner in about half an hour, and you’re welcome to join us if you haven’t already eaten.”

“Thank you, ma’am. Whatever you’re cooking smells great.”

“It’s pot roast. And call me Red, or I’ll be looking around for my grandmother every time ‘ma’am’ comes out of your mouth.” She waved for him to follow her through the living room and around the corner, then down the hall to where the guest room was. The house was small, and the guest room had been her bedroom when her parents had still been alive. After they died, she’d moved into their old bedroom, which was a little larger. The extra space had become all the more necessary when Daniel moved in. “Did you bring a bag?”

“Yes, m—Red. I always keep one in the trunk of my car, just in case.”

“Handy.” She gestured to the open door of the guest room. “There you go.” He nodded at her stiffly, and she turned away, glad to go. It was bad enough that they had to put up with a complete stranger for...who knew how long? It could be days, even weeks. *It better not be months, not unless the PD is ready to start paying this guy’s rent.* She wished they had sent a woman, or even an older man, rather than someone so hot he made her teeth hurt. She contemplated the thought as she hurried to check on the food. He was easily the tallest guy she had ever met, with hair the color of black coffee, eyes the shade of gunmetal, broad shoulders and a perfect smile...*and those cheekbones! God in heaven, this is going to be rough.*

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the cop emerging from the guest bedroom and heading for the front door. He came back a few minutes later toting a nylon duffel bag and carried it back to the room she had shown him. The sound of a zipper unzipping reached her ears as she ducked into the kitchen. Daniel had gone to the grocery store to get rolls to go with the dinner, just missing an introduction to the lieutenant. She could still feel their mingled juices inside her, drenching the panties she had yanked on hastily. If Daniel would get his ass back in time to keep an eye on the food, he could run interference, and maybe she could grab a quick shower before it was time for dinner. *It’d be nice not to have to sit there across from this cop for a half hour while Daniel’s juices dry on my thighs.*

The sound of the bathroom door shutting put an end to that idea, and she grimaced and peeked around the corner. The guest room was empty, and she realized Lieutenant Kennedy must have stepped into the bathroom to wash up before dinner.

“Great,” she muttered under her breath. “Can this day get any worse?” With a frown, she hurried to her bedroom to get dressed.

Jack closed the bathroom door behind him and drew a deep breath. He couldn't walk around all night with a raging hard-on. Not only would it shoot his concentration all to hell, it'd ruin his professional image too. And yet, here he was, in his assignment's bathroom, about to take the edge off. *Like that's professional.* He exhaled and yanked his pants down, letting out a sigh of relief as his rigid cock sprang free from its confinement. Pearly drops of precum leaked from the slit at the center of the purplish-red head and trickled down, almost reaching the flaring edge of the crown. He knew he had to make it quick. The ache that had been boiling from the moment the front door of the house opened refused to go away, even after the woman had left him alone in the guest room.

*This is never going to work. Never.* He wrapped his fingers around his rod and gave it a squeeze, trying not to groan aloud. The sweet perfume of her flesh and juices haunted him, and he cupped his balls with his other hand, feeling their heavy weight against his palm. He was well aware that there was no way in hell he was going to be able to sit down across from her and eat dinner if he didn't do something to relieve the pressure.

His erection pulsed, huge and hard, and he stroked his dick with a slow, steady rhythm, closing his eyes to imagine Red beneath him, moaning and writhing. His hand moved up and down his shaft, slicked with his own juices, and he could feel the pressure building rapidly. The image built in his mind: her small breasts slick with a sheen of perspiration that drew his mouth to them. He could almost taste her as he imagined laving his tongue over the taut pink nipples, feeling them tighten with each lick.

She would lift her legs and wrap them around his waist, drawing him even closer to her, her mound grinding against his groin, her eyes rolling back in her head with each thrust. He could hear the soft, breathy moans she would make, feel the sting as she raked her short, clean nails over the broad planes of his back. And then he'd roll her over so she was on top, her ass

rubbing against his thighs as she bounced atop his dick, breasts heaving, her face contorted, her hands gripping his chest. *Fuck. I want this so bad, it hurts. I want to be inside her. I want to hear her scream my name as she comes.*

He knew he would never be able to actually plunge himself inside her tight, waiting channel. *I'll kill myself before I willingly infect someone else with this insanity.* Werewolves traditionally made more wolves by biting; no doubt Jack's saliva was infectious. After the attack, he had buried himself in research, and although he was no scientist, the Internet made it easy for him to track down old legends these days. It seemed as though everything could be found online, if he knew where to look. Stories of people changed by being bitten by a werewolf were hardly the beginning and end of the matter. As with AIDS, *any* body fluids probably carried the disease. From what Jack had learned, it wouldn't take very much to infect her. A single drop of his cream inside her would do it. *Anywhere* inside her—pussy, ass, mouth. And condoms could tear. One vigorous thrust and a splash, and she would be a werewolf just like he was. It wasn't just his semen that would infect her, either. Even a kiss would do it if she had a cut in her mouth. Blood, tears, sweat... There wasn't any sort of human contact more intimate than a hug that he could chance, unless he was willing to risk condemning another person to the same torment that he had to face every month.

But, oh God, the idea was so tempting. To finally have a woman to sheathe himself inside, to fuck until they were both roaring with the sheer animal rapture of it. His balls tightened in his hand at the images that swam before his mind's eye, and he knew his climax was close. His breath quickened in his chest, and her enticing aroma was still as strong as ever in his nostrils; he groaned loudly, too loudly to hear the sound of the bathroom door opening.

His eyes shot open at the sound of someone gasping. Another man stood in the open doorway, gaping. *Shit! I forgot to lock the door!* The man stayed riveted where he stood as Jack spurted, seed splashing against the hand he had moved from his balls to cup over his cock, and the look in the stranger's eyes fused surprise with lust. The man flushed and backed out of the bathroom hastily, shutting the door as hot semen dripped from Jack's fingers onto the floor.

"Well, *that* was awkward," Daniel muttered as he slunk into the kitchen where Red was pulling the roast out of the oven.

“What was?” Red asked, setting the dish down and turning off the oven.

“I...uh...walked in on the cop in the bathroom.”

Red snorted. “He was still in there? Damn...go light a candle or something.”

“He was jacking off.”

Red turned around, arching a brow in amusement. “I see.”

Daniel went to one of the cupboards and took down a pair of plates, paused, and then belatedly got out a third.

“Did he see you?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Huh. Maybe he’ll storm out in outrage, and they’ll send someone else.”

“Is that what you want?” Daniel asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s...” She hesitated, and Daniel came around to look her in the eyes, then laughed.

“You think he’s hot!”

“And you don’t?” She snorted.

“Never said that,” he countered. “And you should know better. Just because I haven’t been with another guy since we started seeing each other doesn’t mean I don’t like them anymore.” He smirked. “Hell, the last time we went out to the mall, we ended up checking out all the same guys.”

She grinned at the memory. When they had first met and started dating shortly after her parents had died, Daniel had been absolutely frank about his bisexuality. His last relationship before her had been with a tall, muscular, blond lifeguard; it had ended when Daniel came home from law school one night to find his lover stoned and balls-deep in another man’s ass. The thought of her lover fucking other men didn’t bother Red; in her dreams, it sounded kind of hot. *At least if I get to watch.* He had promised fidelity, and he meant it. She knew that so long as they were together, he would be completely faithful to her. But that didn’t mean he was blind; she sure wasn’t. And she knew it would make her a hypocrite if she got angry when he ogled other men.

“Anyway. Just keep an eye on the guy.” Daniel paused, picking the stack of plates back up, and snickered. “I know I will.”

She watched him go to set the table and then took the foil-wrapped baked potatoes out of the oven, unwrapped them, and dumped them into a bowl. The homemade gravy was hot, the biscuits Daniel had brought back from the store were almost ready, and the corn on the cob was done. She transferred the roast to a platter and carved it into neat slices, then carried it out to the table. She and Daniel worked together, going back and forth from the kitchen until the table was full.

“By the way,” Daniel whispered into her ear as he passed her on his way back to the kitchen to grab the bowl full of biscuits, “he’s got the biggest cock I’ve ever seen.”

She blinked, then shook her head. “TMI, size queen,” she replied drily.

“Oh admit it,” he teased her. “You’re attracted to him too.”

“I do believe that’s already been established, Counsel,” she murmured, then winced at the sound of the bathroom door opening and hoped the cop hadn’t heard either of them. “Dinner’s ready, Detective Kennedy,” she yelled down the hall.

“This’ll go a lot more easily if you’ll call me Jack,” the man said as he stepped into the dining room. The trench coat had made him seem bigger, but even without it he towered at least five inches over Daniel, a fact which no doubt had Daniel drooling. Jack’s shoulders were broad enough that they almost brushed the frame of the door as he came through it. “Is there anything I can do to help?” he asked.

“No, it’s all taken care of. Sit down, and let’s eat,” she said, gesturing to the chair at the side of the table. She sat down at one end, opposite Daniel, and began filling her plate.

The silence as everyone served themselves was uncomfortable at first. Red wondered if the detective—*Jack*, she reminded herself—guessed that Daniel had told her about walking in on him in the middle of pleasuring himself. She found it strange that that was the first thing he had done as soon as he got there. It didn’t seem to be standard police procedure. Maybe with it out of the way, he’d pay attention to the case and not her. *That, or it’s going to be a hard week for me.* She tried not to giggle at the unintentional double entendre and found she felt kind of flattered that Jack had thought her hot enough to jack off as soon as he’d seen her. Then the sight of the rich red meat and the thin slick of watery blood against the white china plate made her stomach

twist. All thought of humor vanished at the memory of why Jack was there, and she tilted her head back down to her unfinished dinner.

“So, um...” Jack began, and Red winced as she realized she had neglected the introductions.

“Sorry. Detective Jack Kennedy, this is Daniel Keller, my boyfriend. Dan, Detective Jack Kennedy.”

They didn’t reach across the table to shake hands—not very surprising, considering what Daniel had interrupted. The embarrassment hung thick in the air, and she tried not to squirm.

Jack finally broke the tense silence. “So...what do you do, Mr. Keller?”

“I’m an attorney. I specialize in family law. Red and I first met after her parents passed on; I was a paralegal at the time, working in the law office that handled her parents’ wills,” Daniel told him blandly. It was a familiar spiel, one he recited to everyone who had ever asked how the two of them had met. “I was putting myself through law school at the time.”

Jack nodded. “And I understand you’re a jockey, Ms.—Red?”

She had a strong suspicion that he had been about to call her “Ms. Taylor,” and she reflected that the difference in their ages—the detective had to be at least seven or eight years older than she was—probably made it difficult for him to use her first name as she’d told him to.

“That’s right,” she answered. “My goal is to ride my grandmother’s horse in the Kentucky Derby. My grandmother’s been training thoroughbreds since before my mother was born. She bought Grandma’s Goodies for me shortly after my parents died.”

He smiled at the horse’s cutesy name. “How long have you been training?”

“I’ve been riding since I was six and seriously riding my grandmother’s horses since I was eighteen.”

“That’s what...five years?”

“Right,” she replied. “I’m my grandmother’s regular jockey. How about you, Jack? How long have you with the police?”

“Since I was eighteen. Fourteen years now.” He didn’t go into any detail, and she frowned, uncertain whether to let the matter drop. He scraped up the last forkful of potatoes from the nearly empty skin and glanced back up. “It runs in the family. My father was a cop and so was

my grandfather. I think my older brother probably would have been after he got out of the army, but he died during the Vietnam War.” He shrugged, a distant look on his face.

“I’m sorry,” Red said slowly, wondering if it was a painful subject for him.

He blinked, looking startled. “Don’t be. You didn’t kill him. Besides, I really didn’t know him. I was only a year old when he died.”

“Is this the first time the police department has had you protect a potential victim?” Daniel asked, changing the subject. Red threw him a grateful look, and he flashed her a smile.

“Yes,” Jack said abruptly and then fell silent.

That worked great, Red mused in annoyance. She got to her feet and grabbed her empty plate and silverware, then reached out for Daniel’s dishes as well.

“If you want, hon, I can do those,” Daniel offered, rising a moment after her.

“How about if I clear the table and put away the food, and you can scrape the dishes and stick them in the washer?” she asked.

“Works for me,” he replied.

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Jack asked, finishing his last bite of dinner. He had eaten three helpings of roast and potatoes and two ears of corn.

“That’s all right, Detective,” Daniel said. “I think the job the police sent you here for is more important than making sure you do your share of the household chores.”

Jack snorted, his steely blue-gray eyes steady on Red as she cleared the table. Even after she carried the last remnants of the roast into the kitchen to wrap and store in the refrigerator, she could feel him watching her, his gaze hot enough to raise gooseflesh on her arms and shoulders and make her knees go weak with desire. It was unnerving, though she did her best to ignore him as she cleaned off the dinner table. Daniel was in the kitchen, whistling cheerily as he scraped the plates off, and she shook her head in exasperation. The tension in the air was thick enough to choke on, and he didn’t even seem to feel it. *Men!*

“So...” she said diffidently, “your job. How do you plan on protecting me, anyway?”

Daniel’s whistling stopped. He set down the plate he was holding and came to the kitchen doorway to listen. Jack looked up at her with a faint smile on his face.

“I’m going to be your shadow from now on,” Jack said. “When you go to the grocery store, or the racetrack, or the mall, or out dancing, or to the doctor’s office—anywhere, really—I’m going to be right there with you. If you go outside to work in your garden, I’ll be there handing you the shovel and trowel. If you go to the gym, I’m going to be on the elliptical machine right next to you, huffing and puffing away like the big bad wolf.”

Even though it was the only answer that made sense—how could he watch over her if he wasn’t right at her side everywhere she went?—it was not the answer she had wanted to hear. It was bad enough he’d be going with her to the track, to the post office, and to the grocery store, but any chance at things like a romantic dinner for two at her favorite restaurant, a night together at the movies, or a picnic at the park with just her lover was now history. She scowled, grabbing the butter dish off the table and marching off to the kitchen. She didn’t slam the dish down on the kitchen counter, but she wanted to. *Maybe I should just move to Alaska. Or would the sicko who sent those photos follow me there?*

The idea was a sobering one, and although she hated the idea of Jack following her everywhere, the idea of being found dead and dismembered in a ditch was far, far worse. With a sigh, she resigned herself to the thought of Jack going everywhere with her.

And maybe—just maybe—it wouldn’t be so bad after all.

## Chapter Three

The rest of the night was no less awkward, and though ten o'clock was an early bedtime for both Red and Daniel, she was glad to scurry off to the bedroom, leaving Jack alone to catch the evening news and the late night talk shows if he wanted. She stripped out of her jeans and T-shirt and tossed them into the laundry hamper along with her bra, panties, and socks.

"Tired, hon?" Daniel asked, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her.

"Not really," she murmured, lowering her voice to something that was almost a whisper. Although she knew the detective couldn't hear through the house's walls, she still felt self-conscious knowing he was right in the next room. "But I don't think I've gotten quite used to having a houseguest yet. You remember the weekend your little sister came up from college and spent the weekend here?"

He nodded. Rachel had been just eighteen then, and all she'd wanted to do when she got away from New Orleans and her parents was smoke, dance, drink, go clubbing, and screw. They'd come home from a movie one night to find her on the couch completely naked with a guy whose name she was too drunk to remember.

"Yeah, I can imagine you're a little put off about folks staying overnight since then," he purred in her ear, slowly sweeping his hands up her sides to cup her breasts. She shivered, arching back against him, feeling his cock rigid against her bare ass.

Behind her Daniel stifled a moan, and Red gasped at the surge of wetness that filled her pussy. Though their sex life had never been lukewarm, something about earlier today with the chance that the police officers might walk in on them had turned up the heat a notch. Now, knowing that Jack lay in the other room made her want to put on another show.

Thinking about Jack reminded her why he was here. The pictures. Her supposed stalker. Daniel's hand found her breast, and he caressed a nipple between his thumb and forefinger. He rolled it back and forth, a gentle seduction like the lulling of waves against the side of a boat. His

hands on her body told her not to think about anything but his touch and how good it could make her feel. So did the erection pressing against her buttocks. And though she'd never been a woman to hide from anything, that was exactly what she wanted to do right now—hide in the security Daniel offered her.

“Bet you wish it was the hot detective doing this to you,” Daniel said as he licked a path down the column of her neck. His free hand splayed across her hand where it rested against his thigh, then around to her sex. He trailed his fingers along her slick labia, inching them ever so closer to her swollen clit.

“Mmm hmm,” Red murmured. “If I sucked your dick, you’d probably think the same thing.”

Daniel stifled his deep, masculine laughter against the crook of her neck. “Yeah, but his pussy isn’t as sweet as yours.” He dipped a finger inside as if to prove his point.

“It’s not his pussy that interests you, Counsel,” she countered, once more falling back on her habit of teasing him with lawyer-speak.

“The defense rests, but not for long.” He nipped the side of her throat, and the sudden, sharp pleasure-pain was enough to drive all thoughts from her mind. Spinning her, he toppled her to the bed.

Red landed face-first. She had just enough time to grab fistfuls of comforter and lift her ass in offering before Daniel was there. He blazed a trail down her spine with his lips, long sweeping caresses of his arms over her ribs, sensitizing her skin to a fever pitch. In the back of her mind she suspected Daniel liked pounding into her from behind, if only because it mimicked his male partners so well. She didn’t care, not when he made her feel the way he did.

He cupped the insides of her thighs and spread them, then licked her clit and labia. He started softly, then increased the pressure with every stroke. Back and forth, up and down—he left no inch of her pussy untouched.

Red whimpered. She swallowed hard against the rising tide of her release. How he knew she needed it hard and fast, she didn’t know, but right now she could kiss him for it. Except, she’d somehow managed to grab a pillow and used it to muffle her cries. She hoped—hell, after what Daniel revealed he’d seen, she prayed—that they were being quiet enough, but Jack was a cop. There was no way to be sure.

Daniel pulled away, and she growled at the loss of contact. “Fuck me,” she ordered, looking over her shoulder to see him rearing up behind her. His cock pointed straight at her, fully hard with a drop of precum on the tip. To think of that thick rod deep inside her had her inner walls clenching with anticipation.

He rubbed the head of his cock back and forth against her wet folds. “Bet you’re not thinking about him now,” he said as he inched into her.

“Bet you’re not either. Oh God, that feels so damn good,” she moaned, leaning back against his slender yet muscled frame. He reached between her legs to toy with her clit.

“Please,” Red whimpered. The finger between her legs tormented her with the promise of the ecstasy his cock would bring. She undulated her hips. The sheer act of keeping her words muffled heightened her pleasure. To think Jack might be in his room, hearing the tiny sounds of their sex, sent a fresh wash of cream to her cunt.

Daniel brought the head of his cock to a stop against her opening. She expected a quip, a sarcastic remark. Instead, the smooth thrust of penetration robbed her of her ability to speak. She gasped, not quite able to stifle the moan that came to her lips, and tightened her muscles around him. Right now, she was thinking about only one man—the one inside her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jack gritted his teeth and rolled over in bed, reaching for the spare pillow to pull it over his head. For anyone else, it might have served to shut out the groans and moans coming from the other bedroom in the house, but he could still hear each squeak of the bedsprings as clearly as if he were standing in the same room, watching them.

*Oh God. There’s an idea I didn’t need.* He heard a gasp from Red half a second after Daniel’s teeth clicked together, and he could imagine the younger man nipping at her shoulder or nipple. The house wasn’t old, and the sound insulation was probably as good as could be expected, but short of building the house with thick sheets of cork sandwiched between every wall, nothing was going to keep the tormenting sounds at bay.

*And the scents are worse.* The excellent central-air system’s ducts ferried the sweet perfume of her pussy almost straight to him, bypassing doors and walls. The scents of their mingled sweat and the man’s seed were just as bad. Jack’s cock stood at attention, throbbing blue steel under the queen-size bed’s thick comforter and sheet.

He threw the covers back long enough to yank down his pajama pants and boxers and wrap his fingers around his shaft again. *Less than six hours, and here I am beating off again. Damn it. I thought I had more control than this. I did...until I saw her.*

His keen hearing found the rhythm of Daniel's thrusts by the creaking of the bedsprings and Red's breathy little sighs. His fingers matched their pace, catching the drops of precum on the tip of his rod and coating his shaft with the viscous fluid. In his mind, it was him pounding into Red, his fingers on her clit and then reaching around to stroke her nipples. He'd bite her shoulder, marking her as his.

But no, he couldn't fuck Red. Any bites would only infect her with the same virus that tormented him day and night. A sudden image of him pounding into someone else while they screwed Red filled his mind. Sex by proxy. Was that all he was doomed to have? He bit back a harsh burst of self-mocking laughter. No, any sex he had would be flesh against flesh, no middlemen allowed.

He heard her breathing quicken. Her moans escalated, and he knew how close she was to coming, almost as if he were there. The scent of her arousal tormented him. Sweat's salty tang floated on the air, and he drank in the smells, the sounds. They were all he would ever have.

His fingers tightened around the base of his shaft.

"Daniel!" He heard her cry out, though she probably thought she'd muffled her cries against a pillow.

A male grunt answered. An image of them locked together, with Daniel spilling his seed into her, filled Jack's mind. His dick twitched, balls tightening. An all-too-familiar pressure built, and then like the couple in the next room, he came.

His body jerked, the force of his orgasm blowing through him like a shot from a .45. Light flashed behind his eyes. Damn, as a human it'd never been that good. Or maybe it was the woman he heard murmuring sweet nothings to her lover in the other room. Maybe it was the smell of their mingled juices, all three of them, as if they'd had one big orgy. Jack smiled. Yeah...in his dreams, maybe.

He lay there for a while, letting his thoughts carry him down carnal roads. After long moments, he realized that the sounds from the other bedroom had stopped. *Thank God.* He rolled out of bed and kicked the pants the rest of the way off, his hand full of his own juices. Before

stepping out of the guest bedroom to run across the hall to the bathroom, he paused, listening at the door. But there were no little sounds that might indicate one of them had returned to the living room to watch TV. The last thing he wanted was for one of them to see him like this. Then he shook his head. No, the last thing he wanted was for the Axman to come by and slaughter the girl while he had a handful of cum. But her or her boyfriend catching him like this ran a close second.

He pushed the door open with his empty hand and stepped across the hall into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him before turning on the light. This time he remembered to lock the door, then stepped over to wipe his hands clean with wads of bathroom tissue. He flushed those and then washed his hands in the sink, lathering them up with the sweet cream-and-honey-scented liquid soap twice before rinsing them and drying them off.

When he was finished, he paused again to listen at the bathroom door before shutting the light off and returning to the bedroom. He yanked his boxers and pants back on and slid between the sheets, rolling over on his side drowsily. He had made one last search of the house before going to the bedroom in the first place, but his instincts were no less sharp even after relieving himself of tension. The least little sound would wake him—not to mention any scents he didn't recognize.

Reassured, he fell swiftly asleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

He woke long before the first footsteps came from the other bedroom. He lay in bed, listening to them shower together, their hushed whispers and giggles reaching him as clear as screaming would have. The scents of shampoo and the same soap he had smelled on Red last night when she opened the door came to his nostrils, and he rolled over with a sigh. The clock on the nightstand told him it was a few minutes after six a.m., a full hour later than he usually slept when on day shifts, and he got out of bed and stretched. It took no effort to bend over and touch his toes, and he did a hundred jumping jacks, fifty sit-ups, and fifty push-ups before they finished in the shower.

When they had gone, he grabbed a spare change of clothes out of his overnight bag and headed across the hall to the shower. There was still plenty of hot water left, for which he was

grateful, and he showered quickly, loath to be away from the woman he was supposed to be protecting for very long.

He shaved at the sink in quick, long, efficient strokes, knowing it was a waste of time. Even before he'd been bitten, he'd been shaving by the time he was thirteen. These days he could shave at six a.m. and have five o'clock stubble by noon.

The savory scent of frying bacon, eggs, and waffles with real maple syrup slapped him in the face as he came out of the bathroom, and his stomach growled reflexively. He stashed yesterday's clothes in the bedroom and headed into the kitchen, where Red was just transferring bacon from the pan to a plate bedded with paper towels to soak up excess grease. The bacon was perfect—crisp without being burned—and she had managed not to break the yolks on any of the eggs. *This. This is what I want.* Someone to eat breakfast with in the morning. Someone he could talk honestly to. Someone who knew what he was and didn't fear it.

Someone he could love.

Family.

"Smells delicious," he grunted. She nodded and flashed a brilliant smile at him, far brighter than any she'd shot his way last night. It hurt to be on the receiving end of that smile when he knew it came from simple good manners and not any real affection. Getting laid twice in one day must have agreed with her, he thought cynically. Either that or she doesn't like showering alone. The thought of stepping up behind her lithe, naked form in the shower crept up on him unawares, of him holding a soapy sponge in hand, running it over her slim shoulders and down the line of her spine to that succulent ass...

He jerked his mind away from the vivid fantasy with an effort. "Need me to set the table?" he offered. She had showered but still wore her pajamas, bright green with goldfinches scattered across them, and the scent of last night's sex still lingered tantalizingly in the soft fabric, too faint for anyone to smell but him.

"Thanks, but Daniel took care of it. Go sit down, I'll be right in."

He shrugged and headed into the dining room, taking the same seat he'd picked last night. Daniel lowered the top of the newspaper long enough to smile at him genially.

