



# *Best of Breed*

Pat Cunningham

**BookStrand**  
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# **DEDICATION**

To the fur-fans at the Shapeshifter Seductions blog. You're all Best in Show!

# BEST OF BREED

PAT CUNNINGHAM

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Adele spotted him first. Some intuition, perhaps the instinct of the prey alerted to the predator's presence, made her look up. She peered beyond the line of dogs and their handlers, into the stands where the audience watched the Best of Breed judging for the Siberian Huskies. There. A shock of startling white hair above a long brown coat. He sat three rows up, just to the right of a woman with a rhinestone Poodle on her T-shirt. His eyes swept unhurriedly over the show ring, the people, the dogs. Just another face in the crowd.

All her elation drained away, replaced by a swelling dread. It couldn't be him. Not now, not here. Not at a dog show.

Trevor noticed nothing, not even his sister's sudden agitation. He was too busy grinning and shaking the judge's hand. He accepted the Best of Breed ribbon as delightedly as if he'd won it himself. Adele forced herself to stay calm, to stand with head up and tail wagging, like the simple dog she pretended to be. She tugged on the lead and whined up at Trevor, urging him to wrap it up.

She risked another glance at the stands. The hair and the coat had vanished. And so should they, as fast as possible.

"You're in a rush," Trevor murmured when she moved at a trot from the ring. "Slow down. Give the monkeys a look at you. You know, I think we've got a real shot at—"

"Mr. Chase?"

She caught his scent before she saw his face. His odor exploded with cinnamon, just as she'd been warned. She knew she would remember it forever. She lifted her eyes and spotted the hair. All weres knew that hair. Thick and silver-white, it brushed the collar of his leather coat. The sharp

planes of the incongruously-young face it framed matched the photos she'd been drilled on. His stance brought her practically muzzle to sheath with the knife outlined beneath his coat, secured on his hip by a cinched belt and within his easy reach. The blade was reputedly silver, said to have been blessed by a druid, guaranteed to slit a shifter's soul along with his throat.

Bowie, the werewolf hunter.

Trevor stopped. Still elated over her win, he didn't recognize who faced them. Then the silver hair registered and realization hit. Trevor went white to the lips. Bowie only smiled, his posture relaxed but his scent high and biting and his eyes as intent as a hawk's. His hand rested casually against his hip, far too close to the knife. One swift move and he could have it buried in Trevor's belly, or hers. Security, the crowd, the dogs and their handlers wouldn't be able to stop him. From all she'd heard, Bowie cared little for anything beyond the death of weres.

Panic flooded Trevor's scent. He tensed his legs to bolt. She had to do something. She thrust herself between the males and growled up at the hunter. Try something now, she dared him. One howl would have heads turning. One tug on his coat would expose his knife to security. One bite would make him pay for the countless deaths he'd inflicted on her kind.

The hunter's mouth smiled down at her. Not his eyes. His eyes were gray and pale as arctic ice. And, at the moment, uncertain. He rocked back a step. "So this is Heidi?"

"Huh—" Trevor swallowed hard, licked his lips and tried again. "Heidi. Yes. She's a dog. She's my dog. I show her. What do you want?"

The hunter continued to stare at her. "Unusual eyes," he remarked. "They're...blue."

"That's not unusual for a Sibe." Trevor had wound the lead around his fist so tight he nearly choked off Adele's growl. She yanked to give herself some slack and bared her teeth in warning.

"Not very friendly," Bowie observed.

"Strangers make her nervous." Though not nearly as nervous as Trevor just now. His terror tore at her nose like salt in a bite. She feared he would shift and blow both their covers. Adele took the lead in her teeth and dragged Trevor away from the ring, away from Bowie and disaster.

Undeterred, Bowie followed them. Adele ripped a snarl at him, and he stopped. Something shifted in his scent, a hint of an unexpected tinge smothered by the cinnamon. It tugged at her instincts, disturbingly familiar.

“What do you want?” Trevor repeated shrilly.

“Merely to congratulate you on your win.” The hunter nodded at the blue ribbon poking out of the pocket of Trevor’s suit jacket. “She’s a fine animal.” He hesitated barely a heartbeat over the word *animal*. His brutal scrutiny never left her. “Good luck with Best of Group.”

“Um—”

They needed a quick way out, and Adele found one. The Saint Bernards were up for judging next, and a pair of them and their handlers lumbered toward the ring just vacated by the Siberian Huskies. Adele pressed against Trevor’s legs and backed them both up so that the huge dogs got between them and Bowie. By the time the Saint Bernards entered the ring, Trevor and Adele had made their escape. She glanced back. The werewolf hunter had disappeared into the crowd.

Adele panted in relief. Safe. For now. She looked up at Trevor and whined a question. He was trembling. Without a word, he bolted from the arena, shoving his way through the press of humans and their dogs. With little choice, Adele loped at his side, and prayed the hunter wouldn’t choose to follow.

\* \* \* \*

Bowie watched their flight from near the stands. Rather, he watched the boy, and not by choice. The dog was hidden from his eyes by a sea of skirts and trouser legs and all manner of big, furry bodies. He caught a glimpse of them both as they dashed through an exit. He tapped the edge of his program thoughtfully against his teeth, which were bared, unconsciously, like the dog’s.

The boy was a were, without question. He had the look, and the smell. He reacted as a low-ranked wolf, right down to the averted eyes and the bristling hair on the backs of his hands. Not old enough to have been among those he hunted, but possibly a relative. Close enough to wreak his vengeance on.

The dog...



He frowned. The dog was a puzzle. She didn't move or look like a wolf, much less a were. Yet she didn't carry herself quite like any dog he'd ever seen. He'd noticed that about her in the ring. She moved with a purpose and certainty that bespoke a human self-awareness. Too much intelligence glowed in those eyes, and it didn't belong to a dog.

Those eyes. Those eyes were the problem. No were had blue eyes. Yellow marked the were. The boy's golden eyes fell just within shifter range, making him a target. Not the dog. The dog was no dog, but she couldn't be were, not with eyes like those.

He opened his program and flipped through the pages until he found the Siberian Huskies. The entry leaped out at him: Chase's Hide in Plain Sight, aka Heidi, co-owner/breeder Adele Chase, co-owner/handler Trevor Chase.

He tapped the program again, this time against his sleeve. He knew of the Chase clan. Not the pack he hunted, but kin. The boy would be Trevor, then. Adele? He would need to meet her. If, he reflected with a humorless smile, he hadn't already.

Puppies, the both of them. *Hide in Plain Sight*. Who did they think they were fooling? But puppies grew into adults who killed without warning or provocation. Who slaughtered children in their beds. Who must be hunted down and made to pay.

He rubbed his nose with a little irritated snort. Someone nearby must be wearing lavender perfume. It had crept up his nose and refused to decamp. It stirred bizarre sensations in him, a sudden, near-overwhelming need for feminine company. One woman in particular, with raven hair, a narrow face and wary eyes. Blue eyes.

The Saint Bernard judging began. No weres among that drooling bunch. Over the generations shifters had become adept at blending in with humans, even adopting "monkey" walks and mannerisms. They'd also learned, he'd discovered, how to pass themselves off as family pets. Or, as on his present hunt, as show dogs.

Most of the Davenport show's one hundred and fifty represented breeds he could eliminate easily. He wouldn't find his quarry among the Chihuahuas or Dachshunds. Any one of the bigger breeds, however, was suspect. A clever groomer with a pair of clippers could sculpt a dog out of a werewolf with frightening ease.

He focused his suspicions on the herding dogs, in particular those with long legs, low-slung tails and pointed muzzles. And the sled dogs, that looked half wolf already, the Malamutes and Samoyeds. And the Siberian Huskies.

The string of killings he'd investigated pointed to a were following the show circuit, possibly as a handler, more likely as a dog, or a dog/handler team. The state of the bodies, animal and otherwise, suggested a were he knew too well. If Trevor and Adele and their "Heidi," whatever or whoever she turned out to be, were part of his pack, then they would suffer the consequences.

He'd marked his suspects in his program with harsh red Xs. He stared at the question mark he'd scratched beside Hide in Plain Sight. "Heidi" had just won Best of Breed. She'd need to return tomorrow to compete in Working Group. They wouldn't be going anywhere. He could track them down at his leisure.

He wondered if Adele Chase would have blue eyes.

Bowie tucked the program under his arm. A cold smile touched his lips, the grin of a hunting wolf. He left the judging ring and strolled out of the arena.

\* \* \* \*

Adele wasn't surprised when Trevor rushed her across the parking lot and hustled her into their van. Unlike most of the show's competitors, who had booked themselves into the seven-story chain hotel across the highway from the arena, Trevor and Adele had opted for a small, two-floor motel almost a mile down the road. It sat in an overgrown patch of trees, weeds and brush bisected by a little stream. Not so attractive to handlers anxious to protect their charges' coats, but perfect for a pair of weres who preferred the odor of earth and grass to the rank stink of vehicle exhaust. Any stand they made against the hunter Adele expected to happen there.

She was therefore surprised when Trevor roared the van right on by their motel without slowing. She stuck her muzzle out the window and watched their room recede, then barked a question at Trevor. When he didn't answer, she shifted. "What are you doing?"

“Getting us out of here. What do you think I’m doing? And if you’re going to stay in that form, cover up. There are too many monkeys around.”

“Turn around.”

“No way.”

“Trevor, you turn around right now or I’ll bite you.”

She bared her teeth to show she meant it. Trevor gaped at her. “Are you scatty?”

“No.” They’d draped a beach towel over the back of the passenger seat to cover any shape-shifting emergencies. Adele wrapped it around her naked human body. “We’re not leaving.”

“If I may repeat,” Trevor said tightly, “are you scatty? That was Bowie in there, sis. *Bowie*. You know, the guy who kills weres? He’s spotted us. He made it a point to talk to me. He *knows*.”

“He suspects,” Adele said. “He’s not sure. If he was sure, he’d have gone after us at the arena. Or followed us, at least. I don’t see him back there.”

“No, nobody ever sees him. That’s the problem. He’s probably stalking us right now. That’s why I’m taking us home.”

“You’re not,” she said, and reached for the wheel. “We’re staying.”

He batted her hand away. “Adele, for Lycaon’s sake—”

She tried to grab the wheel again. Trevor pulled them over to the side of the road and cut the engine. “Okay. Explain to me why you’re so eager to die.”

“Trevor, please. Just listen. I took Best of Breed. I could win this. We could go all the way.”

His jaw fell open farther. “You’re kidding, right? You’d risk our lives over a joke?”

“It’s not a joke to me. I want this, Trevor. I need to win this. I need Best in Show.”

“Lift your leg on Best in Show. *I* need my hide intact, not up on Bowie’s wall.”

“Why would he be after us? We haven’t done anything.”

“We were born were. That’s enough.”

“Maybe he’s hunting somebody else.”

“And maybe he’s a dog fancier. Goes to shows in between slaughtering shifters and this is all just an ugly coincidence. Bite that.”

He started up the van. Adele opened the passenger door. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Back to our motel. You can leave if you want, but I’m staying. I’ll find someone else to handle me in the ring. I’m sure there are plenty of —”

“Lycaon bite it, get back here!” Trevor made a grab at the towel and almost succeeded in baring her to the world. Adele didn’t flinch. She had her wolf form, but she would stalk monkey-naked right up the highway if it would get her back into the show ring. Trevor saw it in her set expression. “Adele, please. What happened to you? You’re the sensible one, remember?”

Adele hesitated, but in the end his “please” got her back in the van. She tied the towel more securely around her body. “I need this,” she repeated. “This is my chance to be somebody. I *am* somebody here. I don’t care if it’s a lie. It feels real enough when I’m out there.”

“Even if it gets you killed.”

“Neither of us will get killed. Tell you what: we stay through tomorrow, for Best of Group. If I don’t win, we leave. The first place Bowie will check is the hotel across the street. That’ll waste most of his time. I don’t care how dangerous he is. He’s still only human, and there’s only one of him. If nothing else, we’ve got him outnumbered.”

