



# Legend: The Wolf

By

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## Prologue

*Millions of spiritual creatures walk the Earth,  
Unseen,  
Both when we wake and when we sleep.*

--John Milton

The dark heaviness of night pressed down firmly on my chest, forcing me to wake from the nightmare that had taken hold of me. This wasn't the first time I had seen the creature, no, he had come to me in my dreams before. But this time, I was fully frightened that he might not be just a dream, that he might be real.

My eyes peered through the shadows of my bedroom looking for the beast, for an answer as to why my heart was beating frantically against myself.

The moonlight shined in through the narrow slats of the blinds that appeared to be bathed in white light. The cherry colored dresser and armoire stood motionless with the stale, humid air.

I pushed the white sheets and sage green comforter off my body and took a sharp inhale trying desperately to combat the feeling of suffocation that enshrouded me.

My small hands reached for my forehead and sloppily wiped off the beads of sweat that were racing down my cheeks and resting gently in the crook of my neck. My hair was plastered to my head and felt heavier than the sweltering heat that lived in this room.

I stepped out onto the warm, laminate wood floors and trudged mindlessly to turn on the air conditioner. I pushed the button to 'on', but nothing happened.

I moaned silently and cursed the summer heat for breaking the air conditioner and for probably costing me a few hundred dollars in repair. The last time the air conditioner needed repaired I ended up paying a \$146 for a new wire. Damn rip off.

I looked to the kitchen and saw that the kitchen night light was on pressing a soft, white light to fold over the shadows of the darkness. I opened the refrigerator, slightly closing my eyes to the blinding shimmer that only man-made light can cause and felt the soft chill dance upon my drenched skin and sweat-ridden, crimson silk nightgown.

My right hand reached for a bottle of water, hoping that I might quench the thirst that had taken hold of me.

Summer nights in Florida are never fun, especially if the air conditioner is broken. The temperature earlier in the day reached over ninety-six degrees and lingered into the night, relentlessly cooling itself only a few degrees. So, the heat remained only to further my discomfort.

I guzzled down the water and felt it shatter the heat of my mouth and throat as it wound its way down into my stomach. The freezing liquid boiled the top of my skin forcing several chill bumps to surface. I shivered.

Still, the heat surrounded me, suffocated me, and enshrouded me as if I was living in a nightmare, as if the very air held my demise, held danger like it was panting for

breath.

I swallowed a few more gulps of water and realized I had to pee. I guess the nightmare had squeezed my bladder so that I was forced to use the bathroom. I absolutely hate that.

I sheltered my eyes with the palm of my hand as I flipped the switch. The bright, yellow light of the bathroom shone through my hands and I squinted harshly into the well-lit room. I placed the cold water bottle on the white sink, passing a beige towel rack and finally resting my tush on the cold toilet seat. Porcelain doesn't care if the heat is sweltering, it will always remain cool.

I looked up at the gray walls and then to the black, beige, and gray shower curtain and realized that my bathroom was very modern. Not only in the design, but also in the architecture. Chrome rods and shower hooks lined the white porcelain tub while granite with silver streaks embedded itself upon the rim and up the side wall. The tub was larger than most, fitting comfortably two people although usually, only one person could be found lounging in it, me.

I sighed heavily into the stifling air, struggling to meet some sort of a breeze when I heard a slight muffle, a slight creak.

I know it's only a muffle, nothing more, but still the stream beneath me stopped, occasionally dripping one or two drops into the large bowl. I reached for the soft, white toilet paper and cleaned myself as fast as I could. My pulse was hysterically beating against my skin like a butterfly beating its wings against a net, trying desperately to escape.

I took another deep breath and tried to calm myself down. It was just night sound, a creaking piece of furniture, nothing more is what I kept telling myself. But I didn't want to believe the logic. I couldn't.

The dream that I had only moments before had told me of a dark shadow that would forever haunt me. I know it was just a dream, but my dreams tend to fall into reality. Cinderella was wrong; I never wanted any of my dreams to come true because they were just too brutal and horrifying.

The dream's prediction of a dark shadow was more than just shadow; I had seen teeth, claws, and lust so forgive me if I was more than just a little startled over hearing creaking furniture.

I swallowed again feeling the thick air glue itself to the insides of my throat, closing it tightly so that I could no longer breathe. My mind at once ran. The panic set in so fast that I couldn't struggle against it; all I could do was scream silently as my mind filled itself with chaos, with gnashing teeth and tearing claws of the creature from my dreams. It was like a volcano had just erupted and everyone was running around, trampling their own mothers.

My knuckles turned as white as the sink as they grabbed tighter. I don't remember standing up on the gray tiles, nor gripping the sink, yet here I am facing the mirror and looking at myself with obscene horror.

My eyes were still green, only darker due to the fear that was racing through them. My cupid-bow pink lips cringed into themselves forcing me to accidentally bite the corners as I struggled to maintain composure.

I slammed my hands on the porcelain counter and forced my mind to cooperate. There was nothing here. There was no reason to panic, no reason to believe in the

nightmares that had plagued me this past week.

My tensing hands reached for the medicine cabinet and I pulled out a few prescription pills, just to calm down my nerves. I suffer from anxiety, among other things, and occasionally, I take a few Valium just to settle my mind. I'm not fond of the damn pills, but in situations like this, they were a necessity.

I swallowed the pills and the cold, crisp water down my tightened throat and breathed steadily in through my nose and out of my mouth. The breathing exercises helped, although they were only short term. Another wave of panic and fear would soon be here and I would be screaming silently again into the mirror.

I looked back at my ruddy face and knew the panic had pushed all of the blood down to my heart leaving me pale and gaunt. Normally I have a natural tan left to me by my Seminole ancestry, but tonight, I looked like my mother, pale and freckled. I have several freckles that run over the bridge of my nose to the tops of my high cheekbones.

So, I focused on them. If I could count every single one of them, then maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't allow that fear to take me again before the valium kicked in.

I pulled my dark hair back into a ponytail so that I could better see the multitude of brown spots that covered me.

I started to count, one, two, three...

Another muffled sound.

Shit.

My heart started racing again tormenting my veins and arteries to work harder and push faster than ever before. The surge of adrenaline ran through me, forcing every muscle to convulse, forcing my lungs to hold and yet breathe faster. I shouldn't panic, it was just a nightmare and they don't come true. At least, they shouldn't come true.

I clutched at my chest, praying to slow this down, praying to make this stop. I closed my eyes and tried for the breathing exercises once again. In through the nose and out through the mouth. Again. In through the nose and out through the mouth. Again.

Slowly, my body began to calm down. I looked back into the mirror and hoped that the surge of blood had moved the valium into the stream and that at any moment; I would be ready to sleep.

I shuffled along the floor, pushing my stiff and sore body closer to the king-sized bed. The green of the walls was bathed in the moonlight making it look white instead of sage. But the walls weren't important and they wouldn't be able to distract me long enough to calm down. I needed to hide under the covers, shelter myself from my own imaginative fears.

My knees sidled against the soft, downy bed and the rest of my body followed suit. Adrenaline can only last so long before the muscles fall apart and scream for sleep.

I lie horizontally across the comforter and felt the water in my belly slosh around as the weight of my back forced it deeper into the mattress. I hated lying on my belly but I didn't feel like moving.

My fingers tried to dance, to tap, to vent excess energy but to no avail. The valium had indeed kicked in and I was fully relaxed. Every muscle, every breath, slowed. I could hear the faint whisperings that used to be blood sluggishly flow through my veins and rest silently in my barely thumping heart.

My eyelids shuttered, just barely, as they fell atop my eyes closing the moonlight from my sight, closing the room to my cognizant mind.

I lazily opened my eyes again and peered around the room. The moon had shifted in the sky and the light was now dancing in the corner of the room, where a lamp rested.

I really needed to sleep. But I couldn't. Something wouldn't allow me that wish.

Perhaps it was the air, the stifling, hot, and humid air that kept me awake. Although, being born and raised in Florida your body gets used to the heat so much so that when the temperature drops down to sixty degrees, you literally freeze to death.

So, no, it couldn't be the heat.

The heaviness of the air had once again forced me to rise and I leaned up against the cherry colored bed post. The cool wood soothed my sweaty back even as the hard bed post edges dug into my soft muscles.

The valium was still in my system, hugging my neurons so tightly that I couldn't muster a reaction even if I was sleeping with the devil. I was sluggish, so sluggish. And yet, I was wide awake.

My ears pricked in the darkness and the same muffled sound echoed softly through me. I tried to focus, to hear the sound fully this time instead of just panic around it. It was deep, low, and bass-like almost like a growl.

But I didn't own a dog, nothing would be growling in my room.

My stomach flipped and I suddenly had the sharp distinct feeling of nausea creep into my sluggish system. The butterflies that were once pounding against my skin were now frantically dancing in my belly as that same fear decided to announce its return.

As much as I wanted to gaze throughout the room to see if a nightmare had come alive, I wasn't allowed to. Even with the soft ebb and flow of adrenaline the pills were still conquering the fear. At any other time, I would have congratulated the creators for making a drug that works, but for now, I wanted to scream and run away.

My eyes worked through the shadows, pushing the light into the dark corners and until...I froze. I couldn't breathe. For a moment, my heart stopped.

Two bright yellow oval eyes glared at me from across the room. I couldn't see very much else but I knew the horror that was about to beset me. The black of his body hid in the darkness pronouncing those vivid gold eyes. Even though everything was hidden, I knew this wasn't a person. I knew something otherworldly, something ethereal was staring intently at me. I had seen him before, seen his claws and his teeth before in a dream. But was this a dream or reality that I was looking at now? Did it even matter?

His body stood erect and tall against the moonlight and the faint bristle of hair shivered under the faint glow. In the darkness I could see the rigid ears and watch as the lips pulled back displaying very white and very sharp incisors.

I gaped visibly into those distinct eyes and saw a beast living behind them. It wasn't a beast that has a name, no, this was supernatural. This was the stuff of myth. It squirmed and howled behind those eyes, threatening to devour me, threatening to tear me limb from limb.

As I continued to stare, my heart pounded faster and more erratic sending shockwaves of frantic heat throughout my terror filled mind.

But this wasn't real. This couldn't be real. This is what doctors call a night terror, nothing more than a dream so vivid, it feels tangible. After all, the creature was in a suit, an honest-to-God suit. He wore a black tuxedo and white shirt with a black tie that hid the tail underneath a black vest. He looked like a bad mix between *The Godfather* and *An American Werewolf in Paris*. Only this thing was stately and, for lack of a better

word, beautiful.

Again, those hungry gold eyes continued to hold my gaze and there is nothing, not logic, not intelligence, not anything that will allow you to talk or think you're way out of this.

Regardless of how smartly dressed he was, I knew for a fact that this was real and he was about to pounce. I was going to be his meal. Whether or not he used a knife and fork or just teeth and claws made no difference, I would still be dead.

If I could have screamed, I would have. A soft, high-pitched sound was all that managed to squirm its way out of my mouth when I opened it.

And that was enough to force the creature to attack.

## Chapter One

*I walked aimlessly in a desert, the shifting sands piling underneath my feet. The air was dry and hollow, hot but not humid. I placed my small hands over my eyes to shield them from the harsh winds, keeping the debris from piercing my sight.*

*I could hear him calling my name on the endless sea of sand, "Anput. Anput".*

*My feet continued to trudge along through the sand towards the voice. I pushed myself harder, forcing the air to slice itself around me, allowing me through. But the sand seemed to hold me longer than it should have and would occasionally drown my feet with a sandy grip. The more I looked at my feet slipping into the cool darkness of the ground, the more they sank.*

*So I forced my gaze elsewhere.*

*The sky was dark blue and a few gray clouds rumbled in the distance. The thunderous applause that clapped in the heavens beat in time to my pounding heart.*

*"Anput," the voice whispered again.*

*I knew who the voice belonged to, and I desperately wanted to go to him. I longed to feel his touch, feel his intense power like waves of heat rush over me.*

*He was my life, my soul, my very essence and only when we were together did I truly feel alive.*

*My legs picked up speed and my thighs rippled outward to run in step with my determination. I knew he was close by, I could smell him on the breeze; smell his power like a breath of ancient sage and rosemary with the foul addition of rotting corpses and burning leaves. It was a scent that bristled the hairs on the back of my neck, a scent that spread my very being for him.*

*"Anput", he howled again, rumbling louder than the thunder that was now opening for the rain.*

*But Anput isn't my name. My name is Sophie.*

*The rain poured down in large drops pelting my soft and dry skin and flattening itself on the shifting sands. The ground beneath me became hard and easier to tread upon as it absorbed the cool water.*

*I finally brought my hands to my sides so I could see where I was headed.*

*All around me torches flared to life, signaling my own personal runway. I decided to follow the trail laid out for me, because I knew he had made it.*

*Who was it that was waiting for me?*

*As I approached, dark blue drapes ensconced a singular room where I could see an orange power exuding through the air. I couldn't see it exactly, but I could smell it. And the scent of my one true love embodied a power that could be felt, seen, and touched. It wafted on the rain-soaked breeze, leaving remnants of curly-cues breathing in the air.*

*I pushed the curtains to the side taking in the multi-colored pillows that lounged on the white stone floor. They circled him as he lay in the middle of the room, his tail wagging slightly and pointing downwards.*

*"Anput," he said with a hushed growl.*

*My feet stepped on the cold, stone floor and the smell of death and decay stopped*



*me. I turned around to look over the sands that I had just walked and saw millions of corpses instead. They were piled endlessly on top of each other; white dry bones littered the landscape while a few browned skins blew in the heavy breeze.*

*I knew at once he had caused this.*

*"It was for you," he said, pushing an ivory vase in the shape of a cat into my hands.*

*"He's in here," he continued touching my shoulder and allowing the black fur to caress my skin. His touch always had a way of touching more than just one area, I could feel him all over and I knew I was safe.*

*The smell, though, of rotting corpses and desiccated bodies pounded against me, and locked my heart away into a place that could never be opened. For he could never be forgiven.*

*"Anput", he said again.*

*"That is not my name," I replied slowly and distantly.*

*His shiny, white claws etched their way around my waist, keeping him at my back. They slowly and surely slipped themselves into my belly, bringing five red lines of blood dripping down my naked hips.*

*"No," I said more loudly than I was accustomed to.*

*"I do this for you, Anput," he growled.*

*"My name is not Anput," I said turning on my heel to face those hungry gold eyes.*

*His white teeth bared at me and slobber washed over my face as his roar threatened to take the very heart of me. His large paws found my head and forced me to the floor as his anger rode louder and heavier upon me.*

*My heart sped up and pumped adrenaline through me, giving me the edge I needed to run away. But running is what he wanted. He could smell it now, he could smell my fear. And at any moment he would swallow me whole.*

*The green eyes of my body turned to face me and they said, quite simply, "Wake up".*

My toes prickled as the cool breeze meandered around them, tickling the soft baby hairs that rested tenderly on the knuckles. The chills aroused me from my sleep, whispering silently to open my eyes.

Big, brown eyes stared intensely over me. They had a smooth, green edge around the iris, creating a swampy, halo effect on his large peepers. I knew at once who it was, although, it was beyond dark and he shouldn't have been here.

The dream was still echoing in my mind as I drew up the courage to fully wake. Billy was shaking my shoulders gently, pushing my body deeper into the bed, forcing me to rub the sleep out of my eyes.

"Billy, what are you doing here?" I yawned, "How did you even get in here?" I asked. I keep several chain locks on my front door and several bars on my picture window and sliding glass door. After the attack that fateful night two years ago, I kept everything locked. Fear has a way of leaving one paranoid and heavily guarded.

My eyes turned to face the red digital numbers to discover the time, it was 3:12 in the morning, "Do you know what time it is? Are you changing?"

Billy Masterson is my safety partner. If either of us lost control either from too much drinking or too much emotion, we would call each other and try to calm the other

one down. To normal humans we were AA buddies, but the truth was far less attractive. We were werewolves and we needed to be kept in line. If Billy was here this late at night, then something had gone wrong.

“No, nothing like that,” he said, toning down the anxiety that was quivering on his lips.

Billy had been a werewolf since he was four years old so, he had much better control of his beast than I had, even though he is younger than I am. Billy was nineteen and enrolled at the local community college, working towards a business degree. He really didn't seem the type to sit behind a desk, instead, his black, punk rock hairstyle destroyed that image. He kept it spiky and hard from way too much product. There were at least five gold earrings in his left ear and two large hoops in his right. A silver hoop held tightly in his small nostril complementing his sharp nose. Nothing says Wall Street better.

My eyes lingered on the silver hoop and for just an instant, I wondered why he would be wearing silver, after all, isn't it dangerous for a werewolf? And then my mind became fully aware; werewolves do not fear silver because it does not hurt them. Now, if there are silver bullets, then it will hurt because it's a freaking bullet. No one is immune to a bullet.

I looked back to Billy who was wearing a bright blue vest that laid open on either side, showing off a white T-shirt that said, “Getting things done with Delores” portraying a woman with curly brown hair wearing a smile that was way too 1950's perfect. He always wore shirts that I didn't understand and every time he did, I would have to ask what they meant. Sometimes it was better not to know.

His khaki-colored cargo pants drooped slightly on the floor, occasionally being stamped on by the blue Converse shoes. I still don't see the appeal of baggy pants that show off boxers. I mean, really, pull your pants up. Women make themselves beautiful for you, the least you can do is make yourselves beautiful for them.

His right foot began tapping and suddenly I was well aware of the urgency of the situation because Billy doesn't tap his feet, “What's wrong?”

“It's Clyde,” he said simply.

“What happened to him?”

His large hands wiped at his forehead and it was then that I could smell it; depression. It rolled off him in waves, sending that sickly smell of despair rushing through me. I can't explain the scent exactly, but it reeks of days being in an alley and drinking oneself to death and laying effortlessly in vomit and refuse. I knew Billy hadn't done that recently (long story), but that was the smell.

“He's dead, Sophie,” Billy said as he sat down beside me gently pushing the mattress.

I reached for him and brought him in for a deep hug. Clyde was the newest member to the pack although he had been a werewolf for several years. He had recently moved to the area and as soon as Billy and Clyde met, they became instant sweeties. Clyde was very genteel and elegant. He was twenty years older than Billy, but age doesn't matter when it comes to love.

“I'm so sorry, Billy,” I whispered into his metal-infected ear and felt the harsh sting of the cool gold upon my lips. I really hoped that the relationship was too new for them to grow that attached, but time doesn't matter when you love a person. Especially if

you're soul mates. And Billy and Clyde were soul mates. They were perfect for each other. I had never seen a better couple before in my entire life. They literally oozed love from their pores, from their very being.

And that's when I noticed it, Billy wasn't crying. He was somewhat limp in my arms, but the pure reality of his lover's death hadn't set in yet. Billy was still in shock from it all.

I squeezed him tighter and held him because that's all I could do.

"How did it happen?" I asked and immediately wanted to shoot myself for asking such a rude question.

Billy pulled back from my arms and faced the wall. He was silent for only moments, but it seemed like an eternity. His shoulders slumped upon themselves and the soft, staggered breathing began to appear. He sniffled slightly and held his head in his hands.

I gently touched his shoulder, letting him know that I was still here but giving him enough space to feel like a man. In my experience, men never reveal their emotions, even if those emotions are overwhelming. They prefer anger to sadness, sex to cuddling, warrior to normal. So, I gave him space even though I just wanted to hold him and tell him everything was going to be alright.

But that wouldn't be true. Death takes the souls of the dead and pieces of the living. Billy was missing a piece.

"Matt said you need to see it," Billy managed, still gazing steadily at the sage green walls.

Matthew Davis was what humans would call an "alpha" if they didn't know jack about wolf packs. But a real werewolf pack is more than just an hierarchy, we are family. If any term suited Matt, it would be father. And his wife, Sheila, would be mother.

Werewolves have tightly knit communities; each person is treated as a person, not as a submissive or dominate. Contrary to popular belief, we don't sleep in huge naked puppy piles nor do we screw around with each other. We may be part animal, but we are also part human and the prudish side will always win hands down.

"What do you mean, see it?" I asked nervously.

"He thinks you can get a feeling or something by looking at it."

"Everybody knows I can't do that anymore, that it died as soon as I became a werewolf."

"Yeah, we know that," he said now facing me, showing his big brown eyes filled to the brim with tears, "please try. The least you can do is try."

"What happened, Billy?"

He just shook his head and continued to stare at the blank wall, determined to be an isolationist. But he had earned it, and so I managed to throw off the sage green comforter and walk towards the cherry drawers.

I shed the red silk nightgown that was torn in several places (I still kept it even after the attack, a constant reminder to stay paranoid), and rummaged through my drawers for something decent to wear. I wanted to take my time looking for clothes because I didn't want to "see" whatever happened to Clyde, but on the other hand, I didn't want to disappoint Billy, either.

It was a tough quandary, but in the end, I went with speed. I threw on a white

tank top and light blue jogging pants from the first drawer that I opened. I didn't bother myself with a bra because my breasts aren't large enough to require one and showing a bit of nipple through clothing never hurt anyone, especially at three in the morning.

I slightly trotted to the hallway closet, passing the bathroom and very small foyer and reached for my black ADIDAS sandals.

"Did you bring your car?" I asked Billy because sometimes he just had his bike. Not only was he a full-time student, but Billy was also a messenger so his usual transportation was a Huffy bicycle.

"No," he said coming down the hallway to catch up with me, "I didn't want to think about driving."

I left it at that. He didn't need to explain himself right now and I was pretty sure he didn't want to. Billy was in mourning, and whatever Billy wanted, Billy would get.

My keys rested tenderly on a wall peg beside the white door and they jingled as I swooped them into my hands. I gently shut the door behind us and tried quietly to lock up. I live in a condominium complex like many Floridians, so I try not to annoy my neighbors with loud sounds.

"We'll take the Jeep," I said. I don't know why I said that, it's not like I have five Jags just sitting outside in a garage. I guess I was trying to break the sorrow-filled silence with some sort of speech.

But Billy didn't have a smart ass comment like he usually would, so instead, my remarks came off as idiotic.

The red Jeep Liberty beeped loudly as the alarm signaled itself off. Normally, I wouldn't have a gas hog and before I became a werewolf, I drove a Yaris. But I needed the room to haul around a few shape-shifters and a bigger vehicle suited that need perfectly. A full on werewolf can grow up to eight feet in height and weigh over four hundred pounds. So, I needed the torque and the space.

I popped the trunk, (if you could call it that), and Billy placed his bike in the hold. The yellow bike shined brightly against the soft crescent moon.

I fixed the rear-view mirror checking to make sure I could see out the window and realized I hadn't done a thing with my hair. Oh well, I guess if I didn't mind a rat's nest in my hair then no one else would.

"Billy," I said, putting the vehicle into gear and feeling the leather grind underneath my legs, "I need you tell me what happened."

I glanced over at his body, hunched under the heavy pull of the seat belt. He shook his head and continued to stare out the window.

"Please, Billy, I need to know."

"I don't want to talk about it."

I turned onto 436 and waited for the light to turn green. At night, the lights will always change faster because they're based on movement detection. I was glad that I didn't have to wait the normal five minutes for the light to change because I didn't know how much more of Billy's pain that I could endure.

I don't remember ever seeing him like this before. I wanted to comfort him, but knew that if I did, I might hurt his manly ego. And he was already hurting enough. But I couldn't just sit here and ignore it. I had to do something.

So, I turned on the CD player. I had remembered listening to the Doors recently and I instantly regretted that decision.

*People are Strange* began to dance inside the jeep, forcing its melancholy mood deeper into the already depressed vehicle.

I turned it off. We didn't need help being depressed. We were already there.

"Clyde lives down Crane's Roost? Right?"

Billy nodded and said, "lived."

I concentrated more on my driving. I should have left him at my condo instead of dragging him back to Clyde's place to relive happier memories or to face a future that didn't include Clyde.

Crane's Roost used to be a normal, middle class playground for those who couldn't afford the 'burbs such as Lake Mary or Heathrow, but after a few housing developments and the building of Uptown Altamonte, Crane's Roost was now a highly regarded area. Before the downhill decay of the housing market, a one bedroom condo went for three hundred grand, nowadays, they sell for seventy thousand. Even though the prices have dropped, the neighborhood hasn't gone into disrepair. Palm trees still line the smooth sidewalks and smooth black, asphalt roads. White lampposts exude light enough so that people can walk their dogs with bladder problems without fear from shadows. And beautiful water fountains still erupt from the small lakes that surround the neighborhood.

As I pulled the Jeep in front of Clyde's condo complex, I instantly wanted to turn around and go home because I could smell it, if only slightly. The foul stench of rot and decay and fresh meat exploded through my body sending passionate chills down my spine.

I shivered slightly in the well-lit darkness and heard the passenger side door slam closed. Billy had already begun to trudge up the butterfly-bush path towards Clyde's white door.

My senses became fine-tuned as the smells from Clyde's apartment gently wafted on the breeze towards me. I had only been a werewolf for two years now and I still didn't have that great of control yet. And as that intoxicating scent of death poured through me, my body trembled even more.

I tried to take deep breaths to calm myself down, but that wasn't the best of ideas because the smell lingered heavily on the air and on my tongue.

I closed my eyes and focused on the sounds. If I could hone one sense, then the others seemed to shut down slightly. And if I could shut down the smells, that would be a very good thing. So I listened intently on the surrounding sounds; The crickets were still chirping their love songs creating a symphony that was interceded by the sound of passing cars. The soft gurgle of a dying muffler caught the exhaust pipe of a station wagon sorely in need of a tune-up. A baby was crying somewhere near us with its mother singing a sweet lullaby. The song was a little bit off tune, but the sound of her voice calmed the child down. That same voice echoed through me and relieved a little bit of tension that had built in my shoulders.

I opened my eyes but kept my hearing in check. I wanted to make sure that I didn't lose control inside that room. Because if I did, well...I didn't want that to happen. No one did.

I knocked gently on the door so I wouldn't disturb the neighbors and felt Billy's hand brush past my arm and turn the knob. Apparently, manners weren't needed tonight.

The smell hit me like a wall, thick and unmovable. I wanted to gag and rejoice at

the same time. The scent was undeniably death and I wanted to roll around in it, wallow in its liquid form, and swallow it down in chunks. Hence, the gagging. Sewage lined the smell like silver lining on a cloud, threatening to spill my bile all over the floor.

“How long has he been dead, Billy?” I managed.

“I don’t know. I last saw him at eight.”

Billy was crouching in the corner of the foyer, his head pressed against a black and white photograph of a seashore. His brown eyes held that hunger that I felt and I saw the rumblings of his beast stir. Billy had more control than I ever could because he had lived with his beast practically his whole life, but the scent was just intoxicating. The smell of pack, of wild death, of bleeding meat was almost too much for anyone to ignore.

He grasped my hand tightly and that otherworldly strength would have broken a normal person’s hand several times over. But I squeezed back. We needed the feel of pain, of strength, to carry ourselves through the room. Billy probably needed that to overcome his sorrow; I needed it to overcome my hunger.

Hand in hand we trudged down the narrow hallway passing many more black and white photographs of seascapes and lagoon birds before the hall turned into the living room. The walls were mauve with white cornice moldings wrapping around the ceiling. The sofas were white as well except there were a few bright red-brown gobs staining the very clean surface. Between the two sofas rested a glass coffee table completely destroyed into tiny, broken bits and wearing the same brown-red gobs as the couch.

As I passed by the blue and white oriental vase, I knew where the smell was coming from; Clyde was nothing more than hamburger strewn about that immaculate room. If the scent of our pack wasn’t on him, I wouldn’t have known who it was. His face was a shredded remnant of aged perfection with bits of white bone and gray matter sticking out at odd angles.

The entire inside of his belly had been ripped out, leaving torn intestines, liver and lungs seeping from their out-of-body posts. His ebony skin, although now in tiny pieces, was still as smooth as I could remember it. The skin no longer covered his entrails, instead, his entrails covered his skin.

I felt a hard grip on my hand and its sudden release as Billy ran back down the hallway and slammed the door behind him.

My eyes returned to the pulp in front of me. No human could have done this, only a monster could have.

“Hey, Sophie,” said a soft voice from behind me. Through the haze of death I smelled her vanilla perfume and the unmistakable musk of the feminine protector.

“Hi, Sheila,” I replied placing my head in-between the crook of her neck and shoulder. Like many pack animals, I had an uncontrollable need to constantly touch members of my family. Especially in times of distress. I was never much for inviting people into my personal bubble, but I needed that feel of safety running through my fingers and down my arms.

I inhaled her deeply and allowed that smell of serene calm replace the smell of death. Sheila’s vibrant, from-a-bottle red hair trailed over my face leaving hard, hair-sprayed curls landing with a thud on my smooth skin. In this kind of humidity, curling hair means lots of product and Sheila was living proof of that. And honestly, I’m surprised that her hair was still curled at three in the morning. She probably used more product than I originally anticipated.

Her small hands wound their way around my back, massaging me lightly in an attempt at sympathy. I breathed her in one last time and turned around to face the remains of Clyde.

As I looked over that torn and shattered body, I had to ask myself, *What the hell am I doing here?* I'm not a forensic scientist or a detective nor do I have a special license that makes me an expert at crimes scenes. I'm just a normal, everyday werewolf.

"I'm sorry you had to see this," Sheila said, "but Matt thought it would be best."

My eyes continued to roam over the battered and strewn corpse and I knew I didn't belong here, "I don't belong here, Sheila, I don't even know if I can control myself."

She touched my forearm lightly and nodded, "I know how you feel, but we need you. Your talents..."

"My talents?" I interrupted, "They disappeared the night I turned. I don't have those talents anymore."

I knew I should never have told them about my past abilities, but we were family, and we don't keep secrets from one another. So I told them how I had dreams and feelings and that whatever I dream or feel comes to fruition. Hence, my job as a psychic although now, I was more of a charlatan. I used to be able to read people, but I can't anymore. All I can do now is lie.

"We hoped they might reappear over something this dramatic," she said.

"Well, it's not, and it won't. The only thing I can offer to this pack is my loyalty and some money in case one of us needs medical attention. That's all I can do."

I donate to my family because we have to hire a specialized doctor whose primary concern is the health of the preternatural community and who can keep our existence a secret. And trust me, he doesn't come cheap. If there's an outbreak of fleas or ticks, don't expect us to run to CVS and pick up a flea collar. No, those are dangerous chemicals. The doctor is more of a shaman than anything and he uses herbs and the like to heal us. Therefore, health insurance is useless. What are you going to say on the form, outbreak of werewolf fleas? I'd like to see that explained to the plump nurse who now believes you should be in the loony bin.

I looked back at Sheila through the flashlight haze of early morning and dimmed lights. Her eyes were begging me to divine something from the scene and I knew I couldn't. The sixth sense that had plagued me since I was eight had vanished two years ago and frankly, I preferred it that way. And now I was being selfish and thankful that I couldn't help my family figure out who killed one of my wolf-brothers because I was glad the gift (I use that word loosely) was gone.

So, I was upset that I was here, upset that they had put so much faith in me. I couldn't walk in here and get a feeling or dream about the murderer, instead, I just felt hungry and embarrassed that I lusted over the corpse. It's really quite pathetic how tight I was getting and wet.

"Please, Sophia," Sheila began, "please try."

I sat down because my knees just didn't want to stand anymore and they buckled under the pressure of the scent. Cross-legged, Indian style, my favorite sitting position was all I could do. As my eyes rested on the shredded remains I breathed deeper. I inhaled that intoxicating scent and felt the bristles of my own power crawl along my skin like tiny biting insects. It raced in-between my thighs and out through my mouth as a

moan.

My beast was stirring. I felt the black jackal that was me rousing inside, threatening to come out and devour all that precious meat in front of me. It could sense the corpse, taste the body in the air, and it wanted to swallow it all. The black jackal growled from deep within and began that run up the tunnel and through my muscles. The beast was coming and I couldn't stop it.

I fell back into the blood feeling the cold, coagulated liquid soak my tank top to my skin, feeling the sensation of sticky sweet crimson drown my back. My beast pushed against my body, pushed to lick up that treasured blood, to roll around in it...

"Matt!" Sheila yelled from far away.

I knew what was coming and I didn't want it. The change is painful and intense because the skin, muscles, and bones literally rip themselves apart to change. Do you know what its like to feel your insides explode through your body and plaster themselves on the wall as that beast then eats it all back up? No? Then I can't explain it.

And I hate being in wolf-form. I only remember flashes of what I do, and those flashes I would rather forget. I remember the first time my beast emerged. My human body was littered all over Sheila's bedroom and my beast devoured it. I tasted myself like I was nothing more than spaghetti, swallowed my own muscles and bones and then puked them back up only to eat myself again.

In books and movies, werewolves just change forms but nobody tells you what happens to the human body, nor even the wolf body. Well, in simple terms, it gets eaten. I have to eat myself at least once a month, whenever there's a full moon or whenever I can't control the change.

Luckily, I have faint memories of the instances, but those memories are hard-wired into me and it makes me nauseous just to think about them. I've eaten a Pomeranian before, trash--a lot of trash. People throw out so many great tasting, rotting fast-food hamburgers and fries and...oh, shit the beast taking over. How do I know? Because under normal circumstances rotting meat is not what I crave.

"Matt!"

Sheila's arms drove my shoulders hard into the wet carpet, forcing my seizures to subside just enough to maybe, just maybe gain some bit of control. I felt the large frame of two hundred pounds slam me down against the floor. My beast perked up to the violence and I felt a sudden need to tear at the smooth, massive neck that was on top of me. I could hear his pulse, taste that power...his power rolled through me like a freight train bearing down on a pathetic dog with four broken legs, crashing on top of it, slicing and tearing it apart. His power literally forced my beast to run and hide, to find that dark, dank pit that it lived and stay there for as long as it could. I felt the jackal run back down that tunnel, away from that wild train of power and as soon as it did, my muscles began to relax.

Matt smelled like a thousand oak trees glittering in a damp forest. He wore the scent of the woods, of trees, of leaves, and of Stetson. He was both animal and man. He had grown accustomed to the beast that he was and the beast had grown accustomed to the human. Together they were symbiotic and strong. I, on the other hand, was just a straggled mess of one trying to dominate the other. I wasn't in perfect balance like Matt or Sheila. They wore control like a stripper wears stilettos, natural and painful. But I guess that's why they were the mother and the father of this dysfunctional family.



I opened my eyes and stared into the Caribbean blue of Matt's eyes and took a deep breath. His power rode over me in waves of hot orange, suffocating the scent of fresh meat, filling me instead with the scent of the forest. His square face towered over me and his thin lips smiled gently.

"I'm sorry," he said in a deep, ruffled voice. His voice always sounded like a mix between his beast and a man, "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't," I managed hearing a soft growl pour through my mouth. That definitely wasn't my voice.

"I did." He nodded his head toward my forearms and a few lines of blood dripped softly down, mixing with Clyde's.

"It doesn't hurt."

"It won't yet, but I didn't mean to."

"I know, you helped me," I said still with a deep, bass-like voice.

He shook his head. I don't think he ever fully came to terms with what he was, because I knew he didn't like hurting people even if that meant saving their life. And honestly, the scrapes didn't hurt that much. Matt had given me just enough power to swallow my own beast, to keep it from rising. So, I didn't mind the scrapes.

"That was close," Sheila said now lifting her arms from my shoulders, "If she had turned, I don't think I would have been able to control myself, either." She sat back on her calves and rubbed her forehead as if she was suffering from a massive headache. I knew that gesture. She was still dealing with her own beast.

Matt jumped off me landing squarely on his brown, bloodied loafers. His normal attire of a polo shirt and pleated khaki pants were still in his closet because tonight he was sporting a blue t-shirt and jeans. Matt had his shirt tucked into his jeans giving him the 80's appearance of a tight-tuck which would definitely tell women his age. But women didn't matter to Matt, only one did, Sheila. They were high school sweethearts and had been together for twenty some odd years. I know it sounds selfish to think of this right now, but it pissed me off how everyone around me had someone and all I had was my job and my beast.

Well, not everyone had a special someone now. Billy had lost Clyde, his soul mate, and the more I thought of that loss, the more I hated myself for thinking of only my well-being.

"Sophie," Matt said, turning my attention to him, "do you feel anything?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, nervous about voicing my concern over my selfishness.

"Can you divine anything?"

Oh, that.

"What exactly do you expect from me, Matt? You know I can't do that anymore, so why did you bring me down here, or better yet, why bring us all down here? He smells like food, Matt."

"I know, I know," he said nodding his head in agreement, "it's just that, well, looking at Clyde like this, I want answers. The cops sure as hell won't find who did this, so its up to us."

"Why? Why is it up to us?"

"Because he's family, Sophie. That's why."

I shook my head and realized I was angry. I don't know the reasoning nor the

logic behind my rage, all I know is that I was angry. I could take a guess and say it was because this was a waste of time. I'm not going to bad mouth the dead, but right now, Clyde wasn't important. We had all risked our beasts by just coming here, risked our lives. If our beasts had escaped us, who knows how many more would be dead? How many more would have their intestines ripped out? How many innocent humans would have been murdered just because we couldn't control our beasts?

This just wasn't something we should be dealing with. A mangled corpse is for the detectives to figure out, not some rag-tag Scooby-doo werewolf squad who are likely to go ape-shit and kill everyone in our way.

I looked back to the body and, as much as I wanted to swallow it down, my logic kicked in and I noticed that not a damn piece of him was missing. Sure, there was blood and meat piled endlessly in the large room, but muscles weren't missing, the heart wasn't missing. Everything that a monster like us would have eaten was still here. So, what the hell did this?

"Matt, what happened to him?"

"It looks like an attack."

"I don't smell pack on him."

"Neither do I, so it wasn't a werewolf."

"Then what?"

"That's why we're here, Sophie. Would the cops really be able to handle the answer of supernatural? I don't think so."

Being a werewolf is a closely guarded secret. There are rumors of our existence, fiction of our existence, but never any proof. And that's how it should be. We are a danger to society and if word got out that we were real, well, panic would beset so many that countless would die just in the stampede.

There are millions of spiritual and supernatural beings on Earth. Everything from demons to vampires to mermaids to leprechauns exist. According to scientists, 95% of the world's creatures that once existed, are now extinct. But what the scientists don't know, is that 15% of that number are in hiding including the unicorn, abominable snowman, and even Nessie types.

There are some deadly creatures out there and even Matt will not utter certain words in the darkness for fear of them hearing. Added to that, no one knows everything that prowls the darkness.

And knowing that, as I look at this body, I realize that anything could have killed him. And that Orlando's finest were useless.

"Well, do you have any ideas?" I asked.

"None. That's why we brought you here. Give us something, Sophie."

"I can't."

"Please try."

I sighed and continued to hold onto his hand. I still needed him to steady my beast so that I could concentrate. I closed my eyes and focused. But what do I focus on? I felt Matt's pulse run through his palm, heard the countless cockroaches roam underneath the floorboards because no matter how clean a place is, those bugs are just everywhere. I'm pretty sure that if the end of the world comes, cockroaches will be the only things that survive.

Besides the cockroaches were hoards of maggots chewing their way through the

rotting muscles, eating their way to morph into a fly, eating away at my friend.

For a split-second, a slight rage boiled just under my skin, angry and terrified that Clyde was nothing more than food to over a million hungry insects. The bugs didn't care that he had a style no man, nor even woman could match, they didn't care he had a lover who was also his best friend, and they especially didn't care that he was ever alive in the first place. All Clyde was to them was just a meal.

I squeezed my eyes tighter and swallowed so loudly I must have sounded like I was choking on a frog. If only. I was swallowing a lump of emotion that had been steadily growing since I first set foot into the place and I didn't like it one bit. There was too much loss in my life, too much to even mention. Adding Clyde to the list certainly wasn't helping anything.

I felt a slight jolt from Matt's palm as his pulse reminded me that I was trying to help. I noticed that as I listened and focused on my surroundings, that I was honing with my werewolf skills, I wasn't just feeling. It's difficult to block out the sensations of life crawling all around you to focus strictly on the dead. The dead only gave one thing, smell. And I didn't want to dwell on that anymore. I tried to release my five senses, to embrace the sixth one, but nothing came. There was too much life all around me, from the leaves that rustled outside to the faint smell of burning tobacco...

"Anput," the voice said. It was like my dream, except closer, tangible. The word was so full of feeling that I could touch it, watch it materialize in my hands. I knew that voice, I think. Was he really here? Or was it just a dream? I couldn't really tell. And as soon as I focused on that voice, it was gone.

There is always more to see out of the corner of the eye than there is in looking straight ahead. Some fey can't even be seen by staring directly at them. Perhaps that's what this intangible and yet very solid being was, not fey, of course, I would be able to smell daisies and daffodils (because that's what fairies smell like), but perhaps this dream creature had a few of those characteristics. He was real and yet, no, he couldn't be real. After all, I didn't dream anymore, I didn't 'feel' anything anymore. This was all just a figment of my imagination.

I should probably stick to my medication.

"I don't know," I said releasing Matt's hand.

"You don't know what exactly?"

"For a second I thought I felt something, but I can't describe it. And I don't even think it has anything to do with this."

"What do you mean?"

I shook my head, "nothing. It's nothing. I told you I couldn't do this. It was stupid to bring me here."

I didn't want them to know that I started to dream again, because perhaps, I hadn't. Even though I knew that was a lie. But I wanted to keep this dream, this vision, to myself. I didn't want the world to know about the dark figure that haunted me. I wanted him all to myself and I wouldn't share with anyone else.

The room suddenly became very close and stale threatening to drown the air and suck the life from the still living. I got up in a huff and made my way to the door and paused, "Do we have to eat him?" I asked. The supernatural, as I said before, is a close kept secret, any proof of any kind is immediately snuffed out.

"No, he didn't bother to change. He didn't even try to defend himself. He just

laid there. Lycanthropy can't be detected in blood or remains. So, he's safe."

I closed the door behind me and sat on the cold concrete sidewalk. I wanted out of that house. I didn't want to have to face this. I'm used to seeing shredded deer whenever we hunt, because, well we have to. But I'm not used to seeing shredded bodies, especially a friend.

Granted, I didn't know Clyde that well, but still, I had known him. I had watched him live, move around the picnics that we have every Sunday afternoon, felt his red wolf prowl beside me as we went hunting, and I had seen the love between him and Billy.

I placed my head in my hands and closed my eyes. All I could see was that desecrated body. All I could smell was the rotten stench of death. In a way the smell intrigued me, in another, well, I wanted to vomit.

My eyes opened and I looked up at the black sky; red lights from airplanes blinked down at me and overshadowed the barely there stars.

I knew I was being cowardly. And I didn't know why. I wanted to help my family, to contribute, to help Billy and to bring some peace to Clyde, but instead, I sat out here looking at discarded cigarette butts and man-made stars. I was being pathetic and selfish. But really, would you want to go back inside that death filled room?

Whether I wanted to or not, I stood up and went back inside. There's something to be said for destiny and curiosity. Or was there something to be said for revenge? I was scared and I think it was due to the fact that the killer could be a werewolf hunter and that this person or thing wouldn't stop until it killed all of us. So, I might have selfish intentions, but at least I'm trying to help.

"Matt, did you smell anything weird when you first got here?" I asked shutting the door behind me and walking carefully down the hallway.

"The usual," he muttered, "What are you doing back?"

"I'm really sorry, I want to try again."

"If you think you can, we appreciate it."

Matt was really too nice for his own good or maybe that's what brought out my better qualities. Because if he wasn't here, I wouldn't be helping them out now. I preferred to be on my own, a lone wolf if you will, and I wasn't used to the idea of a family. I spent my childhood being handed from one Foster home to another like ice cream in the wintertime, never being chosen. And until I was attacked that fateful evening two years ago, I didn't know I could ever have a family. So, I owed him. All of them.

If they had given me this curse, I would have hated them, but still, to this day, no one knows what or who caused my lycanthropy. Matt believes it was an out-of-town rogue wolf and I guess I would have to agree. But in public, with the other wolves in our pack, Matt told everyone that he had bitten me and given me the disease. He lied so that no one would think he was weak, imagine the head honcho letting something like that happen in his town, inconceivable. Besides, if other wolf packs heard about it, they would try to take over. That's just how animal instinct works. It's not logical, its all primitive and territorial.

I stood in the middle of the room, facing the dead body and destroyed coffee table. I didn't close my eyes this time nor allow any other senses to complicate my feelings. Instead, I let them come.

And the wrong ones came. I felt the flurry of sadness and depression oozing from

Sheila, the disappointment and fear from Matt, the insane rage from Billy who was racing down the street outside, and the passion and the lust from...from who? Me? No. Who was feeling that? Who else was in this room? They weren't the residual feelings from a corpse, that's for sure. Or were they?

"Were Billy and Clyde staying in tonight?" I asked.

"Yeah," replied Matt, "Why?"

"I can feel lust and love from him. Those were his last feelings," I said.

"His very last?"

"Yeah." When I said that, I had the sickly suspicion that maybe Billy didn't have everything under control. Sex and love can sometimes bring a beast to the surface depending on how passionate it is and according to these hot feelings of lust rolling off the corpse, that might have been what happened.

"It couldn't have been Billy, though, right?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" asked Sheila.

"His very last thoughts were of sex," I said, "not instant death."

For a moment they brushed it to the side, "how do you know?" Matt asked.

"I know that you're disappointed and fearful, that Sheila is depressed, and that Billy is beyond angry."

Matt sighed and walked towards me. He placed his large, smooth hands on my shoulders, "those are scents, Sophie. We can all smell that. Besides, Billy isn't capable of something like that."

I brushed off his hands and plopped down on a wooden chair that was placed in the corner of the room. I guess I had lost my abilities. I had gained new ones, but none that would help us here.

I didn't know how exactly that explained Clyde's last emotions, but I didn't need to question it either. If Matt could smell it, then it wasn't a clue.

"I'm sorry," Matt said, "you should go home. Take Billy with you. He needs you right now."

"Are you going to call the police?" I asked.

"I'll leave the door open, let the neighbors smell it."

"What about wild animals?"

"We were never here, Sophie, so we can't do anything stupid."

"But our DNA is all over the place."

"Yeah, but were friends, we've been here before. The cops will ask us questions but they won't suspect any of us."

"I can't leave him to the ravaging of vermin," I said.

"You have to. We have to. We can't know about this."

"Sheila, back me up here, this is wrong," I said in attempt to make my point.

"My husband's right, Sophie, we have to just leave him."

"This isn't right," I said and headed back towards the door. Part of me was angry with not being able to help and the other part was furious that there was nothing I could do. I had a super-smeller, crazy good hearing, better than 20/20 eyesight, Hulk-like strength, Flash-like speed and still there was nothing I could do.

If there was a can on the sidewalk, I would have kicked it, but a sign said quite proudly that there was no littering. I saw the occasional cigarette butt in the brown dirt as I meandered to my car. I knew I had to find Billy, but I just didn't want to deal with that

right now. I couldn't handle my own emotions much less the deranged anger that comes from the death of a loved one.

I know, it's selfish and ridiculous of me, but I couldn't help it. How was I supposed to face him and tell him that there was nothing I could do? That we had to rely on the police to solve a supernatural crime? If that was our only option, then we would never know who killed Clyde. Not only was it supernatural, but Clyde was Black and gay. There was no way, down here, that he would get the justice he deserved. It's the awful truth of living in the South, most people just don't want to admit it. So back off if all I wanted to do was go home and sleep.

## Chapter Two

I paced back and forth across my dining room floor carefully inspecting the laminated wood. As I looked at the fake pine I couldn't help but to think about Clyde. It had been a few hours since Clyde had knocked on the pearly gates and that image of his mangled body had not left my mind. It's hard to ignore a scene like that even if you're trying to focus on living an ordinary life.