"Good morning. Sleep well?" the lawyer asked.

“Well enough,” Jack lied, trying to will his erection away. “First night in a new house is always a little difficult. I lay awake for an hour or so, listening to the sounds the house made so I’d be able to recognize them. I’d hate to get woken up one night, think I heard footsteps, and come running out of the bedroom with my gun drawn, only to find out what I’d heard was just the house groaning in the wind.”

He managed not to smirk as Daniel flushed, looking faintly embarrassed. *He thinks I might have heard them fucking.* He was right. Jack could hear Red moving around in the kitchen, no doubt getting the last few things needed for breakfast.

“Listen,” Daniel lowered his voice, clearly not wanting it to carry beyond the table. “Leave Red be, all right? All her energies need to be focused on her training right now, and this homicidal freak stalking her isn’t helping any. The last thing she needs is some guy almost old enough to be her father hitting on her.”

“Relax. I’m here to keep her from getting killed, not to get laid.” It was a reflexive protest, and Jack doubted Daniel believed him for a minute. After all, Daniel had walked in on him with his dick in his hand, already climaxing. Daniel hadn’t been there when he arrived, so he certainly knew he hadn’t gotten all hot and bothered over *him*. At the very least, the lawyer probably figured that even if he didn’t go out of his way to hit on her, Jack would take her up on it and fuck her if she came on to him. *And if I were any other guy, he’d be right...but I can’t do that to her. To anyone.*

“Yeah, right. Look, I know she’s hot—hell, I know that better than anyone—but I’m sure if you don’t already have a girlfriend, you can find one just about anywhere. It’s not as if you aren’t good-looking—” He broke off and frowned, and Jack could smell his sudden wave of embarrassment, smell the other man’s own desire. Things clicked suddenly, and Jack sighed again, more exasperated than ever.

*Great. He goes both ways. As if I needed this to be any more complicated.* He opened his mouth to say something, and Red came bustling in from the kitchen and set down the plate full of bacon and another plate with the eggs.

“Hold on, let me get the waffles. Jack, do you want coffee?”

“Yes, thank you. Black, please.”

She hurried back into the kitchen and came back with the waffles and coffee. Jack dug in, helping himself to the bacon while Daniel loaded his plate up with eggs, and then they swapped plates. He didn't take any exceptional pains not to touch the man's hand as they passed plates to each other. Unlike some of the older cops on the force, he had no particular feelings about gay and bi men one way or the other. He knew some of the older men on patrol would happily beat a man unconscious with their nightsticks if another man so much as ogled them or whistled their way. But he wasn't so insecure about his sexuality that he needed to hospitalize someone over it.

"Did you sleep well, Jack?" Red asked, pouring him a cup of coffee.

He grunted and nodded, his mouth full of bacon, and forked two of the waffles off their platter before slathering them with butter and maple syrup. She was a good cook, better than his mother had been, and sure as hell better than his ex-wife. She also had a good idea of how much two full-grown men could eat. She'd cooked up at least a full pound of bacon and a dozen eggs. He hid a wince at the realization. Their grocery bill was apt to go up quite a bit while he was staying with them, and he made a mental note to offer to recompense them the difference. *It's only fair. I know I eat like a horse.* A faint smirk curved his lips as he thought of Red down at the track with the thoroughbreds. *Or rather, a wolf.*

They finished the meal with a minimum of chatter, and he watched almost wistfully as she got up and went to change out of her pajamas into regular clothes. He could feel Daniel's eyes on him as the other man cleared the table of dishes. *He's going to go off to his law office, and I'm going to spend the day at Red's side, never letting her out of my sight. That's got to bug the hell out of him.*

Jack almost felt sorry for the younger man as he got up and went to the guest bedroom to pull on his holster, trench coat, and shoes.

*Okay, I can understand him panting over her like a dog in heat. She's hot. But he's a damned liar, to boot.*

Daniel brooded as he scraped the dishes clean and rinsed them before putting them in the dishwasher. The coffeepot had been emptied, the butter and maple syrup put back in the refrigerator, and the stove double-checked to make certain all the burners were off before he left for the office. He had seen how the cop looked at her during breakfast...as if what Jack was up to

in the bathroom yesterday wasn't proof. He might say he didn't want her, but actions spoke louder than words.

He paused for a moment as the dishwasher cycle started up, the whooshing of the water in counterpoint to his thoughts. An amused smile flickered on his lips for a split second before dying. *I'm not jealous. I'm not. Much.* If Red really wanted to sleep with another man, he guessed he could handle that, because he knew she loved him. They'd been together for years, and it was still as good now—still as *hot* now—as it had been in the beginning. She wasn't going to throw that away for a fling.

He dried his hands on a dishtowel, hung it back up, and returned to the living room to grab his briefcase and pull on his suit jacket. Red emerged from the bedroom, dressed in riding pants and top. "I have to get to the office," he said, coming around the side of the table to wrap his arms around her and kiss her fiercely. The detective had retreated to the guest bedroom, and for that, Daniel was glad.

"Have a good day at the office, sweetie," she murmured into his ear, pausing to nip his neck lightly. He shivered and pulled away reluctantly, although he would have much rather carried her right back to the bedroom and fucked her until she could barely remember her own name.

"I'll do my best," he replied lightly, nodding to Jack as the bigger man came back into the dining room, now wearing a trench coat that made him look damned sexy, like something out of a noir detective film.

It wasn't until he was in the car and halfway to work that he realized just why he was jealous.

He didn't mind him looking at her like that. Every man looked at her like that.

*I just wish he'd look at me the same way.*

"Are you ready to go?" Red asked Jack after Daniel had gone. He nodded, and she could see the nylon straps of the shoulder holster he wore under the trench coat. She scooped up her car keys and jingled them in her hands, and he shook his head. "What?"

"I'll drive," he said, holding out one hand for the keys.

“I don’t think so,” she snorted, aggravated at the thought. “I’ve been driving myself around since I was sixteen. I don’t need someone to play chauffeur now.”

“Sorry, I’m afraid I have to insist,” he said. “If the Axman gets it in his head to follow you to the track, or even to try to run us off the road, we’re going to have a much better chance at getting away from him in one piece if I’m behind the wheel. I’m sure you’re an excellent driver, Red, but I’ve had lessons in situation-specific aggressive driving, and if I have to, I’ll wrestle the keys away from you and handcuff you.”

She went wet at his words and tried very hard not to squirm at the image that presented itself instantly in her mind—herself chained to her bed with two pairs of those fur-lined novelty handcuffs, while he held himself above her, the muscles on his arms and back and in his shoulders rippling while he pounded into her rhythmically.

She grimaced and forced the thought away, grudgingly conceding that he was probably right about being the better driver if they were being chased. “Fine.” She growled, plunking the keys into his hand. “But I don’t have to like it.”

“I really didn’t expect you to, but that’s just the way it has to be. If it helps any, I’m sorry.”

She nodded stiffly and grabbed her things—riding helmet, crop, boots, wallet—and let him lead the way out the door. The morning was warm and brilliantly sunny, a complete 180-degree change from yesterday. Her mood lightened a bit, and she locked the door behind her. Then she stood there as he checked the car—underneath the hood, under the body, everywhere. When he finished, he nodded and unlocked the passenger-side door for her.

“No bombs? Brake lines not cut? No one hiding in the backseat?” she teased.

“You can joke if you want to,” he said mildly. A shiver ran through her as she realized he meant it. All those horrible things were possible. More sober now, she slid into her seat and tossed her gear into the back. She pulled her seat belt on as he shut her door. She locked it instantly and watched him come around to the driver’s side and get in.

“You’re the navigator,” he said a little more gently. “I know where the track is, but there are several ways to get there. Today we’ll take the usual way you go when you drive, but after that, we’re going to start taking a different route randomly every day. We don’t want him to get your routine down pat.”

“Okay,” she murmured and let him back out before she gave him directions. The car was small; while he wasn’t quite crammed in behind the wheel, it had to be a tight fit, even after he slid the seat back to its farthest point.

He flashed her a smile as he turned onto Lee Street and headed toward the track.

## Chapter Four

He unlocked the basement door and reached out to grab the string that dangled overhead. The incandescent bulb blinked to life, shedding light on the wooden stairs leading to the cellar. The old wooden boards creaked under his weight as he descended them with the camera in hand. The stench of film-development chemicals permeated everything down there: the faded gray indoor-outdoor carpet, the stairs themselves, even the vinyl curtain that closed off the small room he had set up as his darkroom from the rest of the basement. Dust filmed the old jars of preserves on the shelves in the corner, relics left over from the house's last owner. The washer and dryer stood against the far wall, rusted out and useless, just two more things like the dust-covered jars that he had never gotten around to throwing away.

He stepped into the darkroom and drew the curtain shut behind him before flicking on the red light. Crimson radiance washed down from the bare bulb overhead, painting everything in the room a murky wave of gore. He popped open the back of the camera and took out the roll of film. Shots from the last few rolls he had taken hung by clips from the lines he had strung around the room. Each print showed the same woman—sometimes laughing, sometimes looking annoyed, often mounted atop the back of a horse. Her long red hair was usually confined in a thick braid, and she carried herself with an air of confidence and joy.

“So pretty,” he whispered as he lifted a print out of its bath of chemicals and transferred it to another. His eyes gleamed as the image came into focus: the same woman, running up the front steps of her house in the rain, her arms full of grocery bags.

It took him a little while to finish developing the roll of film, and when he finished, he stepped out of the room to load the camera with a fresh roll. Then he crossed the hallway to the only other room in the basement that had its own door, reaching into his pocket for the keys to unlock it.

Inside, the walls were covered with yet more photographs. Light glimmered across the sprawling montage. On one of the four walls, dozens and dozens of beautiful women were frozen on paper, caught in everyday moments—jogging, smiling, going to work, coming home from work. Blondes and brunettes and redheads stood side by side, eyes crinkled in laughter or scrunched up in frowns as they went about the business of life.

On the other three walls, the same mouths stood open, screaming silently against a background of scarlet splashes. Eyes were squeezed shut in agony or glazed flatly in death.

In one corner of the room stood an ax, its wooden handle bright with polish, its steel head sharp, gleaming, and clean.

He stood at the center of the room for a long moment, eyes shut, soaking up the room's ambiance with a beatific smile on his face. His breathing grew more and more ragged with each second that passed, and finally he opened his eyes and walked over to the office chair that stood at the center of the room. He set the camera down on the floor a few feet away and began to undress, his eyes filled with raw lust.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Park there,” Red instructed Jack, who obediently and deftly guided the vehicle into the empty space she pointed out. He rolled up his windows quickly as she got out of the car, his brow furrowed with intense concentration. He had realized as soon as he got behind the wheel with her that it would be impossible to drive with the windows up. Forced to endure the tantalizing scent of her musk, he knew he would have ended up driving into a tree. Either she was already missing her boyfriend, or she wanted Jack as badly as he wanted her. The thought would have had him hard again in an instant if he hadn't been hard already; sitting just inches away from her for the entire trip had been torture.

The other thought on his mind was the horses. He had discovered very early on after being infected that animals reacted abnormally to him. Dogs were the worst; the smell of predator that he gave off drove them almost insane with rage. Cats fled before he got too close, pigeons and squirrels shunned him even if he had a bag of popcorn or a hot dog in his hand, and the single time he'd had to answer a police call at the zoo had been a nightmare. He thought things would be no different at the track, but he knew he couldn't exactly keep her from her job. *I'll figure this out as I go along.*

He got out of the car, locked it up, and set the car's alarm. "I'm glad to see you had a few precautions before this," he said. "If you hadn't had a car alarm put in already, I would have suggested you get one as soon as I started this job."

She nodded. "The barn is this way," Red said, and he followed her, intently scanning the surrounding area. Jack squinted and pulled out his sunglasses; the sun shone down brilliantly from a cloudless sky, and the temperature was already rising. It looked like it was going to be a nice day. The grounds were fairly empty that early in the morning, and the only other person in sight was the groundskeeper, who was trimming the grass on a riding lawn mower at the far edge of the property.

Jack wasn't sure what he expected to find at the back side of a racetrack, but the neat rows of buildings and the clean, well-swept walkways leading to the paddock and the racetrack were far tidier than he would have thought. The grass looked manicured, and the area didn't stink of horse manure nearly as much as he would have thought. Someone stood next to a grazing horse in a green area, where nearby someone hosed down a horse at a wash rack.

Red gave a few passing waves or greetings as she headed to one of the middle barns. Jack had no problems matching her long strides.

Inside the stables, it was less bright, and Jack tucked the sunglasses away, inhaling the scents of sweet straw, not-so-sweet horse, and—stronger here than outside—the inevitable smell of dung. Mingled with those aromas was the perfume of leather coming from the lockers where the saddles and other tack were stored.

Uneasy snorts and stamping hooves came from the surrounding stalls, but Jack ignored them as Red made her way to the last one on the right.

Red paused just outside the stall, her face scrunched into a puzzled expression. "Not sure why Grandma's Goodies is so agitated. Usually she greets me with a whicker." Red sighed. "We'll work out that frustration on the track, won't we, GG?"

The horse snorted in agitation again as Red lifted the latch, and Jack frowned, realizing abruptly that the horses were reacting to him.

"Shhh, GG," Red crooned reassuringly. "It's okay, girl. It's just me."

Red had barely gotten the door half open when the horse inside bolted forward, kicking the stall door open the rest of the way and rearing. Jack cursed and lunged forward, tackling Red an

instant before the mare's hooves would have smashed into her skull. Grandma's Goodies let out a high-pitched, whinnying scream and reared again, leaping over the two of them and racing for the open door at the end of the barn.

"What the hell?" Red blurted, stunned and eyes wide. "Catch that horse!" she yelled.

*Shit.* A wave of mingled anger and dread washed through him. *I was afraid this would happen. No horse with a working nose is going to let me get anywhere near him. That's going to make it pretty hard for Red to get any work done.*

Barely had that thought gone through his mind when he became aware of her soft, warm form trapped underneath him. Her scent rose to his nostrils in dizzying waves, and he could feel his erection grinding into her groin. The look in her eyes went from confused to suddenly hungry, and before Jack could stop what he was doing, he bent his head and kissed her.

Her mouth was soft and hot, and she tasted of toothpaste and a hint of the maple syrup from that morning's waffles. She moaned and melted against him, her arms coming up to wrap around his shoulders, her fingers tangling in his hair. He lost himself in the sensation, three years' worth of unwilling celibacy washing over him like a tsunami, bringing every lustful urge he'd ever had in his life raging back to the fore. She writhed underneath him as he plundered her mouth, his tongue twining with hers, feeling her arch up into him in need as great as his own.

The sound of someone clearing his throat intruded roughly, and when Jack lifted his head to see who had interrupted them, the stable boy struggling to hold the halter of Red's horse shrank back abruptly at the fury in his gaze. "I...uh...sorry," the teenager mumbled, averting his gaze from the two of them. "I just...uh...Ms. Taylor's horse..."

"Get off me," Red muttered, her face flushed scarlet. Jack got to his feet and reached out to grab her hand and helped her up.

"Are you okay?" he murmured, too quietly for the boy to hear. "The horse didn't kick you, did he?" He realized with annoyance that his own face was hot, both with lust and with embarrassment. *What the hell was I thinking? If she's got even the tiniest cut in her mouth, I've just infected her.* Daniel's words at the breakfast table haunted him. Not even with her an entire morning, and he'd already acted on his baser urges.

"I'm fine," she snapped, pushing him out of the way, walking over to where the boy stood, and taking the lead rope from him. The horse bent its head and sniffed her, whickering

unhappily. No doubt my scent is all over her, Jack realized. But maybe the horse was comfortable enough with her that it wouldn't matter.

"Thanks, Mike," Red told the teen. "I can handle things now." The boy nodded and made a hasty getaway. Jack sighed, meeting her glare head-on.

"Listen up," she said, her tone firm. "We've obviously got...*problems* with each other. I'm not going to be able to get any work done with you hovering around me and breathing down the back of my neck, and you're never going to see the killer coming if we're down on the floor, rolling around together like weasels in heat." He winced at the accusation, and she smiled grimly. "So here's what you're going to do. You're going to wait here while I get Grandma's Goodies saddled and ready to ride, and then you're going to go back to the parking lot and watch me from there." He opened his mouth to protest, and she held up one hand to silence him. "Or I can put my horse away now and call your supervisor and tell him you just mauled me. I've even got a witness." She glanced toward the exit where the stable boy had fled. Jack doubted the boy had gone far.

"And you weren't mauling me back?" he observed, his tone ironic.

"That's not the point, is it?" she said. "For whatever reason, my horse doesn't like you. You're living in my house and going everywhere with me, but I draw the line at having you upset GG."

He sighed again, knowing she was probably as angry with herself as he was at himself. "All right." He doubted she would be able to get much done if he was close enough for the horse to smell him. "I run pretty damn fast, and I can shoot anything I can see. As long as I keep an eye on you and stay close enough to react quickly, you should probably be okay." He knew that if he didn't let her have her way, she was likely to send him packing. People weren't required to accept police help if they chose not to, *but* if he weren't around, she would be dead. Her boyfriend might be a pretty little toy, but he wasn't good enough to keep the sicko from getting her.

"All right," he said. "But not the parking lot; that's too far away. I'll go out to the track and watch by the fence."

"Fine," she muttered. "I'll race along the inside lane of the track." She put the horse back in its stall and went to get her saddle and tack. He might have moved outside by the fence, but he

never lost sight of Red. She returned with a few small leather straps and a saddle that probably wasn't even big enough for his left butt-cheek. With deft movements, she put the gear on the horse.

Mike came over and walked by her side out to a gate in the rail. "Give me a leg up?" she asked, and Jack envied the lanky kid as Red stepped into his palm and boosted herself into the saddle. Her feet found the stirrups like a pro, and she nodded to Mike as she directed GG onto the track.

Jack stepped away from the track, not wanting to spook the other horses the way he'd done in the barn. He swept the visible area of the track with a long, slow glance. A few horse-and-rider pairs rode along the oval. Out of habit, he noticed their positions, then frowned. Something dark and four-legged, much smaller than the horses, stood half-hidden by a clump of brush and brambles at the far end of the track, near the fence that kept gawkers out. The wind was blowing away from Jack, not toward him, preventing him from catching the creature's scent.

But it looked very much like a wolf.

Before he could start around the track, a loud whinny from GG drew his focus back to Red. She sat on the horse with an easy grace he doubted he could copy. He had no idea how one would train a racehorse, but he figured he was about to learn.

When he looked back, less than a split second later, the mystery creature was gone.

As soon as she vaulted onto GG's back, all her worries faded away. Ever since seeing the photos and then Jack's arrival, her world had been twisted upside down. But not here, not with a thousand pounds of finely tuned racing machine beneath her and her goals in sight. GG moved into a long trot, then an easy canter, almost as if the animal sensed Red's need to lose herself in her work.

She turned down the far side of the track, and even from there she could see Jack leaning against the rail. He watched her, though she doubted that the planning and work that went into training a racehorse entranced him. Instead, he probably saw it as a job. She was his job, and he would do her—no, *it*—well.

GG snorted.

“I know, girl. Got to keep focused.” Red drew a deep breath, focusing on her plan for the day. A couple of quick furlongs to get GG responding off her leg, followed by a long-pace run. “You ready?”

GG tossed her head.

Taking that as a clue that GG was ready, Red waited until they passed the quarter pole, then gave GG a nudge. The horse took off.

All jockeys carried a mental stopwatch in their heads, and Red was no different. As each hoof hit the ground, she clicked off the seconds, slowing GG two furlongs later. She did some quick calculations. Not a bad time.

She rounded the fence and saw Jack watching her. A few members of the media stood a short distance away, furiously scribbling notes. Red smiled. *Let them see this.* She cued GG again, and the horse took off like a shot. A few flashbulbs popped as she passed them, and exactly two furlongs later, she pulled GG back into a walk. She suspected their picture would be in the paper tomorrow morning.

*“Don’t focus on the glory. Just pay attention to what you’re doing.”* Her grandmother’s words echoed in her ear. So she marked out her place on the rail and eased GG into it. As they passed the quarter pole one more time, she cued GG into a hand gallop. When the Derby came, she didn’t want anyone to say she and GG weren’t ready.

## Chapter Five

Red paused to inhale the fresh citrus scent of the navel oranges she'd bagged. On a whim, she added two more before knotting the bag shut and setting it in the cart. The fruit balanced precariously against a bag of apples and half a dozen ears of corn. Feeding Jack was taking a bite out of their weekly grocery budget. Her shopping cart looked like she was feeding the Waltons instead of just the three of them.

"Can we not take forever with this?" Jack's annoyed voice cut into her awareness. "Places like this are dangerous—multiple entrances and exits, blind spots around the end of every aisle. If the suspect followed us in here, it'd be damn hard to spot him. All he'd have to do is grab a cart, and he'd have instant camouflage."

She glanced over her shoulder at him and shrugged unapologetically. "Sorry. The cupboards at home are almost bare, and you eat as much as Dan and I do all by yourself." She maneuvered around an older lady pondering the cantaloupes. "My budget won't cover getting dinner delivered every night for as long as this takes."

He scowled.

Consulting her list, she added more produce to her cart before steering it around the corner. A glance at the refrigerator this morning while cooking breakfast had shown her that Jack was rapidly eating them out of house and home, and he'd only been with them one night so far. She grabbed one last item—a newspaper off the rack by the customer service counter—before heading through the cashier's aisle.

Out in the parking lot, she loaded the groceries into the car's trunk as Jack stood guard. Nice of him let her do the heavy work, she thought, slamming the trunk lid. She tucked the newspaper under her arm as Jack unlocked the car's doors. He waited for her to slide into the passenger's seat and fasten her safety belt before he sat down behind the steering wheel.

She unfolded the newspaper as he pulled out of the parking lot to head home. The headline on the front page jumped out at her in bold type: AXMAN STALKS NEW VICTIM. Her own features limned in stark black and white stood out directly below the headline. Fear's sudden icy chill froze her to the core. She wavered in her seat, held in by the seat belt. Her vision went dark. "Oh God." The only mote of relief at seeing her face splashed over the page was the fact that her grandmother was currently out of town, down in Jamaica for the next two weeks on vacation. Red clung to the thought like a butterfly to a nectar-rich flower.

"Shit," Jack muttered. His pithy curse brought her back to awareness.

She looked up from the headline to see his brow furrowed in anger. His body was taut with it, and his eyes had gone almost black.

"I was hoping to keep you out of the papers."

"No such luck," she murmured shakily. The racetrack was visible in the photo's background, and she recognized the shot as one the newspaper had taken last year when she had won three races on the same day. She scanned the article quickly, mouth going dry as the more gory details of the killer's past exploits leaped out at her. "Wait... What the hell?"

"What?"

"This says that the Axman's other victims also received pictures of the other women he killed before them. If the police knew the Axman was stalking them, why didn't they receive police protection too?"

Jack was silent for the rest of the drive, only speaking up at last when he steered the car into her driveway and parked. "They did," he admitted with a sigh. "It wasn't enough to stop him."

Ice coated her spine, and she stiffened. Raw terror bloomed in her gut for a moment before it was swept away by hot rage. "Great," she spat. "Just great."

She shoved the car door open, got out, and went around to the trunk to get the groceries. After he opened the trunk, she grabbed two of the eight bags. She then headed up the front stairs and unlocked the door. She heard him slam the trunk closed behind her but ignored the sound as she stalked into the kitchen and dropped the bag on the kitchen counter with a growl. She jerked open the door to one of the cupboards hard enough for it to slam against the wall. As Jack

walked into the kitchen, toting the other six bags of groceries, she jammed cans and jars into the cupboard, her anger barely contained.

“Are you going to act like this all night? I understand you’re upset, but—”

“I’ll act like I fucking want to in my goddamned house,” she snarled. “I might as well strip naked and go jogging in the rain if I like. Nothing you or I do is going to stop this bastard.”

“Don’t be stupid,” Jack snorted. “He’s just human, and he’ll be caught. In the meantime, you’re going to follow my instructions, and you’ll be fine.”

“Fine? Do you honestly believe you can save me when all those other women have died?” She turned toward him with a can of green beans clenched in one fist. Her knuckles were white as she glared at him.

“Anger’s good. It’ll keep you fighting and keep you alive.” Jack strode forward. His attention flicked toward the vegetable can in her hand, then settled back on her face. “You have something those other women didn’t have. You have me.”

Red laughed. The harsh sound grated on her nerves, but his words were so ludicrous. *Typical arrogant man.* “So you’re saying you can succeed where other officers have failed?” Her arm ached from holding up the can, and she set it on the counter. After all, what was she going to do, brain him with it? Knocking out her protector wasn’t the greatest idea.

Jack braced his hand on the counter, pinning her in place. “In the time that you’ve been yelling at me, I’ve taken stock of the situation, heard Daniel’s car pull into the driveway, and made a note that your neighbor is mowing his lawn for what appears to be the second time this week. You need me.”

“I don’t *need* you,” Red growled. She drew a deep breath to try and steady herself and only succeeded in filling her lungs with his rich, woodsy scent. Instant heat flooded her body, erasing the chill of fear the newspaper article had given her.