Trevor scratched nervously behind his ear. “You’re going through with this with or without me, aren’t you? It means that much to you?”

“Yes.”

He let out a breath that carried an undercurrent of whine. “Okay. Best of Group. Then we’re gone. I guess I can’t convince you to throw the competition.”

She bared her teeth. “Don’t you blow it either. We’ve come this far and we’re this close to winning. I don’t care if there’s a hundred Bowies in there. No one’s going to stop us.”

“The other handlers might disagree.”

“Them.” She sniffed. “All they’ve got are dogs.”

“And we’ve got a shifter-killer breathing down our necks. But okay.” He grinned, a bit shakily, but it proved he still had her back, as always. She cherished him for that. “It isn’t every werewolf hunter who gets to say he offed a Best in Show champion.”

“No. He’ll get to say he missed. And we’ll have a tale to take back to the family.” Let them try to mock her after this. She unclasped the show collar and lead from around her neck. “Now let’s head back. Bowie’s being here throws a bone in the works. We need to revise our strategy.”

\* \* \* \*

Adele Chase had never considered herself pretty, either as a woman or a wolf. In human form, she was scrawny with listless black hair and a long nose, in wolf form much the same. The typical Chase were form ran to stocky, with blunt, almost ursine muzzles. They looked down their noses at scrawny and long. Adele appeared, in fact, more dog than wolf, as her acceptably-lupine relations never failed to remind her.

At the heart of it all lay her eyes. Were eyes ran the yellow gamut from pale powder to deep honey. Even Trevor’s brown held enough gold for acceptance. No Chase in family history had ever had blue eyes. Until Adele. When she grew out of puppyhood and they still hadn’t changed, her perplexed and defensive parents had to admit they weren’t going to. Adele’s doggish wolf form didn’t help matters. The epithets “ugly” and “freak” appeared in family conversations soon after, behind her back at first, then to her face.

Trevor stood by her, her only defender, and saved her from becoming totally outcast. However, she resigned herself early to the role of low wolf, forever ranked last in the family. As far as a mate, a pack, puppies of her own, what were the chances of that? Low-rankers got the scraps, the dregs. They certainly didn’t win mates.

Again, Trevor came to her rescue. He was idly flipping channels one night and came across a televised dog show. And there was Adele—or, rather, a breed that looked almost exactly like Adele in her wolf form. She stared at the screen in disbelief while Trevor abandoned the TV for the Internet. A few minutes’ research on the American Kennel Club web site sparked what Trevor’s twisted mind considered a bright idea.

Her disbelief morphed into incredulity as Trevor outlined his plan. She might not be a perfect Chase wolf, he pointed out, but with a little hair dye and some creative grooming she would make a perfect Siberian Husky. Right down to the blue eyes.

Think of the fun, he urged. What a joke on the pack and the monkeys alike. His enthusiasm swept her up, as it so often did, and she found herself agreeing to it. What had she to lose?

They registered her with the AKC as Chase's Hide in Plain Sight and entered her in a small match show with Trevor as her handler. Her first-time jitters quickly succumbed to the excitement of the ring. Here she wasn't a monster. Here she could hold her head alpha-high among a dozen other canines who looked exactly like she did and were prized for that appearance. Here she heard no cries of *mutie freak* and *monkey eyes*. Instead, she got applause. And it was all in fun.

Until she won.

She couldn't believe it. When the judge pointed to her and Trevor, she nearly shifted in front of the little crowd of wildly clapping humans. Stunned, she managed to hold onto her wolf form for her victory trot around the ring. She was beautiful. They thought she was beautiful and were giving her a ribbon to prove it. Afterwards, in the back of the van, she sat staring at the ribbon with tears running down her face until Trevor grabbed his water bottle and threatened to splash her if she didn't snap out of it. It's just the first, he told her. Just the beginning. Now knock it off and shift back so I can brush your coat.

She didn't place at all in her group, but she didn't mind. It had never occurred to her that her appearance could somehow become an asset. That she could actually matter to someone for looking as she did. That night she slept with the ribbon under her pillow and brand-new dreams in her head.

Adele took Best of Breed again at the next match show, and this time third in Working Group. The competition fired her wolf nature. Were society lived in a state of perpetual competition, a constant jockeying for rank. Best in Show represented top rank. She, the ugly little omega, could be an alpha here. In the ring, she could be beautiful.

So far that prize had eluded her, but she'd come as close as second in the past. The Davenport show was the largest yet, two whole days and almost two thousand dogs of one hundred and fifty breeds. It would all come down to one. Adele had already decided she would be the one.

If Bowie tried to stop her—

She growled under her breath, so sharply Trevor glanced at her from behind the wheel of the van. Adele ignored him. Bowie filled her thoughts.

In that moment, she hated him enough to want his neck in her jaws. Nothing would drive her out of the ring, not even the threat of death. Nobody would ever make her feel ugly again.

\* \* \* \*

Their strategy session fizzled quickly. Trevor felt he had the only sure-fire plan for dealing with Bowie. “We stay in the room,” he insisted. “We hole up here until you’re needed for Working Group.”

“And how am I supposed to gauge the competition from here? The other dogs—”

“Don’t have to worry about getting a knife in the gut. Look, what’s the difference? We’ve seen most of them at other shows anyway. You know what they look like. We don’t have to see them again.”

“Sabre’s here. Remember him? He beat me out at Bergstrasse. I want to see how he’s moving. There’s a Standard Poodle that’s got me concerned. And—”

“And Bowie’s got me concerned. We stay in the room and that’s that.”

Adele growled softly. Fine for Trevor. *He* didn’t have to go up against those other dogs in the ring. “Bowie didn’t see me. He only saw ‘Heidi.’ If I go back in human form, he won’t know who I am.”

“He’ll know. I don’t know how he does it, but he can spot a were from across the state. It’s like he can smell us or something. Like he’s a were himself.” Trevor’s nose wrinkled. “Speaking of smells ...”

“That’s you,” Adele said mildly. “Fear stink. You’ve smelled like that since we ran from the arena.”

“Strategic retreat,” he corrected. “Bite it. Now I’ll have to shower and clean this outfit. We get even a whiff of wrong smells on us and we’re done for. Remember at Dover?”

“The wolfhound.” She nodded, and shuddered. That one’s instincts had been too finely honed, and the encounter too close a call. “I’ll shower as soon as you’re done.”

“And you’ll be right here when I come out. Got it?”

She offered up a meek little whine and tipped her neck to show throat. Mollified, Trevor stepped into the bathroom, shedding clothes as he went.

Adele waited until she heard the water running before she made her move. Trevor could afford to hide like a pup in a den. She couldn't. She had too much invested in this show, too much at stake. Her pride and self-esteem, for starters.

Her experience at shows had taught her how to blend in among humans as easily as she did among dogs. She picked out a tight-fitting red dress and black heels and a copper clasp for her raven hair. No were she knew would dress like this, all bound up like a roast. She tucked her disguise carefully into a plastic grocery bag, shifted to wolf form, and set out for the arena at an easy trot with the bag in her teeth. The human drivers who might spot her would be likely to simply stare. If any tried to catch her, she was confident she could outrun them.

Avoiding the hunter...Well, she'd deal with that when or if she had to.

She found a secluded corner at the back of the building and changed into her human form and her human outfit. She tossed the bag into a trash can and strolled inside, just another face in the crowd.

As always, the smells struck her first. Davenport's arena mainly housed sporting events and the area's annual farm show. Even with the powerful overlay of dogs and grooming products, her nose picked up the ghosts of livestock and tractors past. But not were. If some other shifter were present, they'd disguised their scent too well.

Adele walked into the main arena, and almost at once hit a patch of air that stopped her dead. It reeked of cinnamon. Bowie was here. The hunter had paused in this spot, perhaps studying a potential target, and then moved on. So did Adele, at as brisk a pace as the flow of spectators would allow. She would have to stay on the alert. At least she had the advantage of knowing what the adversary looked like.

She'd missed most of the breed judgments in her Working Group, so she wandered and observed as she pleased. The Irish Setters, though vivacious and pretty, didn't offer anything worth worrying over. The English Setters, on the other hand.... She stopped to watch. One among them, a liver and white male with a take-no-prisoners attitude, easily won his Best of Breed. If he won Sporting Group and she won Working, he could give her a serious run for the ribbon. She noted his and his handler's names and moved on.

While she moved, she rubbed her nose. Constantly. The scent of cinnamon had invaded her nostrils and seemed happy to put down roots



there. Her stomach did a little drop and flip that left her vaguely lightheaded, not to mention hungry. Too late, she remembered she'd failed to bring money for lunch. Maybe she could slip into the grooming area and swipe a handful of kibble or something.

Her stomach flipped again, and she paused to steady her breathing. She almost never felt this way, except when—No. Impossible. Adele knew she was nowhere near her season. She and Trevor never went to dog shows at those times. They'd been cutting it close at Dover, and look what happened there.

It had to be the cinnamon, and the threat of the hunter's proximity. Maybe she'd better stop pushing her luck and leave the premises after all.

She started for the exit, then spotted the Belgian Sheepdogs filing into the ring. She changed course and climbed into the stands instead. Sabre was ranked among the top ten herding dogs in the country. This might be her best chance to get a close look at him.

She and Sabre and Sabre's handler, Oscar Dartmouth, had crossed paths before. Sabre and "Heidi" had begun their climb at almost the same time, though they rarely competed at the same shows. Dartmouth had a reputation as a top-flight owner/handler. She had spoken to him only once, and avoided him thereafter. The man was ill-mannered and snide, and had a penchant for bad-smelling cologne. She wondered how Sabre put up with it.

Quite well, apparently. Dog and handler worked as one, with Dartmouth expertly showing off Sabre's perfection to best advantage. No baiting, she noticed. No tugs needed on the lead. Instruction seemed to pass from handler to dog by telepathy. Or perhaps, she thought, by body-language cues too subtle for humans to pick up on. The way the pack communicated on the hunt. Or the way she and Trevor worked in the ring.

Adele leaned forward and narrowed her eyes. Could Sabre be—? Unlikely. He didn't even look like a were. But then again, neither did she.

She knew she sat too far from the ring to catch Sabre's scent, but tried anyway. She widened her nostrils and sucked in a deep breath. And was nearly rocked out of her seat by the spicy aroma of cinnamon.

Panicky, she stared around. There, scarcely two rows away, a head of silver hair. The hunter.

He had not noticed her. He was studying Sabre with a fixed intensity that lifted the hairs on her neck. Even after dog and handler finished their

circuit and the judge motioned the next dog forward, Bowie continued to stare at them. What that look on his face boded for Sabre Adele did not want to contemplate.

As if aware of her regard, Bowie suddenly stiffened. He abandoned his scrutiny of Sabre and scanned the arena. Adele quickly looked away and scrunched down in her seat. She set her face toward the ring as if the Sheepdog judging had just become intensely fascinating, while sweat broke out on her forehead.

Coincidence. He couldn't know. He couldn't possibly recognize her, not in her human form. Even if he possessed were-keen senses he'd never sniff her out from where he sat. He couldn't.

He'd spotted her. She felt it in the prickle of hairs along her neck. She darted her eyes his way and saw him watching her as fixedly as he had Sabre, and with much the same expression. She lifted her chin and peered at the ring, her eyes avoiding his. *Stay calm, stay calm.*

When he moved, she knew it. He had left his seat and was headed her way. She didn't dare confront him alone. She must find a way to escape.

At that moment, the judge pointed to Sabre. Dartmouth's dog had won his Best of Breed. Adele seized her chance. She hopped up and clattered down out of the stands as if she meant to congratulate the winner. Once on the floor she could lose herself in the dog-and-human crowd.

Her plan worked too well. She reached the floor just as Dartmouth and Sabre exited the ring. They stopped directly in her path, cutting off escape. Dartmouth seemed startled by her abrupt appearance. A cold shadow passed through his hazel eyes. It vanished quickly and he smiled, revealing a line of dazzling teeth, bared a bit too harshly. "Well, look who's here. Adele Chase. So you and Heidi are still at it, are you?"

