

ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT

CRICKET STARR



Bad Dog and the Babe

Cricket Starr

A Hollywood After Dark book.

Al isn't happy when a beautiful, upper-class werewolf female in heat struts into his bar looking for her underage sister. Barbara is trouble, proving it when a riot breaks out over the right to mate her, although he can't complain when he ends up taking her to bed instead.

Barbara needs Al to keep her heat under control while she searches for her sister but there can't be anything permanent between them. She might be attracted to Al's "Bad Dog" persona but she knows he isn't the right wolf for her. Too bad he's so good at scratching that pesky itch she has at the moment—although she really wishes he'd stop calling her Babe.

Lots of werewolf sex and encounters with vampires, spellcasters and other parafolk lie in their future—just another busy weekend in Hollywood After Dark.

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Bad Dog and the Babe

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BAD DOG AND THE BABE

Cricket Starr

Dedication

This one is for my grandmother, who I would never in a hundred years let read this book but I know she's proud of me for writing it anyway.

Love, Janet

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Lexus: Toyota Jidosha Kabushiki Kaisha TA Toyota Motor Corporation

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Chapter One

Of all the gin joints in the world she has to walk into mine.

Favorite movie quote still in mind, Albert Lupas—better known as Al to his friends—stared as the most beautiful werewolf bitch he'd ever laid eyes on finished closing the front door. He couldn't take his eyes off her any more than the other poor saps in the bar. Beautiful she was, but that didn't begin to cover it. She had tawny hair forming a corona around her face and delicate features proclaiming her aristocracy, a slender nose and perfectly shaped mouth with lips he wanted to lick.

Her looks didn't end at her face. Her haute-couture tailored suit couldn't hide her body's lush curves...in fact it was possible it wasn't intended to do so. She'd probably had the garment made special to skim over the firm jutting of her heavy breasts and tweak in at her waist.

She had to be rich. He knew money spent when he saw it and unless he missed his guess the purse she had slung over her shoulder was the same as one he'd seen in his aunt's shop a couple of weeks ago. The cost of it alone was more than most of the werewolves in his bar made in two months.

Rich, beautiful and with a body for sex—she was ripe. Lush. Filet mignon.... She was choice, prime and more—she was perfect.

Al licked his lips and appreciated the view but frowned. Whoever this beauty was, she had absolutely no business in his place of business. The clientele of the Dog House were shapeshifters of the beer and kibble-out-of-a-bag sort, not those who were used to fine wine and thin crackers topped with freshly made liver pâté. If ever there was a lady who should be sipping champagne, she was it. So what was she doing here?

Whatever it was it meant trouble, he'd bet his last T-bone on it.

For a moment she blinked in the darkness, then she moved toward the bar with an assurance he couldn't believe she felt. She had to know she was slumming and unless she was terminally stupid she should be at least a little nervous. The quick glances she made right and left as she approached told him she wasn't stupid. She knew she was out of place.

Heads turned as she came closer and noses went up. In the darkness, Al saw multiple eyes glow with intent masculine interest, particularly those nearest her.

Uh-oh. Something else is afoot. Moving from behind the bar, Al headed to intercept her. As soon as he got close he caught her scent and realized what more was wrong than a high-class piece of meat slumming.

She was in early heat. Al suppressed the urge to groan even as his cock responded to her scent. Two to three times a year an unmated werewolf bitch's sexual need went

into overdrive, making her irresistible to any unmated male in her vicinity, and he was no exception. It was early yet...she wouldn't feel the full effects for another day or so, plus unless he missed his guess she'd taken some kind of suppressor intended to cut down on the pheromones she was pumping into the air. His experienced nose told him that. But even so she had no business being out in public, particularly not in his place.

The Friday night crowd was well into their second and third rounds of the evening's drinking and feeling frisky. A bitch in heat was all that was needed to start some kind of festivity and he doubted she was looking for that kind of attention.

At least he hoped she didn't want it. She seemed too fine to be cruising a low-class bar for a gangbang. But no, that couldn't be her purpose. Otherwise why had she bothered with the suppressor?

She clearly didn't want to be in heat, but what she'd taken wasn't working as well as she probably thought it was and with this crowd a fight over her could break out any minute. He had to get her out of here.

Al grabbed her arm. Startled, she stared at him and for a moment he couldn't breathe. Her eyes were that rare blue-green that very few werewolves could claim and up close they shone clear as a deep-woods pond.

"What do you want?" she asked.

You – doggy-style, he thought, but he didn't repeat it aloud. "Come to the back. We need to talk."

She resisted his pull. "Why should I?"

Al leaned close and whispered into her ear. "Because, princess, if you don't I'll toss you over my shoulder and carry you there."

Her gaze flew to his face and those blue-green eyes locked with his. There was something inside those depths. She was shocked by his comment...but something in her liked it as well. Al revised his opinion of her again. The lady did have a bad side to her.

Even so, as she followed him to his office, she growled at him. "Don't call me princess."

He opened the door and thrust her inside, directing her into a chair. "What should I call you then?"

With surprising strength she pulled out of his grip and crossed her arms across her chest. "My name is Barbara Grisloup. You can call me Ms. Grisloup."

Grisloup? Aw, hell. He knew that name. One of the five families that made up shapeshifter aristocracy was named Grisloup. If she was one of them, she wasn't just out of his league but in a whole different ballgame.

Still he grinned at her. "We don't use a lot of formalities in this part of town. Barbara—" He shook his head. "No, wait. You don't seem like a Barbara to me. Maybe Barbie, or Bambi?" Then he snapped his fingers. "Naw, you aren't any of those. A beauty like you should have a name that matches. Babe...that's what I'll call you. That's what you are—a real babe. I'm Al Lupas, owner and head dog of the Dog House. You

can call me Al or Bad Dog if you like." He suppressed a chuckle at her outraged expression.

"I'll call you nothing of the sort—and don't call me Babe!"

Ignoring her remark, he sat on the edge of the desk. "What are you looking for, Babe? Trouble? If so, you've found it."

"What business is it of yours?"

"Because this is my place and an unmated werewolf bitc...I mean lady," he corrected himself at her sharp glance, "particularly one in heat, can't help but be trouble. If I hadn't gotten you out of that room there would have been all kinds of fighting for the right to mate you."

Her blush extended from her cheeks to her neck. Pink looked good on her. "I'm not in heat..."

Al shook his head. "Oh yes you are. Any unmated male shapeshifter could smell it once they got close enough. You've used some kind of drug to suppress it but that's only helped a little. I can tell and so can most of the other men here. You're in heat and in a bar you most likely wouldn't be caught dead in normally. Either you're looking for someone like me to scratch that itch of yours—and if so, why take the suppressor—or something else has driven you into my lair. What's the story?"

"What makes you think I'd be interested in having you 'scratch my itch'?"

Al stood up and leaned over her, filling his nose with that cock-teasing scent of hers. Already half-hard, his cock rose to fill the front of his jeans. Even with the suppressor messing with her reactions, he knew she must be aware of just how turned on he was.

From the way her breath caught, she'd received the message. Al let her see the bad dog he was, ready to push her over the table, pull up that tailored skirt of hers and plow into her swollen pussy. She was ripe and ready. The babe was in need and he was just the dog to fuck her to satisfaction.

Babe's eyes widened and her irises expanded until the blue was only a sliver around the edge. She licked her lips and he wondered if she weren't actually thinking of letting him have his wicked way with her. His body tensed, ready to do just that.

She turned her head and pushed on his chest. "I'm not here for sex. I'm looking for my sister."

"Your sister?" Al allowed her to push him away, withholding the urge to swear. His irritation was for more than the pull back from imminent sex. That's all he needed, two high-class bitches hanging out in his joint.

"Older or younger?" Older, he hoped.

"Yes. Tammy. She's younger...she isn't even drinking age."

"Fuck!" he said, ignoring Babe's shocked expression. This was getting worse and worse. He had an underage werewolf princess slumming? That kind of thing could get

a man in real trouble with the werewolf aristocracy, something he most certainly didn't want.

"Are you nuts? You risked coming into a shapeshifter bar while in heat, just to find your sister? What makes you think that she's here?"

Babe all but wrung her hands. "Tammy's kind of wild. Hangs out with people other than shapeshifters, like nightwalkers and psis instead of her own kind. She's into movies. Loves the beach and even likes to surf."