Even as the words left her lips, she knew she was wrong. She needed his protection, and they both knew it. And deep inside, she knew she needed him in other ways that had very little to do with anything except getting naked and sweaty. His eyes blazed, and before she could take a breath, he crossed the few feet that separated them and yanked her into his arms. She wasn’t sure whether the fire in his gaze burned with lust or fury, but then his mouth closed over hers and eliminated any doubt.

Jack fisted his hand in Red's hair. Her crimson mane came loose of the rubber band that held it in its ponytail. Her words had torn something loose deep inside him. She needed him, all right; she just didn't realize how bad or how much. And he needed her every bit as badly. Her long locks slithered free from their confines and over his hand as his mouth roamed savagely over her lips. She stiffened for the barest of seconds before she melted into his arms, returning the kiss with equal passion. He pulled her more tightly against him, feeling the softness of her breasts against his own chest. He could smell her arousal, and the aroma drove his lust to greater heights. His cock, already stiff in his jeans, hardened further, so painful he thought it might explode.

Some part of him heard the front door open and Daniel's voice calling out, "Hey, what's for dinner?" but he had neither time nor interest in reacting, in pulling away from Red before the other man came into the kitchen and stopped abruptly at what he saw.

Jack felt rather than saw Red's eyes flicker open then widen as she saw Daniel standing there. She pulled back, blushing brightly. Jack released her reluctantly and turned toward the lawyer.

Without hesitating, Daniel punched him. The younger man's fist collided with Jack's flushed, lust-swollen mouth. Jack felt the skin of Daniel's knuckles scrape against his teeth and break. He caught the faint tang of blood when his tongue flicked forward automatically, and realized what it meant. Daniel pulled back to punch Jack again—

—and Jack caught his fist neatly in one callused hand.

Jack groaned as he saw the blood on Daniel's hand. His mouth throbbed faintly from the punch, but he'd been punched plenty of times in his life, and this one hadn't even loosened a tooth.

What it *had* done was much worse.

"Shit," he muttered.

"I want you out," Daniel snapped, livid. "I warned you this morning—"

"Sit down and shut the hell up," Jack sighed. "Both of you."

They gaped. He grabbed each of them by a shoulder, steered them into the dining room, and pushed them down into chairs.

“Hey!” Red protested.

“Shut up,” he repeated. “I was so hoping not to need to have this conversation.” He rubbed his eyes wearily with one hand, knowing that they wouldn’t stay startled—and docile—for very long. *Best to just spit it out, I guess. But they aren’t going to believe me. Fuck.*

“There’s something you ought to know. Red, you asked why I could save you when those other women died. There’s a reason—”

“What other women?” Daniel interjected.

“The other women the Axman murdered.” Jack found the paper Red had dropped on the coffee table and tossed it at Daniel. “There’s a reason why they failed and I won’t.”

He watched them exchange glances—half-confused, half-scornful of what they no doubt considered to be bragging. He knew they couldn’t understand until he simply spat it out. It was harder than he’d thought it would be; every cell in his body, every instinct, still screamed that silence was the only rational response to what he had become. But he knew they would never accept his words without an explanation. *And probably a demonstration.* “I’m a werewolf.”

Daniel burst out laughing.

Red stared at him in disbelief, the confusion etched on her features slowly turning to indignation. “You son of a bitch. I could be dead tomorrow, and you’re standing there making stupid jokes!”

“Don’t I wish,” Jack said quietly. “Three years ago, I hadn’t been assigned to the homicide division yet. I was working on a case with an officer from animal control. An animal had been attacking children in one of the more rundown neighborhoods in Louisville.” He paused and licked his lips. They had gone dry.

“We were searching condemned tenements when I heard Officer Morrell scream. I came running. Morrell was on the floor, and this...*thing* was ripping open his belly. This creature looked like a cross between a wolf and a man...and it moved faster than anything human.”

He paused again, trying not to shiver as he remembered. “I got hurt before I was able to kill it. It bit almost half my hand off.” He lifted his hand to show them the scars, which throbbed nastily in momentary mockery. “My fingers grew back.” He shook his head, then continued. “Morrell was dead, and I was infected. I changed for the first time a month later. Fortunately, I was on leave after Morrell’s death, at my family’s old hunting cabin up in the mountains, and the

only thing I hurt that night—so far as I know—was the ten-point buck I found torn to shreds in my front yard the next morning.” He shrugged. “The were that bit me had to come from somewhere. I spend all my off-hours searching for others so I can learn more about this disease from them. But I’ve never found any so far.”

They were staring. “You are so full of shit,” Daniel finally said, shaking his head in blatant disbelief. He flipped the paper open.

“I’m done with this,” Red muttered at last, her voice low with anger. “Does your captain know you’re insane?” She got to her feet and pulled her cell phone out of her jeans pocket. “I’m calling him right now.”

Jack arched a brow. “Daniel. How’s your hand doing?”

Daniel glanced down at his bloody knuckles and froze. The blood that had been seeping from the ragged cut Jack’s teeth created had slowed to less than a trickle, and even as all three of them watched, the cut finished healing and closed to a faint scar.

“Holy shit,” Daniel whispered, bolting to his feet and backing away. He shook his head back and forth, obviously trying to will the truth away by sheer force of belief. “No. No fucking way. This can’t be—” He spun around and raced out of the kitchen.

Jack tore after him and grabbed his right shoulder once he was just shy of the door to the master bedroom. The full moon was too close to let him run away; Jack had no idea if the possibility existed that Daniel might change *early*. If he did, he could hurt someone. And then there was the secret they both now shared. The world didn’t believe in things like werewolves, but if Daniel changed in public and started tearing into people, it’d be given very solid proof of their existence. People would have to believe then. That wouldn’t mean that they’d understand, or accept. Jack knew that people feared what they didn’t understand—and killed what they feared. For his own sake, and for Daniel’s sake—and even, in a way, for Red’s—Jack couldn’t let Daniel leave.

Daniel whirled around and swung at him again. Jack jerked back and out of the way. Great. He knew he could pound Daniel into a bloody pulp, which would subdue him for all of five minutes—if Jack was lucky—or he could find some other way to calm him down. He remembered how wired and tense he had been before his first change. It had felt like he’d chugged a tanker truck full of espresso, and that had been two weeks before the full moon. The

next full moon was set to arrive in just two days. Daniel needed something to take the edge off, to calm him down—hell, to calm them both—so they could focus on protecting Red. Jack could turn this into an advantage, make it work. He just needed to find a way...

He grabbed Daniel's wrists, and Daniel snarled, yanking away, pulling him off balance. Jack roared and struggled to stay on his feet. "Calm the fuck down! I can get you through this, goddammit!"

"Let me go!" Daniel screamed, one hand twisting out of Jack's grasp. "You did this on purpose!"

The cop in Jack recognized the glazed, angry look in Daniel's eyes. It was the same look perps got before they did something stupid and either got themselves arrested or shot. Daniel wasn't going to listen to him no matter what he said. Never mind that Jack had been dealing with this for three years now...superior experience counted for diddly-squat right now. His window of opportunity was closing, and fast. He had minutes, maybe, if he was lucky, before Red freaked out and called 911.

Jack slammed Daniel against the wall hard enough to rattle the drywall. Drawing a deep breath, he smelled the tang of blood and...something else. Jack sniffed again. The unmistakable scent of male arousal flooded his nostrils, and a quick glance down Daniel's body showed not only had the man stopped fighting him, but he was also hard as a fucking rock.

"If you ever so much as touch Red again—"

Jack spun Daniel around and pressed the younger man's right cheek against the wall, wrenching his arms behind his back. Looking at the possessiveness in Daniel's eyes, remembering the way Red had responded to him, distracted Jack from what he had to do. "Don't worry. I can't touch her, and now, neither can you."

"Fuck off!" Daniel yelled.

Jack slammed Daniel against the wall again, not wanting to hurt him but needing to knock some sense into him. "Keep your voice down. You don't want to bring the neighbors running, do you?"

"Go to hell!" Daniel struggled to free himself. Pinned between the wall and Jack's body, he couldn't.

Jack snarled. “Been there. Done that. Listen to me. Neither one of us can touch Red. You don’t want to infect her.”

“Cut the werewolf crap.” Daniel sagged against Jack, no doubt intending to catch him off guard. Instead, the denim slide of Daniel’s ass against the fly of Jack’s jeans made his cock stiffen. “You’re just a man.”

“A man you apparently want.” Jack transferred both of Daniel’s wrists to his left hand, grabbed the collar of Daniel’s golf shirt, and yanked. The material split easily, no match for his increased strength, and whatever Daniel was about to say was cut off by his groan.

Jack worked on autopilot. He’d never swung this way before, but there were two things that he knew, fucking and fighting. Subduing Daniel in a fight wouldn’t work. The younger man had lived a cushioned life, one where every day wasn’t a battle for survival. Sure, Jack knew he’d easily win. It wouldn’t work. Daniel would come back again...and again. The consequences of which wouldn’t be pretty for either him or Red.

But fucking, on the other hand... Jack suspected Daniel understood *exactly* what it meant to give up his ass. Jack pushed the door to the bedroom open, shoved Daniel inside, and kicked the door closed behind him before he pushed Daniel up against the wall again. A bottle of lube sat on top of the bureau-style headboard next to an erotic novel. He figured sex with Daniel wouldn’t be much different than sex with a woman. Slot A in Tab B, and all of that.

Jack reached around and grabbed the waistband of Daniel’s pants. His thumb brushed against springy hair. The scent of Daniel’s arousal came thicker now, and as Jack worked on the waistband of his jeans, he felt the ridges of Daniel’s abs. The combination of male musk and coarser hair aroused him. His own panting breaths echoed around him, mingling with Daniel’s low moans as Jack unzipped him.

*Damn, this is hotter than I imagined.* Of course, it could just be because it had been a long while since he’d stuck his cock into anything other than his own fist.

Completely unfastened, Daniel’s pants slid down his hips and legs to pool around his feet. Good, further restraint. He wore designer boxer briefs. Jack shoved them down his legs too.

Daniel’s bare ass brushed against the fly of Jack’s jeans. His cock twitched, hips flexing involuntarily into the muscled cushion. Before he could come in his jeans, Jack unfastened his

own pants and shoved them and his briefs out of the way. He rocked forward, pillowing his shaft in the cleft of Daniel's buttocks.

Both men groaned.

Jack drew a ragged breath. He used only his weight to pin Daniel to the wall—not that the other man was fighting him now. Jack grabbed the lube and generously filled his palm, then reached down to stroke his own shaft.

The slick liquid coated Jack, teased him with what it would be like to sink into a hot, wet pussy—preferably Red's—and he brushed his thumb across his crown just to torment himself. Clenching his teeth, he withdrew his hand from his cock. He had no doubt plunging his cock into Daniel would feel far better than his own fingers.

Jack reached around and wrapped his fingers around Daniel's penis. He tested the weight and girth in his fingers, for a moment wondering what it would feel like if their positions were reversed. Nah, he doubted Daniel could take him. "Like that?" he growled in Daniel's ear.

"Fuck, yeah," Daniel moaned.

Jack captured a drop of precum with his fingers and then grabbed his own cock. He pressed it against the puckered opening, eliciting another groan from Daniel. "I am your Alpha. I brought you into my world, and I can take you out of it. You do anything to hurt Red, or anyone else, and I'll do just that. Do you understand?" Jack slammed his forearm against the back of Daniel's neck.

"Yeah." Daniel gasped.

Jack eased off. "Good." He flexed his hips. The head of his cock slipped inside Daniel. He groaned. The tight ring of muscles, the heat of Daniel's body—it felt so good. His balls tightened. *Focus, man. You have to prove to Daniel that you're the Alpha.*

He operated on pure instinct as he sheathed himself inside Daniel's body. He'd never done this before, but he knew that sensitive place behind his own balls, and his fingers found it on Daniel. The slide of lube-slick fingers along Daniel's cock probably felt as good to him as Jack knew it felt personally. The knot of nerves beneath the crown of Daniel's penis, all those little places a man knew how to touch just right and needed to teach a woman—he found them on Daniel's cock and balls.

Fully sheathed inside Daniel's body, Jack savored the moment. Tight muscles, heat surrounding his cock, the feel of Daniel's shaft twitching in his fingers... He could grow to like this. At least now he'd get laid. He pulled back, leaving the tip of his cock inside, then plowed forward once more. The silken slide reminded him so much of sinking into a pussy that he groaned and thrust again. Daniel's balls tightened in his hand; the other man liked it as much as he did.

Red stood stunned for all of thirty seconds before she heard the grunts and pounding coming from her bedroom. It didn't sound *quite* like a fight, but something more like...sex? Her jaw dropped. No, it couldn't be. Surely Jack and Daniel weren't...fucking? *Oh god, I have to see this.*

Red raced down the hall, nearly tripping over her own feet in her haste to find out what her boyfriend and her bodyguard were doing. She knew about Daniel's bisexuality, had thought it cute that they enjoyed the same guys. But to see her lover having sex with another man... A shiver darted down her spine, and moisture flooded her sex. Oh yeah, she'd pay to see that.

She skidded to a stop by the door, eased it open, and braced her hand on the frame. There, by her bed, Jack had Daniel pressed up against the wall. Jack's pants were down around his knees, revealing a very nice ass and muscled legs. She squeezed her thighs together just thinking about the kiss and what might have happened had Daniel not come home. Her lover was pressed against the wall, a torn shirt lying on the floor, his underwear and pants down around his ankles. With his face pressed against the wall, she couldn't see his expression, but from the throaty sounds he made, he was enjoying the feel of Jack thrusting into his ass.

And what a sight it was. Her breath hitched as she focused on the back and forth cadence of Jack's hips. Low grunts emerged from his throat, the animalistic sound reminding her about what he said he was. A werewolf. Her fingers went to her lips, then to her breasts, finding her nipples hard and pointed behind her sports bra and shirt.

She and Daniel had rented gay porn flicks. She knew what two men having sex looked like, but this... It was nothing like what she'd seen on her television. This was raw and primal and so full of testosterone that every feminine cell inside her screamed, "*I want.*"

She flipped open the button on her jeans.

“Harder,” Daniel growled.

The lustful demand in his voice sparked jealousy. The thought that Jack might be giving something to Daniel that she'd unknowingly denied him simply because she wasn't a man made her shudder.

The spectacle before her was beautiful, Jack's darker skin against Daniel's paleness. The contrast in their hair, the muscled forms, both masculine, both gorgeous in their own ways. She'd always found her lover hot, but watching him get fucked was even hotter. Red slid her fingers beneath the waistband of her panties to find her labia already wet.

She turned and leaned against the wall to spread her legs and find her swollen clitoris. Rubbing her fingers over it, she gasped, her voice mingling with the husky moans and sighs from the men. She flicked her fingers over her opening, feeling her walls tightened with the thought of a cock deep inside her. One finger, then two, slid into her, and she heard Daniel's ragged cry that announced he was about to come.

Jack's fingers tightened on Daniel's cock.

“Yes!” Daniel shouted.

Red's hips bucked, remembering him shouting that as she'd wrapped her lips around his cock and sucked him deep into her mouth. What she wouldn't give to be right there, on her knees in front of him, doing just that. Her thumb rubbed her clit. *Oh, so good.*

She pulled her fingers away from her sex, a mewl of need in her throat. She shoved her pants down, toed off her shoes, and kicked her jeans and panties away. Once her lower half was naked, she moved less than a foot to lean against the wall and spread her legs. So much better now, she thought as she brought her fingers back to her slick folds. She stroked herself, a gentle strumming at odds with the men's pounding against the wall. She slipped a finger inside herself, then a second, thinking how big Jack's cock might be, and all the ways he'd stretch her full. She rotated the heel of her hand against her clit.

Her nostrils flared. She breathed heavily, unable to tear her eyes away from the men in front of her.

“Damn you,” Daniel growled, his voice breaking, growing rough as his release overtook him. He shuddered, and though she couldn't see his cock, she watched Jack's arm pumping as he

stroked her lover off. More shuddering breaths, low groans, and the sight of Daniel's cum splashing the wall had her writhing in place.

She slid down the wall, the surface cool against her back. The carpet pricked her bare ass, but here she could splay her legs wide. If only she were on the other side of the room. She'd open the dresser drawer, pull out her vibrator, and stuff her pussy while she watched the men fuck. She moaned just thinking about it.

Jack gave a final thrust, burying himself balls-deep inside Daniel. With a ragged groan, he came, his hips jerking as he spilled himself inside her boyfriend. His cries echoed around her, dissipating into panting breaths. He turned his face to the side to avoid Daniel's hair. Droplets of sweat dripped down Jack's forehead.

Red jammed two fingers deep into her pussy. She ground the heel of her hand against her clit, her release slamming into her with the force of a runaway horse. She cried out, her screams drowning out the men's breaths and the wet sounds of her fingers moving inside her.

She sat there, too drained to do anything as the aftershocks rocked her body. Her fingers grew slack. She barely had the strength to lift her eyelids to see Daniel and Jack standing there, staring at her, mouths agape.

"Oh," she breathed, a hot flush covering her body. "You're done."

"And so, it seems, are you," Jack drawled, and the look in his eyes said he'd enjoyed the show.

## Chapter Six

The bathroom door opened, and Red watched Jack and Daniel emerge. Daniel's eyes were downcast as he headed for the kitchen, his hair still damp from the shower. While Jack had pulled on jeans, his bare chest gleamed with the last few droplets of moisture. He glanced over at where she sat at the kitchen table, a cup of coffee in front of her. The steam billowing out of the bathroom raised the humidity inside the house—as if it wasn't steamy enough in the house now. She shook her head, still unable to believe what she'd done. *What the hell came over me?*

Daniel moved to pour himself a cup of coffee as Jack pulled on the white button-down shirt he'd carried out of the bathroom. Red could feel the heat in her cheeks at the thought of what she had witnessed less than an hour ago in the bedroom—and her response. Daniel took a sip of the coffee, still not speaking or meeting her eyes, and she saw Jack frown as he buttoned his shirt up and tucked it into his pants.

“All right,” Jack finally sighed, shaking his head. “Daniel, sit down. We all need to talk about what just happened before things get any more awkward. Long, uncomfortable silences aren't going to keep Red any safer.”

Daniel sank into a chair at the far end of the table from Red, and Jack pulled out a chair between the two of them and sat. “Dan, you're probably feeling guilty right now. You think you cheated on Red.” Daniel's head whipped up, and he fixed Jack with a startled expression. “And you, Red, I'm guessing you're probably embarrassed as hell.”

She blushed again and toyed with her cup. “I...yeah,” she finally admitted. “I've...never done anything like that before.”

“Neither have I,” Jack admitted. She blinked, but it was Daniel who looked shocked.

“But you—I mean, it felt like...you knew what you were doing...” He trailed off uncertainly.

“No, that was a first for me. But I figured gay sex isn’t that much different from straight sex,” Jack said. The look on Daniel’s face was almost comical. Red could see that he clearly didn’t want to believe Jack. “You were about ready to lose it, Dan,” Jack said, his voice softening. “You realized what I was telling you was the truth, and you panicked.”

“Yeah,” Daniel admitted, looking uncomfortable.

“Beating the shit out of you wouldn’t have done me any good. You—we—heal faster than normal humans could ever dream of doing, and as soon as you woke up, you would have been just as crazy.”

Red frowned. “I’m still not buying this werewolf crap,” she said at last. “It’s completely ridiculous.”

Jack sat for a moment, not saying anything, before he stood. At last, he sighed. “Draw all the blinds and curtains in the house.”

“What?” she asked, trying to figure out what he was talking about.

“Do it.”

She frowned and got up from the table. She closed the curtains on the windows in the kitchen before heading to the living room to do the same. It took her five minutes to close the blinds and curtains on every window in the house, and when she returned to the kitchen, she was stunned to see that Jack had removed his clothes again and stood naked in the center of the room.

“What the hell are you doing?” she blurted.

He smiled ruefully. “I like these clothes. I don’t want them shredded.”

She couldn’t help but notice that Daniel was staring, mesmerized, the bulge in his crotch getting larger by the second. Before she could ask Jack what he meant by his words, he began to change.

At first, she thought he was bending over, as if to tie his shoe. It took a few seconds before she realized that he was actually diminishing in size. Dark, bristly hair began to sprout from every pore, growing at a rate that reminded her of the science-class films in elementary school that showed flowers blooming with time-lapse photography, going from bud to full blossom in seconds. He fell forward onto his hands and knees, and the kitchen filled with cracking, popping sounds as the front of his face began to jut forward, distorting into a muzzle. She clapped her hands over her ears as his spine began to elongate, a tail thrusting itself forward from the base of

his spine. Daniel looked simultaneously fascinated and horrified, and she realized that, in his mind's eye, he was seeing himself going through this transformation in just a few days.

*I'm going to throw up. Or faint. Or both.* She gritted her teeth as the reshaping of Jack's flesh and bones continued. His ears, shifting like melting wax, were drawn upward from the sides of his head to the top, lengthening into feral points. Even his teeth were changing, neat flat ivory twisting and growing like stalagmites jutting up from a cavern's floor, meeting with identical daggers growing downward from the top. His rib cage bent outward from its flat human shape, the breastbone shoved forward like the keel of a ship, and loud cracks made her flinch as his knees abruptly reversed themselves, angling backward like a dog's. The fur had covered his entire body, from the tip of his snout to the end of his tail, and at last he looked up at them, the process complete.

She had seen wolves in the zoo before, on documentaries on the nature channel on TV. *Oh shit. He was telling the truth.*

It was unmistakably a huge wolf that stood before her on four legs.

He could see the shock in their eyes. More, he could smell it in the air. After a few moments, when the truth had sunk in, Jack concentrated, willing a reversal of the change he had brought upon himself. The first few times he had transformed himself into a wolf had been painful. And returning to human form had been every bit as painful as becoming a wolf. Both, however, had paled in comparison to the amount of pain caused when he shifted into the half-human, half-wolf form that came over him at the full moon. In that monstrous shape, shaggy as a bear, towering at over eight feet, with scythelike claws almost six inches long, he was strong enough to tear a bull in half with his bare hands and quite capable of mindlessly slaughtering anything that crossed his path.

Over time, the pain of the change had diminished to bearable levels as his body had grown accustomed to its new abilities. He suspected that, whether the change was supernatural or merely a natural phenomenon that science had no awareness of yet, the lessening of the pain was an evolutionary mechanism. Werewolves were clearly predators, but their ability to hunt would be greatly impaired if they spent the first five minutes after every change trying not to puke their guts out from the pain. As with all his speculations about what he had become, he had no way to

prove his ideas. *And maybe that's a good thing.* Not for the first time, he could imagine what might happen to him if he let some university biology professor know what he was. The images of being strapped down on a table, ready to be dissected, had haunted his dreams for months after his first change. Those nightmares had never quite gone away entirely.

When he stood on two legs again, he bent to pick up his clothing before looking them both in the eyes. "Now do you believe?"

"Holy shit," Daniel whispered, sweat beading on his forehead. His hands were shaking, and he wiped his damp palms against his slacks. Red just nodded, her eyes wide.

"I figured it was going to take something like that to convince you," Jack told them. "I can change at any time of the month, but when the full moon comes, I change whether or not I want to, and I can't always control myself. That's what Daniel's going to be going through in just a couple of days."

"Why? Why show us this?" Red murmured.

"Because we need to get past it," Jack replied impatiently. "What *I* am is not what we need to be talking about now. Now that you understand why I did what I did with Daniel, we need to move on from that and talk about the real threat here—the Axman."

"So...what do we know about him?" Daniel asked, picking up his coffee cup. "He's a serial killer who uses an ax to chop women up. How many of them has he killed?"

"Five...that we know of," Jack answered. "The FBI has given the department some help on the case, including working up a profile of the Axman. The profiler who looked at our case files believes that the first killing here in Louisville was far too expert and polished for it to have been his first. Agent Marr theorized that the Axman may have killed victims in other cities, although not with the ax. There weren't any unsolved ax murders matching the Axman's MO that the FBI could find, so Marr thinks that the Axman was killing women in some other way before coming to Louisville. It's rare that a serial killer changes his MO, but this is the theory that fits what little evidence we have to work with."

Red shivered, and Daniel got up from his chair to move to another one closer to her, putting an arm around her shoulders after he sat back down. "No eyewitnesses? No fingerprints or hair or fiber evidence? No saliva on the envelopes he licked when he sent his next victims the photos of his prior kills?"

Jack arched a brow. “I thought your specialty was family law, not criminal law.”

“It is. I just watch a lot of *CSI* and *Law and Order*.”

Jack suppressed a laugh and shook his head bitterly. “Hardly any evidence at all. The lab was able to take a saliva sample off the envelope before Red’s, but there’s no DNA—the Axman’s a nonsecretor.” At Red’s blank look, he clarified. “It means he doesn’t secrete DNA in body fluids like saliva. It makes it that much harder to catch him.”

“Yeah, the police never caught the original Axman, either,” Daniel muttered.

“What do you mean?” Jack asked, frowning.

“Oh, it’s old New Orleans history... I’m from New Orleans originally, and I moved to Louisville with my parents when I was sixteen. Back in...let’s see, I think it was 1918, right before the end of World War I, there were a series of murders committed with an ax from 1918 to 1919, all presumably by the same man. The final toll was eight deaths and four survivors, none of whom could identify their attacker. That Axman didn’t have quite as narrow a focus on his targets, though; he killed men and women, and even a little baby who was asleep in his mother’s arms when the killer broke into the family’s house.”

“God.” Red shivered at his words, and he hugged her gently.