"I—she took Breed." Adele shrank back a step. The man's sour cologne was already clawing its way into her nostrils. His stance radiated hostility. She reminded herself to smile, and watch her pronouns. "And so did Sabre. Congratulations," she added, with a nod for the ribbon in his hand. She nodded to Sabre as well. Sabre twitched his nose and growled faintly, clearly uncomfortable. Who wouldn't be, she thought, the way Dartmouth gripped his lead. "Maybe we'll be seeing each other again for Best in Show."

"I seriously doubt it. This show is for pros. Your little bitch shouldn't even be here." Dartmouth's gaze shot over her shoulder. He made a strangled noise, like a muffled oath. "Go home, Chase," he advised her, and sharply turned his back to her and stalked off through the press of fanciers. Sabre moved smoothly with him, at one with his handler.

"Miss Chase? Adele Chase?"

The tang of cinnamon enveloped her like a net. Her stomach did that funny little flip again. No time, no chance to run. He'd moved faster than she expected. He must have overheard Dartmouth speak her name. The hunter had her cornered.

Cornered, perhaps, but not yet dead. Nor would she die with a knife in her back. She fixed a polite, human-female smile to her face and turned to confront the enemy.

\* \* \* \*

Blue. Her eyes were blue, just as he'd imagined. As he'd been hoping, he realized. Pallid as an arctic sky, just like her dog's. He sucked in a temporizing breath and discovered she smelled of lavender. It couldn't be coincidence. More like fate. He'd had that smell in his nose all morning, ever since he confronted the Chase boy and the dog. He couldn't seem to shake it. Encountering it now on Adele, he decided he no longer wanted to.

Those remarkable eyes lifted to meet his. Fear darted through them, swiftly suppressed. Her smile was courteous, but guarded. "Yes?" she prompted.

She couldn't be were. Not in those shoes that no shifter female would ever subject her feet to, or that dress that clung so tightly to every delightful dip and curve of her body. Not with those blue eyes.

He'd felt those eyes on him up in the stands, dragging at his awareness, demanding response. One look at her and he'd become obsessed, even before he heard Dartmouth identify her. He wanted suddenly to draw her to him and learn the texture of that midnight hair. Learn how she would respond to his most intimate touch. Test the strength of those athletic-looking limbs, discover how the skin between her breasts would taste.

Not at all his normal reaction upon meeting a woman, not even the most attractive ones. That scent of lavender had scrambled his thoughts. He'd

been on the trail too long, he decided. Too long hunting weres and nothing else.

He'd slit his throat with his own silver knife before he'd do with a were what he wanted to do with this woman. She must be human. She had to be.

She fidgeted at his continued silence. Her smile had disappeared. She wrenched her gaze from his and darted it at the nearest exit. She tried to slip by him. "If you'll excuse me—"

He reached for her arm. She shied away, with a quick, instinctive lift of her lip. A were's reaction. Her eyes thinned to ice-blue slits. "What do you want from me?"

To kill her, if she weren't the human he desperately wanted her to be. He doubted she'd appreciate hearing that. He found himself groping after an answer. That had never happened to him before.

It was the lavender, of course. And the way she stood before him, head raised and eyes direct, every line of her body proud and sure. Just like the dog in the ring. "You're very beautiful," he blurted.

Her jaw dropped. Not the reaction he expected when he complimented a woman. Her voice shot up the scale to a squeak. "What did you say?"

"I said you're very beautiful, and I meant it. I'm also incredibly rude. My name is Jeff Bauer." He held out his hand.

"You're...who?"

"My name is Jeff Bauer," he repeated. "You *are* Adele Chase? Owner of Hide in Plain Sight?"

She stared at his hand as if it held poison. Then at his eyes, as if she expected the same. She seemed confused when she found none. He hoped his smile looked reassuring. Smiles did not come to him easily. He let his hand drop. "You're not thinking I'm somebody else?"

"I'm not sure who you are, Mr....Bauer. Or what your interest is in me."

"To be honest, my interest is more in your dog. You bred her yourself?"

She smiled tentatively, as if at a private joke. Even that faint expression transformed her from beautiful into a woman who could shake a man's soul in her teeth. "My parents bred her, actually, but she belongs to me."

"And her handler? Your...?"

"Brother. Trevor is my brother, and Heidi's co-owner." She eyed him cautiously. "Are you a Husky fancier, Mr. Bauer?"

"I'm becoming one." She was a cool one, this Adele Chase. If she were a shifter, she'd know all about him. She should have tried harder to escape. Instead she stood her ground. There was steel in this one, forged in a bitter crucible. She wouldn't die easily, and she'd do serious damage on the way down.

She couldn't be were. He wouldn't accept it.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She blinked, a bit startled, as if he'd just read her mind. "I've been hungry all morning. I was just thinking of lunch."

"So was I." His stomach hadn't given him a second's peace since his encounter with Heidi. The sensation had upped its intensity from the moment he spotted Adele. He'd simply assumed it was physical hunger. Now he wasn't so sure. "Let me treat you. As long as you don't mind grease."

She smiled up at him. "Grease is fine."

"I was hoping you'd say that." He let her precede him out of the judging area, but kept close enough to her back to grab her if she tried to bolt. He wouldn't allow her to escape him. Not until he was absolutely sure.

\* \* \* \*

Another being, one not human, watched the encounter with avid interest from a short distance away. The expected battle and bloodshed didn't come to pass. The hunter and the freak spoke civilly, then left together with no sign of animosity between them. Interesting. Bowie would never ally himself with his prey. This must be a trick, by one or the other. Sooner or later he would go for his knife, and the bitch would go at him with fangs. That would solve everything, if it occurred. This development would need to be monitored.

\* \* \* \*

Insane. This was insane. *She* was insane. Bowie hunted her kind. As far as she knew, he did nothing else. Yet not only hadn't she run or tried to fight him, she'd just agreed to share a meal with him. If her family disdained her now, they'd surely drive her out for this.

Strangely, she no longer feared him. She knew by his scent and his body language that she perplexed him. She also knew he wouldn't hurt her until he had the puzzle worked out. She need not worry about his knife, for the moment.

Besides, she felt at ease with him. Almost comfortable. Something in his smell, his manner, sparked a sense of kinship. That in itself should disturb her and she shouldn't ignore it, not if she wanted to live.

His walk, that was it. He moved like a wolf. She caught herself matching his stride, as pack members fall in with the alpha on the hunt. That did scare her. Perhaps she'd better slip away from him after all. She checked around for a ladies' room. It was an ancient dodge, but it just might work.

Too late. The vendors' stalls loomed before them, with their enticing fried-food odors. "What would you like?" he asked her.

Adele chose a hamburger. Risky, but his scent in her nose had her mouth watering for hot red meat. She attacked her sandwich ravenously before she remembered she was supposed to be human, and modified her assault to dainty bites. No problem. Bowie hadn't noticed. He ripped into his own burger like a starving were and ordered another before she'd finished her own. "Fries?" he said.

"No, thank you."

Paradoxically, the burger only fired her hunger. Her insides kept doing those quick little flips every time she caught his scent and whenever he spoke to her. She had to get away, but somehow running had become out of the question.

*He's doing this*, she thought. Somehow he'd bound her to his side as firmly as a dog on a leash. Was this how he got close enough to his victims to end their lives? The females, maybe. Surely not the males.

She studied his face. The worn photos the weres passed around misrepresented him. She'd thought him cruel and aged. Not so. High cheekbones dominated a narrow face that seemed to grow handsomer each time he smiled, which increased as their lunch date progressed. And so young. He couldn't be that much older than Trevor or herself. The white hair and the lines at his mouth and eyes gave a false impression of age. Of ruthlessness. His eyes had been hard and bereft of emotion when he'd looked at Trevor and "Heidi." They laughed now when he turned them toward her, striking the hate from his features.

Why the loathing for her breed? Why did he want the weres dead? If only she dared to ask him.

Bowie polished off the remains of his second burger and licked the hot juices from his lips. Adele's tongue threatened to mimic the gesture. Fortunately she caught herself in time. "Are you staying for the whole show?" she said.

"Possibly. There are more types of dogs than I imagined. You?"

She chuckled. "I have to. I won Best of Breed. It's all breed judging today. Tomorrow is Group. I have to compete in Working Group. If I make it through that, it's on to Best in Show. A one-in-seven shot at fame. Until the next show, anyway."

"*You* have to?"

Panic shot through her. "My dog, of course. I take her wins and losses personally."

"Of course."

"How about you?" If she could slip up, she figured, perhaps so could he. "What do you do, Mr. Bauer, when you're not wandering around dog shows?"

"For a living? Very little in the way of traditional work. My mother's family made some wise investments, and I'm the sole heir." Something flickered through his eyes, like flecks of shattered glass, then hardened again. He trained that knife-edged stare on her. "I'm a hunter."

If he expected a reaction from her, she vowed to disappoint him. "Big game?"

"Predators. Killers. They're kind of my specialty."

"Then you're here to look at hunting dogs?"

"I came to look around," he said evasively, although his eyes did not evade hers. The edge in them softened, erasing more years from his features. "I found some things I wasn't expecting. Something very lovely."

She fidgeted a little on her chair, abruptly shy. She surprised herself by responding. "I'm glad."

"So am I." He appeared to consider something. "You know more about dogs than I do. Would you show me around? Point out the breeds and explain to me what I'm supposed to be looking for?"

*Yes* swelled up in her automatically. She beat it down. She'd spent too much time in his company already, and her reactions to him worried her. "I have to get Heidi ready for tomorrow. I really shouldn't be here at all."

"Please." He reached for her hand. "I feel like I've been on my own forever. I'd love some company."

"I can't," she said, and edged away. "I'm sorry."

Not fast enough. His hand closed over hers. Energy erupted between them. She felt the power of him, all he kept concealed. A raw, primal sexuality swept up her arm and into her being, so forceful she wanted to howl with it. Like—

No. Never. Not him. Not the werewolf hunter.

Adele yanked her hand free and fled. He shouted after her. Heads turned. The urge to shift speared through her. Her arm hairs prickled painfully. She clung desperately to her human form, though the effort made her head pound. And she ran.

\* \* \* \*

The she was escaping. Abandoning him. He wouldn't allow it. He wouldn't let her go. Her lavender scent, neither human nor were, had sunk into his soul and become a part of him. She belonged with him, and he with her.

Bowie lunged in pursuit, just as a woman with a Cocker Spaniel in her arms stepped into his path. They collided. The woman and her dog both yelped. Bowie barked an apology and shoved past her, but Adele had disappeared. He growled low down in his throat.

"Excuse me. Mister?" The woman with the Spaniel laid her hand on his arm. "Are you all right? If you don't mind my saying, you don't look so good."

The woman's touch—a human's touch—jolted him back to reality. He shook his head to wipe the fog away. What the hell had just happened? It was like his brain had shut down for a second so something primitive could take over. Just because a woman had walked away from him? He didn't even know her and he'd gone charging after her. To do exactly what?

Oh, he knew what. Desire and lust weren't familiar emotions, but he'd had his brushes with them in the past. The sensation that ripped through him



now ran deeper than both put together. It stirred things in him he'd long believed safely blocked away.

He jerked his thoughts away from that, and turned to the woman instead. Even her dog looked concerned. "Thank you. I'm all right," he assured her, while feeling exactly the opposite. "Just some kind of reaction. I think I may be allergic."

"Then are you in the wrong place. I'd get out now while you can still breathe. What's the story? Your wife showing?"

Wife. He smiled bleakly. "Yes. I have to find her."

The woman snorted. "Good luck. This place is a madhouse today." She moved off, cooing to her dog.

Bowie also moved, back toward the main arena. She had fled that way. He scanned the crowd for sleek black hair, a red dress, pale blue eyes. No shortage of any of those, but none he saw belonged to Adele. It had to be Adele. Only she could satisfy him now.

He would find her again. That was inevitable. He would hunt her down. And once he did... His heart twisted. He would deal with the implications afterward. After he gazed into those uncanny eyes again, and determined the species that owned them.

