



Carnal Passions Presents

Bane Of His Existence

By

Melody Knight



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Other Books By Melody Knight

Artifact

Dedication

To Rosemarie Louise Hansen...

Wolf Bane

Lusty moons, so clear and bright
Lure werewolf souls to hunt and bite,
Instincts strong and ethics weak,
Carnivore prone, blood scents seek.

Aversion for this woeful state,
For tooth and hair, wolf paw and gait,
No trust for passion 'neath the moon,
With savagery striking all too soon.

To find a soul with common ground,
Primate traits mixed up with hound,
Confronting evil, and compulsive feast,
To capture, curb and love the beast.

N. D. Hansen-Hill

Prologue

She was back. He had sat on the ledge—perilous spot that it was—for nearly a week. For the last three days he'd howled out his woes to whoever would listen, and for pride's sake, he'd sincerely hoped there weren't an abundance of listeners. He was too close to his transition to be anything other than emotional. And truth was, all his emotions were simplistic at this point. If he was happy, it was zinging fulfillment that culminated in a tongue loll or a tail wag. If he was sad, it was a belly crawl, a droop, a howl at Mother Moon.

The sorrow and loss were there, but not the voice at first. His thready, tremorous "Owwwwwwwoooo" had sounded merely...warped. By yesterday, though, all his vocal apparati had adjusted for a deep, long, growly, mournful, keening howl.

Perfect. And his olfactory refinements had returned just in time...to realize he no longer needed that resilient howl. His lady had returned. Anger and irritation at her absence made him mock her return. She didn't want to be caught out. She'd come back for security, so she could be in familiar territory at the full moon.

She didn't come back for you. Hell, she doesn't even know who you are, any more than you know her. They'd never met face to face.

It all came of not being brave enough. He'd been afraid to approach her. As a man, he slept with enough ladies to feel no qualms about bouncing bed sheets. This, though? Wolf intercourse seemed almost...aberrant. Oh, it

didn't to his wolf mindset, but it sure did to his human one. Besides, he'd heard...somewhere...that wolves mated for life. He was appalled at the thought of being stuck with someone he couldn't tolerate, in looks or temper. It wasn't enough to be attracted a couple of days a month.

No way.

Was there a decorum for horny werewolves? A once-a-month meeting of bodies, and hang the minds? No strings attached? Or would the fur fly, so to speak, over such a shallow commitment?

The hell with it. She was back, and life was returning to normal. The moon was on the wane and he'd be good for another month.

But, your sniffer's still sensitive and her scent's sufficiently potent. You could track her down.

If you want.

Asking for trouble. The last thing he needed was to encourage a relationship. The way he'd mooned over her, the last few days? Crap, no. If she was half as sensitive as he became at this time of the month, he'd be setting himself up for disaster.

The memory of his lonely howl was fading fast. At the moment, staunch and resolute, lone wolf sounded a lot more appealing than hooked up loser.

One

Verity tossed down the razor with relief. Lord knows, this had to be the best time of the month for her. After four days of shaving, of razor burn and five o'clock shadow, she was free. Free of foreboding. Free of that sense of impending doom.

She'd never been enamored with vampires the way most of her friends had been. That was teenage stuff, but many of her female friends were now reading erotic tales about werewolves. To them, though, it was fiction.

Verity peered derisively into the mirror. *Fiction! If they only knew...*

But it was far better that they didn't. They'd be terrified, at translating their fantasies into fact. The reality was far too graphic.

All except the erotic sex. Verity burst out laughing, embarrassed when a couple of her deeper laughs came out almost like barks. She tried to imagine herself performing, doggy style, with some big lusty werewolf, but just...couldn't. If anything, the idea filled her with disgust. She could deal with superfluous body hair if she had to, but by nature she was more fastidious. Having unprotected sex with dogs wasn't part of her plan any more than chomping down on raw meat was. Neither one appealed.

When I'm sober. She had to admit it frightened her. Moon nights were madness, when she suffered from lunacy. Moon madness. It would be so much easier if she had somebody to talk to.

But it just wasn't going to happen. Unless she wanted

to let down her guard and seek out the male's lusty smell on the night air, she hadn't a prayer of finding a safe confidante. Her olfactories didn't seem to work with females of her kind.

And I don't trust men. That was the truth. She hadn't trusted a man for the past four years, and it had been that long since she'd dated. She was sure he was the one who had bitten her, but all she could remember were teeth, sinking into her shoulder. It had hurt, that bite, and she'd fought to break free. He'd still been chewing on her when she'd fingered her stun gun and let him have it.

After that she was in shock, she supposed, but there was a lot of writhing and frothing from her attacker while she dug in her bag for her mobile phone. By the time she found it, the man was gone. That was odd enough. He should have been out of it for a while longer, considering the voltage, but the bastard had slunk away, blast his hide.

Verity had passed out, and when she'd come to, she could barely recall what had happened, but her wound was nearly healed. What happened the next night, when the moon was at its fullest, was so horrible she wished she could forget it. Suffice it to say that her dread on seeing a waxing moon never faded. She'd promised herself long ago that she would never, ever, infect another human being.

As for her attacker? He was just a guy she'd met in a bar. He'd left her no clue, and his phone number turned out to be a fake. Verity made excuses for him at first—"he couldn't have known" and "maybe he thought it was safe". He'd been human enough at the time she'd dated him, after all.

Be honest. It was his animal magnetism that lured you in.

As for him? The truth was, he'd had an urge, and he just hadn't cared about the consequences.

Bloodlust was one of those horrendous compulsions, so strong as to be almost indescribable. She'd thought sexual tension could top it, or that the drive was connected somehow with a desperation to eat, but it was more than just hunger. It was the scent of blood molecules on the air, so strong that she could smell it through the skin, in the sweat, in the tears. At those times, the skin became merely

an ineffectual filter, holding the blood and organs at bay. And her conscience became an inconvenient anchor, hanging around her neck.

~ * ~

Charlie went out for a morning run. Physical exertion was the best way to vent on days like this, when the aftermath of his wolfiness could still hit him, and put him in a temper. Running it off made him fit to face work. When you worked on the ninth floor of a high rise, surrounded by friends and colleagues in close-set cubicles, you couldn't afford to let your bad temper get away from you. He didn't want to have to live down a day's ire the rest of the month. Or be the subject of the week's gossip train.

Sweated out, showered up...again...he scrambled to get to work on time—to shake off the *laissez faire* nonchalance that crept into his mindset on days like this. It was all too easy to discount his real life in favor of his lunar-triggered one, and evil lurked just around the corner. There were times Charlie was tempted to toss all this modular, fit-the-mold stuff, to run wild on the dark side. Drugs, alcohol, profligate sex. No matter how much damage he did to his person, short of chopping off a limb, he was sure to come right at wolfie time. Regenerate, recuperate, re-hair.

He was the original superhero with nothing heroic to back him up. He had the meek and mild down pat, but as for the counter measure, that of superpower saving the world, he was too busy keeping himself from running amok and doing damage. Supervillain he was sure he could manage, if he'd only give himself the chance, but superhero? Not likely. Of late he'd been such an emotional wreck from missing his would-be mate, that he couldn't even claim wolfie toughness. *I'm a wuss at work, a wuss under the moon.*

He attempted to shove all these unpleasant conjectures out of his mind. Stability—that's what he needed. Ditch the emotions, go for golden boy in the office. It was the wolf stuff which should be relegated to the background, not the job that paid his way.

Charlie ran for the elevator, making it just as the doors were sliding closed. They re-opened, ingesting him like a maw. Another victim, breathing heavily, late as he was, was already aboard.

He drew in a breath, desperate to stay his panting and appear at least partly civilized. Intent on appearances, he sucked half a lung's worth before he recognized the other occupant on the elevator. *I know her!*

He turned his head to focus on her fully, half expecting a greeting in response. A "Hi, Charlie", or "How's it going?" while he wracked his brain to recall her name. Surely, if he knew her so well, he'd recall where they'd met? Did they work together? It wouldn't be the first time he'd failed to recognize a workmate. Oh, there were team-building exercises scheduled on a regular basis, but people on the ninth floor still worked in cubicles, semi-private workspaces with screens in-between, so they weren't in each others' faces. Otherwise, they wouldn't have been able to play call center so effectively. All those overlapping voices, plus the constant turnover... Only the desperate or exceedingly long term knew everybody's name.

Slyly, he eyed the lighted button. *Eleven. Not on nine at all.*

The lady was above him in every way. Dressed in corporate style, power clothes and shiny shoes. Hair drawn back in some kind of knot, her only concession to femininity the sparkly clip in her tresses. By comparison, Charlie was just one of the chumps in the call center. This female was management.

Maybe she was on my floor when I first started. Could be that's how he knew her.

She must have noticed he was staring, and trying hard not to, because she smiled. It smoothed out some of the tension in her brow, and when he smiled back, hers widened, becoming more relaxed, genuine.

With something like reluctance, Charlie stepped off the elevator. "Bye!" he offered, brightly if lamely. "Maybe—"

"Have a good one!" she cut in, assuming the elevator rider's blank gaze at nothingness as the doors slid closed once more.