“It’s gotten to be a pretty famous bit of folklore in the Big Easy. There have been songs and books written about it. Someone—supposedly the killer—sent a letter to the local newspapers in March of 1919 saying that he would kill again on a particular night, but that he’d spare anyone he found if live jazz was playing where they were. The night he named, all the jazz clubs in town were booked to capacity, and there were hundreds of house parties that same night at peoples’ homes. Nobody died that night.”

Jack furrowed his brow in thought. “I doubt there’s a connection,” he said at last. “It sounds like the MO is completely different; the only similarity is that the two killers both use—used—an ax.” He glanced down at the newspaper on the table. “But it might be worthwhile to have more information about that guy, in case *our* Axman is a copycat with a fetish for the original.”

“I have a couple of books about him back at my office,” Daniel volunteered. “I have a lot of non-work-related books there I keep to read on my lunch breaks. I could run and get them, I guess. They have a lot more information than you’re likely to find on the Internet, anyway.”

“Good idea,” Jack said. He looked up at the clock on the wall and noticed, without any real surprise, that it was almost eight p.m. “How long will it take you?”

Daniel shrugged. “Half an hour across town, if traffic’s good and there aren’t any accidents or trains, and half an hour back. Maybe an hour and fifteen minutes.”

“Do it,” Jack ordered. Daniel nodded and got to his feet, then bent down to kiss Red. Jack shot him a look as Red tilted her face up to him, and Daniel sighed and kissed her on the cheek instead.

The look Red turned on Jack was as murderous as any he’d ever seen while booking a suspect, and he managed not to wince as Daniel grabbed his car keys, wallet, and headed out the door.

Red waited until the sound of Daniel’s car driving away had faded into the distance, and then rose from her seat with a snarl. “You dirty son of a bitch,” she growled, eyes ablaze with rage. “Bad enough you come barging in here like this—”

“Don’t start—” Jack began.

“Oh, I haven’t even begun,” she snapped. “First you take every chance you can get to paw me, and then you steal Daniel right from under my nose. Did you know when you first got here that he was bi, or did you just take that chance?”

Jack backpedaled, a little startled by the intensity of her fury. “This doesn’t have anything to do with stealing him—”

“He hasn’t been with a man since we started dating, because he’s actually sincere about being faithful to me—”

“You need to calm down—”

“And now you tell him he can’t ever sleep with me again? What sort of sick, fucked-in-the-head bullshit is that?”

She took another step toward him, and he backed another step away, feeling perversely helpless. He knew he could break her over his knee without even raising a sweat, but he was there to protect her, not hurt her. “As nearly as I’ve been able to tell, what happened to me works a lot like rabies—or AIDS,” he hastily tried to explain. “I got bit. The thing that bit me got saliva in the open wound I don’t know for sure, but from what I remember from the biology class I had in high school, bacterial and viral infections can be transmitted through any bodily fluid. I’ve

done research of my own since then too. All the stories I've found in folklore seem to bear out that idea. It would only take an exchange of saliva, semen, or blood, and he'd infect you too."

"You didn't seem to be thinking about that when you kissed me," she pointed out acridly. "Which is what led to this stupid...*fiasco* in the first place." She reached up and began to unbutton her shirt.

"What are you doing?" he snapped, feeling his cock twitch back to life. "Stop that, now!"

She ignored him and shrugged the shirt off, letting it drop to the floor before reaching behind her to unfasten her bra. "Why not me too, dammit? If you're going to steal my boyfriend, can't you at least let me in on it too?" The bra dropped away, revealing her small, high breasts. She knew she had good tits. Riding racehorses kept her upper body muscled, and her size kept her breasts perky. She gave a little wiggle, noticing the way his eyes followed the movement. His nostrils flared, and the sudden look of hunger in his eyes made her think about what she'd done in the bedroom...and how much she wanted to do it with Jack watching.

She took a deep breath. Men like him thrived on confidence. She couldn't look weak. Not after he'd just fucked Daniel into submission. God, and to think that she'd thought her boyfriend was *happy* with her. Surely, he was, but the way he and Daniel looked together... She swallowed hard and unfastened the button on her jeans.

A slow shimmy had the denim garment falling to the floor, revealing her serviceable pale pink cotton panties embroidered with small horseshoes around the waist. Sure, not the most seductive garment, but she had gone too far to stop now. Hooking her thumbs in the waistband, she tugged her panties down her legs and stepped out of them.

Jack's throat worked. He wanted her. If the size of the bulge behind his fly was any indication—and since she'd seen him in action, she suspected it was—he wanted her like she wanted to win the Kentucky Derby.

"Red." Her name shot from his lips, half groan, half benediction. "Don't."

She stopped, two fingers pressed against her sternum. "Don't what, Jack?" She caressed a path to the top of her sex, then dipped her fingers lower. Her digits emerged, slick with her cream. "Don't try to seduce you? Don't see if you want me as much as you want my boyfriend?" Her voice wavered, a show of vulnerability, and she hated herself for it. She stepped forward.

Jack held out his hand. “Don’t come any closer.”

“Why not? Am I making it too *hard* for you to think? Or are you wishing you were looking at my boyfriend’s cock rather than my body?” She threw the words at him, wanting to wound him with her accusations.

Faster than she thought he could move, Jack grabbed her wrist and hauled her against him.

Her breath whooshed from her lungs. Plastered against his hard chest, the ridge of his erection pressing into her stomach, there was no doubt. He wanted her. She grinned, and then he flipped open the top button of his jeans and shoved her hand inside.

Instinctively she curled her fingers around his steely length, groaning a bit at the thought of such a big cock inside her. Daniel and she were more closely matched in size, but Jack had him beat by probably a good inch. Her fingers barely circled him, and just thinking about taking him inside her made her cream anew.

“Does this feel like I don’t want you?” Jack snarled.

Red’s only response was to draw her fingers slowly along his length.

“What, then?” she asked, the anger in her eyes undiminished. He tried to focus on the emotion she was showing—the anger that masked the uncertainty he knew she had to be feeling—rather than the sensation of her fingers curled around his cock. “Why fuck him? Yes, I know you had to show him who was boss...but couldn’t you have done it some other way?”

It took everything he had not to take her right there, his disease be damned. With a hard swallow, he pulled her hand out of his pants and curled her fingers shut. *Gotta give myself credit...that just might be the stupidest thing I’ve ever done in my life.*

“There’s more at risk here than just showing him I was in charge,” he said quietly, her hand still cupped in his. “If he loses control of himself and changes, he could hurt someone, even kill them.” He paused. “Even you. And the first change is the worst. He’ll have no control at all, because all those emotions are boiling away inside him. I had to find a way to help him vent those emotions.” He studied her face for a moment, then sighed. “And it isn’t just him.” He deliberately didn’t mention the fact that he and Daniel, and by association she, were now a pack and how fucking long he’d wanted a family, someone who knew what he was and understood. That it came in a male body surprised him, but it didn’t shock him.

“What do you mean?” She pulled away from him and hastily dressed.

*Good girl. Hold on to your anger. It'll keep you alive.* Though he regretted having her pale skin covered and his cock leaped at the knowledge that she wasn't wearing a bra, he mentally applauded her decision to get dressed. She might be pissed, but she wouldn't do something stupid. “I've been like this for three years. I've learned to control myself most of the time...but I can be pushed too far. I've almost snapped twice in the past when that happened...and I'm pretty sure if I *had* lost control, someone would have died. Someone like Daniel, who kept pushing and pushing.”

“Bullshit!” Red barked. She fumbled behind her, groping, and finally closed her fingers around a delicate ceramic vase full of daisies, sitting on the counter. Whether she didn't believe him or just didn't want to believe, he couldn't tell, but he saw the sudden flare of rage in her eyes. “You're lying!”

The vase sailed through the air at him, and he ducked instinctively, feeling it go past before it hit the wall behind him and shattered into a thousand pieces. “I'm not—” he began and then stopped when he saw the quick rush of surprise and fear on her face.

She was looking past him at the vase lying broken on the floor. He turned, frowning. *If the vase was a family heirloom or something, she shouldn't have thrown it—*The thought was derailed without warning when he spotted the glint of metal from among the shards of china.

Carefully, he knelt and brushed aside the broken pieces with one hand to pick up the little device. He recognized it immediately and went cold as the Arctic Ocean.

“Is that—”

“Yes,” he growled. “A bug. Someone's been eavesdropping on you for a while now. And I assume you don't have any stalker exes?” She shook her head mutely, and he dropped the miniature radio transmitter to the floor, straightened up, and crushed it underfoot.

“Then that means...the Axman heard every word we've said,” she whispered.

“Including me telling you two what I am,” he agreed.

*Shit. He knows I'm a werewolf.*

## Chapter Seven

Red reached for the phone book and flipped it open.

“What are you doing?” Jack asked.

“What do you think? He’s been in my home. I’m getting the damned locks changed, for starters,” she snapped.

I’m not so sure that’ll work, he thought, but he realized it was useless to say it aloud. She was obviously scared to death, and he couldn’t say that he blamed her. He wondered how many times the Axman had been in the house, maybe looking at her and Daniel while they slept? If he had, they’d never know it. Jack knew for sure that the killer hadn’t been there since he’d arrived. *I would have smelled him. Not that the news would be much of a comfort to her.*

What was more troublesome to him was the thought that the Axman had no doubt heard every word he had said about being a werewolf. He realized the Axman probably didn’t believe it...not even with the gasps the man would have overheard when he’d showed them. But that didn’t mean the killer wasn’t crazy enough to go out of his way to get silver bullets anyway. Jack had been hurt at work plenty of times since being bitten—punched, stabbed, even shot. The wounds had always healed instantly. But he had never been wounded with silver before, and he wasn’t sure if that part of the legend was true. He was fairly certain silver had killed the werewolf that attacked him. But he wasn’t in any hurry to test the theory out on himself.

He watched as Red dialed the number she had looked up and talked to the locksmith. He ached to protect her, to take her into his arms and tell her that everything would be all right. But he knew he couldn’t promise that to either of them. All he knew for certain was that if the Axman harmed either of them, there was no force on earth, in heaven, or in hell that would keep Jack from tracking the Axman down and tearing him into bloody shreds.

\* \* \* \* \*

The law offices were deserted; even the janitors who came to clean up after the office closed for business had finished their work and gone home before Daniel arrived. The hallways were empty, the smell of lemon furniture polish and the sharp, astringent scent of glass cleaner lingering in their long expanses. He wondered if he could smell things as well before he had been infected. *Could I, and I just never realized it before?* Or was the new keenness of his senses because of what he was going to become?

He headed down the hall to his own office, listening to the tiny sounds around him that disproved the notion that the building was silent when everyone had gone home. The hum of the computers that had gone into sleep mode rather than being shut off, the gentle bubbling that came from the watercooler, and somewhere—probably inside the walls—the almost inaudible scratching of what was probably a mouse. He frowned, focusing on that last noise, and his nostrils flared to catch a scent he knew he had never noticed before—dry, decaying paper mingled with the pungent smell of animal urine. *Okay. I'm pretty sure my senses weren't this damn good before.* There were still two days until the full moon, and already parts of him were changing. He wasn't sure if the idea frightened him or delighted him.

Inside his office, he flipped on the light and went to his computer, starting it up and then turning to his bookshelves while it powered on. He found the books he had mentioned to Red and Jack almost at once and tucked them into his briefcase before settling down at the computer.

He was an inheritance lawyer, but he hadn't forgotten what he had learned in law school about research. The firm had a couple of former cops turned criminal lawyers among its ranks, and through them, they had access to the NCIC database. The National Crime Information Center had been founded by the FBI years ago to collect statistics and information on crimes committed across multiple jurisdictions throughout the country, all the better to coordinate searches, manhunts, and prosecutions. Among the information collected were police reports on recent murders, and now Daniel pulled up the relevant access page and began to type.

It took the FBI systems less than ten minutes to sort through stacks of recent records, using the keywords "ax," "murder," and "female victims," and spit out the list of Axman's victims in Louisville.

Even as he was hitting the Print button, however, the computer beeped again and began adding more records to the list—the ax murders of three young women, committed between nine and seven months ago in New Orleans. Not very long before the killings had begun in Louisville.

“Shit,” Daniel muttered and printed out that file as well. He collected the pages as they came out the printer, stuffed them into his briefcase with the books, and turned his computer off, ready to head back. There is no way to know if there’s a connection, he mused as he shut off the light in his office and strode back down the hall to leave. But it was still worth looking into. He considered what Jack had said about the Axman being a copycat of the old New Orleans boogeyman. The thought made him shiver as he locked the office back up and hurried down to the underground parking garage.

The ramp down to the level where he had parked his car was deserted—not unusual, given the late hours. He whistled under his breath, his steps echoing hollowly as he crossed the expanse of cement toward his car.

The pungent, unpleasant scent reached his nostrils at about the same time as something crashed into the back of his head. He grunted at the pain, his vision already going wobbly and black, and tottered two steps forward. Something struck him again, this time smashing into his back from behind, and he went flying. The briefcase slipped from his numb fingertips, hit the ground, and slid across the pavement before tipping into a sewer drainage grate.

He never saw it disappear; by then he was out cold.

He held up the ax, the blade gleaming dully in the street lights. A trickle of blood rolled along the blunt side of the head, matching the matted hair on the back of the man’s skull. Not enough to kill. No, he was too smart for that. Just enough to wound, to hurt, to make him bleed.

He opened his mouth to laugh. Deep inside something stopped him, clamping his teeth together so hard they rattled. *No laughing. Not here. Laughter bad at night.*

The scent of blood hung in the air, and he flared his nostrils to catch and savor the metallic scent. *Not as good as those whores, never as good as them, but enough. For now. And it will bring her and that damn cop.*

*The cop who tells lies.*

He stared at the man lying prone on the cement and thought he looked too thin to be the kind of man the whore really needed. Not the way she wrapped her legs around those horses. *She needed a real man, someone like*—No, he knew he mustn't think that way. He couldn't take his pleasure in the whore.

The cop would. He knew she'd swoon all over the cop! The things he'd heard. He spat on Daniel's back at the thought of two men fucking in the bedroom. It was disgusting, like the cop telling them he could shift into a werewolf. The cop told lies.

"You're not so tough now," he said, taking a step forward.

The prone man on the ground didn't answer.

Mute. He liked them silent. Liked them begging with their eyes, not even whimpering when he knew they wanted to scream.

He straddled the lawyer, grabbed his wrists, and wrapped them with a strip of duct tape he peeled from the roll he held. One strip. Two. Then a third for good measure. He twisted it tight against the man's skin. Same for the ankles, though the man's socks kept the tape from biting too tightly. Oh well, he'd hurt him later. And if he didn't bring *her* and the cop...a tiny cackle escaped.

"Shut up. Must. Shut. Up." He hissed the words, hauling the pansy lawyer to his feet and slinging him over his shoulder. Scrawny fag probably didn't weigh much more than a hundred and fifty soaking wet. His head twitched as he thumbed the remote to open the trunk.

He dumped the lawyer inside. The crack of skull against wheel well echoed in the trunk's interior, and he grinned. Bet that hurt.

He slapped tape across the man's mouth. He couldn't have him talking. Not until he wanted him to talk.

He slammed the trunk lid down, whistling as he went to the driver's-side door and slipped behind the wheel. Moments later, he gunned the engine and backed out of the parking space. Something made him slow down. Couldn't draw attention to himself. Mustn't drive too fast. He'd be a very bad boy if he did.

He turned into traffic, thinking he knew exactly where to take his catch, the perfect place to lay a trap. Then all he'd have to do was wait.

He laughed, not even caring about the stoplight that delayed him.

The woman in the car next to his crossed herself.

He laughed some more. God couldn't save the whore and her cop. No one could.

\* \* \* \* \*

Red jumped from her chair to head for the refrigerator for the fifteenth time in twenty minutes. She curled her fingers around the fridge handle and took a deep breath. Eating wouldn't do her any good, and when she stepped on the scale in the jockey's room, it'd show. Her fingers tightened, the knuckles turning white.

"This isn't like Daniel." She whirled from the fridge and leaned against it, arms crossed over her chest. "He's never late. He's a lawyer, for Christ's sake. 'Five minutes early' is his mantra." She started to pace again.

"Sit down, Red. You're only wearing yourself out like this." Jack sat on the other end of the couch, a coffee mug within easy reach. How he could drink the stuff at this time of night, she didn't know. Must be part of being a cop.

Her lip trembled, and she bit it to keep from giving into the fear and worry churning inside her. No calls, wondering what happened—it conjured up memories of waiting for her parents to come home and then that fateful moment when her grandmother had shown up on the front step, eyes reddened with tears. "*Honey, I have something to tell you...*" Her grandmother's words echoed in Red's memory.

"Red!" Jack's sharp yell cut through her thoughts.

She whirled to glare at him. "What?"

"Sorry. I asked if you had tried Daniel's cell phone again."

"Not for the last"—Red glanced at the clock—"five minutes." She lurched for the phone hanging on the wall and picked up the handset. She punched in the numbers, praying with each ring that this time would be different, that this time Daniel would answer.

He didn't.

She slammed the receiver back into its cradle, then winced. She didn't need to take out her frustrations on the phone. "Nothing. I don't like this, Jack. I don't like this at all." Her voice wavered.

Jack bolted to his feet. In an instant, he crossed the room and cupped her shoulders. “You said Daniel is usually punctual. There’s no other reason he could be taking so long? Maybe he ran into someone he knew...or was driving too fast on the way home and got stopped by the police?”

“He never speeds. And he’s always talking about how none of the guys he works with ever work over the weekend.” She answered each of his questions in turn. “What if I did this? What if this is my fault?”

“What do you mean ‘your fault’? I’m sure you have nothing to do with Daniel not being home. Maybe he had a flat tire. Or there was a traffic jam.” Jack released her and shrugged. “I’m sure Daniel’s just fine.”

“Cop-sure? Or ‘telling Red what she wants to hear’ sure? Because I saw you look worried when he didn’t pick up. Don’t lie to me. Not now. Not after this hell’s come crashing down on my doorstep.” Red released a shaky breath. “I know this is my fault. This Axman’s been bugging my home. I’m sure he knows where Daniel works. What if something happened? What if the Axman has him?” Her voice broke, and she shoved her fist in her mouth to keep from crying. Her short, panting breaths echoed around her.

“Breathe, Red. Come on. Don’t lose it on me.”

“You’re worried, aren’t you?” Red whispered.

“Yeah,” Jack admitted. “I don’t like this any more than you do.”

“Well, we can’t just sit here and do nothing!” Red pulled from his grip. She whirled to the counter, grabbed her purse, and slung the strap over her shoulder. “I want to go to Daniel’s office. We could at least see if he’s still there.”

“And if he’s on his way here, we’ll pass him on the way. I think we should stay here.”

She had to admit Jack had a point. If only he weren’t so damn stubborn about seeing hers. “Daniel is in danger. I *know* it.”

“Look, I can call, maybe have an extra patrol swing by his office.”

“That’s not good enough. I’m going to find him. You can come with me or not. I don’t care.” She took exactly three steps before Jack closed his hand over her arm, stopping her. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Saving your ass. Don’t be stupid, Red. Someone is trying to kill you.”

“And the thousand-pound pissed-off thoroughbreds I get on every day don’t want to do the same?” She arched an eyebrow at him. “I can take care of myself.” With him here, she was suffocating. If he had his way, he’d wrap her in wool and hide her away like an heirloom quilt. But she wasn’t built that way. She needed to do something, or she’d go crazy.

“Come on. Think about what you’re doing. How would Daniel feel if something happened to you? I’m sure there’s a good reason why he’s not answering the phone.”

Red closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “How would I feel if something happened to him?” Her voice broke, and she cursed herself for the sign of weakness. She blinked back the sting of tears. Already her mind took those pictures she’d been sent and superimposed Daniel’s face on them. Broken. Bruised. Bloody.

And if something happened to her, it’d kill him. She squeezed her eyes shut, remembering the day a knucklehead two-year-old filly lost it in the starting gate. She’d fallen off and gotten kicked. Daniel had helped her tape her ribs, almost completely losing control when he saw the perfect, horseshoe-shaped bruises on her side and beneath her breast. He’d ranted about how her sternum could have been crushed, a rib could have punctured a lung, and a thousand different ways she could have been hurt or maimed. In the end, she’d crawled off the bed, rattling with athletic tape and aspirin, and kissed him so long and so hard that they’d tumbled into bed and made sweet, achy love.

“Oh hell. Don’t cry.” Jack’s thumb brushed away a tear she hadn’t even known she’d shed. “Okay, we’ll retrace his route.”

“Thank you.” She gave a shaky breath and fished her car keys out of her purse. “You drive.”

The keys rattled as he closed his hand over hers. “We’ll find him. And when we do, he’ll be alive and safe. I promise.”

Jack cursed his need to say those words to her, but the way she just sighed and shook her head, her lips tight and eyes glassy, punched him in the gut like a nail-studded two-by-four. Right now he’d do anything, anything at all to erase the fear from those whiskey-colored eyes.

He extracted the keys from her hand, and the fact that she didn't fight with him over who got to drive—it'd always be him—told him how fragile her mental state was.

Neither of them spoke much on the way to the office, aside from Red giving Jack directions there. Her hands twisted around each other ceaselessly, white-knuckled and shaking. He drove carefully, going no faster than the speed limit, though he could smell how afraid she was and knew she probably wanted him to drive more swiftly. But he knew it would take even longer to get there if they got pulled over. *Yeah, once I flashed my badge and told them it was a family emergency and I'm on assignment, they'd let me go—after all, most of them have probably been in the same situation—but even five minutes' delay is too long.*

They arrived at the office, and he parked the car in the underground garage. He had barely killed the engine when she was unbuckling her seat belt and climbing out of the car, locking the door behind her and starting across the garage toward the elevator. He cursed and caught up with her immediately.

“Slow down,” he urged her quietly. “The last thing I need is you getting ahead of me and this guy jumping you, if he's here.”

She pulled out the cell phone and dialed Daniel's number again, nodding automatically at him without really listening. “He's still not answering,” she muttered, flipping the phone closed. Before Jack could respond, his sensitive nostrils caught the scent of blood, and his head jerked up.

“What?”

“Shush,” he growled, turning to try to find the source of the smell. He locked on to it almost immediately and grabbed her hand, leading her down the aisle until they came to a car. He could smell the sudden burst of shock that exploded from her pores.

“That's Daniel's car!”

There was blood on the ground a few feet away from it—not much, but it was still fresh enough to be tacky. She looked as if she was about ready to burst into tears—or worse yet, faint—and he could only think of one thing to prevent it.

With a curse, he swung her into his arms and kissed her.

Her mouth was hot and soft and yielding, her lips parting to allow his tongue access, and he took full advantage of the breach in her defenses, greedy to taste her. Need surged through his

veins, tearing away the thin vestiges of self-control he had managed to maintain for the last few hours, and his arms tightened around her, feeling her slender body mold against his. He could smell the sudden rich flush of her lust as it bloomed from her every pore, a heady, intoxicating musk that made his head swim dizzily. He could feel his cock come roaring to life, hot and hard as an iron bar against her belly.

*What the fuck am I doing?*

He released her abruptly and took a step back to put distance—and sanity—between them. Her eyes were unfocused, dreamy, and her cheeks were flushed with the heat the kiss had generated. He could still taste her on his lips and shuddered in need, the blaze at his groin demanding he go right back to what he had been doing.

He figured he ought to have his head examined. Better yet, he should have called the captain the moment he had laid eyes on Red and told his superior officer he couldn't continue on this case because he couldn't be impartial and think clearly any longer. His judgment was clouded. He couldn't pretend anymore. He was falling for her. He fell for her pretty much the first second he laid eyes on her, and things had only gotten worse since then. Every time he touched her, he ran the risk of infecting her, and he couldn't quit touching her.

"Sorry," he finally managed, his voice gritty with denied hunger. She reached up with one trembling hand to touch her mouth, and that small gesture nearly undid all his resolve. Stiffly, he half turned away from her; he could see her well enough in his peripheral vision to respond immediately if there was danger, but it was important not to look at her for a few seconds while he tried to put the broken pieces of his discipline back together again.

"You have to change me, make me what you are now, just like you did with Daniel." The flat, calm words took him completely by surprise, erasing lust as certainly as a bucket of cold water or a bullet wound would have. He spun to gape at her.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" he blurted out.

The look on her face was determined, her chin jutting out mutinously, her mouth set in an unwavering line. "If I'm a wolf, the only way he can kill me is with silver bullets." She wavered for a moment, her expression uncertain. "At least...that's the way it is in all the movies. And then we can track him down together and find Daniel before he hurts him."

He admired her reasoning even as he rejected it. "Absolutely not."

“Why?” The cry was torn from her, desperate and pleading, and the tears he saw in her eyes felt like an ice pick sliding into his heart.

“First of all, things aren’t always like you see in the movies.” She frowned, and he took a deep breath, trying very hard to control the enraged beast inside him. “Maybe silver is the only thing that can kill you. Maybe it isn’t. Do you really want to take a chance on that? I don’t.”

The frustration in her eyes didn’t diminish. “But—”

“Weren’t you listening to me before?” he barked, wanting to roar. “What part of ‘no control on the full moon’ and ‘savage as a rabid animal’ did you not understand? Or maybe it was the ‘tear innocent humans apart like so much wet toilet tissue’ part that you didn’t get?”