I had taken up chewing my nails and pacing because I blamed myself. And if I stopped to think about my past regrets, then my heart became heavy and I would cry. I'm not one for tears, but somehow it was my fault that I couldn't 'read' the scene or divine anything from it.

And worse than that, I hadn't answered the phone since then. Matt had tried calling and I had just let him go to voice mail. I couldn't face them, I could barely look at myself in the mirror. I just felt so useless.

The soft pounding of a few knocks brought my attention from a fake knothole in the flooring; my one o'clock was here.

Just because life had gone to hell in a handbag didn't mean my business would be closed down. No, I still had bills to pay and give Caesar's things to Caesar. In other words, the federal government was still taxing me. I really wish they had some sort of loss clause allowing me take a few days off to mourn and only charging half the normal taxes. That would be nice.

I quickly lit a candle encased in a purple globe and pushed the 'on' button on the Airwick to release the scent of Sage and Pine. My customers believe in my skills because the mood is always right. Bring a person in a stark white room and say you can read their fortune, and they'll laugh at you five ways to Sunday. So, the dining room was decorated in a heavy Turkish motif with billowy scarves floating from the ceiling.

I ran my business out of my home, and because it was a one bedroom condo, every space was precious. Therefore, I turned the dining room into the fortune-telling room. Practical. Besides, who needs a table to eat pizza?

Along the side of the wall where the table rested, hundreds of small glass apothecary bottles had been placed on several shelves. Anything from love potions to truth serums could be found on that wall. Some were real. Others were pure snake oil. I usually sold the snake oil to my clients because real potions in the hands of amateurs would be like a horrible remake of *Dawn of the Dead*.

I walked past bushels of dried herbs including sage, rosemary, thyme, cilantro (which I used for cooking, but my clients don't know that), lemongrass, flame caps, and the list goes on and on. I usually pull a few twigs from the pile as a gift to my clients after a session for use in their home.

My bandaged forearm reached for the French door knob and with the other hand, I pulled the sleeve low enough to cover the wound. I regard my privacy highly, never showing any weakness so that no one asks personal questions. I especially keep to myself when a wound is caused by another werewolf because how exactly would I

explain the cuts on my arm? *Oh, its nothing, I nearly turned last night to go on a rampage to kill tons of human babies when my father slammed me into the ground forgetting how strong he was.* So, I tugged on the sleeve harder, fully covering the white bandages.

I pulled on the doorknob, revealing a mid-thirties mom of four who already had the title of Grandmother. Her cloudy blue eyes were camouflaged by the bright blue eye shadow that covered everything from the eyebrow down to the bottom line of false lashes. Whenever she blinked, her lashes danced like spastic jumping spiders on cocaine.

The woman was attractive if someone removed all that eye make-up, three shades darker than her skin foundation, bright pink lipstick, and bleached white hair. I was pretty sure she didn't bother with boxed hair colors, that her hair was indeed scarred with peroxide.

Today, her leathery skin was showing in places that a mom should never reveal, forcing one to look at her breasts that spilled over a tight, leather vest. She wore matching black leather pants that she must have been poured into and five-inch black stiletto pumps. She was obviously ready for Bike Week to start.

"Hi, Sophie," she said with a deep, musky voice that was ruined by smoking too many cigarettes.

"Ms. Jean," I said smiling softly, "how have you been?"

I took her hand and led her into the dining room where she sat facing the crystal ball and me. The table was round so that no one felt they sat at the head or the foot of the table. Everyone was equal here. Yeah, King Arthur had given me the idea, but it made sense. No one likes to feel inferior.

"Guess what?" she began, her eyes going wide with excitement and the need to spill the dirty details of the night before.

"Stop right there, Ms. Jean. Don't give me any hints. You know the drill."

Ms. Jean had been seeing me once every two weeks for the past year. She was definitely what I considered a regular along with several other customers. They fully believed in my abilities and paid handsomely for my advice.

Yeah, I'm ripping her off, but I also offer hope. And hope is more important to the customer than money, right?

As I sat across from her, I grasped both of her bony hands in mine and felt her large, fake diamond ring push into my skin. She still wore it even though she had been divorced for over three years.

I closed my eyes and breathed her in. The first smell that reached its way inside me was the stale scent of cigarettes entrenched in her clothes mating with the smell of overly powerful floral perfume that was probably backed by JLO or Mariah Carey. Past that, the musky flavor of sex bounded from her more delicate parts and I knew she had found a new man. He was probably a one-nighter based on the lingering smell of beer and usually it was my job to tell her. But like I said, I like to offer hope. It makes what I'm doing less sleazy. So, instead, I twist the readings to make it appear like she's doing the right thing.

I opened my eyes and gazed deeply at my globe, telling her that the answers will come from this thing made of plastic. My hands gently roamed over the surface, pretending to separate the imaginary mist within, allowing me to fully see her life.

"Ms. Jean", I said still smiling, "You have found yourself a new man." It's true, I



can see into the...present.

She gasped and shook her head, "How do you do that? You're some kind of special. What does it say about us?" she urged trying to see into the globe, bending over the table so that her breasts literally rested on the hard surface.

I removed a pack of Tarot Cards from a small, cherry colored chest that rested just beside the globe. They were ornately decorated with artistic pictures of queens, mermaids, and wheels. I didn't really know how to read them, but none of my clients ever corrected me. I think mainly because I never gave them a wrong answer and I was really vague on the future aspect of the whole thing.

I shuffled the deck slowly, allowing the cards to amble through my fingers (having animal-like quick reflexes allows me to perform otherworldly shuffles and it really gets the crowd on its feet). As the cards meandered over my hands, the soft chill of, for lack of a better word, magic, tickled at the cards.

I brushed off the sensation secretly hoping that the air conditioner had turned on. But it hadn't. I made sure to turn it off so that the aromas of sage, rosemary, and countless other herbs stifled the life-giving oxygen.

I had dreamed last night, and it wasn't a normal dream. The tickling sensations of a true reading were about me now. If the trend continued, I would find myself screaming into the night, watching as hundreds of people were murdered, raped, and molested. The only good thing to come out of my attack was the loss of this ability--I didn't want it to return.

So, I secretly prayed that the chills were from a machine.

"This is your past," I said placing one card face down in front of me, "your present," another card joined the first, "and your future."

Ms. Jean looked at the cards and then hungrily looked up at me, anxiously waiting for my fingers to flip her life over.

The first card I turned over, 'her past', was the Nine of Swords. "By the light of a crescent moon," I began, throwing my voice around the room to give it a hollow, more creepy and eerie sound, "a woman sits up in bed as if awakened by a nightmare. A silent cat watches her as nine swords float above her head," I paused and tried to remember the passage of the training manual I had memorized entitled *Ripping the Public Off VII* (it wasn't really called that, but it my hands, it should be).

"She crosses her arms over her chest to protect her heart. As evidenced by the swords, this woman is clearly troubled by some large problem, large enough to disturb her sleep. In your past, Ms. Jean, you agonized over something, your love life, and yet you walked through that problem alone, avoiding the true help that you desperately needed. This card reminds you to allow someone to reach out and comfort you."

"That is so true," replied Ms. Jean, slouching in the large, red leather chair.

The pull of soft, chilly wind once more echoed over my goose prickled skin. I shivered slightly into the hot and humid room. The scents of the mixing herbs nearly choked me as I took in a larger breath to continue on.

"You may feel like you're alone or your pride may stop you from calling for help, but this card, the Nine of Swords, says quite clearly--You are not alone and if you let your pride consume you, your future will be bleak."

"Oh, Lord," she said, placing a hand on her chest, "I promise I will look for help. The card reminds me, right, to seek help?"

“Yes.”

“Well, here I am. So, I’m finally doing something right with my life.”

I smiled again and felt a small twinge of guilt bite at my conscious.

So, I flipped the middle card. The Two of Cups. I began to quote the passage again, “A blonde woman...”

“That’s me!” she screamed silently into the heavy perfumed air.

I continued softly, nodding my head, “and a brunette man...”

“Dear Lord, that must be Jonathan!” She squealed with delight over the so-called truth of the cards.

“join under the shadowy light of the moon. Their union creates a unique energy that is mystical and beautiful...”

“That is so true. It was beautiful.”

“You are faced with the opportunity to partner with someone. The potential for creating something very special is there. Honor the gift of the moment and enjoy it.”

“Oh, I will.”

“But there is warning from this card. They are under a shadowy light. So enjoy the moment but do not let it enslave you.”

The chill of magic became harsh as I looked at both of the cards. It snapped at me and bristled along my spine. I could feel the cards coming to life, talking to me, telling me to embrace the past and present before me. They spoke in hushed whispers in the crowded room allowing every single word to become entranced in my mind. It isn’t technically magic, because there is no such thing, it is more like an entity, a spirit that allows this sight. And it is an awful thing. It doesn’t understand human emotion, nor does it understand suffering, instead it shows only the harsh truth. The more you ignore it, the more violent it becomes. The images and whispers begin to scream so loudly that the sudden icy chills of that power will break skin.

It has happened many times to me before. During particularly harsh dreams, I have woken up in a pool of my own blood.

I was thankful that I now was only a charlatan; I didn’t want to be real. I wanted to be a fake.

My eyes peered down at the Nine of Swords and the Two of Cups. The breeze shifted around me and I could feel my metaphysical shields being torn asunder. In the past, I had thrown up shields to protect myself, to keep the entity from telling me its secrets, but I hadn’t been using my shields these days because the entity had left.

But as I saw the shields tumbling down like the walls of Jericho, I knew the spirit had returned.

If I had any brains at all, I would have asked the fey what exactly the entity was. Fairies know every single thing about the supernatural world because they are the most curious beings a person could ever meet. They’re also the most dangerous. Albert Einstein was a fairy and look what he created, the atom bomb. So, as much as I wanted to know what exactly it was whispering to me, I also didn’t want the fairies to know my secret. Like I said before, they are dangerous, curious, and most importantly, intelligent. If killing you gets them ahead in the world, then so be it. They are not plagued with a conscious, so human life doesn’t matter. And they are downright creepy. A few months ago I met a tooth fairy, and trust me, you don’t want to know how the conversation went. In the end, I was suffering from twelve cavities that the wench had cursed me with. So,

asking a fairy for help? I don't think so.

The chill of the entity snapped at me, tearing me away from reality; from normality. I swallowed loud enough to choke on my own spit and to choke on the lies that had enveloped my home. I coughed steadily in the suffocating air, gasping for breath, holding my chest as if my heart were about to explode.

I suppose I looked like a flailing goose or a dying weasel but I didn't care. The power had returned albeit gently. The spirit or whatever the term was being gentle. It hadn't hurt me yet, instead it caressed the skin where it had slapped it, stroked the strangled suppression of breath, and if it had formed, I think it smiled.

Why would the spirit or whatever be smiling? It had left me and that's how I wanted it to stay and yet, here it was, prickling along my skin announcing its presence.

I heard Ms. Jean from a long way off, crying over my well being. She was in a type of awed hysterics, the way one is when they see Niagara Falls and I guess she was allowed to be. I must have looked like the greatest seer in the world because the spirit was flowing all around me.

"I'm alright," I managed, regaining some air.

"You're sure you're not having some kind of seizure?"

"Seizure? No," I shook my head, "I felt the power of the cards. Didn't you see it?"

She shook her own head, casting shadows across the failing candlelight and closed curtains. She swallowed audibly and the strong pungent aroma of fear crowded into the herb-infused room. My beast prickled at the intoxicating scent of sweat and pulsing blood and for just a moment, I stopped to listen to her heart. It thumped frantically against her chest, knocking a frightened hello towards me. I wanted to reach out and touch her, to feel that life that was all hers spill over me. The warmth of my beast began a slow cascade over my body, erasing the foul chills of the unknown entity.

My feet stepped closer to the pile of meat sitting so delicately in the chair and my nostrils drank her in. The stale cigarette smoke didn't seem to cloud the mouth-watering taste of nervous fear, of drowned horror, of metallic blood. After seeing Clyde, it was all I could do to maintain control and now her fear was seducing me, tempting me to gobble her up, waving her hot and moist flesh right under my nostrils like some punk kid eating a cupcake in front of Bally's. My breathing hastened and my feet wound their way closer, stalking towards my prey.

My ears prickled as her chair fell backward. With the sudden banging of sounds I finally looked at her with very human eyes.

She was slightly cowering in the corner of my dining room, squeezing a book entitled *Mythology: The Rise of Anubis*. I think she meant to hit me with the ten pound book to defend herself. My wolf laughed at the idea of her trying to protect herself with just a book. My claws could definitely take the book on.

With very human hands, I tore the book from her death grip and placed it gently on the shelf above her head. I knew that she had seen a part of my beast rise and that from now on, I had to be most delicate. I didn't want her to panic nor spread wild accusations and rumors to her friends. If word got out about this, not to sound so selfish, but my business could be ruined.

A soft growl rumbled through my mouth as I spoke, "Ms. Jean, the power of your future is strong and violent."

I wanted to be vague, I wanted her to believe that I saw the future and that the beast was not a part of me. I wanted her to believe lies instead of the brutal truth that she was my next meal.

“What, what do you mean?” she asked trembling and shaking.

“Please, sit back in the chair, I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

I offered her my hand and she looked at it with a deadly fear. She still saw me as an animal, and could I blame her? I wondered just how close to turning I came.

And yet, her hand met mine and she slowly sat in the red, leather chair.

“That’s never happened to you before,” she said warily.

“These feelings were particularly intense,” I replied sitting down in my own red leather chair. That was the understatement of the year. Not only did I have foul chills running across my arms, but the painful and intense heat of bloodlust was currently running through my pores, threatening to call my beast.

I took a deep breath and stared at the frightened woman across the table. Her blue eyes were more bright and intense than I had ever seen them before and she was wearing a face that screamed intelligence. As horrible as this sounds, I never saw her as a smart woman because her appearance and her believing in me I considered to be dense qualities. But there she was staring at me as if she knew, as if she knew that I was a fraud and that I was a werewolf.

But that couldn’t be true. How would she know? I could play off the scenes of earlier as just charlatan tricks but I wasn’t sure I could ignore that intelligence in her eyes.

Her body began to place itself upright and whorish, lifting and separating her leathery breasts back onto my table as she came closer to the globe and the cards.

“You’re real, aren’t you?” she asked.

For a moment, I didn’t know how to respond. I had thought she knew about my lycanthropy, knew I was a fraud and with that one single question, the intelligence was gone. I guess she wanted to believe in something more tangible, less fantastical. People will only see what they want to see.

“Are you believing that just now?” I asked trying desperately to crawl back into my con-man shell.

She giggled a little bit nervously and said, “No, I’ve always believed you were real, girl. But that performance really sealed the deal for me.”

“I apologize for that, sometimes I can’t control the power from the spirits,” and would you look at that, a few words of truth came from my mouth, “Shall I continue with the reading?”

“Oh yeah.”

I turned over the last card, the Knight of Wands, and felt a tad bit empty. The warm power of the beast was slipping away in to a dark recess and the cold power of the entity was no longer in the room. I was back to being normal, but a small part of me missed those feelings. Of course, I’m not going to admit that, but I wouldn’t be able to deny the truth for too long.

“A fully armored knight rides confidently and purposefully,” I began, “His stance and coloring indicate passion and bravery.”

“Was he fighting,” Ms. Jean asked, “Is that the power of the future you were feeling?”

Crap. I had forgotten about that lie. Oh, what a tangled web I weave.

“We shall see,” I said and continued on, “He is well rested and ready to take adventure where he finds it. This passion that you are feeling is dragging you ahead of the current. Instead of fear, you are excited and determined. You are ready for that same grand adventure. If one doesn’t come to you, you will go out and find it.”

“Does that mean me and Jonathan will have a great future?”

“Look closer at this card,” I said. And for a moment, I did. There was danger here, that I could feel as the soft ebb of chills harkened me back to only a few moments ago. The entity had returned, yet it was standoffish, distant, so I spoke the only words I knew to speak, “His horse is hidden by robes of red, barely peeking its eyes. A word of warning is written here, ‘Fools rush in where angels fear to tread’. Do not be taken by the current so much that you drown.”

“Oh my, so I have to enjoy the sex but not confuse it with love?”

The meaning is deeper than that, but this reading isn’t for her, it’s for me. I am in danger that much I know. And the cards didn’t need to tell me that; Clyde was dead and my dreams were returning. Something was definitely brewing...

“Exactly, Ms. Jean. I don’t know why you come to me, you would have already figured this out.”

“No, Ms. Sophie, I wouldn’t have. Those cards help me so much.”

She reached for my hands and squeezed them tightly with a soft tremble of residual fear, “Thank you for your help. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You’d be just fine, Ms. Jean. You’re a smart woman...”

“Well, I don’t know about that, but thank you just the same.”

“Is there anything else you need me to help you with?” I asked secretly hoping she would leave and I could either ponder the cards, or become a hermit and run away from all of this.

She took a deep sigh and frowned, “How much for a single card to get me through the day?”

I smiled, “On the house.”

It was the least I could do. After all, the reading wasn’t for her, it was for me. And I was charging her, using her for my own financial gains. Somehow, that seemed a little bit shady. So, I offered the reading free of charge.

My hand reached into the shuffled deck that was spread before me. I turned over the card and felt a small prickle of ice curl around my fingertips.

The Eight of Cups stood in my sight. I swallowed quite loudly and showed her the card.

“Is that card bad?” she asked.

I ignored her, knowing the foreboding that this card had for me, and began the description of the card, “A young man turns his back on a tumble of cups. A sleeping mole remains hidden, showing his blindness to the world. The man gazes off at the horizon before beginning on his journey. He has tasted from all the cups and found them lacking. Although they may have filled the thirst or the passion for the moment, they only provided a distraction from his destiny. The full moon rises and he cannot ignore its light nor its call, just as he can no longer ignore the voice of his soul, his spirit, his entity. The time for blindness is over and he must move forward,” I swallowed again and hoped that I had read the card wrong. But I hadn’t. I was being told to open my eyes, to

embrace both powers that resided in me otherwise, well, I would perish if I remained immobile and silent.

I wanted to slump down in my chair, to curl up and hide from this card because of the truth that it was speaking, that the entity was speaking. I didn't want to have to face both my powers and take them on at the same time because they were too intense. And that's what the card wanted me to do; it wanted me to marry the two powers and become whole. As beautiful and easy as that sounds, life is never that simple. I can still remember the power of the entity filling me with nightmares so vivid and frightening that I prayed for death and the power of the beast is just as scary. I couldn't allow them to both run through me at the same time; not only would it be painful, but it could be downright dangerous.

My hand rubbed across my forehead wiping a few beads of nervous sweat onto the tablecloth. I took in another deep inhale trying desperately to focus on the woman sitting in front of me.

"You are stuck in a rut, Ms. Jean, enjoy the cups that give you moments of passion," I said tossing out words that I hoped made sense because honestly, my brain wasn't following the cards at the moment, it had more important thoughts to dwell on such as the combining of the powers, "but there is more for you than just pleasures of the flesh. You have a destiny, and you must not turn away from it."

"That's a daily reading?" she asked, her voice a tilt higher than usual.

I knew it wouldn't make sense to her because I wasn't technically speaking to her. But I gathered enough brain power to toss out some bullshit because that's readily available to a con-artist, "A reading is never just daily, Ms. Jean. They compile and guide you on your path. Your new journey may begin today, but know this, you have to listen to your heart and your soul. And as the warning from the Knight of Wands says, do not become enslaved to those emotions that hold you back."

"I don't understand, but I trust you."

"Basically, enjoy life and follow your heart and don't allow false love to keep you from your soul mate."

I turned the cards meanings from adventure and destiny to something she would understand, her love life. Ms. Jean doesn't come here to find out if she will win the lottery or even if her life will become something more, no, she comes here hoping that each new man she encounters will be the last, will be her only love. And so that's what I promise. No matter what the cards really mean, she needs the hope of true love.

I may be a charlatan (perhaps not anymore) and a definite sleaze ball for swindling people out of their money, but I won't intentionally hurt someone. I offer hope to those who don't feel like they deserve any.

The four cards; the Eight of Cups, the Knight of Wands, the Two of Cups, and the Nine of Swords stared menacingly at me from the red and gold laced tablecloth. This wasn't her reading. This was mine. I knew that. I felt that. I was being told what to expect and how to deal with it when it came. The nightmare had already woke me up before in the form of a werewolf. A friend, a lover, someone, would help me overcome the shadowy figure that haunted me. It would be a journey to set my soul right, but I couldn't look back. I must never look back. Because if I do, I won't be able to fix the problem that shadows my every movement. And as the cards showed me that the events were more than just mere coincidences, I wanted to hide. I wanted to look back, actually,

I didn't want to have to face anything. I wanted to remain right where I was, stagnate and content that only a beast was stirring, that only a few chills were circling the air. I didn't want to deal with anything more.

"The usual, fifty dollars?" Ms. Jean asked pulling a bright green fake alligator clutch from her bright red fake alligator skinned purse.

"No, not today."

"Well, how much? I can't afford much more."

"Ms. Jean, you don't owe me anything."

"Whatever do you mean?"

"This reading is free."

"Why?" she asked with an incredulous look on her face that made her leathery wrinkles crease into her big, blue eyes.

"Well, now that you know your future, there's no point in visiting me anymore," I said smiling softly, forcing the grin to reach my eyes. The truth was, I felt guilty. Here I am reading the cards for myself and lying through my teeth to her. Was I really offering hope or did I just say that to make myself feel better? And the more I ask these questions the more I know I'm being selfish. So, sue me if I don't want to charge the kind lady sitting in front of me whose only crime is wanting answers to the meaning of life.

"Ha! You know I'll see you two Friday's from now. Same time, same place, right?" she asked.

I stood up and reached for a bundle of sage giving her the present that I give all my clients making them feel special, "take this and use it as incense. It will guard against evil spirits and will cleanse your mind and heart giving you the clarity to make the right decisions."

"Oh, thank you," she said tucking the bundle of green sticks into her alligator bag.

I smiled at her again, donning the soft professionalism of a con-artist and escorted her toward the door. I wanted to push her out of my home as fast as I could and I never wanted to see her again. Perhaps I saw my lies etched on her face and I couldn't deal with it, perhaps I knew that I was a fraud, a selfish charlatan. I may be feeling that cold power again, but I wasn't using it to help her, instead, I was using it for my own selfish gains.

"Thank you again," she said clutching harder at her purse, "I just want you to know, that I'll be recommending you to all my friends, so you might want to hire a secretary for all the calls you'll be getting."

"Thank you, Ms. Jean, I'll try not to let you down."

"Oh, you," she said grinning from ear to ear. She had heard what she wanted to hear and that was just fine with her.

I watched her lope down the concrete path past the low-rising fronds of bushes that I have no name for and wanted desperately to yell out and tell her to stop and face the music. I wanted her to know that I was a fraud, that most people like me, were frauds, that we took advantage of the down-trodden because we are nothing more than blood-sucking parasites, leeches.

Instead I smiled and waved goodbye and knew that I would see her again in a few weeks.

### Chapter Three

I closed the door on Ms. Jean and heard the incessant tapping of branches dancing against my bedroom window. The branches had been beating against the glass with more haste lately and one of these days, when I had the time, I would call management and have them trim those bushes down. But for the time being, I was forced to be content with the constant rapping against the window and made to feel like the raven was watching me with a close eye saying, “nevermore”. It’s odd how the raven was the man’s conscious screaming at him to make the right decision almost like the rapping at my window is telling me to stop Ms. Jean and pronounce the truth.

My legs carried me to the bedroom window where I peered out into the cloudless sky and blinding light. The branches were still as were the leaves and not even the air stirred. My heart beat just a little bit faster as I realized the wind wasn’t blowing the branches against the glass. Could it be that I was hearing my own guilt begging me to confess?

I turned and stared down at the floor and closed my eyes. No, I’m not some character from a Poe novel, I’m just an ordinary werewolf with a wild imagination. The wind had probably died down as soon as I came into the room. These things happen. My guilt was screaming at me telling me to recognize the fact that I’m ripping people off left and right and that I ditched Billy to stare at his own abyss alone last night.

But these things shouldn’t be bothering me. After all, I left Billy alone with his thoughts because he needed time. He didn’t need someone to hold his hand and watch him cry. He was suffering enough without a woman staring at his pain and agony and petting him like life would be okay. Because honestly, it wouldn’t. I lost people I love, my parents, and my life was ruined because of it. So how the hell am I supposed to tell Billy that life would be okay without his lover when I don’t even believe that? I guess I could argue that I’m an excellent liar due to my experience at being a charlatan, but telling people lies because they’re desperate and helping someone through grief are two completely different subjects.

My cell phone rang ushering the 5<sup>th</sup> Symphony of Beethoven throughout my humble abode. Usually I keep the phone in silent mode because I don’t want to disturb the atmosphere for my clients, but today I hadn’t bothered. Having seen Clyde’s dead body and my recent re-acquaintance with the entity were higher up on the totem pole than a mere cell phone mode so I could be forgiven for forgetting this lack of attention to detail.

I said hello before I even looked at the caller ID, which had been stupid. I was trying to ignore anyone in the family because I didn’t want to deal with Clyde’s death anymore because I knew I was a failure. Although, I should try looking at Clyde’s body again, perhaps the entity or spirit or whatever would return and tell me something important. Or not. The entity is not predictable.

“Good, you’re okay,” said Matt through the wireless speaker, “I’ve been trying to call you all day.”



“Yeah, well, I had clients today and only now just checked my phone,” okay so I was lying. What’s new?

“I’m just glad you’re alright.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Sophie,” he said holding the edge of fatigue on his tongue, “Billy’s missing.”

“What do you mean?”

“We found some blood, but his trail stopped a few feet away from Clyde’s home.”

“Blood?” I asked more shocked and confused than I had ever been before. I didn’t even know which line of conversation to follow, the blood or the lost trail or worse, Billy’s disappearance. Definitely not the latter. Billy was more than just a wolf-brother, more than a safety partner, more than a friend--he was family. So, to keep sane, my mind focused on blood and completely dismissed the fact that Billy was missing. But with blood, he couldn’t have just run away to mourn Clyde. No, blood was most certainly a bad thing.

“Yeah, blood,” Matt replied slowly, “we can’t track him. I called Ernie and Eric but even they can’t find his scent. It’s like Billy just vanished.”

“But how?” I asked still unable to wrap my head around this disappearance.

“I don’t know,” he said regretfully.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. A small headache was beginning to form, threatening to zap all of my brain power and threatening to release the flood of tears that I knew were waiting for Billy. I could feel the sharp burn of caged tears in my throat and knew that at any moment I would be sobbing uncontrollably.

I took a deep breath and felt it shudder as it escaped my lungs. I choked a little on the air and sniffed gently trying desperately to not cry. After all, blood doesn’t necessarily mean he’s dead, he could just be hurt. Well, that sentence didn’t help anything. If he was missing and hurt then the situation was much worse--he could still be in pain. He could be in the hands of a torturer.

The branches once again tapped at the window, beating themselves slowly against the paneled glass. It was a rhythmic tap, tap, tap that shattered the quiet noise of misery sheltering itself in my mind. I was thankful for the abrupt change of subjects, thankful that I wouldn’t have to think about Billy. I don’t respond well to heavy emotions, so I was glad to be listening to the tapping of the raven.

I looked up at the branches and saw that the breeze was nowhere to be found. But the branches were still plaguing the window. My eyes glanced sideways (as much as they could through the wall) to see what was causing the branches to move. A shadow, at least I think it was a shadow, ran from the corner and disappeared.

My heart stopped. My breathing stopped. And then, all at once, panic surged throughout my body like a thousand stampeding mustangs, each hoof pounding at me, breaking every single bone in my body. My empty hand clutched at my chest as I looked around for something to calm me down. I knew the valium I kept in the bathroom was empty; I hadn’t needed to fill the prescription in two years. I didn’t keep paper bags anymore, instead I had used the last of them to carry lunches for the werewolf picnics.

So as my mind raced and my heart frantically raced ahead of it, I sat on the bed, gripped in fear. I couldn’t feel my beast, I couldn’t even hear him. I think it was angry with my fear because it was stronger than this panic that had stricken me. So, the beast didn’t stir. It didn’t lend me its power to control myself, instead it rested, curled up in

that dark, dank cave.

My muscles were clenched, frozen in a static fear. I had a death grip on the phone in my hand and my legs were stiff as a statue remaining straight out, knees straight, as I was sitting. They didn't bend, they just kept pointing out the window.

From a great distance, I heard my name. It was hollow and empty like a transistor radio, and yet, the more I listened, the more it became loud and annoying. My name was repeated again and again.

I blinked. The frozen state of fear began to melt away as Matt's power drifted over the phone and gently rocked me awake. I don't know how otherworldly abilities can use scientific technology, but they can. Thank God.

"Sophie, answer me."

"Y-yeah," I stumbled.

"What just happened?"

"I thought I saw..."

What did I see? Was the part of me that panicked just being irrational? There are several domestic cats that roam this area so the shadow could have been a cat. That would make logical sense. But if that were the case, why did I freak out like that?

No, it was more than just a local cat. I hadn't felt those overwhelming feelings of fear since that horrible night; since I was attacked.

My stomach dropped like a two-ton sand bag filled with rocks. The slow and steady onslaught of panic was slowly beginning to return as my memory played the image of those great, big gold eyes and large white teeth.

I swallowed so loudly I could have leveled a mountain with just the sound, "I think..."

"What is it, Sophie?"

"I...I don't know."

Why couldn't I bring myself to tell him? It's not like I was embarrassed to tell someone that I was scared out of my mind that my attacker was back in town. So, why couldn't I tell him?

I glanced sideways again at the window and saw a black cat sneak through the bushes and rest gently in the hidden leaves.

I took a deep breath and felt stupid. It had been just a cat. The nightmare that was my attacker still haunted me and I needed to learn how to deal with it. I shouldn't be jumping at every black shadow that passed me because shadows can't kill you. Well, except for the Lithe shadows but that's beside the point. They don't reside in America.

"Sophie?" I heard Matt ask.

"No, I'm fine. I'm just...jumpy is all."

"I'm sorry I wanted you to 'see' Clyde. It's traumatic enough to hear about his death without having to view it. It would make anyone jumpy after seeing him like that."

"I guess so."

I rubbed at my head and felt the ache subside just enough so that the disappearance of Billy was foremost in my mind. As soon as I thought of Billy, I felt those tears rush back to me. I held them as tight as I could because I shouldn't cry yet. If I did, that would be admitting that Billy was lost forever and there was still hope that he was fine. So, I couldn't cry. I wouldn't.

"Well, I called in some help," continued Matt. I really hadn't been listening to a

word he was saying.

“Who?” I asked.

“Damon Black.”

“Damon Black? Damon Black? What kind of name is Damon Black? It sounds made up.”

“I don’t care what his name is, he’s good at what he does. He’s a preternatural detective and sometimes,” he paused, wondering whether or not to drop the next bomb, “sometimes he’s a Hunter.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” I yelled into the phone feeling the hot rush of anger now fueling me instead of the delicate wash of tears.

“Watch the language,” Matt said ignoring the most important question of the century.

“He’s a Hunter?”

“Yeah, and a good one.”

“You hired a Hunter to find Billy?”

“Yeah, and to find Clyde’s murderer.”

“Are you fucking insane?!”

He sighed again into the receiver, “watch the language.”

“How can you be so blasé about this? He’s a fucking Hunter!”

“Watch the language.”

“Say ‘watch the language’ one more time and I’m coming over there and ripping your fucking heart out!” I screamed into the phone hoping that finally my anxiety and fear and anger would slap him in the head and bring him to his senses. You don’t hire a Hunter to track a werewolf. Why? Because they kill us. That’s why. They pull our wolf out and kill it and skin it and sell it to the highest bidder. They’re nothing more than poachers.

“They’re nothing more than poachers, Matt!” I yelled again.

“I know, I had those concerns, but he’s also a detective. He’s solved a lot of preternatural crimes. This guy isn’t going to hurt us. We’re paying him.”

“Yeah, and when this case is over, he’ll come after us and kill us, Matt! What the hell were you thinking?”

“Look,” said Matt, his voice growing with power so thick that it was beginning to dry my tongue and choke out my breath, “I wouldn’t do anything that would hurt this family. You have to trust me on this. He may be a hunter, but he helps the innocent. He only kills the rogue wolves, like the one that attacked you. Any wolves that are in a family, he doesn’t mess with because he knows we are not a danger to society.”

“Oh, yeah, a right saint, he is. He still kills people,” I replied feeling overtly sarcastic.

“Regardless, he’s coming over to visit you today to ask you some questions.”

“What?! You involved me?”

“He doesn’t know you’re a werewolf, he just knows that you knew Clyde. He’s trying to get all the information he can. Okay? He’s not there to hurt you.”

“Screw that, he’s not coming over here!”

“Thank you for not cursing,” he said, always trying to discourage me from saying bad words and encouraging my language skills, “but he’s already on his way. Now, you would have known about this had you been answering your phone.”

“Oh, yeah, so this is my fault.”

“He’s not going to hurt us. I promise you.”

“He’ll find out I’m a werewolf.”

“Not if we don’t tell him.”

“He’s a hunter. He’ll know.”

“So what if he does? He’s not going to hurt us.”

I just shook my head and watched as a beat-up 1998 black Hummer pulled up in front of my condo. The silver on the vehicle had been painted black to keep it from reflecting any light. The windows were tinted so dark that I could barely make out any shapes even as the sun cast its rays upon the vehicle. There were a few shapes that I could see, quite clearly--three rifles were hanging on a gun rack on the back of the hummer.

The Hunter had arrived.

## Chapter Four

I looked at the dented and half-torn Hummer and knew that none of my middle-class, Garden Society neighbors would drive a vehicle like that, much less know anyone who would drive a vehicle like that. So, who else but a Hunter would own a pseudo steel tank?

“Oh my God,” I said frantically now jumping off the bed and pacing in front of my picture window, “he’s here, Matt. What do I do? What do I do?”

“It’s okay, remember, he’s not going to hurt you. He’s a professional.”

There had been far too many waves of panic slam into me today and I was feeling like a beaten Cliffside, torn and ragged from erosion. I especially didn’t need any more fear to clutch at my heart. Clyde was dead, Billy was missing, the Entity had returned and now a Hunter was at my door. I honestly didn’t know a person could house that many horrific events and still be alive.

“A professional hitman, you mean.”

“This is the last time I’m going to say this,” Matt replied sending waves of power rolling over me, “he will not hurt you. Answer his questions and be polite. He’s here to help. He’s being paid to help. I want you to call me after he’s left and tell me everything he asked you and how you answered him.”

“Fine. But I’m not happy about this.”

“I don’t need you to be happy about this. Billy’s life is on the line. I’ve already lost one member of our family and I won’t lose another one.”

I sighed heavily into the phone hoping I could exhale all of the emotions that were clouding my mind. I wanted to purge the fear, the anger, and the sadness with just one breath. It’s funny how it doesn’t work that way. Instead, the emotions tend to fester and eventually ooze at the most inappropriate times. I really hoped that they wouldn’t show during the interview with the Hunter. I didn’t want a poacher like that to know my weaknesses. He could use them against me and my family.

“Remember, everything’s going to be fine,” Matt repeated, “Call me when you’re done.”

“Bye,” I said into the phone after Matt had already hung up. I have terrible phone manners. Communication through a machine just seems so impersonal that I guess I don’t see the other person, I just go through the motions of talking.

The silver flip phone was still grasped in my hands as I heard the fateful knocking on my door. My legs barely trudged toward the hall, making themselves heavier with each step. I felt like I was being weighed down with cement blocks as I continued to walk.

Even though I knew who was at the door, I still stood on my tiptoes to look through the peephole. Unfortunately, I have a home-made wreath hanging on my door and parts of the flowers were covering the hole. So all I could see were bits and pieces of the man standing just a foot away.

I took a deep breath and pulled again on my sleeve making sure those cuts

weren't noticeable. If I had had more time, I would have covered the trash can in the kitchen so that the Styrofoam bottoms of several pounds of beef that I had scarped down in just ten seconds weren't obvious. I don't know why he would even be in the kitchen, but I shouldn't be taking chances. He was a Hunter and it was his job to notice everything and be fully aware.

The doorknob turned and the squeaking from the slow turning shrilled loudly into the foyer.

The Hunter stood menacingly tall at around 6'3 (give or take a few inches because I'm terrible at guessing height). And, honestly, if it had been anyone else looking like that, I would have said *Take me, I'm yours*. He was obviously a centerfold for Playgirl and judging by the dark shadows that were etched in his golden brown eyes, he was Mr. October because he carried that same presence of a haunting night on All Hallows' Eve--dangerously frightening and exciting.

My heart picked up as my eyes continued to be rude as they made their way down his broad shoulders and large chest. The white t-shirt that he was wearing just barely covered the muscles that were screaming to escape his shirt. Being a Hunter, I guess he was required to be built, after all, he deals with supernatural strength, he has to be able to handle it.

I knew I was wearing a goofy smile when I bit my lip gently as I imagined him without pants. If he looked this good from the front, then he had to look that good from the back. His gasoline-washed jeans hugged snugly, but not so tight that he turned into some sort of Wrangler, but were worn just right so that a person knew what sort of muscles lay beneath.

His shoes were torn brown loafers that he must have had for many years and that he wore on a daily basis because they were just falling apart. Bits of leather flew softly in the stilling breeze, occasionally placing themselves back into the sides of the shoes.

I brought my eyes back up to his face, because, let's face it, I was checking him out and being obvious about it which is kind of embarrassing. And based on that smug smile he was wearing, he knew he looked good. Damn. Cockiness can be such a turn-off and yet, he wore it with style.

He had the most kissable lips I had even seen--plump enough to pull on and soft enough to delicately kiss. The perfect lips. It was really all I could do not to start fantasizing about this man. But it was too late. My mind was already racing about him chasing me in the woods and finally catching up with me, pinning me on the ground, forcing his power...

Okay, enough of that. He's a hunter. He's dangerous. And as much as I want him to be dangerous in a good way, he's not. He kills my kind for sport and money. He's a very bad man. End of story.

But that doesn't mean I'm not allowed to stare.

My eyes finally soaked in the rest of him, taking in his long, black hair that was placed neatly in a low-rise ponytail. The top of his head was covered by a look-alike Indiana Jones hat which made me want to laugh and then sigh. One of my sexual fantasies included Indiana Jones, so the hat wasn't helping my mental state of mind.

I don't know how long I stood there staring at him, treating him like some kind of meat when I realized I might be drooling. Oh yeah, I was being really smooth today.

\_\_\_\_\_ I wiped at the corner of my mouth and managed to speak, "Can I help you?" But

what I really wanted to say was, "Take off all your clothes and come to bed with me." Which wasn't a smart idea at all.

He held out a large, calloused hand that had seen years of hunting action and said, "My name is Damon Black. Matthew Davis listed you as a friend of Clyde. I have some questions to ask you."

Too bad he's all business.

I was still looking at his hat when diarrhea of the mouth took me uncontrollably, "What's with the Jones' hat?"

From out of nowhere a voice shrieked in the hallway, "You call him *Doctor* Jones, doll."

I glanced past the Adonis and looked at his assistant who had imitated Short Round almost exactly and felt a little bit inferior. She was cute, well more than cute. She was a very beautiful, very young, assistant. Her short, blonde hair was styled efficiently into a bob which accented her perfectly lined chin. Her delicate features reminded me of a Barbie and her body was in the shape of a Barbie made in the 1950's. The white eyelet dress that came to her knees made a point of showing off her full and thin figure. I was just a little bit jealous because I could definitely use a smaller waistline but I smiled and said, "Nice impression," with sincerity.

She grinned a beautiful, white smile and began jotting down a few notes onto a Rainbow-Brite notepad. I haven't seen Rainbow-Brite in years. And as much as I wanted to envy this girl, I liked her style. She had adorable taste. But I did wonder what on earth she could be writing down this early in the game. Was she writing what I was wearing, or how I was acting? I sincerely hope not.

I looked back to the Hunter, not wanting to take my eyes off of him for two reasons: 1) he was a Hunter, and 2) he was hot. His lips parted delicately into a smile and he replied, "I like the hat. It's lucky, you know."

"How so?"

"May we come in?" He asked completely ignoring my question. I didn't move but he brushed past me anyway and normally I would have been angry, but I caught a glance at his butt and I couldn't help but to just sigh again.

A soft whisper resounded in my ear and his assistant said, "It's nice, huh? Why do you think I walk behind him?"

We shared a muffled giggle and I closed the door with a loud bang. I didn't mean to slam it, but I wasn't exactly in a controlled motion. The Hunter had definitely thrown me off my game.

I watched him look at everything as he passed the apothecary bottles, the fake seer's globe, and finally all the books that lined my walls. He was absorbing parts of my life without asking me a single question, knowing exactly who and what I was. It was a bit unnerving and fortunately, it brought me back to my senses. He may have been attractive, but he was still deadly. I was like a mouse entranced with the sway of the viper which is never a good metaphor because it spells certain doom for the mouse.

The girl's heels clicked on the laminated wood floors just as the rapping at the window shouted through the hallway, past the dining room and into the living room. I really need those bushes trimmed because that tapping was growing more and more annoying.

As I stepped down from the dining room and entered the living room, I

immediately felt a wave of embarrassment. I should have cleaned up the place more if I had known a Hunter and his assistant would be visiting. You know, like lay a few human traps that are the equivalent of bear traps so they wouldn't get a chance to kill me, that sort of thing. On the other hand, if I acted like a predator, I would probably be treated like a predator so I should dawn my nice face and conceal my fear and anger lest I be a pelt on the black market.

The girl sat down on my beige leather couch and flattened her dress down along her legs, erasing any sort of wrinkles that might have attached to the cloth. She was sitting in front of the mirror that hung gently over the couch and I caught a glimpse of myself. I was wearing my con-artist psychic attire--a dark crimson velvet robe with billowy sleeves meant for blowing in the wind. My dark hair was curled and piled neatly on the top of my head while gold jewelry was haphazardly thrown across my wrists, my waist, my arms, my neck and my ears giving the appearance of a fourteenth century wizard. I looked pretty comical and tacky compared to the Barbie and her prim dress.

The burning sage and Airwick Pine lingered heavily in the stifling air, so I turned on the overhead white fan in hopes of dissipating the smells. When the scent of herbs and chemicals receded, only then did the corpse of Clyde say hello. His scent was all over them, decaying and rotting. I had eaten over fifteen pounds of raw beef since I had smelled the body, and thankfully, my beast's appetite was sated. Now was especially not the time to turn.

"This is Shirley, my colleague," the Hunter said motioning to the supermodel reclining on my couch.

"Nice to meet you," I said shaking her hand and feeling her very strong grip nearly overpower my own. She had an otherworldly strength about her, and yet, as I inhaled her, I couldn't smell anything out of the ordinary except for a heavily laden scent of metal. Smelling like metal could mean anything--she could be a robot (now that's funny) or she could have a blood disease such as anemia. Yeah, my super smeller can detect diseases and even specify which type of cancer a person has. To be a wolf means to be a predator and they are well adapted to sniffing out the weak and helpless because it makes for easier prey. I'm not saying it's right, I'm just stating fact.

"Would you like something to drink? I have water, milk, and some tea?" I asked, looking at the small beads of sweat that rested on Shirley's temples.

"No, thank you. Besides, I *hate* milk," she replied and the Hunter merely shook his head.

I nodded quietly and sat down in the awkward silence. They were both sitting uncomfortably in the leather sofa, squirming their legs and feeling their skin peel off the leather. I, on the other hand, accustomed to sitting in leather, just smiled knowing that I was causing some discomfort to the Hunter. After all, I wasn't here to make his life easier. If he wanted my help, then he shouldn't have been a Hunter.

"Ms. Morgan," he paused glancing at the stone wolf statue that rested on my glass coffee table, "May I call you Sophie?"

"Ms. Morgan is fine," I replied now immune to his erotic, deep voice that reminded me of liquid chocolate. Well, not exactly immune, I was just repeating that he's a Hunter again and again and that was distracting from the urge to jump him and kiss him all over.

"Ms. Morgan, then," he said brushing aside the formal refusal of a more friendly



conversation, "I couldn't help but notice your dining room on the way in. Are you a Wicca?"

I smiled and replied, "No. I'm a psychic. I can read people and sometimes I can see the future or the outcome of someone in distress."

"Is that why Mr. Davis called you in to see the body last night?"

"You mean to see Clyde?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, that's why he called me in."

"Did you find anything?" he asked carrying the most perfect poker face I had ever seen. If he didn't believe in psychics he wasn't showing it. He was absolutely blank.

I thought about the question and the word "Anput" popped into my head like a bad memory. I didn't understand what I thought I had felt or seen there so I was definitely not telling the Hunter my enigmatic vision. Hell, I wasn't going to tell anyone because it didn't even make sense to me.

"Ms. Morgan," he repeated, "did you find anything?"

"No," I said quickly.

"Nothing at all?"

"No. The spirits weren't talking to me that night."

"You say spirits talk to you?"

"Well, it really depends. I can't explain it really. Sometimes there are feelings other times it's like some sort of entity sends me images...I can't really explain it."

"So you said."

"You have to use all five of your senses to use the sixth one. I guess that's the best explanation I can give it."

"I see," he said sending a glance over at Shirley's notebook, watching her scribble down every word, "Was that the only reason you were brought there?"

"What do you mean?" I asked trying to delay the inevitable *Are you a werewolf* question. I just knew the Hunter was making a list of all of us and checking it twice. There is a lot of money to be had selling the skins of werewolves. You wouldn't think so either because Siberian Tigers are more endangered than we are. Werewolves are actually quite common. But it's still murder if someone wants our skins.

"You were just there to divine information?" His poker face was beginning to fail and I could feel the disdain for my occupation on the air. He didn't believe I was for real, well, neither did I, so technically, could I blame him for not believing in me?

I crossed my arms in front of my chest and stared into those golden brown eyes. They were so vivid and rich with color that I could have gazed at them all day. If he wasn't a Hunter, I would have.

"Ms. Morgan, I hope you understand the urgency of this situation. Clyde Benson has been murdered and Billy Masterson has gone missing. I really hope I don't have to keep repeating myself because that's going to use up time that I don't have and will most likely, get someone else killed. So, let's agree to stop wasting each other's time and just answer my questions."

I kept my arms firmly crossed. He can make as much sense as the next guy, but one thing's for sure, the devil can quote scripture, too. Just because his logic was sound doesn't mean he isn't dangerous and I couldn't trust him.

"Ms. Morgan?"

“Clyde was a friend,” I said through clenched teeth. I was never good at being lectured to especially from an enemy.

“Just a friend?”

“Yeah, just a friend.”

“How did you two meet?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I asked feeling more and more like a suspect in a homicide investigation instead of the victim with a Hunter sitting right across the table.

“Please answer the question.”

I threw my hands up because it was obvious this guy wasn't going anywhere until I answered his stupid questions. And if he started poking around at the werewolf aspect, then I was inclined to change and rip him to shreds before he could kill again, “At a picnic.”

“When?”

“A few months ago.”

“Why were you at the picnic?”

“Because I socialize. I have friends.”

“I find that hard to believe,” he said underneath his breath.

“Excuse me?”

His eyes widened just a little bit more than usual fully breaking that impenetrable blank face that he had been sporting, “You have really good hearing.”

“No, you're just being loud.”

He grinned then and just like that, his poker face was back in full swing, “How do you know Billy Masterson?”

“He's a friend.”

“You're right, you do have friends.”

I smiled mockingly and clenched my arms tighter to my chest.

“Was he a close friend?”

“Yeah, he was.”

“How close?”

“Oh, please. Billy is gay.”