That caught Al by surprise. Werewolves weren't known for their swimming abilities. For one to take up a sport that required paddling about in the ocean was nearly unheard of. "That must make your folks happy," he said sarcastically.

Babe shrugged. "She generally avoids our parents when she's at home. Even so, up until lately she didn't normally stay away overnight," she said, her voice worried.

"But she has now."

"Yes. Last few weeks she's been gone nearly the whole night but she'd come back in the morning. But a few days ago she had a fight with our dad and she left and didn't return. She's been missing for three days and my folks are frantic. I finally searched her room to see if I could find anything about where she'd been or whom she's been hanging out with. I found this."

She handed him a matchbook and Al knew why she'd shown up in his place. The familiar symbol of a doghouse with a full moon decorating its side filled the front flap. He handed it back to her. "So she had a matchbook from my place."

"So, she's most likely been in here. She collects stuff like matchbooks."

"Does she." He contemplated that for a moment. The matchbook was unused and from a recent batch he'd ordered—he could tell based on the slight change to the design. She'd been here in the past week or so. "Do you have a picture of her?"

Babe reached into her designer purse and pulled out a wallet-sized print, probably a school shot. The tawny-headed girl in the picture was a younger-looking version of Babe with a ponytail, pointed teeth and a mischievous smile. If Babe didn't belong in his place, this kid had even less business being here.

"I haven't seen her," Al told her. "But I have other interests I tend to so I'm not around all the time, and I stay by the bar when I am here. She might come in and sit toward the back where I wouldn't notice. She's over eighteen?" At Barbara's nod, he shrugged. "Then whoever did serve her wouldn't have kicked her out unless she ordered alcohol, and not even then if she has a fake ID."

"Which she might. She knows enough people who could get one for her."

Al had to admit that was right. Given that parafolk often needed false identification to change their names—or legal age, usually making it lower in the case of a hundred-year-old nightwalker—fake IDs were pretty easy to come by in their world. Tammy wouldn't be the first youngster to have taken advantage of that fact.

Al moved toward the door. "Okay, Babe. I don't want you out in the main room. You've got to stay here but I'll bring my people in one at a time and we'll see if someone's noticed her."

Barbara watched him go, her temper barely under control. *Of all the arrogant, insolent, overbearing, meatheaded...* There weren't enough words in her vocabulary to describe Al. All macho male, he acted as if she were crazy just to leave the house when in heat. She'd taken precautions. The suppressor was supposed to keep the symptoms under control...

Just then a flash of heat sped through her and landed in her pussy and she ached at the sensation. She wanted to moan and rub her crotch on the nearest long thick object.

What had been in Al's pants would have done nicely.

Babe flushed. Okay, so Al was overbearing and insulting but he was right. The suppressor wasn't working.

He also filled out the front of his jeans in rare fashion. She could almost see the veins on his cock pressed through the fabric. Even the black t-shirt he wore, emblazoned with the message "Biggest Bad Dog In Town", clung to his biceps and pecs in a way she hadn't noticed on a man before. The sight was—stimulating to say the least and she didn't need much stimulation in her current state.

For a moment back there she'd thought he'd been ready to throw her up against the wall and ravish her. Not rape—somehow even with the little she knew about him she didn't think Al would force an unwilling woman into sex. But any kind of action that he initiated would feel like ravishment. A really great ravishment.

Her pussy ached harder and her nipples tightened. Ravishment was sounding pretty good, even by a self-proclaimed "bad dog".

But she had her sister to think about. As stupid as Tammy sometimes behaved, Barbara didn't think she'd stay away this number of days on her own and that worried her. If Tammy was under someone's influence, particularly a male influence, then there could be all kinds of scandalous ramifications. With her mom's condition, the family couldn't afford any kind of shocking news.

Al was back in a moment with one of the men from behind the bar. He gave her a long look and licked his lips a few times, clearly tasting her scent in the air, but under Al's scrutiny he didn't make any moves on her. He looked at the picture and said he hadn't seen Tammy. The next man said the same thing, although he didn't react at all to her and she realized that he wasn't even a shapeshifter. Once he was gone Barbara stared in amazement at Al. "You hire norms?"

"Sure norms, psis and the occasional nightwalker. I hire who I need to get the job done." Al shrugged. "I've one more person here on duty. Let me get Reya."

The young woman was another shifter who looked at Barbara sympathetically. "Don't you just hate it when that season rolls around?" Barbara blinked until she realized the other woman was referring to her being in heat. Her cheeks heated again.

Reya shook her head. "Almost makes me want to take a mate, just to get it under control. So let me see this picture."

She studied the image and then grinned. "Hey, yeah, I know this kid. Comes in about twice a week, usually in the late afternoon, but always stays in the back corner booth. Just orders soda and hamburgers so I leave her alone." She looked at Barbara warily. "Why are you interested in her?"

"She's my little sister and she hasn't been home in the past couple of days. I'm so worried about her." Barbara let her desperation show in her face. "Please, have you seen her lately?"

Reya looked at her closely then nodded slowly. "Yes, I can see the resemblance. Okay then. She's been meeting her boyfriend here. I think he's a shifter but he isn't like any werewolf I've ever seen before. Has a real funny smell to him."

Barbara frowned. "A funny smell?"

"Yeah. Kind of fishy. Like he lives near the beach."

"In that case why wouldn't they meet someplace down there? Why would she meet him here?"

The waitress shrugged. "I think because we're convenient to the bus lines that run from Santa Monica. Every once in a while I see them at the bus stop together after I get off work."

"But Tammy has a car."

"Maybe he doesn't."

A budding romance with someone who couldn't afford a car, that's what her sister's big secret was? Barbara was so relieved she almost laughed. "Listen, next time you see her, you tell her I don't care who she dates, okay? I just need her to come home."

Reya's mouth stretched into a toothy grin and her eyes twinkled. "Oh, you can tell her yourself. I just served her and her friend in the back booth a few minutes ago."

Barbara blinked twice then in a flash was out of her chair and at the door. Behind her Al said "Wait..." but she tore down the hall and back into the bar, heading for the furthest reaches of the room.

"What's your hurry, doll?" A man blocked her path. He was big, hairy and oozed testosterone. Barbara tried to dodge around him but he was too large for her to push past without using her shifter power.

She stepped back and snarled at him. "Get out of my way."

He didn't budge. Instead another man came forward to join him. He too grinned leeringly at her, and she knew for certain that the suppressor wasn't doing a bit of good. Barbara looked around and everywhere men were getting to their feet, their eyes glowing with feral intent.

Suddenly Al was behind her. "Mine," he said over her shoulder, his tone inviting no argument. "I claimed her first." The men in front of her bristled and she could see them considering what to do. The rest hesitated and watched.

Al's arm went around her waist. "Don't argue, Babe," he said into her ear. "Just come along."

She leaned back into his strong body and didn't feel like protesting at all as he pushed her past the men now stepping away, apparently abandoning the field to Al.

"Let's go find your sister." Still holding her, Al pushed through the bar, giving low growls to the other men, keeping them at bay. She'd have suspected him of playacting the jealous lover but the truth was she felt that hard cock of his against her spine, proof enough that he was as attracted as any other man in the bar.

Only a mated werewolf would have been able to resist her charms and obviously very few of these guys had wives, anymore than the bad dog behind her.

The back of the room came into view and the back booth where her sister liked to hang out. Barbara saw a pair of heads poking up over the short divider, one clearly the tawny blonde of her sister, the other an even paler color.

Al's cock poked her harder and suddenly Barbara couldn't stand it any longer. She broke his hold on her and headed for the back.

A man at a nearby table grabbed her as she passed. "Looks to me like the lady wants another choice." Standing, he peered closely into her face while the smell of beer and dried dog food filled her nose. "You're a sweet thing to be down here. Looking for something one of the gentle set can't give you?"

Barbara didn't have time for this. "Let go of me," she whispered to him.

He just grinned harder. "Or what?"

Calling on her self-defense training, and adding her shapeshifter strength, she kneed the amorous werewolf in the groin and tossed his gasping body aside. Chaos resulted as every other man in the place dove either for her or out of the way. She could tell the mated ones as they tended to do the latter. The unmated ones began to fight each other when not grabbing at her. Three other men she had to treat similarly, and behind her she heard Al swearing and fighting his way through the crowd to her.