It wasn't until he turned his back that it hit him. It wasn't sight or memory that triggered the sense of familiarity. He recognized her, all right. Hadn't he been pining for her, positively howling out his complaints, only a few days prior?

Humanity sometimes seemed on the cusp of fading into commonness, of losing those sensory distinctions which made his life as a wolf almost unbearable. This was one time, however, when his senses were working in Charlie Ascott's favor. He'd recognized her, all right...by scent.

~ * ~

Have a good one? Oh, my God, was there ever anyone as maladroit at male-female interaction as she? Verity wondered how the hell she'd ever made it so far up the corporate ladder, with so few people skills. The guy had clearly been interested, and it wasn't as though she had anything else going.

Her prim side countered with, *That's not good enough. If you're going to date him, just to go out with someone—anyone—it's a cheat. Unfair to you both.*

He'd seemed...familiar somehow. One of those people you know from somewhere, but just can't put name to face. *He probably expected me to say hi,* she thought, shamefaced. *Maybe it wasn't a dating scenario at all, but one where I should have asked after his family. Dear Lord, I'm a twat.* Now, he'd merely realize she didn't recognize him, which meant she'd pegged him as inconsequential. Worse, it meant that she was a snob, because he'd exited on nine, which so obviously made him one of the call center grunts, while she was management.

Verity sniffed sadly, then sniffed again. Lord, she had to pull herself together before the doors opened. The truth was, this time of the month was worse than PMS. She was emotionally drawn, and sensitive to everything. Moody as hell, and swinging between wanting to bite someone's head off, and paroxysms of dismay over everything from squashing someone's feelings, to feeling as though she'd somehow singled herself out by her attitude.

I'll never have any friends. Sniff. Sniff.

No real ones, anyway. A tear trickled down and she hastily swiped at it, pawlike, with the back of her hand. *Damn it!*

There's nobody who'll want to know me, once they find out... But then, they'll never find out, will they? I can't afford the risk, because half the time I don't even recall what I did on moon days. I'm as bad as a drunk on a bender.

Amnesia all the way...

The doors opened and Verity left the elevator, by all appearances as in control of herself as ever. Only her stumble would have given her away, if anyone had been watching. Hard to walk straight when your eyes are filled with tears.

~ * ~

Charlie strode onto the floor with a new sense of purpose. *I know who she is!*

And no matter what, he intended to track her down. Pin her down. Interact.

It wasn't until he was heading toward his cubicle that he thought, *Odd, how she works in my building.* Coincidence? Or was the werewolf locus, the Typhoid Mary of Were infection, somewhere close at hand? *If he is, he's got a lot to answer for.*

Or she does. It suddenly occurred to him that half his attraction might be familiarity. He didn't remember becoming infected. That time was hazy. That night was lost in an alcoholic blur he could never quite resolve. He'd awakened in an alley, bleeding from a gash in his shoulder. He didn't recall a fight, so he'd blamed it on a mugging. After all, nobody with any class, of any social standing, went around infecting people.

He froze, stock still, one hand gripping the back of his chair. *Good grief, I'm a bigot. Classist.* He'd automatically labeled his vector an outcast, a social misfit, a loser. He'd relegated him to some subspecies, not quite human.

It was a scenario he could live with because it distanced him from the common, run-of-the-mill lycan. Not for him chasing victims through alleys, or chomping his way through the masses. He was far too classy for that kind of scene.

Only, he'd just met a lady who outclassed him in every way, from position to earning power to dress code. It opened his eyes to the possibilities, and they weren't pretty ones, even if she was. The vector may have been able to get at him *because* she was a pretty face. Was this mournful crap he'd been putting himself through the last few moon days solely because he was "attached" to her somehow? Was that the way Weres worked? Like the vampires of lore? One

main vampire, and all the little sub vamps flying around sucking at jugulars? His longing for her might have nothing to do with their olfactory connection, and everything to do with physical contact—something he'd forgotten.

Charlie remembered to turn on his computer, then slowly twisted, eying his coworkers while he waited for his machine to boot up. *Friggen' hell!* He wondered how many other people were attempting to hide their wildness today behind a corporate exterior. Paul claimed every night was wild, and he wasn't looking any too fresh this morning. Neither was Jack. Or Sammy. Mary appeared positively haggard, but then she had young kids, didn't she? That didn't explain Teri's bloodshot eyes. The lady looked pieced together with Scotch tape.

Is it me? Did I infect any of 'em? It was something he always worried about, no matter how lame. *Surely, I'd remember biting somebody.*

But I don't even remember being bitten.

Well, there's that. He sank down in his chair, and tried to focus. He needed to get on the phones—this was a call center, after all. It was niggling at him now, though, so he stood up one more time, doing a quick survey. Nobody was gazing at him with hate in their heart. So far, so good. If he was the vector, at least they didn't blame him.

But it was another reason for tracking his elusive lady down. Surely, no one could know less about this wolfie business than Charlie Ascott. The woman was bound to know more. She was hiding her secret in the middle of a much more discerning and demanding group than he was. All he had to do was think of his own frantic scramble on these after-mornings, in order to piece himself together to face the world with any appearance of normalcy. It would be that much harder if he worked on eleven.

It would take some doing to scale the corporate walls to commune with her. All this time, his goal had been to move up the ladder and take the very next management position that came his way. Eleven had beckoned as the source from which all good things came: a private office, a company credit card, an expense account, a car, and a sweet increase in pay. He'd never thought until now just how difficult it would be to balance his lunar lifestyle in

management mode. He actually felt a trace of pity for the seductive female he'd encountered in the elevator.

Pity, information, seduction. Three great reasons to look her up. After work, Charlie had plans to do just that.

Two

Verity finished the meeting with her boss, then sat in her office, plucking her eyebrows. Talk about bushy! In the last two hours, they'd sprouted at an alarming rate. They'd be all right by tomorrow, but at the moment, it was one of her hair problem areas.

She was glad to be home. Business trips were hell near moon days, and she avoided them at all costs. This time, she hadn't had a choice. Thank God she'd made it back before the moon hit full! The thought of being caught out, in a strange town, made her cringe. It was all she could do to control her shudder.

Her mind kept drifting back to the guy in the elevator and how stupid she was to curtail her chances of a normal relationship. *What if I infect him?* What if, unknowingly, she passed on the Were virus to him? There were a lot of things love could overlook, but having your significant other turn into a hairy beast really wasn't one of them.

Coffee. Lunch. Dinner. None of these commit you to a relationship. Get your shit together, woman. She'd been making excuses for four years now, ever since her first lunar disaster. Now, for the first time, she found herself making excuses to overcome her fears, to toss them away and take a chance. *The Were thing's not my fault. I only get hairy at intervals.*

Ask him out.

Clearly, the best match for her would be another Were, but the last thing she wanted was to encourage her dark side. Even though she classed herself as a good person,

with ethics, she could readily admit she didn't expect to meet any other "good" werewolves. It was all she could do when the moon rose to avoid attacking anything that moved. Bloodlust was no fun.

Be honest. You've been saving yourself. The memory of an elusive, musty scent nagged at her. As much as Verity would have liked to be above the fundamentals, to make sex into an elaborate and romantic sport, the attraction she would feel, whenever His aroma entered her nostrils, was both stimulating and basic.

And doggy. Wolfie. Disgusting.

Distasteful.

It was better if she were to forget Him until the full moon arrived once more. And the best way to do that was to take on a fully human consort, with nothing to hide. It was time for a little passion, a little romantic play. Without such things, she would no longer *be...human*.

This thought in mind, she finished her plucking, checked for any more errant hairs, and straightened her skirt. She grasped the first sheathe of papers that came to hand, and on the flimsiest of excuses, took the elevator to nine.

~ * ~

He saw her the moment she came onto the floor. Homing in on her like that wasn't normal. Usually, he tried to tune out extraneous noise and activity and concentrate on his phone caller. Not today.

She was holding some papers, and scanning the cubicles. Charlie couldn't help himself—he was holding his breath. *Please be looking for me. Please be looking for me.* There was a chance, slim maybe, that she'd recognized him, too.

Her hazel eyes alighted on him, fixed, held. She smiled, but it was tremulous, nervous. Charlie had been acting on instinct up till now—only the instincts weren't the ones he'd been born with. They'd been acquired under a full moon, some years back. It was time to dig up the appropriate human responses to deal with this situation. At the moment, though, his mind felt abnormally blank. *What now?*

~ * ~

Oh my God. Verity stood there, feeling foolish in the extreme, well aware that any moment one of the team leaders would be coming over to help her out. If they asked who she was looking for, or what she needed...

I got nothin'. I don't even know his name.

And it was too late to pretend she hadn't seen him. There was only one thing to do...

Straighten up. Confidence first. Play the part.

Oh, hell. She couldn't believe she was doing this.

She headed his way, her gaze focused lightly on her surroundings, doing her best now to avoid his eyes. Her brain was working frantically on a reason to approach him. It was work time. If she hit him up for a coffee date, would that be harassment?