“And Clyde was his partner?”

“Yeah.”

“When was the last time you saw Mr. Masterson?”

“Around three last night.”

“Can you give me a more specific time?”

“Does it look like I wear a watch?” I asked maliciously and as I raised my hands to show my wrists the sleeves of my robe fell down around my elbows revealing the white bandages that were wrapped on my arm.

“What happened?” He said, nodding to the obvious.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Then why the bandages?”

“Fine, you caught me. It's embarrassing,” I said trying to reach for the con-man costume that I wore with my clients, “I was cooking, boiling water and I slipped on some spilt water on the floor and somehow my arm landed on the eye of the oven and I burnt myself pretty badly.”

“May I see?”

“It’s wrapped up. I’m not supposed to let air reach it.”

“What sort of cream are you using?”

Great. Follow-up questions. Perhaps I should have thought that lie through instead of walking head first into these traps.

“I don’t need any cream.”

“Well, that’s a relief. At least the burns aren’t as bad as you made them out to be.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, I’m just glad you’ll be alright,” his smile seemed to be sincere, but I couldn’t be sure. He really did have a great poker face.

“Thanks.” Although I was sure he wanted my arm to be infested with gangrene so that I would be an easier target.

He smiled with those beautiful and tasty lips and I just wanted to kiss him again. Which, by the way, is really aggravating. He’s a threat to my life and all I can do is think about his touch, his kiss, the sweet caress...there I go again. I feel like a male praying mantis just wanting to get it on knowing the consequence is losing my life.

So, instead, I focus on the other elephant in the room, “Matt tells me you’re a Hunter.”

He cocked his head to the side and seemed to really look at me for the first time. I probably shouldn’t have asked that because I think he can smell fear, and I knew I reeked of it.

“I am,” he replied softly, “is that why you’re not answering my questions?”

“I’m answering them.”

“Not readily. Are you afraid I’ll hunt down your friends?”

“Something like that.”

“I’m not a poacher, if that’s what you’re thinking. But I do hunt rogue wolves and dangerous beings if the occasion calls for it. If they have hurt someone, killed someone, then they need to be kept in check.”

“There are a few wolves around here,” I said softly, “and I don’t want them hurt.”

“They won’t be, so long as they stay in line.”

“Who made you God?”

“Who else is supposed to protect the non-supernatural community? Who else would? Have you ever thought about a rogue wolf attacking an innocent, just leaving them to either die or change without caring about the consequences? Do you know what that’s like to have your life changed abruptly and without your permission?”

I knew what it was like.

“I view myself as a public servant, so should you. By the way, how do you know Clyde and Billy were werewolves?”

“I’m a really good friend.”

“I see. Do you know of any other werewolves in the area? You mentioned there were a few around here.”

“Why would I tell you?”

“So, you don’t believe I’m not a poacher.”

“You’re still a Hunter. You still kill them.”

He sighed and fell back into the couch, allowing his firm body to relax into the

folds, "I don't know how to convince you otherwise, and frankly, it's not important that I do. But we both want to find Billy and we both want whoever killed Clyde to be brought to justice. On those two points, I think we agree."

He paused again and I felt those deep, dark eyes roam over my clenched arms, "Okay, you're right, I am a Hunter. And as such, I am good at finding my target. It's my job. So the one thing you can be sure of, is that I will find Billy. You can count on it. But what I need from you is honesty. You have lied several times to me so far and that I don't appreciate. If you're lying, then you have something to hide and as much as I don't want to view you as a suspect, that's what you're becoming because you keep lying to me. So, let's try this again, Ms. Morgan, who are the other wolves?"

"I don't see how that's relevant," I said, copying the tone and texture of a CSI program. I was angry and scared mostly because he was right. I was lying, so therefore I could be hindering his investigation but I was terrified that he would hurt everyone else. What if he was the murderer this whole time and I just gave him names of wolves to be taken to the slaughter? I couldn't have that on my conscious. But if he was truly trying to help, then what choice did I have?

"The killer might be on a rampage and wolves his target. So it is most relevant."

"You should ask Matt," I said knowing that I was being absolutely honest in my answer. I'm not the one who should be telling my family's secrets.

"I did."

"So, why are you asking me?"

"Because he gave me a list of 'friends'. That's it. Just people who knew the victim. He said I should ask them personally if they had wolf-form."

"Sounds like Matt."

"So, my question to you is, are you?"

"Am I what?" Oh God, I wanted to delay this as long as possible. I didn't want a Hunter knowing my secret because he could turn on me. Or worse, he could treat me like I wasn't human. Technically, I'm not human 36 hours a month and sometimes more, but the point remains valid. Even other members of the supernatural community treat each other as something less than caring, feeling individuals. And the funny thing about that is, it's *human* nature to make others feel inferior. Everyone does it. That's why slavery existed in the past. Its why there is a class system in every single economy--the rich look down on the poor and the poor look down on the desperately poor. There will always be divisions because its human nature.

"Are you a werewolf?"

"What do you think?"

He smiled and stood up, flexing a bit of his chest muscles as he silently stretched.

"Well, Ms. Morgan, thank you for your time," he said.

"That's it?" I asked secretly wishing he could stay just a little bit longer.

Shirley stood up beside him and I had just remembered she was in the room.

She's a sneaky little thing. She would be a great asset on a hunt because you forget she's there.

"I'm pretty sure you don't want me hanging around longer than necessary."

I chuckled nervously and walked slightly ahead of them, focusing on the heart beat of the Hunter. It thumped with a normal rhythm, occasionally speeding up as I felt him closer behind me. If I hadn't known better, I would have said he was staring at my

butt.

“Thank you again, Ms. Morgan,” he said as I stopped in front of the door, “Here’s my card if you remember anything.”

As I took the white rectangular card from his hand, I managed to just brush along his firm and rough index finger and instantly things grew tight in between my legs. My beast opened its eyes and took a deep inhale. The Hunter still smelled of dead meat and yet he also smelled of sandalwood and night air. And as those other scents wafted gently towards me, I knew I wouldn’t be able to control myself for much longer.

I basically pushed him out the door feeling his ripped back muscles under my small, soft hands tense. I felt an unexplainable pull towards that immaculate body and the sexual frustration howled at me in the form of my beast.

“Goodbye!” I yelled as if my voice was going through male puberty, cracking on every syllable.

My heart was beating uncontrollably and I could feel it pounding against my chest, threatening to rip itself out if I didn’t touch him one more time.

I ran into the kitchen and threw open the white, side-by-side doors and struggled to tear the cellophane from the wrapped up bundles of meat. I stuffed the cold, squirmy bits into my mouth, piling the chunks of flesh effortlessly until I was gasping for air.

Sex is like a hunger, and if it can’t be filled by normal means, then I fill it with other things. After I had downed more than ten pounds of the chilly meat, my beast finally backed off and returned to its home. It was sated for the time being, but I didn’t know if I could control it if I saw the Hunter again.

## Chapter Five

I turned the knobs over the bathtub hearing them shriek with a squeakiness I didn't know new knobs could have. I had just replaced those things and still they squeaked as I turned them on.

I had called all my customers and cancelled the readings for today, because after the events with Ms. Jean, I was too nervous to try again. I had almost shape-shifted three times in the past twelve hours so I was worried that I might lose control in front of my clients. That would be a very bad thing.

The knobs on the bathtub continued to squeak until I turned the knobs to off; the tapping at my window was still going on strong as the black cat continued to push on the branch. If I wasn't such an animal-lover, I would have taken a shovel and killed it. Wow, that was a morbidly gross sentence. I could never do something like that, not even to my worst enemy, so why was I fantasizing about killing the cat? That just seemed so wrong.

I should fantasize about something else.

My feet sunk into the deep bath feeling the hot sting of water come rushing over them. Slowly, I sat down, twitching as the liquid burned at me. I don't know why I keep the water so hot that it practically boils me alive, but I know that after a few seconds of uncomfortable stinging, the bath feels so good.

I let out a deep breath into the silent bathroom hearing the air circle around the shower curtain and drapes. My eyes closed slightly, shuttering in the steam.

The water continued to rise, resting in the crook of my neck as my body sunk deeper into the water. My toes poked out of the water sending chilly sensations down my legs only having those goose pimples be burned away by the warm liquid.

I was glad to feel normal hot/cold sensations like everyone else because I was tired of feeling the heat from my beast constantly rising and now, only recently, feeling the cold breath from the Entity that had returned. And trust me, I wasn't happy about the latter. I didn't want that spirit to return because it wasn't a very nice spirit. It was mean and cruel and it didn't care that someone was dying or being molested, no, it only cared that someone received its' message. The bastard.

I really didn't want it back in my life. For the past two years I had grown comfortable, as much as I could living with my beast, but now, my life was taking a curve that I didn't want to follow.

I hated the spirit. I still hate the spirit. And I don't relish its' return.

As much as I feel like a sleaze ball ripping off my clients, it's still a better feeling than those horrid dreams and visions that the entity sends. I was required to take Valium back in the day because it would knock me out cold, stopping the dreams in their tracks. Of course, the psychologist thought I was a nutcase because I could divine things and that helped to fill the prescription.

But I didn't have any valium left and I hadn't seen my doctor since that fateful night. So, I was going to have go this alone. Not something I was looking forward to. I

would rather go to a friend's funeral than be paired with that spirit.

Or would I?

If Billy was dead, I don't know if I would be able to handle it. Billy meant so much to me, he had always been there for me, ever since we were first paired up as safety-partners. He never once let me change. He always had a way of calming me down, of keeping my beast in check. Not even Matt could do that. Matt just used raw power to force my beast into submission; Billy used love. He loved me. And I love him. I don't know whether to think of him in the past or present sense and it drives me crazy.

I want him to still be alive, I pray he's still alive. But Clyde's body tells me different. This thing doesn't take prisoners. No, it takes lives.

I brought my hands up to my eyes and felt the soft pulls of my heart strings. A ball of emotion had wadded itself in my throat and the only way to release it was through tears. So I cried. I cried for Clyde, I cried for Billy, and then I cried for my parents.

I couldn't lose anyone else, I just couldn't. I don't know if I could stomach the loss of Billy because he meant, *means*, so much to me.

My chest began to shake as the sobbing became worse. Flashes of Clyde's torn and shattered body ran through my mind like a disgusting array of apocalyptic horsemen. His blood and tissue were splayed all over that immaculate room and I couldn't help but remember the fine details of vomit-inducing blood. Billy had been so angry, so hurt, so depressed and I had done nothing. I just let him face that abyss alone thinking I had done the right thing.

Even if he was a manly male with a sensitive ego, I should have comforted him. I should have been there for him. Instead, I left him. I drove away from him, turned my back on him.

My imagination ran wild when I thought of Billy still alive. There had been blood, so he was hurt. He was probably being tortured into turning into a wolf so that the poacher could take his hide and leave that torn, broken body.

My stomach flipped at the thought. What if it really was a poacher doing these things to werewolves? What if he was pulling the beast out and leaving the human body behind as nothing more than a mangled corpse? The poacher would, of course, leave the body behind but take the wolf. He would probably skin it elsewhere, in a factory of some sort, where it wouldn't be seen.

That makes sense. That makes perfect sense.

I wiped the remnants of tears from my cheeks and jumped out of the tub splashing water across the gray walls and onto the white-tiled floor. My feet slipped a little as I struggled to maintain balance but if I happened to sprain my ankle, who cares? I really needed to call Matt and tell him my theory because it was so plausible. The evidence matched up and there was definitely a Hunter in town.

I don't know why none of us saw it before.

My hand reached for the silver flip phone and I dialed a 1 plus send to instantly reach Matt. The phone rang several times and finally Matt, huffing and puffing (no pun intended) answered. He was completely out of breath as he managed to exhale a 'hello'.

"What's wrong?" I asked hoping that some word of Billy had come through.

"Nothing, nothing," he stammered.

"Why are you out of breath?"

He was nervous. I could feel it. I could almost smell it. He reeked of salty sweat

mingled with dog shit and cigarettes. I don't know where the dog shit nor the cigarettes came from, but the stench was unmistakable.

"Just out for a jog."

"Oh," that would explain the dog shit and cigarettes. I know whenever I jog outside I always step in something foul and I always manage to run through a cloud of smoke.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but listen, I just thought of something."

"What?" he asked.

"Clyde was found strewn, right, just like we get when we shed our human bodies, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I was thinking, what if the killer took the wolf and skinned him, like a poacher."

"I think I know what you're getting at, but, Sophie, it's not..."

"It's possible," I said interrupting him, "and I think very likely."

"Sophie, I've already thought of this angle and both myself and Mr. Black have dismissed it."

Fraternizing with the enemy, was he? Well, that's just great. Of course the Hunter would say that it was a ridiculous theory because he's behind it all. Why would he admit to it?

"Sophie, there aren't any poachers around here."

"Yeah, but there's a Hunter."

His deep, heavy sigh exploded through the receiver sending chills down my spine. It was the sound of disappointment, like a parent giving their child a sigh because the child was found in the cookie jar. But my hands weren't covered in chocolate chip cookies so he had no right to be disappointed. I was merely stating fact.

"How many times do I have to tell you this, Sophie, he's here to help us."

"Matt, he's a Hunter. There's no denying it. He is what he is."

"He *is* a detective. He only has the safety of the public on his mind. Therefore, he's here to help."

"But he..."

"Sophie, I'm saying this one more time," he said, his power now drilling through the receiver in an attempt at pacifying me, "He..." Matt began, slowly enunciating every single word, "is...not...here...to...hurt...us. Are we clear?"

"Well, maybe he's not, but what if someone else is?"

"I can see why you would think it's a poacher, but it's not."

"How do you know?"

"Because it doesn't add up. That's how I know."

"Can you tell me why it doesn't add up?" I asked now wanting to shake him so hard that my logic wouldn't be looked upon like a kindergartener's play-doh model compared to Rodin's *The Thinker*.

"Look, Sophie, it's late. We've had a long, hard day and I think we both just need some rest. After seeing Clyde, losing Billy, and having to deal with a Hunter, we both need some sleep. I'm going to hang up now and work on that, I suggest you do the same."



“But...”

“No buts, Sophie, just get some sleep. We’ll talk in the morning after our brains have rested up some. Okay?”

I took in a deep inhale and nodded. He was probably right, but my theory just made sense. I really wanted to know why he could dismiss it out of hand so easily. Couldn’t he just tell me why he didn’t believe my theory?

“Can’t you just tell me why you don’t believe my theory?”

“I’m going to bed. I’ll talk to you in the morning. Goodnight, Sophie.”

“Wait,” I said into the phone hearing the dulcet tones tell me he had already hung up.

I snapped the phone back into place feeling more and more useless. Matt was most likely right and I had no clue as to what had hurt Clyde. I guess I was grasping for straws because I wanted answers. I wanted to avenge Clyde, avenge Billy and I couldn’t.

The investigations were for the big dogs, so to speak, and I just wasn’t one of them. I was a puppy compared to their experience and know how. I was especially a puppy compared to the Hunter. He had been dealing with these sorts of affairs for several years, probably, and if he didn’t think it was poachers, then I should agree.

But I didn’t trust him. Even though I wanted to. Hell, I wanted to do more than just trust the Hunter. I wanted to finally see him naked instead of just wonder, I wanted to touch that smooth skin, feel his rough hands scrape over my own silky flesh...

I took another deep inhale. I had run the emotional gambit for the day and I was tired.

And what a day it had been. I saw the slaughtered remains of Clyde, felt the rage at his loss, felt the tear and pull of my heart as Billy went missing, and now, I was feeling the temptation and lust as the dangerous Hunter kept entering my thoughts.

I stood in my bathroom, watching as a vanity light bulb flickered and then died. The dim room suddenly made me very aware that I was still naked and wet and dripping all over the tiled floor. Something just isn’t right when you’re standing alone and wet, it’s almost unwholesome.

Matt was right. I needed some sleep.

## Chapter Six

*The shifting sands of the desert were once again upon me. With small grains and pieces of glass that crawled over my easily torn flesh creating lines of blood that ran their way down my feet.*

*The scrapes didn't hurt; instead, they felt like tiny brushes of power crawling on my skin like a feather duster being rolled down my spine.*

*My eyes managed to avoid my body now casting glances around at the horizon and the sky. The sun was sinking low throwing soft hues of orange and purple against the twilight-ridden sky.*

*I stood under the silky raindrops and felt my white sheer nightgown billow in the gentle breeze. The small titter of water brushed across my face erasing the tears that had swelled in my eyes. I don't remember crying, but I was.*

*My feet turned around in the sand and saw the perfect ebony corpse of Clyde strung to a pole. His strong arms were overhead as if they were nailed through his palms. The tops of his feet were also nailed to the wooden pole as if the Romans had accused him of murder and this was his sentence. His eyelids shuttered open and with barely moving lips he whispered, "Help me".*

*"How?" I asked.*

*He began to cry blood, leaving crimson trails flowing down his cheeks. I started to touch him, to discover some way I could remove him from this torture. The rain became heavier and pelted at Clyde's body. The moment the water touched him, his body split apart. Flesh and skin peeled off from his bones delicately flopping onto the sand in front of me. A few spatters of blood landed gently on my cheeks. My hand wiped the blood across my face, smearing it as I tried to remove it.*

*I looked back at the pole and instead of the strewn corpse of Clyde, Charlie Groves, one of my wolf-brothers, was now impaled upon the post. His long blonde hair wafted on the hurried breeze, beating in time with the thunderous applause that had now taken the sky. I looked into those soft, child-like features and felt a moment of guilt. Had I allowed this to happen to him? I think I had.*

*It was my fault he was on that pole. But why was it my fault?*

*My hands reached toward him and he quivered against my touch. He shifted his body just enough that I had to move closer to feel him. As my fingers reached up to pull the metal spikes from his palms, he began to cry. The tears, once again, were blood. They etched their way down his face dragging skin and flesh with it.*

*His body was torn into a thousand tiny pieces, each flopping on the ground like a dying fish. His parts were alive, and yet he was dead.*

*I shook my head and took a deep breath, ignoring the pain and suffering that was dancing around my legs. The ancient spice of rosemary and true sage smacked itself into the air. The shadow was here. And he was watching me.*

*I could feel his gold eyes roam over the smallest parts of me, boring themselves*

*deep into my soul. My heart shuttered underneath his stare and my body, uncontrollably turned around in hopes of touching him.*

*His stare forced my body tight and wet, making me cringe on the brittle sand. One by one my feet carried me closer to him, closer to the love who would cherish me, hold me, and protect me.*

No.

*As I walked aimlessly in the desert, searching for him, I felt his hot, mottled breath flow across my back and down my chest. His large black paws glided down my now naked stomach feeling like so much soft fur. I writhed slightly into his touch. I wanted to turn around, to take him...*

No. Don't turn around. Don't do this.

*So, I didn't. Instead I stared directly ahead of me into the black, starlit sky. As I gazed more firmly, a small outline of a man grew on the horizon. His hair matched the darkness that surrounded him, but a certain light gleamed from his countless earrings. He was so far away from me that I couldn't really see him.*

*"No, Anput," the creature growled, "Come to me."*

*I wanted to. I wanted to race into those strong, ancient arms, feel that embrace that only he could give. But instead, I shook my head.*

*I didn't want him here. I didn't want to feel his touch that could make me cry out for more.*

*He roared loudly and dangerously behind me and his heavy thumps trumpeted his power as he bounded towards me. I still had my back to him and I braced for impact...*

My cell phone was ringing allowing the hollow electronic tune of Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> to echo in the heavy silence.

Lazily and groggily, I reached over the several dozen sweat-drenched pillows and grasped it up in my hands. The blinding light of blue temporarily unsighted me in the pitch black of the night sky. I squinted and looked at the caller id, *Matt D.*

"Matt?" I asked huskily. My voice was feeling dry and unused like someone had stuck one of those breathing tubes down there and then ripped it out none so delicately. I didn't think he literally meant we would be talking in the morning, the *early* morning. But if he wanted to speak so soon, then I wasn't going to complain. After all, he had just saved me from a horrendous nightmare.

"Sorry to wake you, Sophie, but you need to come down here," he replied hastily.

"Down where?"

"Charlie's place."

"Charlie Groves?" I asked hoping there was more than one Charlie in our pack. But I knew otherwise. Out of the 48 members of our pack, there was only one Charlie. I just didn't want this feeling of dread to grow into something factual. I don't know how much more death I could handle. I especially didn't want to see another family member torn into tiny bits. But according to my dream, he had been on a pole just like Clyde and had been ripped apart. As much as I hated dreaming of these events, I was also pretty pissed off that it wasn't warning me in time. What's the point of seeing the dead, mangled corpses more than once? How does that help anything?

"Well, yeah," he replied slowly as if I was special education student. I should probably focus on listening to people instead of living in my own internal monologue.

"What happened?" I asked, swallowing slightly, praying and hoping that Charlie

had just won the lottery and was giving us each a million dollars instead of being a strewn corpse.

“I don’t want any more of us to be alone. You’re right, we’re being targeted.”

“What do you mean, ‘targeted’?” I asked, but I already knew the answer; I just didn’t want to admit it to myself.

“Charlie has been murdered. Looks like the same guy who killed Clyde was here.”

My heart sunk so much into my chest that it hurt to breath. I had seen this, I had dreamt this. I knew that Charlie was dead even before I received the call, I just didn’t want it to be true. And seeing the aftermath as a vision wasn’t giving me any clues as to who exactly was behind this. Sure there was a horrifying creature who kept calling me “Anput” but I didn’t know who or even what it was. And honestly, I didn’t even know if he was behind it, or if in fact the creature was the Entity.

“Sophie, are you there?”

“Yeah, sorry, I was just...” Just what? What exactly could I say, that I’ve maybe seen the culprit but I don’t remember who or what it was? What exactly could that help?

“Sophie, are you alright?”

“I think I’m just a little bit shaken.”

“Do you want someone to pick you up?”

“Pick me up?”

“Like I said, I don’t want any more of us to be alone. So, are you okay to drive down here?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Please stop asking. I’m as fine as someone who has lost three friends in the past twenty four hours can be.”

He hesitated for the slightest of seconds, “I’m going to send someone.”

“Really, Matt, it’s not necessary.”

“I can hear it on your voice, Sophie, you’re scared. We’re all scared and like I said earlier, I don’t want anyone one of us alone.”

“You’ve said that three times now,” I replied even more scared now that he was repeating himself, really hammering the point that he didn’t want us to be alone.

“Sophie, I’m putting my foot down on this. I know Billy is missing and I’m sorry you’ve lost him right now, but I’ll send someone to just bring you down here. You can stay with Sheila and I until we find another partner. Okay?”

“Another partner?”

“If you can’t control your beast you need to be able to call someone.”

“Why are you even considering the idea that Billy will no longer be my partner?”

I asked tears now rising to the brim.

“Just until he gets back, then.”

“Matt...”

“Sophie, don’t argue with me on this one. Billy has disappeared and two of our family are dead. I’m not taking any more chances. You will hole up with us until we find something else. Now pack a overnight bag or two and get your ass down here.”

“Okay,” I said not wanting to push the issue because I was so damn tired and emotionally overwhelmed. I didn’t know I had any more fighting left in me. And he was

my father in a sense, so I wasn't going to argue. Not only that, but he made some valid points. It wasn't safe for any of us to be alone anymore.

"Good, someone will be there in about ten minutes, so make sure you have everything. They'll bring you to Charlie's place, alright?"

"Why there?"

"I've only known you for two years, but I can tell when something's wrong. And I think you know exactly what's happening to my pack. So, you're going to come here and you're going to get a feeling or two and then you're going to tell me everything. There are no secrets in this family, Sophie. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah," I said feeling just a little bit like a teenager who was caught trying to sneak out of the house. This is why I appreciated my loneliness, my private bubble, because no one could command me. But as a part of this family, I was obligated to follow him even blindly.

The only thing is, what exactly would I tell him? That I have abnormal feelings for a creature who was maybe slaughtering our pack? Or that all I could see was just the strewn bodies, not who was going to be next so that we could protect them? I may have the Entity back, but it wasn't divulging information like it should have. It was still standoffish and sluggish.

How am I supposed to tell them that? And would they even believe me? Everyone wants something to believe in during a crisis and I'm not so sure that I was the right thing to believe in. Shouldn't they put their trust in a higher power? Why me, why do I get to be the center of attention? They all think I know the answers and I don't. I'm being given my fifteen minutes of fame to be an ass. Woopy.

"Alright, Sophie, you better hurry up and pack. I'll see you in a few."

"Bye," I said into the phone realizing he had already hung up.

I threw the phone on the bed and went to the hallway closet to pull out my luggage. I was probably only going to spend the rest of the night with them, so I wouldn't need much. I packed my toothbrush, toothpaste, mouthwash (because no one ever had the good kinds of dental equipment that I preferred), a blue t-shirt bra to fit under the blue t-shirt, khaki crop pants and a pair of beige thong sandals.

I grabbed my purse and zipped the luggage bag. The cell phone was already in my purse when I locked the door behind me. Matt had been so sincere and instilled that horrific fear that he had actually lit a fire under my ass. This was the fastest that I had ever packed, a record really.

As I walked down the concrete path to wait on the curb, I past several small cigarettes that had been thrown into the bushes. I didn't know anyone who smoked in my building so I guessed they were Ms. Jean's. The first few times I had seen her for a reading she was smoking her Virginia Slims one right after the other. If only she had a cigarette holder she would look like a clown-ed-up version of Cruella DeVille.

I sat on the curb and listened to the ants scurry beneath my feet, marching to and fro in order to harvest the small crumbs of McDonald's fries. I glanced at the red container that had been thrown out and wanted to dispose of it properly. But, I didn't have any gloves and I really didn't want to catch anything. If only I had a litter spear than I would be able to clean that up. It's infuriating to watch people throw out garbage willy-nilly. This is your home, keep it clean.

My eyes glanced back up into the starless sky seeing only the bright red blinking

lights of helicopters and airplanes and I wondered what time it was. Darkness had already seeped into the bright corners of the day and the moon was halfway across the sky, threatening to be full within a few days. I always looked at the moon, because what else was I supposed to do when my very life depended on it?

A soft bristle of fur mashed itself on my sleeveless arms and I gave a very unattractive yelp turning to find a black cat had brushed up against me. The cat nuzzled in close to me, desperately wanting my attention so I acquiesced. I stared deeply at the cat recognizing it for the one that had been playing the role of a raven, constantly tapping at my window.

“So, it’s you, huh?” I said to the cat, gently stroking its head, back, and tail. The cat meowed loudly and came back for another round of petting.

As I stroked the cat, my own beast woke to the soft scent of wild forests and underbrush that was issuing from the cat. Through my eyes it saw the small animal and for a split-second, the idea of a taking a shovel to the poor thing made logical sense.

I took a deep inhale into the mouth so I wouldn’t have to smell anything and looked back to the tossed McDonald’s container. I needed to focus on something, anything, to calm my own beast down. I guess being a supernatural werewolf is a lot like being a dog, always wanting to sniff and then chase the cat. I had once thought being werewolf was a little bit better than being a dog, but now I see we are the same exact creatures especially as my beast prowls under my skin, forcing me to reach for the tossed fries.

I was debating whether I should sniff the garbage and stuff it into my mouth when a bright, yellow bug pulled up in front of me. The headlights shone upon me like I was under a spotlight. The driver’s side door opened and I heard her walk towards me. Her heels clipped lightly on the pavement just as they had on my floor.

The cat ran into the bushes, hiding itself from view when Shirley approached, holding out her hand.

“Hi, Shirley,” I said, grabbing my suitcase and purse. I wasn’t expecting her to be my chauffer for the night and I was instantly put on guard. She could be kidnapping me and taking me to their secret lair where the Hunter would pull my wolf from my body and then skin my poor beast. But as I touched her hand in a shake, I knew she meant me no harm. She wasn’t afraid like most humans are when they’ve been alone in the night, instead, she was confident and solid, more so than she had been earlier in the day.

“Hey, do you need any help with that?” she asked nodding to my small overnight bags.

“No thanks, I can manage.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, thanks,” I said, *I can tie my own shoes and everything.*

Her preppy little white summer dress bounced with her every step as if she was the Queen of the Daisies. And for some reason, I didn’t like her. She shouldn’t be so perky and happy after all that’s happened. She may not have known the victims but she could at least pretend like they mattered instead of flitting around dancing on sunshine.

But I guess I was being cruel. I had a right to be. I had thought that there wasn’t any more people to lose and I had been wrong. Seeing Clyde’s body for the first time was enough to push me over the edge, losing Billy was enough to don cement blocks while falling off the edge, and now losing Charlie, well, someone should have just shot

me before I fell off the edge because I don't think I can take this.

Three friends in one day. And they were all my friends. They were my wolf-brothers, my family. They were my only family, my only *real* family and they were gone. Yeah, I'm adding Billy to the mix because if his trail had disappeared and I had heard nothing more since then, then he was gone, too. Death seems to drown out any semblance of hope and I was no longer struggling against the current. This was all too much to bear, too much for one person.

I looked back to Shirley and she grinned even deeper, her teeth spilling out like a Cheshire cat gone mad. I wanted to smack her then and there. People were dying, my pack was dying, and she was smiling. She just didn't seem to give a damn that my world was collapsing.

I heard her heels walk towards me and as I looked at her face, it changed from a perfect smile into something so sympathetic, I wanted to cry.

Her arms wrapped around me and pulled me tightly to her, forcing me to return the hug. And I did. She was soft, so soft, and yet so strong. My head rested against her neck and her pulse beat softly and steadily. I couldn't help but to feel her pulse because that's what I always do and hers was strong. She wasn't afraid, she was perfectly calm. And she was hugging me. If I could have taken out the Beast that was me, I would have cried in her arms.

I stepped out from her hold and continued to stare at the black pavement. Anything was better to look at than her eyes because if I did, I would have fallen apart and I still didn't want the Hunter nor his assistant to know my weaknesses. No matter how much the pain was crushing me, I couldn't let them know it hurt.

"You can put those in the trunk," she said clicking on the black remote to pop the trunk, pulling me from my internal stupor.

I opened the passenger side door and threw the bags into the back seat. I just wanted to be left alone now, alone with my feelings so I could deal with them. My pain shouldn't be on display for all the world to see. It's private and I want to keep it that way.

"Well, whatever is easier," she said with a mild-mannered Flight Attendant voice. "Be sure to buckle your seatbelt," she continued and turned the key in the ignition.

For a moment, I didn't want to. I wanted to ride in a car without wearing a seatbelt, and hopefully, if I was very lucky, we would be in a car accident and I would fly through the window and never have to feel this despair ever again. But as the thought washed over me, my feelings quickly turned to anger. Who could do this to people I love? Who would do this to anyone? And those questions alone told me to divine something from Charlie's crime scene. I was going to help my family, not hinder them. I wasn't going to think of suicide or the loss of them anymore because I needed to look ahead, I needed to focus on something sure and I knew what the surety was: I would find the person(s) responsible and I would kill them.

I firmly clicked my seatbelt into place and knew what sort of hell waited for me as she pressed play on her CD player. Taylor Swift erupted from the speakers and I immediately wanted to kill myself again. I thought I was past that, but the upbeat music just didn't help my mood.

"So," I said trying to get her to turn down the music, "how long have you been working with Mr. Black?"

“Damon?”

“Sure, Damon,” I said yelling just a little bit to make myself heard over the obnoxious speakers.

Her fingers reached for the volume and she turned it down to setting one. Thank the good Lord. I didn’t know how much of those poppy tunes I could stand. Besides, I don’t need happy music when two of my friends have died and one had gone missing. It was like a slap in the face.

“We’ve known each other for a year and a half now. BTW…”

“BTW?” I asked.

“Computer lingo for by the way,” she said, cocking her head as if I didn’t know that than I should be mentally handicapped, “Matt said you should eat something. So, what’s open at three in the morning down here?”

“What do you mean, ‘down here’? Where are you based out of?”

“Anywhere and everywhere. We travel the country answering calls of those who need our specialized help.”

“Oh, so how did you get involved?”

“Damon rescued me from a company that had been experimenting on me my entire life.”

“What were they doing to you?”

“Oh, the usual, implanting alien DNA to turn me into a superhuman.”

“What?!” I asked incredulously.

She laughed, “just kidding.”

The cheerleader may have been joking, but the strange thing is, I couldn’t smell a lie nor a joke on her. She was exuding the soft, cottony scent of truth which was actually a little bit disturbing.

“So, where to for food?” she asked and then replied to herself, “I know about that place. Geez, can’t you just shut up for like two seconds?”

“Excuse me?”

“Did I say that out loud?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, sorry. I have this narrator in my head and she’s such a bitch.”

Right. I’ll just ignore her and look out the window now. I had too much misery on my plate and I didn’t need a side of crazy.

The trees brushed past us creating a dark blur of non-moving life through the clean glass. I rolled down the window, inhaling the cool, humid night air, smelling the stench of rotting garbage, blossoming hibiscus, and Taco Bell’s all night drive through.

“How did you know this place would be open?” I asked.

“I pulled up a list of non-variable,” she paused, “I read the large billboard. You don’t mind tacos, right?”

“They’ll do.”

“Great.”

She pulled up to the speaker and then looked at me, wondering what I would get.

“So, what will it be?” she asked.

“I’ll have six ½ pound combo burritos and a large Mountain Dew Baja blast.”

“Oh you,” she said giggling, “We’ll have two volcano burritos and two waters please,” she then looked over at me, “One for you and one for me. It’s on the house.”



Her eyes glazed over for just a moment and I thought I could smell the harsh sting of cold metal when she began again, “She’s not one, okay? So, she doesn’t need that much. Whatever. I know I’m right on this.”

Her talking to herself was a little bit creepy but it was a nice distraction from the depression that I was trying to keep at bay. For a few moments, I hadn’t thought about my friends, and as terrible as that sounds, I appreciated it. Sadness weighs down the soul forcing the heavy burden to crush any sort of happiness that life can give. So for a while, I was relieved. My heart wasn’t as slow and fearful, my mind wasn’t riddled with confusion, instead, I was feeling like a normal person compared with the cocaine-inspired cheerleader (I mean, she had to be on something to act like that).

“I could really use some more food, though,” I said.

“What are you, a bear? One burrito is enough. Especially for a woman your age. You don’t want your slow metabolism to add a few extra pounds.”

Okay, if she was trying to instill anger, congratulations, here’s your solid gold cupid doll.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Eighteen.”

“Really? That young?”

“What are you talking about? I’m getting to be an old woman. You know the Greeks thought that women reached the height of their perfection at eighteen. So, it’s all downhill after this.”

“Are you joking?”

“No...”

“I am 26 and in the car with you. Could you be more rude?”

“Sorry, I tell it like it is.”

“Well, maybe you should keep your mouth shut for the rest of this trip.”

She mumbled slightly to the side but I heard every word she said, “I can kill you fifty-seven different ways...oh, yeah, you’re right, a hundred and two different ways.”

Wow. I’m not sure Matt thought his safety plan out very well. I mean, this girl was obviously some kind of psycho killer freak. That’s probably why the Hunter kept her around. If she was mumbling the truth, then she would be handy if they were ever attacked by something really and truly dangerous, hell, she’d be handy as a weapon, a useful tool for taking down creatures like me.

And just like that, I was in fear for my life. I still believed in my theory that there were poachers in town taking every single werewolf pelt they could get, and now I’m thinking, she’s definitely helping them.

## Chapter Seven

We ate in silence. Shirley continued to mumble a few things to herself, but other than that, the car ride was eerily quiet. I was more than a little relieved when I stepped out of her bug onto solid ground. Not only was she nuts, but she was also a dangerous driver. She had nearly hit seven teenage punks and two prostitutes on the way over. And they weren't just walking across the street, no, they were on the sidewalk. Shirley had swerved several times to hit them and then miss them. Every time she passed by their live bodies she would mumble, "ten points" or "five points" or "if only one was in a wheelchair, that would be like five hundred points and then I would have you beat". It was all quite creepy really. And honestly, I don't know if she was joking or not. I think she really wanted to run them over. Had I not been in the vehicle, I think she might have.

So, as my feet approached solid ground, a beautiful feeling of relief poured over me only to be stopped abruptly as Matt and Sheila came outside to greet me. Both of them carried the scent of death and despair that rolled off them like so much vomit and decay.

"Sophie," Sheila said outstretching her long, slender arms to hold me. She wrapped them around me and I held her back, feeling the soft flower-patterned dress under my palms. I breathed her in and the scent of perfumed fear tickled at the back of my throat. She reeked of violets and violence and the smell was more than just a little bit nauseating. She didn't smell like a protector anymore, instead, she smelled like prey like a fawn that has been caught hiding underneath a rhododendron bush.

I pulled back so that the fawn didn't tempt my beast. With so much that had happened, I didn't want to lose control right now. Besides, what little remained of the taco would hopefully sustain my hunger for a while longer. I really wish I could have ordered more than one. But if I did, Shirley would have discovered my secret and I didn't want her to know.

"Her bag is in the back," I heard Shirley say as Matt pulled me into a big man bear hug. His large frame wrapped around my small one and for just a moment, I felt calm, at peace. His power caressed my fear and soothed it away just like eating chocolate could. That's why he was considered the Father; he was loving, caring, and exuded strength.

"Any other time," he whispered into my ear, "I would have sent you home, but we need you. And remember, keep this to yourself, I haven't told the rest of the pack."

I pulled away from the hug and glanced over his shoulder. Eric and Ernie Kitts stood menacingly behind him like two enormous, unmovable boulders. They were real, biological brothers, born only nine months apart. There were several differences between the two; Eric was tall and blonde while Ernie was short and dark; Eric had more of a brain while Ernie only had a stupid sense of humor; Eric had a multitude of earrings and tattoos while Ernie had none. Other than that, they were exactly alike. They each fancied bright Hawaiian shirts that sported extremely large and flashy hibiscus flowers dotted with occasional pineapples and hula girls. Their hair was short and spiky like

most of the young twenty something year old men these days and they were both staring intently at Shirley. They had a weakness for blondes so they just kept watching her. For so-called bodyguards, they were really pathetic. But why should they be elite and highly trained? After all, nothing bad ever happened in this pack. We didn't have enemies and the rest of the supernatural community kept to itself. The supernatural community was more like a high school; you had the nerds (the fairies), the jocks (the were-animals), the preps (elven folk), and the Goth (vampires). So, we kept to our cliques like good little immature humans.

I guess werewolves were considered jocks because we are extremely athletic. We can bound over twenty miles in half an hour and keep chasing our prey until it finally falls. We have unbelievable stamina, power, strength and grace.

So, why were we dropping like flies? Even with a poacher in town, he shouldn't have been able to get the drop on more than one of us. Now that I thought about it, no one should be able to have taken down so many in less than 24 hours. No one. We're too strong, too careful to allow another predator into our territory.

"Do I have to go in there?" I asked noticing the back-up that Matt felt was needed.

"Like I said, I wouldn't normally ask this of you," he said with a sigh, "but its getting dangerous around here."

"Yeah", I replied with a nod.

"And I don't mean just around here. I've checked with a few other packs around the state. They have dead members as well."

"They do?"

"Yeah. Something is gunning for us. And I don't want to stand around and wait for it to happen."

"I get it."

"Do you?"

"I do. I'll try to see if I can pick up on anything. Does Charlie smell the same as Clyde?"

"Exactly the same."

"But Charlie didn't bathe as often as Clyde." Trust me, it was the reason that I never hugged Charlie, my wolf-brother. He always smelled like molding pizza and warm beer. What's the saying, *you can't choose your family*. But just because you can't choose them it doesn't mean you don't love them. And I loved Charlie. He may have stunk, but he was a really nice man. He treated everyone equally and always had a stupid joke to tell. The first time I had met him, he said, "Have you heard this one? Two guys walk into a bar, the second one ducked." I had to laugh because it was the stupidest joke I've ever heard. But Charlie could always make you smile.

"I know, Sophie," continued Matt, "their individual scents are gone. All that remains is death."

"Just death?"

"Just death."

"I thought I had smelled more than that at Clyde's house."

"What else did you smell?"

"Rosemary and sage. You didn't smell that?"

He shook his head, "No. You should probably go in and see if you can smell that

again. Be sure to tell Mr. Black everything.”

“He’s here?”

“Well, yeah, he is investigating their deaths, Sophie.”

Duh. I should have known he would be here for two reasons, 1) Shirley had picked me up, 2) We had called him in just to discover the culprit(s). Earlier this evening I thought I had been so fast with the packing and now I was just slow.

My stomach lurched like I had swallowed six-day old calamari and I desperately wanted to get out of there. I was nervous to see the Hunter again. It had been easier to talk with him yesterday because I was still in somewhat of a shock that a hunter was in my living room. But that calming shock had worn off and I was faced with two dreadful episodes; talking to the Hunter again and leaning over the corpse of another friend. I don’t know why I could compare the two because you’d think one would be worse than the other, but my beast constantly stirred at the thought of the Hunter and I didn’t want to arouse it.

I said “hello” to the two brothers as I passed them feeling their eyes roam to my butt and then back to Shirley. They may prefer blondes, but they were perverts all the way. I really hope they weren’t staying the night with Matt and Sheila. If they were acting as bodyguards, then I could expect them to unfortunately. I guess I should have brought more clothes to hide in. They wouldn’t try anything, but I definitely didn’t want their eyes on me all night either.

I pushed a palm leaf out of my way as I approached the screen door that was attached by only one hinge. The door somewhat jammed on itself and I had to thrust the thing to the side. It shuttered on its only hinge as it busted near the wall.

“I did that once before,” I heard Shirley mutter behind me.

I don’t know what that statement meant, and right now, I don’t care. There was something much more devastating beyond this door that was weighing on my mind.

I peeked in through the doorway, staring at the brown carpet that I was sure was covered in stains. The good thing about brown-colored carpet is that it hides all kinds of past sins. I could smell spilt coke, milk, salsa and other weird scents that I couldn’t put my finger on and truthfully, I didn’t want to.

My skin bristled for the slightest of seconds and my beast stirred. Down through the darkly lit hallway I knew what awaited me. And my beast wanted to be near it. I could see it uncurling inside me, stretching, waking up to breathe in the luscious scent of meat.

I closed my eyes and focused on my hearing. I had to shut down the olfactory nerves just enough so that I could focus on the task at hand. The smell of death was just too intoxicating. So I tried to ignore the scent and focus on the sounds of life around me. There were more cockroaches here than at Clyde’s. The crickets weren’t chirping, instead, the only sounds being made by animals were my family members outside and the Hunter’s beating heart inside. Nature is not quiet. She never sleeps, she never takes a break, and she never becomes silent like a frightened hen.

I heard a soft pitter-patter beat beneath a hollow box and realized it was Shirley’s heart. It didn’t sound like anything I had ever heard before. It sounded distant, faint, and uncomfortable. There really was something unique about her. When I get the chance, I will ask if she was kidding about that alien comment.

But later, for now, the silence was a little bit more than overwhelming. There are

clichés for moments like this; the calm before the storm, the silence before the attack. I made that last one up because it had been so quiet when I had first been attacked. I haven't appreciated silence since. Nor do I appreciate it now.

"I know," she said in a tangible whisper, "it's quiet. I think he is still here."

"He?" I whispered back, my heart beginning to dance a little bit faster, "how do you know it's a 'he'?"

"Because he's watching us."

"From where?" I asked not wanting to know the answer. The beast that was me began to growl. It wanted out to defend us, to protect us because the insane cheerleader was right; the killer was still here. I could feel those eyes searching me, anticipating my movements, waiting for me to stir. It is an otherworldly feeling knowing that someone is boring their eyes into you, watching you, breathing you in and that you are helpless against it. Because what can you do, other than feel icky? It's not like you can gouge out their eyes; all you can do is hope that the moment passes quickly.

"We need to communicate via telepathy," she said as if telepathy was akin to using a cell phone.

"I can't do that."

"That's too bad because he can hear us. If we go after him..."

"How do you know where he is?"

"I can hear him breathing. Can't you?"

I pricked my ears to hear the faintest of sounds but the cockroaches were encouraged by their own fear so their tiny little legs dug deeper into the crowd creating a barrage of scraping explosions in my head.

"There's too much interference," I said, and then I realized I shouldn't have been able to hear anything out of the ordinary, "not that I could anyway."

I could feel Shirley roll her eyes, "I heard you growl. I know what you are. But I won't tell anyone. Besides, shouldn't we be focusing on the sound?"

"How can you hear him breathing and I can't?"

"Long story. I'll tell you another day," she paused, "do you think that's wise?"

"What?"

"Sorry, wasn't talking to you. Fine, I'll do it. I'm going to chase him off."

"What?!"

"He's only here to watch us, he doesn't want to get caught," she paused and then I felt her body relax behind me, "Ah, you hear that, he's not breathing anymore. He's already left."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Just trust me on this one."

"Shirley, what are you?"

"I'll keep your secret if you keep mine," she paused again and then rolled her eyes, "of course I'm not going to tell her. Sheese," she looked back at me as if she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar, "I said that out loud didn't I?"

"Yep. But don't worry, I don't need to know."

Although I would really like to open that Pandora's box and see what's inside. Shirley was definitely something different and special. As I mentioned before, there are millions of spiritual creatures wondering the earth and not everyone knows them all.

"So, is he gone?" I asked.

“Oh yeah. He’s probably looking up his next victim.”

“You say that like it doesn’t mean anything.”

“I’m just stating facts. There’s a serial killer here; he’s going to keep on killing. Wake up and smell the corpses, Sophie.”

“What?”

“It’s just a phrase. It means get with the program.”

“These are my friends you’re talking about. They’re more than just stats.”

“Of course they are, to you. But to me, they’re just more victims. I can be cold. You can’t because you’re too close. Honestly, I don’t even know why you’re here.”

I nodded, “I don’t either.”

Sometimes Shirley is cute, but other times, she’s just rude.

I continued down the hallway and tried to focus my mind on feelings and visions. Instead, all that ran through my head was that the killer had been here. He had been watching us, studying us, hoping that he could find a weakness and exploit it. I had several weaknesses that he could exploit and I didn’t want him to discover any of them.

My eyes were still closed as the rancid smell of death, rosemary, and sage played at the back of my throat. Charlie’s body hadn’t decayed yet, so he smelled like a fillet mignon roasted in rosemary served with a baked potato. My stomach growled and my beast howled along with it. I opened my eyes to maybe focus on something other than that delicious and tempting scent.

I looked at the torn, rose-printed couch and saw the same bright red gobs splattered all over the room that were in Clyde’s living room. It was the same scene except different location.

The Hunter was standing off to the side of what I guess was a corpse. He stood with his Indiana Jones hat tucked under his right arm and held a notebook in his left. His desiccated shoes were covered in red goop that looked like so much hamburger. He had his back hunched down and over the ‘body’, if it could be called a body, and scribbled a few words down onto the white paper. He actually looked like a detective; he was doing his job--detecting. For a moment, I was glad that someone would be able to solve this and then that moment slipped through my fingers like water. He was a Hunter and nothing good could come from him.

“Ah, good, Shirley, you’re here. Anything new?” he said completely and totally avoiding me. His eyes managed to stare right past me to the girl who stood behind me. What was I, a sofa?

“You know, the killer was outside,” she said nonchalantly as if she was discussing the weather.

“Did you see him?” he asked, now standing to face her from across the room.

“No, I heard him. He could hear us. He ran off when I said I would go after him.”

“What did he sound like?”

“Like nothing I’ve ever heard before.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s powerful,” she paused, “No, I’m not going to say that. Would you shut up already?”

“What are you keeping from me, Shirley?”

“Nothing.”