The two light-haired heads in the corner turned around and briefly Barbara saw her sister's face, shocked at the battle scene. Then she must have recognized her sister because she grabbed the man with her and they both headed for the back door of the bar.

Damn it! To get this close, only to lose them? Barbara fought harder to get through the crowd. She jumped to the top of a table and then fairly danced from one to another to get to the back. The pair disappeared through the door just moments before Barbara reached it.

Behind her Al caught up, a sleeve torn on his shirt but his face in a grin. "One thing about it, Babe, you sure are interesting to have around."

Pushing on the door, Barbara moved into the alley, Al right behind her. The door closed behind them, shutting out the sounds of werewolf growls, fists hitting flesh and crashing furniture.

It was dark but her shapeshifter eyes saw two figures running hand in hand to the end of the alley. They moved to a parked car Barbara recognized as Tammy's and jumped inside, her sister taking the driver's position. Barbara screamed after them but she doubted they heard her over the sound of the engine coming to life. Before she could get there the car shot forward and made a turn into the street beyond.

Barbara stood, gasping for breath. She shook with fear, anger, frustration and...and something else, something that was none of those things.

Al came up behind her, his voice soft in her ears. "Sorry you lost them, Babe."

Barbara turned to him, panting for breath. Hormones streamed through her, leaving her wet and wanting. Wanting hot sex with a man—any man would do.

Al was better than any man she'd seen in months.

The need to find Tammy had forced her to leave the safety of her home where she could have ridden out this heat the way she usually did, with a vibrator and her collection of erotic books and movies. She'd taken the suppressor pill hoping to delay the full effects until she could get home.

Between the stress of the battle and everything else, the suppressor was a mere memory. Barbara was hot and ready for a hard, fast screw. She'd find her sister and the man she'd been with but not now. What she needed was right in front of her and from his reaction to her earlier, Al wasn't going to need much persuasion.

She stepped closer to Al until bare inches separated them. She stared at him for a moment then leaned up to run her tongue over his lips. He tasted of hot man...hot werewolf man, primal and ready.

Al tensed. "Not good to tease."

"Not teasing," she managed to get out. "You like me, Bad Dog?"

His eyes brightened at the nickname. "Yeah. I like you."

"Then I think you better take me someplace and fuck me." Putting one arm around his neck she leaned up and kissed him, seeking more of that hot male taste. It was a hard kiss, and long, and when it ended he was breathing as fast as she was.

Al clutched her closer and she felt the hot hard length of him through his pants. "Yeah, Babe. I think that can be arranged."

Chapter Two

Al led the way to a door opening onto the alleyway, which he used a key to unlock. Inside were stairs leading upward. Barbara took them two at a time, Al hot on her heels. At one point she pulled off her high-heeled shoes and carried them, the better to make time up the stairway. The apartment Al directed her to was three stories up from the street, two above the bar. For a moment Barbara wondered what was on the second floor but her curiosity didn't survive Al unlocking the door to his apartment and her first glimpse of the inside.

For a bachelor it was relatively neat. That is, there were no empty beer bottles or cans lying around, or empty pizza boxes. The smell of the place wasn't obnoxious either. In fact, it pretty much smelled the way Al did...like a shapeshifter man loaded with testosterone.

Truthfully he smelled pretty good.

Dropping her shoes, Barbara pulled off her jacket and draped it over the back of the couch. She pulled her blouse out from where it was tucked into the skirt and began to unbutton it.

Al grabbed her hands and pulled them to her side. "Hey, wait a minute. Where's the fire?"

Inside me, she wanted to say. "I need you."

"I know, Babe, but I'm not going anywhere. Slow down, take some time. It will be better that way."

She didn't need it better—she needed it over with. "I have to find my sister and I can't the way I am."

A funny look crossed his face and she could swear he looked disappointed. "That the only reason you're here? To fuck me and get yourself under control so you can go out hunting again?"

Well, yes. But even she knew better than to say that aloud. Al might get angry enough to toss her out. She leaned into him, letting his rich male aroma fill her nose. She didn't want to leave—she craved him right now. When she gazed into his face she saw he wasn't unaffected by her either.

"Not the only reason...Al," she said, using his name for the first time. Reaching up, she ran her tongue across his lips. "I want you."

"I want you too. And I want it to last more than a few moments. Besides, you're not going to be satisfied with a fast fuck, not the way you are. At least three orgasms, or the relief won't even last until morning. You need it long and hard," he said, rubbing himself against her.

The feel of his cock through his pants made her moan. It was long and hard, just as he said.

Releasing her hands, Al pulled her into his arms. "I promise you I'll help you find your sister. I've got contacts around the city, even friends outside of the shapeshifter community. Give me the license plate of her car and we'll locate it for you. But later."

He ran his tongue along her lips just as she had his, and Barbara moaned at the tender caress. Al covered her mouth with his, kissing her and swallowing her cry. When she moaned again he took advantage to slide his tongue between her lips and taste the inside.

Pulling back, he stared into her eyes. "We've got time, Babe. Let's take advantage of it."

Barbara was in no mood to argue with Al's unhurried approach to lovemaking. He undid her shirt, using slow fingers to ease open the buttons, and by the time he was finished her breath was coming in short pants. He kissed her neck as he slid the silk blouse off her shoulders. For once Barbara was glad that she'd selected some of her more decorative underwear as the lacy bra was revealed.

Al fingered the edge of her bra cup and smiled. "Nice. I've always been fond of pink. Particularly *hot* pink." He emphasized the word "hot" in her ear and she shuddered. She was hot all right – hot and wet. The matching hot pink panties she wore were soaked already.

"I need you," she whispered.

"And you'll have me." Al said. "But not before we do this right."

He laid her blouse on the couch next to her jacket then worked loose the zipper on her skirt. That too was dropped on the couch. At least she thought that was what happened to it. She was distracted by Al nuzzling her neck, nipping and biting along the length and it made it hard to keep track of where her clothing was going.

She pulled on his shirt to remove it but apparently a seam had given way sometime during the fight downstairs. It ripped and Barbara ended up with the front of the black shirt in her hand.

She held it out to him, her face heated. "I'm so sorry..."

Al simply grinned. "Don't worry about it. I have a dozen just like it. Use them like a uniform when I'm working the bar." He leaned closer. "You can keep it as a souvenir."

Like she'd need such a thing to remember this experience.

He lifted her effortlessly and carried her through a door into what turned out to be a bedroom. Barbara gave a happy cry on seeing the bed. It was large...large enough for any of the sexual positions she was thinking of.

Trust the bad dog to have a great bed.

Laying her on the bed, he paused to pull off his shoes then slowly began to undo his belt. Barbara sat up. "Let me help."

He considered her for a moment. "Sure...but take it slow."

She did, using deliberate movements to undo the buckle and slide it open. Then she undid the buttons of his jeans, one at a time. Excitement rolled off him in waves as she worked, making her hands tremble. She forced them still to finish the job.

"Nice," he said in a husky voice as she finished and pulled the now undone pants off his hips. His underpants were taut underneath, clinging to and outlining his cock, already fully erect. It was an impressive sight and Barbara had to take a moment to admire him.

"You really are a big dog."

"Biggest in town," he said with a grin. "And the baddest...but not bad," he added quickly. "I know how to treat a lady."

He stroked her cheek and she had to admit that, so far, he really had been a gentleman, in spite of his rough looks. Still, some of the veneer fell away as she stroked his hard length through his underpants.

"Yeah. Like that, Babe." His voice was a rough growl. "You do that well."

"Good for a princess?"

He laughed, the sound of it roughening as she slid her hand under his waistband and caressed the smooth head of his cock. "Good for anyone. You've got talent."

"I'm glad you think so. Let's see what you think about this."

Pulling his cock into the open, Barbara gave it first one lick then another. Al sucked his breath in hard as she enclosed the tip in her mouth and slid her tongue around it. He tasted good. Amazingly good, even for a werewolf man, even given how much in heat she was. Barbara couldn't remember a man tasting as good as he did.

Al tasted special. And she loved it.