Oh, shit. It was. It is. Because it's not like he can turn me down. She was management, and as much as she liked to belittle any differences between their jobs, those differences would seem a lot more glaring to him than they did to her. She knew, because it hadn't been so very long ago that she'd been in his position.

Crap. Crap. Crap.

Crap. Crap. Crap. And damn.

~ * ~

This is it. The moment. In his dreams, during his howling soliloquies under the full moon, he'd had it sussed. He'd known exactly what to say and how to woo her. All that longing, translated into a passionate night, of...*what? Doggie style interaction?* And that mating for life thing? Were they still subject to that? Being on the cusp of the moon the way they were?

Shit! Charlie blushed, bright and red. He hadn't had a response like this in years, and leave it to the Wolf Girl to bring it on. Resentment rose as he realized that some of his co-workers not only noticed her attention, but that she was now headed his way. Add that to his baboon-butt red face, and there'll be enough yack to sustain the team for weeks.

Good move at a time when I—when both of us—should be keeping a low profile.

He stiffened, his eyes narrowing. *She's got to be the vector—the one who infected me.* He could easily picture himself getting close to her—close enough for her to bite

him. Why had she come down here, anyway? *To find other victims?* In his heart, he knew it was stupid, but the irritation and traces of bad temper he'd been fighting all morning resurfaced. When she reached his cubicle, Charlie let her have it. In a rumbling voice that would have better suited a growl, Charlie held out a small dish of snacks he kept in his drawer. "Treat?"

He noticed her hand shook a little as he poured them into her palm. She put them in her mouth and her eyes widened. She was really enjoying them.

Charlie, in contrast, was beginning to feel decidedly evil, especially when she exclaimed, "Delicious! What are they?"

He sighed, then gave her a humorless toothy grin. *There's no backing out now.* He tugged open the drawer all the way, and showed her the box of Tender Treats. "On days like this? I just can't get enough of 'em."

~ * ~

Verity didn't remember fleeing, but she must have. What she *did* remember was the ice-cold flooding of her limbs. And the way she'd snapped at the food.

Her eyes scrunched closed, pained, at that particular memory. She'd snapped at the treats, figuratively speaking. What she'd actually done was grip the drawer open with one hand, and scoop everything out of the dish with the other. As for her exit, she wasn't sure if that was shock, or selective memory. Shame could do a lot to make recollections picky.

There was no doubt she'd see him again, but she wasn't looking forward to it. Crud, the man practically unmasked her right there, in front of fifty co-workers!

It's not his fault. It's yours. He just guessed...somehow.

That, of course, started another panic. Verity checked her knuckles and arms, then drew out the mirror and checked her eyebrows, her face, for signs of superfluous hair. Something must have given her away.

He knows. She wanted to whimper, realized it was an inappropriate human response, and cowered at her desk, instead, chewing idly on a pencil.

Maybe he doesn't know. Maybe he hates management. Could be he was just trying to show me up.

Yeah, right, dogfarts.

No one would be that stupid or immature—not at the office. Or if he were, he wouldn't brag about it until after she'd left his presence, until she'd unknowingly gobbled the doggie stuff, then left for upstairs. In her absence her name would then be bandied around level nine as the world's stupidest manager.

A feeling of doom settled heavily on her heart. It made her feel positively sick, and tired of fighting, of hiding. In that moment, she dearly wished to toss it all. To let down her hair—all of it—and bare her soul to the world. To preclude any damage he could do by beating him to the punch line. Revelation time.

I can't. She'd gone through it too many times in her head. She could picture it all: her friends, newly fearful of being alone with her, and terrified of leaving their children in her care. No more "Auntie Verity", no more lunches, no more shopping expeditions. Instead, the word would undoubtedly leak out, spreading to blogs and newspapers. People needed to vent, and they wouldn't have the same loyalty to a friend who'd lied to them, even endangered them and theirs. Skeptics would abound, and those who didn't think her or her friends mad would be gun-happy hunters, awaiting wolf day and the flimsiest of excuses.

Job security? Not a chance. The stigma would be horrible. Everyone would be recalling a violent death in their lives, in the media, and lodging blame. You could counter a lot of prejudice, but the company wouldn't want to be labeled a harbinger of cold-blooded, vicious killers, and her personal status wouldn't come into it. Despite the popularity of Weres in fiction, there'd be no popularity here at home. The minute she revealed all, she would become the enemy.

If he knows, who else does? How the hell did he find out? Were they talking just him, or was he part of a hunting party? Or was it a joke, the dog treats merely a taunt?

For her sake, she hoped he was merely some crackpot who liked to dabble in the darkside. Though, Lord knows, whatever his story, there was no doubt he was a threat. *To my very existence!*

Tone it down a bit... The last smacked of bad drama and women tied to railroad tracks.

Alternatives. She pored through them, no matter how improbable. The man was attractive, but wooing him wasn't an option. If she were to dump him at any point, he'd become twice as nasty.

But then you could always blame it on sour grapes...

Verity shook her head, unknowingly resembling a dog shaking off after a rain shower. The truth was, she could go human, and get all convoluted about this, or play wolf and go for the basics. A growl rumbled low in her chest, lodging deep in the back of her throat.

Maybe it was time to deal with him, wolf style. She'd never deliberately infected anyone—in fact, had done her best to avoid it at all costs—but it might just be time to prowl on the dark side.

Whether he liked it or not, she was determined to "chew out" her tormentor.

~ * ~

I am a devil. Charlie felt absolutely dreadful for the rest of the day. Despite her little show of bravado with the treats, he'd stripped her bare.

He paused for a moment to picture what she would look like bare...

Stop it, you animal! He'd ripped her cover wide open and left her with no avenue for escape.

There's always denial.

Yeah, sure, Charlie. How can she tell you she's not a Were without admitting she understood the implications to begin with?

I'm a dick. He'd given in to impulse, and on the cusp like this, when he was still operating half in dogbrain mode, impulse bought him nothing but trouble. His mind drifted to the memory of him lifting his leg on the front of the DVD store where the guy had cheated him on his change.

Grimacing, he made it drift away again. If he were going to remember things, he'd much rather they offer him insight, instead of disgust. His sigh rumbled deep in his chest. If this female was his soulmate, he'd just destroyed his chances.

Bloody hell!

"Tough call?"

Charlie looked up into the face of one Gary Shreever.

Charlie had worked with him for five years now, yet the guy never seemed to grow up. Even now, he was barely holding back a grin.

Did I goof somehow? Did he see what I did to her?

Her? I don't even know her name! Fuck me! He held onto his temper with monumental effort.

"Yeah." Charlie nodded, then remembered Shreever was monitoring the phones. He could, and did, listen to calls for quality control. He'd know both the duration of the last call, and whether it was "tough" or not.

Charlie gave The Shreever his best smirk—the one that usually bought him friends. "Naw, nothing I couldn't handle."

"What'd she want?"

Charlie looked up quickly, spying the flash of anger in The Shreever's eyes. *Ah-hah*, so the guy had the hots for the management chick.

Hey, she's my management chick. Charlie realized he was frowning, and lightened it up. "She thought I was someone else."

Shreever nodded, but it was clear he was in a bit of a snit. "Saw you give her something."

Shit! Since when was it wrong to offer someone a snack? "Just some candy."

Shreever sniggered. "Way to kiss ass, Ascott," he said, emphasizing the "As".

Fool and a tool. But, Charlie merely offered him a toothy grin. The Shreever must be really hot for her if he was making ass jokes around the office. The guy was usually so keen to move up, he would have licked the boss' boots clean.

But it wouldn't do to have the man turn on him. He could make Charlie's life hell. "Since it's about the only ass kissing she's gonna get from this direction, let's hope she appreciated it."

It must have hit just the right note with Shreever, because he howled with laughter.

Charlie made himself a vow, right there and then, that if anyone was going to be kissing the lady's delicate derriere...*it's going to be me.*

~ * ~

There was a certain darkness to this kind of double duty that suited her. Oh, it was wrong, and she knew it, but she'd never deliberately infected anyone before. *It's self-defense.* Time to stick the good-looking idiot in the same boat she was in, and see how *he* handled it.

All her years of Catholic school upbringing revolted at the thought, but she had to take some kind of action. She couldn't exactly can his ass, but she could give him a warning, a smirch against his name. She deliberated, but that would mean itemizing what he'd done wrong, or rather, lying about it. Either would be bound to stir up hard feelings.

He already has those. What did I do to cause it? Ever since she'd stepped into a management role, she'd been treading a wavery line between managing and interacting with her old team. They were all on seven, and a few, like her, had moved up, but things just weren't the same when she went down to visit. They all seemed a bit too jolly, and a lot less open. There was no unity any more, because she was their boss. It was difficult to gloss that over.

For the last few years she'd been too self-absorbed, caught up in her personal *Were* troubles, to pay much attention to what was happening in the ranks. It had been all about survival, and getting from one full moon to the next, with no one the wiser.

But it could be this joker on nine had heard something negative from one of her old team-mates. She thought they'd had a great rapport...*but I've been wrong before.* She could be hopelessly naive when it came to interpreting people's feelings. She always wanted to credit them with positive thoughts, but not all actions were well-intentioned.

Like mine at the moment.