He somewhat leaped over the strewn corpse and brought Shirley to the corner of the room and kept asking her questions. If I had been anywhere else, I would have eavesdropped because I did wonder who or what presence she had felt. But my attention was somewhere else. Charlie's corpse looked exactly like Clyde's only Charlie had Arian coloring and Clyde had ebony. But the bodies were the same. The strewn muscle, the fragmented bones, the intestines lopped all over the room; they were the same.

As I looked over the red meat and bright white bone that stuck out at so many different angles, I couldn't help but to breath in just a bit deeper. A part of me wanted to, the other part needed fresh air. I could smell the sewage-filled intestines and taste it in the air. I saw speckles of waste ooze from the cream-colored intestines and I had to turn away. I felt the twinge of nausea race through me pushing that volcano taco to the back of my throat.

I swallowed deeply hoping that I could swallow the sick that wanted desperately to come up.

But I couldn't. I bent over and heaved. I threw up. My stomach muscles contracted violently and I cried. I sat on the floor, on his bloody remains, and I cried. Clyde had been taken from me, Charlie too, and Billy was out there somewhere soaking in his addled depression and most likely, dead.

And I was here alone. I had to face the torn corpses, had to dream about their souls, and had to lust after the Hunter. It's not right, and its not fair.

So I cried. I cried like a little girl who lost her favorite pony, weeping into the wee hours of the night.

I covered my face in my hands and felt the hot liquid of blood racing down my cheeks. When I had plopped to the floor I must have touched all that blood, vomit, and meat because I was wearing it like a mask.

I felt hands on my shoulders and I literally choked on my own tears, coughing and sputtering over the dead. My head dug into the chest of a man and I could smell that gun powder-sandalwood scent wash over the death that surrounded me. I grasped onto his white t-shirt and held him tightly. I didn't want to let go, I didn't want to be alone.

## Chapter Seven

The Hunter wrapped his arms around me like a flannel blanket in the wintertime. He was so soft and yet firm. His biceps curled over my shoulders delicately slowing down my hiccupping spasms. Just his touch was enough for me to snuggle closer, to actually trust him while he held me.

His breath pushed my hair out of my face as I placed my chin more firmly on his chest and felt it lift and fall as he continued to breathe. With every inhale, I relaxed more and more into those strong arms and secure chest. I felt so safe, so protected, so warm that I didn't even care I was in the arms of a Hunter. All that mattered was his warm touch, his gentle embrace, his thumping heart.

For a few moments, I didn't think about Clyde nor Charlie nor Billy. All I thought about was the peace that was flowing all around me, circling me like fireflies on a warm night. The tranquility tickled my skin and erased the nightmares that were still haunting me.

And just as I thought about the nightmares, they returned. So, I held the Hunter tighter and wrapped my hands around his collar in a death grip in an attempt to pull the serenity back to me.

I felt his hands move down my shoulders and across my back soothing my tense and sore muscles with every stroke. His rough palms lightly massaged their way down my spine and back up again to pet my neck and shoulders. The constant and rhythmic caressing returned that feeling of peace and chased away the vivid and horrendous images that were plaguing me. He was hypnotizing me with his hands and I was letting him. If he wanted to lull me into a trap, then I didn't mind. I would willingly go to him if he continued to pet me, to soothe me, to obliterate my nightmares.

"Shirley," the Hunter said, his voice rumbling through his chest and vibrating my cheek, "bring Mr. Davis in here."

I heard the smooth, liquid chocolate voice and wanted to drown in it and when I thought of the image, I realized that wouldn't be a terrible way to go. In the words of Shakespeare, I would die in his arms. Although, the word 'die' in the playwright's mind meant orgasm. But that wouldn't be too bad either. Shakespeare definitely knew what he was talking about.

The Hunter's heart continued to beat so steadily that my own heart became in-tuned with his, thumping when his did, and silent when his heart was silent. If I didn't carry the burden of bias within me, I would have said that this was a perfect moment, one of complete and utter bliss. But at some point, a person has to wake up and smell the gun powder.

He was a Hunter and a killer. I was his prey. And now he knew my weakness.

I managed to open my eyes and as soon as I did, I saw the strewn remains of Charlie lopped all over the dirty, white walls. My bottom lip began to quiver and I thrust my face back into the Hunter's chest. I didn't want to face any more loss today, nor ever. I had my fill and I couldn't handle it. There was too much emotional loss and too much



physical slaughter for anyone close to the victims. Perhaps I should refer to my deceased family as victims instead of family and friends. Perhaps if I could be cold, then I wouldn't feel so miserable and depressed.

The only downside to that option was I had seen their smiling faces. I knew the wolf they had turned into which meant that I had known their darkest secret. In knowing something that special, you can never keep your distance because you're too close.

I was too close with Clyde, Charlie, and Billy and honestly, I'm glad I knew them. Although this pain that they're causing wasn't necessarily endearing them to me right now.

I heard the panicked shuffles of Matt's loafers and instantly I regretted the sound. I was slightly enjoying the soft peace and reflection that the Hunter was giving me and I didn't relish the idea of relinquishing my inner thoughts. After all, I hadn't cried since his strong arms had wound their way around me and the only time I did want to cry, was when I opened my eyes. So, I wanted to keep my eyes closed and shut out the pain that was tearing through the air. I wanted to be blind to everything around me except for the Hunter. I wanted to see him.

I opened my eyes gently, allowing the harsh white light to glide through my sight. Matt was now coming into the room with a look of pure horror on his face.

"Oh no, how is she? What happened?" he asked bending down beside us and splashing some of the cooling blood as he lowered himself onto his knees. His palm touched the back of my head and I felt his warm, streaming power cascade all around me. In a rush of heat it danced over my skin and tried to chase away the fear and loathing that had taken hold of me.

The Hunter shifted slightly, pushing his chest into my face in attempt to move me. But I didn't budge. I didn't want to move. I never wanted to leave his tender hold. I wanted to absorb it, become locked to it somehow. I never wanted to be without that calming touch, without the protection of that physical shelter.

"This has all been too much for her," the Hunter responded still trying to move me away from him.

"What do you mean?" asked Matt playing the role of idiot for the evening.

"She shouldn't be seeing this, Mr. Davis. No civilian should. It's difficult enough for Shirley and myself and we didn't know the victims personally."

"I know it's rough, but we need some kind of information about these deaths and if Sophie can divine..."

"Stop right there, Mr. Davis. Why did you hire me if Ms. Morgan could 'divine' the culprit? Why bother? Is it because on the off chance Ms. Morgan doesn't pick up any clues then perhaps I'll be able to? Is that it? Because if you really cared for Ms. Morgan, then she wouldn't be here at all. Instead, she would be mourning normally, not creating nightmares and vivid images to look at for the rest of her life. These scenes will forever haunt her and for some odd reason, you didn't think of that."

"But..."

"Mr. Davis, I'm taking Ms. Morgan home. And don't worry, I'll stay with her all night because you're right about one thing, no one should be left alone right now especially after what Shirley told me."

I still had my eyes closed but I could feel the tension that was building in the room. Matt didn't have a choice when it came to bringing me to the crime scene. He just

wanted answers. We all want answers. It's not his fault that I can't handle the deaths of my friends nor the way in which they died. If I was stronger then perhaps I could help but all I could do was hold on to the Hunter. I wasn't about to let go of him. He was the first person in a long time who made me feel safe so I wasn't about to throw that away. Security was a luxury that I couldn't afford before and now that the Hunter was willingly giving me safety, then how could I turn that down?

"Yeah," Matt finally replied with a sigh, "You're right. I shouldn't have brought her here or to the first scene. I just didn't want anything happening to the rest of my pa..." he almost said 'pack' and then quickly tried for a save, "rest of my family."

But the Hunter was too quick and I knew he had spotted the change of words because his breathing picked up speed and his body released just a little bit of that strong hold, "Your pack? Is Ms. Morgan a member of your pack?"

"She's family," Matt replied delicately, "and I didn't want any harm to come to anyone who knows us so I thought perhaps Sophie could tell us something. It was selfish of me, I know."

"No, it wasn't selfish," the Hunter replied still holding me albeit standoffishly, "but your plan wasn't thought out either. Now, if you don't have any objections, I'll be taking Ms. Morgan home."

I should have intervened, but I didn't. They were talking right over me and I didn't care. I just wanted to remain in the Hunter's arms. I'm reminded of the metaphor that I said earlier; I was like a mouse caught in the trance of a cobra, caught in the warmth and strength of the Hunter's embrace. It was a dangerous place to be but even my beast enjoyed the caressing and the calm nurturing. I didn't know that anyone who smelled like gun powder could be so sensitive. I guess you learn something new every day.

I snuggled up closer to the Hunter's chest and felt the soft vibrations of his thumping heart once more. Logic was screaming at me to run away, but instinct was telling me to cuddle. Cuddle? Yes, cuddle. So, I did.

His right hand reached around my waist while his left arm grasped my legs and he lifted both himself and me into a standing position. I still held onto his collar like my very existence depended on it even as he easily carried me down the hallway and out of sight of the strewn corpse.

"Shirley," he whispered, leaning into his assistant and bumping my knees against her very firm arm, "See if you can't find some way to clean this mess up. We don't want cops clogging up the place and cordoning off the area."

"Should I shovel up the body?" she asked.

"Yeah, then put him in a few coolers and burn him in an isolated area. Bring his ashes to Mr. Davis," he paused and I felt one of his hands accidentally brush along my naked skin where my shirt had lifted, "do whatever you can to make sure Charlie Groves has moved. Somewhere north, maybe."

"How about Maine?"

"Sure."

If my brains were working properly, I would've tried to ponder the partial conversation and tried to make heads or tails out of it, but instead, I remained motionless in the Hunter's arms. I had so many questions I wanted to ask and so many things that I wanted to say, but I was so tired. I was tired of the fear, the angst, the pain, and most

importantly, the sadness.

Couldn't I be selfish for just a moment and enjoy the blank state my mind had taken instead of being hammered with the loss of so many friends?

The Hunter was right, I didn't belong here. I shouldn't have seen this because I don't think any loved one would have left those rooms sane. You can't look into the abyss and not have it stare right back at you. And you can't see the discarded remains of your friends and not worry that one day, you too would be discarded.

My hands slightly released his collar and wrapped themselves around his neck. I needed to feel something living, something solid instead of the intangible groping of death. I breathed in the musky scent of sweat and strength and rolled it around my tongue as the crickets began their symphony for the evening. My beast uncurled for the slightest of seconds and allowed the peace and beauty surrounding us in. The beast was actually enjoying the moment, remaining pacified as I was.

If it had been any other time and with any other person, I would have treasured this moment for the rest of my life. Instead, I just accepted the moment and smiled.

I heard the door to his black Hummer open and I was placed gently onto the torn, gray seat. Beige stuffing was exuding from slashed areas reminding me that at one point, there had been a werewolf in here. I don't know why it was in the front seat and I didn't care, but it had been in here and with the Hunter still alive, I knew the beast had been killed.

My heart sped up for a time while the adrenaline began to pump its way through my system, erasing the memories of my friends and inspiring fear to force me to run. I listened to my heart pounding in my chest as it threatened to beat out of my chest, to tear its way out.

What had I been thinking? Well, obviously, I hadn't been and now I placed myself with a Hunter. A deadly Hunter.

My eyes glanced sideways as the Adonis entered the driver's seat and the keys turned the ignition on. I remained very still, hoping that maybe he had forgotten about me, forgotten about the 'pack' remark that Matt had made earlier. I was now the trapped fawn, frozen in fear, and trying desperately to hide in the underbrush, only it wasn't working. I was sitting right out in the open, a tanned skinned woman against a gray background, not blending in at all.

I looked at the steel bars that ran through the inside of the vehicle and wondered what the hell their purpose was for. I was trying to camouflage myself in the Hunter's carriage, so I was taking in everything. As my eyes centered themselves on the bars, my nostrils flared for just a second as the smell of other beasts and blood entered. The steel bars ran across an opening in the back where more seats should have been but was instead just cargo room. I suppose he tied the beasts to the bars before he killed them. Maybe watching them squirm as he skinned them was delightful. He was probably psychotic enough to do that.

My heart beat faster as I wondered if he was going to tie me to those steel bars. What if he was pretending to play the good guy as he brought me to a secluded area, away from the people who could help me...

I jumped as his hand gently patted my own.

The Hunter put the vehicle in gear and began to drive towards my home.

I wanted to scream as my imagination told me he would do horrible things to me

in my own home.

If only that calm had lasted just a little while longer instead of being torn away leaving me only with my nightmares and a Hunter.

## Chapter Eight

I remained stiff as a board during the entire drive home. The only two things that moved within me were my beating heart and my roaming eyes.

For a werewolf, I'm a bit skittish. I should be brave and courageous because I'm perfectly capable of defending myself. When I first became a werewolf, my panic and anxiety attacks drifted away, removing all of my human fears. But now that I'm a beast, I'm afraid of what beasts are afraid of, namely, Hunters.

I could be the most deadly, the most dangerous creature in the wild but compared to a fully trained and elite Hunter, I'm nothing more than a cow being roped into the slaughter.

I wish I could return to those earlier feelings of peace and serenity because living in a constant state of fear and sadness was beginning to drag me down. I was becoming more and more confused by the minute which only aggravated my already on edge nerves. I was confused because I didn't know how or why my family was being murdered. Even though Hunters are dangerous, there still would have been signs of a fight, and there wasn't. Both Charlie and Clyde seemed to die willingly. And Billy was still missing. His trail had actually disappeared so much so that even our super-smellers couldn't track him, couldn't follow his scent. Our noses are like bloodhounds, and the fact that they couldn't follow a single scent was driving me insane.

There was too much happening for one woman to handle. There were too many memories, too many sad memories, for me to contemplate. I wanted to turn a blind eye towards my family because I just couldn't deal with their deaths anymore. In so many works of fiction, a person seemingly moves on from their pain and embraces the future, but I couldn't do that. I don't believe I'll ever be able to move on from this. On one thing I could agree with the Hunter; the crime scenes would give me nightmares forever.

Having a psychic gift that was forever giving me nightmares should have made me immune to new nightmares, instead, it only served to remind me that I would continue to dream, continue to see horrific images every time I closed my eyes.

Being a psychic werewolf should have insured that I could handle anything, be immune to whatever surprises the Fates had cooked up for me, but it didn't. Those qualities didn't overshadow the full human that I had been all my life. I was an emotional being, a sensitive woman, and if I really think on it, even the strongest man would have cowered at those crime scenes.

I know I did. I know that I'm still trying to turn tail and run. Only I'm running away with too much panic and fear, running in the wrong direction. Because if I had been smart, I would have left town. I would have moved somewhere else instead of being in the passenger seat of a Hunter's vehicle.

Which brings me full circle to one of the reason's on why I'm stricken with fear.

"I apologize," he said, leaning over me to unlock my door because apparently he didn't believe in automatic door locks, "I completely forgot about your bag."

As he leaned over, I took a deep inhale and breathed him in again. I may be

scared out of my wits but my beast wasn't. No, it wasn't scared, it was tempted. I don't know if it wanted to rip out the Hunter's throat or kiss his throat and honestly, I didn't want to know. I would rather be frightened out of my mind than lustful. And that's what my beast was feeling as I took in the gun powder sandalwood scent that was rolling off the Hunter. My beast was feeling an ancient draw and was beginning to pull me to the Hunter as well. It was something unexplainable, I mean, logically, I needed to be wary of the Hunter, but emotionally, I needed to be closer to him.

My mind and heart had been split a million different ways within the past twenty four hours and I didn't need them to be torn anymore. Enough was enough.

"I don't need my bag," I replied shakily, my lips trembling on the exhales, "I always have extras."

Now that was impressive, I could manage speech after all I've suffered through. I had thought for a fleeting moment that the tragic events had rendered my tongue useless, but I was relieved to discover they hadn't. I don't know that I would have been able to survive if I had also gone mute. Too much stuff had happened. Was I really capable of handling it all?

My arms also began to move, tearing themselves out of the frozen stupor that they had been in. I slowly reached for the gray door handle and heard the unmistakable click of the door opening. It was actually a relief to hear that sound because then I would be opening the door to freedom. I would have enough space to run away from the Hunter, to run away from my problems. I would race into the forests of Wikiva National Park and never be seen again. There I would live and forever hide from psychic nightmares, loss-of-loved-ones nightmares, and Hunter nightmares. Perhaps I would live in a state of peace and never have to remember Clyde, Charlie, and Billy. I could forget them, push them out of mind and never think on them.

My feet landed on the black pavement and my dark sandals reflected the soft glow from the moonlight. I reached into my pants pocket and pulled out three keys: the key to my jeep, one for my home, and another key for Billy's apartment. Because we were safety partners, we each carried a key to the other's home just in case. It was how he was able to get into my home several hours before. It was how he told me that Clyde had died.

I swept his key to the side of the ring and grasped the gold key that was my home. All of the keys jingled silently as I turned the doorknob and pushed open the door.

The Hunter was close to me, almost too close. He was invading my personal bubble and within a few seconds, he would be invading my home once more.

Logically, I was screaming inside my head. After all, a killer was in my home and worse than that, I had invited him in. I showed him where I lived and was about to ask a ridiculous question.

"Would you like something to drink?" I asked. I was being cordial and civil to a murderer. He killed my kind. They might have been rogue werewolves and they might not. Who knows how many innocent wolves he's slaughtered without asking questions? And here I was being a perfect hostess.

"Water would be great," he replied as he stopped to look at the many potions that lined my dining room wall.

"Is a bottle okay?" I asked pulling an Equate water bottle from my refrigerator.

"Yeah, that'll be fine."

My eyes took in the butcher's knives that rested neatly on the granite counter tops in my kitchen and I memorized exactly where they were, just in case. I also took quick inventory of any pots and pans that might come in handy if I had to belt him upside the head. If I had to defend myself, then I would try not to shape-shift. As I said before, turning is painful and disgusting. And I really didn't want to waste time by eating myself, making sure all of my blood and bones were within my wolf belly.

"See anything you like?" I asked handing him the bottle and feeling my chest tighten as fear began its outward spread. A few minutes ago I had been cradled in his arms, felt at peace within his embrace, and now I was actually trying to find weapons just in case his Hunter reflexes kicked in. Wow. Even that is too much of an abrupt change for me.

"Do you have any real truth serums?"

"I wish. If only something like that existed."

Some detective he was not knowing that truth serums were fake and nothing more than a pipe dream. I mean, would I really be just middle class if I had a truth serum? Imagine what I could do with that...

"Do these love potions work?"

"A few of them do."

"Which ones?"

I picked up a few clear bottles filled with a bright red liquid and looked at the ingredients.

"This one is real, you can tell a real one by the ingredients."

"How so?" he asked taking the bottle from me and looking over the ingredients like he was checking how many calories were in it.

"Anything with flame caps are real love potions."

He nodded, "you have to harvest them from the volcano on Pompeii, right?"

"Yeah, you know your herbs."

"I also know that you have to beat a Sphinx in a game of wits just to enter the volcano."

"Yeah, they're hard to get."

"So, how come you have a real love potion?"

"I buy them from eBay."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"I know occasionally you can get blessed weapons and ancient artifacts from there, but I didn't realize you could get love potions."

"And not just love potions. I have berserker potions, calming potions," which now that I think about it, I should probably take. I don't know why that thought hadn't entered my mind before. When the Hunter leaves, I'll take it, "There are a few potions containing curses on these walls as well."

"Why do you have them?"

That's a good question. I have no idea why I bought them. But out loud I said, "they look good with my decoration."

The Hunter nodded again and slipped the small, red bottle into his side jean pocket.

"Ahem," I coughed and held out my hand, "if you want it, it'll cost you. But

don't even try those tricks in my home. A normal person wouldn't have seen you pocket it, but my eyes..." Shit. A normal person? Way to go, Sophie, way to blow your cover. If he didn't already suspect you were a werewolf, he does now. I silently cursed myself and prayed that I would get a new brain soon.

He raised his eyebrow and stared fully into my eyes, sending me a hard glare from his dark eyes. As I looked closer into those beautiful chocolate covered eyes, I noticed they were ringed with a golden light almost like a halo effect. I smiled almost uncontrollably. I hadn't seen eyes that beautiful nor that golden since...never mind.

I shook my head and looked away. I had had enough with past memories and I was trying to focus on the now because my life was in danger. I was trying to remain calm, to remain cautious so I didn't need my memories to haunt me right now. I was in a very perilous situation and it would take all of my cunning to survive this. Not only was the Hunter dangerous, but my beast reacted lustfully towards him. So both sides of the coin were treacherous.

"That's right, you're a psychic," he replied instead of whipping out a gun and shooting my beast, "how much?"

He couldn't have been that great of a detective if he didn't realize I was a werewolf. There were too many clues and instances pointing towards my beast. But if he didn't recognize tell-tale signs that I was a werewolf, then I wasn't about to piss on my parade; I wasn't about to tell him.

"That particular vial will cost you \$1332.99."

He whistled, "That's pretty high."

"Yeah, well it's not snake oil. And as you readily pointed out, it's hard to come by." Which, when I think on it, why the hell would a Hunter need a love potion?

"I suppose," he said and placed the bottle back on the shelf in-between a power-reducing potion and a vomit-inducing potion. I don't know why I bought the vomit-inducing potion because if I wanted to puke, I could just eat rotting food or visit the crime scenes of my family.

No. Don't think about that. Don't even mention it. Focus on the here and now. Make sure the Hunter doesn't find a way to corner you. Don't linger on the deaths of your family because it will only slow you down. I reminded myself that I didn't want to join the list of victims that I wanted to remain with the living.

The Hunter had already moved past my dining room, pushing aside a few crimson, billowy drapes and entered my living room where he had sat only a few hours ago. I almost couldn't believe that I had a Hunter in my living room twice in one day.

He sat down in my green, leather chair and faced the two beige, leather couches. His shoes that were both torn and blood-stained rested gingerly on my very clean coffee table. I wanted to scream at him to remove his feet from my table, but I didn't. Instead, I sat across from him and stared at the blood stains. They weren't red anymore because they had dried to a dirty brown crust. Whenever I heard the psalm 'dust to dust' I never actually pictured a human body decaying into dust. But when you see liquid blood dry to a brown crust that looks like dirt, then you realize the saying is true. It's a little bit overwhelming to know that Clyde and Charlie would soon be nothing more than a pile of dirt. Or according to the future actions of Shirley, be nothing more than a pile of ashes.

No matter how much I tried to focus on the here and now, I couldn't. I couldn't escape the deaths of my friends and there was no way I could ignore them. I wanted to



erase them permanently so that I wouldn't have to feel as if the world was collapsing around me, as if God was turning his back on me.

But as I said before, Death takes the souls of the dead, and pieces of the living. I was missing a few pieces. I was left with nothing more than a shattered soul.

## Chapter Nine

The Hunter and I sat in silence for several moments, savoring the flavor of awkwardness. My hands rubbed themselves together sending the signal that I was nervous and scared. I don't carry a good poker face, instead, every single emotion is worn all over my face and body. For a con-artist, it's one of my largest flaws. For a werewolf hiding her identity from a Hunter, it's downright dangerous.

Through the silence the soft tapping of the branch on my window continued its constant rapping, occasionally beating against the window with louder than usual thumps.

The Hunter's eyes followed the noise and slowly, he stood and walked towards my bedroom. I suppose he was going through the motions of a bodyguard, making sure that every noise was nothing more than just noise.

He may have been doing his job, but I didn't want him anywhere near my bedroom. That was my personal and private sanctuary where only I was allowed to be. Since I opened my home to my clients, I needed a space that was all mine, a space that no one else would ever see. That space was my bedroom. And the deadly Hunter was walking right into it.

I saw his head move left to right as he looked through my bedroom, checking to make sure no one was hiding behind my catty-cornered cherry-colored armoire or my cherry-framed standing mirror.

"Get down," he said huskily, "I'm going to raise the blinds. If anyone is after you, we don't want them to know where you are."

Good point, but it's a little bit late for that. 1) They could have followed me home, and 2) it's just the Raven tapping on my window. Nothing more.

But I followed his orders anyway. There was something so demanding about that voice that I had to obey. It was kind of disturbing to follow someone so willingly, especially to abide by the rules of the Hunter.

"It's just a cat playing beneath my window. It does that all the time."

"The cat taps a branch on your window?" he asked closing the cream-colored blinds.

"Yeah."

"Uh-huh," he mumbled and then took a deep inhale, "I don't want you sleeping in here tonight."

"Why?"

"It's too vulnerable, too open a space, and too easy a target. If anyone is after you, they would check the bedroom first."

"So, you want me to sleep on the couch?" I asked incredulously. This was my home and I wasn't about to give up the comfort of a soft bed.

"Honestly, I don't want you sleeping at all. I want you to have your wits about you. I want you to stay on guard."

"What's the point, you're my bodyguard."

"I'm only one man. I may be a Hunter, but what if I'm late getting to you? We

can't take any chances."

If only he knew that I already took a chance just by letting him in. There was a werewolf killer out there and it just happens that this Hunter is in town when the killing starts. If you ask me, that's too much of a coincidence. So, perhaps he's right, perhaps I shouldn't be sleeping tonight. I needed to stay awake, I needed to keep my eyes on him.

And another good reason for not sleeping would be no dreaming. The past two dreams that I had to be privy to weren't helping my already weakened emotional state.

I walked out of the room towards the couch that would be my home for the next few hours. I could feel the Hunter staring at me as I moved away from him. On one hand, his gaze sent chills down my spine and for a split second, I wanted to add a nice sway to my walk, but on the other hand, I knew that he was going to kill me. He was watching me for weaknesses, watching me as the lion with the antelope, biding his time until he pounced and finally killed me.

This guy was obviously psychotic, he didn't just kill, no he first drove his victims insane by scaring the shit out of them. What was I supposed to do with him in my home? Should I go ahead and grab a weapon and kill him first? But on the off chance that he isn't a murderer, then *I* would be considered the murderer.

Shit. What the hell was I supposed to do?

I plopped back down on the leather couch and kept my eyes peeled on the Hunter. I should be patient and wait for him to make his move. There was no point in jumping the gun just yet. I needed to make sure that he really did pose a mortal threat.

Perhaps I could delay the inevitable slashing by bombarding him with questions. Most villains love to talk your head off about their world domination plans or what they're going to do to you. I've seen it in movies. It's always the villains downfall when they start monologue-ing. Perhaps I could get him to do the same.

I should get him talking by starting out with an easy question, "So, how many wolves have you killed?" Oh yeah, that was a real easy question. Way to go, Sophie, let's spark his bloodlust. Jeez, and I always thought I had a brain. Apparently not.

The Hunter's eyes went wide for the slightest of seconds and then he answered quite simply and psychotically, "Hundreds, probably. I lost count."

Oh God, he's killed so many of my wolf-kind and he was in my living room. More than just a slight wave of panic erupted in my chest. If I couldn't get it under control, then I would likely go into hysterics. I grabbed the water bottle that was sitting on the glass table and took three or four large gulps that nearly emptied the bottle. The jolt of cold water made my stomach jump and whine, but I didn't care. At least the wave of panic was subsiding somewhat.

I sat the bottle down on the table and realized I had just drank his bottle. I should have noticed when I could taste a distinct warm mint flavor with the water, but I wasn't exactly using all my faculties tonight. I had tasted his lips and although my beast was very excited, my logical brain had sent me blushing.

"Sorry," I said literally running to the bathroom. I think I was too fast for him because I managed to slam and lock the door. Which was a very nice surprise that I could outrun the Hunter. I should keep that in mind. I might not be able to take him in a straight up fight, but I could at least kick my flight response in gear.

I could hear my beast rumbling just below the surface, brushing its tail against my skin, tickling my skin to soften, to remove. Usually my beast doesn't try to coax me into

turning, usually it just tears me apart. But tonight, it was being gentle. I believe it wanted to try a new tactic because the old one really didn't work that well.

But the new tactic wasn't going to work either. I wasn't about to let my animal loose. There are too many things that could go wrong. 1) I could eat a human, 2) I could fuck the Hunter, 3) I could die trying to fuck the Hunter. So, I wasn't about to change.

It's pretty disgusting having those images of a wolf-woman screwing a regular human being, I mean, come on, bestiality is not attractive. I keep some of my human form when I change such as I walk upright even though I run on all fours, I somehow manage to keep my breasts and vagina only they're insanely hairy, my arms are very human as is my neck only my head fully transforms, my feet and hands turn into claws, I end up with a dew claw on my knee, and a large bushy tail grows out of my ass. So, technically its not really bestiality, but it's close enough to make me uncomfortable. And if anyone wants to have sex with a creature like that, then they need some serious help.

I grabbed my electric toothbrush and scrubbed at my lips and my teeth. I didn't want to taste him anymore, I didn't want my beast to lick him up nor tempt me into changing. I tried to tell my animal that the man was a Hunter, that he was dangerous, but it wasn't listening. It didn't care, it wanted him.

Sometimes it's difficult to tell the difference between a sexual hunger and a food hunger when it comes to my wolf, but I could definitely feel the sexuality oozing from my beast. It tightened me in places that hadn't seen any action for years, forcing me to nearly cream my pants as the beast began to paw at me.

I stiffened just a little bit more and snapped back at my beast, calming myself violently to force it back into it's cage. I really didn't need lust to cloud my emotions right now.

A few small knocks came at the bathroom door and I realized I had probably looked really stupid running away after drinking from the Hunter's water bottle. I guess it was pretty childish. But I didn't want my beast to emerge and if I had sat there and acted like everything was okay, then the beast would have torn me apart because it desperately wanted to be next to the Hunter. I don't know if I would have been able to stop it.

"I'm going to trim the branches outside because I don't know how much more of that tapping I can take," he said, his voice muffled slightly through the door, "I want you to come outside with me."

"What if I'm seen?" I managed through a toothpaste infested mouth.

"I don't want you out of my sight."

"Okay," I replied spitting out the toothpaste and rinsing my mouth out with sink water. I don't know why I agreed with him so readily. It was really a bit unnerving. I shouldn't be agreeing with a Hunter.

I finally looked into the mirror out of habit and noticed that my eyes were red and swollen. My face was puffy and blotchy and my nose was bloated with mucous. I looked a right mess. Tears are never complementary to the face.

I splashed some cool water on my cheeks in the hope that I could somewhat dissipate the pathetic state my face was in when I realized I didn't want to remove the puffiness. I wanted to wear it so that I could remember Clyde, Charlie, and Billy. I wanted to wear their suffering on my face like a badge of honor. I wanted everyone to know that I lost people who were important to me, I wanted to scream to the world that

my wolf-brothers were dead. I guess I wanted pity. I wanted sympathy. Instead, I was rooming with the enemy, staying the night with a Hunter.

I heard my front door close and I instantly left the bathroom. As much as I didn't want to be anywhere near the Hunter, I also didn't want to be alone. I was scared and frightened that I would be the next victim and I didn't want to take my eyes off the Hunter because he could be the culprit.

I watched as he pulled a ten-inch blade from underneath his jeans and my heart lurched for just a moment. I hadn't even smelled his weapons. I didn't even know he had been carrying. If he had somehow got the jump on me, I would have been dead.

I stepped back a few feet just in case he was going to turn the blade on me so that I could have a head start when it came to running away. But I stopped short of a head start. Instead, I was fascinated with how the knife easily cut the branches and my beast wondered if the handy man in front of me could replace the light bulb that hung just out of my reach in the living room. I have no idea why my beast was thinking of domestic issues. I think that unnerved me more than my eagerly agreeing with the Hunter. It was all a bit too weird for my tastes when I started wondering if he could unclog the disposal while he was here. It would be nice having such a handy man around.

What the hell was I thinking? There is a very dangerous, very deadly Hunter trimming my bushes and I'm thinking about white picket fences! I think the stress was finally getting to me.

I turned on my heel and walked back into the condo. I didn't want to stand there one more minute and think of the Hunter because every time he was in my thoughts, my beast would perk up and try to get out. I was tired of dealing with that prospect.

My hands roamed over all of the vials of potions that were placed neatly on my shelves. I had remembered discussing the calming potion earlier and it would behoove me if I took a drink of it right now. I needed to be calmed and relaxed. I had dealt with more in one day than most humans would deal with in their lifetime. So, I needed this potion.

I managed to put the cork back in the bottle when I heard the Hunter's tell-tale soft padded shoes hit my laminate flooring. I swallowed down the chamomile infused and lemon tasting liquid and instantly felt a slight relief. I don't know the exact ingredients in the potion, but I do know that a frog's left testicle was extracted as the main calming ingredient. It's kind of creepy that I just drank a testicle. An amphibian testicle.

The relief spread through me like a soft breeze on a warm evening and I managed to sit down on my red leather chair. My knees were feeling a little bit wobbly so I didn't know if I would ever be able to stand again. This stuff had more kick in it than eight shots of tequila. I only hoped it wouldn't give me a hangover.

The Hunter sat down in front of me, where a client would sit, and I followed his every movement with my lazy eyes. He was getting a bit hazy the more I looked at him, his face was blurring like someone had rubbed Vaseline on the camera lens, giving him a soft, picturesque glow.

Dear God, I shouldn't have taken the calming potion. I thought it would just calm me down, not make me temporarily drunk. This was not good.

I really wished that the fiction on werewolves having a high metabolism was true. Although, now that I think about it, it should be true. I was constantly stuffing my mouth

with several pounds of beef and steak and I was still just a size 3. So, hopefully, the calming potion would be burnt out of my system in just a few minutes. That would be a very good thing.

The Hunter continued to stare at me and if I was in my normal state, I would have cringed. Instead, I took it as a complement and slithered into a variety of poses. I must have looked like I was posing for Playboy or soft porn because I was beginning to show some skin.

I knew that when the potion wore off, I was going to really regret this. I would be so freaking embarrassed but my hands reached for the hem of my blue tank top and I began to lift.

My eyes watched him as his face grew with a dark shock, one of lust and fear. I could smell his musky scent growing even more profuse as my shirt slowly revealed more and more of my tanned skin but I could also smell a fear, not of being frightened, but a fearsome worry. He was scared for me. He was being torn by raw primal instincts and logical reasoning. I hoped the instincts won out in the end.

I stopped lifting the shirt just enough so that the blue wire of my bra peeked through and crawled over to him. My wolf was stalking through my legs as I padded nearer, aware of the Hunter's body tightening under his clothes.

My wolf seized my semi-conscious brain and I was no longer in control. The Hunter was in front of me, looming, his chest big and magnificent and calling me. I placed my hands over his nipples, skating the edge of them through his shirt.

My eyes inhaled him even as they were wet as was my cheeks. I tried to hold back my tears of embarrassment and loss, but the calming potion didn't care how I acted out and I wasn't supposed to care either.

His large hands stopped mine just as my palm caressed over his cock, just beneath, swelling, full and firm, but he kept me from moving, from smothering him.

"Sophie," he groaned huskily, "this isn't right."

"Your friend says different," I replied in a voice that sounded distant and not my own.

"He's not the boss," he continued and grabbed my hands further away from his private area.

I was definitely getting mixed signals from him and I wasn't enjoying it one bit. Even my own brain was yelling "No!" but my body was saying "Yes!". After years of being alone, years of being afraid, my body knew what it wanted--the calm and intimacy of the Hunter. My mind, on the other hand, knew what danger awaited for me in the arms of the Hunter.

Unfortunately, the calming potion didn't care what my body or my mind wanted, it would go either way. If only I could muster some sort of a reaction then I could escape this embarrassment and try my hardest to forget it.

So, my body acquiesced and gave me a reaction. It wasn't one I was hoping for. My fingers laced their way around his neck and for the first time that night, I noticed the bloodied remains of Charlie was still on his shirt from where he had held me. I breathed them in as I shimmied closer and wallowed in the intoxicating smell of death and sandalwood.

I pressed my nipples to his chest and rubbed myself on him, feeling both of our hard nubs through the cotton that was blocking my real satisfaction.

The Hunter moaned again bringing forth a deep rumble that began low in his ribs and made it all the way up his throat before stopping. His heart was thumping against my own, a thudding, primal, near-violent beat.

“Sophie, please,” he begged as his hands wrapped around my waist and brought me closer to him, “we shouldn’t be doing this. Please stop.”

“Why don’t you stop?” I whispered into his ear as I nibbled slightly on the soft lobe. His breathing became more heavy and harder as I kept pulling on that delicate area.

“Sophie,” he muttered again, grounding out my name as if it was a curse, “this isn’t right. Not like this.”

“What do you mean?” I asked licking down his throat allowing my tongue to absorb the beating pulse that was fluttering in my mouth. I could feel the warm blood surging just beneath the skin and my beast perked up again. Should I tear open the pulse, feel the blood course all over my face? Or should I just continue to suck and kiss? Decisions, decisions.

“You’re under the influence of something, probably that calming potion you mentioned earlier.”

Impressive, he still had his faculties. Any other man wouldn’t have cared, he would have just fucked me and that would be the end of it. But that’s all I wanted. I just wanted sex. I wanted to feel pleasure instead of this back-stabbing pain that was beginning to tear through my mind again. I just wanted some semblance of pleasure. Anything would do.

“You’re vulnerable right now because of everything that has happened. And I can’t take advantage of that. No matter how much I want to.”

My mind knew he was right, but I didn’t care. I didn’t care he was a dangerous Hunter and I especially didn’t care that I was making a fool of myself. I knew what I wanted. And he was denying me.

A sharp flare of anger erupted from my beast, from my core and I felt more determined than ever to get what I wanted. I had been denied my wants and my needs for so long, that I wasn’t going to be denied any longer.

I cupped his head, kneading the nape of his neck as I thrust my tongue deep into his warm mouth. His lips parted slowly and opened even more and his own tongue began darting in and out of my mouth, licking my lips and exploring every part of me.

His sex was aching against the ridge of his pants and that hard thrust was enough to send me nearly over the edge. I hadn’t felt that in years and I was already so close just because of the anticipation, the yearning, the longing. I wanted this so badly.

He was hard everywhere, his fingers bold and questing around my ass, underneath my clothes, and it had been so long since anyone had touched me like that that a small, pathetic whimper escaped my lips. It was the whimper that ruined everything.

The Hunter’s hands stilled and then pushed away from me. He broke the kiss that had me longing for more, tore my own hands away from his neck, and then cursed at himself as he stepped back.

His face was in shadow but his darkness was more than just a lack of light. He was angry. At what? I wasn’t sure but that anger transferred itself to me and without looking, without questioning what I was doing, I grabbed for that calming potion and took another gulp before he tore it out of my hands.

If it wasn’t for that second drink, I would have ripped him to shreds. I was

furious with not just him, but with myself. He had denied me and I was embarrassed because of it. But fortunately, I didn't have to dwell long on the thought because that potion had already begun to course through my system. I was feeling sluggish once more and very tired.

"Dammit, Sophie," I heard him say through my groggy haze, "This isn't..." He paused and kneeled in front of me, holding my hand in his, "You've been through a lot lately, and I don't want to add anymore pain to that."

"Why would you add more pain?" I asked, forcing my mind to string words together to form coherent questions.

"You're so vulnerable right now. So fragile."

"Fragile?!" I managed still very confused and foggy, "How do you know how I feel right now?"

"Because I've lost people I've cared about too, that's how. And I know the wanting for closeness, to just feel another person's heart beating so that you know yours is beating, too. But it can't be like this."

"You're awfully preachy for a killer."

The Hunter sighed and finally sat back down in the red, leather chair facing me. Just like that the conversation was over. I ended it, hopefully once and for all. I knew the calming potion had turned me into a drunk, incapable of making wise decisions, but I also knew the potion just removed my inhibitions. Should I admit to myself that it wasn't just my wolf that was attracted to him, that, I too, wanted to feel his soft touch? No. That wasn't true. The past few moments were all because of that potion. The End.

He's a Hunter. A deadly and dangerous Hunter and as I thought about that, the potion kicked into another gear and my mind went back into that peaceful fog.

But not for long.

A few loud knocks came banging on the door, threatening to zap that inner peace that I had just managed to gain.

The Hunter jumped up and pulled a black Berretta from underneath his left pants legs. That was the second weapon I hadn't spotted on him. He looked relieved to be doing nothing more than being my bodyguard and I almost regretted that. For just an instant, I wanted him to like me, to want me, to never cast me aside as he just did. When I sobered up, I knew the rejection would hurt just as much as the loss of my friends. Because then, I would truly be alone.

I heard the frantic ramblings of a deep and musky voice and knew that voice belonged to Ms. Jean.

She raced into my dining room wearing nothing but a torn white bra and blue flower-printed thongs. Her leathery and wrinkled skin jiggled as she grasped my arms and began to shake me. My eyes noticed a few dark brown pubic hairs erupting from her thong and I was about to say something when my brain realized she looked stricken.

Through the haze that had enveloped my mind, I took her slowly in. She was gasping for breath and clutching at her chest. Her bright, blue eyes were watering from so much fear.

I managed to ask, to speak a few words even though it was difficult to move my mouth, "What's the matter, Ms. Jean?"

"Remember the warning you gave me earlier?"

"No." I said simply. My mind wasn't working at all.



“You told me of a shadowy figure that would haunt me. I saw it, Sophie, I saw the dark figure.”

## Chapter Ten

The Hunter had grabbed my red silk robe from my bedroom and placed it gingerly around Ms. Jean's shoulders. I guess during the earlier walkthrough he had indeed absorbed his surroundings. If my mind wasn't in this funk, I would have thanked him. Instead I wanted to slap him silly for touching my things. I really needed out of this slump.

"Thank you," Ms. Jean said, visibly shaking.

"My name is Damon Black," the Hunter said, turning Ms. Jean to face him, "I'm a detective and I need to know exactly what happened."

"Well, I," she began, staring at me and waiting for some sort of acknowledgement from me that I knew wouldn't come for some time, "I was with my boyfriend, Jonathan. Well, we were starting to do the..." she paused, wondering whether or not her embarrassment would be worth more than her pride, "well, we were doing the dirty, when for just a second, I looked out the window. I like to keep the blinds open, see, so that my peeping tom neighbors can watch and be jealous while I put on a show. Well, I looked out the window and saw a dark figure. At first I thought it was Tim 'cause he's always watching, but as I looked closer...this thing," she paused again, swallowing hard. Ms. Jean doesn't pause when she talks, she never pauses. "I think it had a dog face or something. It looked like a Doberman with a human body. But that can't be right, right?" She asked sneaking closer to the Hunter's body, wanting that same safety and protection that I had been asking for earlier.

"What happened next?" he asked, holding her shoulders tenderly.

"Well, I, kind of froze and Jonathan felt me freeze from behind, and he asked me what was wrong and all I could do was point at the window. He saw it, too and ran outta my house like something fierce."

"He left you alone?"

"Yeah."

"What a jerk," I managed through the dimming haze. My faculties were beginning to respond, albeit slowly. Hopefully it would only last for a few more minutes. I shouldn't have taken that second drink.

Ms. Jean began a soft, muffled cry and the Hunter rubbed her shoulders more fervently, just as he had with me. If I wasn't under the influence, I wouldn't have thought twice about it, but since I was, I wanted to believe that he was caring, no matter who it was. I wanted to believe in his humanity and his charity. I didn't want to dwell on the lives he's taken.

"Ms. Jean," the Hunter continued, "how did you tear your undergarments?"

"Oh, that," she said while she blushed, "rough sex."

"So, the shadowy figure didn't hurt you?"

"No."

"Good. Did you call the police?"

"No, I didn't think they'd believe me. And I remembered Sophie telling me about

that dark figure that would haunt me so I braved the five feet to my car and sped outta there.”

“Do you know if it followed you?”

“Oh God, I don’t think a dogman can drive.”

“Ms. Jean, are you well enough to drive?”

“I’m a little bit shaken, but I can.”

“Good, we’ll follow behind you back to your place.”

“No. no. no. no. I’m never going back there. Never.”

“Ms. Jean, we need to…”

“I don’t care what you say, Slick, I’m not going back there. I’ll stay here with Sophie thank you very much.”

“Sophie has to remain with me for the night; she’s under my protection. So if you want to stay with Sophie, then you have to stay with me and go where I go.”

“I said I’m not going back there.”

I stood up on wobbly legs and walked towards my purse. I don’t know why I was going for my purse, but it seemed like the right thing to do.

“Sophie, what do you think I should do?” she asked.

“The black eight ball says future is hazy, ask again later,” I giggled at myself and nearly lost my balance, slamming instead into the door. A sharp pain lodged itself in my shoulder and I began to rub it out. Not only was I in emotional pain, but now physical pain. Just keep adding hurt to my list, please.

“What’s wrong with Sophie?” Ms. Jean asked, now standing closer to the Hunter. She had just seen a werewolf for the very first time and she was asking about me. If I wasn’t so bogged down with amphibian testicles, I would have been amazed, instead I continued to rub at my throbbing shoulder. It would probably bruise.

“She took something to calm her down.”

“She needed calming, why?”

“Two of her friends are dead and one is missing.”

“Oh my God, I had no idea. Why didn’t she tell me?”

Ms. Jean walked over to where I was crouched and shoved my head into her leathery breasts. Her skin rubbed against my temples and I could have sworn she felt like rough cloth. I inhaled slowly, trying to breath and caught the scent of a few hours old semen. He must have came on her chest a few hours earlier, before the dark figure had appeared. Apparently Ms. Jean didn’t bother showering after her first encounter with him so my face was right in it. Gross. I really didn’t need that extra aggravation added to the rotting and oozing intestines that I saw on both Clyde and Charlie. I pushed her away and wanted to rip my robe off of her. I didn’t need one night stand cum on my favorite robe. And knowing her type of men, Jonathan probably had herpes or something and now it would be all over my face. That’s really disgusting. As my face left her chest, I felt my cheek slightly stick, the cum clinging onto my skin. I shivered slightly and went to the bathroom hoping that I wouldn’t vomit anymore. Because after puking in Charlie’s apartment, I didn’t have anything left to come up. And throwing up stomach acid burns worse than rejection.

I was being very rude but I didn’t care. Apparently the calming potion does more than just calm, it also includes apathy in its repertoire. Normally, I wouldn’t have done something like that especially to a regular client, but I just didn’t seem to care.

I really wanted this potion out of my system.

I grabbed my Aveeno oatmeal cleanser and began scrubbing at the side of my face, nearly ripping off my skin just so that nasty semen would leave my cheek. After six washes I finally decided that should be enough for at least the next few minutes because my skin was raw and hurt to the touch. I grasped my moisturizer and caked it on. The smooth and cool cream sent chill bumps down my arm as it relieved the sore skin.

My ears prickled as I heard both the Hunter and Ms. Jean talking outside the door. They had been discussing me since I first entered the bathroom and only now did I actually care. Maybe my real self was coming back and the potion was finally dissipating.

“Am I going crazy believing in a dogman?” Ms. Jean asked.

“I think a few shadows must have distorted your view,” the Hunter replied.

“No, I’m pretty sure it was a dogman. That face was unmistakable.”

“But it was dark.”

“Yes, it was very dark. But I could swear I saw him clearly. At first, my mind didn’t...”

I stopped eavesdropping and thrust my head under the cool tap water from the spicket and felt it cascade through my thick and matted hair. I wanted to shock my body out of this sluggish state, to return to reality. My face was hidden under a veil of wet hair and with one sense, my sight, faded from view, I focused on the other senses. I closed my eyes tightly and screamed for my beast. Perhaps it could pull me from this gut-wrenching funk and bring back a state of normalcy. I would have to be careful, though, because I didn’t want the beast to fully wake, just enough to eat away that potion and return my sanity.

I reached for my beast, sending out silent howls in attempt to locate that dark and dank cave where it dwelled. I keep saying it’s a cave where my animal lives because that’s where I can find it, in a cold, dark cave. I don’t know how my body was capable of making a cave, but it did. I guess the extra room came with the beast. Oh, the perks of being a werewolf.