She loved filling her mouth with him, the sweet tang of his pre-cum on her tongue as he slid inside. It was intoxicating and exciting and she needed nothing to excite her. But somehow he did. He excited her when she didn't need it and that went above what she wanted. Scary in a way, and disturbing.

Barbara had never been afraid of a man before and she wasn't now. But she liked this one and that was interesting as well as scary.

Right now she was too much in need to think very hard about that but she knew she'd have to worry about it later. Fortunately there was something to keep her distracted.

Al's cock in her mouth and the way it tasted. Yummy.

She sucked harder and he grew harder and they seemed to be heading rapidly to a place that wasn't yet where she wanted to go. Barbara had needs and fun as sucking Al's cock was, it wasn't dealing with that ache between her legs, which wanted serious attention.

He pulled out of her mouth. "Come on, Babe. Make room on the bed for me."

Still wearing her underclothes, Barbara scooted over. Al slid onto the bed and reached for her. "You're wearing more clothes than I am. Not fair."

Sliding her bra straps off her shoulders, he revealed her breasts. "Damn, lady. You've got nice ones."

At least he didn't call them tits or boobs. And the way he touched her breasts, firmly with practiced fingers, made her forget that she was with a man far cruder than she usually hung around with.

But few of the men she knew were hung the way he was either. The big bad dog really had the equipment in the shape and size she craved. From the way he was using his hands on her, he seemed to have the experience to use it too.

Sex with Al was going to be great—she just knew it.

He was still keeping it slow though. She leaned into his hands, hoping to make him want to work faster. Al didn't take the hint, just kept up those long sure strokes of her nipples that drove her absolutely wild.

Just as she was about to complain he bent his head and caught her mouth with his. Another long and steamy kiss, all tongue and tasting. He nibbled at her lips and she forgot what she was going to grumble about. One hand left her breast, sliding down her front to where the waistband of her panties guarded her nether reaches.

The elastic gave easily and he slipped his hand inside. One finger, just one, slid between her folds and carefully found her clit. The slightest pressure and she exploded, her legs shaking beneath her. Barbara fell into Al and he held her to his chest as he gently stroked her through a monumental orgasm.

When she came down from the sensual heights he was cradling her, his voice a gentle murmur in her ear, words that sounded like nonsense until she made them out. "Like that, yes, like that."

She shuddered and he pulled his hand away, bringing the fingers up. He held them out to her. "Smell this, Babe. You came on my finger. This is you getting what you need. It isn't enough, not yet, but by the time we're done it will be."

This was new for her. Barbara was no virgin but her experience didn't include this kind of intimacy. The raw sexuality was more exciting than what she'd known. When Al took his fingers, shiny with her essence, and licked them clean, she very nearly came again.

Al was one werewolf who knew what he was doing in bed. Barbara made up her mind to not try to coax him into doing things her way. His way was turning out to be far too interesting.

Now he lifted her and slid her underpants down her legs to toss them onto the floor. He unhooked her bra with one hand, an interesting feat in itself, and threw it after her panties.

Barbara sat naked next to the burly dark-haired man and felt not the least bit embarrassed. Al's appreciative examination made her comfortable with her nudity. She was even more comfortable when he stripped the covers off the bed and eased her back onto the bare sheets. They were cool against her overheated skin, a nice contrast with Al's own heat.

She was the one in sexual need but he seemed nearly as close to losing control as she was, for all of his insisting they take it slow. Maybe more.

Crouching over her, he laid a line of kisses down from her neck to her breasts, each of which he paid special attention to. Now that an orgasm had taken the edge off her mating need Barbara was in a better position to appreciate how well he nibbled and suckled her breasts, kneading the soft curves with the palm of his hand. His position left his cock dangling over her thighs and she felt the hard length push against her occasionally.

Al's cock was so long and hard. Barbara enjoyed that evidence of how much he desired her.

When he seemed to have exhausted the ways in which he could tease her nipples he sank further back on his heels, caressing and stroking the rest of her body. His mouth moved down her abdomen, pausing for a moment to gently tongue her navel. His hands strayed back up to her breasts, kneading them, gently twisting her nipples.

Barbara enjoyed it all but she nearly sighed with relief when he began his downward movement again, heading for the crotch of her legs and the soft folds, hard clit and ever-dampening pussy that awaited his special attention.

They got it too. With one hand he spread her labia and licked that sensitive nub between them.

Barbara's hips rose off the bed to meet his mouth after the first stroke of his tongue against her clit. It was like he'd made his tongue a little rougher... Was it possible he had that kind of shapeshifting control? Whatever it was, his lick against her had the effect of an explosion of sensation.

His hands seized her hips, forcing them down to the bed and holding them there as he increased the pressure against her pussy. He licked and laved then freed one hand to stroke his fingers deeply within her. He even teased her anus, sensing somehow that she liked a little exploration there. Not too much, although tonight the sensation of being probed there didn't make her as uncomfortable as it usually did.

Maybe she was getting used to being touched all over by him. Maybe he just knew how to do it right. Either was okay by her.

Al focused his attention back onto her clit and wrapped his tongue around it. The sensation was like nothing she'd felt before and another climax approached, virtually being sucked out of her.

There was nothing slow about his actions now and nothing gentle about the way he lifted her legs to rest across his shoulders. It lifted her ass closer and he sped up his actions, all but inviting her to scream.

She did. "Fuck, Al!" Too overcome to worry about the expletive, Barbara came again, this time harder. It lasted longer too, and when she finished shaking her respite from sexual heat lasted longer. Before now an orgasm had barely relieved the need driving her, but this one had been different.

In a post-orgasmic haze, Barbara almost felt normal for the first time in days.

It didn't last and she felt the burn start again but by that time Al was on his knees over her again, his cock gently probing her entrance. She was wet enough and relaxed enough to take him with one thrust but he didn't push inside just yet.

"I need to know, Babe. Our kind doesn't need a condom for sickness, but I don't leave unwanted cubs in my wake."

Through her heated need she understood the question. "I'm on the Pill." Birth control for a shapeshifter was difficult to create and expensive but Barbara wasn't looking for unwanted cubs either. Wanted ones, later on perhaps, but not right now.

Al grinned at her. "Babe, you know just the right thing to say." And he entered her, moving slowly but without any hesitation. Barbara moaned as his size stretched her rarely used opening, but it was a good stretch and she welcomed him.

He seemed to welcome it as well. "Hell, Babe. You are tight."

"Feels good?" she panted.

"Oh yeah. Real good." It seemed to take forever but finally he was deep inside her. Sweat dripped off his skin, bathing her in coolness. Except she wasn't cool, she was in heat and burning, and having Al's hot cock inside her only fed the burn.

It felt so good the word good hardly covered it. Great, fantastic, super. Nothing seemed big enough.

He moved, one long stroke then another then a regular rhythm that took all of Barbara's concentration to keep up with. When mating, werewolves did it harder and longer and with more force than normal humans, but she could feel Al keeping track, making sure she was heading for another climax.

Three orgasms he'd said, or she wouldn't be relieved. It bothered her that he knew so much about unmated female werewolves and their heats but she had to admit she couldn't be in better hands than his.

Al was far better than her battery-operated friend had ever been.

The third climax came quickly and Barbara felt something untie inside her as it finished. But Al wasn't done and in moments he'd brought her to a fourth then a fifth, each one longer and harder than the one before.

By the sixth one she was screaming her release. Al's face was a mixture of masculine pride and intense concentration as he continued to withhold his own orgasm. But something in the sixth one made him gasp and then he was groaning and jerking and Barbara felt his cock spasm then empty itself, spewing hot cum deep inside her.

She was instantly glad that a condom hadn't been needed. The feel of his cream coating her inside was something she wouldn't have missed for the world.

They collapsed in a heap and long moments passed in post-coital coziness. Barbara felt Al relax into her side and she suddenly had to fight sleepiness. Relief from being in heat would only last until sometime tomorrow but at least she'd be able to rest tonight.

She yawned then apologized to an amused-looking Al. "I didn't get much sleep last night."

"That's normal. You can sleep here."

Barbara yawned again. "I think I have to. I'm feeling too exhausted to drive."

"Babe, you can stay as long as you want. My home is yours." Al pulled up the sheet and blanket and tucked her under his arm.

"I hope we didn't disturb your downstairs neighbors."