He moved off through the press of dogs and handlers. The knife at his hip had never weighed on him so heavily.

\* \* \* \*

Adele hit the parking lot, tore off her shoes, and ran barefoot toward the only wilderness in sight: the riverside park down the slope from the arena. At one time Davenport had earned the "port" in its name. Those days were long over, but the city still honored its waterfront history with plaques, trees, sculpted shrubbery, mini-gardens and a paved walking path. She found a thick stand of trees and huddled with her back against a brawny oak, heedless of the stains the earth left on her pretty red dress. She panted like a panicked pup, while her brain whirled and her emotions roiled.

She did not fear death at Bowie's hands. If what had happened between them was indeed what she suspected, death would be the least of her problems.

Any were could mate, and breed. The old pack laws that restricted mating to only alphas had been abandoned generations ago. But the source of those laws remained locked in their genes: mate bond.

Alphas always knew their mates. The strongest, the canniest, the most powerful were always drawn together. They had to be united, mind and body and spirit, to care for the pups and lead the pack. Were genetics ensured that the best of the breed would reproduce, and present a solid front against all dangers.

She shook her head and growled. She was no alpha. She'd had that pounded into her from birth. Bowie definitely had no love for weres. Yet the mate bond between them could not be denied. His scent spoke to her. His touch had tied her to him as firmly as a leash. Human, were hunter, irrelevant. Bowie was her mate.

As hard and desperately as she wanted, she couldn't wish it away. He was the male her body insisted would sire the strongest pups. He was the male her were instincts wanted to birth a pack with. He was the male who hated her kind and carried her death on his hip.

He thought she was beautiful.

That thought ripped a sob out of her. How long she'd dreamed of being beautiful, of attracting the attentions of the males, of winning a mate. The dreams of an ugly little low wolf. Well, she'd done it. Found her own beauty, caught a male's attention and won a mate. Made her dreams come true.

Adele threw back her head and howled her misery at the sky. She didn't care who heard her or saw her. She didn't care if she led Bowie and his knife right to her exposed throat. All a joke. Something to throw in her family's face. The joke was on her, all right.

It wasn't Bowie and his knife or even a human who found her. She blinked through her tears and saw Trevor pounding toward her from the path. He clapped his hand over her mouth by way of greeting. "Here you are. Lycaon's tail, will you shut up? You've got half the dogs at the show howling. I figured you'd head back to the arena the second I gave you a chance. You've got the Chase stubborn streak, that's for sure." He took his hand away. His nose worked, and his eyes grew huge. "Bite it. You're not in season, are you?"

She shook her head and scrubbed at her eyes and the tears that stung them and the wetness that streamed down her cheeks. "I just want to go home."

"Sure. Sure. Of course. C'mon, get up. The van's in the parking lot. Let's get out of here before some ape comes along. We can be packed and gone in an hour." He got her to her feet and put his arm around her. "We'll be home and safe by tonight. It'll all turn out okay."

\* \* \* \*

He heard her. Even with close to fifteen hundred dogs and three times as many humans all yapping away like baboons, Bowie heard the distant cry of the wolf. A powerful, primal male response stirred in his own breast, but he swallowed it down. The hunter must move in silence.

Adele. He recognized her voice, her call. She had just betrayed herself. Were after all. He would run her to ground like the vermin she was, and then—

Yes, his heart sneered at him. What then?

Decide later. First find the quarry. He hurried out of the arena with her howl still ringing in his ears.

\* \* \* \*

Bowie wasn't the only being to identify the howl of a were. Fully half the dogs in the arena threw off generations of domestication and responded with roars of challenge or yowls of support, depending on their natures. The wolfhounds in particular lunged at the ends of their leads and bayed as if on the trail of prey. Judging had to be suspended while frantic handlers struggled to control and calm their dogs.

The other's lips pulled back at the sound of the freak bitch's wail, and the sight of the hunter in pursuit. The two who most deserved to die. Still, nothing guaranteed they'd destroy each other as hoped. Something would have to be done. Something more direct.

\* \* \* \*

Bowie pushed through the arena doors and almost at once glimpsed a spot of red at the far end of the lot—Adele, being helped into a van by her brother. He started across the lot, but Trevor pulled out before Bowie could reach them. He stood in the aisle and cursed helplessly and watched Adele being carried away from him.

\* \* \* \*

Back in their motel room, Trevor kept up a nonstop chatter while he emptied drawers and jammed clothes into suitcases. Adele watched him from the ratty overstuffed chair in the corner. She made no move to pack her own bag. What had she to go back to? A family that despised her for imperfections that hadn't been her fault. Back to being lonely and ugly.

Yet, if she returned to the show ring, she risked a confrontation with a man who wanted to kill her. Her destined mate.

Trevor came in from the bathroom, his arms loaded with grooming supplies. He dumped them onto the bed. "You just going to sit there and whimper? I thought you wanted to leave."

"So did I. I changed my mind. We're not leaving. I started this and I'm going to finish it. No matter what."

"Did you run into Bowie?"

"Forget about Bowie. He's nothing. Just as I'm nothing in the pack. You know that. Don't deny it. If I run now, I'll be even less. I won't go back to a life like that."

"If you stay, you may not have a life at all. Bowie's looking for us. You know what'll happen when he finds us. *When*, Adele."

"I can handle it." She straightened from her slouch. "I want this, Trevor. I'm going home alive, with a Best in Show ribbon and Bowie's knife in my pocket, if that's how I have to do it."

"If you say so," he said doubtfully. "Now, are you going to tell me what made you howl? Or got your scent so hiked up? Or was it the same thing?"

This was the difficult part. She swallowed. "There was a male—"

"I knew it." He slammed his fist on the suitcase lid. "What did he do?"

"Nothing. I didn't give him a chance."

"Who was he? Which clan? Do we know him?"

She shook her head. "I don't think he has one. As far as I can tell, he's lone."

Trevor growled. For the were, "lone" was a death sentence. "So maybe Bowie wasn't after us specifically. That doesn't change things. A were male's at the show and he sniffed you out. He may try to—"

"I won't let him. He's not alpha. He can't force me."

"Sometimes the low ranks are worse. All they need is a mate and a litter to establish themselves as head of a pack."

Adele smiled wanly. "I wouldn't be of much help to him, then. I'm not alpha either. Nowhere near."

"Don't sell yourself short, sis. You've changed since we started this dog show thing. I think that's why the family's been coming down harder on you. You're making the upper ranks nervous." He grinned. "You know, I think you could take Bowie's knife, and Bowie too. Another were, though...I'd better stick closer to you until the show's over."

"All the way to Best in Show?"

He caught her up in a bear hug. "All the way."

\* \* \* \*

Trevor kept his word by treating her to dinner at a steak house down the road from their motel. Afterwards, they indulged in a run together at another section of the riverfront park, safely distant from the arena. By the time Trevor pulled the van into the motel's parking lot the sun had dipped below the trees, and Adele's favorite dress showed definite signs of hard wear.

"I need a soda," Trevor announced. "You want anything?"

"No thanks. And no colas. You're not going to sleep well tonight as it is. The last thing you need is caffeine."

"Right, Mom. You go straight back to the room. Don't open the door for anyone but me."

"Right, Dad."

They'd gotten a room on the ground floor. Trevor watched her until she reached the door, then set off in the opposite direction, toward the small alcove next to the office that housed the soda and snack machines.

The motel had a narrow strip of earth planted with flowers running along the base of the building. Adele had buried her key card near the door.

One never knew what shape one might be in when one returned to the room. She knelt and dug her fingers into the soil.

Her nose twitched. She froze with her hand in the dirt, and the sweet, damning tickle of cinnamon in her nostrils.

Somehow Bowie had followed them, and found her.

He made no effort to hide himself. He stepped out from around the far corner of the building and stood there, staring at her. His coat hung open, but his knife remained in its sheath. For now.

What now? She could howl a warning. Run to Trevor, put them both in danger. Or face the danger alone.

She rose and strode toward Bowie. She stopped just out of reach of a thrust. "What do you want?"

He held up a pair of black high heels. "Are these yours?"

She cursed herself. She'd left her shoes behind at the arena and completely forgotten about them. She took them from Bowie, careful not to touch him. "Thank you."

"Where's your brother?"

Trevor. Any second now, Trevor would step out of the alcove and see them, and someone would die. It probably wouldn't be Bowie. Instead of answering, she caught his arm and dragged him with her around the corner of the motel and into the weeds, out of sight.

At the edge of the stream, she released him. The glare of the motel's security floodlights banished every shadow. If he tried to kill her, some other guest would see. She vowed she would not die silently, or easily. "How did you find us?"

"I'm a hunter." He seemed amused at her defiance, which only raised her hackles. "All right, I got lucky. I was cruising around and I spotted your van."

"What do you want from us?"

He opened his mouth, then shut it again. His scent roiled with conflict, shifting between the cinnamon and that other, somehow familiar tang. Finally he said, "One thing. Tell me what you are."

She flashed a quick smile, a hard baring of teeth. "So that's it. At least you were nice enough to give me warning. Yes, I know who you are, Mr. *Bauer*, and I know what you do. If you're going to kill me, do it now and do it fast."

He cocked his head, were fashion. His amusement faded. His hand twitched toward the knife on his hip, but stopped well before it got there. "I can't."

"Then leave us alone."

"I can't do that either."

"Why?" she blasted at him. "Why do you hate us? What did we do to you?"

His eyes hardened, the gray darkening to lead, so that it took all her nerve to hold her ground. "That's my business. There's death between the weres and me. But not for you."

What she saw in his eyes then frightened her more than his anger. No wonder his scent churned. He, the callous, relentless hunter, was shaken to the pit of his soul. By her.

Why? How? How had the mate bond happened at all? He was human, immune to the call of the wolf. Mate bond couldn't touch him.

Unless...

Her eyes widened. That familiar tang under the cinnamon...the lupine way he moved...

"Now answer me," he demanded. "What happened back there at the arena? Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about. How did you do that? What did you do to me?"

She blinked. "You don't know? When you're—"

His face tightened. He went for his knife.

Here it came, and she couldn't move. He grabbed her shoulder, and she steeled herself for death. Then he shoved her aside and lunged to meet the attacker that had come up behind her.

She staggered and grabbed at a sapling to right herself. By now the two combatants had become a rolling blur in the twilight. Then they broke apart. The attacker was were, a big male with a thick black pelt and long muzzle. She didn't know his acrid scent. The were turned his face to her, and his sulfur eyes burned with a hatred that shocked her. Eschewing the armed man practically at his feet, he bared his fangs and lunged straight at Adele.

Bowie roared. No other word could describe the sound he made. He leaped at the strange were like a wolf defending his mate. Adele scrambled out of the way. The motel's lights flashed off fangs and Bowie's silver

knife. The males ripped identical ferocious snarls at each other. They lunged and parried with tooth and blade, but neither could land a telling blow.

She couldn't, she wouldn't just stand by. The red dress and the flats she wore split around her body as she shifted. The fight rolled past her and she darted in and scored a deep slash along the were's hind leg, in the fleshy part of the thigh.

The were yelled. He broke free of Bowie and faced her. No mistaking the loathing in his eyes or in his snarl. This strange male of her own kind wanted her death more than Bowie's, and she couldn't fathom why.

Then another male charged into the fray. This one she knew: big, brown, stocky, with the familiar blunt muzzle of the Chases. Trevor misread the situation and launched himself at Bowie. The black stranger hesitated, then threw a parting snarl at Adele and loped into the night.

Adele's squeals and desperate nips put a quick end to the Bowie/Trevor tussle before serious damage could be done on either side. Her brother was no fighter; Bowie heaved him off easily. Trevor rolled into the little stream and came up wet, muddy and human. "You stinking monkey. If you've hurt her—"

"Shut up."

Bowie's piercing glare swept the area. The black male had escaped. His glare hit Adele instead. She studied him from three feet away, a beast with pale blue eyes. Still watching him, she shifted. Bowie's hand clenched the hilt of his knife, and the gray of his eyes turned to lead. "So you are were," he said flatly.

She regarded him coolly. "So are you."