I found the cave only it was immensely large and didn’t seem to have a ceiling of any kind. Instead, the black sky overhead shined with the brilliance of millions of white stars and the moon was loud and full thrusting its magnificent light towards a lake that reflected all that light.

In the middle of the lake, there was a small round island where I saw my black jackal snoozing. From a distance, the beast looked so peaceful that I didn’t want to disturb it but I approached just the same walking across the water, not making a sound nor a splash. This cave was in my mind, so I could be as quiet as a mouse, as light as a feather. The water was cool on my bare feet and I left puddles of ripples in my wake as I took step after step.

I inhaled deeply and smelled the scent of raw forest, of tree moss and leaves, of sap and wild animals. As I continued across the lake towards the small island, several fireflies flew around me, shining from time to time, lighting my way as if the stars and the moon weren’t enough.

For once in my life, I was jealous of the beast. It lived in perfect peace within this cave. Nature was harmonious here, beautiful, unspoiled. I wondered if my beast always felt that serenity even when the moon was full, even when he was out of my body in the

real world. If so, then I would be forever jealous of that calm.

I pulled up beside the sleeping animal, curled and snoozing lightly. Its chest rose and fell softly as it purred in its sleep. The beast had smooth fur, not rough and full like a real wolf, but rather the smooth and short hair of a jackal. It was odd that we could be two completely separate creatures but inhabit the same body. In this cave, my animal looked like an animal not like the were-form that it took when it had control.

I wasn't afraid of the sleeping beast, instead I wanted to touch it, to pet it. It smelled like me, it was me. For the first time in my life, I finally saw my beast. I didn't know what to do with the mental image, so instead I leaned forward.

My nose touched its cold, wet one and it opened its eyes. The same bright gold eyes of my attacker looked right back at me. I jumped a little in my own skin as those vivid eyes continued to stare. The jackal then stood up and looked at me curiously. I swear it raised an eyebrow. Usually, I never call on my beast so I don't exactly get to see it, but tonight, I did. And my beast was confused. Well, it wasn't the only thing confused. I was just as baffled myself. I mean, why on earth was I doing this?

The beast began to sniff around me, its nostrils growing bigger with every inhale. It shook its head once and jumped back as if there was something really foul standing right in front of it. Its tail slowly dipped between its legs and then it leapt at me with teeth fully bared.

I felt my body go flying back into the bathroom wall as the beast began to tear at my muscles, tear at my mind. It was running through me, panting, wagging its tail and licking up the blood that was streaming through my body.

I believe, for the first time ever, it was helping me. It was actually swallowing the potion and returning me to normal, well, as normal as a werewolf can be.

The beast lingered around my toes licking the hair follicles that were just under my skin when it finally turned around and came to face me. Those eyes began to bore into mine and it continued to growl. I knew I owed it a favor now and it would make sure that I paid up. Removing the potion wouldn't be cheap.

I don't know what it expected of me, but from now on, it would be much more difficult to control the beast because I had asked for something and I hadn't rewarded it for its efforts. I owed my beast. And there was only two ways of payment: sex and the hunt.

That was a scary enough thought that I came back to the outside world and found my physical body gasping and wet on the bathroom tiles. My hair was still dripping on the floor as I tossed it out from eyes and watched the individual beads of water fly onto the gray walls and the large mirror. I saw every bead of water as if they were in slow motion and for a moment, I was in perfect symbiotic repose with my beast. We could see everything, hear the slightest plopping of a leaping fish miles away in the lake, and feel the soft breeze rumble through the park's trees. If only that feeling could have stayed, then I would have embraced my animal. But it didn't. It flew off like a bird released, never to return.

The Hunter was banging at the door, threatening to tear it down when I finally responded, "I'm okay, I just slipped on some water."

"We need to make sure your floors stay dry, because didn't you fall earlier and burn your arm?"

Oh yeah, I had forgotten about that. The white bandages were still wrapped on

my arm because unlike a lot of fiction, werewolves don't heal at phenomenal speeds, unfortunately. No, we had a normal healing process. Although I'm pretty sure we're the only creatures to actually eat ourselves and grow out of the non-digested body parts. The growth only takes a few minutes so I guess that's healing at a phenomenal speed.

"Yeah," I replied through the door.

"Ms. Jean decided to go to a hotel," he said, trying to turn the knob.

"Did she leave already?"

"Yeah."

"When?"

"A few minutes ago."

A few minutes? How long had I been conversing with my beast? We needed better communication.

"Finish up what you're doing in there because we're going over to her place," he continued, still struggling with the door knob.

"I don't know where she lives."

"She gave me some directions, so hurry it up."

I stood up on my very strong knees, thank God for small favors, and looked in the mirror. The blotchiness in my face was gone although the raw skin on my right cheek was still blatantly obvious. I don't know why I was staring back into the mirror because the only person who would see me was the Hunter and I didn't care what I looked like around him.

So, I grabbed some bronzer and dotted it on my cheeks, forehead, and nose to add some more color and swiped on a clear lip gloss. My hands reached for a blue hair band and I tied back my ratted hair into a knot. I then grabbed some A&F perfume (I use No.9 because it smells like the forest) and spritzed it on my chest.

"Sophie, are you okay in there?" I heard the Hunter say through the door.

"Yeah, I'm fine, I'll be out in a minute."

I quickly ran some deodorant on and opened the door. The Hunter was still in his T-shirt and jeans, only a few rifles were strapped to his back and his thighs. Several pistols were in leg holsters and arm holsters while two knives rested lightly in the wrist sheaths.

I took a step back and asked cautiously, "What's with all the ammo?" I should have ran right then and there because he was a Hunter and I was his prey. He now had every advantage over me all because I was primping myself. Way to go, Sophie, your life is now over because you can't outrun a bullet.

"I want to be prepared in case the creature is still lurking by her place," he then looked at me carefully, not sexually and said, "It's for your protection. The safety's are on and the clips are in my pockets. I don't carry around fully loaded weapons because someone could get hurt."

I guess that was okay but I still asked him to walk ahead of me. Not only was it safer for me, but I also enjoyed the view. His butt looked like two very firm pillows and I felt my beast slobber as I continued to stare. And hey, don't judge me, I was only watching him to see if he turned a gun on me. That's all. I definitely wasn't lusting after him or anything...anymore.

My beast gave a soft howl reminding me that I still owed it a favor and I ignored it, well, to the best of my ability.

## Chapter Twelve

The rain slightly drizzled in the early morning air as the Hunter turned onto S.R. 436 and followed the directions given by Ms. Jean.

His knuckles were as white as paper as he held both the steering wheel and the directions. He would occasionally glance down, only taking his eyes off the road for a split second.

“Do you need me to read off the directions?” I asked, feeling both embarrassed at my attempt to seduce him earlier and useless just sitting in the passenger side watching the rain cascade down the glass pane.

“No, I’m fine, thanks,” he said shortly. The Hunter’s body was stiff and rigid, looking very much like stone as I inhaled the nervousness that rolled off him. He was scared and worried. Of what? I don’t know. I didn’t think Hunters could get scared. I know that sounds idiotic, but Hunters are cold-blooded killers capable of ripping a wolf’s heart out with their bare hands, or so I’ve been told.

Watching the nervous Hunter was in turn freaking me out. If he was scared and worried about something, then I should be too. If only I knew of what. Sure, we were probably going to face the thing of my nightmares, which should be scaring the beejeezus out of me but I was remarkably calm. Perhaps the potion was still in my system, calming and relaxing me. If that was the case, then I could only hope and pray that I didn’t try to jump the Hunter again.

It was embarrassing enough the first time. And now that I think about it, why the hell did he turn me down?

“Are you gay?” I blurted out into the dark vehicle. If he was, then that would explain both his style and my rejection. A part of me wanted him to be homosexual so that I wouldn’t have to fret over this attractiveness to him and the other part of me wanted him to be as straight as a board so that maybe, just maybe, I could touch him one more time.

For the first time during the entire trip, he really took his eyes off the road. We swerved a few times until he regained control on the wet highway and I felt the Hummer slow down to nearly a crawl. At this rate, we wouldn’t get to Ms. Jean’s home for an hour at least.

Finally, the Hunter pulled completely over onto the curb and stopped the vehicle. I had thought he was just slowing down to concentrate on safety, instead he was bringing us to a stop, to completely end the weirdness between us. I wasn’t looking forward to this conversation. In fact, I wanted to jump out and run away.

Do you know what it’s like to be rejected, to be turned down after you’ve basically opened up your heart and put it on the chopping block? I do. I’ve always been overlooked. I guess it’s the curse of being an orphan--you’re always alone. No one will ever want you. It’s like I reek of desperation, of a secret hope that I will be loved like I’m supposed to be, that I will be protected, held, admired, and respected.

And he was about to shatter that dream just like the rest of the men who had come

before him.

I didn't even want him, the Hunter, not really. My beast did, but I didn't. He was a dangerous man, a deadly man, so why was I on the verge of tears? Why did I have to feel this way?

So much had gone wrong, so many people had died and I guess I was suffering from survivor's guilt. Why did it have to be them? Why Billy? Why Charlie? Why Clyde? Why not me?

I was a wreck of emotions and the Hunter wasn't going to help me fix it. Instead, he was going to ruin me even further.

"I'm sorry," I managed to say getting back my speaking voice, "it's none of my business."

He took in a deep inhale and I waited for the bomb to drop. I wondered what an emotional mushroom cloud would look like, feel like.

"Why would you ask that?" he replied slowly and cautiously.

"You have great style. I mean, what kind of man wears an Indiana Jones hat?" I said trying to delay the inevitable. I always lean on insults to throw myself away from the incoming bus.

His dark eyes turned towards mine and in the soft haze of dusk I could see a light blue tinge deep in the iris. His eyes almost glowed with a perfect light in those black depths. The stare caught me by surprise and I nearly choked on my own breath. His eyes were stunning and haunting and I didn't want him to look at me with those dark, penetrating eyes anymore. It was as if he was reading my mind, intruding into my thoughts that he had no right to be.

"Like I said earlier, this is my lucky hat," he said with his eyes still boring into my soul.

"Why is it lucky?"

His eyes finally withdrew from me and his hands gripped the steering wheel once again, "Do you really want to know why I wear this hat or is there something else you would like to know?"

He was a good Hunter--he could read emotions, faces, and would know exactly what his prey was thinking. It was a bit unnerving actually and honestly, I didn't want him knowing my thoughts.

And how would I answer that question? I did want to know what made his hat so lucky but it wasn't forefront in my mind. I wanted to know why he turned me away. Did I have raunchy hamburger breath or was I not attractive enough? Was my swollen face and watery eyes too much for him to handle? Who turns down a sexual invitation? And why? Why turn me down?

It would have been easy for him. Not only was I vulnerable because I was wrecked with emotions, but I was also under the influence of pretty powerful frog testicles. He could have done whatever he wanted and instead, he pushed me away. What kind of man does that?

What was wrong with me? Why did he reject me?

I knew which part of the question I wanted answered, but did I really want to hear it out loud? What if he turned me down because I was ugly or not good enough? Did I really want to know?

Different events require different types of courage. For instance, if a wild



alligator is chasing a person through a swamp, then that person requires physical courage to out run it. If a kid stands up to a gang of bullies then that requires full courage. If a woman wants to know why she was rejected, then that would require emotional courage and I'm not sure I'm that courageous.

But fortunately, or unfortunately, my curiosity had no bounds.

"Why don't you want me?" I asked honestly and timidly.

"It's not about wanting, Sophie."

"Yes, it is."

"No, you've been through enough already. I thought I had made that clear earlier. I wasn't about to take advantage of you."

"That's not what I asked."

He turned to finally face me once again, his thick and perfectly trimmed eyebrow raised just a little. I scooted closer towards him and listened to his beating heart. It was skipping faster than it normally did, thumping as loudly as the thunder outside. I could barely hear his pulse as the rain pelted the top of the roof, banging away as they landed then cascaded down the steel frame.

My voice was soft and hushed as I asked once more, "Why don't you want me?"

"It's not about wanting," he replied slowly and steadily, his voice barely changing tone.

I felt my chest lean closer to him, closer to that warmth that exuded from his perfect form. My eyes slightly closed as my lips opened, "do you want me?"

I heard the soft gray cloth grind as he, in turn, came nearer to me. I could feel his hand moving towards my cheek, and I waited and I anticipated his touch that I was longing for. I swallowed as loudly and as quietly as I could, careful not to give too much of my emotions away. I wanted him close, so close.

"Yes," he said as his lips met mine. For a moment, I thought the world had stopped. His delicately firm lips caressed mine so tenderly and perfectly that I forgot about everything. All I wanted to do was kiss him. I breathed him in like air and felt the silky and rough five o'clock shadow scratch on the palm of my hands.

"I do want you," he said pulling away from me, "but not like this."

"Why not like this?" I asked sitting back in my chair and feeling the tears well up inside me once more.

"Because of that right there. I don't want to hurt you more than you're already hurting. And every time I touch you, I make it worse."

He wasn't lying. Because every time he touched me, I was peaceful and once he stopped, the world came crashing back on top of me more painful and depressing than the first time. He was right. I just didn't want him to be.

And why did I want him to touch me anyway? He's a Hunter. He kills my kind.

I'm obviously just sexually attracted to him. That's all. There aren't any emotions involved here. It's too soon for any emotions. I just met him a few hours ago so nothing could have developed in that time.

"This isn't emotional for me," I said trying desperately to brush away the tears as though I had something in my eyes, "I just want to fuck."

He snorted and as the car's ignition rumbled through the storm he replied, "well, that's not all I want to do."

I wanted to ask more on that particular sentence, but I couldn't bring myself to

ask. I guess I had used up all my emotional courage so I just sat back and looked out the window.

For the first time in a few days, I actually smiled. It was a small smile that crept up in the corner of my lips, it didn't force my lips apart like a laugh would, nor completely upturn my lips like a grin, instead the smile just barely clung to the outer reaches of my lips, filling me with a soft sense of serenity.

It was nice to know that I wasn't being rejected. He was just taking his time, making sure he wouldn't hurt me.

Imagine that, a Hunter not wanting to hurt a werewolf. Then again, he didn't know my secret. My heart dropped and the smile disappeared. What would happen if he did find out? Would he still want me, or would he just desire my pelt?

All of this is just too much. I've dealt with enough for the day and I'm pretty sure my mind can't handle anymore. Women aren't exactly fragile creatures but we aren't made of stone either. I wish I was made of stone right now. Stones can't feel a damn thing. They are blank, hard, unknowing, and unbreakable. I wonder what it would be like to be unbreakable; what would it feel like to never feel again? Would life be empty or would it become easier?

I really need to stop asking so many questions and instead, find the answers.

I'm not one for philosophizing but when so many tragedies befall one person then the person has to ask why. I know I'm not the only one who has ever suffered nor will I be the last, but I still ask, why me? What have I done in my life that Karma is willing to punish me for?

And there I go again, asking more questions. But I can't help it. I want my friends back, I want my normalcy back, I want my humanity back, and I especially want the Hunter to love me. Love? Really?

I nodded as if answering my own question. Yes, I want him to love me.

Well, since I answered one question, why not have another one answered as well? "Why is your hat lucky?"

The steering wheel turned onto yet another side road and I realized we were pretty far away from city limits. I didn't know Ms. Jean traveled over forty minutes just to see me. She lived in Leesburg, a smaller town north of Orlando that was not a suburb of Orlando. It was its own city, albeit small and rural. Well, rural for Florida anyway. Nothing was every pure rural down here.

"Do you really want to know?" he asked.

"Yes, yes I do."

"Well, I was looking for a hat and Shirley..."

Shirley. I had forgotten about the gorgeous supermodel assistant that never left his side until told to do so. I suddenly felt outright jealousy. The Hunter and I weren't even an item and I wanted to know everything about him and his past loves. Was Shirley even a past love? Did he touch her the way he had touched me?

I felt slightly nauseous at the thought. I mean, I shouldn't even be wondering that because I wasn't dating the Hunter or even screwing the Hunter--he was just protecting me. That's all. So, why was I feeling like a betrayed girlfriend?

I didn't even listen to a word he was saying and I really did want to know what made his hat so damn lucky. Instead, I was seething on the thoughts of Shirley and the Hunter naked in bed, not even in bed, her back against the wall as he held her in place

with his big strong arms...

I needed to find out. I needed to know if he and Shirley ever had sex because I didn't want the visuals anymore. But how on earth would I ask that? It wasn't any of my business and yet, I really wanted to know.

A thousand ice breaker questions wound through my head: do you ever mix business with pleasure? What is your stance on workplace professionalism? Etc etc etc. until finally, have you ever fucked Shirley?

I really wish there was an easier way to find out.

"Have you ever been in love before?" I asked quietly.

"Back in high school I loved my girlfriend in the only kind of way teenagers can love, hormonally. So, I guess, technically, no. I haven't had much time for it. Why do you ask?"

I shrugged, "no reason. Have you had time for sex?"

He took a deep breath and put the Hummer into third gear slowing down on the wet pavement. The water splashed up the sides of the vehicle as the tires creamed into the deep liquid.

"Why are you asking me this?"

"I just want to know you a little bit better. That's all. I feel like I have the right to get to know you. After all, you are going to be staying with me for awhile, at least until I find another saf...another person to protect me."

"Then shouldn't you be asking what's my favorite book or favorite music or something along those lines?"

"I am curious about those subjects, but right now, I want to know your sexual history."

"Sophie, I'll tell you what you want to know, but I will not discuss my sex life with you, past or present."

"So you have a present sexual partner?"

"No, I don't. But I will not discuss that with you. It is none of your business and I don't view my past sexual experiences as stories to tell around a campfire. They are personal and private."

I felt like an idiot. It was definitely wrong of me to pry into his life like that, but I couldn't help it. I wanted to know who I was up against. And that's a stupid thought. I wasn't in competition with anyone. Love shouldn't be about competition. It should come naturally and with ease. If it doesn't, then it's not love, it's only lust and selfishness.

So many people confuse the two. Just as I was doing.

The Hummer pulled into a rock-filled driveway and my head just lightly bumped against the car ceiling. Through the fog that was now settling outside, I saw Ms. Jean's home. I always thought she would live in a trailer but she didn't. Her home was an old-fashioned farm house painted yellow with light blue porch columns. Green ferns lined the porch like street lamps as the windows on the second floor glistened in the early morning light. All around her home, instead of a yard and flowers that one would normally associate with a house like hers, were several dozen trailers. She did live in a trailer park, one that was built around her home.

It was a very odd thing to see. Not only were there steel trailers that had every color of the rainbow around, but behind the home, was a dense forest that spread out into

a swamp.

I had been to Wikiva Park a number of times and I never realized how close the forest was to suburbia. It all seemed wrong somehow like a city under the water. It didn't belong, it didn't seem right.

As I stepped outside the vehicle and felt the left over pitter patters of rain drops, I smelled the rich, intense and dormant forest breath around me. I could the smell the old Spanish moss that hung loosely on an Oak tree filled with squirrels. I smelled the hundreds of saplings trying desperately to gain a foothold in the muddy ground; I smelled the countless lizards and bugs; I smelled the stench-ridden bog; and finally I smelled the gun-powder sandalwood of the Hunter standing beside me. He seemed out of place in this natural woodland habitat. Being a Hunter he should have smelled more like the forest, so that his quarry wouldn't smell him coming a mile away. Instead, he smelled oh so human and oh so male.

I took another deep inhale to draw more of him in but instead I caught that ancient and otherworldly scent of rosemary, sage, and decay.

I had wondered why the forest hadn't moved, wondered why the squirrels weren't chirping away, wondered why the lizards weren't catching their prey and here was the answer. The neighboring trailers hadn't frightened the woods, instead, the killer had.

## Chapter Thirteen

When I was in the Hummer, I felt safe. I knew the Hunter and I were going to hopefully discover the culprit, I knew we were going to chase the big bad and stop him, but I didn't realize we were going to *really* chase down the bad guy. The full realization never hit me in the car, instead, it waited until I was in the dark, in the quiet and still trailer park that rested in front of very gloomy forest.

It wasn't a great time to discover that I was in a dangerous situation nor that the only person I could rely on was a Hunter.

I pricked my ears again and felt the lobes twitch in the silent early morning air. I listened intently to the woods, to the person in the closest trailer flushing a toilet, listened for animal sounds and forest sounds but heard nothing except the grumbings from the next door neighbor.

I had heard this calm before; I felt the heaviness weigh upon me; I knew *he* was here. When I had been at Charlie's apartment, I had felt him. When I had been attacked two years ago, I felt that unfathomable depth of power roll over me like so many waves of rancid humidity.

So, I knew this feeling. I knew the silence.

The Hunter shut the driver's side door bringing my attention back to the other dangerous creature within a fifty yard radius. He looked at me questioningly, his perfectly trimmed eyebrow raising itself into his forehead. He was a Hunter and I knew he could read body language. Mine must have been screaming and fearful because that's how I felt.

"Sophie," he whispered quietly, "what's wrong?"

My breath caught in my throat and I couldn't speak. I didn't want to draw the killer's attention to me although I knew that thing was watching me. I could feel his eyes moving slowly across me, occasionally darting to glance at the Hunter and then finding their way up and down my body.

"Sophie?" The Hunter asked again.

I don't know why I hadn't told anyone how scared I was, I especially don't know why I never told Matt that the killer was my attacker. Why couldn't I bring myself to speak the truth? Why did I remain silent?

"Sophie?" he asked again coming to my side and placing his fingers gently around my shoulder. I shuddered. I knew I shouldn't have, not in front of the big bad, but my body couldn't resist. His touch sent a pleasant wave of warmth and safety through my being and for a split-second, I relaxed. For that small, teeny-tiny bit of time, I was calm and then as soon as his hand moved, I felt the raw surge of my creator's power slam me back into the present, back into the state of fear.

"I'm fine," I managed but I wasn't. I wasn't fine. I was scared, frightened, and panicked. But I couldn't bring myself to speak openly on why I was scared on what waited in those woods. Hell, I couldn't tell myself what waited in the woods even though somewhere deep down, I knew. I just couldn't face it. So, instead, I watched as the

Hunter nodded and began the walk towards the tree line, "Where are you going?"

"I'm going to look around. If he was here, there would be tracks of some sort," the Hunter replied.

"Why?" I asked stupidly.

The Hunter somewhat paused and looked a bit amused, "So I can find some clues. Let me guess, you're not a morning person?"

I dawned a smile so fake I should have been crowned Miss Universe and giggled, "You got me there. I don't do mornings." Which was a truthful statement. I'm a nocturnal creature; it goes with being werewolf, being a slave to the moon.

My muscles finally broke their frozen state and I slowly stepped two feet in front of me. It was difficult to walk, even more difficult to force my steps closer to my attacker. I knew he was here. I knew that power, knew that smell and still I walked slowly. I didn't run. My flight instinct wanted to kick in and sending me running like a bat out of hell, but logically, I knew my attacker was cursorial, he only chased if something was worth chasing; he only attacked when the victim moved. Somehow I knew that so I tried my hardest to keep still and not show my fear.

I may not be showing my frightened state of mind, but I knew he could smell it. I knew he was drinking my scent in like it was life-giving water.

I took a deep breath and took another step forward. I may not trust the Hunter completely, but if a more dangerous wolf came out of the woods, I knew the Hunter would try to disarm the attacker or perhaps kill the attacker.

"Mr. Black," I said not wanting to run to catch up with him but not wanting the Hunter too far out of sight, "have you found anything?" The last few words were high-pitched and frantic and I knew I was sounding scared.

The Hunter's long legs loped towards me and his dark brown eyes stared into mine, "Sophie, is it here?"

"How would I know that?"

"Sophie, is it here?" he asked again more severely.

I rubbed my hands down my arms and realized I was cold. Chill bumps erupted all over my skin causing me to shiver. I don't know why I was suddenly cold because I was still sweating. A few beads of sweat dribbled down my temples and rested in the crook of my neck. I wiped them off and felt my teeth chatter uncontrollably.

The Hunter threw his arms around me and started rubbing his hands up and down my back, trying desperately to warm me up, "Why do you have cold sweats?"

"I don't know," I managed through my clattering teeth.

As the Hunter squeezed me tighter, a surge of liquid hot power flowed through the air. It burned and bit at me like sharp fangs piercing the skin. I wanted to scream, to writhe and I knew my body was shaking violently against the Hunter. I felt the strong pull from the creature in the woods and my beast stirred. It could hear the thing calling, howling and it wanted to run beside the attacker, to be with the attacker.

My hands gripped the Hunter's shoulders and dug in deeply into his skin. I was desperately trying to regain control, to force the beast back into that dark, starlit ridden cave, but I couldn't.

My body fell to the ground and I felt the cold stings of gravel tear up my back and my shirt but that would be the least of my pains if my beast fully came out.

I saw my jackal run up that tunnel, it faced me, stared me directly in my eyes and

howled. I wouldn't be able to stop it, I had no control over it any longer.

I looked up to the Hunter who was delicately multitasking; in one hand his black painted pistol was showing in the light purple sky and my hand was fully grasped in his other, "Damon," I said with a loud growl that I knew was not my voice, "gather up...my...pieces..." and those would be the last words I would speak for the next few hours.

I screamed out loud and through the rumblings of my beast I heard several lights turn on, heard car alarms ring in the distance and knew everyone would be here to see this. I was crying and screaming as the Hunter dragged me into the woods, away from prying eyes, away from sirens.

Through the blurry haze I saw intricate details of leaves and watched as chlorophyll was absorbed into the delicate stems and green leaves. I could see the termites shuffling around in the decaying log and knew they were happily eating it away.

I screamed again and heard it muffled as my tongue licked the hand covering my mouth. The Hunter tasted so good. I wanted to keep licking him, to break his skin and drink him up. I wanted to rip the flesh from his bones and feel his last pulse jump against my lips.

Shit. The beast is coming and I can't stop it.

My heart raced uncontrollably, throbbing and banging against my chest. My lungs broke into several seizures and for a few moments, I could no longer breathe. I glanced down at my arms and watched with obscene horror as my skin started to split apart and explode chunks of red flesh and white fat and crimson blood all around me.

My screams turned into howls as the rest of my body plastered itself against the Hunter and the trees.

I sniffed around my body parts and wanted to eat them up, but something special was calling me. I looked to the Hunter who had a gun pointing at me and I growled. He didn't move, but I could hear his heart beating steadily with an occasional skip of fear. But he wasn't afraid of me, no, he didn't smell like a trapped fawn in a meadow full of lavender, no, he smelled of sweat and desperation. He was afraid *for* me, not *of* me.

I pawed around him and looked back into the dark woods. The Hunter did not interest me. No, a larger beast was out there, calling me. I could hear his howls in the distance, taste his power in the air like a thousand corpses were blowing in the wind.

I stuffed my snout into a few bits of my human's flesh and knew I had to eat them, but I couldn't resist that call. It was too powerful. I glanced back at the Hunter and knew he would put the most important pieces in a bag and save them for later. Ha! My human body was being put in a doggie bag. How ironic.

I lifted my head and looked towards the nearly full moon and let a howl that would haunt the most courageous knight and then darted into the thick and unmovable underbrush.

For anyone else, they would have been lost, trapped, alone and scared in these woods. But I wasn't. Trees and branches spread before me like I was a hot knife through butter. I ran in and out of thickets occasionally feeling a few thorns graze my sides and my feet.

My paws danced easily on the murky, swamp ground and I bounded gracefully through the muck and the mud. Everything shifted around me giving me an easy trail to follow so I ran faster than ever before. My tongue hung sloppily outside my mouth

occasionally scraping against my very sharp canines. But that wasn't pain. That was just running with an open mouth.

I leapt into the center of a boggy water hole and allowed the very warm water to cascade all over my black fur. A few bugs landed on me and bit me, but I didn't care. I just rolled onto my back and scratched at them, knocking off the bugs by grazing against a log.

I shook off the water and let my fur air dry as I took a deep inhale. I knew my maker was here in the forest, but I couldn't find him. All I could do was run. And it felt so good to run. The human keeps me locked up in a makeshift prison for most of the month; it's cruel and unusual punishment. She doesn't understand that I need to run, to be able to chase squirrels, rabbits and cats. Why won't she let me chase cats? I hate those things.

But more to the point, where is my creator?

I sniffed again and tasted the decaying air, the swamp air that always smelled like death. I knew the maker smelled of death so being in this death-filled air wasn't helping me to track him. I ruffled my haunches and tried to feel for his power, that unbelievable and unmovable power that rolled off and hit me like a pile of bricks.

I couldn't feel him. I couldn't smell him. My paws paced on the swampy ground, frantic and desperate just to get a whiff of that glorious rosemary and sage scent.

So I listened. I pointed my ears forward and stopped panting. I had to be quiet to hear everything, to hear every detail. I focused on listening and then, a soft howl called from miles away. He was already on the edge of the other side of the forest. I couldn't keep up with him. He was running too fast. Even for me.

I howled into the night sky and allowed my panting to once again continue. I just wanted to be close to him, to touch him, to feel his muscles ripple close to mine. Was that too much to ask for? He was my master, he was supposed to take care of me.

A sharp whistle exploded behind me forcing my attention towards the sound. I closed my mouth so I could better hear. The sharp high-pitched sound erupted again and I ran towards it. I wanted to kill whoever was driving that insanely shrill noise deep into my ears. It was a loud, annoying sound like a damn mosquito biting in the same place again and again.

I bounded through the woods intent on tearing apart whoever was making that noise when I came face to face with the end of a gun barrel. It smelled like fire and smoke and I knew that it could hurt me. I didn't know how I knew it would hurt me, but I did.

I snarled my teeth at the gun and then the unmistakable scent of my human washed through me. I could smell the metallic blood seeping inside the cooler and I rushed towards it. I knocked the man over and ripped into the plastic carrier. My teeth chipped as I fought desperately to get inside it, to eat my human.

Once the lid flew back, I saw the most beautiful body parts gleaming and stewing in their own juices. My drool washed over the heart and lungs and I swallowed them whole. I was in ecstasy. The muscles were so perfectly raw and tender and the bits of bone and fat made for the most refined au jus. Every single part of her tasted so good that I wanted to wallow around in it, lick each part delicately, but I couldn't help myself. I just stuffed it in my mouth unaware that I was being locked away again as the human came forward.



For some reason, I could never remember not to eat myself, because if I did, the human would return and I would be caged again in that dark cave. Next time I come out, I won't be tempted back inside. I won't let her cage me again.

## Chapter Fourteen

Fetid blood danced over my body as I began to see my own skin. A clear goop stuck eagerly to my fine arm hairs and I tried desperately to shake it off, to shake the feeling of shape-shifting. Sweat poured down my throat and over the tops of my breasts and it was then I realized exactly where I was and what had happened.

I was curled up in a pile of blood, black fur, and other human and wolf pieces that I didn't have a name for. If I majored in Biology or Anatomy I could name everything that was splayed before me and on me, fortunately enough, I don't have names to go with this oozing and bloody goop. I just knew that I had eaten my heart, my lungs, and my brain. The leftover bits and pieces that was me didn't matter anymore. My human body had already regenerated.

I shivered in the hot and humid swamp, hearing several cicadas and crickets chirping in the distance. The forest was back to being alive again. All around me life moved and flowed as God intended it to. Alligators were swimming deeper into the bog in order to withstand the heat from the summer sun; white-tailed deer were running chaotically from a snapping branch; and I was still shivering amongst them. I then heard the tell-tale heart beat of the Hunter who still had his gun pointed directly at me.

My shivers stilled instantly into a cold freeze and I took a deep inhale. I needed to calm myself down, after all, the Hunter wouldn't shoot me, would he? Just minutes before he had told me he wanted to make love to me, didn't he? So, my being a werewolf couldn't have scared him that much, right?

My heart began to beat faster as I knew that the Hunter was about to fulfill his duties as a hunter. He killed werewolves. It didn't matter that there was sexual tension or even a longing between us, he was the Hunter and I was the Hunted. Simple. Life depends on the balance of predator and prey, because one cannot live without the other. The predator keeps the number of prey down so that the prey doesn't starve in the winter and so only the strong survive. The weak and sickly are weeded out. In the world of humans versus supernatural, it's the same. There's always a vicious cycle that continues to spin because if it didn't, then there wouldn't be a balance. I'm not saying it's fair, I'm just stating fact.

But as I stare down that black gun barrel, I wanted to shoot down my theories of balance and fact. I didn't want to die. Not here. Not now. And well, not ever. No one desires to face their own mortality and I was staring right at it.

The Hunter bent down towards the ground, holding the gun in my face. I couldn't really tell what he was thinking because I was too busy trying to find a way out of this. Sure, I could turn again and rip him to shreds or die trying. But, that wasn't a prospect first on my list.

I may be super fast and super strong, but I cannot outrun a bullet. So, just running was out of the question. And who wants to be shot in the back? I would want my killer to look at me in the eyes and know that he was taking something not worthy of him, my life.

Instead of looking in the gun barrel, into that dark tunnel, I brought my eyes to stare directly into the Hunter's. As soon as his dark, piercing eyes reached mine, he smiled. He shoved the gun back into its holster and held out his hand.

That was unexpected, or was it? Was Matt correct in the assumption that this particular Hunter only killed the dangerous wolves and not just any of us? Perhaps.

When the Hunter smiled, his lips parted ever so delicately that I wanted to kiss him. It's insane how my moods were swinging so dramatically lately. I was just thinking he was going to kill me and instead I was hoping he was going to kiss me. I need help.

I took his hand and allowed him to lift me up off the muddy and rain-soaked ground. My legs were covered in brown filth and green moss. I tried to brush off all of the goop but it was embedded into my skin. Only a really long hot bath could loosen its grasp. And then I would have to clean out the tub because Lord knows I'm not letting this dirty crap linger in my bathroom.

Ugh. I hate shape shifting. It's way too messy.

"Here," the Hunter said handing me a brown and torn bomber jacket that smelled like it had been in storage for a few years.

"I'm not cold," I replied, although I was shivering again.

"If I was an asshole, I would say your nipples tell me differently."

Huh? What does that mean?

I looked down and knew exactly what he meant. I was completely naked and completely covered in mud and blood.

I snatched the coat from him and tied the sleeves around my waist, hoping that it would cover my lower and upper arenas. I don't mind showing some arm and leg, but my privates, well, they're private. Hence the name.

"Thanks."

"I tried to follow you, but I couldn't keep up. And honestly, you didn't leave much of a trail to follow," the Hunter said now stepping softly into the mushy ground, heading for the trailer park.

I grabbed his wrist and stopped him, I needed to know what he was planning on doing with me. Yes, I saw him put away the gun but I was still scared. It's not an easy thing to erase the concept of Hunter vs. Hunted. All werewolves are told that Hunters are dangerous, end of story. We are made to fear them, to run from them, to never face them. And here I was, alone with my mortal enemy. I couldn't help but ask, "Now that you know about me, what are you going to do?"

The Hunter moved closer to me, just a few inches away from our chests touching. His fingers wound around my own hands and brushed off the coagulating blood and clear goop, "I always knew you were a wolf. I just didn't know what type."

His touch made me shiver even more than I already was. I wanted to be closer, to feel him all over. He had a steady and unshakeable movement to him, one that I didn't. I was always shaking and I needed a pillar of strength. Just because I have super strength it doesn't mean that I have emotional strength. And when the Hunter touched me, I didn't have to have emotional strength. I could be myself; sensitive and delicate. I didn't have put on airs and don my con-artist suit, I could just be Sophia Morgan.

Eventually I would need to learn how to be myself without the help of the Hunter, but for now, I enjoyed his help in the form of his touch. My other issues could wait.

"How did you know?" I asked slightly moving closer towards him.

“I know a wolf when I see one.”

“I thought you might,” I paused and moved just a little bit more near him, barely brushing his nipples on my cheek. He was so much taller than I was, “If you knew, why didn’t you do anything?”

“How many times do I have to tell you,” he said, his fingers now roaming up my forearm sending chills all over me, “I’m not a poacher. I don’t kill for sport, nor out of prejudice.”

“Yeah,” I replied barely paying attention.

My body bumped against him and I wrapped my cold, naked arm around his waist. His back was so firm that as he moved into me, I could feel every muscle shutter under my touch.

I breathed him in, pushing my face further into his chest and smelled the unmistakable musk of testosterone. It coursed over his body and settled hungrily into his groin and as I gently moved, the length and hardness of him grinded closer onto my stomach.

His heart was beating frantically beside my ear and the constant and rhythmic thumping jump started my own heart to beat in time with his.

My belly fluttered with a thousand butterflies dancing and floating around like the only thing they cared about was this man in front of me.

His chest pushed against my face, increasing his need to breathe. I could hear his pulse racing frantically, smell his sex coming alive, eager with the thrill and the excitement of me.

As I gripped him tighter and shoved myself so close as to become permanently bonded to him, my hard and filth ridden hair crunched underneath my cheek. I pulled back uncontrollably and immediately that perfect warmth, serenity, and exhilaration disappeared.

I stood alone, cold, sweating, and dirty. I desperately wanted the Hunter, but not like this, not ever like this. I was so dirty that it would take hours to become fully clean again and I didn’t want my werewolf goop nor my leftover human blood and flesh ruin something that I wanted to be perfect.

I shook my head and walked towards the trailer park. I heard the Hunter shuffle behind me, felt his hard stare on my back, and at that point, all I wanted to do was run and hide.

It had been embarrassing enough to change in front of him, to be caught, to be revealed even though he had already known. But it was my secret, mine. Only my werewolf family knew my secret, no one else. I didn’t appreciate that just anyone could look at me and know. I felt somehow molested because I didn’t tell the Hunter my secret, that he had just known.

I don’t know why that thought truly bothered me, but it did. Being a werewolf was my secret and if, when the time came, that I trusted the Hunter enough to tell him, then I would. It would be a bonding experience to reveal something so personal and unique about me. And hopefully, in return, he would appreciate my trust and tell me a secret of his.

Instead, he had just known. I had dodged so many questions and pretended like I didn’t know what he was talking about all the while he was probably laughing at my pathetic attempt to hide myself from him.

“Sophie, are you okay?” he asked.

I just kept walking. Perhaps if I ignored him, he would allow the continuing silence, just allow the snapping branches to mingle with the sounds of our heavy breathing.

“Sophie, stop and look at me.”

I didn't. I didn't want to ever look at him again. It was odd, I desperately wanted him, but at the same time, I didn't. I was scared and emotionally unnerved. So much had happened to me in such a little time that I barely could register it all. My sudden mood changes and roller coaster rides were more than I could handle for the time being. I can't just live through so many deaths and desires all at once and not be affected by it.

“Sophie,” the Hunter said and turned me around, holding onto my bare shoulders tightly, “what's wrong?” He seemed sincere, but not that false sincerity that most people assert, no he was genuinely concerned for my well being. I could see it all over his face. He had been worried for a few hours now and suddenly I realized that his emotions had been taking a toll on him as well. A few lines of crow's feet now creased around his very tired eyes and even that beautiful tanned skin drooped with weariness.

He had been concerned about me all evening, from the calming potion to coming to the trailer park to even my shape shifting. He had really cared for me.

So, the least I could do was voice my fear, “Why didn't you tell me you knew my secret?”

He sighed gently and slightly released the death grip on my shoulders, “I wanted you to be honest with me, I wanted you to trust me.” He shrugged and turned away from me then, placing his hands on his hips in a way that I have never seen a woman nor a man do before. It wasn't childish nor feminine, instead the gesture reeked of weariness and exhaustion, “I really wanted you to trust me.”

“Why?” I asked his back.

“Because from the moment I first saw you, I wanted to take you in my arms and never let go. Sex is just sex, but I wanted everything. I wanted you.”

It was my turn to look away.

I swallowed deeply and felt my heart shrivel and cry. Those were the words I wanted to hear and yet I couldn't face them. I couldn't handle them. All I could do was cradle myself.

“Sophie, I'm sorry. I'm not being very professional and I don't know how to go about this. I just don't know what to do here.”

His body brushed past me and I followed behind him. If I was in a better mood, I would have looked at his well-formed ass. But as it was, I was too tired, too emotionally overwhelmed to do anything but walk.

I watched my feet step over felled logs and decaying moss, watched as bugs scattered beneath my feet, watched as spiders made their webs for a new day, and shielded my eyes with my hands as the bright sun beat towards me on the other side of the forest.

## Chapter Fifteen

The drive home was quiet and long. It hadn't been minutes that had passed while I was a wolf, it had been a few hours. Dawn had already come and gone. Rush hour traffic was in full bloom filling the already silent and awkward Hummer with a sense of impatience and anger.

I was still wrapped in a torn brown Bomber jacket, the sleeves tied around my waist so that I could cover all my private body parts. When the human body explodes, you can bet the clothes tear apart as well. That's usually why wolf families have picnics and partners for such occasions; we have back up. We're fully prepared to deal with each other's beast, maybe not our own beast, but definitely the family's beasts.

My nudity and thrown together wardrobe didn't help to ease the tension in the stuffy and hot Hummer. My fingers picked at the torn upholstery, pulling on the yellow padding. I had nothing better to do then to further the damage inside the vehicle, so I continued to pick. All the while I wanted to scream and get the hell out of this uncomfortable and unwanted situation.

I don't know why I was so peeved that the Hunter had told me he wanted me. I mean, wasn't that every woman's dream to have a handsome and rugged man tell their secret desires? I guess it wasn't my dream. But it should have been. I wanted it to be.

Instead, I picked at the torn padding. Bits and pieces of yellow cushion packed underneath the gray upholstery seemed to interest me more than the sky falling around me. Or maybe I just didn't want to face the real monster in the car--my own feelings. I was trying to ignore them, push them aside, forget them completely, but they weren't going to go away. Sooner or later I would have to deal with them.

I heard the click and turn of a knob when the cool, air conditioned breeze blew in my face. I took a deep breath and relaxed somewhat. At least the beads of sweat that had formed were now chilling my body as the cold air swept around me. It was a relief to no longer have to deal with the heat and humidity, that soon, one thing would be comfortable--the air.

My hands wiped at my forehead in an attempt to remove any and all dew that had formed. Unfortunately, they came away with mud and crude debris that were finally unsticking themselves from my skin.

I was trying desperately to avoid the grossness all over me, but the dirt continued to slide and drop all around me and into the small crevices on the seat. I was brushing them onto the floor when the Hunter spoke. I knew what he was going to say, and I didn't want to have to deal with it. I didn't want to face the truth of his words. I was already burdened with emotions that I couldn't handle, so I didn't need the extra aggravation even if it was good aggravation.

"I've always wondered," he began slowly, pulling quickly into the far left lane of the interstate, "what's it like to be a wolf?"

Okay, not what I was expecting. But that was a question I could answer with somewhat more ease than *it's true, I want you, too*.

“Honestly, I don’t really know. I’m not really present when in wolf form. And you should know by now, that were not all wolves. Some of us are foxes, some hyenas, and you know I’m a jackal. There are some wolves, but it’s more of a common term, you know. If it was up to me, I’d call us were-canines. We’re not strictly wolves.”

“I have noticed that. Although, you’re the first jackal I’ve ever seen.”

“Yeah, apparently they’re rare. Matt says he’s never seen another one either and he’s been to several conventions.”

“Conventions?”

“Yeah, kind of like a comic-con. We all get together and...wait, why don’t you know this?” I asked now trying desperately to back track. This Hunter may not have shot me, but he was still capable of shooting other wolves. And lucky me, I was giving him more information about his prey. Yay.

“I only chase rogue wolves, I mean, rogue *canines*. I don’t specialize in the habits or lives of non-dangerous canines.”

“Oh,” well that was a relief of sorts, although, I should watch what I say. Were-animals are a closely guarded secret and I didn’t need to be the one to bust the bubble.

“What do you mean, ‘you’re not really present in wolf form’?”

“Well, just that. I can only remember parts of it really. I’m not in control at all. I mean, I know I’m there with the wolf, but it’s more like a dream when you wake up--you can only remember certain parts and you never really control your dream, it just happens.”

“Hmm, so what do you remember from last night?”

“Not much. Swamp water. Howls. That’s about it.”

“Do you remember what you were chasing?”

I took a deep breath, did I remember? Yes. Was I going to tell him? No. I wish I could but something, some little tiny part of me wouldn’t let me tell anyone my dream, feelings, or the truth of the situation. Honestly, I don’t even really know what was happening. All I knew was that there was another jackal, my creator, out there, killing people. So why couldn’t I bring myself to rat him out? It’s not like I want my friends and my family to be systematically killed off. I want to help them, to exact revenge, or rather, avenge them. So, why couldn’t I tell the Hunter who or what was behind it all? Why was I being so secretive about this?

“Like I said before,” I replied, “I don’t remember too much in wolf form.”

“I know you were, maybe still are, scared of your secret, especially around a hunter, so why exactly did you change in front of me? What called your beast?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t want to change. It’s just, well,” I paused and knew why I had shifted, but should I say it out loud, should I say that my maker called my beast and ripped it from me? That I was no longer in control? “it’s so close to the full moon. I’m a new werewolf, I don’t have that great of control,” is how I responded. I should have told him what was really happening, perhaps he had an answer for me. But I didn’t. Instead, I gave him half-truths, “And what’s with all the questions? Am I on trial or something?”

“No, I was just wondering why you would show me that hidden secret so blatantly.”

“Like I said, I wasn’t in control.”

“So you said.”

Not only was the ride uncomfortable from grime, overwrought emotions, and stop and go traffic, but now it seemed like the Hunter was pulling his Joe Friday routine and that I was Suspect Numero Uno.

I was tired and exhausted and this interrogation was so over. If he really cared for me, he wouldn't be putting me through the gauntlet. He would just trust me and accept my half-truths and move on with the day. Instead, I knew he wasn't buying it. I could tell. He may wear a poker face like it's going out of style, but his eyes gave him away. Those beautiful eyes couldn't lie or don the appropriate blankness. They carried the hint of knowledge, of being able to see through lies and misgivings. As much as I loved to look at those eyes, I wanted to avoid them right now. He could read me so easily that it was a bit unnerving. He may not know the truth, but he could tell I was lying. And I think he was disappointed. He really did want me to trust him.

But like I said, I couldn't tell anyone why I was hiding the truth, why I was avoiding my visions, why I was keeping the killer hidden.

"Other than your were-family, have you told anyone your secret?" he asked.

"No, and up until now, I thought no one could tell," I said bringing both my arms to cross on my chest. I didn't like being found out, being called so easily.

"I'm really sorry, Sophie, I didn't realize how much you wanted to keep your beast a secret."

"It's fine. You're good at what you do," I said looking out the window and trying desperately to end this conversation. I just wanted to be left alone. Hadn't I been through enough lately?

"Do you want to know my secret?" he asked.

"Not really."

"Please, Sophie, I'm trying to make this right between us."

I shook my head, "So I tell you a secret and you tell me a secret we'll be BFF's? This isn't the fourth grade, Damon."

"In the past thirty six hours, you've only used my name twice," he said, glancing over at me as he swerved through traffic into the far right lane.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. But that's a good thing. I don't want you to get familiar with the name Damon Black."

"Why not?" I asked, my curiosity peaked.

"Because it's not my real name."

"I knew it. I knew Damon Black was such a made up name."

He snorted just a bit, swallowing some laughter and suddenly, the air seemed less tense, "How could you tell?"

I chuckled just a bit, "It's kind of obvious."

"I thought it was a great name."

"Why Damon Black?"

"Well, the name Damon is closely related to Damien, son of the devil, and Black is the color associated with Death. I assumed it would strike terror into the hearts of my enemies."

I laughed out loud and as soon as I did, I felt good. I hadn't laughed in such a long time that my soul actually felt warm and my heart literally danced with joy. When a person is constantly weighed down with depression and anxiety, the body tends to rebel



and thought processes fail so miserably that one cannot even add 2 + 2. So, it was beautiful just to smile again.