Even considering changing another person into a *Were* was vindictive, nasty, evil, and would probably condemn her forever. If she did this, she was going to burn, no matter how good a person she was the rest of the time. For all she knew, she might well be creating a vicious killer who would terrorize others. Verity buried her face in shaking fingers.

At least we can talk. She decided not to rule out the changeling idea, but to relegate it to the backdrop. Knowing

it was a possibility would give her the strength to face the handsome and wicked man, with some tricks up her sleeve.

His looks were half the problem, and she blamed her attraction solely on him. The man was too good-looking for words, and no doubt accustomed to women fawning all over him. *He probably thinks he can get away with insulting his boss...*

Or else he knows what I am and was issuing me a warning: there's a new wolf in town. Those doggy treats might have more reason for being there than she'd suspected. His "on days like this" had been very pointed. Post-moon days. When the moon's influence was still there, but waning.

She shivered. If that was the case, and she were to confront him...

...there might be an entirely different outcome regarding who was biting whom.

Three

He strolled out of the office, idly sniffing the air.

No good. He'd lost the sniffer gift. It was the only thing about being a Were that didn't have its drawbacks, the one thing he could totally appreciate. If she was still here, or if she'd left and strolled out the door, he'd have no way of knowing now.

Except...

He had the sensation of eyes boring into his back, and turned, swiftly, hoping to catch the observer. No luck. *Put it down to imagination, bucko. Once a dick, always a dick.* Charlie was still feeling pretty down on himself. It wasn't his way to coerce women. He'd never been a bully, but today? One thing he'd discovered—werewolfery added nothing to a man's charm.

He'd planned to run into her...accidentally...and take her to dinner. It would be worth coercing her one last time into sharing a meal with him if it meant he could clear the air, make things right. He'd been dwelling on it all day. It was only as he was about to leave that he recognized the impracticalities of his plan. He had no way of knowing what time she left. Most of the managers were salaried, and if a situation took a little longer to resolve, so be it. They put in the time where it was needed.

Discouraged, Charlie plodded his usual route, taking the alley cutting between Curzon and Maynard Streets. It was the fastest way to the train station, with the least congestion. The train was another matter, but lack of

congestion, even if slower going, was what he favored when he was in a temper.

He sighed. *Ya'd think I'm always in a mood.* Actually, he could already feel his sweeter side returning. It wouldn't be long before he'd be plain ol' easy-going Charlie once again.

He was halfway through the alley when he knew he wasn't alone. He couldn't say exactly what warned him. Considering the level of traffic noise beyond, a footfall, an exhaled breath, the rustle of clothing should have been lost.

He tensed, wondering if it was a mugger. In his present mood, he almost welcomed the confrontation. Someone was about to attack him, leave him for dead.

She sprang at him, savagely latching onto his back.

She never had a chance. Charlie twisted, grinning, and pinned her against the wall, hands on wrists. He brought his face close to hers, so they shared the same breathing space. "I should've told you," he hissed. "I don't carry those dog treats with me!"

~ * ~

Verity snarled. It was about as far from her corporate self as she could get, but then, she wasn't looking very "corporate". She'd dressed down for the occasion, into dark jeans and sweatshirt. Inside the hood her face was in shadow. Even her running shoes were black.

But she hadn't meant to snarl. It was just too close to her lunar cycle, and she couldn't help herself. Nor could she help the way she snapped at him, wanting to nip him, to bite him. It made no sense, but her brain wasn't pumping sense. The adrenaline surges, stirred by shame, anger, his counterattack, brought out her worst.

~ * ~

He lowered his head close to hers, but just out of range of those sparkling whites. They weren't very pointed at the moment, but the lady was clearly determined, and he didn't want to have to wait till next moonrise to rid himself of bite marks, or a chewed ear. Chomp off enough and he'd have to do without. "So! You *were* the one," he growled, near her ear.

~ * ~

It took her a moment to resolve his words. Fury

always diminished her hearing, or at least made translation lag behind. She calmed...slightly. It wouldn't do to let him think she wasn't angry any more. "'One' what?" At the last, she bared her teeth again, just to show him who was boss.

Apparently, he thought *he* was. "The one who changed me. Infected me." He must have mistaken her outrage for blankness, because he thought he needed to elaborate. "Who—turned—me—into—a—Werewolf."

Stupid bastard. No wonder he's not management. You didn't run around saying the "W" word to near strangers, any more than you offered them doggy treats from your desk.

Then, it really hit her. *He is a Were. Like me.* The least likely of scenarios but the one most pleasurable to contemplate. But how could he be so bold, so open about it? "I'm not—what you said." Verity considered how his words would be interpreted in a normal context, and attempted to backpedal. There was just no reason she could come up with on the spur of the moment to justify attacking a colleague. Finally, brilliance struck. "I thought you were someone else."

His smile widened, and he narrowed his eyes. It was a sly smile, and she couldn't read him nearly as well. "Do you always run around jumping people?"

She relaxed a little. She wondered if, to protect himself, he'd bite her now. It disgusted her to think the idea titillated her, more than a little. Verity swallowed hard, then retorted, "I'm selective."

He's a Were! Who would've thought? Oh, she'd wondered, given his choice of drawer nibbles, but she hadn't really *believed* it. He was a Were, however, who was far too open regarding his wolfiness. She allowed anger to surface once more. *If he's that revealing, he's going to be the death of us all...literally.*

Too bad she couldn't exactly condemn him for stupidity when she'd been the one leaping onto people's backs. He was smart enough to pick up on the fact she was moonstruck, too, which was more than she had with him. Instead, she'd been fixed on taking him down with her.

I'm a horrible person.

She could deal with guilt later. Right now, she needed to extricate herself from this uncomfortable encounter.

Crap! If he made so much over a visit to his desk,

how much more would he torment her after this? She decided to go for pleasant. "It was my boyfriend. I'm really very sorry." The meek smile was a sure winner. It always worked at the office.

He didn't buy it. He was looking more wolf all the time, savage, and damned attractive. Verity was conscious of heat building in her core, and traveling downstream. Her nether regions were swelling, awaiting his response. She swayed toward him, unaware she was doing so.

~ * ~

Charlie was finished being angry with her—finished since he'd first turned and seen her face. He was very aware of her, and hadn't missed the way she leaned into him, despite the fact he still had her hands pinned.

Pinned! Crap! What would someone say if they came into the alley right now?

A distant footfall warned him they might not be alone for long, and he tilted his head to nibble gently on her neck. He released her wrists, cushioning her with his arms as pressed her against the brick with his body. The lady had him aroused. Surely, she couldn't miss the way his penis was jutting and rubbing at the space between her thighs!

Whatever she thought, whatever she felt, it must have been at least partially pleasure, because her hands snaked around his neck, tightening and clinging. She lifted slightly, to rub against him.

He had to let her know it was okay, that this was okay. "I'd have been tempted to bite you, too," he murmured ardently, action suiting words as his nibbles traveled to her nape.

~ * ~

Verity froze, passion largely dampened by his words. She hadn't bitten him—hadn't bitten anyone. And she was actually feeling somewhat wounded that anyone would think her capable of such evil. The fact that she'd been about to do just that—attack him, give him a nip or two—didn't matter, because she *hadn't*. She'd merely thought about it...strongly.

Planned it, ya mean.

In self-defense. He'd come close to telling everyone on level nine what she was.

He was talking again, and she stilled her inner

dialogue so she could listen, only belatedly remembering to deny everything. "I *didn't!*" She'd been about to add, "I'd never do that", but since it was obvious she'd been about to do it to him, a simple denial was far more believable.

Yet he didn't believe her, damn it! That much was obvious. "How many other people have you done this to?" His voice, despite being little more than a growled rumble, stirred a chord of response within her. Not anger. Something else. Warm, maybe even titillating.

He can stir me with just his voice. She fought the urge to wriggle against him.

No way. Tough. Be tough.

And snippy. Pride surfaced, and her voice grew chilly. "No one." Her eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't bother."

~ * ~

Arrogant she-bitch! She brought out the worst in him, and damn it if it didn't feel good! When he'd mooned over her these nights past, it had been more as a missing companion, one he'd veered away from due to the dangers of commitment. He'd never thought she'd be able to stimulate him this way. Despite the situation, he grinned, until he guessed what her reaction would be if she were to catch a glimpse of his smile. *Hellion!*

It occurred to him then that she might be everything he was not. Wicked, ready to take on the world, spreading her lycanthropy every which way. As for her denials? How could he take them seriously? The last, about not bothering, probably struck closest to the truth.

What now? He didn't even realize he'd said it aloud. All he knew was he couldn't allow her to leave—not yet. They had issues to resolve. He wondered if she was into one-night stands. Surely, a night together wasn't a commitment.

"What do you mean, 'what now?'"

Again, that arrogance. This time, he didn't bother hiding his smile. "I can't leave it like this." He almost said, "We can't leave it like this," but realized she would have jumped on that "we." "You attacked me. You owe me."

She seemed taken aback, even a little shocked at that one. His grin widened. "There's a lot at risk here."