"Naw. The second floor apartment is empty and even if it wasn't I own the building so they wouldn't likely complain."

It felt perfect. Barbara smiled. "I am so glad I walked into your place tonight."

"Oh, Babe. So am I."

Chapter Three

Al woke and stretched and immediately knew that something was wrong. At first he couldn't tell what it was but then he realized. It was quiet in his apartment, too quiet. No snoring—or even soft breathing coming from the other pillow on the bed. No rustling from the bathroom or noise from any other part of his home, including the kitchen.

The only sounds were the muted noise of the early morning traffic on the street outside and the electric hum of his clock radio.

The room smelled of sex and Babe but there was no audible evidence of the woman who'd shared his bed last night. She was gone.

Al checked the scent from her pillow. Still strong, only a little faded. She hadn't been gone long. He lay back, vaguely disturbed.

Barbara Grislop wasn't the first high-class werewolf bitch to visit his bed. She wasn't even the best looking, and the sex, while memorable, hadn't even been as wild as he'd sometimes had. It had promise... Babe had a secret untamed side to her and Al could easily see them getting into sensual planes that he'd only viewed from a distance in the past. But to get there made an assumption of repetition.

Unlikely given that the repetition would be with a woman who'd snuck out of his place before he'd woken up, apparently too embarrassed by her actions to even face him.

Al grumbled his foulest oath. So she'd left without saying goodbye. It wasn't even the first time *that* had happened before. He'd been dumped by beautiful sexy women of class in the past. So why was he so bothered?

It bothered him that her being gone bothered him. He shouldn't care about what someone like Babe thought of him. So she thought of him as a convenient way to get her heat under control and little else. Treated him like a one-night stand...an embarrassing one-night stand at that.

Al shouldn't care about her being gone. And yet he did.

He got up, used the bathroom and slipped into a pair of old jeans, worn to the point of holes at the knees, but comfortable. In the kitchen he examined without joy the contents of the refrigerator. Not much available... The meat compartment was bare and he didn't have any eggs. Even the milk carton was empty. No raw protein at all.

Disgusted, he pulled a box out of the cupboard. Dry kibble again for breakfast. He needed to go shopping today, no more excuses. Sure he was busy but a man needed food.

No wonder Babe had left. She'd probably woken up and checked out his kitchen then the rest of the apartment. His place wasn't a dump but he doubted it was what she was used to. A princess like her lived in a palace, not a walk-up apartment over a bar.

He glared at the box in his hand. He doubted his Babe had ever had to eat kibble for breakfast.

His phone rang and Al hurried to pick it up. When he saw from the caller ID it was Chet from the bar he swore at it not being Babe then answered it. "What do you want?"

Chet gave a short laugh. "Wow, and here I'd thought to find you in a good mood. You left with that fine piece of meat last night, who was in a most accommodating condition."

Al didn't feel comfortable talking about Babe that way. "What happened between the lady and me is none of your business."

"Really?" If anything, Chet sounded even more amused. "Well, speaking of business, I thought you'd like to know that the damage to yours was minimal. Once *the lady* left things calmed down right away. No one was seriously hurt and only a couple chairs broke."

"That's what I expected." Even so, Al was pleased to hear it. A couple chairs and no injuries was less than they usually could look forward to on a Friday night. That was one bright point in the day.

"So should I open up this evening?" Chet was still fishing for details.

"Don't know. Maybe. I'll let you know later."

"Fine. I'm downstairs doing homework if you need me." A student at the local university, Chet often used the bar as a study hall when it was closed. He said it was quieter than the dorm, and the close proximity of beer had its own attraction. He never drank enough to worry about, so Al didn't mind.

After hanging up, Al considered. If Babe was gone there was no reason for him to not work tonight. Still, he'd wait to commit himself. Taking the dry dog food box to the couch, he sat and turned on the TV, flipping through the channels with the remote. Maybe there was a game or an old movie...something mindless to make him forget a certain beautiful werewolf bitch who apparently no longer needed him.

The sound of a key in the lock of his front door made him jump to his feet. His jaw dropped when Babe came through the door carrying a pair of white plastic bags and a small suitcase.

She startled when she saw him. "Oh, hi. You're up. I thought I'd be back before you woke."

Al stared. "Where'd you get a key?"

"There was one on the hook in the kitchen. I tried it and it fit the front door so I borrowed it." She shifted feet uncomfortably under his intense gaze. "I didn't think you'd mind."

"I thought you were gone."

Now Babe stared at him. "I guess I should have left a note..."

The frustration he'd felt on waking without her broke loose. "Yeah, I think you should have. For one thing, it would have been polite. But more, you should not be running around without me. Last night in the bar should have taught you that."

"You mean the fight?"

"Yeah, I mean the fight."

"I didn't think you'd wake up before I got back. I wanted to surprise you...with breakfast."

That made Al's attention turn to the white plastic bags. He took them from her and gave a tentative sniff and caught the rich aroma of fresh meat. The label on the outside was from an exclusive butcher shop on the up side of town and inside was a set of packages wrapped in white paper. One was a distinctive flat oblong and Al's mood lightened considerably. Steak for breakfast. Babe sure knew the way to a werewolf man's heart. The other bag held eggs, milk and other staples. Apparently Babe had checked the refrigerator before leaving.

She'd left but she'd come back.

Al carried both the bags and the abandoned box of dog food to the kitchen, sticking the latter back into the cupboard.

Still looking uncomfortable, Barbara followed him, carrying her suitcase.

"What's that for?" he asked pointing to it.

She looked at the bag. "Clothes, stuff. My toothbrush from my house. Since we're working together I thought it would be easier if I took you up on your offer for me to stay here. You promised to help me find Tammy last night. And besides," she looked distinctly uncomfortable, "I need you — for — you know..."

"For sex? To keep your heat under control."

"Yeah. But I don't mean to put you out, there's a hotel nearby."

Al shook his head. She didn't really understand the situation. "Listen, Babe. You're in heat and you've taken me as your mate."

She looked distinctly uncomfortable. "We're not really mated."

"That it's not permanent isn't the point. I suppose you aristocrats have your own rules but when a guy like me fucks...I mean, has sex with a woman the way we did last night, it means something. When you're in heat you don't screw around. You pick a man and you stay with him for the duration of the heat. Understand?"

Babe stared at him. "What do you mean, stay with you?"

"I mean just that. You don't take off on your own. I go with you."

"Why is that necessary?"

"Because it is. Because I don't want anyone messing with you. Because you belong to me!"

She shook her head. "Not permanently. My heats only last five days."

"Even so, for the next five days you belong with me." He crowded her up against the counter. "No one else gets close enough to smell you, much less fuck you."

Leaving the meat on the counter, Al grabbed her suitcase from her and used his free arm to cinch her tight around her waist. "Listen, Babe. I know my place isn't what you're used to but I want you to stay here."

Babe tried a smile. "Your place isn't that...I mean, it's fine. I mean... Thanks, Al."

For a moment he wondered if she were going to say something else. Maybe like it would be nice to live with him, even for a short time?

But she didn't and he didn't push it. It was enough that Babe was in his home and would be in his bed this evening. A warm sensual woman in his bed and she came bearing steak.

What more could a shapeshifter man want?

That it wasn't permanent...well he wasn't looking for anything like that either. He was a happy-go-lucky dog without permanent ties.

Of course, there was the matter of her sister and his promise to help find her. "Why don't you write down your sister's car's license plate number, make and model and I'll call around, get people looking for it."

As soon as she did he called Chet again. "I need to spread the word about a car."

"A car, huh. Does this have anything to do with the shiny blue Lexus that a certain blonde shapeshifter parked in the alley behind the bar?" Al could hear the man grinning through the phone. "Are we happier now?"

Of course Chet would have noticed Babe's car when it pulled up. "We're working on it. But that's not the car we're looking for." He gave the license plate number and Chet promised to spread the word and call him when he heard something.

Al repeated the conversation to Babe after he hung up. "But before then we're going to get a few things dealt with."

"Like breakfast?" she said hopefully.

Al narrowed his eyes. "Yes. But there is something I want first. Your word that you won't leave again without me."