\* \* \* \*

He'd suffered numerous shallow wounds, none of them life-threatening. Adele dressed them briskly, with only the occasional snapped order to keep still. He fidgeted more than Trevor, who curled up on their room's single bed with a blanket around him. Trevor alternately growled and whined. Bowie only growled.

"I'm not were," Bowie insisted. "I have were blood. That's all."

"And that doesn't make you were? I guess I've been mistaken all these years." Adele slapped a bandage on his forearm, where the stranger's teeth



had scored a ragged hit. She had changed into a sweatshirt and jeans, and was in no mood to be patient. Her pretty red dress lay in scraps behind the motel, partially because of this man. Or were. Or half-were, or whatever he was. “Just don’t try to tell me you’re human.”

“Of course I’m human.” His eyes challenged her to deny it. “Don’t tell me you’re not. Yes, I saw you shift, but too much about you doesn’t add up.”

“We’re not human,” Trevor said. “Although—okay, I’ll admit it. There’s monkey blood in the Chase line. Not that that’s ever stopped you from coming after us.”

Bowie went still. He directed his question at Adele. “Human blood?”

“More than we’re proud of. These didn’t come out of nowhere.” She indicated her eyes and their damning blue. “It’s why my wolf form doesn’t look so wolfish.” She set the bandages and iodine aside. “So how did you happen? Accidently? Is that why you’ve tried to wipe us out?”

“Not all weres,” he said stiffly. “Just one clan. The ones who slaughtered my family.”

“Not a chance,” Trevor said. “We don’t mess with—”

“Renaud.”

Trevor shut his jaw with a *clack*. “I see you know the name,” Bowie said.

“They’re kin,” Adele said. “Distant kin. We don’t run with them any more.”

“I imagine not, with human in your line.” Bowie’s teeth flashed briefly. “My father was a Renaud. His brothers and cousins came to the house in the dead of night and killed him and my mother and sisters. To erase the taint. I hid in the closet and held them off with a knife for two hours until the police got there. Some neighbor heard the screams. I’ve been hunting Renauds ever since.”

“And any other were who gets in your way,” Trevor growled.

“Who gets in my way,” Bowie agreed. “It’s clan-feud between us. But it’s almost done. There’s one left from the pack that attacked us. Francois Renaud. That was him tonight. I’ve never seen him in human form, but I remember the wolf.” His thin, twisted smile made Adele sick to see it. Even Trevor had to look away. “Still up to his old tricks, too. Still determined to

keep the breed clean. I saw his eyes. He was after both of us, Adele. He knows who and what you are. You're his target too."

She didn't contradict him. The most vicious verbal attacks on her had always come from her Renaud cousins. "I suppose that's possible, even though I've never met Francois. I heard he was driven out of his pack. Apparently his views were too extreme even for them."

"Or they may have been trying to save themselves. They know I target Renauds." He flexed his bandaged arm, and nodded. "He's following the dog show circuit, whether as cover or to stalk you I don't know. Maybe both. Everywhere there's a show, something or somebody dies. Half-breed weres when he can get at them, pets or farm animals when he can't. He's crazy and a killer, and he's going to die. Don't even think of trying to stop me."

Adele shook her head. "We won't interfere. This is a clan-feud, like you said. But it ends with Francois. Are we agreed?"

He didn't answer at once. "I won't hurt you or your brother."

"I'm so relieved," Trevor grumbled. Adele and Bowie ignored him.

"It ends with Francois," she repeated. "Like it or not, you're were. We're as much your kin as the humans."

"I *am* human. The were blood's incidental."

"Like that stink?" Trevor pawed at his nose. "What's with all the spice? You smell like a Graham cracker."

"Scent mask," he said. "To cover my odor." He half-smiled at Adele. "I've always liked cinnamon toast."

Scent mask. Uncommon, but known among weres. She herself used lavender, especially in the wake of the wolfhound incident. But the clans had picked up on it, identified him by it. Surely he must know—

He was checking the bandage on his forearm again, but she could see his eyes. He knew. It wasn't the noses of other weres he was trying to block his own scent from.

How old had he been, she wondered, when his kin broke in and slaughtered his pack? Trapped him in a closet with only a knife between him and the fangs of his relatives? How long had he been living like this, twisted up inside, driven to hate his own kind?

She wanted to touch him but didn't dare. If his own blood had become so repulsive to him, mate bond wouldn't make him any happier.

“You’ve never shifted, have you?” she said.

“No, and I’m not about to. Even if I could.” His tone put an end to it. He stood. “Renaud’s still out there. I should go.”

“Good riddance,” Trevor muttered. He sneezed, shifted, hopped off the bed and padded into the bathroom. Adele went to the door.

In spite of his stated intentions, Bowie made no move to leave. He continued to watch her with that lupine, inhuman stillness. Adele opened the door, and inclined her head toward the bathroom. “In a minute, he’ll start howling, and then we’ll have a mess. You’re right. You’d better leave.”

He lingered only a moment longer, then strode through the door she held for him. He paused just over the threshold. “Something happened at the arena,” he said. His voice wavered, though only a little. “It’s got something to do with the were blood, doesn’t it?”

Her heart stuttered. “It’s nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

He didn’t look entirely convinced, but let it drop. “You’re going through with it, aren’t you? The dog show.”

“Of course.”

“He’ll be watching for you. He’ll attack again.”

“Let him do his worst. I came to win.”

A wisp of a smile touched his lips. “I hope you do.”

She looked him straight in the eyes and blurted, “Do you still think I’m beautiful? Knowing now that I’m were?”

The question surprised him. He stared at her, in her baggy top and tattered jeans and her ebony hair flying loose and feminine insecurity mingled with the steel of wolf pride in her eyes. She looked beyond beautiful. She looked magnificent. That she seemed completely unaware of this made her shine all the more brightly. He chuckled. “Yes. I think you’re beautiful.”

Quick as thought, Adele caught his head in her hands and dragged his face down to hers and kissed him human fashion, on the mouth. Startled at first, he responded. He caught her up and crushed her to him with the greed of a starving wolf. Her scent filled his nose as her warmth filled his arms. Woman or were no longer mattered. Only Adele mattered now.

When they broke, his head reeled. Adele bobbed unsteadily on her feet. He found his voice at last. "What was that for?"

"I wanted to," she said simply. "And you needed it. Like it or not, you're were. You can't run lone forever. We're not bred for that. It'll destroy you more surely than any Renaud."

"I'm not—"

Trevor's howl boomed out at them, the age-old warning of older brother to little sis to get her tail back in the room, done were-style. "Think about it," Adele said, and ducked back inside. The bolt clicked with finality.

Adele slumped against the door and listened to the sound of the hunter's boots retreat across the pavement. She could taste the wolf of him on her tongue, and how it revolted him.

What did it matter? They could never be mates. She wasn't meant for a mate.

She'd never thought herself meant for beauty, either.

Trevor padded into the room and cocked his head at her. She shoved away from the door. "I'm fine," she said. "He's gone and I'm fine. We'd better try to get some rest. We've got a big day tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

Group judging was scheduled to begin at nine a.m., starting with the Terriers. Adele's Working Group would take the ring at noon. Trevor had them at the arena by eight-thirty. He claimed a grooming station and went to work on "Heidi's" appearance. Davenport was a major show, with entries from all over the country. It was considered a birthplace of champions. Its winners regularly showed at Westminster. Competition would be brutal. One hair out of place could spell disaster.

Adele stood as still as her nerves would allow while Trevor fussed and brushed and clipped. She kept glancing around, and her ears swiveled constantly. For the fifth time in as many minutes, she whined.

"Nobody's watching you," Trevor muttered. "We're surrounded by monkeys. You're perfectly safe. Look, there's a police dog right over there." Adele cut off her whine to snort. "That's what I thought. Now hold still. I need to do your tail."

Dear Trevor. He thought she still worried about Francois Renaud. He thought she was afraid. Let him think so. Better that than the truth. Her nose continually scanned the air for a scent she knew better than her own. Her eyes sought white hair and a somber face among the sleek cuts and excited expressions of the handlers. The memory of cinnamon pounded in her nostrils.

Her senses told her he was near. Searching, like herself, for a murderer.

When Sporting Group judging was announced, Adele insisted on going to the ring. Even with all that had happened, she hadn't forgotten her primary goal. Six other breeds would challenge her for the win, and challenge is life's blood to a wolf. She needed to check out her rivals.

As she expected, the English Setter handily won his Best of Group. He and Sabre, if Sabre took Herding, would be her biggest hurdles, provided she won Best of Working Group.

The handlers gathered at the ring for Working Group. The lead hummed between Trevor and Adele with their mutual excitement. "This is it," Trevor said, his voice a shade higher than normal.

Adele gave a low whuff. *Relax. You're not helping.*

They entered the ring between a laid-back Newfoundland and a Mastiff so huge Adele imagined she felt the floor shake beneath his paws. She ran out her tongue from sheer nervousness. She couldn't help scanning the stands. Trevor gave the lead a brief jerk. "Stay focused," he whispered, as jittery as she.

Bowie was here. He had to be. She sensed him somewhere near. The were hunter, the were-hater, watching her trot around a show ring at the end of a leash. What must he think of her?

Her Chase pride roared to the fore. Her head and tail came up. Let him think what he would. This was her choice, her chance to be someone for herself. When the judge motioned to them she strode boldly forward, leading Trevor instead of vice versa. She would show them all a were's beauty.

Her resolve held, but only just, when the judge—a woman, thank Lycaon—knelt to examine the length and texture of her coat, and feel the muscles and contours beneath. No male had ever touched her in mating. She'd never expected one to. Human scent did not arouse her, and her own kind had no use for a scrawny-limbed, blue-eyed freak.

Adele stifled a snort. Her own kind? That was Bowie, like it or not, a were with human blood. Small wonder she had responded to him. Her body knew nothing of human prejudice or were law. It only knew what it wanted.

His touch would not be a were's touch. His kiss had told her that. He would take everything she had the strength to give him and return it to her redoubled. She had seen another side of him, back when he thought her human, at odds with the stories of the cold-eyed killer who only lived to hunt weres. What kind of a mate would he be? Brusque and aloof? Or generous and considerate, as he had demonstrated he could be? She imagined his hands on her body, in her hair, until she quivered and whined. Trevor looked down at her oddly and gave the lead another sharp tug.

The judge's signal to move came just in time. Adele sprang forward, forcing Trevor to trot to keep up. Never mind Bowie. This was her time, her place. She was beautiful here and she knew it. It showed in her eyes, in the lift of her head, in the confidence of her stride.

Up in the stands, Bowie saw it. He sat in the fifth row and watched her cover the length of the ring and back. He couldn't take his eyes off her. She commanded all attention, more *present* than any dog could be. She wanted this more than anything, badly enough to risk death to win it. While he couldn't understand her motivations, he had to admire her courage, and marvel at the power of her pride.

He shut his eyes against the wolf and remembered the woman instead. The supple strength of her body in his arms. The heat of her breath against his lips. The wildness in her eyes. His hands ached to explore her bare human skin, test the power in those limbs. He suspected he could make love to her the night through and still never get enough of her.

A hopeless dream. No way could he touch her, let alone love her. She was were.

*So are you.*

Impossible, blood or no blood. He couldn't be. The were in him had died with his family, killed by mocking snarls and teeth and eyes that blazed with hate for the human pollution in the line. All weres were his enemies, good for nothing but a thrust of his knife. He slid his hand beneath his coat and clenched the hilt of that knife, his resolve shaken by the memory of stubborn, determined blue eyes.

The people around him applauded. Bowie's eyes snapped open. The judge's top five picks paraded around the ring, Adele among them. When the judge pointed to her, the crowd went insane. She danced to the head of the line, where she hopped from forepaw to forepaw while an equally-giddy Trevor accepted the ribbon for Best of Working Group. The crowd chuckled when she jumped up and lapped her handler's face, and laughed openly when he hugged her back.

Bowie could do neither. The reality of the wolf jarred too painfully with his awareness of the woman. He had to look away. Unknowing, he growled under his breath.