~ * ~

All her anger faded. God, he was right. Absolutely

right, and self-defense didn't cut it. Whatever he knew, however much he was willing to reveal, or taunt her, or demand from her didn't matter. None of it was worth losing the last of her humanity.

It didn't matter that at least three-quarters of her days were spent as just that, as human. In this moment, it was suddenly very clear. She'd been willing to infect another human being. Worse still, she had been in that mindset for hours, had gone so far as to lie in wait, to watch for him, then to follow him here.

Dear Lord! What have I become?!

She sucked in a deep breath and went on the offensive. "Something you should have thought of before you dished out insults in the office."

~ * ~

He shrugged, unflappable. "I didn't dish out insults. I dished out doggy treats." He smirked. "Some people would have been more discerning." He waited for her comeback.

But when it happened, Charlie couldn't figure it out. One second, she'd challenged him. The next, her eyes darkened. Now, God help him, they were filling up with-with tears. "Did I hurt you?" he asked worriedly. He'd pinned her wrists pretty hard.

"You can't 'hurt' me! I'm unhurt! Didn't they tell you that?"

Charlie had no idea who "they" were, but figured this wasn't the appropriate time to ask. He stepped back, essentially setting her free. If those tears were a form of manipulation, they'd worked. He didn't know what else to do.

Neither, apparently, did she. With a snuffle that bore no similarity to the arrogant sniff she'd given before, she moved clear of him, pausing only long enough to pull the hood forward to better conceal her face. Charlie caught one last glimpse of her eyes. Glistening, damn it! More tears.

She moved into a stumbling run toward the end of the alley, abruptly pulling herself together to exit calmly, head bowed, but outwardly in control, sedate. Only Charlie saw her swipe at her face with the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

He didn't know how the hell it happened. She'd attacked him...

...yet he was the one left feeling like a monster.

Four

I'm sick. It went from the pit of her stomach out to icy limbs and stiff fingers.

Maybe, if you bothered to sleep...

But, that was impossible. She wanted to blame someone, but the only person really at fault in the alley was herself. In her worst imaginings, she would picture herself as a beast, attacking people willy-nilly. She imagined it so hard she wondered whether that was the truth, and if the innocence she liked to adopt was the farce. Maybe she was a cold-blooded killer, and just didn't know it.

Somewhere around three a.m. she managed to convince herself she hadn't killed anyone, but the power of invention still bothered her. Had she "turned" many others? Was it possible that the mood which had afflicted her yesterday led her to mayhem and maulings? It would be far easier for her to excuse—to make excuses and conveniently forget—infliction of damage than something deadly.

By four a.m. she no longer knew fact from fiction. All she wanted to do was sleep.

She did, for twenty-three minutes. When she awoke, it was from a nightmare, in which her co-worker featured prominently. She was biting him, then he turned, pinning her, and began that slow nibble down her neck. She woke up when he reached her nipple and began slowly, torturously sucking, while her belly did heated flip flops.

This was another form of torture altogether, but it allowed her no more sleep than guilt. Every time her eyes closed, she'd picture him behind her lids. Awake, her mind

drifted to the hard texture of his muscles when she'd grasped him in her arms, his chest and flat stomach against hers, while his erection rose firmly...

Stop it!

In the end, it wasn't the pleasure of her own company which kept her at home—it was cowardice. The fact that she'd been working there for what? Five years, and had never noticed him before didn't matter. Now, how could she help but notice him again?

He thinks I turned him.

That much was clear. She'd certainly shown herself capable, if not culpable. It had been a near thing, and that he was already a Were didn't matter. At the last moment, if he hadn't pinned her, hadn't caught her out, would she have done it?

I don't know. She would have liked to say "Absolutely not", but then she'd planned her attack, hadn't she? Even down to the alley...

If I'd turned him, he would remember...if I'd slept with him, he'd remember it even more.

She put the last aside, and concentrated on the former.

Why don't I remember more about the guy who infected me? She was as clueless as her cute co-worker when it came to casting blame. Was that some form of Werewolf mania? Was it self-defense, to bite and run?

Or did the Were beast who bit me merely catch me at a weak moment? When my defenses were down? A long time ago, it seemed now, she used to go out on the town with friends. *I used to know every nightclub in the district.*

I used to have lots of friends, too. Those were the days when she'd take off with people from work. It was also the time when Fate had marked her, casting her aside in an alley.

Be honest, Verity—at least with yourself. She'd already been a party animal. Somebody may merely have pushed the comparison further. *I was drunk as a skunk.* And her date had taken advantage of it.

The alley. For the last three years, Verity had jokingly referred to it as the "Alley of Regret". Now, she scrunched up her face, attempting to remember details, but it was lost in

the mists of time; in alcohol fumes, which had numbed her to the consequences.

Bloody hell.

Ever since Bite Day, she'd been afraid to drink, fearful of even minimal lunar influence. She'd withdrawn from her family, her friends. It was easy to see now why she'd been so successful at work. She had nothing else to distract her.

And now, because all her mates, her measures of standards and ethics had been lost, she'd convinced herself in her anger that it was okay to infect someone else.

He's right. It can't be left like this. She had to face him—maybe even find out how he managed to combine his lunar lifestyle with friends...a life. Otherwise, before much longer? *I'll turn into the same kind of animal who "turned" me.*

~ * ~

Charlie did what he should have done first thing: checked for her picture on the corporate register. Stupid, really, that he hadn't thought of it before. *Wolf brained.* He'd thought with his hormones instead of his head.

He recalled his gaffe with the doggy treats. *Disaster...*

"Wanna go for a drink?"

Charlie tuned in a little belatedly. The truth was, he usually tuned Shreever out. The man was an irritating son of a bitch, and he'd rarely made friendly overtures before.

Was I nice to him? Did I encourage him somehow?

Charlie rearranged his features into a smile. Shreever didn't have many friends. *Maybe he thinks I have an in with corporate since she came to my desk—or that I've applied for one of The Positions. Keeping tabs...*

Charlie altered his thinking, ridding himself of his wolf. *Could be the guy's just desperate for a friend.* He had "Avoid Me" written all over him. Charlie figured Shreever was a loner, and not by choice.

Now that he knew her name, Charlie was hoping to con Verity into a drink after work, not The Shreever. *Bloody hell!* The man had a knack for wrong time, wrong place.

It was too soon after moon day, though—soon enough that Charlie could still easily recall lunar influence, and the impulses that went with it. Cruel, sadistic things unless you could keep control over 'em. He never had a very

good reaction to Shreever, but he was so tempted to boot the bastard that he decided to cut him some slack, instead.

Getting his disposition back on track...Charlie sucked up his quick, "Fuck off," and managed a "Sure. We'll go to Waitey's." It was the local hangout many of the staff frequented. Charlie had been there lots, but he no longer drank anything stronger than Coke.

Shreever brightened, which told Charlie he'd anticipated a refusal.

Probably gets them all the time... Charlie felt a moment of pity for the poor bastard. He was irritating as sin.

He waited until Shreever went back to his cubicle, then punched in Verity's extension. *No answer.* If he was lucky he'd ditch Shreever early on, then meet up with her afterwards. If she wasn't up for a date, maybe he could find a way to casually suggest a "let bygones be bygones" encounter. No hard feelings and all that...

No hard feelings anywhere but in my groin... Charlie grinned, and changed extensions. This time, he got Maggie Sherwood. She'd been in his team, way back when.

"Hey, Mags."

"Hey, Charlie. Whatchu up to?"

"Trouble, girl. You know me."

"What can I do?"

"Verity Connors. I wanted to talk to her if she's there."

"Off sick."

"Oops."

"Maybe I can help."

Sorry, Maggie. You're lovely, but not my type.
"Thanks, but it's not urgent, Mags. I'll catch her tomorrow."

After he hung up, Charlie pulled up the White Pages, and did a search for his girl. He tried a call, but got her voicemail. He didn't leave a message. Instead, he scribbled her address. Some issues were better discussed in person. He and Verity had unfinished business.

He stood and stretched. *Break time.* As he strolled toward the coffee room, Charlie's eyes met Shreever's. The man was raging, and it was so startling, Charlie couldn't help but be taken aback. *Fuckin' hell!*

He schooled his expression to nonchalance, and

nodded a greeting as he passed by. What the hell had gotten into Shreever?

His job, that's what. He'd been monitoring calls today, too. And he knew Charlie had called Verity's number.

The man had designs on her...of his own.

~ * ~

Verity stood dolefully at the window, hating herself for missing work, hating herself more for creating this predicament. Work was her mainstay—her means of hiding, of being normal, of preoccupying herself so she couldn't *think*. If she hadn't had her job these last few years...

She shuddered, picturing an endless number of nights and days like the one she'd just had. Guilty, tortured, angry times, when she wavered between hating herself, and hating him, for bringing her to this.

He didn't.

Of course he didn't, and hadn't, and she didn't really blame him. *No one can make someone else act like a moron.*

That was when she spotted him. The fears, guilt, and worries of the wee morning hours descended into self-disgust during the day, and just as she had trouble during her off-moon hours believing what she became under the full moon's influence, so it was difficult during daylight to believe yesterday's resolutions were contrived in her right mind.

I was nuts! Crazy! Out of my fuckin' mind!