Damon laughed along with me, his laugh thundering in the large vehicle, overshadowing the honking of horns and the blast of the air conditioner. It was a hearty laugh, a real laugh, and it warmed me more than any fire could.

And the truly funny thing about that statement; it wasn't very funny at all. But we were both exhausted, tired, and weary and we just needed some lighthearted conversation. We had seen so much in such a short period of time that something needed to curb the atrociousness running through our minds. We just needed to laugh.

"So, it comes down to this, then, what's your real name?"

"Well, I changed my name for two reasons; I wanted a better name suited for my occupation and my real name is terrible. I don't know what my parents were thinking."

Through my dotted chuckles I asked, "What is your real name?"

He took a deep breath and shrugged, "No one else knows this and I prefer to keep it that way. Okay? Don't go telling everybody."

"I pinky swear," I said giggling over the childishness of the conversation.

"Good," he paused, and for a moment, I thought he wasn't going to tell me. He was obviously embarrassed of his name, "Mortimer Edison Pyle."

I held my mouth and looked out the window. I could feel tears of uncontrollable laughter pouring out of my eyes. He had to have been mocked so many times with a name like that so I couldn't also join the crowd and make fun of it, no matter how much I wanted to laugh and point.

I took another deep breath to steady myself and wiped a few tears away from my cheeks, "That's not so bad," I managed.

"You can laugh, it's okay," he said smiling widely.

"It's, you know, it's a name. You were probably named after your grandfather or something."

"Nope. My parents were just lunatics."

I couldn't help myself anymore, I bust out laughing, "You can say that."

He grinned back at me showing the most brilliant smile that left it in stark contrast to the black windows and gray interior. I felt a part of me melt when those shiny, white teeth glittered at me. It's such a cliché, but his smile really could light up a room. At least, it was able to light up my darkened heart.

"You know, I kind of like it."

"My name?"

"Yeah, you can bet no one else has it," I said, "I had a friend named Sarah, and she was always bitching about everybody else having the same name. In fact, I had another friend named Carter, well, her first name was Sarah, but I had to call her something other than Sarah 2."

"Yeah, I guess some things are a blessing in disguise."

"Exactly, it's all in the way you look at things."

"You know, I never pegged you for the optimistic type."

"You've never seen me at my best."

"I like what I'm seeing now."

I looked back out the window at the passing trucks and red sports cars and wanted desperately to go back to the laughter. The mood had lightened itself so much and it had

felt so good and then he had spoiled it by...by what? By telling me something that I longed to hear? Why was I so afraid of hearing my ultimate dream of acceptance, was I afraid of the change from rejection? Why couldn't I tell him how I really felt, that I wanted him to?

And I did want him. I wanted every part, from the goop that was stuck to his torn boots to the so-called lucky hat that fit perfectly over his long, brown hair.

But I couldn't bring myself to drop my guard around him. I had been mistreated and used so many times before that it's not easy to allow someone else in. No matter how much a part of me wanted to, the other part screamed for caution.

Oh, screw caution.

I threw myself over the black center console and wrapped my legs around his thighs. My head bumped against the roof as I dove towards his lips with an enthusiasm so rich and vibrant, I was left breathless.

As I kissed those perfectly firm and delicate lips, the word 'shit' erupted from his mouth and I felt my back smash into the steering wheel as the Hunter, Damon, or Morty whatever he wanted to be called slammed on the brakes.

His frantic hands pulled my face back into his and he kissed me forcefully, thrusting his tongue into my mouth, tasting me as I tasted him, darting my own tongue deeper into his mouth, licking up every part of him.

I barely heard the horns honking around us as the Hunter pulled away from me and parked on the curb. His breathing was hard and raspy and his heart was beating uncontrollably, thumping loudly in the silent vehicle.

"We're less than a mile from your place," he said, his hands winding over my shoulders and trying urgently to untie the jacket knot, "If we can only wait a little while longer..."

But instead, I felt his weight crash on top of me which made things tight and wet.

His legs were shaking, his palms sweating, his heart beating frantically as I helped him untie the sleeves that were covering my body, getting ready to ease this thing pulsing with life between us.

The air reeked of drying blood, swamp dirt, and a sexual hunger that I just couldn't take anymore. The metallic tinge that perfumed the masculine musk was nearly more than I could bear. My beast howled inside its cave, pacing eagerly with anticipation.

I pushed him off of me, throwing him back onto his side of the vehicle and reached for the button that would push his seat backwards.

The seat slammed backwards on its hinges, thundering in between our heavy and raspy breaths. My legs crossed over him, my knees digging into the gray upholstery while my head slightly bumped on the roof of the vehicle. You would think there would be more head room in a vehicle this size, but you'd be wrong. But that didn't matter. I just tilted my head to the side a bit and bent forward to lick that pulse that was beating just under his smooth, tanned skin. He tasted like a hundred starry nights glimmering in autumn, like a perfect breeze on a hot and humid day, like wilderness that has never been touched by man--wild and untamed.

His rough and calloused hands scratched along my naked flesh as he kneaded my back harder and clutched tighter at my shoulders. He had a hang nail, probably from cleaning his guns, and it tore straight down my back sending chills of both pain and

pleasure forcing me to bite none so gently on that beautiful pulse that fluttered just under the skin. I moaned throatily and moved my lips past the pulse and closer to his heart, his nipple. I flicked it back and forth with my tongue and heard the thumping of his heart grow louder inside my mouth, heard the soft groan of desire become more and more loud as I licked and sucked deeply on that small, pink nub.

I felt his soft lips brush against my shoulders, felt his teeth gingerly caress my skin sending wave after wave of lust tearing through my body. I felt the hot wetness inside me pour out from me and drip onto his dirty and mud-stained jeans. I hadn't been with a man in so long, that even the foreplay was bringing me closer and closer to orgasm. It's actually kind of pathetic that just kissing him sent my internal muscles squeezing against air.

My hands reached for the jeans button and I tried to unlatch it, but I was so caught up in feeling his warmth, licking his stomach that I couldn't unfasten the damn things. I growled silently to myself as I tried to focus on the clasp, becoming more violent as I became more and more frustrated.

"Here," the Hunter said, bringing his hands to both unfasten and unzip his pants. I should have been embarrassed that I couldn't even remove his jeans, but so long as they were off his body, I didn't care who took them off.

We both pulled at the denim until it was past his thighs and hinged on his knees. The plaid boxers were easier to remove, or rather not remove. My hands reached tenderly inside that cottony slit and I pulled his large, erect, and hard member through the hole and into my hands. It was velvety smooth with extraordinarily soft skin that felt like both silk and suede. As much as I wanted to put it in my mouth, my inner thighs began to shake and tremble and I knew I wanted him inside me, deep inside. I wanted every inch of him pulsing and pounding within me, thrusting and fucking me uncontrollably, violently. I wanted to scream and yell when I came and that can only be accomplished by rough and heavy sex. And that's what I wanted.

I didn't want emotional sex, tender sex or gentle sex, I wanted to be fucked. I didn't want to deal with emotions, I just wanted to feel something other than sadness, depression, and loss.

The tip of his head brushed against my inner lips, slipping on the wetness that was issuing and sliding down my legs.

"God, just put it in," I said, tensing under the pressure and the longing for this. The anticipation was killing me. I wanted it, him, so badly, "Just do it already," I screamed.

He pulled back for just a moment and said, "I don't have a condom."

Shit.

"I don't care right now," I said through gritted teeth. Didn't he know that I needed this right now? What's with the hold up?

"I know you don't care now," he replied, his breathing coming at odd intervals and his voice raspy like he couldn't talk, "but when we're done, you'll care."

"God! What is your deal?" I yelled and threw myself off him. I landed with a plop on the passenger side seat and crossed my arms over my breasts. I was so frustrated, so angry. Nothing had been going right lately and even my attempts at sex was failing miserably.

My heart was pounding against my chest, thudding now through rage instead of

lust. Adrenaline had ran through my body leaving me breathless and annoyed. I picked off the clear goop and green algae from my collar bone and winced. I had been so caught up in the moment that I had forgotten how dirty and probably stinky I was. The grime was still covering my body and now I had my vaginal secretions adding to list of extreme filthiness. Not that my secretions were filthy, it's just, well, they're only good when having sex. Afterwards, you just want to clean up and sleep.

My breathing slowed down again to a normal pace and I looked out the window, through the very dark tinted window, and realized we were still parked on the side of the highway. My home was only a few seconds from here.

I wiped at my forehead and pulled slick goo off and thrust it onto the dirty, gray floor. I was a mess. Both physically and emotionally. The Hunter had been right all along; I didn't need the extra aggravation of sex and intimacy. I needed time to deal with what had happened to me. I needed time to deal with the loss of Charlie, Clyde, and probably Billy. I needed time to face my nightmares, to no longer show fear in the presence of that powerful shadow. I needed time to be myself.

The roar of the Hummer's engine sounded loudly in the quiet and awkward interior and I knew I was going home. At least I would be back in my sanctuary, in my safe haven. Even though my home had a horrible track record of safety, i.e. being attacked by a rogue werewolf; I still considered it my refuge.

## Chapter Sixteen

After what seemed like hours, although only two minutes had passed, the Hunter and I pulled up in front of my one bedroom condo. It was a relief to step out of that crowded and stuffy SUV. I needed fresh air, I needed to be alone.

My hands reached back at my long, hard, and crusty hair and then I realized I needed a lot of things; for one, I needed a bath.

I looked over at the Hunter, Damon, or Morty, whatever he was going by these days, and knew I needed to repair our relationship, if we even had a relationship. I had tossed him aside like moldy bread and stewed in my own juices. I had just wanted to feel alive, to feel his heart next to mine, to know that my own heart was still beating. So many people had perished around me that I was beginning to feel like my turn was next. Or rather, my turn *should* be next. Why my friends, why my family, why not me? Why were they taken away from me? And why was I left alone?

I turned the key into my lock and opened the door to what would normally be my sanctuary. But today, it was crowded and uncomfortable. I knew the Hunter needed to stay by my side just in case the murderer returned, just in case the attacker stopped by to say hello and rip my body apart. Still, though, I could have used the alone time. I'm not used to constantly being with others. As I've mentioned before, I'm a lone wolf. And that's how I prefer to be.

If you're alone, then you have no one to lose.

The tarot cards from Ms. Jean's reading, or rather, from my reading were still laid out on the table. I hadn't been listening to their advice. I knew what they had told me, what the Entity had told me, but I just ignored it.

The cards looked up at me with disappointment because I wasn't paying heed to their words. Or perhaps I was just as disappointed with myself as they were. Cards aren't real, they don't take on personalities nor do they come alive, but the reading stays with a person, constantly reminding the person about obligations and responsibilities. The cards can be hard to ignore.

The Two of Cups stared menacingly at me from the other three cards. I was supposed to have partnered with someone in order to face the difficulties ahead. But I hadn't. Instead, I had brushed the Hunter off because I was frustrated with my own emotions. The Hunter had been so kind to me and I had turned him away, probably made him feel like shit. I was so miserable, did I want everyone around me to be miserable too? I was becoming a crotchety old grandma who has hated her life and so she makes everyone around her hate their life as well. Is that who I wanted to be?

No.

The Hunter's jacket was still wrapped around my waist, barely covering anything. Dirt and grime still lingered and glued themselves onto my skin. And the Hunter still stood by me. He was a little bit further away than he had been before; he was constantly peeking out both the front sliding glass door and the bedroom window, pacing occasionally and being just all around busy. He wasn't watching me anymore, he was

doing his job.

I wanted him to look at me again with those beautiful dark eyes, with caring and understanding instead of ignoring me. I guess he was just giving me time to deal with everything. He had been right all along--I did need time to mourn. So much had happened in such a short time that I just skimmed over the events without so much as a pause. What I really needed to do was come to terms with each loss, with each regret, with future consequences.

It sounds nice to be able to focus and move on, but it's not that simple. Life never is. Life is always complicated and most of the time, life is difficult. Life is a constant challenge that a person must rise to face. I wasn't facing life. I was hiding and avoiding.

Even now, all I was doing was staring at these tarot cards. I wasn't speaking to apologize for my behavior, I wasn't trying to deal with the death that had surrounded me, hell, I hadn't even fully dealt with my wolf. I was just avoiding everything as much as I could.

It's really frightening to face your fears, to overcome them. I couldn't even look at my fears let alone beat them. I had been scared all my life, ever since I lost my parents. Fear begets fear and my life was in a constant state of terror. No one should have to live like that. No one should have six locks on their door or bars on their window. No one should constantly look over their shoulder for fear of rape or assault.

Life should not be a constant stream of horror.

I've seen movies, Disney ones mostly, where everyone has a happy ending. Sometimes I wish my story would end happily; that a prince would take me away from the evil in this world, that he would love me for the rest of my days. It's easy to wish for someone to erase your problems--problems can only be solved by yourself.

And I just wasn't that strong.

"I've done my rounds," the Hunter said, now looking at me cautiously, "it's safe enough for you to take a bath now."

"Oh, I didn't know I needed your permission," I said, staring at the cards. Geez, what is wrong with me? Why am I lashing out like this? Why am I so angry?

I heard the Hunter sigh silently and then his soft padded steps came toward me. His rough hands rubbed gently and delicately on my shoulders and then he brought me into a big hug. My cheek rested tenderly on his firm chest and those strong arms held me tightly and securely.

"You've had a rough few days," he said softly, "If you need to be angry, it's okay. Take it out on me."

I wanted to. I wanted to hit him, I wanted to yell, I wanted to scream. I had lost my parents, my friends--Charlie, Clyde, Billy--the Entity had returned, I was in love with a Hunter, and I knew my attacker was waiting for me. How can one person deal with all of that? How can *I* deal with all of that?

I stood in his arms silent and unmovable. As much as I wanted to cry, to be angry, I couldn't. All I could feel was his warmth and listen to his heart. The constant and rhythmic thumping nearly hypnotized me into a peace-like state. I could listen to that bass and quiet down. I could almost feel calm, almost feel as if nothing bad had ever happened to me. Almost.

The Hunter's right hand rubbed up and down my back, occasionally getting stuck in the leather folds of the jacket. The silver zipper was beginning to rub at my belly the

wrong way so I stepped out of that warming touch and into the humid and stuffy room.

I walked towards the air conditioner and turned it to 'on'. Immediately, sharp, cold blasts of air sounded throughout my condo. It was nice to know that at least the air conditioner was still working. Every summer I have to replace some wire or tube and yet, so far this summer, it's been running like a dream. It's the only thing that seems to be working around here.

"I need to take a bath," I said quietly, rubbing the back of my neck, feeling the grime and grit roll under my fingers.

"I'll wait outside the door," the Hunter replied sympathetically, "If you need me, just yell."

"Sure."

I walked into the bathroom alone, just like I had done for several years. This was the first time, however, that I regretted that action. I keep saying I'm a lone wolf, that being alone is better than being with someone, but as I look into the large and empty bathtub, as I stand silent in the vacant room, as my mind scurries from loss and love, I realize I don't want to bathe alone. I don't want to face my fears alone. I don't want to be an old maid who has suffered every misery that life can bestow and who has turned mean and nasty because she has never known happiness.

I didn't want that.

I pulled off the jacket, peeling parts of it from goop-infested skin and said firmly, "Morty?"

## Chapter Seventeen

The knob turned slowly, and the Hunter peeked his head inside the bathroom. His hat was off so that his long, brown hair was finally free to blow in the air-conditioned breeze. It was only the second time I had ever seen him without the hat. It was the first time his hair wasn't in a ponytail. It looked so silky, so touchable, so soft that I wanted to run my fingers through those perfect tresses, feel that mane in my hands.

"Did you say my name?" he asked, an eyebrow raised into his forehead.

"Yeah."

He smiled, "I haven't gone by Morty since I was a kid."

"Sorry."

"No, it's alright. I like hearing you say it."

A small grin crossed my face and then it instantly died. I felt bad for yelling at him, at being frustrated with him when in reality, I was frustrated and angry at myself. I hadn't been able to deal with the events of the past few days and so I lashed out. And he didn't deserve it. He had helped me so much and all I had done was give him hell.

"I'm sorry," I said again, this time looking directly into those beautiful, star-lit eyes.

"It's alright. Really. I don't mind you calling me Morty."

"No, I'm sorry for being..."

"Upset?"

"Yeah."

"You don't have to apologize for that. We all cope in different ways. If you feel the need to yell or cry or be angry, then so be it. I'm not here to judge you."

I kept staring into those dark eyes and asked, "What are you here for?"

His eyes narrowed for the slightest of seconds, "There's a double meaning to that question, isn't there?"

I smiled, "I guess so."

"Come here," he spoke gently and fervently.

I practically ran the two steps towards him and shoved my face into his chest once again. I loved to hear his perfect heart beat, to feel his warm touch, to know that he would protect me.

He kissed the top of my head and said, "Let's get you cleaned up."

I looked back into his tanned and dirty face and replied, "You too."

The Hunter slowly slid his white and grimy shirt over his head and dropped it onto the white tiled floors. I had seen parts of his chest before, but this time, my breath caught. He was a model of perfection and of muscle. His nipples were the ideal shade of pink and a soft trail of fine brown hair ran down from his belly button to lower parts past his jeans. His abs contracted as he pulled off his pants and boxers leaving nothing to the imagination. I finally got to see him completely and utterly nude. And I stood there, frozen, and gulping so loudly I should have been embarrassed.

He was already slightly hard, erect, and waiting for my touch. I wanted to reach



for him, reach for that incredible and solid member, feel it slide through my palms, my fingers and then lick the tip gently only to swallow him whole.

But I didn't. I just stood there staring and fantasizing. I didn't know what to do. It had been so long and I was so nervous that I couldn't move. I couldn't even blink.

The Hunter seemed to understand my hesitancy and his calloused, rough, and smooth hands began to rub at my bare forearms. It was like he was pumping heat throughout my body, bringing blood to the surface in an attempt to relax my rigid muscles. His warmth echoed through my body sending tremulous chills that left me standing cold. I don't know why that hot touch left me frigid...I guess I was just so nervous that I was scared. But if that was the case, then where did my inhibitions go when we were in the Hummer? I was all over him then, so why couldn't I move now?

"Sophie," he asked softly and with a faintly ragged voice, "what's wrong?"

I took a deep inhale and closed my eyes, "I'm not sure. I can't seem to move."

He pulled me closer, touching skin on skin, heart to heart, and breath to breath. I breathed in his musky sandalwood gun-powder scent and could taste it on the back of my throat. As soon as I swallowed, my jackal began to pace. My beast had had a long morning and judging from the way it was moving back and forth, it wasn't finished. It was still demanding more payment for the earlier favor. I could hear it growl, sniff the air in that dark cave and stare directly at the naked man in front of me.

I knew my beast had longed for the Hunter and it was salivating at the thought that this morning, today, its wish would come true. A part of me didn't want to give in to the beast--I didn't want to agree with the canine, but I stood frozen for a reason.

Morty was so beautiful that I didn't want to fail him in anyway. And what if, after all these years of solitary, I had lost the ability to seduce, to kiss, to touch, to make love? I was plagued with the ability to constantly think, never just react as a normal human would. I had to analyze the situation and then run away so that I wouldn't get hurt. After all, if I had ran away when my attacker was staring at me, I might have had a fighting chance.

I shook my head, no, that's not true. The attack would probably have been much more violent because wolves are cursorial, we love to chase frightened, running things. I don't know why, but we do. So being frozen would help in that situation.

I always froze when I was scared. And as my eyes roamed over those beautiful, well-defined pecs and abs, I knew I was scared. I was afraid to disappoint him, afraid that I would lose him. I don't know when my mind had decided it wanted to be with the Hunter forever but it had. And now I was frightened to take another step towards Morty, frightened that if I gave myself to him that he would leave just like any other man. Just like every man has done in the past.

I didn't want Morty to leave me. I know that sounds desperate and needy and clingy, but my heart literally cried every time I couldn't see him. How unhealthy is that? I had only known Morty for a few days now and there is no way that a bond that strong could have formed in just a few days. Right? According to Redbook and other magazines love takes time, a lot of time, that instant attraction is just that, instant attraction, nothing more.

I took a deep breath and realized, that yes, I was definitely over-analyzing the situation. Just kiss him, touch him. Shouldn't sex be like riding a bicycle--something that you never forget how to do?

The Hunter moved past me toward the bath and my eyes followed his movements. I knew when I had first seen him in those jeans that his ass must have been amazing and sure enough, it was. His cheeks were like two soft and silky full moons, round and muscular and calling to me. I wanted to sink my teeth into that firm butt, grasp them tight as he's thrusting deeper into me.

So, why wasn't I? I believe being naked in front of someone is an open invitation to sex, so why was I still standing here?

No, don't answer that. Don't over think it, just touch him. Let your body do the talking from here.

I know I'm talking to myself, and that's just fine. At least my feet were stalking behind the Hunter, quietly and hungrily coming closer to him.

The water from the spicket was spraying loudly, concealing my soft footsteps, hiding my presence from the Hunter. My beast smiled and licked its lips in anticipation. My heart began to beat faster, savoring the flavor of the Hunt. I happened to glance at myself in the mirror and my green eyes were gone. Very gold and very round eyes stared back at me. I was looking at Morty with my wolf eyes. I was staring at him like he was nothing more than a juicy, succulent meal.

I felt myself smile.

Morty turned around to face me, only he thought I was further away so he jumped slightly. He looked taken aback, almost shocked and then his face relaxed completely and his heart continued to its steady, rhythmic beating.

I had frightened the Hunter, albeit for just a moment, but in that miniscule moment I felt a surge of adrenaline so fierce, that it was screaming in my head. It needed an outlet, it needed physical exercise. And right now, I wasn't thinking of a mile run, no, there are other physical motions that work just as well.

I pulled the sink drawer out and rummaged quickly through nail polish remover, tweezers, etc until I found a neatly wrapped Trojan. I hoped it still worked, but screw it, my animal was racing uncontrollably inside that dark cave, scraping and biting, pushing me to eat this man alive.

The Hunter stepped backward into the tub, water splashing ever so quietly. He grasped my hand and pulled me next to him, his touch slipping on the clear and bloody goop still stuck to my hands.

Slowly we sat down in the hot water, steam clouding the room creating a foggy haze that blanketed our vision. I had chills on my arms but I wasn't cold. I was hot all over. Fire was raging in between my legs forcing me to be wet and pulsing.

Beads of sweat ran down the Hunter's five o'clock shadow, occasionally resting on those coarse hairs. I reached closer to him, felt his breath warm my already sweaty and dirty neck and my lips kissed those beads of sweat from his jaw, absorbing that salty liquid. My tongue flicked out and continued licking him, licking my clear goop that had managed to stick to him, licking my blood that had crusted on his neck. I paused, for just an instant, and savored my taste on his pulse. It pumped so violently under his skin that I wanted to rip it out, take his life in my mouth, drink him down.

Instead, I lightly bit his neck, scraping my teeth delicately against that baby fine skin.

The Hunter moaned throatily, his voice being cut off by the anticipation of my mouth. And I couldn't stop. I kept licking off my blood and goop from him, licking and

swallowing all of the swamp gunk and sweat that was clinging to him. He tasted so good, so natural, so pure--he tasted like the woods, like a forest on a rainy day, wild and wet. I knew most of that taste was me and I was in heaven swallowing that other worldly power transformation.

I bent forward, dragging my tongue across his chest, his pert nipples, his fine brown chest hair. His heart was beating madly against his chest and I lingered there, for just a moment, to listen to the life flowing through his body, to listen to what kept him alive. I kissed his heart slowly and moved on. I knew my beast wanted to stay by his heart, to drink his life, but there was another body part pumping blood and calling my name that I couldn't resist.

My tongue led the way down his happy trail, down to where I most wanted my mouth to be. He was no longer semi-hard, no he was fully erect, fully waiting to be taken inside. My palm slid around his velvety smooth shaft slightly pumping and I brought my lips to the tip of his head. I licked softly, flicking and tasting his manhood, and then I swallowed him. For a split second, I choked, remembering to swallow and suck instead of allow my gag reflex to kick in. It had been a long time since I had given a blow job. I was a bit out of practice. But I was right, it was like riding a bicycle. My head came down again and again as my throat pumped his penis, leaving saliva to spill down his shaft and my hand. My free palm lightly gripped his right testicle and I massaged it tenderly as I continued to lick, suck and swallow him.

I heard the distant moans of pleasure from somewhere above me and remembered that I wasn't the only one in the tub. I was so focused on that perfect erection I had actually forgotten it belonged to someone.

I brought myself to my knees, regretfully removing his penis from my mouth and my lips went for the man standing in front of me.

His soft and firm mouth hugged mine tightly, occasionally thrusting his tongue inside my mouth to fully taste me. He came up for air and pulled my hair back to reveal my neck. His own tongue, slippery and course licked up and down my pulse and he continued to pull my head back by my hair, while my beast continued to come alive.

The Hunter's hands found my breast and he pulled it up to his mouth and suckled it softly at first, then tugged and bit it until my body was shaking so violently, I wanted him to fuck me then and there. No more foreplay, just sex.

I tried to bring his mouth back to mine, but his lips had moved on to my other nipple, his mouth swallowing my breast. I watched as my breast flowed in and out of his mouth, as my nipple was pulled and bitten on. My breath caught and finally I managed to say, "Fuck me."

The Hunter shook his head and smiled maliciously. With both hands he lifted me to a standing position and he knelt in front of me. His mouth licked down my abdomen sending chills of expectation down my body.

My heart skipped a beat as his lips lingered over the top of my pelvis, kissing and licking his way down to my feminine core.

My beast paced faster inside that dark cave and its tongue mercilessly slopped out, panting and nearly begging for more. I wanted to let go, to feel everything the Hunter was doing, but the beast was so strong, so involved, that I couldn't. If I did, then the jackal would be let out and I'm not sure the Hunter would survive.

So, instead of fully feeling that slippery and course tongue sliding over my clit,

over my wet lips, I...oh, who the hell am I kidding? There is no way I could ignore that.

I moaned loudly and grabbed the back of his head as his tongue thrust deeper into my core. He was eating me from the inside out and forcing me to tighten around his tongue and now, Oh God, his two fingers. They thrust forcefully into me, curling and pushing in, rubbing the area just behind my clit as his tongue searched for that creamy goodness that was oozing out from me.

The soft patter of sounds escaping my mouth grew louder into screams as he pushed and licked me. I wanted him to stop, to stop this teasing, this cumming and just fuck me. I wanted to feel his huge member sliding inside me, pumping me, fucking me.

I grabbed his long hair and pulled him away violently. My hands reached for his jaws and I lifted him up to standing position, smelling my musk all over his face. I smelled good. I licked my cum off his chin and savored that delicate juice for just a moment before I turned around and placed my leg on the tub wall.

I wanted him to fuck me from behind, fuck me like an animal. I heard the tell-tale sounds of ripping plastic and knew that the condom was being put on. I could still feel myself dripping and squeezing, begging for that penis to be thrust inside me.

The Hunter grabbed a handful of hair and pushed his way deep inside me. I placed my hands on the steamy wall to balance as the Hunter pumped again and again, faster and faster, slamming me against the wall, fucking me like the animal I was.

My beast howled as I screamed and for a second, the beast and I were one. We relished the insatiable lust and desire that was rolling all around us, feeding us, tempting us to come again.

The Hunter pulled out and turned me around, kissing me deeply. His long, silky hair covered my hair creating a veil of sandalwood. He grabbed my upper thigh and lifted it carefully and put himself in between me again. I had missed that member throbbing inside me and now that it had returned, I squeezed against it.

The Hunter was slower now, his eyes searching mine, his body intertwined with my own. His lips caressed my cheek, my jaw. His hands held me tightly, keeping me so close, that our hearts were mating.

My beast sat back, confused, and watched. It was almost as if my animal didn't understand actual love-making, that the idea was as foreign to it as eating vegetables.

But my human mind rejoiced in the Hunter's arms. He had, at first fucked me, and now he was making love to me. There is a huge difference between the two and as much as I loved the rough sex, tender sex is always more genuine, more heartfelt.

So I closed my eyes and just felt him living inside me, felt the heat of his body warm my soul, felt the love surround me.

## Chapter Eighteen

The Hunter and I cuddled in the warm bath water, my head leaning against his chest. My neck would move forward whenever he breathed like a rhythmic dance. His arms enveloped my entire body with his biceps squeezing my own. He held me tightly as if he didn't want to ever let go. And that's fine with me, I didn't want him to let go either. I could have stayed in the bathtub forever, watching my skin prune, just as long as the Hunter snuggled beside me.

For once in my life I wasn't embarrassed that I had sex with a man. Usually I felt regretful, remorseful, and ashamed, afraid to even look the lover in the eye. I guess I didn't want the person to know how much I cared for them because if I did, then they would hurt me even more.

But with Morty, I knew he cared for me in the same way that I cared for him and knowing that we love each other is the most peaceful feeling that anyone can have. I didn't worry that he would leave me because I knew he wouldn't. I didn't worry that he would hurt me because I knew he wouldn't. And I especially didn't worry that he didn't love me because I knew he did. Actions speak louder than words and I didn't need to hear three words, all I needed was his arms wrapped around me. In one relaxing pose I gathered all the information I would ever need: he loved me. Plain and simple.

Words can actually cheapen moments, strip the life from a hug with just an utterance. So I didn't need him to say anything. In fact, the silence was so beautiful that I was grateful. I had, at one point, been horrified of silence. But today, the silence was golden. I was completely at ease, completely fulfilled, completely happy.

Nothing could take that away from me.

From somewhere far, far away, a distant beeping echoed in my living room. It was high-pitched, barely audible, almost like a dog whistle except the Hunter could hear it.

He sighed loudly and stepped out of the bathtub leaving me in a chilly, watery tomb. The bath water had lost all of its heat and I was left alone. But not alone in a purely physical sense, no the Hunter was still in my home. I was just left alone in the bathtub. It was too soon to feel sorry for myself. After all, the Hunter wasn't about to leave me. He was more than just my protector now, he was my lover.

I heard his wet footsteps trudge through my dining room and towards the couch. His hands fumbled through a jacket and finally he clicked a button.

"Hello," he said gruffly.

I knew I shouldn't be eavesdropping, but with super ears like mine, it's hard not to. I'm constantly listening in to other people's conversations because it's so difficult not to. First of all, they talk so loudly that I'm sure they want the world to know and secondly, well, sometimes the conversation is just too juicy to ignore. Only the best gossip can be heard in a grocery store.

I sat back into the tub, placing my back on the cold porcelain. I already missed Morty's warm chest. I wasn't desperate or needy or clingy or anything like that, I just

knew what made me feel comfortable, what made the bath feel so much more warm--Morty.

Everything always felt so much more serene and peaceful when he was around. Even rough sex. I don't know how to explain the feeling of safety when he's fucking me so hard my brains are coming out of my ears, I just know that I still feel protected and loved. No matter what.

I happened to catch a glimpse of myself in the chrome spicket and for the first time in a long time, I was smiling. The Hunter had that effect. I was actually smiling. I wasn't grinning because of a funny joke or the Daily Show was on. No, I was smiling because I was genuinely happy.

It felt good to be happy.

"Damon," said a female voice on the other end of the phone. My super hearing always catches both sides of the conversation, "It's Shirley."

"I know your voice, Shirley," I heard the Hunter say with a smile. I could tell he was smiling just by the inflection of his voice. People who are unhappy tend to talk through their lower chest, making their voice deeper. But Morty was practically sing-songing. He was just as happy as I was.

Wow, I've used the word 'happy' so many times in these past few minutes than I have in my entire life. I guess I was truly...happy.

"I think you should come down here and see this," Shirley replied a little bit curtly. She obviously wasn't having the best day of her life. Then again, why should everyone be as happy as I am right now? The world is constantly turning, constantly full of problems. I don't know why I was expecting those aspects of life to change.

One's outlook on life is funny; it really does depend on how light-hearted a person is. I used to look at the world as a dark and hollow place, but now, the world seems to be a long lost friend that has made its presence known on Facebook. It feels good to be reacquainted.

"What is it, Shirley?" Morty asked, his tone changing ever so slightly to convey a sense of urgency and intrigue.

"Just something that I think you should see. It's really interesting."

"Shirley, spill it."

I thought I heard her chuckle for just a moment and then the sound was gone, "Just get your ass down here, Damon."

"Shirley," the Hunter paused, and as the silence weighed around him, I heard his heart beat just a little bit faster, "Would you like me to pick up anything for you?"

"Yeah, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich would be fantastic. I haven't eaten since I took your girlfriend to Taco Bell."

"Hmm," he muttered softly, "My what now?"

"I knew a long time before you did that you two would hook up. It was a bit obvious. I think *everybody* knows."

"Oh, right. Where are you, Shirley?"

"I've activated my homing beacon, just follow the blips."

"Do you not know?"

"Of course I know, but you never follow my directions. So just follow the blips. It's easier than explaining every detail."

“Sure thing. And you said you want a PB&J?”

“Yeah.”

I heard Morty pause and sigh deeply. He scratched at the back of his head and took in a large breath, like he was about to face the abyss.

“Oh, and Damon, bring some milk so that I can drink it down.”

But Shirley hates milk. I remember her specifically saying she hated milk when we first met. So why would she be asking for it?

“Sure thing. I’ll be there in a few.”

The phone clicked and I knew the conversation was over. Was he really going to ditch me so that he could bring a sandwich to his co-worker? Had I really misjudged their relationship that much?

“Sophie,” said the Hunter still nude as he stood before me in the bathroom, “I have to go.”

“I know.”

“You heard?”

“I have wolf ears, remember?”

“Yeah. I’m going to leave you, but I don’t want you to leave this house. Don’t open the windows, don’t stand in front of the windows, don’t open the doors, and especially don’t go outside.”

“Yes, Dad,” I said sarcastically. I mean, really, I think I know how to stay safe in my own home. On second thought, I don’t. If I did, I wouldn’t have been attacked in my own bedroom.

The Hunter scoffed quietly and then kneeled in front of the bathtub, “I’m serious, Sophie, keep yourself safe. Do you know how to use a .35?”

“A .35?”

“It’s a gun.”

“No, I don’t believe in guns.”

“Okay, do you have any knives around here, daggers?”

“Why would I have daggers? Didn’t they stop making them in the 15<sup>th</sup> century?” I asked with a vague smile on my face.

“Sophie,” he replied completely avoiding my comical question, “Do you have any knives?”

“Yeah, some kitchen knives.”

“Keep them handy at all times.”

I stood up naked in the cold bath water and a few chills ran down my arms, lifting the tiny hairs to stand on end. I looked at the Hunter, *really* looked at the Hunter and he was afraid.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

He took a deep breath and grabbed both of my hands into his and he smiled wearily up at me. He just stared at me for a few moments and then released my hands, relinquished that calming and serene touch.

“You’re not really picking up a sandwich, are you?” I asked more fervently now that I knew something was running afoul.

He smiled at me again, tentatively, hiding those secret thoughts from view and from me.

I stepped out of the tub, splashing water onto the gray walls, slipping on the now

wet white tiled floor, “Answer me, Morty. What’s going on?”

I was so nervous now and scared that I wanted to hide. It’s amazing how fast emotions can change. One second I was happy, and the next, well, I was practically peeing in my pants. I didn’t like the look that was crawling on the Hunter’s face. He was frightened and very worried. A few frown lines were etched on that perfectly sculpted face ruining the mask of confidence that he constantly wore. What would have him so scared? What could possibly frighten a Hunter?

And with those questions, I should be very afraid. Hunter’s are never frightened. They never falter. They never fret. They are always in control, always at the ready.

Morty was not. Instead, he was naked in my bathroom with beads of water trailing down his chest. He was not prepared.

“Answer me,” I said again, grabbing his broad shoulders and shaking him just a bit.

“Don’t worry, baby,” he said gently pulling me into a giant bear hug, “Just keep yourself safe.”

He released me and instead of holding me, he reached for his blood-stained pants and slid them on.

I was trying to grasp some piece of normalcy so I asked, “No underwear?”

“They’re too dirty to wear. Have you ever noticed that jeans rarely get dirty? But underwear and t-shirts do?”

“No, I wash everything.”

He nodded and threw on the grime-encrusted white T-shirt and instead of smelling like the rose-perfumed bath water, he now reeked of rotting swamp and decaying blood.

I should be accustomed to those smells, hell, I should love those smells. But just because I have a beast curled up inside me, doesn’t mean that my human side has to like rotting scents.

So I crinkled my nose.

The time of beautiful scents and of peaceful cuddling was over. It was time to get back to work.

“Morty, please...” I began.

“No,” he said shaking his head and pulled me once again into that loving embrace, “Keep yourself safe.”

He kissed me on the forehead and left me alone in the bathroom.

In the thumping silence I heard his vehicle start up and drive away.

That beautiful silence was gone. It had disappeared with the Hunter and had left me with only myself as a companion. They had both abandoned me to stare horrified into the stuffy air and breathe in remnants of anxiety and loss.

I was left alone to wonder if I would ever see the Hunter again. I didn’t like the look of fear that he wore and I knew he was about to face something deadly. What he was facing, I know not. But the butterflies in my stomach were prancing so frantically that I knew the outcome would be the makings of a nightmare.



## Chapter Nineteen

The condo felt empty and void of life as I walked naked toward my bedroom. Beads of water ran down my legs and splashed gently on the hardwood floors. I hadn't bothered to grab a towel and dry off from the earlier bath. Instead, I just trudged around like a stray dog; naked, wet, and lonely.

The first time the Hunter had entered my home I had immediately wanted him out. I couldn't believe that I had invited him inside and even offered him a drink. And now I find it disturbing that he is no longer here.

I know he has a job to do and I want him to find the people responsible for Clyde, Charlie, and Billy but still, I was being selfish. He was the first man to ever treat me with respect, he was the first man who actually gave other men a good name. I guess he was the exception not the rule when it came to mankind. And I didn't want to lose that. It's difficult enough to find a good man these days. So when one comes along, you have to hold on tight.

I took a deep breath and plopped down on my perfectly made bed. The pillows were always kept in an upright position, the sheets and comforter pulled back. I made it that way so it would be easier for me to get under the covers. If I'm tired, I don't want to waste time climbing into bed because there are usually two modes to a bed: made for company and made for sleep. Made for company is when a person makes sure that the bed has come straight from a catalogue and made for sleep is when the person throws off all the pillows and pulls back the covers. Instead of wasting my time on both modes, I combine the two. The bed looks made but it's easy to get into at night.

So I laid back and stared aimlessly at the white, popcorn ceiling. I don't like popcorn ceilings because it gives the appearance that the ceiling has some sort of horrible disease. Poor thing.

My God, I'm rambling. I must be really upset. I only ramble about inane things when I don't what to think about what's really bothering me.

And I knew what was bothering me: The Hunter.

I was in love with him.

The relationship happened too quickly. I didn't have enough time to adjust to not being alone anymore and when he took off because he had to work, I just didn't know how to cope.

How pathetic is that? I'm now pining away feeling sorry that he's out there catching the bad guy. I should be rejoicing. I should be ecstatic that he has a lead and that he'll bring the murderers to justice.

But I'm not. And it has more to do with just me being alone. I never told the Hunter about my attacker. I never told him that the rogue wolf was responsible, that my maker was responsible.

It's odd. There's some sort of connection between the attacker and myself, one that I can't seem to explain. On one hand, I want him to be found and caught, on the other, I have this crazy desire to keep him safe. It's probably because he created me, and

who should turn their back on their maker? It would be like turning my back on God. I couldn't do that.

My hands grasped for a large, sage green pillow and I held on tightly. I needed something to hold, to hide my face in. I couldn't deal with any of this anymore. I needed sleep. That's an understatement. I haven't slept in over thirty six hours. No wonder my mind was a wreck. No sleep, loss of friends, new lover, attacker back in town--I should be exhausted.

And I am. Adrenaline can't last forever, unfortunately. I wanted to stay awake, to keep my eyes open for any movement that wasn't warranted. But I was just so tired and the bed was too welcoming and the chill in the air made me want to snuggle even more. So I pulled the covers over my head and felt my eyelids delicately struggle to stay open. They soon lost the battle.

*A stiff breeze hustled about my naked body. It wound its way through my long, dark hair and across my rain-splattered chest. Chills danced over my skin as I began to walk through the wet sand.*

*The sand glued itself in between my toes and as I reached down to brush it off, I noticed that my feet were no longer human. Instead, the black paws of my jackal were sinking deeper into the ground.*

*From outside of my body, I saw that I had shifted. But all of my human faculties remained. I could think, I could feel, I could do everything a human could only I was more powerful, more in-tune to my surroundings.*

*The wind was blowing from the north, bringing very cold air amid the hot sun. I felt the frost nip at my fingers underneath all of that black fur and knew the chill wasn't from the weather, but instead the Entity was making its presence known. I searched all around me with not only my eyes, but with my ears. I could feel it stroking my back sending its tell-tale signs of foreboding through me.*

I knew this was a dream, but I also knew, with the presence of the Entity, that something was going to be revealed, that an answer was going to be told.

It's odd that I could have an unconscious dream and yet have cognitive thought at the same time. I've never been able to use my brain in my dreams, I just always went with the flow. But now I was actually analyzing what was happening, I could make my own decisions.

*I stepped down onto all fours, using my arms to help me run. I didn't know where I was running to, I only knew that I should run. I didn't have much time so I had to be fast.*

*The sand was thrown up into the air as my paws dug in and I powered myself forward. Tears washed themselves from my eyes as the wind blew harder. My tongue lopped out, giving me room to breathe deeper and faster, to keep myself alive as I soared across the desert plain.*

*A small dot on the horizon began to grow into an immense temple. Statues of werewolves lined the stone road. They were holding flails and looked as if King Tut had personally dressed them. They were Egyptian.*

*Torches lit themselves as I continued to run down the path, inhaling the rosemary and sage that lingered heavily on the crisp air.*

*As my eyes peered around, I caught glimpses of a Sphinx, of pyramids, of several different types of animal-like statuettes. One had the head of a cat but the body of a*

*human, another had the head of an alligator with the body of a human, and finally, the last statue that I past was larger than the others. It alone stood in the middle. The head was a jackal.*

*My heart stopped. I stood silently facing that statue. I couldn't look away nor did I want to.*

For the first time in two years I knew what had caused my fear, I knew what had attacked me. The answer was impossible, nay, improbable yet the answer was well defined. I was staring at the stone face of my maker--Anubis.

Really, Anubis? If I were to believe this right now, even though the truth is staring me in my face, I don't think I could forgive myself for accepting it so readily. I mean, I know that there are thousands of spiritual and supernatural creatures out there, it's just, well, Anubis? An Egyptian god has been plaguing my dreams for the last few years, seriously? An Egyptian God? Anubis from the Mummy movies? Seriously?

But I had remembered the jackal face, the gold eyes and the black body, the distinguished look that he carried. He wasn't feral like so many werewolves, he had worn dignity. Every single detail from that night was always clear in my head and I don't know why I never saw it before. Perhaps I didn't want to. Perhaps my mind kept telling me that Egyptian gods weren't real, just as Roman or Greek or Norse or any other religious icons weren't real.

I could see why a person would mistake a werewolf for a God--werewolves are powerful, mysterious, dangerous, and frightening. Could Anubis really be the first werewolf, or at least, the first one any human ever saw? Is that where the myths came from? And how is it that he's still alive anyway?

I kept scoffing to myself while I stared at the statue. Anubis. It just boggles the mind. But in a roundabout sort of way, it makes sense. Werewolves had to come from somewhere and old wives tales about putting on sacred wolf pelts or rubbing a magical salve all over the body to shape shift I knew had to be ridiculous ideas.

It makes sense that a disease this old and this popular would have its roots in ancient society. So, I guess Anubis has been biting people for many years turning them into abominations like him. But if that answers the question of who was the first werewolf, then *how* did he become the first werewolf? And why is he still alive? And what the hell does he want with me?

*My eyes lingered for just a few more moments on the statue of Anubis before I began the trudge up at least a hundred sandstone steps.*

*The invisible Entity curled around me, danced on my fingertips as I pulled aside a sheer, white curtain.*

*He was in my past two dreams and only now could I fully see him. He was, in fact, stately, around eight feet tall. His body was indeed human only he was covered from head to toe in black fur. He wasn't wearing a suit this time, instead, he was naked like myself.*

*As he stood up, his shoulders became more broad and defined almost as if someone was pumping his shoulders full of air.*

*His face was indeed a jackal and those eyes were more than just golden, they were brilliant and shined with the power of a thousand stars.*

*His toes clicked on the marble floor as claws descended from the black paws. He could turn his body into whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He had control and*

*power, something that I didn't.*

*I couldn't force half my body to be a wolf and the other half to be human, no, it was one or the other, not symbiotic perfection.*

*My heart picked up speed as I felt his hot breath roll across my forehead. He was so close I could touch his fur, pet him, stroke him. My hand reached out to him and brushed along his hairy chest. I could feel his nipple tighten under my touch, feel his muscles contract so violently that I was slightly taken aback.*

*"I've missed you, Anput," he said coming so close that I could feel a hard growth lop across my chest. He was erect, and it was searching.*

*Waves of nausea passed over me as his hands reached around me, as his member became more hard and heavy.*

*"No, please," I said, trying not to plead but desperately wanting out of this situation. I had started this by touching him and now I wanted it to end. I could stop it, right? Please tell me I can stop it.*

*I have always lusted for my maker, desired him, and yet, I didn't want to be anywhere near him. I was constantly torn between my wolf self and my human self and I wanted my human self to win. I was in love with the Hunter, not this aggressive and cruel beast that mauled people in their beds.*

*I may have a spiritual connection with this thing, with this false god, but only because he made me, not because I love him.*

*"Don't touch me," I said again more fervently even though I didn't move away from him.*

*"We've been through this before, Anput," he muttered, his tongue running across my upper shoulders.*

*"Why do you keep calling me that?"*

*"Because Anput is your name."*

*"Because you named me Anput when you gave me this disease?"*

*He chuckled. I think the giggle was more disturbing than the groping. He was enjoying this as I struggled to wrench myself from his grasp.*

*"No, you have always been Anput," he said, pulling me tighter to his chest, "You just don't remember."*

*"What do you mean?"*

*"I will tell you all, Anput, but we need to be re-united. It has been too long."*

*"What do you mean, re-united?"*

*"You know, women used to be beaten for asking questions of their betters."*

*"Excuse me?"*

*"But I prefer this modern woman. I appreciate feisty. It makes the beatings more interesting."*

*"Fuck off."*

*He laughed loudly this time, the sound crashing around the stone temple like tumultuous thunder during a hurricane.*

*"You're going to be fun as I break you."*

*I turned around violently to fully face him. But my try for intimidation failed miserably. I couldn't look him in the eyes because he was so much taller than me. Instead, I stared up at him like some sort of scared whipping boy waiting for the sting.*

*"Oh, Anput," he began, his clawed hand stroking through my long, dark hair,*

*“what happened to you?”*

*I stepped back, slightly, so I could leave him be. I wanted out of this dream, this nightmare, but I wasn't waking. Instead of opening my eyes like I should, I just looked at Anubis with admiration and fear, just as I would looking into the face of God. Those two emotions should never be used in the same sentence and yet, that's exactly how I felt. I admired his beauty, his confidence, poise, charisma, and the ancient touch of wisdom. But I immensely feared his power, his beliefs, his physical touch.*

*So I was torn.*

*I took a deep inhale and felt the cold frost bite at my nostrils as the stench of rot and decay clouded my head.*

*I finally looked around me and the temple had vanished. Countless strewn and torn bodies laid about my feet. On a big body pile I stood on top of them. I glanced up at Anubis in horror and he smiled.*

*“I am ready and waiting,” he said.*

*Within the blink of an eye he vanished. I was left alone with the corpses of at least a hundred men and women each having their intestines and meat lopped about them as if they were on a disgusting serving platter.*

*I had seen this kind of violence before, in fact, Clyde and Charlie's bodies looked exactly like this. They had been nothing more than hamburger. Was I here to see this because somehow I had caused this? That somehow these dead bodies were my fault?*

*I swallowed deeply hearing my own gulp echo in the chilling breeze.*

*And still I was not allowed to wake. There was something here that the Entity wanted me to see otherwise I would be awake and gasping for breath.*

*But what did it want me to see?*

*My eyes roamed over the endless sea of sand and mutilated bodies until finally, far off in the distance, I saw several wolves circling a beaten body. I squinted in the harsh wind to better see. The body had long, brown hair that was tied neatly into a low ponytail. His white t-shirt was stained red. His face was completely crimson from the rivulets of blood coursing down his strong jaw line.*

*With his dark, golden eyes he looked straight at me.*

*My breath caught and my heart picked up speed. Adrenaline beat at my chest as I saw the wolves pounce.*

*The Hunter was going to die.*

*On the wind I heard Anubis say, “I'll be waiting.”*

*I woke gasping for air and shaking. My eyes were fully wide and I felt the warm rush of tears streaking down my cheeks.*

*Not him. Not the Hunter. I couldn't lose him too and survive.*

## Chapter Twenty

I know a trap when I see one. The Egyptian God, Anubis, was holding the Hunter hostage, biding his time for my appearance. He had said, "I'll be waiting". He knew what my reaction would be. It was kind of disturbing that the God of Mummification could predict my future actions. Perhaps because he was so old, so ancient, that several hundred years worth of wisdom and experience had fully developed in his mind.