"Al, I don't know why that's necessary. Besides, it's embarrassing." Babe's pretty chin went up and she looked at him defiantly. "I've been taking care of myself for a long time. Why should I have to drag you along everywhere I go? Even for a few days it will be a problem." She gave him a contemptuous glare. "I can assure you I'll not be running off to bed with anyone else. You don't need to be around all the time."

"Just when you have the need for me?" □

"That's right." □

Al set free the temper he'd been holding back. Pushing the paper-wrapped meat with one sweep of his arm, Al lifted and sat her on the kitchen countertop. He crowded between her legs, arms on either side, imprisoning her.

"You will stay by my side because I wish it. I take no chances, not when it comes to this sort of thing. You will also stay because you need me."

"I don't. I've gotten along just fine before, without sex." □

"Before? You mean you've gone through heat without mating?" At her nod, Al shook his head. The aristocrats were even more screwed up than he thought. "How?"

"Meditation and..." Her voice trailed off for a moment. "Other means."

"I bet you were told that's what nice werewolf girls did. Suffer through it without finding a man to give you relief. Babe, that's just cruel."

She looked at him uncertainly and for a moment he wondered if she didn't agree with him. He moved closer, rubbing his chin against her, licking her lips. "I know what you need," he said, his voice becoming a harsh whisper. "I know how to calm the wildness inside you...and it isn't by meditating or with a vibrator. You need a man, Babe. You need me."

Her anger was turning into something else. He felt her tremble within the confines of his arms. The heat he'd helped satisfy last night was only banked, ready to flare up at the least provocation. Al breathed against her neck and it flamed to life.

He felt her trembling increase and knew that when he touched her private spots he'd find her damp with need. Babe was responding to his presence—her mate's presence—and it didn't matter that the position was temporary.

She needed him, needed him to satisfy her.

He'd do that. But he'd get what he wanted in return.

She'd changed clothes from the business suit of last night to a pair of formfitting jeans and a soft sweater. Al slid his hands under the sweater, seeking her breasts, the nipples hidden behind the shield of her bra. Too much confinement. He'd have to disabuse her of the idea that she needed underwear to support her lovely breasts at all times. The closure was in front—convenient that!—so he undid it, letting her softness fall into his hands.

Small breasts... Shapeshifters didn't usually have large ones but Babe's were a nice handful, soft and with a lovely natural shape. Al loved how they filled his hands and he touched them tenderly.

As Babe opened her mouth to moan, he covered it with his. He used his lips and tongue, the first to seduce her cooperation, the second to catch her taste. Her taste drove him wild.

His seemed to be doing the same for her. Babe's blue eyes were darkened with passion when he pulled back.

"This isn't going to be like other heats for you. Before you suffered through them. This time will be a celebration of werewolf femininity. A werewolf bitch is at her most primal at this time. Unmated and seeking. Seeking a mate who can satisfy her. I'm that mate, Babe, and you don't need to worry about satisfaction. I know how to give you what you need."

She said nothing but gave a sharp moan as he slid down the opening of her jeans. Slipping them and her underwear off at the same time he found the sweet hair-covered opening to her pussy damp, the lips swollen and pink. She was aching for him and she'd get what she needed — once he had her promise.

Al licked her clit gently then harder, Babe's hands buried in his hair, seemingly urging him onward. She moaned then cried out as he worked, her ass sliding forward on the counter until it was right at the edge, her legs spread wide to give him better access. Like the hair on her head, her pussy hair was tawny gold and it curled in abandon around her nether lips. No artifice about Babe. She didn't color her hair or trim her pussy, leaving it wild for him to plunder.

Not that she was his...exactly. Just for now, just for the duration of her heat. Once that was over, Al knew, she'd be gone from his life. He wasn't the kind of guy a woman like Babe hung out with, certainly not the kind to take for a permanent mate. Even if he were just a plain werewolf man he wasn't one born with a silver spoon in his mouth. And he wasn't just a werewolf either.

He'd have to be careful not to lose his heart to her. Someone like Babe could mess a man up really bad if he weren't careful. She'd leave when she was done with him, just like the other women in his life.

But she wasn't leaving now. Her breath was coming in sharp little pants and he knew she was ready for him.

Time to get what he needed first. Al stood up, holding her shoulders, and stared into her face. "Okay, Babe, I want that promise."

"Promise?" Her eyes were wild and unfocused and the word came out almost as a whimper.

"You want me to fuck you?"

"Uh...Yes. You know I do."

"Then I need your promise. You won't go off on your own again. Not until I say you can, after this heat is over."

"Not until the heat is off. Okay. Sure."

That was almost good enough but he had to be sure. "You promise?"

"Yeah, I promise. I won't leave until you say I can." Babe tapped him on the chest. "Now fuck me, you bad dog!"

With a roar of triumph Al dropped his pants and plunged into her, fucking them both into oblivion.

* * * * *

After cleaning up they settled down to breakfast. Al would have been happy to eat his steak raw and cold from the paper packaging but Barbara put the steak into the microwave to heat it to body temperature. She used a knife and fork on her share of the

steak so Al decided to follow her lead. They even used plates and sat at his rarely used kitchen table, washing down the steak with hot coffee.

He had to admit it was rather nice not to have to scrub his face and hands after eating, particularly since Babe washed the dishes. Sated and settling onto the couch, Al felt happily domestic. He turned on the TV to once again see if maybe he could find an old movie, but this time he wanted something romantic that Babe would like as well. Maybe they could while away a few hours cuddling on the couch.

But then his cell phone rang. The display said the call was coming from the bar. Maybe news about Babe's sister Tammy. But perhaps not, and he hoped it wasn't and that little sister hadn't been quite so easy to find. That way Babe would be sure to stay a little longer.

He felt guilty for that as soon as he heard the news. Hanging up the phone Al turned to face her. "They found your sister's car, near the beach."

"And Tammy?" Al hated the eagerness in her voice. She loved her sister and he was going to have to disappoint her.

"Not there. There were signs someone had broken into the car, and," Al took a deep breath, "and they found blood on the front seats. From the smell, shapeshifter blood."

Chapter Four

On a sunny Saturday morning the beach parking lot was scarcely empty but a small crowd of shapeshifters hanging around Tammy's car had done a good job of keeping the norms away. They'd even blocked off several parking spots nearby so that when Al and Babe arrived he didn't have to circle the lot looking for a place to park. He drove smoothly into the spot next to the small sporty coupe and stopped.

Babe climbed out of the passenger side of the car, Al from the driver's side. "We could have taken mine," she said.

Al gave a loving pat to the top of his car. "And leave this beauty behind?"

"This old thing?" Babe didn't look impressed.

His lady friend had at least one fault after all. She clearly didn't appreciate fine vintage automobiles. "This 'old thing' is a vintage 1969 Pontiac GTO, hardtop, in black, of course."

Babe grimaced and rubbed her rear end. "Of course. But the cushion on the rider's seat needs replacing."

"That's all new. I bought the car cheap and fixed it up myself."

"Well you should have put more padding in the seat bottom."

"You don't drive a muscle car for the comfortable seats, Babe," Al said, but he made a mental note to check out the passenger seat. It wouldn't do for his lady friend to not like riding in his car because it was uncomfortable.

"I don't drive a muscle car at all. Not much reason with the traffic in L.A. being as bad as it is." She glanced over at her sister's car with a troubled look. "I have to say, though, it got us here fast."

Al watched as she stayed by the car, not rushing to check her sister's vehicle out. With all her hurry to get here, she seemed reluctant now, as if she was worried about what she was going to find. He shared her concern.

Blood left behind was not a good sign.

Finally she peeled herself away from the GTO and headed to Tammy's car. Other signs weren't any better as they got closer. The shifters surrounding it looked concerned and since there wasn't much sign of a struggle that worried him. What about the car had them so spooked?

One of the men came forward, a shifter named Roger. "We contacted the patrol, Al, so they're on their way."

"The patrol?" Al stifled the urge to groan. Officially titled the "New Moon Protection Agency" but more commonly referred to by its nickname, the shifter patrol

acted as a private militia for the shapeshifters and getting involved with them wasn't his favorite activity. These days they were recruited mostly from the upper echelon of shifter society and they didn't always see eye to eye with people like him. Al liked having good relationships with those of other parafolk persuasion—the shifter patrol didn't.

In fact they could be downright prejudiced against them.

The other man shrugged. "Didn't have much choice. As soon as we got the door open... Well, you'll see."