He wanted to do what she was asking. No matter how much he hated what he was, how wrong it would be to make her just like him, he wanted to. She had no idea how much he needed it or how easy it would be. His loneliness would finally end. And she was not just some random person to be intimate with—not just *a* woman, but *the* woman. The *only* woman he would ever want for the rest of his life. *Jesus*.

It was only everything he had ever wanted.

“But it’s the only way!” She moaned and began to cry.

He sighed, crossed the space between them in a single step, and drew her into his embrace. He could feel her ready to break apart; it would take only a little more fear, just one more shock, to destroy her completely.

So he wrapped his arms around her a little more tightly, pretending she was fragile china and he was glue, willing to stand there and hold her as long as it took to keep her in one piece.

## Chapter Eight

At last, her tears tapered off to sniffles, and she wiggled out of his arms. “I...I’m okay,” she said awkwardly, her voice rough from sobbing. He knew she wasn’t, of course, but she was trying, and that was a start.

“Okay, then, we’ll—”

She interrupted, clearly trying hard to hold herself together. “Should we check his office? Is there any chance he could have gotten away from the Axman, ran inside, and locked the door?”

He hated to take away her hope, but there was no point in letting her harbor such delusions. “He’s not there.”

“How can you tell?” she asked, her eyes imploring him to prove it.

“Because I can smell he was here,” he told her. “But the scent’s fading. It’s actually fresher in the garage than it was by the door to the building, which means he was in the garage more recently than he was inside the office.”

The sound she made low in her throat as she clenched her fists was composed of equal parts frustration and fear, and he could feel her pain. The scent of it rolled off her in waves, the smell very little different than that he’d caught in the past when approaching animals—usually dogs, but sometimes deer—that had been hit in traffic but hadn’t died yet. Underneath that, neither as strong nor as fresh as her smell, was another familiar odor—Daniel’s. He breathed in deeply, catching notes of worry, impatience, and anxiety.

“Okay. We’re going to take a closer look at this—treat it like any cop would treat a crime scene—and see if we can learn anything that might help.”

She nodded, stepping back out of the way so he could take a closer look. Daniel’s car, the splattered blood...and nothing else. There had to be more to the situation than just what he saw.

With a frown, he took another whiff of the blood now slowly drying on the cracked, oil-stained pavement. There was no corresponding scent of fright, and he realized that whatever hit him, Daniel hadn't seen it coming. There was another scent there mingled with Daniel's, rank and greasy, putrid as rotting meat in high summer. He grimaced, his stomach doing queasy flip-flops. The downside to having an enhanced sense of smell was that the stink of death never got any sweeter. But the upside was that he knew he would never be able to forget that smell, even if he wanted to. If he ever smelled it again, he knew he would recognize it.

Step by step, he traced the stench, following it to the parking spot directly opposite Daniel's car, where he found another tiny drop of blood on the ground. And a few steps farther—enough to pace around to the driver's side of whatever car had been parked there—the smells ceased. *He put Daniel in the trunk of his car and drove away with him.*

“Well, do you want the good news or the better news?”

“Start out with the better news,” Red said fiercely, the strength seeping back into her voice. “I could use it.”

“All right. The Axman knocked Daniel out, probably tied him up, loaded him into the trunk of his car, and drove off. But as nearly as I can tell, Daniel was still alive when he left the garage.”

He watched the tension drain from her—not all of it, but enough to make her shoulders slump in relief. “That doesn't mean he's alive now, though,” she said in a small voice.

“No, but I think he is. Why would the Axman bother to take him alive if he only meant to kill him later? He kidnapped him for a reason, and while it's possible he could end up snapping in a fit of rage and killing him at any time, I think he's too smart for that. The killings so far have been savage, but they were still controlled.”

She looked thoughtful at that, clinging to his words, storing up hope like a squirrel storing up nuts for winter. “What's the other good news?”

“I have the Axman's scent. I'll recognize him at once if we cross paths—and although he drove out of here and the scent cuts off here, if I pick it up again anywhere else, I can track him with it.” He paced back across the lane to where she stood and put an arm around her shoulders. “If I track him down, he's dead.”

He knew he should arrest the killer and bring him in, but the case wasn't going to work out that way. *I hate having to lie, but when I finally find that monster, he's going to be shot "resisting arrest."* If Jack did this by the book, there was always a chance that a jury trial might find the Axman not guilty by reason of insanity or diminished mental capacity. The jury would lock him up in an institution, and if he were ever cured, he would go to jail, but eventually he might be set free. Jack refused to risk that. *I won't take the chance that twelve well-meaning jurors who don't realize that this man's a demon might not give him the death penalty.*

He inhaled again deeply, willing his sense of smell to dig deeper, anything to seize another clue from the morass of odors down here. Another scent came to him, and he froze for a second, trying to etch it into his mind. Shaggy fur, sun-warmed skin, sweat, feral musk. Not Daniel; it was too early for him to have changed, much as Jack wished it. And not a dog. No, it was a scent almost as familiar to him as his own, so like his own that his entire body ached. Another wolf. And recent, too. The trace lingered. It had been left no more than an hour ago.

He tightened his hands into fists without thinking. As much as he wanted to follow that scent, track down its owner, he had another obligation now, one he couldn't turn his back on. Bitterly, he knew that by the time he had finished here—after his fellow officers had come and secured the crime scene and made their investigations—the scent would be gone. But there was nothing to do for now but let it go.

He closed his eyes, uncurling his hands, letting the tension drain out of him, doing his best to pretend he had never found that new scent. When his mind had cleared enough so that his own wishes would no longer distract him from his responsibility, he breathed in again, deeply. A thin thread came to him—newly-scratched metal, sliding across the pavement toward the cement barrier at the rear of Daniel's car. *Is that steel? Aluminum? Whichever of the two, it smells familiar.* He closed his eyes, shutting out the distraction of sight, and let his nose sift through the endless tapestry of aromas—car exhaust, piss, beer, gasoline, perfume, sweat, stale food—until at last it locked onto a single note intertwined with that scratched-metal smell. *That. That's Daniel's aftershave.*

He opened his eyes and bent down to bring his nose closer to the source of the smells, glimpsing the shine of metal from a drain opening at the retaining wall behind the car. "Hold on," he said, straightening up. He rummaged around in his pockets and came out with a pair of latex gloves. He slipped them on. *Don't want to leave my fingerprints on what I'm thinking I've*

*found*. He might not be able to avoid messing up any prints left on whatever was down there, but that didn't mean he had to contaminate a valuable clue with his own prints. When his hands were gloved, he moved to the rain gutter to fish Daniel's briefcase out of the drain.

He flicked the latches and opened it without hesitation. Inside were two paperback books and a sheaf of papers, stapled together. The books had more detailed summaries of the crimes of the New Orleans Axman than the brief description Daniel had been able to provide, but there was no chance the killer was the same. Those murders had taken place over ninety years ago, after all. Jack flipped through the papers with more care, recognizing the NCIC file format. It took him only a few minutes to skim them. Three women in New Orleans, killed within the last year. *More victims of the Axman? The bastard really gets around.*

"What did he find?" Red asked.

"NCIC records from New Orleans. The MO is the same as the Axman's. No prints, same type of victims chosen, no witnesses, very little other evidence. Photographs of prior victims sent to the ones after that, like he did with you." He saw her wince.

"Does that mean he was killing women there before he came here?"

"It looks like it. I'd be very surprised if the FBI hadn't made the connection, but even so, I think it's about time to call the department in on this."

"I want to do it." Her words came surprisingly strong, considering everything that she'd been through tonight.

He nodded. Calling the cops would give her something to do, so he could focus on things here. "Go ahead." If they gave her any crap, he'd just take over and get officers out there ASAP.

She deftly flipped open the phone and punched in 911. A moment later his keen hearing picked up the dispatch operator. "This is Red Taylor. I'm under the protection of Lieutenant Jack Kennedy for the Axman case." She glanced at him for affirmation.

*Good*, he mouthed. He liked the way she said that she was under his protection. Probably liked it too much, but he didn't dwell on that. Not when she really did need him, and every instinct he had told him to wrap her in his arms, cradle her head against his chest, and never let go. Except with his fellow officers coming, he couldn't do that, couldn't give them any hint that things were less than official between the two of them. Jack opened his mouth to say more, a part

of him wishing he'd made the call, but she needed to do this. He stepped away, wanting to give her space.

"Daniel, my boyfriend, didn't come home. We came out to where he worked, and his car is here. He's missing, and there's blood on the ground. We also found his briefcase."

Jack's esteem for her ratcheted up another notch with the no-nonsense way she gave the facts. Her work as a jockey, having to think under pressure, probably helped with that. Her matter-of-fact way would make the cops more comfortable. Though with this being the Axman case, he was surprised he didn't already hear sirens. No doubt at the merest mention of the high-profile murderer, officers had already been dispatched.

"We have officers on the way, ma'am. Is Detective Kennedy with you?" His keen hearing picked up the dispatcher's words.

"Yes. Would you like to speak with him?" She walked toward him and handed him the phone.

"Kennedy here." The dispatcher relayed information about the arriving officers. Jack added a few details to what Red had said. Flipping through the contents of Daniel's briefcase, he snagged the papers and books Daniel had come out here for—the lawyer had done a thorough job of researching—and folded the papers in half. He tucked the papers in the inner pocket of his jacket and handed the books to Red to stash in her purse. No need to let the information get lost in evidence handling.

The first wails of sirens sounded like music to his ears. He checked on Red. She stood near the car, not touching it, just staring at the fender. He went to her and touched her shoulder. She sighed and leaned into him. He accepted the contact, knowing it would be all too fleeting. After exchanging a few final words with the dispatcher, he disconnected the call. He handed the phone back to her; if he needed to make any other calls, he had his own.

"They're going to talk to you and ask some questions. They'll also look for evidence, probably pull security tapes. I'll stay close, but I'll have to work with the arriving officers. You did well on the phone. You'll be fine." He gave her shoulder a quick squeeze, something far less intimate than the kiss that still haunted him.

Though her eyes were glassy and her cheeks flushed, she managed a weak smile. "We're going to get this bastard. I swear. And if he's hurt Daniel, I'll kill him himself." She shook with

the force of her words. Balling her hands into fists at her sides, she turned toward the entrance of the parking garage. Approaching sirens echoed off the cement.

She stepped away from him. And as the first cop cars arrived, Jack knew she'd be all right. He just had to keep her alive and get Daniel back in one piece.

\* \* \* \* \*

Somehow Red made it through the next forty-five minutes of questions and answers. Jack went with the officers, walking them through the situation. A policewoman stood by Red while the woman's partner and a couple of other officers secured the area with crime-scene tape. One had gone across the street to see if the office building had external security cameras; another had contacted the DMV to get the stoplight camera photographs from the nearest intersections. It seemed like a lot of work, more than she had really expected, and all the while the policewoman had gently interrogated her. When did she expect Daniel back? Why had he gone into the office so late? Was this a habit with him? She had resisted the urge to snap at the woman, knowing that the questions were just part of her job. Still, it sounded as if they somehow thought Daniel was involved, and that pissed her off.

Before she could blow up, Jack returned to her side, almost as if he could sense her escalating tension. Come to think of it, he probably could. Shortly thereafter, he hustled her into the car, and they returned home. She sat alone in the car, doors locked, engine still running while Jack swept her home for bugs.

Her home. She stared at the small bungalow, the feeling of safety she'd once felt there completely shattered. Raking her fingers through her hair, she sighed and once more tried to wrap her mind around the fact that someone wanted to kill *her*. It made no sense. Sure, she broke barriers daily with her work as a jockey—there still weren't that many female jockeys at her level. But no one would want to kill her because of that. Or at least, she didn't think so.

Jack emerged from the front door, his presence a welcome relief. Somehow, his being here had kept her from going ballistic. She still pondered his refusal to make her like him; she would have thought he'd want every advantage he could get. But she understood that becoming like him would destroy her dream. For years, she had worked hard training GG, the vision of standing in the winner's circle with the horse always at the front of her mind. She could almost

see the bright flashes of reporters' cameras, smell the wreath of roses around GG's neck, feel the light film of sweat covering her body after riding the horse around the track to the finish line.

Becoming a werewolf would mean that vision would never come to pass. The memory of how GG and the other horses had reacted when Jack had visited the track with her stood out clearly in her mind. If she became like Jack, she'd never be able to get near GG or any other horse ever again. She couldn't do that to her grandmother, or to GG. The horse deserved her shot at the big time, and so did her grandma. She couldn't let them down, which meant she couldn't become a werewolf, and she couldn't die.

Jack tapped on the window. She lowered it. "Go inside and pack a bag. Don't say anything. There were more bugs in the house."

She cursed, low and pithy, the frustration and rage welling inside her finally finding an outlet. Every word she'd learned growing up on the back side of the stables and then some came pouring out as she worked through her entire inventory of obscenities.

When she looked up, Jack was grinning. She reached across the front of the car and turned off the engine, then unlocked the doors and got out, pressing the lock again before closing her door.

"Don't say anything once you're inside the house. Just pack your bag and we'll go. I'll be inside with you," Jack whispered, the warm rush of his breath against her ear intimate.

The house was as they'd left it—broken vase swept up with the broom, but the shards not yet thrown away; water from the flowers mopped up with paper towels; the flowers themselves wilting slowly. She swallowed hard, forcing back tears. Daniel had brought those flowers home to her just a few days ago—not the scentless, long-stemmed, hothouse-grown roses that she hated, but sweet carnations and mums and daisies in gorgeous pastel colors, releasing their perfume in a rich flood. *Now they were dead. But not him too. Oh God, please let him be all right.*

She packed quickly, throwing jeans and T-shirts and underwear into a canvas duffel bag, the same one she used to carry spare changes of clothes to the track with her for practice. Working out with GG was hard and sweaty work, and there were locker rooms at the track for both men and women. She was used to cleaning up and changing before coming home to Daniel's loving arms—

*Stop it!* Her mind was whirling back along the same panicked track, and she had to put an end to it. *If I can't stop thinking about it, if I let the fear and worry paralyze me, I'm useless to him and Jack both.* She made her hasty way to the bathroom and stuffed her toiletries into the bag: hairbrush; toothbrush; toothpaste; shampoo; razors; deodorant; the special handmade soap she and Daniel had found at the farmer's market a few months back, chopped bits of rosemary, lavender, and other herbs speckling its sweetly scented surface...

She realized her thoughts had jumped down that path again and tried not to sob. *I can't stop thinking about him. Memories of all the good times we shared. Part of me thinks he's already dead.* Admitting it to herself snared the air in her throat in a hot, tangled ball, dropped a heavy weight on her chest, made it impossible to breathe. She felt tears burn her eyes like acid and forced herself to suck in a breath and make her mind stop in its tracks. She set the bag down and turned on the cold water in the sink, then splashed it over her face and plastered her hair and the back of her neck with it. The shocking chill cut through the panic for a moment and let her straighten up with something impersonating calm.

She shut the water off, grabbed her bag, and headed back out to the living room. Jack was there, his own bag in his hand. Relief flooded her mind as they finally walked outside.

"Do you have everything you need?" he asked her on the front steps, the door closed and locked behind them.

"I think so. I—" She stopped in her tracks as her gaze came to rest on the car. Someone had tucked an envelope under the windshield wiper of the car, and her name was written across the front in a messy scrawl.

It hadn't been there just a few minutes ago when they'd gone inside.

"Shit," Jack muttered, his voice dropping low. "If he was close enough to come running and plant this here in the short time we were inside, then he was probably close enough to hear me say we weren't staying here. There's no real security at a motel or hotel, not even a good one. He'd have to suspect we'd be going to my place." He glanced around, but there was no one in sight, and no cars she didn't recognize. "My phone's not a listed number, so I'm not in the phone book, and I use a PO box for my mail. That doesn't mean the bastard might not be good enough with a computer to hack the DMV database and get my address off my driver's license record, though."

He reached for the note, and she caught his hand. He arched a brow, turning to look at her. “It’s addressed to me,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “I’ll open it.” She plucked the envelope out from under the windshield wiper before he could object and flipped it over. It wasn’t sealed, and she pretended her hands weren’t shaking as she slid the note out of the envelope.

*I have your man. I’m sure you’ve already called the police. I expected it. But if you give this note to the cops, I’ll kill the lawyer.*

*Come alone to the Welcome Center at Jefferson Memorial Forest and hike up along Mitchell Hill Road until you reach the Horine section of the park. Take Red Trail until you reach the cemetery at the far end of Cemetery Road and wait. Be there at one a.m. on Friday night/Saturday morning.*

*If you don’t show up, I’ll kill the lawyer. If the cops show up at the park, I’ll kill him. And that nutcase of a cop that thinks he’s a werewolf doesn’t count as police. He’s crazier than they say I am. I don’t care how big he is. He’s not big enough to stop me...but you still better leave him home.*

There was no signature at the end of the missive, but there didn’t need to be. She knew who had left it there. Wordlessly, she passed the letter to Jack, trying not to cry. She had been to the forest plenty of times, had even hiked that trail before. It was the toughest one in the park, with lots of steep parts and places to hide in the woods. *I’ll be a sitting duck.*

“One in the morning Saturday is the height of the full moon. Either he’s too far gone to realize it, or he thinks what he overheard about me is bullshit,” Jack finally said, breaking into her thoughts. “No way I’m going to let you go there.”

“I have to,” she said numbly. “You read the letter. If I don’t show up, he’ll kill Daniel.”

He swore and crumpled the letter in his fist, shaking his head. She watched him open the car door and inhale deeply. “Okay, get in the car. We can discuss this elsewhere. I don’t want to take the chance that he’s still hanging around.”

She glanced at the car. “What if he bugged the car?”

“He didn’t. I can smell his stink on the car’s outside, where he planted the letter...but there’s no scent of him inside it.” The look on his face was pensive. “That wouldn’t keep him from eavesdropping on us from a distance with a parabolic mike. He could hear us right through

the car windows from a couple of hundred yards away with one of those, and they're easy enough to make that even an amateur electrician can make one." He opened the door for her while she was still absorbing that, and she climbed inside.

She expected him to come around to the driver's side instantly, but instead he stopped where he was, eyes narrowing as he stared off down the street, where a thick stand of bushes stood tall on either side of the gateway leading into Seneca Park. The wooded area at the end of the park nearest her house boasted a cross-country trail and walking path—a perfect place for the Axman to hide and spy on them from, she realized with sinking hopes. Her hand was shaking as she rolled down the window and reached out to snag his sleeve.

He looked startled as he glanced down at her. "What?"

"Is it him?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. He shook his head, then became instantly apologetic.

"No," he answered. "Caught a familiar scent, and thought I saw...something. Not him. What I smelled...well, he stinks a lot worse." He shook his head and came around the front of the car, opened the door, then slid behind the steering wheel.

Her hands shook, and she clenched her fists, pressing them into her thighs to stop their telltale wobble. Her heart pounded hard enough inside her chest, she figured it'd break a rib or two. She'd have one of the other exercise riders take GG tomorrow. There was no way in hell she could concentrate on the horse with Daniel missing. She thought about calling her grandmother, but just as quickly dismissed the idea. No sense in worrying her.

One way or the other, this would be settled within a couple of days. If she lived, they could share a glass of iced tea, and her grandmother would claim that her grandfather was looking down over her, riding with her like when she was three and he'd taken them on a circuit of the track on one of the lead ponies. A hiccuped sob edged past her clenched lips. Jack looked at her, and she forced her chin to stiffen and her emotions to flee. He didn't need her getting hysterical. The longer she went without knowing Daniel was safe, the tighter her anger wound inside her. When she finally saw the Axman, she'd rip him apart with her bare hands.

Of course, had Jack actually *made* her a werewolf, that would be a lot easier to do.

She lost track of time, meandering around inside her own head, and Jack's light touch on her arm startled her.

“We’re here.” Just two innocent words spoken in his low voice made something tighten deep inside her. Warm and safe was all she ever wanted. A home. A boyfriend who loved her. Maybe a picture of her atop GG winning the Kentucky Derby. Her needs were simple, or at least as simple as a girl with her background could be. Now, those thoughts included Jack, his strength, his virility. He made her feel small and feminine in a way that Daniel didn’t, and a teeny part of her felt like she was betraying Daniel.

*Damn it, he’s not dead yet.*

“I’m going to go first, make sure it’s okay. We weren’t followed.”

And just like that, Jack plunged her into the ice-cold chill of the real world.

She managed to nod, her fingers tight on the handle of the bag she hadn’t managed to let go of during the drive. He got out of the car and jogged up the sidewalk. He paused at the door. She thought he was fumbling with his keys, except a man as trained as Jack wouldn’t do that. She caught the quick movements of his fingers that told her he checked for entry. When he turned the knob and flipped on the interior lights, she breathed a sigh of relief. He motioned for her to follow.

She did, racing across his front yard as if she were a thoroughbred released from the starting gates. She ducked inside his house, nearly bowling him over in her haste.

He stopped her. “Easy. Place is so small you might run in the front door and out the back.” He released her long enough to lock the door, flip the dead bolt, set the chain, and arm the alarm.

*Paranoid much?* Still, she was thankful for his extra security measures, even if they did make her front door lock look like a child’s toy.

He flipped on a table lamp in the living room. “Sorry. Didn’t know I was going to have company.”

She chuckled at the sprawl of cut-out newspaper articles across his coffee table and a couch with a rumpled blanket on one end. Jack grabbed an empty pizza box and two beer cans from the table and whisked them into a kitchen that barely had room for a stove and a fridge. The dining area probably couldn’t hold anything other than the smallest of tables. It didn’t have one. Instead, a pressboard student desk had been shoved against the wall, a computer and papers perched precariously on top of it. A battered vinyl dining room chair in a garish yellow and green

print from the seventies served as his desk chair. An empty twelve-pack of beer cans sat on the floor beside the desk.

The newspaper articles littering the top of the elderly coffee table came from different papers across the state. WOLF SPOTTED NEAR LOUISVILLE SUBURB. PARK RANGERS FIND EVIDENCE OF FERAL DOG PACK NEAR STATE PARK. WOMAN ATTACKED BY WOLF NEAR OLD CHICKASAW SETTLEMENT. She glanced up at him curiously.

“I’ve been looking for others like me for a while now,” he explained, sweeping them into a neater pile and setting them aside. “No luck yet, but I check out every news article and police report I hear about that mentions wolves, coyotes, dog attacks...anything that might be related.”

“Do you really think there are more of you?” she asked.

“Well, there was at least the one that infected me,” he said. “And someone had to infect him, right? So I’m hoping there’s at least one more and that I’ll find him. Or her.” She frowned at the idea that he might find a female werewolf, and he changed the subject. “Let me put some clean sheets on the bed. You can sleep in there. I’ll take the couch.”

She glanced at the olive green couch, which looked like it had more lumps than a box of sugar cubes. With his frame, he wouldn’t be comfortable. “Don’t be silly. If you don’t want to share the bed, then I’ll fit on the couch better than you.” She followed him down the very short hall, noticing the bathroom, a shut door, and the bedroom. She peeked around his arm to see a double bed with rumpled covers, a dresser, and an open closet full of button-down shirts and slacks. A pair of underwear hadn’t quite made it into the laundry basket and hung over the edge, the tiger-striped fabric making her smile. “I thought you said you were a wolf, not a kitty cat.”

“What?” Jack looked from her to where she still stared, a flush creeping over his cheeks. He hurried forward and jammed them into the bottom of the hamper. When he turned back to her, his face still flamed.

She’d made him blush. Red stifled the giggles, most likely driven by her stress level, which threatened to bubble from her. She clamped her hand against her mouth, managing to give only a couple of chortles.

“You can sleep in here.” He pulled the closet door closed harder than necessary, rattling it in its tracks, then brushed past her into the hallway.

She reached out, her fingers catching his sleeve. “Hey. We’re both adults. There’s no way you’re going to be comfortable on the couch.”

He flinched away from her as if she’d stung him. “No.”

“Can’t you make me forget?” She hadn’t intended to spill her secret; she’d hoped she would be strong enough. But after everything that had happened...she shook her head and wrapped her arms around herself. “Please.” Her voice broke, and this time, it was she who looked away.

“We can’t.” His rough words forced her to look at him, to see the tortured conflict on his face. The heat in his eyes told her that he wanted her. He reached for her, and he slid his fingers across her cheek to tangle in her hair. “I want that more than anything. But I won’t infect you and force you to give up your dreams. And if we sleep together, that’s what would happen. I don’t think you want to give it all up for a night of sex.”

“It wouldn’t be...” She swayed toward him, one hand coming up to rest on his left pectoral. Beneath her palm, his heart tangoed in time with hers. She stepped forward until the toes of her sneakers bumped his.

Jack bent down and brushed his lips across her forehead. “I can’t make you forget, but I won’t leave you. Do whatever you usually do before you go to bed. We better sleep well. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

Red wrapped her arms around him and enfolded him in a bear hug. Tears stung the corners of her eyes, his strength touching her. He meant what he said. He wouldn’t leave her side. She squeezed him, and if the ridge she felt pressing into her stomach was any indication, he was denying himself more than he denied her. The thought made her smile, and she wished she’d packed something other than an oversize T-shirt with horses on it for a nightgown.

## Chapter Nine

Red came up out of sleep like a swimmer slowly surfacing, the dream she'd been having melting away. Warmth surrounded her on all sides, and she could feel a heavy weight draped over her waist. For a moment, she floundered. The room was dark and unfamiliar, and the bed felt wrong.