And he was right. I wasn't going to sit idly by knowing that Morty was being tortured or killed. No. I was going to do something about it.

I wiped thousands of tears away from my eyes as I threw on just a white T-shirt and light blue yoga pants. Normally, I look in the mirror to make sure that I'm decent, but tonight, it didn't matter. I didn't care what I was wearing nor that my hair was one big pile of frizz. Those things were trivial compared to the Hunter's life.

I didn't have a plan to save the Hunter or even to find him, I just knew I had to. Somehow I knew where I should go, that my hands and my feet would take me there. I'm not used to being tossed around by fate and despite the fact that it was a little bit disconcerting, I still managed to lock my door behind me. Like it mattered.

I scoffed and squeezed my keys tight enough to gouge my skin. The most dangerous thing out there wasn't a burglar, it was a god. At least, a monster who thinks he is a god.

The swift shot of fear kicked me hard in the back as I stormed toward the Jeep. Yeah, I was scared. Beyond scared. I was searching out a monster in order to find the love of my life. I was stepping into an unknown world to barter with the devil. My heart was beating so fast that I looked like a cartoon coyote with my heart jumping out of my chest.

At least my jackal was enjoying this. It paced back and forth in that dark cave, howling at the full moon that was constantly in the black sky. It lived for the hunt. It lived for the excitement.

And that's where you separate man from beast. I don't live for this kind of traumatic experience, I instead, try to focus on the good things in life; my friends, my "family", and now, the Hunter.

The beast, however, was thrilled at the expectation of meeting its maker. It was volatile. At any other time, the beast would have taken over me because he was so strong right now, completely intense. But so was I.

I needed to stay in charge, needed to keep my body so I could find the Hunter and warn him. Hopefully the dream had come earlier than it had with Charlie. Hopefully this time, I could save someone instead of writhe in the bloody trail.

The walk towards my vehicle seemed to take an eternity because so many thoughts were running through my head; can I make it in time? What would I do when I got there? How would I react to my creator? And why the hell am I doing this? No matter how much you care for a person, Fear will always turn its nasty head towards you and make you doubt all of your convictions. It takes so much love to force a person to

walk head first towards the nightmare.

But he was worth it. The Hunter was worth it. And honestly, I would do this for a complete stranger because no one needs to be treated like a piece of meat, to be treated like something less than human, like something less than living.

So I took a deep breath and I heard my vehicle beep as I unlocked the door.

Something brushed by my leg and immediately I jumped ten feet into the air. If my heart wasn't already beating fast enough, it sure as hell was now. My head turned in a million different directions searching for what had touched me. Finally, I turned off my eyes and found the scent. It was the cat. It was the same black cat that had tapped on my window for a few days now. Stupid cat. Didn't it know that I was going to face my own demise in a matter of minutes? Did it really have to scare me that much?

I sighed and bent down to pet it. I didn't know if it was male or female because honestly, I didn't want to look at its privates. It's odd that I'm being a prude with a cat when there are larger issues at hand. I guess my mind was trying to protect itself instead of focus on the shadow that had plagued me for so long.

The cat's fur was soft and silky and just by stroking its back I felt a little bit more calm. Unfortunately, my beast didn't feel calm. No, it wanted to tear the poor thing apart.

I shook my head and kept petting the cat. I was strewn a million different ways tonight; a piece of me was a monster trying desperately to kill, another was horrified at meeting its maker, still another was hysterical that I would lose my love. And here I am petting a cat instead of making any movement towards my future. Like I said before, I'm scared.

In books and movies people just plow head first with courage and determination that only heroes have. But I'm just me and I'm not that brave. So I was delaying when every second counts. I don't like cowards and I don't relish being one, but I couldn't help it. I knew the claws and teeth that Anubis had because he had torn me apart before so excuse me if I was scared to death that it would happen again.

I wiped a few more tears from my eyes and thought of the Hunter. How could I leave him there with that monster? Why was I letting fear control me?

Still, I stroked the cat with my indecision and fear. It had the most beautiful gold eyes...

Why does everything in my life have gold eyes? Anubis has gold eyes, the Hunter has golden brown eyes, and now this damn cat has gold eyes too. Everywhere I look, I see those eyes. It's a constant reminder of my terror, of my nightmare.

My own eyes roamed up towards the heavens, towards the starry night sky. One more night and it would be a full moon. One more night and I would be a monster. Like I wasn't already. I was a monster because I was delaying. If I was a better person, I wouldn't let my own dread hold me back. I would rush in and sacrifice myself for the one I loved.

That's what people do when they're in love. It's like my own life doesn't matter anymore, that only his does. If that was the case, I would stop petting this cat and drive.

But this indiscriminate fear was becoming more and more unbearable. The dream was fading from my fore-mind, lessening its impact. Maybe it was just a dream and I was over-reacting.

The cat meowed loudly and I looked back down at it. It wound its way through

my ankles, slithering around me. This thing really craved attention.

“What do you want, cat? I’m really not in the mood,” I said fully believing that the cat would respond and tell me what to do. I talk to animals like they’re people, I guess because I am one. I talk to my jackal all the time. It’s not great dialogue more like, “no, not now, please God don’t let me change,” but it’s still talking to an animal as if it understands.

I looked back down at the cat and I swear to God it shook its head. Great, just great, I’m so scared and out of my mind that I’m starting to see things. That’s really great. I’m going insane. I’m sitting out in the dark parking lot petting a cat that can understand me while I wait for the Hunter to be ripped to shreds. Someone nominate me for the Hero award. Or better yet, nominate me for the Biggest Coward in the Universe award. I hear it’s made of solid gold, or would that be fool’s gold?

Shit. A few minutes ago I was charged and ready. I was going to march into Anubis’ domain and do something noble. I hadn’t really decided on what. I didn’t realize at the time that my future included me paralyzed with fear.

I shouldn’t be waiting, I shouldn’t be frozen. I should be driving as fast as I can towards my destiny, trying desperately to spare the Hunter instead of sitting here on bended knee petting a stray cat.

And the really sad thing is, Anubis would come after me whether or not he spared the Hunter. I knew he would always come for me. I was his, he made me, he wouldn’t give me up that easily. He would systematically try to lure me into his trap no matter how many of my friends and family he took. And then it hit me. Anubis had been the one who was killing my friends. I’m not sure how I know, I just do. If he was willing to kill my lover then you can bet the farm he was willing to kill my friends leaving me alone and “helpless”. That son of a bitch.

Okay, good. Anger. I can use anger.

My jackal howled a few more times at the false moon, riding my rage as I jumped in my Jeep. Anubis had killed so many of my friends just to get my attention. Pathetic. All he had to do was knock on my door and he would have it. Hell, he never lost my attention. Every night before bed I would think of my attacker and make sure the doors were locked tight. Every dark corner I turned I would be scared that he would be there, waiting for me. So all of this showboating was for naught. He had my full attention all along. That son of a bitch.

Well, he might have taken Clyde, Charlie, and Billy, but he wasn’t about to get anymore. I’m not going to allow it. I’m going to embrace my destiny. The cards had said to become one with my beast, become symbiotic or perish. And if I stayed here a coward, I would die like one. Better to go out on top.

As I shut my door, a movement blurred past me. The cat had jumped in the vehicle and was sitting upright on the passenger seat, the tip of its tail flicking.

For a moment I was speechless. After all, I had bigger things on my mind. I really didn’t need any hitchhikers.

“What are you doing?” I asked to the cat.

It licked its paw.

“Come here,” I said and I picked up the animal and tossed him back outside. Within the span of two seconds the cat had jumped back in. I kind of sat there, dumbfounded and shocked at the cat’s speed and determination.



“What the hell?” I said to myself, then I just shook my head, “Fine, I don’t have time for this. If you piss on my seats, though, I will let my beast eat you. I am so not kidding.”

The cat nodded again and I knew I had lost my mind for good.

## Chapter Twenty One

Instinctively I drove. I turned onto the interstate and headed north toward Wekiwa National Park, where I knew Anubis waited. It seemed kind of odd to me that the nicely dressed god of the dead would be waiting in a swamp, but I guess logic doesn't dictate a monster's actions.

As I drove, the black cat rested gingerly on my leather passenger seat, its gold eyes narrowed and focused on the pavement ahead. It looked to me like it was waiting, thinking, wondering what it was going to do when the vehicle stopped. Would it jump out and make a new life in the wilderness? Would it find some unknowing couple or lonely person to settle with? Those questions seemed so trite compared to my own; what the hell was I going to do when I faced Anubis?

I had a few thoughts running through my head; try to use my jackal strength to delay Anubis from hurting the Hunter, use my feminine wiles, distract him with food...never mind the food bit, I didn't have any extra available and I wasn't about to stop by the store before my demise.

I grinned. This whole situation now seemed a bit comical. Anubis was chasing after me, really? The ancient Egyptian god was still alive and hungering for me, really? It all sounded so ridiculous. Being a werewolf was ridiculous. A person grows up knowing what exists in normal society that supernatural creatures were just stories made up to keep people in their homes after dark so that governments and military could do whatever they wanted without anyone knowing. Which, by the way, reading those conspiracy theory websites will really mess with your head. When I first turned, I instantly read everything ever written on werewolves and that was one of the explanations; they don't exist, they were imagined to keep peasants in their place.

But there I go on a tangent. I ramble when I'm nervous, when I'm scared, when I don't know what else to do. Perhaps I could talk Anubis out of harming the Hunter, talk him into leaving me alone, just talk his ear off.

My jackal scoffed which feels like a small, isolated earthquake located right at the base of my heart. It's a bit jarring to first feel the emotions of another animal, but lately, my beast had been making his presence known. My beast had probably realized that Anubis, its maker, was in town and was most likely rejoicing.

I guess I would be rejoicing too if I thought freedom was only a breath away. My beast longs to leave me, to become an individual not hampered by the moon or by me. I can feel it. When the beast thinks of freedom, a sort of shimmer runs through my body and I almost feel at peace, finally free to frolic in the woods, splash around in the creeks and riverbeds, and hunt without regret. But that feeling disappears as quickly as it arrives and fades into only a wonderful dream.

Sometimes I feel sorry for my beast, trapped and hungry, only allowed to roam when the moon is full. And then I remember, I hold back the beast because hunting includes its insatiable desire for babies, fawns, fast food trash, etc. Just like a real wolf or a real predator, it wants the innocent, the easy to catch, prey that cannot protect itself.

Most predators are opportunistic seeking out the weak and vulnerable so they don't waste energy on a meal. I'm not saying I approve, but it makes sense. And that's why I can't let my beast roam free without chaperones.

Speaking of things that try to take over my body, where the hell is the Entity? A few years ago all it ever did was linger around me, tell me that the mail man was dropping by in 23.4 seconds (it's very exact with its predictions), send me horrifying dreams and never ever leave my side. When it came to me several hours ago, it was the worst feeling I could possibly remember because I didn't want to see my future, I didn't want to see horrible events, and I couldn't stand the cold. But now that it had returned, why wasn't it with me, telling me what to do? Why was it being secretive and distant?

"Because you don't know how to control it," the cat said nonchalantly. It wasn't a meow, no, it was definitely a soft female voice that carried age and experience like a kindly grandmother who's offering advice you would do well to listen to.

All I could do was shake my head. That's great. Not only am I going to face my fears, but I'm going insane at the same time. Wow, two birds with one stone. I'm on a roll.

"You're not insane," the cat replied, licking its right paw as if it didn't just speak.

"I beg to differ. It's one thing to talk to a cat, it's quite another to hear it talk back." "So, it's alright for a wolf to have human thought but not a cat?"

"What do you mean?" I asked swerving just a little in my lane. It was getting difficult to drive in the dark while a cat was talking to me.

"I'm simply asking you if you believe in other types of were-animals."

"Other types?"

Okay, I was flabbergasted. First of all, wolves don't talk, they howl. Secondly, a cat was talking to me. I shouldn't be this surprised, after all, I've had conversations with a tooth fairy who looked like a crocodile and wore a yellow ribbon around her neck. Why should this surprise me? I live in a supernatural community and I'm shocked at the idea of a talking cat.

Maybe I wasn't just shocked at the cat, I think my mind was trying to protect itself. So much had happened in the past few days that I hadn't had time to deal with it all. When a person is in a car accident and their body goes into shock, then their body is protecting them from further harm. So my mind must be doing the same thing. It's protecting me from all of the supernatural bullshit that had become my life.

I wanted desperately to just be a charlatan who reads tarot cards, ripped people off because they were desperate, not go insane because *I'm* the desperate one.

"This has been a traumatic time for you, I'm sure," the cat said gently, placing its paw on my thigh. I nearly jumped out of my chair. It's one thing to imagine it talking, it's another to have it touch you, "but you need to embrace this."

That's the second time I was told to embrace myself, my future, my destiny. First the Entity had told me and now the crazy cat was telling me.

"I'm not the one who's crazy," the cat replied in hush tones.

I brushed the comment aside. I didn't need a cat to tell me I was losing my mind, I already knew that. Hell, I knew my mind was done for when I saw Anubis in my dream, so really, I didn't need a talking cat to spell it out for me.

"C-R-A-Z-Y spells 'crazy'," the cat responded.

"Jeez, stop reading my mind! I already have too many things messing with me

anyway.”

“Such as?”

“The jackal, of course. It always wants me to change. The Entity sending me dreams of blood and gore never of anything cute and cuddly. And now you, a talking cat.”

“Perhaps your mind has made me up, to safeguard you.”

“How exactly would that work?”

“You need to talk to someone, you need them to hear you, to listen. You’ve said it all along, so much has happened to you recently. A person would go insane if they only experienced half of what you have. So, perhaps I’m your mind’s attempt at a psychologist.”

“See, I told you, I’m insane. Even the talking cat in my head agrees with me.”

I paused and watched the palm trees fly by as the soft white light of the moon danced on their fronds. Nighttime can be so peaceful, so serene, if nothing else is weighing on the mind. It can be quite beautiful.

“Alright, you’re probably just in my head,” I said softly, “so, when I face Anubis, will you shut up so I can focus?”

“It depends on your plan.”

“My plan?”

“What is your plan exactly?”

“I’m not really sure. I just know I have to save the Hunter before he becomes just a memory like Clyde or Charlie or Billy.”

“That’s noble of you.”

“You think so?”

“Oh yes. I doubt many would have the courage to face Anubis.”

“Thanks,” I said sadly. I still didn’t feel very heroic, instead, I felt insane. A doctor once said that all the crazy people are the ones who really know what’s going on and if that’s the case, then I think I prefer ignorance. Ignorance isn’t stupidity, ignorance is bliss.

My eyes darted sideways to the lounging black cat that was now licking its neck, cleaning itself in the only way that cats do. It didn’t look at me as if it had the knowledge of several centuries nor the vocal cords of a human, instead, it looked like a cat. It finally laid its head down on the passenger seat and closed its eyes, taking a “cat” nap.

I prefer cats that are just that--cats. All of this supernatural and/or insanity crap is a little bit too much to handle from time to time. For instance, I could look at that candle in the back of my jeep and say that’s a real living thing with thoughts because in the supernatural world or in the crazy world, anything goes. There isn’t any stability nor reality and that makes life difficult.

But there I go again, rambling.

Perhaps I was more scared than I let on.

As I passed the sign, “Glen Park”, I knew my instincts had drawn me back to Ms. Jean’s trailer park. Just a few hours ago the Hunter and I had stood in front of her yellow farm house knowing something sinister was watching in the woods. I should have called Ms. Jean or done something other than hide in the bathroom yesterday. I wonder if she’s doing okay, if that “dogman” scared her as much as he scares me.

I stepped out of the Jeep and oddly enough, I stepped into the Hunter’s tracks.

The ground was still muddy because of all the rain and the swamp dirt around so I could fully see his large shoe indentations in the ground. At one point, he had stood here, with me. He was alive, healthy, and not in any kind of pain. He hadn't been kidnapped yet, nor had we made love. Perhaps if we kept to the plan of just finding the culprit then this wouldn't have happened. I had the sinking suspicion that Anubis, my creator, was extremely jealous of his creations and that no one could have me but him. So if the Hunter was being hurt, it was my fault. I shouldn't have gotten close but I couldn't help it. I love Morty and I would do anything for him which is why I'm here facing the silence and about to face Anubis.

The trailer park was eerily quiet, not even the flushing of a toilet could be heard. So as I stood there, I felt nothing, heard nothing but my own internal monologue.

The cat had already jumped out of the vehicle and was bounding through the swamp, out of sight. She obviously had plans.

But I just stood there and looked around. I still didn't have a fully detailed outline of what I should do nor where I should go. I was flying by the seat of my pants which is never a good idea because I wouldn't be prepared for what the future held. I needed a plan. I needed to really know what I was facing.

I remembered that I had a book on Anubis back at home and I silently cursed at myself for forgetting about it. The book could have probably held certain insights about Anubis that I could have used to my advantage. I wanted to slap myself for not doing any research. But I had been in a hurry, after all, the Hunter was in danger.

Oh my God, I'm an idiot. I should have called the Hunter and warned him instead of prancing off to my doom. Matt probably has his number, I should give him a call.

I dug deep inside my black purse and reached for my silver flip phone calling Matt on my speed dial. Why didn't I think of this before? I shouldn't be making stupid moves when there is a very ancient and very intelligent monster out there watching everything I do.

The phone rang several times before Matt answered, his breath a ragged picture of health, "Sophie...you alright?"

"Matt, what's wrong?"

"Sheila, Eric, Ernie and I are on our way to an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Wekiwa."

"Why?"

"We just got a message from Mr. Black telling us to meet him there."

"When did you get the message?"

"Just now."

"And you're on your way?"

"Yeah. Sophie, what's going on?"

I wasn't really sure what was going on. If the Hunter had just given them a message, then he was bound to be fine, right? Maybe there was still time to save him before the dream came true. Perhaps I hadn't made the worse mistake of my life by running off like a bat out of hell. Perhaps I could fix this before anyone else got hurt or worse, killed.

"Do you have Morty's number?"

"Who?"

"The Hunter. Do you have his number?" I asked impatiently.

“Yeah, why?”

“I have to get in touch with him, Matt, it’s important.”

“Sophie, what’s going on?”

“Matt, I just…” I took a deep inhale and finally I could say it out loud. I had been keeping Anubis a secret for so long, hiding his identity for so long that it seemed like I was betraying him by revealing Anubis, but that no longer mattered to me; I had to speak up, “Matt, I’ve been having dreams again. I’ve felt the Entity again. And I know what’s out there. I know what’s doing this.”

Matt was silent for several moments. All I could hear was the deep inhales and exhales pouring through the phone. With the way he was breathing, he should be running a marathon, not riding in a car.

“Matt?” I asked.

“Yeah, Sophie, I’m here.”

“Matt, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

He wasn’t. His power wasn’t oozing through the line as it normally did, no, instead, he felt frozen with fear. His presence over the phone was icy, standoffish, and frightened. I had never felt that before from him and needless to say, it was a bit disconcerting. Matt is never afraid.

“Matt? Something’s wrong, I can feel it.”

“Nothing’s wrong, Sophie. I promise. And how would you know if something is wrong anyway, you can’t feel me through the phone.”

“But I can, Matt. You’re scared, why?”

He muttered softly to himself even though he was rigid, “You shouldn’t be able to feel anything, I can’t feel anything.”

“What do you mean? I’ve always felt your power through the phone.”

“Sophie, normal werewolves only feel supernatural power via touch, smell, not through electronics. I didn’t know you could do that.”

“Well, what does that mean?”

“It means you are Anput,” said the deep, gruff voice that I had heard so many times before in my dreams. It was Anubis. And he was with my family.

## Chapter Twenty Two

“You!” I yelled into the phone nearly forgetting my fear and relishing in the anger and rage that was coursing through my body. Anubis had taken so much from me; my freedom, my humanity, my friends, and now he had my family and he would most likely take them away too. So, I was furious.

“Who else were you expecting?” he replied softly, “the Hunter?”

My breath caught for a few moments, fear tickling my lungs, “How do you know about him?”

“I know everything about you, Anput.”

“How many times do I have to say this, my name is not Anput!”

“But it is,” he said, his power rolling through the phone, crashing into me as swatter squashes a fly. He was strong, old, and fierce. I could feel his hatred like a red hot poker stinging me through the phone, biting at my heart. If he felt this dominant over a phone, then I could bet he was even more intimidating up close and personal.

“I don’t relish these gadgets of yours, so I think it’s time we met in person,” he said, his voice rumbling through the speaker like an earthquake shaking a crumbling mountain.

“I don’t think we should. I didn’t enjoy our first visit.”

He laughed. His laugh was worse than his power; it was raw and filled with malice, he truly hated me. But why? He was my maker, he should want me, after all, he created me. Instead, his power wanted me in pain, wanted me to do his bidding, wanted me to kneel in front of him, and wanted me to spread my legs.

“I like it rough,” he said nonchalantly, “just as you do.” He somewhat cackled then and I could hear him licking his lips, “You know where to find me, I’ll see you there. And if I don’t, then you can say goodbye to this so-called family and continue to be an orphan, alone and unwanted.”

The phone clicked on the other end and I didn’t know whether to be scared or really pissed off. I was frightened for my family and frightened for the Hunter, but I was more angry that anyone could be that mean, that malicious. Anubis was a cruel monster, manipulative and, well, I guess evil. I’ve never used that word to describe anyone before, but he was evil. Who takes friends hostage just so they can see you in the flesh? What kind of monster does that? Where is the logic? If Anubis wants me to worship him, then why make me hate him? It doesn’t make sense.

And I truly wish I knew who Anput was. He keeps referring me to that name, he has called me Anput since my very first dream. The name sounds Egyptian, so he must have dubbed me that when he first made me. But no, that can’t be right either, because he said in an earlier dream that I had *always* been Anput. If he’s confusing me with someone else, then...well, I don’t know what I’d do. I don’t think I can be any more angry than I am now. He has killed my friends and my family, he has taken my happiness, he turned me into a monster, and now, he wants to take even more. So I don’t think it’s possible to be even more angry. No, I think I would explode if I had more rage.

And where the hell was I supposed to meet him? I don't know what he means. I can't read his mind, we've only met one time before and that was in my condo and I don't think he meant there again. So I stood in the mud, in the dark, and looked into the very black forest that loomed behind Ms. Jean's very yellow house. I had come here for a reason, instinct had drove me here, so maybe I should just feel my way to him. I didn't want to ever see Anubis, nor even be within a thousand miles of the monster, but I couldn't let my family die either.

And Anubis knew about the Hunter. All those moments I could feel eyes roaming over me, it was Anubis watching me the whole time, gathering information to use against me, finding weaknesses. He found several. He knew I would do anything for those I love and he took advantage of that. He took advantage of my love. He was the worst kind of evil, he doesn't just take because he can, no he takes because it's amusing.

I stepped lightly into the sloshing ground, feeling the mud linger on my naked toes and I thought about my own beast, my own monster. During the entire conversation my jackal never made a sound nor even a movement. Why? Even now I don't feel my beast, it has gone dormant, silent. I can't feel it inside that dark cave and I can't see it.

I closed my eyes and took a deep inhale just as I had done earlier in the bathroom when I begged my beast to eat the calming potion. I flew through my body searching myself but nothing supernatural was there. I paced loudly towards the cave but it was empty, only the dark sky and the full moon was present, my wolf was gone. But where could it have gone to? This is the only place my beast lives inside me; it couldn't have just vanished from me, it couldn't have been taken from me as if it were just a piece of clothing. The beast was a part of me just as my heart is, just as my mind is. So, where did it go?

I turned on my heel and was about to start searching elsewhere in my body when I heard a slight whimper come from the island that my beast lived on. I looked back and saw the black form of my jackal tied and bound by a bright yellow light. I don't know how I missed it before, but my beast was tied up tightly. It couldn't move, it could barely breathe. I ran across the dark lake toward the island splashing the still, black water in my wake, listening to the gulps in the water as I passed and saw my beast's eyes grew larger as I approached. It was scared of me. For the first time ever, it was frightened of me. It was like a scared little puppy at the pound waiting for its final injection. I reached out toward my beast and it frantically tried to squirm away from me.

"Wait, it's okay, I'm not here to hurt you," I said softly.

The beast continued to pull away from me and fell over its bindings. It landed with a thud on the top of the smooth lake, its back touching the water and its legs soaring up into the sky.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

Still the beast kept rolling away from me, further and further across that great, dark lake. I followed steadily, confused and bewildered as to why my beast was tied up and why it was squirming away from me.

I saw a few falling stars in the black sky as my beast continued to roll away from me, roll towards the shore. It was leaving the island, crossing the lake just to get away from me. The further it moved from the island, the more the sky literally began to fall around me. In the distance of that lake, stars plopped into the water creating white light underneath my feet. The sky was fully black, only the full moon remained.



I continued to walk across the white water, towards my beast. It finally stopped squirming and instead panted so violently that its chest looked as if it was going to explode.

For the first time ever, I pet my beast. It shook at first, its muscles convulsed, and then it quieted. I continued to stroke its belly through the yellow, glowing bindings and its breathing became steady once more. My jackal's fur was so soft and velvety, like it was made of cheesecake that I wanted to kiss it and lick it and make it mine. Instead, my hands reached for the bindings and a slight burn licked my palms. It wasn't exactly pain, more like an annoying ache, so I continued to untie my beast. The bindings on its legs released and it jumped up to stand on all fours. There was only one area still tied and honestly, I wasn't sure if I should remove them. Its muzzle was secured, making sure it never bared its teeth. But I pulled at the bindings anyway and fully released the beast.

It jumped up towards me, not attacking me, but licking me as a dog does. I smiled lightly as the beast ran back towards the island, as the stars then fell back into the sky, as the cave once more became peaceful and serene.

The beast stood on its island with its tongue lopping out and I think it was grinning. It wasn't foreboding nor trying to be dominant, instead, it looked as if it would work with me, be one with me, finally help me instead of hinder me.

I still had the glowing bindings in my hands. They were gold and they slithered around me, as if they had a life of their own. They left my hands and evaporated into the air leaving no sign that they were ever here. What were they?

I opened my eyes and came back to the swamp, back to reality. I don't know what the bindings were on my beast and right now, it didn't matter. I could figure that out later. What I needed to do right now, was find my family, find Anubis. As much as I hated that prospect, I knew I had to face my creator. He had been calling me for awhile now and it was time. Anubis had made sure that I would be alone; he made sure no one could intervene. And if I didn't make an appearance, he would kill more of my family, take more lives, and I would still have to face him.

As I walked through the dark swamp, sweaty and damp, I couldn't help but wonder what Anubis had in store for me. Why was he that desperate to see me? Why? What did he want from me? I just didn't know. I was walking towards him blinded and confused which is never a good idea when facing certain doom. I didn't stand a chance. All I could hope for was that everything would work out. That maybe, just maybe, we could all make it out safely, that no one else would be hurt or killed, and that this could all end happily ever after.

But I doubt it.

## Chapter Twenty Three

I wandered aimlessly in the swamp just as I had wandered aimlessly in the desert so many times before in my dreams. I knew eventually I would reach Anubis because I had so many times before. Only this was real and not a dream. This time I wouldn't be able to wake up when things became too dangerous, too scary. This time I would have to face my fears, this time I would have to face Anubis. Trust me, that prospect wasn't making me very happy. I was scared out of my mind, angry that he had my family, terrified of what Anubis would do to me, and completely confused as to why.

Anubis had never said why he had created me nor what his reasons for creating me were. I guess he was saving those answers for our one on one interview. Which is another prospect I'm not rejoicing over.

My feet continued to slush through the damp ground and decaying logs as an owl hooted softly in the distance. On nights such as tonight, when the moon is full and the sky is bright, animals, bugs, and birds are so loud, so alive that the forest screams with life. But tonight, all I heard was the hooting of an owl. Even then the sound was distant, faint, miles away. So I knew I was getting close.

Sounds of life are always silent around danger, because life itself is afraid. It quiets down like a fawn and waits silently until the danger has passed.

A torch lit up in the distance, the orange fire burning bright in the darkened swamp. I moved some Spanish moss from in front of me to get a better look as several more torches were lit. It was just like my dream; a runway was being made for me, telling me where I should go. Except, I wasn't about to walk down that path. If I was to stand my ground in full light and make my presence known, then I knew I couldn't do a thing to help my family nor my lover. I needed to get my bearings, know my surroundings, make a plan. I shouldn't walk in there half-cocked like a crazy person, I needed a solid plan of action. But how does one plan for something like this?

I crouched silently on my knees, trying to dodge the light and hide in the shadows while my eyes searched around me. I crawled past the lit torches making sure I couldn't be seen and with all the swamp bog sticking to me, I was pretty sure I couldn't be smelled either. There were two ways I could be found out: my scent and my appearance. The swamp reeked of rotting sulfur and decaying logs which would overpower normal scents. Being a wolf so many times before had actually taught me a lesson in camouflage, you have to be invisible to catch your prey.

So I was completely hidden as I crept along the side of the runway, my eyes searching around me. It was odd; I wasn't scared yet or panicking like I should be. Instead, I was calm, cool, and patient, waiting to strike like a coiled rattlesnake, biding my time.

If Anubis wanted to see me, then it would be on my terms. He had controlled my life for too long already and I wasn't going to let him anymore. He controlled me when I locked my doors, paranoid that he would strike again. He controlled me when I turned at the full moon, because normal humans don't shape-shift. And finally, he controlled me

when he killed my friends just for my attention. So no more. I wasn't about to give him any more control than he already had over me.

I moved one more step closer, to what? I'm not sure, but I knew I had to follow the runway, that Anubis would be waiting at the end.

My eyes were blinded by the harsh torchlight in the dark swamp so I resorted to just smelling and feeling my way around. Unfortunately, I couldn't call on my beast because it was still whining and curled up in a fetal position. I wonder if Anubis had done something, if he could control my beast. It would make sense if he could, after all, he created me, he should be able to control me. He had for so long, why would he not be able to control my beast?

"Anput," I heard the sound rumble through the swamp and a few lagoon birds squawked loudly and fluttered away at the noise. Nature was not keen on being silent for too long.

My heart danced and jumped for the slightest of seconds as he called out that name. He couldn't have spotted me; I was hidden, silent, like a predator. I had strength; I was the one in control.

"Anput," he said again, this time more fervently and demanding than before, "I know you are here. I can feel you on the wind."

He can feel me? Not good. My nerves started twitching and my breathing became faster. I was supposed to be in control, I was supposed to be hunting him, not the other way around. My hands clenched tighter at the loose ground underneath me trying desperately to find some sort of stability to mask the fear that was racing through my body. I didn't want to face him, I couldn't. I knew what he was capable of because I experienced it firsthand. I was in the hospital for more than a month and that's with supernatural healing. He had broken 236 of my 245 bones. He had torn 87% of my ligaments and tendons. I had lost more than 3 pints of blood, which by any standards, would have left me for dead. And he did all of this to me slowly. The attack didn't take a few minutes nor even a few seconds as most attacks last. No. Mine took an hour. He enjoyed my pain, my agony, my screams. He wallowed in my fear as a pig wallows in the mud, nastily and joyfully.

I was shaking, violently, because the mud puddles underneath me were bubbling as if something large and heavy were walking by. I couldn't help myself, I was scared. More than scared. There are no words to describe a fear so intense that I was about to go into convulsions.

"I know you're nearby; I can hear your heart beating, hear your blood flowing underneath your perfect skin. So, come on out. I'm waiting."

Shit. How could I forget that I had super awesome hearing? Damn it, of course he would too. I was in over my head here. I was no match for him. Why was I even here? What possessed me to venture into the jaws of death?

"Not only am I waiting, but you're little boyfriend is as well."

The Hunter. I hadn't exactly forgotten about him, but I was just too scared to move. I was paralyzed and crying. I was paralyzed with my nightmare come to life and crying uncontrollably for the Hunter, my friends, and my family. I have cried too much lately to even have tears, yet they came, in floods. I was silently sobbing, hoping and praying that my hiccups and breathing wouldn't give me away, when a large, red paw came into my sight.

My breathing stopped. My heart stopped. I slowly looked up from the muddy ground and came face to face with the beast of Clyde. I knew that wolf anywhere. I had run beside him so many times before, hunted with him so many times before, and I had loved him. But his eyes were showing no semblance of recognition. Instead, he looked at me as if a Doberman had caught the burglar and that my time of hiding was up. His growl was deep and haunting as his mouth came closer to my head. I could smell the rancid decay of meat lingering on his breath, feel the specks of saliva on my face as he breathed intently at me. His nostrils flared and he began to pace around me. I kept on my hands and knees so I wouldn't make any sudden movements and force the attack. Like I said before, predators are cursorial, they only attack when the prey moves. In fact, chasing prey aids in the digestion of food, jump starting stomach acid to do its thing.

But as the wolf of Clyde paced around me, I knew I had been right in one theory; the human part was being killed keeping alive only the beast. Clyde would never be Clyde again. He would remain a monster, a predator, a werewolf. He would never again enjoy the feel of silk nor satin, nor enjoy a hot, gourmet meal, nor the touch of a lover. He, instead, would relish in the hunt, death, and blood. And that is a fate worse than death. Because that is not living.

"Good boy, Clyde," Anubis said in a very mocking manner, "Thank you for welcoming our guest. Such a good boy, yes it is."

I wanted to puke. Clyde shouldn't be treated as a dog, he was more than that. He had been a such a great man, loving, caring, kind, and above all, genuine. And now he was less than human, a mere animal to be coddled and praised. Hearing Anubis say those words to Clyde made me stand on my own two legs because he was treating me like an animal as well. And I was more than that. Just because I have a jackal living inside me that doesn't mean I'm not human.

My eyes found Anubis through the hazy, torch-lit swamp. He was relaxing on a large gold throne with red velvet cushions. It was a bit odd to see such a tacky display in the middle of gooey swamp, but what did I expect from the God of Mummification?

"Why don't you help escort our guest, Charlie?" Anubis demanded more than asked.

I looked around hastily and realized there were at least a hundred wolves hiding in the shadows just as I was doing. I hadn't smelled them and neither had they smelled me. The swamp was doing an excellent job at hiding the predators from the prey.

Charlie stalked towards me from the darkness on my right, his light red fox body slithering next to me. Charlie was the only fox in our pack and we used to make fun of him for being so small and feral. And yet, now, I was scared of him. He was still quite tiny, but he looked rabid. Bits of drool lined his black lips and his sharp, white teeth were gleaming in the firelight.

I looked more around me, because apparently, hiding in the shadows, I had seen nothing. I scanned the wolves for signs of Billy, Matt, Sheila, Eric, Ernie and the Hunter. I didn't see them anywhere nor could I smell them. Then again, there were no scents in the swamp other than muggy decay.

Clyde's wolf pushed me forward, his nose digging into the back of my knees. I yelped quickly and as soon as I did, the other wolves took a step forward. They knew I was the meal for the evening, that I was the weakest link. Predators always attack the weak, it makes for easy pickings.

I tried to calm myself down by taking deep breaths, but that only aggravated my system. I could barely breathe through my fear, yet alone inhale properly.

The wolves stalked closer as my thumping heart rang out as if I was in a marching band, announcing my fear and my weakness.

“Come to me, Anput,” Anubis said again just as he had in my dream, “Come to me and they will stop. If you do not, well, what’s the term? I will ‘release the hounds’,” he sighed and then continued, “England used to be quite charming.”

I didn’t really care what England used to be like because there had to be at least a hundred wolves here, each of them eyeing me like a succulent steak. I couldn’t really blame them; I was scared, frightened, jittery, shaking; I smelled like food. Clyde and Charlie were the closest to me. They padded around me and occasionally thrust their muzzles into my legs as they stalked me on all fours. They kept rubbing up against me, forcing my fear to tell me to run. They wanted me to run. They wanted to hunt me. To tear me apart.

I stood there, frozen with fear, a few tears seeping down my burning cheeks. I didn’t want to die this way, I didn’t want my friends, my “family” to be the ones who killed me. So I did what I had to do, I walked toward Anubis.

## Chapter Twenty Four

As I walked steadily with frozen legs towards Anubis, I felt his “pack” crouch around me. They didn’t take their eyes off of me, not even when a falling branch crashed in the distance. Instead, they paced and growled. I walked through them as if I were walking in a gauntlet; I was patient, cautious, and slow. If I made any sudden movements, the “pack” would attack and I would be dead. On that I was certain. I could feel their anticipation on the air, hear their wolf hearts pump blood to their bodies, preparing them for the hunt, for the kill.

I kept Anubis in my sights as I walked the gauntlet and he didn’t take his eyes off of me either. As much as I hated him, I continued to stare and come closer to my attacker, the monster who ruined my life. It was as if I was being pulled, as if Anubis had thrown a rope around me and I was being dragged not of my own free will.

The mud slopped on my naked toes and a few bog spores decided they would make their home in between my toes. They tickled my feet and made me feel even more grimy and dirty than I already felt. There was something about Anubis that made me feel dirty. I don’t know exactly what it was, or is, but he certainly ruffled my nerves.

“Anput,” he said, reaching out his giant paw towards me, “it has been too long.”

“Not long enough,” I replied, surprised at my own courage.

He laughed then, proudly and throatily. A wave of power rushed through him, sending an array of bright orange curly cues dancing in the hazy night sky. He stepped from his ornately decorated throne and stalked the last few feet towards me.

My breath caught as I felt his breath quiver over my face. It was hot, damp, and reeked of rotting meat. His teeth were just as I remembered them, white, long and very, very sharp. His eyes glowed that brilliant golden yellow that outshone even the brightest of stars. His eyes were ageless. Timeless. They hadn’t dimmed over time nor lost their luster, instead, they had grown even more dazzling and intense since I had last seen them. It was like looking at two vivid suns and going blind just by getting lost in them. He was so otherworldly, so supernatural, he was definitely the stuff of myth, of legend and those eyes told me why he was mistaken for a god; he was rare and beautiful.

He left me entranced, hypnotized by his power and his prowess. He towered above me, at least four feet above my head leaving me eye level with his pelvis. He wasn’t naked, however, he wore that mafia suit all black and form-fitted, double-breasted with bright gold cuff links. The gold didn’t shine as near as wondrous as his eyes, leaving his cuff links to look as if they had dulled in this damp and mildew-infested swamp.

I continued to just stare at the beast-man who stood in front of me, even as he began to touch me. Feeling his soft and silky black fur caress my sweaty skin sent chills spiraling up and down my back. I shivered slightly as his paw moved a strand of hair away from my face.

“It has been too long,” he said deeply, his voice hollow and bass-like, “It has been far too long.”

Even as he continued to pet me, I stood there dumbfounded, entranced by his beauty, his power. I couldn't move, yet alone react on anything he was saying or doing. I just soaked him in like a very wet sponge, like a desert that has gone far too long without water.

He stepped closer to me, with his pelvis now mere inches away from my nose. I managed to move back, only slightly, and he chuckled morosely. It was the laugh that brought me back, that condescending and egotistical laugh that told me I was just a woman, and that I was pathetic, nowhere near the greatness that was man. It made me sick.

"Like I said before, not long enough."

"Oh, Anput, you were always adorable, so cute and child-like."

"Keep egging me on and we'll see how child-like I can be," I said forcefully looking up from his waist and catching a mouth full of teeth in my sight. My heart beat just a little bit faster and as soon as it did, Anubis laughed again. He was laughing at my fear and finding my discomfort most entertaining.

My mouth was so dry that I could barely swallow, as if I had stuffed a thousand cotton balls on my tongue, but I couldn't allow any man to treat me this way, not even one so powerful, that he could crack the very moon with his howl. I was shaking so hard that my threat seemed less demanding and more pathetic as I said, "Hand over my friends or suffer the consequences."

Anubis wore a smile on that black muzzle of his, showing his black gums and very white teeth. His eyes loosened their grasp on my form and smiled as well. It was a bit disconcerting to see this huge monster grinning at my dismal attempt at a threat, "What are the consequences, exactly? I should know in case I don't hand them over."

The consequences? Shit. I don't know. What could I possibly do a 1,000 pound werewolf, smack it on the nose with a rolled up newspaper? Doubtful.

I donned my con-artist mask and tried to go in as brave as I possibly could and tried to erase the fear swirling around my head, "Do you really want to know?"

"Please do enlighten me."

"Very well. I will..." I paused. No matter how good a liar I was in front of my clients, this kind of pressure was too much. And he was so large, so scary, so violent. I just looked down at the muddy ground and felt a large tear bubble into my eye. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't threaten him. He laughed at me then, heartily and chauvinistically and still I just stared at the ground. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't face him head on and win, I couldn't blackmail him, I couldn't manipulate him, all I could do was wallow in my dismal fear and sadness.

"Women," he scoffed, "What would they do without us? More to the point, what would you do without me?"

"Probably live a happy life," I muttered towards the ground.

He had won. I knew it. I didn't even know we were playing a game until it was too late. We were trying to see who would control the situation and it was obvious that Anubis would. And why not? He had controlled me for so long, why wouldn't he be able to control this too?

"I doubt that. If it wasn't for me you wouldn't have even known a "family". If it wasn't for me, you would still be a pathetic little orphan overwhelmed by dreams and overwhelmed by your lack-luster performance with men."

“What?” I asked, looking up from the ground.

“You heard me. Although you’re still a bit dismal. You have a jackal who would fight beside you and all you can do is bow to me. Pretty pathetic for a goddess.”

“I am none of those things. You ruined my life. You stole my freedom, my safety...”

“I did none of those things. You ruined your own life by not embracing who you really are. You’ve been split several different ways, split into meaningless pieces living a fragile existence because of your fear, of your ignorance. You could be so much more, but instead, you chose to be a charlatan, you chose to be alone, you chose to be a weak little woman who cries at every slight, every loss without questioning motives or the logic behind it.

I’ve been searching for you ever since you left me, Anput, and this is by far the worst costume you have ever wore. I thought Red Riding Hood was bad enough...”

“What?” I asked again barely able to hold myself together, because I knew he was right. I did cry all the time, I did allow fear to hold me hostage, I was pathetic. I should be doing more to help those that I loved and all I could do was just stand here and stare at the monster who was speaking truths. I was truly pathetic.

He sighed loudly and annoyingly, letting me know just how bored he was with the conversation, “We’re Egyptian, Anput. You should know this. Reincarnation is a basic tenet of our beliefs. You were first created Anput, as my feminine counterpart, my lover for all eternity, but you turned on me when you discovered I had killed Ra. I killed him so we could be the ultimate gods, we could rule the world, bring death and fear wherever we tread, but you were just another pathetic woman and so you betrayed me. You offered me up to Bast, the cat goddess, and she drove me into hiding. But I didn’t give up on you that easily. Because I love you. You are my mirror image, you are part of my soul. You have my jackal, you have my beast. You are the only one who does. So, I hunted you because I wanted you back. I finally found you a few millennia later, hiding in the Black Forest of England, posing as a sweet and innocent young lady who loved to wear a red riding cape. I tried to get you, to tell you who you really were, to remind you of our history. But you had friends, you had family. And you had a lover. He was a woodsman and he always carried an axe. I ate your grandmother so I could trap you, I killed any who would interfere with my plan, except for the woodcutter. I didn’t realize how much he loved you. And when he heard your screams, he came for you. I had to run because he brought other woodcutters, others with axes, and as strong as I am, I was no match for so many axes. So, I ran off into the forest and waited for another chance. But none came. You married the woodcutter and were never alone. I went to your funeral and saw your spirit leave the burning pyre. I tried to follow it, but I lost it over the Atlantic. A few hundred more years passed and on a beautiful sunlit morning twenty six years ago, I saw your spirit enter into a succulent little baby. I watched for a few years and knew what I had to do. So I killed your parents, after all, you had to be alone. Unfortunately, fate was on your side. I couldn’t keep up with your constant moving, with all of the foster homes you were kept in. So I lost you for a while. And then, two years ago, I saw you camping in Wekiva Park with some guy. I watched and knew he posed no threat. You two broke up and that’s when I attacked. I wanted a part of me to return to you so that you would return to me. After all these years, I wanted you back. I wanted you to come to me. And you did.”



“I never came to you willingly,” I said with tears in my eyes and a giant lump of emotion in my throat, “You forced me here. You took people that I loved and cared about away from me.”

“Only because I needed you alone. You are mine, and mine alone.”

“Why do you think, that now, I would be yours? After everything you have told me, why would I willingly love you? Why?” I asked as the tears began to fade away and my rage began to boil. He had taken so many people from me, and for what, his obsession? His maniacal depravity? I felt a growl stir from somewhere deep inside me and knew my beast was reacting to my emotions. But I didn’t care, I wanted my beast out, I wanted to release him so I could tear Anubis apart just as he had torn my life apart.

“Because we’re meant to be together. If I had left anyone alive, you would be taken away from me again. And I cannot allow that to happen.”

My eyes went wide with the sudden knowledge that I was really alone. My rage died down as I remembered Morty. Anubis had just said that he didn’t leave anyone alive. I grasped my chest and felt my heart pull apart. I felt my soul collapse when I knew Anubis was telling the truth. He had killed my hunter, he had killed my woodcutter, and he always would.

My knees wobbled for a few seconds and I fell to the ground, weeping hysterically for my lost love. We had only just met, we had only just begun, and then the Hunter and I were torn apart. I thought of Morty, of Matt and Sheila, of Eric and Ernie, of Shirley, of Clyde and Charlie and Billy and even those wolves that I didn’t have a name for and cried with more ferocity than ever before. Anubis had killed them all just so he could be alone with me. Their deaths were my fault, because Anubis had wanted me and I hadn’t gone to him so everyone was killed while he waited for me. I felt sick. More than sick. My stomach convulsed and thick, yellow acid burned its way through my throat and across my tongue finally burying itself in the muck of the swamp. I vomited at the depression that was my life. I vomited because their death was my fault. They had been killed because of me. More acid came forth and I choked on it as I kept sobbing. I felt Anubis touch my back and I didn’t care. I didn’t care what he did to me now. After all, what did I have left to live for? He had taken away everything. Possessions are fleeting, material is just material, but souls are what keep us alive, keep us happy. Having people who love us is what keeps us happy. Having a family, being with friends, having ties in the neighborhood and at work are the precious moments that make life truly worth living. And I had none of that now. I just had a monster obsessed with me, obsessed with nothing more than a possession.