An echoing growl whipped his head around. Dartmouth stood in the aisle, with Sabre beside him. The handler's eyes were narrow, cold and hazel. The growl might have come from him or his dog. "What an insult. She didn't deserve that win, and she won't take Best in Show. Little skinny bitch."

Bowie snarled, a full-on growl with a show of teeth. Dartmouth's eyebrows climbed. Sabre pulled on his lead, anxious to be gone. The pair hurried away.

Adele, meanwhile, had dropped back to all fours in the ring. Only then did she spot Bowie up in the seats. Face averted, unable to look at her. Her tail and her heart sank. So much for dreams of a generous mate. The man had spent half his life hating her kind. What else could she expect?

Trevor tugged the lead. Time to go. She couldn't get out of the ring fast enough.

\* \* \* \*

"Best in Show, Best in Show," Trevor chanted. "Focus on that. Focus on what matters. We've got a shot. We've really got a shot."

She hadn't had the chance to tell him what she'd seen. Her listless stance on the grooming table summed it up better than words. Trevor worked on her coat, which didn't need it, and spoke to her heart, which did. "Look, forget about it. Renaud's not stupid enough to try something in the middle of a dog show. After you win, he won't dare touch you. As for Bowie, or that male who was after you, well, bite them. They're not worth your attention. You're better than all of them put together. You're going to

be Best in Show. Now get that tail up! You wouldn't slog around Westminster looking like this, would you?"

Adele lifted her tail for his benefit, and even favored him with a wag. She flicked her tongue over his cheek. And tensed when she noticed Bowie approaching from over Trevor's shoulder.

The hunter halted well back from the two suspicious weres, but close enough to be heard. "Do you mind if I take your...dog...for a walk?"

Adele waited for Trevor's refusal, but Trevor didn't speak. She glanced over at him, and caught him watching her. Awaiting her decision. Stunned, she managed a nod. Trevor always made the decisions. At some point over the last forty-eight hours she had assumed rank, become leader. Become the alpha in their two-wolf pack. She looked to Bowie and understood just how serious this so-called game had become.

She leaped down from the grooming table and stalked off without waiting for the leash. Bowie's long stride caught him up to her easily. She fell in at heel, for appearances' sake, but neither looked at the other. In this manner, they left the arena.

Outside, Bowie turned automatically toward the park. They followed the path to a display of tall ornamental shrubs, thick enough to hide them from passing strollers and joggers. Beer bottles and snack food wrappers attested to previous trysts.

Adele crouched down. Bowie slid out of his coat. A thin sliver of exposed blade winked in the sunlight. He angled that side of his body away from her. For the first time since he took up the hunt, he felt ashamed of the knife. He held out his coat and averted his eyes.

After a moment, human hands took the garment from him. When he glanced around, he found Adele seated on the ground, shielded from the path and discretely covered. "Well?" she said.

"I still haven't found Renaud. He has to be near the arena. I'd hoped to run him to ground before he made a move."

"Is that all you have to say to me?"

This had been a mistake. He should have been content to stay in the stands and watch her from a distance. But the urge to talk to her, to be near her, overwhelmed him. "What do you want me to say? That I'll abandon the hunt when I'm this close? You and your brother are safe. I promised that and my word is good. But Renaud has to die. That's a given."



"I don't care about Renaud, or the show, or your clan-feud or my chances of winning. This is about your were blood, and what it's doing to both of us. Don't tell me you don't understand. You do. I can smell it on you."

He knew, all right. Her scent, just the nearness of her, all but drove him mad. Another reason he kept his body angled away from her eyes. "I've heard the stories," he said, and was shocked by the roughness in his voice. "Were reproductive urges. Destined mates. That doesn't apply to me. I'm human, dammit, not an animal."

"I'm not an animal either."

"So what do you want? A quick roll? I suppose there's time before you have to compete—"

Her snarl cut him off. Apology rushed to the tip of his tongue. The were of her shriveled it there. The conflict kept him silent.

"You don't understand," she said. "You don't even want to understand. It's not just a roll. It's forever. It's about leading a pack, raising puppies—"

"Children," he barked. "Humans have children."

"And I'm not human," she said flatly "That's what you can't get past. I'm were. I'll always be ugly to you."

"No," he began, but she couldn't answer. She'd shifted. She left his coat in the dirt and loped away from him, back toward the arena. Dogs on leashes yipped at her, and joggers swerved out of her way.

He didn't try to follow. She was right. She was were and he was...not. He couldn't even bear to watch her shift.

"You're not ugly," he said aloud. "You could never be ugly." She had a pack to return to. What would he have when the hunt was over? A knife bathed in blood and a life apart from weres and humans alike. A life lived hating and killing his own kind. Nothing could be uglier than that. He snatched up his coat and trudged back down to the path.

\* \* \* \*

Trevor saw Adele come back to the grooming station alone and said nothing. He picked up a brush and cleaned the faint streaks of dirt from her fur. She stood with her tail at a neutral angle and gazed idly at the surrounding dogs.

“Everything okay?” he asked finally.

Adele shook herself. *It's done.* She cocked her head. *What did I miss?*

“Sabre won Herding Group. He's a contender for sure. Y'know, now that I think about it, the Renauds are pretty doggy too when they're in their wolf form. Shepherdry. They've all got that face.”

And the were last night had been black, like Sabre. She'd been thinking of that too. But the were last night had seemed bigger, with an unfamiliar, sour scent. There'd been no mistaking the yellow of his eyes, however, or the loathing for her in them.

She thought she glimpsed a familiar figure at the door. She stretched her neck. Trevor followed the line of her stare. The man at the door was not Bowie. Adele lowered her muzzle.

“Forget him,” Trevor said. “Jerk. Doesn't even want to be were. What a loser. Um, we're still safe though, right? He won't come after us?”

Adele nipped his hand. She wasn't going to think about Bowie any more. She had come to the show for one thing only, to win. To prove herself and rub her family's muzzles in it. She tapped a brush with her forepaw to remind Trevor they had a lot of serious grooming to do.

\* \* \* \*

The PA system boomed the announcement of Best in Show judging in ten minutes. Trevor slipped the lead over Adele's head. This was it, make-or-break time. Adele vowed she would never be broken.

Six dogs and Adele entered the ring. She studied the competition. A Standard Poodle, a Papillon, a Kerry Blue Terrier, a Basset Hound, the English Setter, and Sabre. They circled the ring. Sabre trotted behind her in line. She couldn't get a good enough look at him. What color were his eyes? She couldn't remember. She'd bitten the other were hard enough to draw blood. Hard enough to cause a limp? But if injury had thrown off his gait, how had he won his Group?

They formed up a line to await examination by the judge. Adele scanned the stands. No sign of Bowie. She'd be spared that distraction, at least. Ha! Tell that to the nervous quiver of her skin and the glass-bright stab in her heart.

The judging of the Poodle and the Kerry Blue passed in a blur. Her turn. She stood impassive while the elderly judge lifted her tail, ran her pelt through his fingers, prodded her chest muscles. Tension lifted her lip, urged her to bite. Trevor hissed a warning and patted her head.

They did their circuit and returned to the line. The judge turned his poking on the Basset. Adele began to breathe again. When the English Setter went up, she paid close attention. This dog was a pro. He knew a good performance meant applause, affection and treats. He practically floated around the ring. He'd be the toughest to beat.

She followed the Setter's progress critically, alert for any flaws. Instead her gaze landed on Bowie, standing practically at ringside. He ignored the Setter and stared at her. His face held no expression. She looked away and whined uneasily. Trevor sent a scowl at the stands.

Sabre's turn. The judge went over him carefully and found nothing wrong. Maybe she hadn't bitten as deeply as she'd thought, although weres healed supernaturally fast. Or maybe Sabre wasn't the were at all.

Dartmouth and Sabre made their circuit across the length of the ring. Sabre's gait was smooth, effortless. Not Dartmouth's. His left leg landed less heavily than the right, just a hair, but obvious to her eyes. When they stopped, he rubbed his hand against his thigh.

Dartmouth? But his eyes—

Landed on her. Fixed and thin and full of hate. The face might be human, the scent wrong, the eyes hazel, but the wave of loathing blasting off him was all too familiar. She'd seen it in the eyes and heard it in the voices of her kin almost from the day of her birth. From her Renaud kin in particular.

The crowd vanished from her awareness. The other dogs and their scents and noises disappeared. Her immediate existence shrank to the weres—herself and Francois Renaud, recognizing each other at last; Trevor, sensing her sudden tension through the lead, following her fixated stare and putting it all together; and Bowie, outside the ring. She risked a glance his way and saw him stiffen and a silent snarl take over his face.

There was nothing he could do. Nothing any of them could do, including Dartmouth/Renaud. His scent hit her like a punch in the nose. The awful cologne he wore to mask it couldn't hide him from her any more,

spiked as it was now by his heightened nerves, and his hate. His posture assured her of a swift and bloody death the second the show ended.

Why? Because she might win over Sabre? Or because of ancestry she'd had no control over?

The judge vacillated. He instructed the handlers to trot their dogs around the ring again. Adele set off, her mind on everything but winning. Trevor's rigid hand on the lead nearly choked her. His scent reeked of mounting panic. She felt Renaud's glare on her, heard the soft growl that didn't come from any dog. Sabre caught his master's rage and growled in kind. A whine broke out of Trevor. Adele swallowed her own.

They passed Bowie's place in the stands. He watched Renaud, not her. His hand crept beneath his coat. The look on his face chilled her blood.

The line stopped. For Adele, time stopped. Exultation, death, or both, would come in the next few minutes.

The dogs knew something was up. The Poodle had her tail straight up and swiveled her head around at all the bitter smells. Her handler tried to distract her with treats, with no luck. The Papillon yapped briefly, and the Basset bayed. The Kerry Blue jerked at the end of his lead, spoiling for a fight. The Setter edged as far from her as his handler's lead would allow. Sabre's growl upped in volume.

Trevor's hands shook. "For Lycaon's sake, pick somebody," he moaned under his breath.

The judge smiled. He went to the table and picked up the ribbon and started back toward the line. Toward Adele.

And Sabre, feeding on Renaud's roiling energy, did what any loyal beta would do, and attacked his alpha's enemy.

Whether Renaud loosed him or he pulled free, Adele never knew. She never saw and neither did Trevor. Both were intent on the judge. Then Sabre slammed into Adele, and all hell broke loose.

Sabre wasn't a trained attack dog, although he tried his best. He lunged for Adele's throat and got a mouthful of fur. Adele's return strike, honed on countless hunts, was more accurate. Sabre fell back with a startled yelp and a wide gash along his shoulder. Screams erupted from the humans in the stands and anxious yowls from their dogs.

Trevor hauled on her lead to drag her back. Some part of her understood the wisdom of it. They had to get out of the ring. But the blood on her

tongue held her steadfast. The wolf in her tasted challenge, and would not run from attack.

She searched for Sabre and found Renaud instead, his face white and his lips pulled back. Sabre cowered behind him. “You mongrel bitch! You hurt him!” He sprang at her.

And shifted.

The humans’ screams, already shrill, now became unbearable. Renaud went from human to wolf in midair and slammed her to the floor of the ring. His fangs found her neck, sank deep and ripped hard. Adele shrieked. Blind with pain, she clung to her wolf form. If she shifted now, he’d rip her to pieces.

Then he was gone. Knocked aside. Adele staggered upright. Trevor? No, Trevor had pressed himself up against the wall of the ring. The wolf that grappled with Renaud was new—larger than she, white-furred, long-limbed and long-muzzled like the Renaud clan, with gray eyes and a knife belted around his narrow hips.

Renaud broke first. He scrambled away from Bowie, vaulted over the ring wall and tore for the nearest exit, trailing scraps of suit. Bowie charged after him, his knife bouncing against his haunches. Sabre howled and moaned.

Still human, Trevor restricted himself to moans. “Lycaon bite it, we’re done for. Adele, come on.”

She couldn’t. She couldn’t leave Bowie to Renaud. She pawed the lead off her neck and raced after the males, spattering blood in her wake.