Then everything clicked. The heavy, musky scent in her nostrils was the clue that did it. Daniel's scent was lighter, crisp as a pine forest in March. And Jack was bigger, nestled up against her like a slumbering mountain. She snuggled backward into his embrace, feeling safe for a moment, trying not to think about the horror of last night. She could feel the scratchy rasp of his stubble against her cheek, the silky brush of his tousled hair...and a thick, hard ridge at his hips, pressing against her ass.

She drew in a ragged breath, tendrils of need swirling through her belly and groin. Her nipples pebbled under the T-shirt she wore, and her hips bucked back against his involuntarily.

Red felt it when he woke, heard his sudden indrawn breath. His arm tightened around her waist, and his breath spilled warmly over her shoulders like a caress. A low, urgent growl trickled from his lips.

"You smell good," he murmured, his voice thick and husky from sleep.

"So do you," she whispered and reached down to interlace her fingers in his. He squeezed her hand gently, then bent close, his lips sliding along the nape of her neck. She groaned.

"So damn hot," Jack muttered, cradling her in his arms, the thin fabric of her T-shirt no barrier to the sensation of his muscular form pressed against hers. "So beautiful."

"Please," she moaned, arching back against him. Visions of the parking garage last night danced through her head, and she squeezed her eyes closed, trying to shut them out. "I need you..."

He inhaled sharply and tightened his hold around her, the ghost of regret skating through his voice. "We can't. You know we can't."

She rolled over to face him and reached down with one hand to wrap her fingers around his cock. It pulsed in her hand, hot and hard, a single drop of pearly juice beading at the slit. His entire body jerked, his breath hissing out of him, the sound almost pained. He caught her hand firmly in his. "Don't."

"You don't want to infect me. Okay. I don't like that, but I accept it. You say we can't have sex because any fluid transfer from you to me will turn me into what you are. But there has to be something we can do that won't change me."

His gaze met hers, measuring, steady. "The problem is that I'm not sure I'll be able to stop if we start. I don't know if I can be content with just touching."

"I trust in your self-control," she whispered.

He winced.

For a long time, he simply lay there, staring into her eyes. She trembled at the intensity of the passion in his gaze. And then he released her hand. Reaching out, his fingers then traced the side of her face. She could feel them shake.

She reached down to touch him again, and she felt his heartbeat thrumming under her fingertips as she traced the veins that laddered up and down his shaft. His hips thrust forward instinctively, and she curled her hand around him, letting his cream slick the tunnel her fingers formed.

He slid his hand under her shirt and lifted it up over her head to toss it to the ground, then reached out to cup one breast, his palm cool against her warm flesh. With one hand, he traced a circle around the nipple, watching it tighten at his touch. Her breath quickened, and she pumped her hand along his shaft, the backs of her fingers brushing against the pendulous mass of his balls. A hoarse gasp escaped from his lips, and she smiled, a little thrill racing through her at the knowledge of how she was making him feel.

He trailed his fingers down along the flat plane of her belly, over the raised ridge of her hipbone, then down to the edges of the triangle of coppery hair at the delta of her thighs. She could feel wetness slicking her lips and quivered as he slid a finger down along the crease of her labia, his finger then slipping over her clit. Her grasp on him tightened instinctively, and he bent

down to brush a blazing kiss along the white column of her throat, then slid one finger into her channel.

A tiny mewling sound emerged from her throat as his finger glided deeply into her with almost agonizing slowness and slipped back out even more slowly. When it delved into her pussy again, it was joined by a second digit, stretching her deliciously. At the apex of each thrust, he crooked his fingers, stroking them along her G-spot, making her spasm in increasing rapture.

*Hard to concentrate.* She tried to focus, moving her hand in a swift rhythm up and down his cock. It would be too easy to lose herself in pleasure and forget about pleasing him too. But that would hardly be fair. *And if this is what he's like just with his hands, I can't imagine what it feels like to actually have him inside me.* For a moment she envied Daniel, and then the jealousy melted away, turning to despair.

“What’s wrong?” Jack asked, his voice gruff with desire. She shook her head, wondering how he had sensed her mood change. His hand changed angles, and with each new plunge into her tight tunnel, he flicked the ball of his thumb against her clit.

The added stimulation was the last straw, and she almost screamed as she exploded, bliss washing over her in a dizzying tsunami. She barely registered Jack’s groan as her hand tightened around him and he erupted. Hot cream poured over her fingers.

Red loosened her grip but didn’t remove her fingers from his shaft. Tiny aftershocks sparked through her, and she noticed that Jack still touched her. A troubled intimacy settled over them as they lay there, their breathing returning to normal. Daniel hadn’t shared this with Jack. He might never have the chance.

Her throat contracted, and she swallowed hard.

“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?” Jack didn’t need to name him; they both knew who he spoke about.

Nodding, she allowed her fingers to slip from him.

Jack rolled away, returning moments later with a tissue. “You didn’t have any cuts on your hand, did you?”

The question washed over her like a bucket of icy water. She shook her head. Jack handed her shirt to her as she sat up, and she tugged it on. Her sensitive pussy, still slick with her juices,

reminded her of what she'd just shared with Jack. Red waited for the sense of betrayal to come. It didn't, making her wonder if that should bother her.

"I don't even know if Daniel's alive." Red buried her face in her hands and took deep, shuddering breaths. "In less than twelve hours I'm supposed to meet the killer. Alone. Defenseless." She wrapped her arms around herself. No, never defenseless. "He knows I'm coming. Maybe I can get Daniel and we can both get out of there alive." She clung to the thin tendril of hope. Jack wouldn't have agreed to this plan if he didn't think that she would live. He was assigned to protect her, after all. He wouldn't let her die.

She searched his eyes, the color of a sky before a sudden summer storm, and sensed the same turmoil that she felt echoing in him. The hoped-for reassurance didn't come, only a grim determination. He'd keep her from dying, or die in the process.

Red bolted to her feet. "I'm going to go take a shower." The strong, silent argument might work on his other charges, except she didn't think he'd ever done anything like this before. Not guarding her. No, that he'd probably done plenty of times. But the whole almost-sex thing, *that* she didn't think he'd done before, or at least not since becoming a werewolf. What had happened with Daniel was different, and they both knew it.

"Hey." Before she could blink, Jack stood beside her. How he'd gotten from the bed to her side that quickly, she didn't know. He's a werewolf, stupid, she reminded herself. He touched her arm.

Staring at his fingers, she wondered why a simple touch affected her so much. Already her stomach tumbled, her sex opening, dampening, readying itself for him, even though she'd just had a pretty damn good orgasm. She licked her lips. "I need to go take a shower. I can't laze around in bed all day." As soon as the words left her mouth, she pressed her lips closed. *Stupid! Of all the things to say, reminding of him of what he couldn't have, what I can't have.*

"We have several hours." The words rumbled from his chest.

She turned to him and closed her eyes. Drawing a deep breath, she steadied herself. Opening them, she cupped his cheek. "And you said yourself we can't have sex. I need to plan. I need to..." Her words trailed off with the realization that she didn't really know what she needed, except to keep believing that Daniel was alive.

“Distract yourself. I know. And I can’t offer the one thing that would probably keep your mind off tonight for a good, long while.” He stepped away from her touch. “Take your shower. I’ll find us something for breakfast.”

“Wait. I don’t think I want to be alone right now. I keep thinking about Daniel.”

“I know.” Jack hauled her into his arms and wrapped her in a tight embrace. “Your scent keeps changing, and I kick myself every time, because I couldn’t stop this from happening. You’re not the only one who plays ‘if only’ games.”

Red tilted her face up, thinking to kiss him, then ducked against his chest at the last moment. In the shower, the rush of water and soap would keep her from being infected. If Daniel didn’t make it back, she’d—No! If she lost Daniel, she’d need GG and her dream even more than before.

Jack’s erect cock pressed against her stomach.

“The shower,” she said, her throat suddenly tight. *I hope you understand, Daniel.* Deep inside, somehow, she knew he probably would. And if not... Well, if their situations were reversed, she suspected that her boyfriend wouldn’t have half the trouble she was having. After all, he was already infected. She grinned, thinking of the two men together, fucking, all that testosterone and marvelous naked male flesh. If they all got out of here alive, maybe she’d ask the guys to put on a show. She ought to get something out of the deal, other than her life.

“Whatever you’re thinking, it’s making you horny,” Jack whispered in her ear. He steered her out the door and down to his small bathroom.

A minimal amount of clutter—razor, shaving cream, deodorant, toothbrush, and toothpaste—covered the counter, and the toilet seat was up.

She put it down. “Good thing I’m only going to be here twelve hours. You’d drive me crazy.” She put down the lid and sat down on the toilet. “Mind getting my bag?”

“Sure. Does that mean you have Daniel trained?”

“Quite well,” she answered, letting the purr in her voice speak for itself.

Chuckling, Jack left the bathroom.

By the time he returned, she’d stripped and stood beneath the heavenly shower spray. His store-brand shampoo and conditioner would be just fine, but she needed something else besides

his men's body wash. Plus, having her own toothbrush would be nice. Jack handed a bottle of her bath gel and a washcloth around the curtain to her.

"Thanks." She flipped open the cap and poured a generous amount of pink liquid on the washcloth. The smell of fresh, ripe raspberries filled the stall, and she inhaled deeply, closing her eyes as she lathered her body with the silky foam. The curtain rings rattled behind her as he drew the drape back and stepped into the shower with her.

*I don't know if I'm going to live through the night.* Even with Jack there, she didn't think she had much of a chance. And Daniel...well, he had more of a chance than she did, probably. She had seen how the cut on his hand healed up right after he got infected. She didn't know how badly he'd have to get hurt before it wouldn't heal, but she'd seen the pictures of the Axman's other victims. She shuddered, the hot spray from the shower not doing much to chase away her sudden chill even as it rinsed the foam from her curves.

Then again, would he do that to Daniel? From what Jack had said, the Axman's insanity was only focused on women. If she didn't show up and he tried to kill Daniel, he would probably just shoot him, or... Thinking of it that way, of Daniel "just" being shot, made her stomach churn. *Oh God. I'm so scared. I'd probably be okay if I were like Jack and Daniel, but then I'd have to give up any hope of ever working with GG again. But I can't exactly race her if I'm dead, either!*

Her breath hitched, and Jack reached out and gathered her into his arms. "Hey," he murmured softly, drawing her close and stroking her wet hair. "You're obsessing over this."

"Not much of a surprise there," she said shakily. "I have a million horrible pictures going through my head about what could happen tonight. I know you're trying to do the right thing by not making me like you, but some part of me is still screaming that I won't survive otherwise."

"I am not going to let that man kill you," Jack said, his voice rough. He brushed a kiss against her brow and held her close. She could feel his hardness rubbing against her mound and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to ignore the trickles of lust swirling through her. "I'm going to go out to the park early, up into the forest, and once I can smell there's no one around for miles, I'm going to turn into a wolf and hide by the place he told you to meet him. There're thousands of animals up in those woods; what's one more? He won't recognize me even if he does spot me. The minute I see him, I'm going to rip his damn throat out."

She nodded reluctantly. "I guess you're right."

But the uneasy butterflies in her stomach only multiplied.

\* \* \* \* \*

She watched him pull on his jeans and button them up, then sink down onto the bed they had shared to pull on socks and shoes. After their shower, they had spent a while just lying in bed together, his arms wrapped around her, holding her close. Comfort, not sex, was what she needed, and he had given it to her without a second thought, stroking her hair and pressing gentle kisses against her forehead. It hadn't completely banished the fear inside her, but his presence and concern had helped soothe her terror, at least for now.

He tucked the shirt he wore into his waistband and shrugged on the shoulder holster with his sidearm, firmly buckling the harness afterward. "It's three hours until you're supposed to meet the Axman at the park," he said after a glance at the clock on the wall. "I'm going to drive my own car up there and get into place. You leave in time to get up there on schedule. Lock the apartment up when you go."

"All right," she whispered, her voice wavering uncertainly. He stood back up and crossed the space between them in two steps, then wrapped his arms around her. She looked up at him miserably, half-afraid she was about to throw up.

"It'll be all right," he said. "I promise." Very lightly, he brushed a tender kiss against her lips, not lingering long enough for it to turn torrid.

"I trust you," she breathed, burying her face against his chest. They stood there entwined for a long moment before she unwillingly let him go and slipped out of his arms.

When he shut the door behind him, the sound of the bolt sliding home in the lock seemed as loud as a cannon going off. Silence fell over the little living room as heavily as a shroud, and she stood where she was for a minute, hugging herself tightly.

She knew that after tonight, one way or the other, this would all be over. The thought didn't do much to reassure her. *Why, why am I so certain this is going to end badly? I have a damn werewolf on my side, for God's sake!* For all she knew, Jack would track down the Axman and kill him before she even got up there and out of her car. Then they could find Daniel together and be done with the insanity. She hadn't slept well since this matter had started, and all she wanted was Daniel back safely and to not always be afraid anymore.

*And Jack.*

If she had to be honest with herself, she knew that the thought of going back to her old life, as wonderful as it was, would seem incomplete. Having Daniel back would be amazing. Not having to look over her shoulder for an ax would be bliss.

But she wanted more.

“I’m falling in love with him,” she admitted, the words sounding paper dry in the empty room.

Before she could pursue the thought further, she heard the musical tones of her cell phone chiming from the depths of her purse. She scabbled for the phone. *Grandma? One of the other jockeys?*

The caller ID lit up with Daniel’s cell phone number, and joy exploded in her heart. She flipped the phone open. “Daniel? Are you okay?”

“He is so far,” growled a rough, unpleasant voice at the other end of the call. She froze. “And he’ll stay that way if you do what you’re told. Just a couple of hours, sweetmeat. I’m looking forward to getting to know you better.”

She screamed in disgust and horror and hung up. Before she could flip the phone closed, it rang again. She let it ring, resisting the urge to hurl it against the wall—*what if Jack tries to call me and can’t because I’ve broken my phone like an idiot?*—but the ringing was incessant. As soon as the five rings ended, flipping the call over to voice mail, the connection went dead, and he called again.

At last, the ringing stopped. She held her breath, heart hammering wildly in her chest, waiting for it to ring again the same way a cornered mouse might wait for a cat to pounce.

Just as she was ready to believe he might have given up, the phone chirped, the distinct tone letting her know she had received a text message.

She opened the phone even though she didn’t want to and clicked through menus until she brought the message up.

ANSWER PHONE OR I KILL HIM.

A sob broke in her throat, and she collapsed into a chair, her legs too weak to hold her any longer. *He’s angry I won’t play his sick game...*

The phone rang in her hand, and she jerked. Wiping away tears, she answered the call.

“That’s better,” he breathed hoarsely. “Do you know what I’m going to do to you when you get here?”

“No,” she whimpered.

He told her anyway. She hunched down in the chair, tears sliding silently down her cheeks as he muttered his fantasies to her. She could hear his breathing grow coarse and labored, and did her best to stifle the slow wave of nausea that churned in her stomach.

At last, she heard him grunt, his words grinding to a halt. “Done.” He snorted after a moment, an undertone of cruel mockery in his voice. “Go on, hang up. You’d better get going. Wouldn’t want to be late to the park.”

She swallowed hard and hung the phone up. She grabbed her purse and keys and headed out of the apartment. She made sure to lock the door behind her, then went downstairs to the building’s parking lot, where her car waited.

*Wish I had a gun.* She realized she should have asked Jack for one. There was a canister of Mace in her purse. It was all she had, and there was no time left to get a gun now. It would have to be enough.

Her expression was bleak as she started up the car and exited the parking lot for Jefferson Memorial Forest.

She drove on autopilot, the flash of streetlights and changing stop signals barely registering. In her mind, she imagined Daniel dead—or worse. From the vile words the Axman had whispered lustfully into her ear, she knew there could be far worse things than dying this night. She shuddered.

*Don’t think about that. Ignore him.* Before the big races—and the small ones too—she’d always visualized what she wanted to do. She imagined herself riding the horse, finding the sweet spot along the rail, then surging to the lead, or finding the lead and keeping it, depending on her mount. The technique had served her well, and as she drove, she concentrated on her mission. Instead of winning a race, this time she’d rescue the man she loved.

And hope the other one didn’t get himself killed. Presumably, Jack drove miles ahead of her, on his way to the forest. By getting there early, he promised to watch out for her. She may appear to be going to the Axman alone, but she wouldn’t be.

Jack. Her breath caught at the very thought of his name. What they'd shared at his place defied categorization. It was hot. It touched something deep inside her. And now that she'd had a glimpse of the passion Jack offered, she wasn't quite ready to send him back into the night once the mission ended. With Daniel being a werewolf, there was a good chance that Jack would be sticking around. Red was woman enough to admit that she liked that—a lot.

At least thinking about fucking Jack kept her from thinking about getting killed.

She couldn't die. She had GG and the Derby. No matter what happened tonight—and she knew if something happened to Daniel or Jack, or both of them, it would rip her heart out—she had to stay alive for her dreams. Not that she *wanted* this to go sour and have something happen to the guys. Far from it. In her ideal world, they all lived, she rode the Derby and won, and they became a happy little threesome forever and ever.

Except Jack had said he could never really have sex with her. And if Daniel was infected now—if he was like Jack—did that mean she could never make love to him again for the same reason? It was a horrible thought, one that made her grip the steering wheel with white-knuckled hands. His fluids were as likely to infect her as Jack's were now. Yeah, she'd work on that. Right after they were done saving Daniel.

Her one regret was that she hadn't told her grandma about what was happening to her. She didn't want her grandma to worry—far from it. But she knew there was a possibility that her grandmother had seen the newspaper articles, although it was unlikely that she got copies of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* in Jamaica. Still, there was always the Internet. Her grandmother was old, but she was amazingly tech-savvy for her age, and could have read the news online.

If something happened, her grandma would forever wonder what the heck her level-headed granddaughter was doing in the woods in the middle of the night with strangers. Besides, Grandma would like Jack. He was down-to-earth and no-nonsense, like her grandfather had been. Grandma liked Daniel, thought it was smart that her granddaughter had hooked up with a lawyer. In the financially insecure world of horse racing, it was nice to know that one of them would have a steady income.

Red laughed. Of all the things to think about at this moment, making sure one of them had a job had to be the most asinine. After all, she had no idea if they'd even make it out alive.

She stopped at a red light and rested her forehead against the steering wheel. She had Mace, and she had her wits. Guiding thousand-pound thoroughbreds around the track didn't leave her weak. She wondered if the Axman knew exactly what kind of strength it took to do her job. Probably not, and she grinned as she hit the accelerator. He'd find out really soon.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Kill the bitch.*

The Axman smiled and hunkered down behind the thick screen of bushes and weeds bordering the parking lot at the end of the state park where he had ordered the woman to meet him. Silently, he listened to the insidious whisper in his head, clutching the ax more tightly. He could see the parking lot from the spot at the edge of the woods where he had chosen to hide, and he knew that the bitch would arrive any moment now, hurrying to save her lover.

He'd had another name a long time ago. He still used it from time to time to write checks to pay for groceries, the rent, and utility bills. But Paul Moran had been dead for a long time, and only the Axman remained. "Just me. Only me, forever." The words came out as a whisper. "And all the bitches. Bad bitches. Dirty bitches. They have to die."

He could feel his fingers tingle pleasantly where he gripped the ax and hear the slow, steady, quiet murmur of words that spilled ceaselessly into his head, just as they had for most of the past year, when the ax had come into his possession. Before, he had always used his bare hands to kill the bitches, taking an intense delight from the feeling of their throats in his grasp. Three in Los Angeles, two in San Francisco, four in Denver, three in Kansas City, five in St. Louis, two in Chicago, and three in New Orleans.

New Orleans was when and where it had changed. He had spent months in New Orleans, some of that time on odd jobs he did in between his *real* work. The man in the dilapidated house, who had hired him to cut down dead trees on his property after Katrina, had been more than willing to lend him another ax when his own had broken.

But the whispers had come with that ax. A voice from a long time ago, telling him about the New Orleans Axman, telling him about the jazz, telling him how beautiful it was to see blood splashed everywhere and to hear the victims' screams.

He hated jazz music; he hated every kind of music but the screams. And he was far more particular about who found their ends at his hands than the whisperer had been. The idea of

killing men and children left him cold. But he was more than willing to go along with everything else that the whispers suggested. The end result was the same, after all, and the method more...satisfying. He shivered at the torrent of memories that flooded through his mind, and reached down with one hand to give himself a squeeze. *There'll be time, when this bitch is in pieces, to...play. Later.*

He had no idea where the whispers came from. An hour's research in a library had been enough to show him that the story the whispers told him was true. He had never heard of the Axman of New Orleans before that moment his fingers had first curled around the ax's handle. He knew the whispers were not the run-of-the-mill voices that lunatics locked up in asylums often heard.

The original Axman's ghost? It was not beyond belief that the ax had once belonged to that killer and that his ghost had stayed with the weapon which had spilled so much blood almost a century ago. He found that he rather liked the idea of having someone to share stories with, someone who would watch over him while he worked. "Dead man watching. Dead man guarding me. Guiding me. Congratulating me."

He had kept the ax.

And every time he used it, he could see his mother's twisted, spiteful face where the beautiful features of the bitches once had been.

Perhaps if his father hadn't died during the Korean War. If his father had been alive to keep his mother from trying to keep her only baby safe from further wars. To keep her from dressing him up as a girl: first as a baby, and then when she had sent him to school. All the way until he reached high school, when the school system had finally put a stop to it.

By then, of course, it was too late. Children could be cruel. Striking back at the other children was out of the question. Striking back at his mother, even more so. In the end, it was the stray animals in the neighborhood that had eased the pain. The trap that he had bought allowed him to capture them alive and caged. He knew better than to risk their frantic jaws. Strangling them was out of the question.

But there was always the river. A piece of rope tied to one of the bars allowed him to pull it back out of the muddy water when the cage had stopped shaking.

When he had finished high school, he had signed up for the army against his mother's wishes and let them ship him off to Vietnam. It was perfectly legal for him to kill there—even encouraged. And in between the days he and his unit spent slogging around in the rice paddies and jungle, there were days on leave.

The first bitch to die with his hands wrapped around her throat was a whore in Saigon. He killed six more of them before being sent home after getting wounded while on patrol. He knew better than to go back home to Louisville and his mother once they released him from the VA hospital. Instead, he chose to wander, doing odd jobs and indulging in his one true love until the day not long ago when he had received word that his mother had died.

He was very careful to leave no trace of himself. Even in the beginning, in Vietnam, he had worn gloves, had made certain not to touch anything. His fingerprints were on record with the military, and it would ruin all his fun if he got caught. A single print would be all it would take for them to figure out who he was and eventually track him down and stop him.

He hadn't originally come back to Louisville for the funeral, but with the intention of burning down the house he had grown up in. But the whispering voice inside the ax had told him to stay for a while, to play for a while, and—unable to refuse it—he had agreed.

There were, after all, bitches everywhere, and he was as happy to kill them here as any other place he might go.

The sound of a car's engine caught his attention, and he smiled slowly as one pulled up into the lot and parked. The ghastly smile deepened as the red-haired woman climbed out from behind the steering wheel.

He couldn't wait to see her red all over. Pieces here, pieces there...and of course, the beautiful, beautiful blood.

When he was done playing with this one, there would be others.

## Chapter Ten

Red's cell phone read after one a.m. by the time she pulled into the deserted parking lot. She stared at the mute device, half dreading it ringing again. Taking a deep breath, she opened her car door. The damp night air rushed at her, wrapping her in the memory of walking in the woods on her grandma's farm or just leaning on a fence and watching the horses frolic in the Kentucky bluegrass. She closed her eyes as the poignant memories assaulted her.

She stood and locked the doors, then tucked the car keys into the hip pocket of her jeans. From somewhere in the woods an owl hooted. "*Whoo! Whoo!*"

"Who's right," Red muttered. "Who would be sick enough to threaten me and take Daniel? Who would want to kill me?" Her breath caught, and she pressed her fingers to her chest. Coming this far just to let hysteria get the best of her was stupid.

The cool weight of the Mace can in her other hand comforted her. She stepped off the parking area and onto the grass. The dark park shelter seemed too shadowy, too secluded for her peace of mind, and she went to stand over by a water fountain, well lit by the moon overhead.

Her cell phone rang.

The sound startled her into nearly dropping it. Instead, she flipped it open with her finger and caught sight of Daniel's number on the display. She licked her dry lips. "Hello," she croaked.

"Good. You came." The sickening voice at the other end made it sound as if she'd accepted his invitation for tea, not for murder.

"Where is he?" Red scanned the trees, trying to find some sign that the Axman was nearby. She saw none. No flash of light, no rustle of leaves.

"Such impatience. You should enjoy this. It may be the last pain-free moments of your life."

“Ever have a horse roll over on you? That’s pain. Or maybe a thousand-pound creature stomping on your foot. Ever watch your toes swell and turn purple and know that you have to ride a full race card the next day?” She shot the words back at him, goading him with his notion of pain. Feral determination filled her with a savageness that scared her.

“I’m sure we’ll be discovering your pain threshold soon enough.”

Maybe she shouldn’t have goaded him. “Where’s Daniel?” She allowed a hint of her fear to creep into her voice.

“Follow the trail behind the shelter.”