And he called me pathetic. He was, *is*, the truly pathetic one. He spent hundreds of years searching for me, wasting his life for someone who would never love him, never respect him, taking lives and ruining families because of his obsession.

I opened my eyes and felt the last few tears scamper away from me. He looked down on me even as he longed for me, he hunted me even as he “loved” me, and that’s when I stood up. No matter what he did to me, I knew I was better than him. I always thought I was a monster because I have a jackal living inside me, but that’s not true. Actions will tell if one is a monster or not, and I was no monster. I had the love of friends, family, and soul mate. I had never hurt anyone the way that Anubis had. I may see corpses as food, but that doesn’t make me evil, it makes me a werewolf.

I looked inside at my beast and it smiled at me. And then I truly looked at it. My

beast was female. All this time I called my beast an “it” and instead, *she* was female. She was a part of me, she is me. I felt her run across the unfathomable lake and come so much closer to me. I felt her passion and her power flow through my veins and I stood up straight and tall.

My eyes reached Anubis and I held his gaze. He seemed a bit confused and curious but I didn't care. I just stood and faced him down. The cards had told me to embrace myself, and just embracing my beast had made me that much stronger. All I had to do now was embrace my Entity and I would be made whole. I would survive this and I would become a better person for it. Anubis may have thought that taking away my friends and family would leave me vulnerable, but he was sadly mistaken. It only served to make me stronger, to make me a force to be reckoned with because I had nothing left to lose.

## Chapter Twenty Five

I stood toe to toe with Anubis, my eyes never faltering on the gold nuggets that were his eyes. Our gazes had locked and we were each vying for power, for control. My beast roamed through my veins, sniffing and clawing inside me, she wanted out, she wanted to be able to fight Anubis, to fight her maker. But she just paced.

Anubis closed his eyes suddenly and inhaled deeply through his nose. I watched as his nostrils flared, as he breathed in my beast and my power. He chuckled again and opened his eyes, "Oh, Anput, you can try, but you will fail."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said trying for my best ignorant face.

"Your beast will never attack me because I made *him*. I can bind *him*."

"Well, see, there are two mistakes with that sentence, 1) My beast is *female*, not a male and 2) you can't bind her. We've already removed the shackles that you tried to her up with. So you can't do jack shit to us."

He scoffed, "I am your master. You will do whatever I say. That's how it works. My Israelite slaves understood the concept, after several whippings of course, and so, too, will you understand this arrangement."

"Are you going to beat me just as you would a slave?" I shook my head in disgust, "How are you even still around? A slaver and misogynistic asshole can't possibly exist in today's society without severe contempt. Is that why you follow me around century after century because you're so pathetically lonely that the only person even willing to have a conversation with you is the woman being forced to stand here and talk? You call me pathetic because I mourn the loss of my friends and family but you don't even know what that loss feels like because you're the one obsessed with a "love" who will never love you in return. I will never worship you as you want me to. You have hounded me for centuries so you must know that I will never be yours. You have completely and totally wasted your life on a dream that you will never reach. And you call me pathetic? The more I learn of you, the more pity I feel for you."

"Pity?!" he roared, "pathetic?!" he yelled again in my face slinging slobber and hot breath all over my head. His large paw-hands grabbed my shoulders and flung me across his wolves, at least forty feet. I tried to turn my body in mid-air so I could land on my hands and hopefully not break my back, but I was still twisted as I landed in the gooey muck of the swamp with a hard smack. My entire right side went numb with the sudden onslaught of pain and I was instantly sick. My stomach turned and knotted and as I looked up to see Anubis running towards me for another throw, white spots blurred my vision. I couldn't really see him, I could just barely make out his arm coming down on me again before my head throbbed as if a million giant elephants were stomping all over me. I felt more stomach acid roll out of my mouth as I laid there limply. I couldn't move, nor did I want to. As much as I wanted adrenaline to kick in, it didn't. I was too hurt to even try to run away. My body pulsed with burning pain and throbbed violently under my skin. I moaned barely as breath came and went none too gently. It hurt so much to breath that I knew my ribs were broken because every time I inhaled, it felt as if

I were being stabbed again and again in my chest.

I reached out toward the ground in an effort to move because I knew I couldn't stay here anymore. I had to get out. I had enraged Anubis, the original werewolf, the powerful false god, and his anger had not yet subsided. I don't know what got into me as I said those words and right now, I really wished I had just kept my mouth shut.

A cold breeze bristled through my blackened fingers as I looked at my hand. It seemed an odd time for the Entity to appear and yet, I expected it. I wanted the Entity to make its presence known so that I could fully make myself whole. According to the cards, I could live through this if I just accepted every part of me. If I could just love the spiritual beings that plagued me, if I could just love myself for all my flaws, then Anubis wouldn't stand a chance. He wouldn't be able to hit me, to hurt me, to take away my friends, my family, my Hunter.

I jerked my hand back as the Entity bit into my broken index finger and in that split second, Anubis' foot had slammed into the ground. The Entity had saved me. Because of its' cold bite, I had moved just in time. I was ahead of Anubis. I was a few seconds ahead of him.

I smiled even as my body screamed in broiled pain. Physical pain is nothing compared to the emotional pain that Anubis had caused me all my life, and, well, previous lives. He had always taken away everyone that I held dear. This time, though, he would not live to see another day. He would not meet me in another life, he would not ruin one more minute of this one. So, I smiled because I knew something he didn't; I was becoming whole, at one with my beast and my entity. Congratulations, Anubis, your wish has come true, Anput has returned in all of her glory and that means we are now on an equal playing field.

I felt my body go flying backwards into the decaying logs and it didn't bother me. I looked harshly into my beast's eyes and she howled excitedly as she ripped herself through my skin, my muscles, my already torn apart body.

I stood up on my two, strong, black furry legs and howled loudly at the full moon. My body rippled outward with strength, with power, with revenge. My tail wagged delicately as I stared at Anubis who was frozen just a few feet away from me. I was the Jackal, the Entity; I was Sophia Morgan and he could never take this away from me.

I jumped gently to the side as Anubis lunged for me. He landed head first into a pile of green goop. His paws slammed on the ground as he hunched towards me.

"All I have to do is release my wolves on you," he said angrily, growling at the same time.

"Then why don't you?" I replied with my voice.

"Because I'm trying to spare you. I'm trying to protect you."

"You have an odd way of showing it."

"Women need to be hit sometimes. They need to stay in line. You need to know who commands you. Everything I do, I do it for you."

"Yeah, I don't think Bryan Adams meant that sentence to be used like that."

"Who?"

"Just some guy. Never your mind."

"And there it is. The uppity attitude that all women cop. It's why you need to be beaten. You must learn to be submissive. You are not stronger than me, you are not more dominate, either. You are beneath me."

“If I’m so far beneath you, then why bother chasing me all these years?”

“Because I love you Anput, you are me, you are a piece of me just as Eve was a piece of Adam. You belong to me, you are mine.”

“I don’t think so. And news flash, I don’t believe in that archaic bullshit of belonging to someone. If I was a piece of furniture like a couch, sure you can own me. But I’m not. I’m a human being just like you and we can’t be owned. I am not property and I will not be treated as such.”

“You call *me* a human? You compare me to a human?” he roared again, his anger pulsing through the air as if a tornado had just landed, “I am a God! So, you can say whatever you want, but you cannot deny my power. And with that power, I will break you. It would behoove you to bow to me now. Otherwise...”

“Or else what? You’ll hit me again. I’d like to see you try,” I said. I don’t know when this bravery came to me, and I don’t know why. Honestly, I scared myself. I’m face to face with a god and I’m back-talking. He could kill me. But I don’t think he would. He’s too obsessed with me, he wants me too badly. Instead, I think he would keep me caged for all eternity just so he could see me every day and with that sentence, I’m much more scared. But I’ll keep fighting because I will not willingly be treated as nothing more than a mouse caught in a trap.

## Chapter Twenty Six

Anubis scoffed in the bright, full light of the round moon. This was the third time that he had laughed at me. There is a difference between laughing *with* someone and laughing *at* someone; Anubis was laughing at me. He didn't see me as a threat, hell, he didn't even see me as a person. He saw me as his property, a piece of furniture he could move around at will.

It was that train of thought that caused my fist to clench. My claws dug deeply into my palms and I could feel the harsh burn of blood seeping between my furred fingers.

The instant I had torn skin, the other wolves began to jitter next to me. They smelled it. They wanted it and I wasn't sure Anubis would be able to hold them back. The sharp splay of metal entered my nostrils so delicately, that I kept inhaling my own blood, entranced and yearning to lick it up.

I looked past my desire and focused more on Anubis. I hated him. I wanted him bruised and battered at my feet for causing all of my pain and suffering. I wanted him to writhe at the thought of losing everyone he loves and losing parts of his soul as he went to each one's funeral. I wanted him to cry himself to sleep as he remembered his family's hopes and dreams. I wanted him to feel this pain that I will always carry because of him.

And my fist clenched tighter. I squirmed gently under my own pain but at least I could focus all of that hurt towards Anubis. It was his fault that everyone I loved and cared about were dead and some were nothing more than animals now, nothing more than his personal minions.

Anubis' eyebrow reached into his forehead as he saw the red liquid coursing down my hand, "And what exactly does self-infliction gain you?"

"Chaos," I said simply. No matter how much control Anubis thought he had of his wolves, he wouldn't be able to keep them back from fresh blood. It's nearly impossible for me to ignore blood when I'm in human form, much less when I'm in wolf-form.

"Ah, you think my followers will betray me and attack you and then I would have to intervene and get hurt in the process as well. Is that it?"

No. Okay I lied to myself. I thought it was a good idea.

"I control them no matter what. They may desire your blood, but they will not move until I tell them to."

"Are you so sure?" I asked as my heart beat sped up feeling the wolf that was breathing on my calves. I felt the first firings of adrenaline rush through my system, telling me to run. But I didn't. I held my ground. I needed this bluff to work to at least buy me time to run the hell out of there.

"Charlie, back away!" Anubis yelled with a malicious smile.

"Charlie?" I asked more to myself than to Anubis. I turned around and that man who had always caused me to laugh was busy sniffing me as if I was nothing more than

hamburger. I wanted to cry then and there. I would never have Charlie back as my friend because his body had been completely burned so there was no chance his wolf could eat himself back up and become human once more. He would forever be an animal, an animal that belonged to Anubis.

“I hate you,” I growled to the Egyptian god grinning with a nasty wickedness that made a person think of Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty* reveling in her own evil.

“You don’t really. Soon, you will come to love me. To worship me, to lay with me.”

As soon as he said the word ‘lay’, an ancient power swept over me sending red-hot chills coursing down my body and pulling at me in-between my thighs. It was just like my dream; I wanted to go to him, but I knew I shouldn’t. Anubis wanted me next to him, wanted me spread before him but I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction. He may be my maker, but he couldn’t control me like he could everyone else.

My fist was still clenched when I leapt forward and threw myself at Anubis’ face. I slammed my hands into those cold, golden eyes and punched him as hard as I could. He had taken so much from me that he wasn’t going to get his wish. Not now. Not ever. I will keep fighting him until it’s the last thing I do.

Anubis howled angrily at the full moon and barred his teeth in my direction. He pushed me off of him and slammed me backwards into a shrub. The harsh needles of the bush dug into my torn skin but I just shrugged it off. Adrenaline coursed through me forcing my muscles to tighten and sending me into a fight response. I ran forward, my thighs rippling outward on the soft, muddy swampland. I roared as I ran and threw myself onto the hard figure of a god. I felt a thousand sharp pains dig into my back but I didn’t care, I just kept hitting him. I saw his gold eyes turn red and still I didn’t care. There was no turning back. I had to keep hitting him.

I was really young when my father died, only eight, but I can still remember one bit of advice he gave me, “once they’re down, keep them down.” Did I mention my father was a wrestler in high school and college? He was constantly living in the glory days and for that, I was thankful because I wasn’t about to give Anubis the upper hand.

My clawed fists kept colliding with his face. I could hear bones crunching underneath my own power even as a massive pressure was bearing down on my stomach. But I couldn’t think about myself. Every hit was for my friends and family. Every hit was revenge.

I almost smiled as my eyes caught a glimpse of his tailored black suit; I had ripped it to shreds as I kneeled on him, tearing the fine linen into a million pieces of muddy and tattered strings. So much for his dignity. It was more than just a suit that I was tearing apart; I was tearing away his pride exactly as he had done to me.

My knuckled paws cringed with each punch as my knuckles glistened in the moonlight. I was drenched with blood and I didn’t care. I relished in the pain and agony that Anubis was suffering. He was still trying to push me off of him and I wasn’t going to give him that chance.

Keep him down. Keep him down, I kept repeating to myself. Don’t let him utter a single word because if he does, his wolves will attack me and there will be no more living for me. My hands found his throat and I squeezed. I wanted to strangle the life out of him, leave him choking and gagging on all the pain he caused me just I had choked and gagged over my friends and family.

It felt good to feel his hot blood splash onto my face every time I dug my claws into his flesh. I wanted revenge for what he did to me.

And then I stopped. I wasn't defending myself, no, I was trying to kill someone. There would be no turning back to human once I took a life. In body I would be human, but my soul would be empty and hollow, a shell of nothing more than pure evil. I had wanted to kill Anubis, to wallow in vengeance, but if I kept hitting him, I would be Anubis. I wouldn't be better than him. I would be a murderer just as he is. So, I didn't keep him down. I stood up in the middle of the circle that the wolves had formed and offered my hand.

I wasn't going to hurt anyone anymore, I was going to help. I wanted to be better than Anubis and I wasn't going to sink to his level.

I may think that he had taken everything away from me, but he didn't. He couldn't take away my humanity.

Anubis reached for my hand as his tongue lapped up the blood on his mouth. He smiled, his black lips pulling back to reveal dozens of sharp, white and pointed fangs, for an instant and before I could move, he pounced.

"Never give them an inch," he growled, "isn't that what your daddy used to tell you."

A few tears etched themselves down my cheeks and matted in the black fur that was my skin. Yes, that's what my father used to tell me and I should have listened. But if I was going to fight, I wanted it to be in self-defense and Anubis hadn't attacked me yet. But now he had.

"If you don't get off me, I will kill you," I said with a hushed growl.

"I highly doubt you could."

"I was just pummeling you with hardly any effort, imagine what I can do if I put my mind to it."

He laughed and I watched as that laugh floated through the trees and shook the very foundation of the swamp, "I let you."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Of course you wanted me to beat you up," I said sarcastically.

"When you felt all that anger and rage, you almost became an animal. You almost became mine."

"Almost is a really big fucking word."

"You can't deny what you are. You are my animal to call, you are my mate, my female. You belong to me. And every moment that you think of hurting me, you become closer and closer to your true self, a true wolf. Once there, you'll be at my beck and call. So, keep on hitting me, please. I can take it," he said cracking a few of his knuckles as if he was about to type a memo, completely nonchalant.

"Fuck you."

"If you really want to we can. I was hoping for a little bit more privacy, but in front of the wolves will be fine."

"That's not an invitation and you know it," I growled back at him with a very deep voice.

"It doesn't matter whether you invite me or not," he panted, his powerful arms forcing my chest deeper into the boggy ground, "I'll do what I want. And right now, your blood is boiling in my veins and I want more of you on me. I want your life soaking



into my skin, clinging to my fur, winding its way down my throat.”

His eyes were so lusty, so hungry, that they glowed with a fury I had never seen before. He had been waiting for this for so long that his anticipation was drooling over my face sending that hot spit down my throat.

I felt my eyes grow wide with fear and horror. Anubis was so much more powerful than me that I wouldn't be able to defend myself. He was going to rape me. He was going to take away my pride next. It wasn't enough to take away everyone I had ever loved. No. He was going to take everything away and leave me as nothing more than a tortured shell of a person.

His body leaned heavily against mine and I felt the cold mud of the swamp crawl into my fur. I tried to struggle, but he was right, he had let me hit him. He was so much stronger than I was. I cried even more and tried to shake him off, but he kept coming closer to me. The other wolves began to howl and then a sharp, erupting sound shattered my screams.

## Chapter Twenty Seven

Anubis' blood splattered all over my face. I opened my eyes and saw that his head was completely gone. He was just a body still holding me tight. His neck turned right to left and looked for whoever pulled the trigger on the shotgun.

"Get the fuck off of her," I heard the deep and rich voice of the Hunter say. For the first time in a long time, I felt relief. I wasn't alone. Anubis had not taken every one away from me yet. I still had my hunter. I turned to look at him and saw both Matt and Sheila standing beside him. They were both very beat up, blue and purple in the face, but they were alive just as Shirley was still alive. She was the only one looking severely pissed. The Hunter looked determined and Matt and Sheila looked worried and scared.

Several small cracking noises brought my attention back to Anubis. From his severed neck grew a new head. Blood and muscles twisted and joined together as new bright, white bones created a skull. I wanted to vomit as I watched the monster regenerate his own head, watched as blood and tissue wound their way together to form flesh, to form skin, to form his face.

Finally, after only a few seconds, his shiny gold eyes turned to face me once more, "Do you actually believe that I was made into a god because I was a 'werewolf'? Tut, tut, Anput. I am a God. I can't be harmed."

He growled mercilessly at the Hunter and said to the multitude of wolves crouching around us, "Kill them."

The werewolves howled loudly and in unison with a chilling bark that would freeze anyone's blood. I heard the Hunter reload his shotgun, the clicking echoing louder than the stampede of wolves. I felt Matt's power collide with Sheila's as they both turned into wolves themselves, making a weapon out of their own body. And as Shirley looked into the mob running towards them, I felt her smile.

"No!" I screamed out loud as Anubis kept pushing me down into the wet ground, "let them go, you son of a bitch!"

"Do you see what happens when I leave someone alive? They try to rescue you. I had thought your friends were all dead, but what's the old saying, if you want something done, you better do it yourself."

"Then why are you over here instead of killing them?"

"And leave you all by yourself? Nice try, Anput, but I will never let you go again. Once my wolves finish off your friends, I will bind us together for eternity. You will worship me, you will obey me, you will bow to me, and what is the saying kids use these days, oh yeah, you will blow me. You will suck my dick and like it."

"Not even in your wildest fantasies," I said simply.

"Once I bind you, you will beg me for the honor of getting down on your knees. But for an appetizer, I want you to watch your friends die."

Anubis grabbed me by my wet and matted hair lifting me up from the ground. I squinted through the dark haze and blazing torchlight and saw the hunter reload. He fired quickly into the furry pack before I saw even more weapons appear into his large hands.

I couldn't really tell from this far away, about half a mile in the dark, but I knew my friends were winning. Matt and Sheila were growling and barking as blood followed their claws while Shirley was single-handedly wrestling five wolves and holding them down. I knew she was otherworldly, but dear lord, I didn't think she could kick so much ass.

More yelps echoed through the mound of fur and guns crackled in the night sky as more and more wolves fell dead before my friends. We were winning. We had to be. I inhaled deeply and smelled only small streams of blood from Morty, Matt, and Sheila. Shirley hadn't lost any blood, but I could smell something else oozing from her skin. It reeked of thick steel being melted in a volcano, she completely smelled of metal. I knew she wasn't human.

"I think your plan is backfiring, Anubis," I said with a cocky smile on my face. It felt good to watch him lose. I was finally taking something from him, hurting him in the way he hurt me, emotionally.

"Your friends are tougher than they seem. But, as you know, I can control wolves," he growled with a soft, toothy smile and slightly closed his eyes. I saw his power shoot from his entire body, the normal orange curly-cues now strode out from him like a thousand stampeding mustangs right into Matt and Sheila. For a split second, they were quiet, still...

Oh no. Not Matt and Sheila. Please don't let them get hurt or...I held my breath as Matt and Sheila turned to look at the Hunter and Shirley.

Anubis' power yelled at my skin, biting like a hoard of hornets as he whispered to Matt and Sheila, "kill them". With slow-motion horror I saw my 'mother' and my 'father' turn on my lover and my friend. They ripped the weapons out of Morty's hands as for a split-second he stood surprised. That's all it took for him to end up on the ground completely covered by several torn and bleeding wolves. Shirley, on the other hand, kept fighting. But I could see she was becoming more and more drained by the second. She wouldn't be able to last much longer. My friends would die in front of me if I didn't do something.

"Anubis, please stop. Please don't hurt them anymore."

He smiled at me wickedly, "I told you that you would beg me."

"Whatever you want from me, I'll do it. Just please, stop. Please," I said with several more tears streaming down my face, washing away the swamp grime that was embedded into my skin.

"That's a tempting offer, but no. When the binding takes place, you'll beg me regardless. You'll do whatever I want, why don't you understand that?"

"Please stop hurting them! They're all I have left!"

"No, you have me. I'm your soul mate. You don't need anyone else."

I screamed into his face with a guttural growl that sounded distant and unknown. He really was going to take away everyone I loved.

My eyes searched the ground for anything and with one quick motion I grasped a slimy branch and smacked Anubis upside the head with it. And then I ran. I had to. I had to run. My heart ached with the loss of my friends and the pain of exertion. My lungs clenched as I breathed in more and more swamp air while my sides burned with acid because of the running. I don't know how far I ran when I felt a huge body collide with mine.

“Why,” he panted with strained breath, “do...you...insist...on running away!” He yelled violently as his hand broke my jaw. I couldn’t really feel the pain because adrenaline was still pumping through me, pushing me to fight or flight.

“Because I hate you!” I screamed into his face as my legs kicked him hard in the stomach. I may be on my back, but I can still hurt someone with my strong thighs.

Anubis groaned slightly and growled even more loud than I thought possible, “You will make me lose my patience, Anput. And you don’t want that.”

“Why not? What else could you possibly do to me? You’ve done everything you can to make my life miserable. So, what happens when you lose your patience? Huh? You kill, who? There’s no one else to take from me. You’ve already promised to bind me so that I’ll freely give you blowjobs, so what else are you going to do to me? What else *can* you do to me?”

Anubis didn’t say anything, he just stared at me with those deep, intense gold eyes.

“That’s what I thought. Your threats are meaningless because you can’t do anything else to me,” I said shaking my head and feeling a few tears run down my cheeks. I wasn’t trying to be threatening, but it’s difficult to look tough when you’re crying.

“Oh, Anput,” he replied with a delicate smile quivering on those sharp teeth, “this is why I love you. In the face of danger, you still bite back.”

“You don’t know what love is.”

“Ha! I followed you for thousands of years, killed everyone you loved just so that I could have to myself. If that’s not love, then I don’t know what is.”

“Exactly, you really don’t. You actually believe that making my life miserable will endear you to me, that all my leftover love will be yours. That’s not how it works.”

Another smack bellowed through the air, burning my cheeks and my already broken jaw. I could feel a few of my own sharp teeth explode onto the ground, ripping out gums and plenty of juicy, stringy blood. It was difficult enough to talk, yet alone breathe.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Anput.”

“One more thing,” I said spitting out more crimson trails through swollen lips and cheeks, “My name is not Anput.”

I think its despair that causes someone to really and truly fight back because I was filled with it. I had just run away from watching Matt and Sheila tear apart the Hunter and Shirley, I had just run away from my were-family that were under the control of Anubis, I had just run away from my fears and my nightmares. And I think that’s why I was angry because I was filled with my own cowardice and despair.

Anubis had started this, but I could finish this. Instead of wallowing in that same pitiful despair, I would use it against him. Take back the power and shove it in his broken jawed dog face.

I pulled my legs together once more and kicked with everything I had. Anubis went flying backwards for a split second before he was back on top of me as another shotgun blast echoed across the dimming night.

“How many times do I have to shoot him?” yelled the Hunter from across a broken log.

“Morty,” I replied with a smile, finally feeling despair wash away and instead

joyful relief come crashing on top of me, “he’ll be back.”

“I know, let’s just get out of here. We need to regroup. Shirley is keeping the other wolves at bay for now, giving us a few moments to make a new plan,” he said pulling me up to my legs. I was so much bigger than him in wolf form and his broken arm trembled under the pressure. Through my broken jaw and split lips, I smiled. It was so good to see him again. I bent over him and placed my muzzle into the nape of his neck. It was still such a perfect fit.

I heard his blood softly flowing directly under the skin and I felt safe just as I had when he had first held me at Charlie’s apartment. I listened closely to his pulse and then I heard the crunching of bones and knew Anubis was growing his head back.

“I don’t know how to defeat him,” I said begrudgingly.

“I can only keep shooting him for so long until I run out of bullets. And honestly, I don’t want to do that forever.”

I chuckled, “yeah, I agree.”

I should be more afraid, more frightened that an immortal god could regenerate his head and that he might never stop chasing me, but I wasn’t. With the Hunter by my side, as my partner, nothing could stand against us which is a reassuring thought. And that’s why I had chuckled. I knew we would prevail, I just didn’t know how.

Another shotgun blast echoed in the silent swamp and Anubis fell to the ground again. I still nuzzled into the Hunter’s neck as the feeling in my jaw returned. It throbbed miserably and I sorely wished adrenaline was back in my veins. But it was gone. Probably for awhile. My body was left weary and tired and in pain. And the fight wasn’t over. Not by a long shot.

But there were two things that were making me feel better; the Hunter was alive and well, and that I was at one with my beast and the Entity. I wasn’t torn apart by all of these powers, instead, I was symbiotic and whole and for that, I should probably thank Anubis, after of course, he’s six feet under or whatever.

My ear twitched and I heard a few soft paw prints make their way towards us. The padding of the feet was too gentle and quiet to be a wolf; it sounded more like a cat with the delicate steps and quiet grace. I pulled out of the strengthening embrace of the Hunter and searched the darkness. Through the black night I saw two bright golden eyes stalking in my direction. They were taller than I had expected them to be. I had thought it was a cat, but the creature was about as tall as myself. For a slight second, I panicked, wondering if Anubis had another werewolf like himself when the oddest thing happened. The eyes dropped close to the ground and the black cat from my apartment was inching nearer.

Perhaps I had a concussion because that was just unnatural watching something shrink right before my eyes and yet I just accepted it as if nothing had happened.

The Hunter turned to look in my direction and asked, “Is that the cat that kept tapping on your windows?”

“Yeah. It jumped in the car when I came over here,” I replied slowly, still a little bit confused as to what had just happened.

I heard the crunching of bones again and knew Anubis was regenerating his head again, taking my eyes away from the cat. I saw the red meat and white bone form together once more and I had to wonder if that hurt to regenerate a full head like that. I hope it hurts.

“Morty, why aren’t you shooting him again?” I asked.

“I don’t think I should.”

“Why not?”

“Because I cannot punish a body without a head,” the cat said in a very feminine voice.

“Did you hear that?” I asked the Hunter. I was seriously hoping I wasn’t going insane again.

“Yeah.”

A talking cat. Well, I guess anything is possible especially after that whole shrinking thing.

The small domestic cat crackled and moaned as a slight breeze twisted the heavy mud into the air, shaking the ground beneath my feet. The cat grew out of the mud and into a large black, were-cat, part human and part cat just like the ancient Egyptian statues.

“My name is Bast,” the cat creature said, “It is my duty to keep Anubis in check.”

## Chapter Twenty Eight

Bast towered over us like a giant in a field of ants. She was at least three feet taller than Anubis and more lean rather than muscular. She had grown into a cat, walking with unnatural ease for a human, stalking like a cat about to pounce.

She was smooth, and no longer black. Instead, her body had changed into light beige, resembling a lioness instead of a domestic cat turned large and statuesque.

Her eyes were the color of a stormy sea, frothy with anger and intelligence. Her blue eyes could penetrate even the strongest of emotional armor leaving a person weak and vulnerable.

She had an array of light brown and dark streaks running through a mane that surrounded her head like a halo. Her hair lightly rested on a necklace that was blue, red, and yellow and had gold cat figurines hanging like pendants or rather like a charm bracelet.

Across her ankles and wrists more jewelry could be found. She looked like an ancient picture of Egypt come to life or like a statue in a history museum. Bast was the epitome of an Egyptian goddess; time had not changed her appearance. Perhaps there was more to her and more to Anubis than just the were-forms. Granted, were-animals live unnaturally long lives, but living for a few thousand years is not a quality of being a were-animal.

Bast stood facing Anubis and I couldn't help but compare the two. She was the complete opposite of Anubis; he was thick and masculine, she was agile and quick; he was dark with bright gold eyes that left a person haunted, she was light with dark blue eyes that spoke of experience and understanding.

I instantly wanted to run into her arms and just be held. Regardless of her size, she felt so maternal, so caring, so loving that I couldn't help myself. I wanted to be near her. Her power rushed on me like none that I had ever felt before, it wasn't strength that echoed on those orange curly-cues, no, it was love and knowledge. If she had been the one to curse me as a were-animal, I think I would have been happy. She just felt like a caring mother, like someone who would love you even if you failed. And as she stood there glaring at Anubis, I wanted to run to her side and protect her from the monster eying her so keenly. He was dangerous and he could probably hurt her.

Bast grinned with beautiful, sharp fangs in my direction, "No, sweetheart, he cannot."

Okay, this is the third time I have had a conversation with Bast in my head. I wondered only slightly if she could read minds, because that would be a cool power and not only that, but that would be creepy.

"I apologize, then, Ms. Sophia Morgan," she replied again and then turned back into the staring contest with Anubis.

So, she really can read minds. Creepy. And cool. It was cool because she knew exactly what I was thinking and very creepy that she could probe into my mind like that, it was almost as if she was trespassing on my inner most thoughts. My large black paws

squeezed onto Morty's and he moaned just a bit as I accidentally broke his pinky. I wanted to apologize but I was just so dumbfounded by the two idols that were standing before me. I may hate Anubis, but one thing is for sure, he is breath-taking. And so is Bast.

"Anubis," she said to him with a nod.

"Bast," he replied curtly, lowering his head just a tad, preparing for to jump.

"I think you know why I'm here."

"I have done nothing wrong," he snapped back now pacing slowly in front of her, "and even if I have, what are you going to do about it?"

"I have followed you for too long Anubis; there is much I could do to you."

I had to know what exactly what was going on. If my brain hadn't already exploded from the fact that Anubis, the Egyptian god of the dead created my wolf for me, then the fact that Bast was standing here as well should surely turn my brain into mush, "What's going on? Why are you here, Bast?" I said breaking the silent wall in front of me.

"I would have thought you would be more appreciative, considering I just saved your life. But you are quite curious, which is an interesting trait for someone who is not a cat."

"I'm sorry, it's just that..."

"You are confused, and rightly so," she walked towards me with her otherworldly legs and then glanced back at Anubis, "Sit. Stay. Good boy."

Anubis growled more fiercely than I had ever heard him before. He was beyond angry, more annoyed that he was being caged, being told what to do rather than independent enough to carry out his plans. If I wasn't still horrified that I was in a swamp and bleeding profusely, I wouldn't have laughed at the idea that a cat was telling a dog what to do. But still he remained in her sight, pacing and growling, thinking of his next move. I could feel him thinking, feel his anger as it bit on my skin, slapping me uncontrollably. As soon as Bast came nearer, his power slipped away. She was like cold water on a hot day, refreshing and desperately wanted. Her power was so much different from Anubis'. Although, I don't know how.

"There is so much for you to know," she continued, "But it is not for me to say. The only reason I am here, is for Anubis, and for him alone."

"Ha!" Anubis yelled into the sky, "there is nothing you can do to me."

The puddles of water beneath me splashed at my feet as the sky itself turned into a dark purple. The air grew heavy and harsh, pushing me to my knees. I felt Morty fall beside as his breathing grew more rapid.

"What's happening?" he whispered to me.

"Power," I said nearly choking on my words, "Power." I had felt his power before but nothing like this. He could paint the sky with his strength, render it his own.

"Hmm," replied Bast pushing her soft yet sharp power back towards him. It wasn't heavy, yet it bit delicately into my skin and the sun nearly rose. I could see the soft haze of orange splatter through the sky as Bast took a small inhale and slightly closed her eyes, "so why do you listen to my commands, like a good little boy?"

"How dare you?" he snapped in her direction and stepped just a foot closer to her body. The power and strength were exuding from both of them, clashing and strangling me. I wanted to breathe, but I couldn't. Their power had tied its hands around me and



squeezed. I felt my tongue lop out as I tried pointlessly to swallow, to inhale but all I could do was fall further to the ground. If Anubis had this kind of power, they why hadn't he used it on me before? Did he hold himself back for me?

"Don't even try it, Anubis," she hissed into the gathering haze of the swamp and released just a little bit more power into the air, releasing my throat from the grasp of Anubis. Anubis was barely ten feet from me and yet his power had nearly choked me to death. He had been holding back and Bast had saved me. I guess she was right; I should have been more appreciative.

"Let me tell you a story of the past thousand years that I've wasted my life on. You will stay put and listen to everything I have to say, because on that point, you owe me!"

She glanced back at Morty and I and for the slightest of seconds, I knew she didn't care one way or the other about what fate remained for us; she was just here for revenge, "If you want to listen, then I guess curling up on the swamp floor isn't the best way."

We had all spilt blood and anger for what? A thousand year old revenge between two ancient gods? I lost so many people and now she was taking away my triumph, my victory. I felt Morty squeeze my paw as he lifted me up, and instantly I didn't need a victory, because I had already won.

I wasn't sure if the cat goddess had come to save us or not and even then, she was being petty. Just kill Anubis already. Let us leave in peace.

I managed to bend down on my shaking knees and I felt my jackal body curl up around the Hunter. I was still in wolf-form because if I changed back now, I would probably need several stitches for the gashes in my back that and I didn't really know where my human body was or if I even needed it.

"Well, Sophia, there is one thing you should know first, I'm not your rescuer," she said, "I'm here out of revenge. I followed you because I knew Anubis would chase you. How did I know Anubis would chase you? I was there when Anput first left Anubis with her bodyguard, I was too late when Sarah, more commonly known as Red Riding Hood left Anubis for the wood cutter and now I am here, watching as the newest version of his obsession runs off with a Hunter," she turned back to stare at Anubis. I felt his power boil under his skin like a volcano about to erupt but I could also feel his fear, trembling deep within his heart, if it could be called that. He was horrified of Bast and knowing that this insane monster feared her, made me fear her just a little bit as well. She was only a cat though, how could she hurt a dog?

"I am so glad I have found you, Anubis. Did you know I was turned into a moon goddess by the Greeks rather than a goddess of the sun because I had to stalk you at night?" Her hand came clawing down through the air and slashed at his newly regenerated muzzle. She didn't have to touch him, her power alone ripped straight into him. No wonder fear was preying on his heart, she was strong and if I haven't used this word enough, powerful. Anubis whined just a bit and then snapped into the air chipping a few of his teeth but he didn't do anything to her, instead she had just stepped back and thrust a wall of blue curly-cues in front of her. I suppose I could call the curly-cues magic or power, but I've felt too much of that power to keep lingering on it, I already felt as if the sky was falling on top of me.

"Everything," she hissed, "everything about me changed when I began to hunt

you. You are the abomination of ancient Egyptian society and you were given so much for it; we left you alone to rule over the dead, the mummification process and even the orphans. But that wasn't good enough. No, you wanted to be more than the face of Death, you wanted more followers than Ra, so you created Anput as your partner. You stole my womb to make her! You stole my womb!" she cried loudly into the early morning sky and a few rays of light gleamed down upon her. She took in another breath as a slight, chilling breeze danced around her, "You were a fool to do that to me! She had my traits as well. She carried my scorn and my hatred for you and to this day she still does. You cannot involve her any longer in your obsession because I have finally found you. And where I go, Ra will know. He will be upon you and punish you justly for the slaughter you caused so many thousands of years ago."

Wait, what? Did she just say Anput was created from her? Isn't Anput supposed to be me? This is all happening way too fast. I need to slow all of this down. I'm still trying to get over my loss of Billy, Charlie, Clyde, and my parents, I really don't need something else that's completely insane to make an appearance.

With my paw for a hand I grabbed hold of the Hunter's hand and just held it tightly. I wanted something natural, something real because too much was going on. I needed an anchor for this conversation and fortunately enough for me, the Hunter wouldn't let me go.

Bast didn't linger on that groundbreaking sentence, though, she continued straight on like it wasn't news that could shatter a person's frame of mind, it was just a statement, "Instead of chasing a woman who will never love you, I would begin to chase my freedom by running as far away as I possibly could. Ra will be here within a heartbeat, so I would start running. And remember, when he catches you, I will be waiting to exact my revenge."

Anubis' bright gold eyes trembled under the weight of those words. He looked so pathetic compared to Bast. He was truly a coward. For a moment, I felt sorry for him. He was mortified of his consequences. I suppose I should be rejoicing, but I guess it's difficult to rejoice in someone else's pain. Or maybe, I'm human, that I'm not a monster because only a monster would find joy in pain.

"Run, Anubis, I want to see you run!" she growled.

And with that statement, Anubis took off. I felt his power ebb through the swamp until I could no longer smell the soft scent of rosemary and sage, all I could smell was icky swamp which was a relief. It's odd that I would rather smell decaying logs than spices, but I guess when bad experiences are associated with certain smells, it tends to put one off.

"Ra and I," she began adopting that loving and caring disposition that she carried so well, "do apologize for the misery that Anubis has caused you. He will be punished for his crimes."

"What will happen to him?" I asked finally standing on my own two feet still clutching onto the Hunter's hand as best I could.

"He will return to Duat and perform his sacred rituals of which he has left vacant for many, many years."

"What are his sacred rituals?" I don't know why I was curious about Anubis and what would happen to him, as much as I hate to admit this, he was a big part of me, a big part of my life. He had created both Anput and my beast so I guess I just wanted to know

that he was out of my life for good, that I wouldn't have to deal with him anymore. I needed closure for all the pain he had caused me and I needed answers as to why.

"He weighs the hearts of man to determine who is good and who is evil."

"Wait," I interrupted, "he decides who's good and bad? Seriously? He's a monster! He's killed countless in his search for me and he's the one that decides who goes to heaven and hell?"

"*He* doesn't decide," Bast replied with a sigh filled with annoyance, "he compares the weight of their soul with a feather. Sins weigh much. All Anubis does is observe the scales."

"Oh," I said.

"But with a feather?" spoke the Hunter, which instantly set me at ease, it was so good to hear his voice, "It seems as if no one's soul would be as light as a feather."

"It is no ordinary light feather and you shouldn't worry about the weight of your own soul. Neither of you. Your actions here tonight have proven your humanity and justice. There is no need for you fret upon the afterlife. Nor should you worry about your lost friends and family. They have been sent to the fields of Aaru, or in your terms, heaven. You should rejoice that in death as in life, they are happy still."

"So, they're happy?" I asked.

"Truly. I know you would rather have them here with you, but take solace in knowing they are at peace."

"But wait, if they're in heaven, then what about reincarnation?"

She sighed again, clearly annoyed with the ignorance of humans, "Reincarnation isn't instant, my dear, when one person dies they don't just rush into the baby being born. No, these things take time and honestly, I'm not here to discuss ancient religion with you. I'm only here to take down Anubis and now that I have found him..."

"So, you only saved me because it was in your own interest?"

"Yes."

"Wow, I didn't realize gods could be so petty."

"Dear, I'm an ancient mythological goddess and if you've ever read anything on old gods, then you would know that your interests are always secondary compared to ours. That's just the way it is."

"So, the climax to all this fighting and death," interrupted Morty, "is that a Goddess won the fight but she doesn't give a damn about anyone's lives? That our suffering means nothing to you?"

"Being grim doesn't become you," she replied stiffly.

"But earlier you mentioned that Anput came from your womb..." I said, "shouldn't you care about your...child?"

"Yes, Anubis stole my womb to create you, his feminine counterpart. As a goddess of fertility he knew, by using my womb, his creation would not fail."

"Does that make you Anput's mother?"

"In a way, I suppose..."

"Then why wouldn't you want to save me?"

"I wanted revenge more than I wanted you. You were just a means to an end. I hate Anubis, he stole my womb and my life. And he will be dealt with."

I couldn't help but feel rejected once more. It's amazing how people, even gods, can make a person lose what confidence they have gained.

“Bitch,” Morty said, “How can you be so callous?”

“Hmph,” she took in another deep inhale and I felt that soft sensation of cold wind slither around my fur, “Oh, Anput, I would have saved you regardless of my vengeance. You are a part of me and as such, I could never ignore you nor throw you to the wolves, so to speak. What both of you have done tonight, what your friends and family have done, has been miraculous. You should be proud of what kind of people you are. Few humans can stand against a god and live to tell the tale.”

She turned her bright blue eyes to the Hunter and said, “Ba-Pef, you are still so ornery and yet it is good to see you again. You were once my favored bodyguard but I asked you to protect Anput and I see you have. You two have a bond that will last forever, I believe that sounds clichéd, but you will always find each other and you will always love each other in this life and the next.”

Several loud howls erupted from the distance and both the Hunter and I stood at full attention. I had completely forgotten that there was still fighting going on and I guess, the Hunter had forgotten as well.

So much had happened that I wasn’t even paying attention to people who should matter to me, “What of the wolves? What of the people that have been turned into beasts?” I asked.

“They are yours; of course, you only need to command them.”

“Will they ever...?”

“No, they will never be human again. Anubis has taken that from them.”

I wanted to cry for the lost humanity, to shed a tear for all of the loss and suffering, but I knew that I shouldn’t because if I did, I wouldn’t be taking care of what remained.

“A part of Anubis lives within you as he is your father, your maker. Just say the word and they will obey you. You can still make their lives happy and meaningful.”

“I just say “stop fighting” and they will?”

“Believe in yourself as you have always believed in yourself and they will follow.”

I closed my eyes and felt deeply for my wolf and the Entity that resided in me. I needed to be whole, to be complete, before I could truly become myself, “but, what about the Entity, what is that?”

“That is me. I was a Protector of the ancient Egyptians, I saw trouble before it manifested. The gift of sight is my trait, please accept it and use it well. With both of your supernatural abilities, you should be able to make the world a better place. You only need to become one with those abilities.”

“But it’s not easy to tell the cops what I’ve seen...”

“You don’t have to. You are partnered with a Hunter, a bodyguard, he can be of help.”

“I know I’m asking a million questions here, but what exactly is Shirley?”

She smiled delicately with her cat lips and said, “that is not for me to say. Perhaps you should ask her yourself.”

“Okay, but what...”

“No more questions,” she swallowed deeply and her face looked pained as she said, “my child... in time you will learn everything you need. For now, I must go and return to my duties.”

“But why don’t we see too many were-cats?”

“There is no such thing as a werecat. If you think you see one, it was not created by me. Most likely it is a curse or a demon. Werewolves were made by Anubis, but he was a mere Frankenstein, he wanted to create an army to overthrow Ra. Of course he failed in his attempt, but werewolves can still be found throughout the world.”

She walked slowly towards me, muscles and bones moving at odd angles, “I hope to one day see you again, and perhaps I shall. But I will no longer worry for you because you are strong, capable, and loving. And let’s not forget, you have a love that will span the ages. Goodbye, Anput-Sarah-Sophia Morgan of Anubis and Bast, until we meet again.”

“Wait...”

In a flash of light and silent meow she disappeared into the dim swamp. I had so many more questions I wanted to ask but as soon as I looked to Morty, Shirley came running through the thicket with a few wolves on her tail.

“Damon! You promised me this would never happen again!” She yelled halting to take a stand, black guns dancing in the faint light, facing the wolves with eyes so fierce I knew she would never stop fighting them.

“Stop!” I yelled into the throng of ravenous mouths and bloody claws and now it was my turn to feel my own power swirl throughout the sky and into the wilderness of the swamp. It was nothing like Anubis’; it didn’t bite, it didn’t sting, instead it whipped around everyone as a cool hale on an autumn day. All at once, the pack stopped and faced me, their eyes confused and glistening, “She’s a friend, and we’re friends here.”

A few of the older, bloodier ones came padding towards me, licking my hands and nuzzling closer to my legs. They knew that I would protect them, they could feel my love and caring for them in my power. I wasn’t mean and callous like Anubis; instead I would forever care for them as a mother cares for his children. They were my wolves, they were my pack. I felt two soft nudges on the backs of my knees and both Sheila and Matt looked up towards me with their very amber wolf eyes. I knew that they had only recently changed so their human bodies should still be intact and ready to be eaten. At least they would return and live life normally.

As I looked over the several wolves, I finally noticed that Billy’s animal wasn’t here. I don’t know why I didn’t look before, I guess I was just lost in all the fighting and confusion, but why wasn’t he here? Where was he?

“Well, that was easy,” Shirley said, interrupting my stupor, “so, you’re queen of the wolves now?”

“I don’t think they’ll all fit into your one bedroom condo,” Morty replied with a slight smile on his face.

“Yeah, I guess not,” I replied still lost and wondering where the hell Billy was. I needed to find him. He was my safety partner, he had always looked out for me and it was my turn to look out for him.

“What’s wrong,” Morty asked looking intently at my worried face.

“Billy’s not here.”

The Hunter turned around in place and looked at Shirley, “did you see him?”

“No. He wasn’t in that warehouse they kept me,” she replied.

I brought my paw up to my face and realized I was still in wolf-form, that I couldn’t wipe the tears from my face without my claws digging into my skin. Where was

Billy? What had Anubis done with him?

“Don’t worry, Sophie, we’ll find him,” said Morty, “I am a Hunter. This is what I do.”

“Yeah...yeah, this is what you do. And I’ll be able to help you this time. Bast left me a gift, and I will use it to find Billy.”

“That’s right, we will find him. If he’s not here, then most likely he is still alive.”

I nodded and smiled. It was the first bit of good news that I had heard in awhile. Billy was still, probably, okay. I didn’t have hard proof that he was, but I knew in my heart that he would be fine and that we would find him, it was only a matter of time.

And just as Bast had said, “with the Hunter at my side, I could accomplish anything,” which is nice to know.

I finally looked at myself in wolf-form and looked at the Hunter standing at least two feet shorter than myself and I had to laugh for just an instant. It’s pretty comical seeing werewolf holding hands with a Hunter.

“So what now?” asked Shirley, more towards the Hunter than myself but I answered anyway.

“Honestly, I want to do something normal, like go grocery shopping. This whole thing has been weird,” I said.

“Grocery shopping sounds good. You know, I can make a terrific steak,” said Morty.

“Mmm, steak.”

I took his firm hand and began the walk back through the swamp with fifteen werewolves following at my heels. Even though my life had changed dramatically over the course of a few days, many new positive events had happened making me stronger and better. I grew through my adversity, through my loss into someone I could be proud of. And as the sun rose on the mucky swamp, I was truly happy.

I looked at the Hunter and wanted to tell him how much I loved him, but he already knew, after all, we had always loved each other. Instead I asked something that had been plaguing me for the last few days, “So, why exactly is your hat lucky?”

### Epilogue

It has been over three months since Billy went missing and neither myself, Morty, or Shirley have found any leads; it's almost as if he disappeared off the face of the Earth. But I will never give up on my best friend because I know he is still alive somewhere, I just know it deep in my heart that Billy is waiting for us.

It's so aggravating and upsetting to find neither hide nor hair of him but I keep busy and try to keep focused. My client list is continually full and my clues and predilections keep Morty and Shirley busy saving lives. It is very comforting to know that some good has come out of all the bad...

As for Morty and myself, well, he is my soul mate. He is the best thing that has ever happened to me. He loves me dearly in the way that he always has, in this life and the next. When Morty is around, I never worry because I know that, together, we can accomplish anything.