As long as she lived, there would always be a question of infection, of infecting someone else through contact. Was sexual contact enough? She had no idea, and there was no one she could ask. A bite into deeper tissues would probably suffice. She could honestly say she didn't know because she'd never done it. Her own bite, way back when, had been nearly healed by the next day. One of the benefits of being a moon beast. She didn't worry about cancer, or diabetes, or heart attacks the way everyone else seemed to. Whatever went amok seemed easily cured by her next transformation.

Now, of course, her first—and last—intended victim, Charlie Ascott, was strolling her direction. *Sexual contact would be safe with him...*

Where had that errant thought come from? Was there some secret well of lust she was tapping in desperation?

The picture in the corporate register hadn't done him justice. She gazed, fixed, on his stature, his walk. *He is rather hot...*

Verity groaned, and buried her face in her hands. *What's wrong with me?!*

She sucked in a deep breath. Time to confront her cowardly human half. Oh, the wolf in her felt free to run around rampaging if yesterday was any example. The human part was much more sedate. Verity continued to watch his progress, nibbling her lower lip as he came on, wondering what he wanted. Clearly, to talk.

To accuse?

She had no excuse she could offer him to explain yesterday's lapse, or her designs upon his person. Very few excuses were good enough to explain away evil.

For maybe two minutes she was tempted to dodge out the front door and head for the rear of the building. Unlikely he could sniff her out, but what was the point? Unless she wanted to walk away from all she'd established for herself over the last few years, it would be better to talk it out. This wasn't going to go away because she ignored it, and if she pissed him off he'd only get nasty about it at work.

Something neither of us can afford...

Besides, I owe him. He was right. She'd attacked him with little provocation. For the first time she realized how hard it was to remain decent when you were driven by animal instincts, and you had no one to bounce ideas off, no one to help curb them. There hadn't been anyone up till now whom she could discuss this with. She'd gone through the horror, the terror of discovery, alone. Since then, she'd avoided contact with anyone at night, particularly when the moon was full. She couldn't trust anyone, least of all herself. Without an ethical sounding board, though, it was too easy for her to slip and let down her guard. The only person she had to answer to was Verity Connors. Yesterday's fiasco taught her that just wasn't good enough.

She just wished Charlie didn't look so howling good to her as he strolled along the sidewalk.

~ * ~

The moment of truth. Charlie sucked in a cleansing breath. Well, actually, it was a still-your-nerves breath, and

he inhaled so strongly his nostrils flared. As far as truth went, he didn't really care whether she was honest with him or not at this point. He just wanted to see her again. He was by no means celibate, but things never got as wild as he wanted. He was too afraid of passing on his curse. His bedroom antics were almost sedate, which left him feeling both like a dick, and slightly dickless. Oh, he satisfied the ladies, but warily, and there'd been a few comments about "not expecting him to be so timid".

But this was her. She. His she-wolf. He'd smelled her before, longed for her, looked for her, mourned for her in her absence. Now, he'd met her. She wasn't exactly what he expected, and that "wolves mate for life" rubbish wasn't going to scare him off. Especially where the "mate" part was involved. Ever since he'd touched her in the alley, he'd had trouble getting her out of his head.

Now, he was nervous as hell. What if she couldn't stand him? Just because he was a Were, and hung up on her, didn't mean she would go for him. *It's not like she's desperate.*

Am I? Charlie hesitated, finger poised over the bell. *Seems pretty desperate to track her down at her home on a day when she's called in sick from work. Stalkerish, even.*

We need to clear the air.

But maybe the air would be better for the clearing if given a little time—for everyone to cool down. Charlie's cock was already stiff, just at the thought of her. He needed a cool down, all right.

~ * ~

Where was he? Verity pressed her face against the window. She'd followed his progress into the building, but there was no buzz to announce him. Was he sneaking up to her room somehow? It was an old building. She'd opted for that rather than terribly modern, filled with cameras. Wolf days were better unrecorded.

She frowned at her door, waiting angrily for his knock. *The nerve of him!* A niggles of who-attacked-whom preyed at her conscience but she shunted it away. *My home. My refuge. Mine.*

Another minute passed but there were no steps in the hall. Verity pressed her face against the glass once more,

and saw him step out of the entry and onto the steps, then hesitate before going back in.

Still no buzz.

Bloody hell! Wolf or mouse?

Frustrated, she checked herself in the mirror, then tore downstairs as fast as she could go.

~ * ~

This isn't exactly showing respect, for her privacy or anything else. Charlie didn't want her to hate him for catching her out. Personally, he had no problem with that kind of thing, but women were different. If he were to see her with scuzzy teeth or fuzzy hair, or without makeup, there'd be hell to pay. It was something he hadn't thought of when he'd come up with this clever plan.

What if she's really sick?

Werewolves don't get that sick. Not in his experience, anyway. He was healthy as a horse...or a wolf.

But what if she's not?

I came here because I'm concerned...?

Like hell. She's really going to buy that. Whether or not it was true now, it hadn't been his motivation. *And she's no dummy—*

It was as far as his deliberations went. The door was suddenly yanked open with a loud hinge squawk, and Charlie jumped. The next second, Verity latched onto the front of his shirt and tugged him in through the door.

Five

She didn't say anything—just switched her grip from his shirtfront to his hand. He wasn't resisting, so she figured he had no major objections. *I do, though.* She couldn't believe she was doing this! *What must he be thinking?!* First, the attack in the alley, and now this.

Verity refused to look at him. "We need to talk." Her hand shook as she twisted her doorknob.

"I agree."

His voice shook as badly as her hands. She twisted to look at him, and caught him grinning. The bastard was laughing at her.

I'm nothing but a parody of my former self. In that moment, she felt as if there was nothing of the cool, professional manager left, and anything she could say to explain her actions would merely sound like an excuse. "The situation's quite serious..."

His eyes widened, and for some reason, it hit her, too, right in her funny bone. Her natural good humor re-asserted itself, and she burst out laughing. "I'm not myself," she told him, thinking what a ridiculous thing it was for a wolfwoman to say. She bit her lip to stop herself from nervous giggling.

"s that why you took the day off?" he asked.

I give up. There was no point mucking around, trying to impress this guy, though Lord knows—she eyed his broad chest and well-muscled arms a little longingly—she was tempted to try. *I'm man-hungry.* Hungry for the safety of a pair of strong arms, a male who would love her for what she

was...everything she was. This guy was as close as she was going to get. He was a Were, a colleague—and she'd already alienated the hell out of him. He was here, but it was more likely to threaten her than anything else. She ran her tongue hungrily over her lips, realized he was watching, and closed her mouth with an audible snap.

Struggling with her baser instincts, Verity did her best to sink coolly onto her couch while Charlie perched on the arm of an overstuffed chair. He didn't seem inclined to make himself too comfortable.

Keeping his edge—or edginess, as the case may be.

Okaaaay... Bald truth time. "I needed a chance to figure out why I waylaid you."

"In the alley."

"Yes. It's not my style."

His smile started in his eyes. "And it's men they always portray as wolves."

She grinned, appreciating the joke, but made a point of ignoring the implications. *Though, give me a reason*, she thought, remembering his hot body and strong muscles pressed against her. *Any reason at all...* Verity cleared her throat. "I didn't think anyone knew."

"If it helps, I didn't—until that day."

~ * ~

She stared at him enquiringly, obviously wanting to know what she'd done on that particular day to give herself away.

Bloody hell! What am I going to tell her? I smelled you? Your scent permeated my senses?

His cock was hardening at the thought, and he dropped into the chair. Perched like that, his hard-on was all too obvious. Charlie wracked his brain for an inoffensive response. Where was wit when you needed it?

"Something in the way you moved," he finally added. "Too smooth for a mere human." There. He'd done it. Charlie wanted to pat himself on the back. Success.

She sniggered, then burst out laughing again. "Too smooth?" she repeated. "Nice comeback, Charlie." It was the first time she'd used his name, and he felt unduly flattered that she'd put face to name. He was back to grinning like a buffoon. This woman was out of his league. He didn't usually

date girls who could read him this well. It wasn't safe.

He decided to be straight with her...to a point. "My wolf senses gave you away."

She blushed. Bright red. She *knew*. Olfactory, it was. *But I washed!* He saw it written in her face, but thank God she didn't say it.

He avoided her eyes and leaned forward to take her hand, moving on to the real bone of contention. "I get it. You didn't mean to attack me."

"Yes, I did." Her eyes filled. "You know how you thought I was the one who turned you? Well, I thought something similar. Even if you weren't, you should be."

He was confused, but figured there was sense in there somewhere. "I should be a Were?"

"Yes. It was self-defense."

"So if I were a Were, too, I couldn't blab about your little problem."

She nodded. "Frankly, yes."

Ah-hah! I get it. He smirked. "What about the time between your little attack, and the next full moon?"

It was clear she hadn't considered that until this moment, and didn't exactly appreciate his pointing it out. Biting him on a waning moon would mean weeks before he fully turned. He crossed his arms sternly. "You could have at least *tried* to be sneaky, or was it meant to be a hit and run?"