Red inched away from the water fountain, hating to leave her pool of moonlight. Behind the shelter she thought she saw a break in the woods, a dark sign announcing a hiking trail. Closer, she saw the sign pointed out several different paths. “Which one?”

“Keep walking.”

Red stumbled. If he was close enough to give her directions, then he could see her. Hysteria bubbled up in her throat, but she quickly tamped it down.

“I told you to keep walking,” the Axman ordered roughly.

Red took a step, unaware that she’d stopped. Glancing behind her, she tried to make out the shape of her car. She thought she saw moonlight glinting off the fountain, but a few steps later, she couldn’t see anything but the darkness behind her.

“Good. Take the right-hand fork. You’ll find your boyfriend there.” He sneered the words. “You know, I ought to cut his dick off. He’s not worthy of you.”

Red stopped, her stomach twisting. “Don’t do that,” she rasped, her tongue like sandpaper in her mouth. “I did what you wanted. I’m here.”

He snorted. “Turn left at the next fork,” he ordered, not answering her.

She took the fork when she came to it, realizing as she did so that she was headed away from the original trail he had told her to take when he had first called her. Jack’s at the other spot, she thought numbly. *He’s going to be waiting in the wrong place.*

“There’s a shelter along this trail about three miles farther up,” the Axman growled. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

The line went dead. She closed the phone and tucked it back into her purse. If he was watching her, there was no way to call Jack and tell him where she was going without the killer knowing it. *And then he'll kill Daniel.* The cold rose within her until she felt as if her insides were sheathed in ice.

She made herself keep walking, flinching at every sound she heard. The farther she got away from the shelter where she'd parked her car, the darker it became, and she was forced to flip her phone open and use the light from the screen to illuminate the path, afraid she'd step off the trail and turn an ankle or worse. The night was mild, with only the occasional breeze to rustle the branches overhead.

When she finally came around the last bend in the trail and spotted the shelter a few hundred yards ahead, she stopped, unable to go any farther. The ice choking her windpipe and the chambers of her heart made her chest hurt, and her breath came in short, petrified little gasps. She desperately wanted to see Daniel and get him to safety, but she knew without a doubt that if Jack couldn't find her, there was no chance that either she or Daniel would walk away from this alive. *Daniel!* Part of her wanted to turn and run back down the trail as fast as she could. She felt hot tears slip down her cheeks, born from a mixture of raw, utter terror and shame that she could even think of leaving him behind.

With a shudder, she forced herself to start walking once more before the phone in her hand could ring again. The Mace in her other hand now seemed pitifully inadequate. What good would it do against an ax? He'd have a much longer reach than the spray would. A wave of deep grief flooded through her as she saw how things would go the next day—the police contacting their counterparts in Jamaica, who would make the trip to the posh Kingston hotel to tell her grandma that her granddaughter was dead. The look she could see on her grandmother's face was enough to rip a groan from her lips, and not far away, she heard an answering grunt come from somewhere by the shelter.

"Daniel!" She ran forward, heedless of the danger, worry chasing fear away for the moment. Her feet pounded against the wood-chip-strewn path as she raced around the shelter, and she nearly tripped over him. He was propped up against the back wall of the shelter, hands and feet duct-taped together at wrists and ankles, another silvery swath of duct tape plastered over his mouth. Dark smears of crusted blood stained his brow, and his eyes fluttered open to fix on her pale face, barely visible by the weak light of the cell phone's screen.

“Oh God.” She peered at his forehead, then probed his head with careful fingers, but could find no wound. The Axman had hit him to knock him out, but he had healed already. *Thank God.* She felt at his ankles for the end of the duct tape to unwind it, but it was layered thickly, a huge cuff of it built up. *I can't cut it! I don't have a knife!* She reached out to worry at one corner of the strip of tape over his mouth and then winced. “This is going to hurt. Sorry,” she said and ripped it free. It came loose with a crackling sound that seemed garishly loud in the quiet night. She flinched.

Daniel worked his jaw back and forth a little, the gummy residue from the tape in a rectangle over his mouth like bad clown paint, and then his eyes widened, focused not on her but past her. “Red! Look out!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Frustrated, Jack bent his muzzle back to the trail to sniff. So far, he had not found a single trace of the Axman's foul scent anywhere along the trail he had told Red to take. *He's clearly lied to us.* Barely restraining a growl, he whirled and sped back along the trail, the spongy ground giving way easily under his paws. *Shit. I can't be too late!*

He ran. The night was warm and clear and still, and the lack of a breeze hobbled him. He had counted on the wind to bring the scents of Red, Daniel, and the Axman to him, and that it did not made tracking harder. *At least it isn't raining.* A storm would wash away the scents on the ground and make tracking almost impossible.

It took him less time to retrace his tracks than he had feared, but more than he had hoped, and he came to a stop in the parking lot. Red's car was parked there, but it was empty. He sprang forward and put one paw against the hood. It was still faintly warm, and with a soft snort, he bent his head to the ground again.

Instantly, her scent filled his nostrils—rich, spicy, sweet. He pushed away the sudden rush of arousal and turned the way she had gone, following her trail as fast as his four legs would take him.

The clouds parted overhead as he ran, and the moon shone down—full, bright, beautiful. Daniel's first change was tonight, if he wasn't dead. *And if he changes and I'm not there, he won't be able to control himself. Red—*

Adrenaline sent a fresh burst of speed through his black-furred legs, and he leaped through the underbrush, taking a straight line instead of the curving path, cutting valuable seconds off the journey. *Then again, if Daniel changes, he's much more likely to go after the Axman.* Wounded animals remembered who harmed them. Given a choice of attacking a hunter or his own mate, no sensible wolf would ignore the better target. But the Axman had heard them talking. Crazy or not, he might have believed it, and if he decided to take precautions... Jack's jaws tightened as he thought of Daniel, flashing up from the heap of his torn clothing, golden-furred and lithe, only to be met by a silver bullet and thrown back to the ground. *And it would work. So far as I know, silver is the only thing that works. If it didn't, I'd be dead.*

The memory flooded up unwanted, refusing to go away. Morrell on the floor, blood everywhere, the ropes of his intestines shredded and torn by the creature that loomed over him. Jack had drawn his gun and put six bullets into the monster, but it hadn't flinched, only whirled and charged him.

Heavier than a man, it had knocked him to the floor. He had thrown his hand up to push it off, and its jaws had closed over the first three fingers of his right hand and ripped them off. Even as it had shoved his arm out of the way to go for his throat, eyes burning, it had gone rigid, foam frothing around its muzzle, then toppled over. It flailed and thrashed, long legs churning in obvious agony, blood seeping from its open mouth, and finally died.

He'd had no idea what was going on and had sat there in shock for ten minutes. Morrell was dead. And then he realized his fingers were growing back. The confusion and pain were impossible to forget. The wound had left only thin lines at the base of each finger where they had been severed. After they grew back, right down to the nails and the fine black hairs on the backs of his knuckles, he had crawled over to the monster and pried its jaws open. Stuck halfway down its throat were his fingers—and the silver high school class ring he always wore, the flesh of the monster softly sizzling, even in death, where the toxic metal lay in its esophagus.

He had been unable to wear silver jewelry since that day.

His paws pounded against the damp ground. He was getting closer; he could hear Red's voice in the distance, and the scents were much stronger.

Blood. The smell of it filled the air even as he heard Red scream.

*No!*

\* \* \* \* \*

The ax came swooping out of the darkness. Red screamed and ducked, and instead of the blunt side of the head hitting her in the shoulder, it struck her hand, sending the small canister of Mace flying off into the darkness. She heard a crunch as the heavy metal hit, and pain flared instantly in her wrist and up along her arm. Tears sprang to her eyes as she cradled her hand close to her body, trying not to move it. *Shit! The Derby is only a few months away. I can't ride if he cuts me too deeply. Damn it!*

"There you are, my dear," the man looming out of the darkness purred. "I was afraid you'd changed your mind and decided not to show up. The cop might be crazy, but he's more of a man than this one is. I could understand if you decided to let this one die to save your own hide and be content with the other one."

He was a couple of inches shorter than Daniel, barrel-chested and thickset around the waist. Receding salt-and-pepper hair framed a squat face. Piggy brown eyes stared out above a bulbous, booze-reddened nose, and his hands shifted their grip on the ax, drawing it back again. He wore navy blue sweats and black sneakers, and Red watched as his gaze flickered down to Daniel. One corner of his mouth curled in a contemptuous sneer.

"Red, run," Daniel said hoarsely. "Forget about me. Whatever he does to me, I'll heal. Get the hell out of here!"

"No," she moaned, shaking her head. "I'm not leaving you alone!"

The Axman grinned and took a step closer to her. "The two of you can die together. I don't care."

She watched as he fixed his eyes on Daniel, and she stepped between the two of them. "I won't let you hurt him."

"Stupid girl," the killer rasped. "It was never about him. I only ever wanted *you*."

He charged, swinging with deliberate strength at her midsection. She screamed, backpedaling, and tripped over Daniel's legs, falling backward and landing on the ground.

She shrieked again, her cries mingling with Daniel's as the Axman laughed, stepping forward and bringing the ax down. She curled and ducked and felt the blade graze her back, not far from her shoulder. She scrambled, working dirt and grass beneath her fingers as she tried to rise. A blow from a meaty fist across the back of her neck sent her sprawling.

Red kicked out with her legs, a solid thud reverberating up them as she connected with her attacker's shin. She kicked again, knowing her legs were the strongest part of her; it took strength to stay on top of a racing thoroughbred. She turned and swiped at his legs with her own. He bobbed, and the ax fell forward. She turned, but not before the blade sliced along her shirt and crunched into the skin at her ribs.

Pain burst through her body hard enough to make tears come to her eyes. She curled in on herself, stretching her uninjured arm out in front of her to try to crawl away. *Must get away*. No one else could ride GG. Someone had to tell Jack what happened. Her grandmother was counting on her.

"Get away from her!" Daniel yelled. Somehow, he'd managed to roll his bound body away from the shelter and toward them. He swung his legs, still wrapped together with duct tape, toward the Axman.

The Axman spun and brought a meaty fist down against Daniel's temple hard enough to drop an elephant. Without missing a beat, he turned back around and straddled Red's legs.

Blood, her blood, dripped from the ax blade. The sight of it made her woozy. *Damn it, move!* She urged her body. She'd seen worse at the track. The sight didn't compare to a horse's broken leg, the bone protruding through slender skin, or the gash along the back of a horse's cannon bone when the horse had caught himself with his shoes. Except that it was *her* blood.

With one hand, her attacker pinned her to the ground.

"Jack!" she screamed. She drew breath to yell again, and a fat hand clamped across her windpipe. She choked.

The Axman smiled.

Red stared into his beady eyes. The emotions, twisted with rage and sickness, weren't those of a sane man. He tapped the head of the ax against Red's shoulder. "Just one slice will make you all nice."

Red spit in his face.

"Bitch." He backhanded her, the ax handle ringing against her head. "Fucking bitch." He raised his weapon and released her throat to take a two-handed grasp on the ax's shaft.

This was it. A cold calmness, as if she weren't quite in her body anymore, descended. Maybe it was her wounds—her broken wrist, the gash along her shoulder, her broken ribs, the

countless other small cuts and bruises—or maybe it was the knowledge that here it would all end. *I love you, Daniel. I love you, Jack. I love you, Grandma. And GG, I'm sorry someone else will have to give you morning apples and horse cookies. I'm sorry I'm going to let you down.*

She screamed, releasing all her fear, her rage, her frustration in one, long wordless wail that echoed through the trees. *Find us and kill him, Jack. Make him pay.* She bucked her body beneath the Axman in one last futile attempt to dislodge him.

Her attacker rose back up, took a step back, and brought his weapon down in a brutal slashing motion. One swipe, starting at her left shoulder, creasing her left breast with a long furrow, then down across her abdomen and hip. The ax cut true. Pain blossomed in her body, and her guts heaved—or maybe they were just spilling from her skin.

Suddenly a primal snarl that no human throat could make filled the clearing. Red cracked her eyes open, nausea and agony making it hard to focus. Something stood by the trees, the figure...it took a moment to register. She pressed her lips closed, not wanting to give away Jack's position, and gave in to the blackness, knowing that whatever happened, at least he was there.

## Chapter Eleven

One sight of the Axman bent over Red's supine form was enough to tear a roar of rage from Jack. He shifted as he rushed across the clearing, flesh warping as he changed from his wolfen form to the monstrous one. It took less than five seconds. Bone resculpted itself with grisly popping sounds, and his spine pushed upward to allow him to walk upright on his hind legs. Inch-long talons sprouted from the tips of his fingers, and the muzzle at the front of his skull grew even larger, saliva dripping from the ivory fangs. Fury burned in his dark eyes, the fur on his body thickened even more, and his long legs made short work of the distance separating them.

He shoved the Axman away from Red hard enough to force the air from the bastard's lungs. Blood. There was too much blood, and it came from her stomach, her shoulder, her ribs, her hip...everywhere.

"What? No!" The Axman stared up from the ground at his attacker, blinking and gaping like a goldfish without water. The acrid scent of urine filled the air.

Jack turned. One step, two, and Jack was there, claws rending, tearing. The Axman screamed as Jack tore into him. Nothing could ever make him pay for what he had done to Red or those other women, but the piece of filth would never again attack any other woman. Never. A swipe across the man's groin sent his dick flying, limp globs of flesh only so much worthless tissue now. Intestines unspooled from his abdomen like a ball of yarn being played with by a kitten. One of the man's arms came off in Jack's clawed hands.

Jack could have gone on for as long as the man's life lasted, fueled only by rage, but Red's gasp cut through the animal haze of fury that gripped him. There were more important things than this worthless excuse for a human being.

*You don't deserve this mercy.* A swipe of his claws across the Axman's throat made him gurgle one last time, then fall silent. His eyes, wide and unblinking, stared at the sky, full of

horror. The sewer stench of the contents of his bowels assailed Jack's more acute sense of smell, nearly sickening him.

He spun back toward Red, shifting into human form as he lowered himself to the ground. He caressed her hair, afraid to take her in his arms lest he do her more damage. She still breathed.

"Red, stay with me," he said, his voice heavy.

Daniel groaned where he lay, the sound thick and guttural. "Red?"

"Jack." She moved her lips, her words so slow it might have cost her precious strength to speak. "Is that you?"

"I'm here, sweetheart. Don't go away. Stay with me."

She lifted her hand and let it fall back to the ground. "Hurts."

"I know." He pressed his bare hands down on her wounds. "I know."

Jack took a shuddering breath. The cop in him knew there was no chance. Even if he could find either one of their cell phones in the dark, there was no way in hell an ambulance could make it in time. Hell, he didn't even have time to run to the shelter and see if there might be a first aid kit in it, and a first aid kit wouldn't have what he needed to save her life. Bandages wouldn't be enough at the moment, just a futile and pointless try.

There was only one way. It hit him as hard as a boxer's right hook, slamming into him with an almost visceral force. He winced as he accepted the truth of it: to save her life—and he refused to let her die—he would have to infect her, make her like he was. The horror of it tore at him; she had begged him for it and he had refused, not wanting to part her from GG and racing forever. Yet as much as he had fought against it, he was here, at that choice—the *only* choice—in the end anyway. A sob caught in the back of his throat, burning like a welder's torch, and he shook his head fiercely at how unfairly fate had conspired to take away every option but one. No matter how much he wanted to be with her, no matter how much he *loved* her, doing this would still take away a part of who she was, forever.

He could see Red the way she was at the track, so slight and fragile on top of the back of that horse, and yet, so powerful, so sure of herself. The way the horses reacted to him—he knew. *Oh, damn me to hell and back a thousand times.* He knew that by saving her life, he'd be taking away her dream.

She whimpered, and he could feel her pulse weakening, the slow vibration running through her veins where his hands lay flat and hard against her torn flesh, trying in vain to keep her life inside her. They were out of time. If he didn't act now, he would lose her. With a deep breath, he bent closer, whispering into her ear.

"Don't hate me, honey. Don't hate me."

Semen. Blood. Spit. Any bodily fluids would transfer the disease.

Her lip was bleeding. Good, that would do. He leaned forward, closing his eyes and steeling himself to kiss the woman he loved and save her life. She'd hate him. She'd fight him tooth and nail; she wouldn't go lightly.

"No matter what you do to me, I love you," he said, and then he pressed his lips to hers.

The coppery tang of blood told him that there was no going back. The mingling of saliva and torn flesh that had forever changed him into something other than human would now do the same thing to her. Opening his mouth, he poured his love, his hopes, his dreams, everything that he shouldn't have allowed himself to have as her protector into the kiss. His tongue stroked hers, searched her mouth, finding little cuts, and making sure that he stroked each one.

His fingers sought and found hers, and she tightened her hand around his.

Hope soared in his heart. Did he dare think that it might take effect so soon? He paused long enough to draw air, then he kissed her again, hungrier, harder, until another growl from Daniel drew Jack's attention away.

"Red?" The lawyer's voice was thick with anger and worry—and the onset of the coming change, no doubt.

Jack gently released Red and went to Daniel. "She's hurt." He started working on the duct tape around the younger man's pants, freeing his legs and then his hands. "She needs you."

"How bad? I saw—" Daniel scrambled over to her and knelt by her side. He looked up at Jack in horror. "Is she going to...?"

Jack shook his head. "Kiss her. Kiss her like you love her and it's her last kiss, because if this doesn't work, it might be."

"You said...I could—Oh God. Red!" Daniel held Jack's gaze for a heartbeat longer, then dipped his head.

Jack stared, his heart clenching as he watched Daniel kiss Red. They deserved each other. They loved each other. And their world was one that he'd insinuated himself into without their permission. If this worked, he'd have a woman, and Daniel would have him... Jack smiled wryly.

Daniel moved his lips over Red's, his kiss gentle, caring. Ending the kiss, he picked up her hand, kissed her knuckle. He then found the wound on her wrist that had started to scab over and kissed it too.

The full moon broke from behind an errant cloud.

"Daniel," Jack barked and pointed to the sky.

Daniel lifted his head, the muscles in his face starting to twitch. The whites of his eyes were going crimson.

"The full moon. You're going to shift. I'm going to put Red in a safe place." He glanced around for a small stand of pine trees. They'd do. The needles would provide a soft bed. He carefully scooped Red into his arms.

"What are you doing with her?" Daniel's voice continued to thicken, a sure sign that the change was approaching. Rage tainted his tone, an unmistakable indication that his first transformation was already underway.

"Taking her over there." Jack nodded toward the trees. "She'll be safe until I can get you shifted and back into your human form."

"She needs a hospital." Daniel patted his pockets, cursing furiously when he couldn't find his cell phone.

"It's a little late for that, isn't it?"

In his arms, Red breathed slowly and deeply, a good sign that her body had started to heal. If he could regrow fingers after he changed, then passing on his abilities should help her come back from tonight's injuries, he reasoned. *She won't change until next month, I think. Her injuries are too severe. Once she's healed, she can change without danger.* He carried her over and settled her down under the trees. He brushed a kiss across her forehead. "I'll be back, sweetheart."

The snapping, grisly sounds that began behind him told him that Daniel had already begun to shift. Thick golden fur, the same shade as the hair on his head, was sprouting from every pore,

growing longer with every passing second. Jack closed the distance between them in seconds, yanked Daniel's shirt up over his head to pull it off him, and tossed it to the side. Rage flared in Daniel's eyes, and he snarled, the sound low and guttural. He lashed out at Jack with fingers whose ends were already beginning to develop sharp, thick talons. Jack leaped nimbly out of the way, containing his own rising anger with an effort. He could feel the moon trying to work its will on him, trying to drive him to simply surrender to the animal inside him.

He refused. Instead he focused on Daniel, whose face was changing. The bones at the front of his skull elongated outward into a muzzle, and the omnivorous teeth of a human dropped from the gums like fragments of broken china, pushed out by the longer, sharper fangs of a wolf. Hollow cracking and popping sounds echoed throughout the clearing as the bones in his face reshaped themselves, and Daniel howled in pain. Jack took advantage of the distraction to shove him to the ground and wrestle his pants off. He tossed them to the side. The lawyer hadn't had a spare set of clothes with him when he was abducted. He would change back when the transformation was over, but if he was wearing his clothes when it was complete, he would rip right out of them. It would be hard to get him home stark naked. *He won't appreciate this now, but he can thank me later.*

The change was almost complete. The long bones in Daniel's arms and legs, his rib cage, and his spine warped and buckled, accommodating themselves to the huge, heavily muscled wolfman form. The spine extended itself outward, extra vertebrae budding from the end of his coccyx. Muscle, skin, and fur flowed like molten wax over them, sheathing the bones of the new tail, which lashed the air furiously. Daniel clawed at the white briefs around his hips, tearing them from his body, then tossing them to the side before throwing his head back to howl.

"Now for the hard part," Jack muttered. He bent, pale moonlight and dusky shadows dappling his naked flesh, allowing the change to come over him. It was no longer the time to fight it, but instead he concentrated intently, refusing to allow the transformation to steal his conscious will. After so many years, the change had become second nature, and the pain he had felt during the first few months when his body was still fighting the moon no longer curled him into an agonized ball until it was over.

Daniel's head snapped down, and Jack bore his glare stoically as he stepped forward, larger, darker, and more muscular. A snarl that sounded like ripping cloth spilled from his muzzle, and then he charged.

*Time to show him who's Alpha again.* Jack met the new wolf's charge with his own; they slammed together with enough force to knock down a wall. Daniel snapped at him, the white fangs flashing with eye-watering speed, and dived for Jack's throat. Jack wrenched one of his arms up into the path of Daniel's jaws, catching the savaging thrust of the bite on the furred meat of his forearm, and shoved him back, wincing and roaring as Daniel's fangs tore out a thick chunk of flesh.

Daniel fell back, caught his balance, and charged again, as single-minded as a cat chasing a mouse. Jack bent low and hurled himself forward under Daniel's reaching arms to tackle him around the waist, throwing both of them to the ground. He needed to knock Daniel out, and fast. The smaller wolf wasn't as strong as Jack, but he was quick enough. With Daniel's mind clouded with rage, Jack knew Daniel could do him some serious damage. He didn't want to have to hurt Daniel any more than necessary. *Thank God the first change is always the worst. After this, it'll never be as bad again.*

He landed atop Daniel's chest and pinned him, then locked his fists together and pounded them into his head like a hammer. Daniel howled, the sound mingling rage and frustration, and tried to roll to the side to get out from under his attacker, but the weight difference between them was even more apparent in lupine form, and Jack refused to budge. Jack hammered Daniel's locked fists down again, the blow landing heavily against the side of Daniel's face. Daniel's fangs sliced open the soft, wet inside of his own cheek. Blood gushed from his dark golden lips, and he jackknifed, pulling his legs up with surprising dexterity to wrap his knees around Jack's chest and push the larger wolf backward off of him.

Jack cursed as he fell back and turned it into a roll that had him on his feet again in less time than it took to blink. *No more fucking around. Time to put him to bed.* He roared, a deep-throated challenge as Daniel leaped to his feet, and charged him again before the other man was fully braced. Daniel snapped at him, snarling with rage as the charge carried him backward, and Jack ran, slamming the other man into a tree with as much force as he could manage.

The thick-trunked oak tree shuddered under the impact, leaves showering down around them to hit the ground in a susurrus of whispers. Jack tensed, ready to continue, but Daniel blinked, eyes glazed. A low sound trickled from his throat, dying before it was fully formed. *Thought I heard ribs break. Probably gave him a pretty decent concussion too.* Cautiously, Jack

released Daniel and took a step back. The smaller wolf straightened, the rage bleeding out of his gaze as he crumpled to the ground face-first.

“Just like two rams butting horns during mating season,” Jack growled, his voice so distorted by the alien shape of the wolfen muzzle and inhuman vocal cords that his words were almost incomprehensible. “Knew I’d need to knock some sense into you the first time around. Mother Nature can be a bitch sometimes.”

As he watched, the unconscious man began to shift again, the fur receding, his form dwindling in size back to merely human. His body reshaped itself slowly, until he lay on the ground naked and unmoving. The injuries he had sustained in their brief battle were already healing themselves, and Jack crouched down and rolled him over onto his back. Aside from a few bruises that he knew damn well would be gone before morning, Daniel was fine. Jack scooped him up in his arms and carried him over to lay him down next to Red under the pine tree.

She was already looking almost fully healed. There was drying blood crusted on her clothes around the wounds, but the flesh underneath the ax-torn clothes had knitted together smoothly. Even the faint scars marking where the savage blows had fallen were no more than thin red lines, fading to white, and he knew they would be gone altogether by the time the sun rose. The pain that had contorted her features was gone, and she looked calm and peaceful in her sleep. *God damn me for not being able to let you go. For taking your dream away from you.* He let go of the wolf inside him as he knelt down next to her, shifting effortlessly from half wolf to man, and reached out to run his fingers along the gentle curve of her face.

A new scent came to his nostrils, and he whirled once he rose to his feet in a graceful sweep of energy that put his own mass between Daniel and Red and the ebony wolf that had just slunk into the clearing. It regarded him calmly, and even as it began to shift, Jack realized it was no more a normal wolf than he was. He froze as he recognized the dark, lean beast; it was the same one he had spotted—if only for a moment—back at the racetrack a couple of days ago. The same one he had scented in the underground parking garage and outside Red’s home the night before. *Another werewolf! At last!*

The newcomer was as tall as he was, lean and muscular, with jet-black hair falling in a raven flood to midback. An amulet of some sort—it looked like a wolf’s claw caught in a twist

of gray fur—hung from a leather cord around his throat. His black eyes and dusky skin marked him as being of Native American ancestry—Chickasaw or Shawnee, or possibly Cherokee. Jack set the thoughts aside for the moment, ready to defend his new pack if it came to that.