The panicked humans made way for her, so she had no trouble reaching the outside. Their trail burned in her nose. Down to the river, into the park. She knew how the were mind worked. Renaud would find trees or rock to put at his back and turn to fight.

Thick trees and tall boulders being in short supply, Renaud made his stand at a Port-O-Potty several yards off the path. Adele came upon them in time to see Renaud shift, fling the john’s door open and kick it into Bowie’s face. The white wolf staggered back and fell to human hands and knees. Blood stained his jaw and several nasty gashes on his body. He looked dazed. Renaud found a big rock and moved in.

So did Adele, at full speed. Renaud saw her coming and swerved to meet her. The rock that would have brained her mate came down on her

injured neck. The pain cut through her like a knife blade. This time she couldn't hold form. She lay naked on earth that bucked beneath her and fought to clear the agony from her head.

"Two for one." Renaud loomed over her. "Better and better."

She struggled up. Chases did not die on their knees. His were scent reached her clearly now, the cologne mask burned away. One hate-filled eye flamed hazel, the other yellow. "Why?" she panted. "Why the hate? We're kin. I never did anything to you."

"We're no kin," he spat. "Half-breed mongrel freak. Monkey blood tainting the line. Insult to the pack." His lips twisted. "The pack. The pack threw me out. To save themselves from *that*." He jabbed his finger at Bowie. "We saved the breed. We kept the line pure. Like Sabre. Purebred for generations. He's worth a thousand of you."

"Sabre's a dog."

"And you're what? Were? You make me sick, you blue-eyed bitch. Your whole bitten line's a mistake. The clans will thank me for this. First you, then him, then your half-wit brother." He hefted the rock.

Which fell from his hands when Bowie grabbed him from behind and spun him around. He thrust his knife into Renaud's vitals, and with one brutal slice ended his long hunt at last.

\* \* \* \*

They bundled Renaud's body into the Port-O-Potty and huddled together under what cover they could find and listened to the distant noises of sirens and pursuit. Adele shivered from chill and the stink of blood, and reaction to her sudden brush with death. Her instincts prodded her to shift and flee, but she would not leave Bowie. He shivered also, for far deeper reasons.

His fingers hovered over her shoulder. "You're bleeding."

She pressed her naked human body against his, seeking warmth, seeking to share warmth. "It's nothing."

"He would have killed you. I didn't think. He went for you and I just didn't think."

He was going into shock. Adele did the only thing she could think of. She nipped his upper arm. "Don't," she snapped. "Don't you dare. You stay with me. I need you. We have to figure a way out of this."

He recoiled from the bite, but his eyes cleared. "I'm all right," he said, in a flat tone at odds with anguish in his eyes. "Well, as all right as a man can be when he's just turned into a wolf."

"Stop that. We're not monsters. Neither of us, humans or weres. We are what we are. If you think mixed blood makes you a monster, you're no better than the Renauds."

"I am a Renaud." He sounded bleak.

She snorted. "Some of them are decent. Not many, but a few."

He went silent. Adele kept talking. She rubbed his arms, the muscles of his back. Anything to ease the shudders rippling his skin. "I should have recognized him," she said, "but I never knew Francois. I knew the Renauds didn't like me, but hate me enough to kill me? I didn't consider it. If he was stalking me, I didn't know it. I avoided him at shows. He smelled awful. He always covered his scent."

"And his eyes." Bowie barked a rough laugh. "Colored contact lenses. I never thought of that. I've never seen a were use corrective lenses."

"I thought about it," Adele admitted. "To conceal my eyes." She shrugged. "Everybody already knew. There didn't seem much point."

"Well," he said, "it's done. He was the last. The last of the pack that..."

He trailed off. Adele pressed closer. He had nothing left now. Just a damning self-knowledge that tore at his guts worse than the jaws of any were.

"Come back with us," she said. "Trevor and me. The hunt's over. You can't run lone forever."

"Yes," he agreed. "The hunt's over." He got up abruptly. He made it halfway down to the river's edge before she could scramble up and follow. Was he mad? Someone would see him down there, out in the open like that. They had to stay hidden, wait for Trevor, wait for dark, think of a plan.

Bowie drew his knife.

She halted. He wouldn't hurt her. He'd promised. He wouldn't dare hurt himself. Would he?

"It's over," he said again, and flung the knife out over the river. The blade sliced into the water and sank out of sight.

He stood trembling on the bank of the river. Adele came up behind him and wrapped her arms around his torso and leaned her head against his back. His odor stank with confusion. She flicked her tongue tentatively over his skin, and felt his whole body quiver in response.

“We can’t stay here,” she murmured. “There’d be too many questions. If they catch us—”

“Can we make it to your van?” He indicated their mutual nakedness. “As we are?”

“Trevor has the keys. We can hide at the motel, but we won’t make it there in this form.”

She watched his eyes darken and his face grow hard, and would not accept it. “Don’t,” she said. “I know how you feel, but it’s the quickest and safest way. Unless you want to be found naked with a dead body nearby.”

Self-preservation warred with self-loathing in his expression. “I can’t.”

“You can and you will.” She caught his face between her hands. “It’s what you are. It’s what we both are. Take a deep breath. Focus on my scent. Look at me. Watch me.”

She shifted in front of him, her hands melting to paws without leaving his skin. She saw the instinctive revulsion rise up in his eyes, then fade out. The instincts of the blood ran stronger. The pull of the mate bond helped. She dropped to the ground on all fours. Within moments, he joined her. He shuddered all over, from nose to brushy tail tip. A whine broke out of him and tore at her heart before he quickly suppressed it.

Adele licked his muzzle. When she moved off, he followed. The police had already begun to converge on the arena. In the confusion, two loose dogs would not be noticed.

\* \* \* \*

Back in Adele’s motel room they cleaned and dressed each other’s injuries. His touch reflected his concern as he dealt with her neck wound. “That needs stitches,” he murmured. “You should see a doctor.”

“No. They ask too many questions about blood type. It doesn’t matter, we heal fast. It’ll be almost gone by tomorrow.” So would most of his own bites and for the same reason, but she refrained from pointing that out.



He had said next to nothing since his return to human form. Instead he busied himself in dealing with their mutual wounds, Adele's more so than his own. Ignoring the issue that loomed between them, and the conflict between his beliefs and himself.

Adele didn't have that luxury. Her nose wouldn't allow it. Nudity taboos did not exist among were; neither had bothered to cover themselves. Being seated close beside him, both of them naked and flushed from exertion and stress, heightened Adele's senses nearly to bursting. Adrenaline had burned off most of his scent mask. The cinnamon remained, but only as a spicy overlay to a rich, intoxicating odor that oozed its way into her awareness. Neither fully human nor fully were, it fired desire deep down in her belly and demanded she answer in kind.

And him? She glanced down. Though he'd made no untoward moves, he was most definitely aware of her. *That*, at least, was comfortably were, and utterly fascinating to her.

She started to reach for it, caught herself, and turned the movement into a reach for the TV remote instead. A scan of the seven available channels revealed news of the uproar at the arena hadn't yet hit the media. Adele switched off the set. "Trevor will be back soon. He'll tell us what happened."

"Your brother." As if suddenly aware of his nakedness, Bowie yanked a corner of the sheet across his lap. "I can't stay here."

"You can't go out there. Someone at the arena may have seen you shift." She thought she saw him flinch at the term. "Did they?"

"I hope not. Attention was pretty much centered on Renaud. My coat may have hidden me." He shut his eyes, gathered in a long breath, let it out again. "My coat. I remember shaking it off me. I hope it didn't rip. I liked that coat."

"We'll get it back from Lost and Found. Now sit still. I want to take another look at this bite on your shoulder." And do what she could to prevent the shakes from overtaking him again.

The shoulder bite was nothing. She knew that before she looked. A scratch, if that, and already healing. She sniffed it. Her tongue shot out of its own accord and licked the skin around the wound. She couldn't help herself. She wanted to taste him, learn his body's mysteries from the top down and

back again. He had fought and killed another were male for her sake, proof of his willingness to have her as his mate. Instinct demanded she respond.

She indulged in a longer, more confident lick. He tasted of salt and spice. He leaned closer. His left hand tangled in her hair. Then he let go and pulled back. "I can't stay here," he said again. His eyes and the jagged growl in his voice said volumes to the contrary.

"You're not going anywhere."

"Your brother could come back at any second."

"We'll hear him."

"You're—"

Her damnation and his own poised on the tip of his tongue. Adele tensed and waited. He let it fall. "Beautiful."

He crushed his mouth to hers. His famished growl vibrated against her lips. The she-wolf in her shook off omega shyness, rose up and howled its triumph. Her fingers laced into his thick silver hair and she surrendered herself to his assault.

She resigned herself to a were mating, rough and quickly done. Instead he lowered her onto her back, all the while kissing her face, her shoulders, the uninjured side of her neck. She whimpered, confused. Bowie paused. "What?"

"I don't know how to do this like a human. Or like a were, for that matter."

"You're—?"

"I'm the low wolf. Not exactly prime mate material."

"I'll be the judge of that. Their loss, if they were too stupid to see it." He smiled down at her in a way that made her insides turn over. "Look at me," he said. "Watch me."

She did. She kept her gaze locked to his while his hands slowly and lovingly worked their way down her body and unlocked brand new, feverish needs. Tentatively, then with growing confidence, she began her own exploration, matching his. "So smooth," she whispered against the taut skin of his shoulder. "I always thought..."

"You thought?"

"There'd be fur."

Chuckling, he pressed his lips lightly to her throat. "You don't like skin?"

She gasped as his mouth whispered tenderly over the sensitive surface. "Skin is nice," she decided.

She dared to lick his throat, his chin. His own tongue traced a fiery path down her neck, over her collarbone, between her breasts.

Too soon, he raised his head. Though his hands continued to stroke and caress her, she wanted more of his tongue. She closed her teeth around his bicep and pressed down, just enough to get his attention. She growled a challenge against his skin, daring him to defy her.

The wolf in him rose up, overriding the human. He bit her back, a warning. She yipped and let go. He growled softly. She tilted her head to show throat, and her body went limp in submission.

Her quiescence lasted until his hands reached her thighs. His right hand slipped between them and up to the core of her need. She yipped again, more shrilly. His fingers teased at her center. She dug her nails into his back and thrust against his hand with short, sharp barks. The sensation built to a crescendo and exploded on a howl. Her nails drew blood.

Bowie laughed softly, his eyes alight at her satisfaction. "Try to leave me some unbroken skin."

Adele panted against his chest. "Was that it?"

"That's just the beginning."

He guided her hand to his shaft and invited her to touch it. His need was so hot she thought it would burn her. She found the touch insufficient. She had to taste. She flicked the tip of her tongue over the tip of his maleness, and shuddered at the heady taste of salt and eagerness. His moan sent a thrill of wonder through her, that she, ugly little Adele, should have such power over another. The realization upped her desire, so that she moaned as well.

"Adele." His voice was so ragged she could barely understand him. "I – I'm sorry. I wanted to go slow for you, but I don't think I can."

In a voice as rough as his, she responded, "Then don't."

The human in them both dissolved before wolf instincts and needs. Words gave way to growls, caresses to rough pawing. His hardness prodded at the gate of her most insistent hunger, and she opened for him eagerly.

In spite of his fears, he entered her slowly. She arched herself to meet him, and cried out as he filled her completely. Bowie loosed a noise that was neither were nor human, but echoed hers in intensity. How she held to

human form she never knew. Her cry became a howl as she joined with her mate, and discovered true, ultimate beauty.

\* \* \* \*

Afterwards, they lay together entwined in each other's arms. Neither spoke. Adele lapped her tongue along his cheek, utterly spent and content. She held him close, her alpha male, her mate.

A police car roared by on the highway, siren wailing, in the direction of the arena. Bowie started, as if coming out of a dream. The tension returned to his frame, and his skin quivered beneath her hands.

Adele's heart sank. She had not eased the conflict after all, only suppressed it for a time.

"It's not so horrible," she said, "the wolf. We can teach you how to live with the demands. You don't even have to shift again if you don't want to."