This isn't the way to make friends, Charlie...

He relented, his voice losing the harshness. Honestly, though, someone had to point out the error of her ways. If that was her idea of surreptitious, she was in deep shit. "I know—you acted on impulse." Charlie attempted to make it sound reasonable, as though he didn't think she was stupid. Actually, he didn't. He knew how strong those Were instincts and impulses could be. Difficult to resist, especially if she was running scared. "Sorry about that—scaring you, I mean." He focused on her face. "None of this would have happened if I hadn't played that stunt with the dog treats. If it had been me, I would've been worried, too." He frowned. "Why did you come downstairs to nine, anyway? I mean, if there was anything you needed, you could have emailed." That had been bothering him. He'd pulled the rug out from

under her, left her defenseless, before finding out what she'd wanted. He'd been too damn surly, too annoyed with her for her wolfiness, for discussion...even work-related discussion.

Just goes to show even a wolf can be a dick.

Her face turned red again, but she faced him. "I thought you were someone I wanted to know."

Then, but not now. Shit! Charlie cringed. "I bet I've given that little decision a workout." His cringe relaxed into an apologetic, and—*hopefully!*—charming smile. "I'd still like to get to know you." He lifted her hand to his lips, and kissed each finger in turn, watching her face as he did so. There was longing there, something he hadn't expected. Lust maybe, yes, but longing, no. It could be she had as hard a time trusting as he did. He turned her hand over, his lips lingering on her palm.

~ * ~

Verity sucked in a quick breath, but didn't pull her hand away. Amazing what such simple gestures could do to her insides, her nether regions. He was working so assiduously on her digits, her palm. She wondered whether he'd apply the same effort to her womanly regions, given an opportunity. Involuntarily, she leaned forward, toward him. It had been so long...

She licked her lips nervously as he continued his explorations, tracing gentle fingers, then lips and nibbled nothings, along the soft surface of her forearm. Her mouth was as dry now as her womanly parts were moist. *Wonder if it all still works down there?*

He froze, and Verity realized she'd said it aloud. "Crap and damn," she whispered, mortified.

He, on the other hand, went for matter of fact. "Maybe we should give things a test run and find out."

Perhaps it was because some of her she-wolf was still present, or maybe all that finger sucking had stirred irresistible impulse. Verity straightened almost primly. "Yes," she said, eyes meeting his as gooseflesh danced down her limbs. "I think maybe we should."

~ * ~

He couldn't believe his ears. She'd given her permission.

She said yes.

Charlie jumped up, all the longing from three years of unfulfilled wolf lures coming to the fore. He broke out in a sweat, a reminder that he was no longer wolf but man. It didn't help overmuch. His hairs stood on end, as erect as his dick, his muscles tensing, all ready to pounce. His mind was filled with visions of his teeth gripping the ruff of her neck, while his cock slipped seductively into her womanly crevice, driving home.

He could barely breathe, and he was about to make his move when he caught her expression.

I'm a man, not a beast. "Sorry..." he gasped, his eyes on her breasts, barely able to mouth the word.

~ * ~

Verity was afraid to touch him. He was poised, tense. Every muscle tight. There was only one way to handle this.

By instinct.

Verity growled, deep in her throat, then gave him a shove so hard he tumbled backward over the chair arm. He was still picking himself up from his sprawl when Verity chuckled, and...ran.

~ * ~

There was no thought left. Her flight stole the last of his humanity. Charlie leapt to his feet and tore after her, catching her halfway to the bedroom. She growled and laughed and squirmed while he tried to devour her with his lips, his mouth, his tongue. His hands stripped down her jeans with her own fingers leading the way. Then his hand was at her core, touching her, but it wasn't what she wanted.

She kicked her feet out of the pants and he was left standing holding them while she ran for the bedroom. Charlie howled and tossed the jeans aside, then sprang after her. She lunged, then flung herself across the bed, and Charlie pounced on top.

She arched her back and he bit her nape, while his glans, his engorged cock, found home. She was so moist, so ready, there was no holding back, nor did she want him to. She forced her pelvis up, tilting to receive his thrusts.

Charlie lost it. He drove into her again and again while she clawed at the bedspread, and did her best to lift up to receive him. Then she was howling, her cunt clamping down as she came, and Charlie howled with her. They rode

her orgasm together as Charlie came, too, driving home to spill his seed deep within.

He lay then, atop her, breath held, awaiting her reaction. Had he hurt her? He'd been so driven, so drawn to her warm wet softness that he'd lost control.

She wriggled, deliberately, suggestively. Charlie couldn't believe it until in one rapid slither, she'd turned over, so they were face to face. She was smiling, but her eyes were wild still.

"Wolf style," she whispered, nudging him, then biting his jaw. There was a ferocity, a feral quality in her expression that drove Charlie wild. "Nowwww...primate," she whispered. With that, she lifted her legs over Charlie's shoulders, opening herself to him.

He moved slowly now, learning her body, the scent of her breasts, the soft skin of her stomach, the slight curve of her womb. He trailed kisses along her neck, wanting to eat her, but in the way of lovers. Wanting all of her with him, surrounding him. Wanting to take her, but deliberately prolonging movement, while she squirmed beneath. Her body was already beginning to know him, to want *him*. It pleased him immensely.

He lowered his head, sucking lightly on her belly button, then moving south to the curls coiling delightfully at her threshold. The scent of sex was rich in the air, and he nuzzled her labia, inhaling deeply. His kissed her clitoris, sucking on the button, while Verity groaned in frustration. There was more exploration to do here, but his lady was ready—now.

Charlie stuffed his thickened cock in and up while Verity gasped, taking him, drawing him deep and hoarding him.

Charlie didn't remember anything after that.

~ * ~

Verity lay there, half covered by Charlie, and half by blankets. She ran her fingers over his head, loving the feel of his coarse hair, the warmth of his face against her breast. His hand was flat on her stomach, the fingers splayed. They'd stretched that way the last time he'd come—the fourth time they'd both come. She'd never been so sexually sated in her life. Warm, satisfied, happy.

It was too much to take in. Too exciting after so much abstinence. Too thrilling for her to lie here quietly, quiescently. What she really wanted was to laugh, shout, howl. Carefully, so as not to wake him, she slid sideways out of the bed and tiptoed to the window, needing to be in the moonlight, no matter how minimal. She stood, eyes closed, in the narrow shaft of light, dreaming...and then she saw him. There was a figure down below, but what marked him was the way he focused on her window.

I know him. Her eyes narrowed. She couldn't name him, didn't know the origins of her antipathy. Verity's lips drew back in a snarl.

Then Charlie was at her side. "What's wrong?" he asked. Verity leaned back against his bare chest, appreciating his strength, his heat. She recalled the snarl. Oh, he'd reacted, but it hadn't really fazed him. She hadn't realized how much it meant to have a partner who understood her howls, her wild hair growth, her moods, her cyclic needs.

At the same time, she understood his inclinations, and what he would do to one he considered competition. Given the strength of their mating, and the remaining glimmers of lunar influence, there was danger here. It wouldn't matter that it wasn't romantic competition. If there was any threat, he would tackle it—literally, if need be.

The idea both thrilled and terrified her. For the moment, though, with the culprit lurking below, the hazard of a savage attack filled her mind. "You were asleep," she murmured, making it a complaint as she proceeded to wrap her arms around his neck. Charlie held her close while she straddled him, then came to rest on his stiffened shaft.

"Woman," he growled, against her neck, "you are insatiable." He thrust and her warmth was all around him.

Verity shivered, loving the thickness of him inside her. "So, satiate me!" she demanded in a lustful snarl, stiffening as her insides swelled and spasmed, clinging to him, tightening to hold him in place.

Charlie grinned wolfishly. He lifted her slightly, his teeth closing on her nipple, not hard enough to hurt, just enough to titillate. Her womb contracted with the first delightful tickles of her orgasm. Then Charlie, damn him,

upped the intensity. He sucked her breast, and in conjunction with her coming, she was groaning with need for him to finish the job, to thrust and fill her up. She wriggled while his fingers kneaded her buns, and massaged the base of her tailbone, moving into her crease... Verity shivered. Lust was devouring her. "Now, Charlie," she gasped. "Now!"

Charlie plunged deep, and rode her almost savagely, bucking and sliding and thrusting. Her cunt swelled and clung to him as he ejected forcefully, far inside her.

The room resounded with the fury of their howls.

~ * ~

At work later that day Charlie couldn't stop thinking about her. He was glad he was alone in his cubicle, because he couldn't relax. It seemed like he'd been hard, aroused and ready, ever since he'd woken up this morning, Verity at his side, the scent of her thick in his nostrils, her breast cupped in his hand...

Stop it! He felt like one of those guys on Viagra, whose penises were stuck on go.