“My name is Luke Adahy.” The man paused. “We have been watching you for a long time,” he finally said, his voice deep and low. He appeared to be as little bothered by the fact that he was as naked as Jack. “Since our pack brother went mad and began hunting children, and you stopped him.”

It came to Jack then, the instantaneous understanding. “The monster I killed.”

The other man inclined his head gravely. “Was my brother. Our laws forbid us from killing our own. The law was originally meant to prevent us from murdering each other in the rage that the full-moon time brings. It was never intended to keep us from stopping one among us who had fallen from the spirits’ grace.”

Jack scowled. “So I ended up doing the dirty work for you. And got myself bit in the process.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Luke agreed. “There is no way we can make up for this, and there is no way to reverse what has been done.” He frowned. “We watched you because we did not think you could be so strong, to stand on your own for so long. Wolves are pack animals. They need the company of others like themselves, or they begin to go mad. Yet this gift is not for everyone, and we feared you would decide to make others like yourself to ease the pain of loneliness.”

Jack had thought of it, every time the full moon neared, and every time, he had chased the idea away, knowing he couldn’t condemn others to be like he was. *And all along, there were others like me far closer than I knew.* “Gift,” he spat, a little bitterly. “It’s a curse.”

The other man arched a brow. “Is it?” he asked. “How many times have you been hurt in your job with the police, shot or stabbed? Hurt badly enough that you might have died had it happened before? Hurt badly enough, at least, that you would have been hospitalized and away from your job helping others for a long time?”

“Point,” Jack admitted.

“But you did not change others,” Luke said evenly. “Not until now. And now, seeing how you feel, that you see it as a curse, we are even more impressed than before. To share a gift is a noble thing, even if it is done out of the selfish need of loneliness. But to spread a curse to

others...” He shook his head. “You chose not to make others like yourself, even though it meant you suffered. Not until this matter”—he gestured at Daniel and Red with a wave of his hand—“when you used it to save their lives, did you finally change others.”

“I could hardly let them die,” Jack growled.

The other man nodded. “And so now you have a pack of your own,” he said. “One I think that will fill the void any lone wolf feels in his heart.”

“If I’m lucky,” Jack sighed. “I’ve noticed that most other animals don’t exactly react well around our kind.”

“They sense the predator hidden under the human facade,” Luke replied.

“Yeah, well, Red is—*was*—a jockey training for the Derby,” Jack said. “Now she’s wolf, and I don’t think her horse is ever going to let her on her back again. I don’t think she’s going to be willing to accept me with open arms when she finds out I took her dream away from her.”

The other man smiled calmly and reached up to untie the necklace he wore, a wolf’s claw on a leather thong. “Yes. As I said, we have been watching you.” He nodded toward the corpse of the Axman cooling on its back in the night air a dozen yards away. “You are a good man. You protect the weak and punish those who have broken the law. Our pack has watched you on this recent case very carefully.” *Him! It was always him, watching me. Always the same scent.* “We know your mate’s passion for horses. It would be wrong to allow the two of you to be parted because you did what you had to in order to save her life.”

He took a step forward, took Jack’s hand, and spilled the amulet into his open palm. Jack felt the fine hairs on the back of his neck rise the instant the wolf’s claw touched his flesh. Power of a sort he had never felt before, warm and calming, flooded into him from the totem.

“Give this to her,” Luke said. “So long as she wears it, her horse—and all other creatures we share the land with—will act as if she were still mortal. It is old tribal magic, and the pack is in full agreement that you have earned it for her.”

Jack knew he was gaping, but he didn’t care. “This...uh... It’ll keep her horse from trying to kill her?”

“It will,” the man answered, taking a step back again. His obsidian eyes shone with warmth and wry amusement. “Take good care of your new pack. And remember...we’re watching.” He shifted again, even faster than Jack could, and melted back into the forest.

“Well...shit.” *I have about a million questions for him, and he pulls a vanishing act. Figures.* He wondered how many people there were in the stranger’s pack, where they lived. How much they knew about being wolf. *Tribal legends, maybe? Wish he’d stuck around.*

With a sigh, he turned away from the forest’s shadows, returned to Red’s side, and knelt to tie the amulet around her throat. One corner of her mouth quirked up in a faint smile as she slept, and he leaned down to brush a kiss against her lips. “Maybe this will work out after all.”

Shaking his head, he rose to get dressed. He had business to take care of and a phone call to make.

## Chapter Twelve

The trees that surrounded the parking lot were bathed in whirling red lights as Red reluctantly allowed the paramedics to escort her over to the ambulance for a more thorough examination. They had wanted to bring her down the trail from the forest on a gurney, but she had refused outright. *I'm fine*. There was nothing wrong with her that a good night's sleep wouldn't fix, and she was still having a lot of trouble dealing with that.

She glanced over at the open back doors of the ambulance where Daniel sat answering questions posed by yet another EMT. He looked tired but relieved, and when he glanced up and spotted her, he flashed her a thumbs-up and a broad smile that made her knees go wobbly with love, desire, and an overwhelming rush of gratitude that nearly made her burst into tears.

*Alive. He's alive, and so am I. There was so much pain...* She shook it off and sat down next to him at the paramedic's request, waiting patiently as they checked her blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing. Daniel's hand crept over, and as his fingers intertwined with hers, he gave her hand a squeeze. She wanted to ignore the EMTs, throw her arms around him, and sob with relief. Even though he was sitting right there with her, unharmed and finally free, she found it hard not to keep reassuring herself that he was okay, that the Axman was gone, and that nothing was going to take him away from her ever again.

"Think they're going to let us go home soon?" he murmured softly as the EMT examining him started filling out a form on the clipboard he held.

"I hope so," she said, unwilling to go any further. Jack had said it would be a bad idea to agree to any blood tests, since he wasn't sure if they wouldn't turn up evidence of whatever it was that made them like him.

She looked up and across the parking lot to where Jack was deep in conversation with his superior officer, Captain Milliken. A number of uniformed officers were stationed around the parking lot, keeping the hordes of reporters at a distance. Vans from every TV station in the city,

as well as CNN and MSNBC, were parked along the road that led to the parking lot, and mingled in with them were reporters from the city's newspapers and several national ones as well. She could hear them shouting out questions, and the bright flashes of light from their cameras were starting to annoy her. She had figured she'd have to win the Derby before she ended up on the front page of the *Courier-Journal*. *I know they're just trying to do their jobs, but no wonder people think of them as a flock of vultures.*

"You do seem to be fine, other than a few scrapes and bruises," the paramedic examining her finally pronounced.

"Then I can go home?" she asked, knowing that things would not be going nearly so well if she had still been wearing the clothes she'd had on when she left the apartment to keep the terrible rendezvous. Jack had driven back to his place to get a clean change of clothes for her, brought back wet wipes to wash off the blood, then cleaned her up and changed before calling 911. They had expected Daniel to be a bit banged up because he'd been abducted, but Jack couldn't have explained to them that the Axman had contacted them and they had gone here to meet him to save Daniel without risking him being fired and brought up on charges.

"Looks like it. Your boyfriend too," the other EMT said, and Red grinned, squeezing Daniel's hand in return. Movement out of the corner of one eye caught her attention, and she turned then grimaced as a second team of paramedics guided a gurney down the trail that led up to where the confrontation had taken place. A zipped-up body bag sat atop the gurney, and she looked away in revulsion.

"Bear attack, you think?" one of the paramedics asked the others as they rolled the gurney across the parking lot to the second ambulance that was waiting.

"Don't know what else it could have been," the other replied. "I figure it didn't go after the guy this monster had kidnapped because he was lying down flat. You know, they say you should play dead if a bear comes after you."

The first one nodded. "Guess the cops'll be informing the park personnel to keep their eyes peeled for a rogue, then. Thought they said black bears weren't killers on the news the other day." They loaded the gurney containing the Axman's remains into the back of the ambulance. Red slid down from her perch and turned, then held out her hand to Daniel.

"Here comes Jack," he said, and she turned, her heart pounding rabbit-quick in her chest.

He loomed out of the darkness, the serious look on his face melting away as he saw them standing there, obviously unhurt. "I take it the EMTs gave you two a clean bill of health?" he asked.

"Clean as fresh laundry," she answered. "What did the captain say? Can we go home?"

He nodded. "I've given him a verbal account of what happened here, and I have to go in ASAP to fill out my report, but first Captain Milliken says I'm supposed to escort you two home. He doesn't want to take the chance on anything else bad happening while you're under the protection of the department."

She felt a ripple of need skate through her body at the intent look in his eyes, the calm tone in his deep voice, and a rush of fluids dampened her sex. She caught the sudden flare of his nostrils, and Daniel's too, and tried unsuccessfully to hide a smile.

"All right, then," she said, her voice only a little quavery. "Let's get the hell out of here. I don't think I feel like visiting the park again anytime soon."

Together, the three of them crossed to his car. "I'll bring Mr. Keller out here tomorrow morning to get your car," he assured her, his words all business just in case any of the reporters were close enough to overhear. They both nodded as he unlocked the doors to his car, and she slid into the front passenger seat and buckled her seat belt as Daniel climbed into the back.

They waited until they had gone all the way down the park roads and emerged out onto the highway before talking again. "You're sure you're both okay?" Jack asked, his voice a good deal more warm and concerned than it had been in front of witnesses.

"Yeah. The bump on the head from where that bastard had hit me was already gone by the time I woke up, well before Red got there, but I couldn't manage enough leverage or strength to break the tape he had me tied up with," Daniel told him.

"I'm fine," Red agreed. "Though I still—" She shivered, testament enough to the horror she'd endured. She had suffered, and she had survived. And now that she was what Jack was, he could no longer object to the two of them being together. But there was one fear that remained, nagging at her thoughts. Her fingers crept upward to the wolf's claw on the thong around her throat. Jack seemed certain that it would perform as the man who had given it to him said it would. She wasn't so sure; it was hard to believe in things she couldn't see or hear or touch. She hadn't believed that Jack was a werewolf until he had showed her. Now...magic? She *wanted* to

believe. *Because if this doesn't work, I've lost GG.* “You’re *sure* this trinket the other were gave you will keep GG and the other horses from going crazy around me?”

“Do you want to test it out?” Jack asked. “It’d only take a few extra minutes to stop by the stables on the way back to your home.”

“Hell, yes,” Red said, instantly eager to see GG again, and Jack obligingly turned off the exit ramp that led to the stables.

“So now what?” Daniel asked as Jack drove, his voice calm. “I think we need to quit ignoring the elephant in the corner and talk about this thing.” He reached forward to give Red’s shoulder a squeeze, and she turned her head to smile at him.

“He’s right,” she said. “Like it or not, we’re all like you now. And it’s idiotic not to admit how we feel for each other. You resisted that because you didn’t want to infect us, but we’re all wolves now. Where does that lead us?”

“Good question,” Jack said quietly. “Red...I love you. Plain and simple. Daniel...before I met you, I’d never felt an attraction to another man before. Never even considered it. But I can’t deny what I feel for you, either. But...” The car had stopped at a red light, and he half twisted in his seat so he could look at them both at the same time. “Would a threesome work?”

His admission took Red’s breath away. She had known he wanted to fuck her, but the word “love” hadn’t crossed his lips until now. She felt a ripple of desire slide across her skin like a hot breeze, but even deeper than that was her own love for him, blooming at the core of her heart like the first rose of spring, tenacious and exquisite, able to withstand anything. They had been through so much together. She bent her head forward for a moment, blinking away the unshed tears that had welled up in her eyes. There was no more need to weep.

At last, when she could be sure her voice wouldn’t catch and betray her, she looked up and spoke. “We won’t know until we try, will we?” Red asked. “I love you both. I could never walk away from Daniel to be with you, Jack... I love him too much. But I love you too, and the idea of not having you in my life hurts like hell.”

“It’ll work if we can make sure that there’s no inequality among us,” Daniel said as the light turned green and Jack turned to drive again. “That means Jack would have to move in with us. Kind of hard to make sure he gets equal time with the both of us if he’s still living in his old apartment.”

“Well, that could be a problem,” Jack sighed. “I’m sure I’d get all sorts of unpleasant questions at work once I had to change my address on things like my driver’s license, voting registration—hell, where my paycheck stubs get sent. They’d recognize it as your address immediately.”

“Then keep your old apartment,” Red said instantly. “Just don’t live there. All your mail can still get sent there, but you’d actually be living under our roof. Our bed is big enough to hold three people.” She smiled fondly at the thought of curling up in the massive king-size four-poster with Daniel on one side of her and Jack on the other.

“You could keep your clothes and personal stuff in the spare bedroom,” Daniel suggested, sounding excited. “It’s not like we have guests very often. Hell, you’re the first person to use that bedroom since my sister visited. Even Red’s grandma doesn’t ever spend the night.”

“That might work,” Jack murmured. “Sometimes I have to bring work home from the department, but it’s confidential. I’m not allowed to share it with civilians. I’d have a place to look over work matters without it being out in the open where you’d end up seeing it.”

“Sounds good,” Red agreed as they pulled into the back entrance of the stable. A few lights were on in the groom’s quarters, most likely a late-night poker game. Wistfully, she thought of the ones she’d attended; she had a pretty good record of winning. With her changed circumstances, she wondered if she’d be able to do that again. Probably. After all, she still *looked* human. She took a deep breath as Jack pulled into a parking spot.

“Want me to go with?” Daniel touched her shoulder. “If you need anything...”

She swallowed hard. “Thanks, but I have to do this myself. If you guys will wait here.” She curled her fingers around the door latch.

“You sure?” Jack turned off the engine. “Because I could—”

“No!” she said, a bit harsher than she intended. “I’m sorry. I just hope this amulet works. And to know that, it has to be me. Just me. Because if you guys are around, and GG freaks because of you, then I’ll never know.”

“She has a point,” Daniel admitted from the backseat.

“Thank you.” Red unfastened her seatbelt. “Give me five minutes, okay? No one is going to hurt me now, thanks to you.” She touched Jack’s arm, wanting to do so much more, but the

confines of the car kept her from doing little more than leaning over and kissing his stubbled cheek.

“Thanks to me, you might not be able to get within ten feet of that horse. Are you going to thank me then?”

The pain and vehemence in his question shocked her. “You saved my life. If I’d lost a limb, it would have ruined my career just the same, and no, I wouldn’t hate you for it. How could you think that?”

“How could I not?”

The pain in Jack’s eyes wounded her. Closing the space between them, she paused, her lips a breath away from his. “I love you. I’ll never hate you.” She kissed him, hard and fast, with all the pent-up desire and need that’d been bubbling since they’d gotten into the car. Daniel cleared his throat behind them, and all she could do was twine her fingers into Jack’s silken hair and pull him closer.

She pulled away and drew a breath. “I’ll be back in just a bit.”

“And this time I get the front seat.” Daniel tried to sound fierce, but it came out like a pout.

Red smiled over her shoulder. “Fine, but I don’t want to find you two necking like a couple of teenagers when I get back.” She waited a moment for her words to sink in. “Save that for when we get home.” Before she could lose her nerve or give in and see if the guys did start kissing, she bolted from the car.

Outside, amid the familiar surroundings, her heartbeat slowed. The sounds of a sleeping stable comforted her, and at the first footfall she made in the stable, GG stuck her head out over the stall door and whickered.

Red stopped. Her throat tightened, and her fingers flew to the amulet. Power, or something like it, pulsed beneath her fingers. “It works,” she whispered. She counted the stalls, reciting horses’ names in her mind, just to be sure no one acted out of the ordinary. They didn’t, and when she heard GG’s soft whinny of greeting, she flung her arms around the horse’s neck and breathed in the scent of warm horse and hay.

GG nuzzled her back, sniffing, searching for the treats she usually kept nearby. She laughed, pressed a kiss just behind her jaw, then backed away. The guys were still waiting in the car, and if she lingered too long, they’d come and probably set off the entire barn.

She scratched the place just behind GG's ears, watching the filly's eyes half close in bliss and her lower lip droop. Placing a hand on each cheek, she pressed a couple quick kisses to the top of GG's muzzle. "Be a good girl. I'll be back in the morning to exercise you, even if it means I don't get any sleep." With a final kiss and a pat, she jogged out of the barn, happier than she'd been in a long while.

"Everything go okay?" Jack asked when she opened the back door to slide into the car. Daniel had taken her place in the passenger seat, though she hadn't been gone long at all.

"Just fine, except I forgot to bring horse cookies with me. You're going to have to start keeping some in your car," she teased.

"Horse cookies," Jack snorted. "I thought they ate grass and corn."

"Hardly. You have no idea the education you're in for now that you're going to be living with us."

"Yeah, don't get her started," Daniel joked. "You'll find that you'll be learning far more about horses than you ever wanted to learn or even knew existed."

"Hey!" Red protested. She mock-punched Daniel in the shoulder, realizing at his wince that she had a bit more power than she used to. "Oops. Sorry."

"I'll make you pay for that later." Daniel grinned and turned to Jack. "And I'll make you pay for that tackle you did in the park too."

"Promises, promises," Jack chided. He backed out of the parking spot. "Don't make 'em if you can't keep 'em."

Red grinned. Jack didn't quite know about Daniel yet. Her lawyer kept every promise he made, and kept them damn well. It was one of the things about him she loved so much.

The rest of the ride home was otherwise uneventful, and when the car finally pulled into the driveway, a rush of relief mingled with anticipation swept over her. She couldn't quite hide the look of need that burned in her eyes as they parked, locked the car up, and went inside. She could feel gooseflesh lifting the fine hairs on the back of her neck and shoulders, and shivered.

"Hey...c'mere, you," Daniel said, pulling her into his arms for a kiss. His mouth captured hers for a long, drawn-out moment. She could feel Jack's eyes on the two of them, watching hungrily. Daniel tugged at the neckline of her shirt and then slid his lips down so he could dip his tongue into her cleavage. As she gasped and arched up to meet him, Daniel traced a warm, wet

path back up the cleft between her breasts, then up her throat before he nibbled on her chin. When he reached her mouth, she trapped his tongue between her lips and let him thrust inside. He drove in and out for a moment, then broke off with a decidedly wolfish grin and looked over at Jack.

“Think it’s time to finally consummate this thing?”

“Long past time, if you ask me,” Jack growled. “Red?”

“Why are you wasting time on words when we could be in bed?” she asked and yanked them both down, proceeding to kiss each man in turn, savoring every line of their mouths with her tongue and lips. All three mouths converged in a delicious duel of give-and-take, and it took her breath away when the two of them locked lips over her. While they were occupied, she used the moment to unbutton Jack’s jeans and peel Daniel's pants off.

Bit by bit, the two men struggled their way out of their clothes and crossed the handful of feet to the bedroom, stopping every step to trade kisses. Red wiggled out of her jeans and underwear, her T-shirt hanging to just past her hips. “Stupid clothes.” Daniel sighed as he climbed onto the bed, totally nude. She crawled onto the bed, and he lifted his hips against her mouth, shivering as her teeth raked lightly along the inside of his thigh, leaving faint pink marks behind. On all fours, she licked at his long, thick shaft, then curled her tongue around the head until he looked as though he could barely breathe. She could smell his musk, and his legs were trembling, his head thrown back, his jaw slack, and his eyes pinched shut in rapture. He’ll remember this for years, she thought and smiled wickedly. With a kittenish swipe of her tongue, she lapped up his fluids, and he shook violently.

He groaned from the pit of his belly when she swallowed his shaft all the way down to the root. Then she uttered her own groan of pleasure as Jack went to his knees behind her and nibbled on her neck for a moment before reaching around her to pull her shirt toward her head. She released Daniel’s cock long enough for him to tug the garment over her head and immediately returned to sucking her first lover. Once Jack had her shirt free, he used the fabric to tantalize her skin, dragging the soft cotton over each of her nipples in a slow, shuddering caress. Finally tossing the shirt to the floor, he used his fingers to tease her as he stroked her arms, shoulders, and ass. His large, solid hands cupped and kneaded her pert breasts, and his mouth

began to make its way down her back, nibbling and licking from her shoulders, all the way to her backside.

His fingers gently traced her labia, flicked at the bud of her clit, then slid inside her. The sensations shot through her with all the force of a gunshot. Red swirled her tongue around Daniel's cock even more hungrily, plunging her face all the way down to his hips until she pressed against the curly thatch of hair at his groin. She moaned around Daniel's penis as she arched back against Jack's chest, his fingers stroking slowly and maddeningly against her G-spot.

Red cupped Daniel's balls, and he gasped, breathing heavily. A moment later, Jack speared his erection deep into her dripping pussy, drawing a shivering groan from her lips. The sound vibrated through Daniel, and he stiffened, thrusting even harder between her lips. She knew Daniel was ready to come, and when he pulled out of her mouth, she glanced at him in surprise.

"Wait," Daniel moaned.

Jack paused in midstroke to look over at him. The look on Daniel's face was impatient, almost pained. She trembled, the delay almost torture, every inch of her body wanting him inside her again. *How can Jack be so patient if it's been so long for him? I don't want to wait, and I'm damned sure he doesn't want to, either.*

"Jack—" Daniel shuddered, then gestured for them to pull apart. "Together."

Awareness dawned on her as Daniel directed Jack to lie on his back. Like a wolf pouncing on her prey, she sat astride her new lover, her Alpha, moaning as his rigid cock slid back into her wet channel. The bed shifted as Daniel moved behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders before settling into place.

The head of his cock nudged against the puckered rosebud of her ass, making her catch her breath in white-hot need. It was hardly the first time she and Daniel had fucked this way, but certainly the first time while she had another man's cock buried inside her at the same time. Quick movements of Daniel's fingers drew the juices from her pussy to her back entrance, and gently he slid inside her, stretching her inner tunnel with a long, slow stroke. She could feel his cock rubbing against Jack's erection inside her, separated only by a thin wall of flesh, and then the two of them began to move, each thrust synchronized, a symphony of ecstasy that made her head swim. Daniel growled like a beast, then howled.

Jack kept up his steady driving pace, the look in his eyes stealing her breath away. She arched back with a moan of delight, nearly screaming as he covered one of her tightly crinkled nipples with his mouth. His tongue danced hotly against the sensitive flesh, and then he nipped at the rosy peak, no longer holding back for fear of infecting her. It was the last straw, and rational thought abandoned her. She returned the favor, palms flattened against his chest for a moment before she caught and twisted one of his nipples between two fingertips, watching as he squirmed in delight.

Two sets of meaty balls slapped against her thighs, clenching and twitching; she could feel how ready they were to spill their burden of seed into her. Jack and Daniel pounded into her relentlessly, kicking her up the ladder of rapture with each hammering thrust until she wavered on the edge of orgasm. Her breath came in short gulps, her excitement more than she could stand, and at last, she screamed and went over the brink.

Pleasure swept her away like a leaf on a river, taking her lovers with her. Daniel gave one last thrust forward and let go, his seed flooding into her depths. Jack arched up off the bed, raising both of them high, and with a strangled cry of lust, he exploded, his juices spraying against the mouth of her womb. Finally, the three of them collapsed into a tangled heap of arms and legs. Red lay in their arms and let their sweat trickle over her body, giving her flesh a warm, slick shine.

It was a while before she could bring herself to spoil the satiated silence with words. “I don’t think any of us could have seen this coming. I bet you figured this was just a routine assignment, didn’t you?” she asked Jack, craning up on one elbow to look at the two of them. *If folks found out about the three of us being together, most of them would consider us freaks. The smart ones would consider us lucky.*

Jack brushed a soft kiss against the top of her head, then reached out across her belly to link his fingers with Daniel’s. “I don’t think anything could be considered routine when it comes to you, sweetheart. But I think we should have seen this coming. After all, everyone knows what happens when Red meets the big bad wolf.”

Red laughed and brushed her finger across Jack’s lips. “What big teeth you have.”

Barely keeping a straight face, Jack answered back, “All the better to eat you with, my dear.”

Daniel snorted. “And good riddance to the man with the ax in the woods.”

Red contemplated their positions, then started to move, inching up to recline against the pillows. As the guys snuggled closer on the bed, she figured that they’d all won—both the good guys and the wolves. Luckily, they were one and the same.

☪ THE END ☪

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## Jessica Quinn & Mary Winter

### Jessica Quinn

I love writing stories about strong, sexy women and the men who love them, as well as reading, the paranormal, poetry, Celtic music, and gardening. When not writing, I can be found curled up with a book, watching a movie, playing with my cats, drinking good hot cocoa, or all of the above. I draw inspiration from my degrees in English (Literature) and Criminal Justice, my children, and my loving husband, who looks as if he could grace the cover of a romance novel.

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Mary commutes between her dream home near the Mark Twain National Forest in Missouri and her current residence in Iowa. She lives with a menagerie of animals including an opinionated horse and a cat that was a dog in past life. When not writing spicy tales of erotic romance, she enjoys writing science fiction and fantasy, spending time with her horse, and enjoying the outdoors. Lucky for her, her partner (hero) shares these same passions, and usually both of them can be found in their respective dens writing.

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