"But I will," he said. "For you. Because the wolf is what you are. And you're a part of me. I'd do anything for you."

"Then stay with me. Come home with us. My pack will take you in. We're not all like the Renauds. The Chases are more open-minded."

At the name Renaud he stiffened, and the bond between them strained. "They'll never accept me."

"They will. I'll see to it."

"It isn't that easy." He removed his arm from around her and let it fall by his side. His hand came to rest where his knife's sheath had ridden for so long. She wondered if he even noticed the movement. "I'm the werewolf hunter. If I walk into any pack on the planet, they'll try to rip me to pieces."

"Not if you walk in at my side."

"You think that will do it? That they'll all roll over and show us their bellies just because we slept together? 'Hi, it's me, Bowie, your kind's greatest enemy. I've killed dozens of you, but it's okay now. I don't do that any more. Oh, by the way, I screwed your low wolf. That makes me one of the family.' I love your heart and your courage, but use your head, Adele. If we go to your pack, they'll kill us both. Never mind me. They'll kill you for sure."

"I won't let them hurt you."

“Oh God, Adele.” He squeezed her against him. His scent wrapped around her as tightly as his arms. He loved her. She recognized that fact through every sense she owned, just as she recognized, with a slow, growing dread, that her own love might not overcome what churned inside him now. “I won’t put you in danger. I can’t let you put yourself in danger. Go home to your family. Go with your brother, he’ll protect you. I’ll...find my own way. I always have.”

“Our ways run together. We’re mates now.”

“No, we’re not. We can’t be. I’m not a were. I’m the were killer. I’ve murdered more of your kind than I can be forgiven for.”

“You *are* my kind. The mate bond proves it. You can’t turn your back on what you are, or what we’ve become together.”

“It isn’t that simple.” He thrust himself out of bed, away from her warmth. “Does your brother have a spare pair of pants?”

Wordlessly, she nodded toward the closet, then pulled the blanket over her nakedness and turned her back to him. She could see him well enough in the wall mirror. Trevor’s pants didn’t fit him. They sagged on his narrow hips, and the cuffs brushed the floor. He glanced up, saw himself in the mirror, and quickly looked away.

“If you walk out that door,” she said, “it’s forever. You’ll always run lone, neither human nor were. And so will I.”

“No. Not you. You have your brother. You have a pack to return to. I’m not ready to face a pack. Not after all I’ve done.”

“It isn’t the pack you can’t face, and it’s not their forgiveness you need.”

“I can’t be were. I won’t be.”

“Not even for me? Is that— Am I—so ugly?”

He looked at her then, and growled. Moving more quickly than any human, he seized her and pulled her against him and slammed his mouth to her lips, as if he would drag the soul from her body to mingle with his and sustain him.

“Never,” he rasped in a broken voice. “Not you. I need to come to terms with this, one way or another. On my own. Do you understand?”

“No.”

Reluctantly, he let her go. Just as reluctantly, she let him. They were mates. They should work through his pain together. If he couldn’t see that,

there was little she could do. Nevertheless she touched his cheek, then kissed it as a human would. He avoided her eyes, and the reflection of his own in the mirror. His agony pierced her to her core.

“Forever,” she said, “is an awfully long time to run lone.”

“It won’t be forever. But it can’t be now. I have too many deaths on my hands. When I’m ready, I’ll find you again.” He snorted. It came out sounding more like a sob. “Of course I’ll find you. Wherever you are, I’ll find you, Adele. It’s what I do. I’m the were hunter.”

With his anguish in her ears and on her tongue, he left her. The door clicked shut like an explosion.

Adele remained on the bed. No point in chasing after him. When males left, they left. Even wolves knew that. She curled up on the bed and shed the burning tears of her human legacy and wailed in the voice of the wolf.

Both tears and wails were done by the time Trevor returned. For once, he didn’t say a word. He settled onto the bed and let her huddle in his arms as she had in her puppyhood, and crooned to her that all would be all right.

\* \* \* \*

“We can leave right now, if you want,” Trevor said. “The police are done with me. It’s late, but—”

“We might as well stay,” Adele said. “The room’s paid for, and I’m tired. Do they need to talk to me?”

“No, you’re in the clear. *You* didn’t shift. I told them you were probably out looking for Heidi. The ground around the Port-O-Potty was pretty torn up. They won’t find enough to connect you to the body.” He eyed her neck worriedly. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt much any more.” She fingered the bandage that Bowie had put there. The skin on her neck throbbed dully. Renaud’s fangs had cut deep. She would carry a nasty scar, and so would “Heidi.” Her days in the show ring were finished. “So who won?”

“What? You mean Best in Show? Oh. Dashiell. The English Setter. You and Sabre got disqualified. I’m really sorry, sis. You’d’ve had it, swear to Lycaon.”

“It’s okay.” She’d been watching the judge when Sabre attacked her. The judge had been heading for the Setter. No need for Trevor to know that.

Let him live with the fantasy. She knew all about fantasies. Some, like winning a dog show, were harmless. Others dug into you and clawed you to pieces unless you let them go. "I don't hold it against him. He's only a dog." She nodded toward Trevor's companion. "Are you going to keep him?"

"I don't see why not, if you don't object." Trevor sat on the bed next to Adele with Sabre curled up beside him. Adele hadn't even noticed him at Trevor's heels at first. He moved when Trevor did, and stuck as close to him as a pup to its mother's teat. "I didn't steal him, I swear. He kept snapping at the security people, even the other handlers. Wouldn't let anyone touch him, not even to fix his shoulder. Then he got a whiff of me and wouldn't leave me alone." He indicated the bandage over Sabre's wound. "I figured it was over after I patched him up, but he snuck out of the arena when I tried to leave him there. He followed me right into the van."

Adele grinned feebly. "Mate bond for sure."

"Bite me. Bite us both." Sabre laid his head on Trevor's legs. Trevor rubbed his ears. "Poor guy. Raised and trained by a were. I don't think he can survive without an alpha wolf around. Guess that's us now. Right, buddy?" Sabre's tail thumped on the coverlet. "Yeah, that's a good boy. Figures Francois would own a dog that looks like a Renaud in wolf form."

"He had no pack," Adele said. "His pack drove him out. He had to have a pack. Even a pack of one."

She gazed beyond Trevor and Sabre, out the window and into the night. Somewhere in the darkness one last Renaud ran lone. From this night onward so would she, even with all the Chases around her.

"Adele."

She glanced back to find Trevor's solemn eyes on her. "What?"

"Bowie. He was the were male, wasn't he? The one you told me about."

She didn't answer. She didn't need to. "Thought so," Trevor said. "I saw how he looked at you. I smelled the want on him, even through all that bitten cinnamon. He'd have killed himself before he let you get hurt. That's the only reason I'm not out there hunting him down right now." He fell silent for a moment. "What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing." She turned her face away from the window. "Let it go."

\* \* \* \*

She awoke once, briefly, in the early morning dark, and listened. Trevor, in wolf form, and Sabre slept at the foot of the bed, back to back and snoring in tandem. Beyond the window, the muted rumble of vehicles groused over the state of the road. Then the sound that had roused her: the howl of a wolf. The loneliness in it broke her heart.

She didn't respond. She knew he wouldn't answer. She rolled over and dropped back into a fitful sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The morning news was full of "Oscar Dartmouth's" death, and the chaos that had disrupted the Davenport dog show. "Bite it, there we are." Trevor pointed them out in the grainy front-page photo that had, unfortunately, caught Renaud in mid-shift. "The Feds are gonna be all over this," he groaned. "Are we gonna get it when we get home."

"We didn't shift," Adele reminded him. "They can't tie us to Renaud, beyond rival dog handlers. As for Heidi, we'll say she panicked and ran away, that we never found her."

"Better yet, she got hit by a car. We found her by the side of the road and buried her in the back yard. Otherwise the monkeys'll keep looking."

"Yes. That works better. We'll go with that." Thank Lycaon for Trevor's twisted mind. "Let's get out of here before the police decide they need to question us after all."

Trevor settled the bill and they trooped to the van, a sad-eyed girl and a nervous boy with a big black dog at his side. No police cars stormed the parking lot. They reached the van without incident.

Bowie waited by the driver's-side door.

Adele scented him even as she saw him. All three of them stopped. His odor still carried a hint of cinnamon, enhanced now by the tang of male were. It stirred her blood and made her want to rush toward him, even as her legs remained stone. She stared at him, unable to speak.

Beyond a low clearing of his throat he also said nothing at first. He must have returned to wherever he'd been denning. He'd donned a charcoal-gray shirt and black slacks and a worn set of boots. A duffel bag sat at his feet. His folded coat lay atop it. The knife sheath he'd worn on his hip was gone. His eyes locked to hers, no more were-yellow than her own, yet no more



human, either. She could read nothing from his stance, either threat or promise.

Trevor stepped forward, Sabre beside him. Both of them bristled. “What do you want?”

“A—” He cleared his throat again. “Asylum. Forgiveness, though if that isn’t possible I’ll understand.”

“Where’s your knife?”

“I got rid of it. The clan-feud’s finished. I’m done with hunting weres.” He continued to stare at Adele while he spoke. “I was told I might be welcome in your pack.”

“Oh. Well, I guess. That’ll be up to the alpha.” He turned to Adele. “Don’t take all day.” He opened the door and Sabre hopped in. Trevor climbed in after him.

Adele and Bowie faced each other. Bowie broke the silence. “I ran all night,” he said. Sleeplessness and more roughened his voice. “On four legs. It wasn’t so horrible, once I adjusted to it. I’m still getting used to the smells.” He glanced at his boots, then back at her. “I had plenty of time to think. Forever *is* a long time to run lone.”

She swallowed hard. “Too long.”

“We’re kin, you said.”

“Distant. Distant kin.”

“But not so different.”

“No.”

He smiled then, almost shyly, his gray eyes still fixed to her blue. “Were’s not so bad.”

“Neither is human.”

The blare of the van’s horn made them both jump. “Cops,” Trevor said through the window. He inclined his head toward the motel lot’s entrance, where a police cruiser had just turned in. The police pulled up in front of the office. “Can we go?”

Adele tugged the side panel open, and she and Bowie climbed in the back. Sabre had taken over the passenger seat. He sniffed at Bowie warily, recognized were scent, and whuffed a welcome. Bowie shut the panel, and Trevor trundled them out of the lot at a sedate, non-suspicious speed. Once on the road he floored it, and kept shooting peeks at the rearview mirror long after the motel fell behind.

At a red light, Bowie leaned forward and offered his hand to Trevor. “Jeff Bauer. My mother’s maiden name. I’ll be a were if I have to, but I won’t be a Renaud.”

“Suit yourself,” Trevor said. The males shook hands. “Welcome to the Chase clan. You hurt my sister and I’ll rip you open.”

Bowie chuckled. “Spoken like an older brother. I’m sorry you didn’t win.”

“Hey, s’okay. Winning isn’t everything. You better not be snickering, Adele.”

Bowie settled himself against the wall of the van, and Adele snuggled into his arms. “Does this mean your show career is over?”

He’d meant the question for Adele, but Trevor answered. “It doesn’t have to. We can’t show ‘Heidi’ any more, but we’ve still got Sabre, provided I can cover up that bite you gave him, sis. Otherwise...” He grinned at them over his shoulder, at Adele in particular. “Two words: agility trials.”

Adele sighed. “Let me think about it.” She leaned into Bowie and drank in his scent. Were-scent. Mate scent. He thought she was as beautiful as she knew herself to be. No other opinions mattered. They headed for home—were/human and human/were, the best their breeds had to offer.

# THE END

**pterofan@yahoo.com**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pat Cunningham was born in southern New Jersey and moved to Pennsylvania with her family at the age of eight. She became corrupted by science fiction and Marvel Comics at an early age and decided on a writing career. As “P. E. Cunningham” she has published a dozen short stories in SF and fantasy magazines. The move into paranormal romances, combining fantasy, humor and relationships, seemed the logical next step. She currently lives in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and is saving up for a laptop.

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