He did, smelling the problem as soon as he approached the open door. *Tranquilizer*. The clear scent of ketamine still clung to the air inside the car. A small dart on the floormat under the seat showed its origin, the concentration stronger than what would have been needed to bring down a normal human.

Ketamine in that dosage was bad...very bad. For one thing it meant that whoever had tranked Tammy and her friend had known what they were—not simply a human couple out for the evening. You didn't shoot a human with a dart loaded with that stuff...not unless you were willing to kill them.

The small amount of blood in the car was probably from where they'd been hit. Babe looked over the driver's side then let Al check the blood there while she looked over the passenger seat. She had a puzzled look on her face.

"I guess Tammy was still driving. The blood here is male."

"There's werewolf blood over here," he said.

"That's hers. I recognize her scent." She worried her lower lip and seemed hesitant to say anything. Al came over to her side of the car.

"What is it, Babe?"

She pointed to the traces of blood on the back of the seat. "This isn't werewolf."

"Your sister is hanging out with a norm? No wonder she's hiding from your folks."

"No, it isn't a norm. But he's not a shifter...or a nightwalker." She looked honestly confused. "He smells unlike anything I've ever come across."

Which is what his waitress had said, Al thought, but he didn't say anything. Babe was focusing on the car and what it would tell her.

Stepping back, Babe examined the car then closed her eyes for a moment. "They were sitting together, watching the moon on the water. It's nearly full, you know."

Al did. One thing every shapeshifter knew was what phase the moon was in. In a couple days he'd turn furry whether he wished to or not, as would Babe. If she were still in heat that could lead to an interesting situation. Most shifter ladies didn't do sex while shifted but others liked it. Gave a new meaning to "doggy style".

Babe continued, her voice faraway. "They were watching the moon. Maybe even making out a little. There are traces of arousal in the car from both of them. But then the door opened. On her side I think. She was darted before she could react."

Opening her eyes, Babe pointed to drops of blood on the driver's seat that he'd seen but not sniffed thoroughly. "That's his blood. He lunged forward, over Tammy, to get to their attacker...or maybe to protect her. Hard to say, but he didn't open his door and try to get away. Someone hit him, hard enough to make his head bleed. I think he was darted too but they took the dart with them."

Al looked admiringly at her. "You're pretty good at this."

Even through her worry she looked pleased. "Thanks. I took classes on inductive reasoning and crime scene investigation. I wanted to join the New Moon Protection Agency but I didn't pass the physical."

"You didn't pass the physical?" Al gave her a long look. "There isn't anything wrong with your physique that I can see."

Babe sighed. "I was missing some equipment—like a penis. So they said I couldn't be a detective."

Al shook his head. He knew the shifter patrol was made up of the more Neanderthal elements of shapeshifter society but he'd no idea they were sexist to boot. "It's their loss, Babe."

She smiled and shrugged. "I think we better look in the trunk."

It opened through a button on the dashboard. Once behind the car they both stared at the collection of stuff inside. Babe shook her head. "Just like at home. Tammy always was a bit of a packrat. I guess that whoever snatched them didn't bother searching the trunk."

Several medium-sized suitcases nestled next to odd pieces of paper and boxes as well as a garment bag. Babe opened one of the larger bags, which looked a little like the one she'd brought to his place. "This looks like her clothes and toiletries." She put it on the ground at her feet and grabbed another one. Inside was a bunch of black rubbery material that she shook out into the form of a wetsuit. Underneath were a mask and a rubber hose with a mouthpiece.

Al stared with her. "Scuba equipment?" He couldn't help his astonishment. A swimming werewolf was one thing but to scuba dive took training and certification—more dedication to the ocean than most shifters would ever have.

Babe sniffed the mask. "It's hers, for certain." She put that bag on the ground next to the suitcase. Hidden well beneath the scuba gear she found a camera case with an expensive underwater camera. A label on the side of the case stated "Property of Fly By Night Films".

"That's odd," Babe said. "She works at Fly By Night but does sound recording, not video. She must have borrowed the camera from them but I don't know why."

The last bag was a thin garment bag. Babe unzipped it and took a quick look inside. Her face pale, she rezipped the bag and put it with the rest. "We better get this stuff into your car before the patrol gets here."

Al grabbed the bags and carried them to the trunk of the car. "You make sure there isn't anything else, Babe. I'll do the heavy lifting."

She did find a few more things in the trunk, including several boxes marked "flyers".

A car turned into the parking lot and headed with all deliberateness toward them. Al took the last box from Babe and thrust it into the trunk of the GTO, closing the lid as surreptitiously as he could manage. As the car approached Al saw the logo on the side of the front door for the New Moon Protection Agency, the official name of the shifter patrol.

The official shapeshifter police had arrived. It was time for Babe and him to make themselves as scarce as possible.

Al had a quick word with the three shifters guarding the car. "No point in mentioning we took anything from the trunk. Right?"

The three nodded, Roger speaking for the rest. "No problem, Al." The look he gave the patrol car was frankly disrespectful. "They rarely ask so we don't usually have anything to tell them anyway."

The car pulled into an empty spot an aisle over from them. Three men got out of the car, all of them werewolves. One stared at them with a long ill-mannered look before closing the car door behind him. He walked toward them and Al tensed for what he knew was going to be a scene.

The other man gave him one long look then ignored him to speak to Babe, a solicitous look on his face that Al immediately pegged as phony.

"Barbara. I'm so sorry to hear about Tammy. Your parents must be frantic."

Babe gave Al a quick desperate glance. "I haven't told them anything yet, Richard. Mom's been so ill. It's just a bad time for something like this. I'm hoping to find her before anything is made public."

"Of course, of course." Richard moved closer, too close for Al's peace of mind, and reached for Babe as if to give her a hug. With a neat quick move she sidestepped him, ending up much closer to Al. He took advantage of that to move between them.

He stuck out his hand. "Al Lupas."

Richard regarded Al and his proffered hand with equal suspicion. Finally he decided good manners required he extend his own. "Richard Grauer."

Al made short work of their handshake, leaving them both with a good sense of the other's strength.

"And who is this, Barbara?" Richard asked.

"A friend of mine. He's helping me find Tammy."

Richard turned to Al. "So you're a detective?"

"Not really. Mostly I'm a bartender." He nodded at Babe. "She's the detective."

"No, she isn't." Richard patted Babe on the arm. "Honey, why don't you leave this business to the professionals? You'll only make things worse by getting involved."

Babe shook off his hand. "Because she's my sister, Richard. I know her so well. I should be able to find her."

A long-suffering sigh came out of the other shapeshifter. "Barbara, just because you've found a lost kitten or two doesn't make you a detective."

Babe's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I've done far better than that, Richard, and you know it. Do *not* patronize me."

Richard shook his head and took a deep breath. Al knew he'd caught Babe's scent when shock filled the other man's face.

He stared at her. "Barbara...you...you're in heat! What are you doing out here? You should be at home, or mating or...something!"

"I'm all right, Richard."

"But...it isn't right...not safe." He crossed his arms and looked angry. "When are you going to get serious and take a permanent mate?"

"When I find a man who doesn't simply want to cage me in his house." Babe looked just as angry and Al wondered if perhaps Richard had wanted to cage the irrepressible shapeshifter lady. It was time to step in.

"You don't need to worry about Babe here. She's with me, Richard." Al drew out the man's name. "I'm her mate this season. So there won't be any problems. No one is going to bother her when I'm around."

"You!" Richard's contempt came out fully now. "I know who you are, Lupas. You're nothing but a mutt. Barbara Grisloop is a lady, from the finest family."

Stiffening, Al resisted the urge to growl over the "mutt" reference. He'd long ago learned not to let someone know that particular expression bothered him. Stepping closer to her, Al put one arm around Babe's shoulders. "Yeah, I know she's choice, a real lady, and that's how I intend to treat her. Just like I'd treat any woman who mated with me."

Inside his arms, Babe stiffened and for a moment it seemed that she intended to argue the point. But then she relaxed and gave Richard a lazy smile.

Richard's jaw clenched and Al knew that the other shifter thought himself a competitor for Babe's attention. He took a few steps closer and Al began to wonder if the man would actually challenge him. Part of him welcomed the idea, even while his common sense told him it was a bad idea.