He made an attempt to focus on his computer screen. The Shreever was really riding him this morning, and maybe he had good reason. Charlie knew he hadn't been exactly attentive to his work. Shreever was pissed off about something, though, and Charlie recalled the man's attitude the day before. Meeting him for a drink had been a dull exercise, particularly when the guy was so openly antagonistic. *If he wanted her that bad, he should have made his move before.*

Too late now. She's mine. Charlie intended it to stay that way. He stood up and stretched, eyes finding Shreever's. The man was quite capable of making his life hell. *Give some guys a little power, and they go crazy...*

Charlie froze, eyes fixed on Shreever's. A trace...a scent, maybe? Something, lodged deep in his memory, was wriggling free. The smell was familiar; so familiar Charlie hadn't registered it then—had never thought about it till now. It had been there, reminiscently irritating, over the scent of the beast. The smell of the aftershave wasn't bad...only the stink of the creature who wore it.

Hatred, venomous antagonism, feral bloodlust. Some emotions were so strong they had a physiological effect on

the body. Just as venomous expressions could be identified by the narrowing of eyelids, the ferocity of downturned brows, the curling of the upper lip, hate sweat had a stink easily identifiable to the discerning nose. They didn't call it "venomous" for no reason. The poison carried through.

It carried through to me. In that moment, Charlie knew, remembered, and Shreever's expression confirmed it. The man, in some misguided attempt to diminish him, had been his attacker—the one who'd bitten him all those years ago.

Are you sure? He might be jumping to conclusions. Shreever was a living irritation. It was what he did.

Charlie recalled something else. When he was in wolf mode, his two middle toes fused together. He scarcely thought about it now, but several years back, when he was in lycan mode, it had driven him wild, and he'd bitten and snapped at his own toes, frustrated beyond measure. He'd done a little research, and been struck by the weirdness of it. Israeli wolves had fused toes, but North American didn't. Wherever his wolf genome originated, it wasn't on this continent.

Gary Shreever had boasted for years about his time in Israel. He'd visited a kibbutz, where things "got pretty wild", he always claimed.

Wilder, apparently, than anyone suspected.

Charlie's nostrils flared and he returned Shreever's glare now with narrowed eyes. The man might not know it, but the day he'd bitten Charlie Ascott he'd created his own worst enemy.

~ * ~

Verity couldn't believe how much a person's perspective could change. Twenty-four hours ago she'd been dreading an encounter, but now—even though it had been less than three hours—she couldn't wait to see him. *Charlie*. They'd decided to play it cool at work, to avoid arousing questions, jealousies, gossip, but Verity didn't care. They'd be meeting for lunch, and after work... She wanted to giggle like a schoolgirl.

She'd barely stepped out on eleven when Gary Shreever popped out of the woodwork, or more accurately, out of the other elevator. She recognized him immediately.

My midnight caller. That was why he was so familiar. For six months, not all that long ago, the man had been everywhere she looked, until she'd learned to ignore him.

She desperately wanted to ignore him now. He was rapidly spoiling her pleasant mood.

Gary didn't want to be ignored. "I hear Charlie's something of a wolf," he said.

~ * ~

Verity was waiting at the restaurant when Charlie arrived. She'd been deliberating how to handle this. Charlie had to realize that Shreever wasn't a threat—not really.

"I can't hurt him." Charlie was so angry he was rigid. "The problem is, I want to."

Verity rested a hand on his arm. Charlie wasn't the only one who'd done research on werewolves. She blushed as she admitted, "There was a time when I thought I'd be a 'lone wolf' forever." She smirked. "I did some reading." She hesitated.

Charlie's anger faded, a glimmer of humor reappearing in his eyes. "Go ahead. You know you can tell me anything."

"I made a purchase."

His eyebrows went up. "Brown bag purchase?"

"Fool." She elbowed him. "Li-Like a cologne." She lowered her head, avoiding his eyes.

It took Charlie a moment but he got it. "I see. You mean bait, don't you?" He squawked, outraged. "You weren't using that on me, were you? I mean—"

"No!" She cut him off, then leaned against him, nuzzling his jaw. "I didn't need to." She nibbled his earlobe, then murmured firmly, "You didn't need any help." Charlie still wasn't convinced. The last thing Verity wanted was to hurt him. "I was afraid to."

"Afraid of me?" Charlie sounded anxious.

Men! "No!" She slipped her hand under the table, delicately cupping his cock. He was already stiff. Now, he bulged in his pants. "I take that as a compliment," she whispered.

"You better." He nibbled her earlobe.

Her eyelids were growing heavy with passion. "We're in a restaurant," she reminded him unnecessarily. "There are people around."

He'd moved to the tender skin beneath her ear. "Which is why you're not flat on the table right now," he murmured.

"Fool." She smiled, happier than she could ever recall being. "Now, about that cologne."

He gave her neck a last, lingering kiss, then lifted his head. "You're right. We don't need any help." He added wryly, "Any more passion, and we'd be doing it in the open."

Verity cleared her throat. Charlie's hands were roving discreetly under the table, up her skirt and along her panty line. "I'm speaking." She giggled when his fingers walked along her crotch. "Stop it."

He paused, offering her an intelligent look. "Do go on."

She chuckled throatily, then told him, "It was an internet thing. One of those werewolf sites where there are scientific papers on lycanthropy at the end. I followed it, even hit the ads." Her cheeks grew warm. It was embarrassing to admit how desperate she'd felt; how fearful of being alone. "Anyway, there were some testimonials from supposed werewolves—"

Charlie's ears perked up at that. "Anonymous?"

Verity nodded. "'Lone Were' was one of them. Said she didn't really want to play 'lonely Were' any more. She'd used the pheromone cologne—and it worked."

Charlie sniggered. "In Shreever's case? It may be his only hope."

Charlie's hand was still resting on her thigh. She repositioned it, so his fingers were probing her creases. "Charlie?" she crooned. "'Stop it'...some more."

~ * ~

Later that day, Shreever came out of the elevator at his and Verity's planned meeting place...but it was Charlie who met him, not Verity. "Hello, Shreever," Charlie said, friendly enough. "Got something for you. Cologne," he told him pointedly, shoving it into his hands.

Shreever took offense and tried to hand it back.
What a dick! The guy thinks I'm saying he smells.

Charlie controlled himself with an effort, but his words still came out as more of a growl. "No reason to be a lone wolf, mate." He was struck with a brilliant thought. He took back the box with seeming reluctance. "Don't know whether I should let it go."

"What the hell is it?" Toughly.

"Let's call it an attractant." He gazed pointedly at Verity, who'd just stepped out of the furthest elevator. Her smile was warm, heated even, and it was obvious her gaze was only for him. Charlie sighed, and slapped Shreever on the back. "Passing of the torch. Once you got one of 'em, though, you gotta be ready to commit." He smirked. "Because *they* are." He did his best to sound doubtful. What he really wanted was to howl with triumph.

Shreever, however, was silent. Then, "Must be potent..."

It was a dig, a cut, a slur. Charlie Ascott couldn't have gotten Verity Connors without it.

Bloody hell.

Charlie tensed, his fingers twitching. He bared his teeth, then tried to pass it off as a smile. In truth, it was all he could do to avoid tearing the guy's throat out. "Yep," he managed, shoving the box back into Shreever's hands. "Use it in good health."

Epilogue

For a few days after the next full moon, Shreever was conspicuous by his absence. Verity, accustomed to his rather irritating and ill-timed appearances, asked after him.

"Oh, he's okay," Charlie assured her, grinning widely. "The fool decided to give your potion a try...while he was running with the pack."

Verity's eyes widened. "Oh my God!"

Charlie's arm slipped around her casually, a sign of ownership. He tilted his head to eye her tensely. "Wolves mate for life, you know."

Verity knew him too well. Charlie was nervous. He wanted to know whether she felt the same way he did. She sighed. The human part of her still wanted to know he cared; that this wasn't just an affair of convenience.

And lust. *We can't forget the lust.* It seemed she could never get enough of him. Her heart was thumping, but she strove for nonchalance. "I'd heard that," she remarked.

He nodded, but none of his moves were smooth now. He pawed inside his jacket and withdrew a ring box, before dropping to one knee. "Verity, would—"

He was terrified. She saw it in his eyes. In that moment he was uncertain, and there was enough of the moon mutt left in him to peer at her with almost frantic loyalty. It thrilled her, wooed her, convinced her. No doubts. "Yes, yes, yes! I love you, Charlie."

He sprang up and took her in his arms. He slipped the ring on her finger, kissed her, held her tight.

Later, as they were strolling to his car, he dangled a

gold chain in front of her. "For those days when a ring doesn't fit." He grinned confidently.

My one, my only. "Hope you have a chain for you, too," she retorted, giving his bun a squeeze.

"Nope." He waited for her reaction, then chuckled throatily. "A collar. Lone wolf no more."

About Melody

N. D. Hansen-Hill writes fantasy, science fiction, paranormal, and horror novels, while her alter ego, Melody Knight, pens romantic prose. Whether horror novel or erotic novella, all ND's and Melody's books are suspenseful.

When she's not writing, ND oil paints, and now has work in 8 countries. She is also studying archeology, with the goal of one day doing contract archeology throughout the Pacific rim.

Her books are published widely, with 40 published or contracted by Cerridwen Press, Double Dragon, The Lotus Circle, Five Star, Linden Bay Romance, Red Rose Publishing, Fictionwise, Drollerie Press, Cyberwizard Productions, Books In Motion, and Carnal Passions.

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