The patrol shifters with Richard crowded closer and out of the corner of his eye Al saw the three shifters who'd found the car slip around to guard his back.

For a moment both groups stood tense, ready for trouble. While Babe showed no outward sign of worry Al felt a slight shudder where her back hit his chest.

Al eyed the participants warily. Perfect. All he needed was a turf war at this point. His relations with the patrol were already iffy given that his bar catered to any parafolk

or even norm willing to buy his beer and he didn't need more trouble. Plus if there was a fight someone could get hurt.

His arm went tighter around the woman standing with him. Okay, so he was most worried that Babe could get hurt and that was the last thing he wanted. She brought out all the protective feelings he had, plus some he didn't know about.

Or had wanted to know about.

Al had to admit Babe was getting under his skin, which could be a very bad thing. Or it could be terrific, if this turned out to be a lasting relationship...something he very much doubted. At the very least it was pretty scary.

Babe glanced around and seemed to notice the other men gathering nearer. She straightened and raised her chin to glare at Richard.

"It was my choice," she said in a quiet but firm voice. "Al is who I want to be with, Richard, and if you don't like it then that's too bad. But it doesn't make any difference. He's my mate for the season and that's my decision. No one can say differently."

She looked up at him. "Al, we've seen enough here. Let's go."

Holding her arm, Al escorted her to the passenger side of his car and opened the door for her. Babe gave Richard and the rest of the men with him one final imperious stare before slipping into the seat.

Before she let him close the door she fired off one more parting shot at Richard and his cronies.

"You know, Richard, maybe I should tell more women to find a mutt to mate with. It is far more satisfactory than the alternatives."

The other men growled but didn't move as Al closed the door. He moved to his side but he didn't hurry. Now that Babe was inside the relative safety of the car he couldn't help swaggering a little to the driver's side. After all, it was his car the woman had chosen to get into and it was his bed she'd be in later. She belonged with him.

By her own choice and she'd told the others that.

Yes, a little swaggering was in order, even if it did make Richard's jaw clench tighter until Al could hear the grinding of the other man's fangs. He had to admit, that was more satisfying than he could have possibly imagined.

Revving the GTO's engine to a shapeshifter-ear-piercing scream, Al drove off feeling as satisfied as if he'd actually fought the other shifter and broken his aristocratic nose.

* * * * *

They hadn't gotten far from the beach parking lot when Barbara began shaking. The near fight between the males and the rampant testosterone in the air had set off her unruly sex drive until once again she was near desperate with need.

Al was driving with a slight smile on his face. He didn't notice that she was having difficulty until they came to a stop sign. He glanced over at her then took another longer and much harder look. "Babe, you okay?"

Slowly she shook her head. "Not really. No. I think..."

Her voice trailed off as she continued to stare at him. "No, I don't think, I know. I need you. Now."

If her tone didn't alert him she knew she was putting off enough pheromones to convince him her condition was critical. Al gave her a brief nod.

"That's all right. We'll go somewhere. Just hang on."

He seemed to think for a moment then picked a direction, heading up a side road away from the beach. Soon they were well off the main highway, surrounded by trees. He picked a smaller road that led to a dead-end among the brush. They were alone and, while outside, there was no one around to see them.

Al parked the car and turned off the engine. Barbara stayed in her seat for one moment before undoing her seat belt and launching herself at him.

He caught her, just as she knew he would, and held her close to him. "It's okay. I've got you. I'll take care of you."

Good, because she really needed taking care of. She was lost, so very lost. Her sexual drive was in high gear and there was no one to apply the brakes. No one but him. "I've never been this out of control before," Barbara said. "It scares me."

"Nothing to be frightened of. I'll take care of you – that's my job right now."

Barbara calmed under his steady confidence. She trusted him and knew he would make sure she got what she needed. Even more, he'd protect her from the emotions that raged through her and keep her from humiliating herself.

He was right. For as long as she could remember she'd avoided the sensual side of being a werewolf female...that is, a werewolf bitch. Regardless of the negative connotations that word had, that's what she really was. A female werewolf. A bitch to his werewolf dog.

As Al smiled reassuringly at her that was all Barbara really wanted. She wanted to be a bitch to his very bad – or very good depending how you looked at it – dog. He was a beast at heart and she wanted to go animal with him.

Make the beast with two backs and then some. She reached for his belt buckle, intending to get into his pants as quickly as possible.

Al grabbed her hand. "Easy, Babe. Let me do the honors here."

"I need you. Now."

"I got that. But there are rules to having me."

Barbara wasn't sure she liked that. "Rules? What rules?"

Now he was grinning at her. "Good rules, Babe. Rules to make sure we scratch that itch of yours sufficiently to keep it from interfering with our goal to find your sister."

Tammy. Yes, her goal was to find Tammy. "So what should we do?"

"First of all we need to slow down. Like last night only this time even more so."

Al reached into the glove compartment and pulled out a couple of bungee cords. "You want to hold your hands out in front of you for a moment?"

She realized he wanted to tie her up and the thought put a shiver up her spine. "Is this necessary?"

"Only if you want to get some lasting relief."

Barbara shivered as another wave of lust poured through her. She needed relief in the worst possible way. She put her hands where he could reach them. With one smooth fast movement Al wrapped one cord around her wrists and secured them.

She stared at her bound hands. "This is necessary? I won't be able to touch you."

"That's the general idea. No touching, Babe, so you can't distract me and I can make love to you at my pace."

Nervously she licked her lips. There was something different about Al today, both this morning when she'd come back to his apartment and when he'd seduced her in the kitchen. It was even more evident now, with an elastic cord in one hand and a feral grin on his face. He seemed fiercer, more demanding than before. He was treating her...well, like a woman, but not just any woman he intended to make love to. Al showed a possessiveness that she hadn't anticipated when she'd gone to his bed last night. None of the other males she'd been to bed with had behaved like this...not that there had been too many nor had she ever taken a lover during her heat.

Al was different from the others. He seemed to be trying to tie her to him, emotionally like this morning and now physically. It was exciting and a little scary.

Another shiver went through her and her underpants flooded with cream from her pussy. Being with Al was scary maybe, but definitely exciting.

Reaching around her, Al moved her seat backward and then lifted her hands and used the other cord to secure them to the back of the seat behind her. Without a headrest she wasn't too sure where he'd hooked the end of the cord, but when she tested it, it seemed to hold firm.

Of course she could probably break the cord if she tried, but she might tear up the interior of Al's car in the process and she could tell he might not appreciate her doing that to his beloved GTO.

The bonds were more symbolic than anything else. To angle her seat back into a near flat position Al had to climb over her and she caught his intense masculine smell. The smell of an aroused male werewolf in the presence of his bitch.

She swallowed hard. He stroked her throat. "Soft. Your skin is so soft, Babe. I can't get enough of touching you."

"I like you touching me."

"Good." With her hands stretched behind her back she felt more vulnerable than before. But not really frightened. Al wouldn't really hurt her.

He nipped her neck hard and she jerked. "What was that?"

"Just making sure you're paying attention." He licked the spot he'd bitten and the pain soothed instantly. Even so she knew it would leave a mark.

"Trying to prove you've been with me?"

Al got a funny look on his face. "I've nothing to prove, to you or anyone else. I'm what I am, Babe, and by the time we're done with all this you won't need any proof you've been with me. We'll both have really clear memories of each other."

She didn't want him mad at her. "That's not what I meant."

He stroked her throat where the slight ache remained. "I guess not. I better kiss it and make it feel better."

Al ran a line of kisses down her throat and the ache was swallowed by the thrill she felt instead. "That feels so good."

"It should. And this should feel better." He undid the button on her pants and slid them down to uncover her panties. It was tough work getting the pants off her bottom and down her thighs.

"Perhaps you should consider wearing a skirt for the next few days, Babe. And no underwear," Al grumbled as he tried to work the garments off.

"Maybe you should just tear them off," Babe said, panting.

Al didn't waste any time. With a ripping sound her panties were off, leaving her pussy open to Al's hungry eyes. "Good idea." He tossed the torn underwear into the back of the car.

Unfastening his own pants, he released his hard and heavy cock. In the closed atmosphere of the car Babe could smell the pre-cum oozing from it. He was hot and ready for her already.

She was ready for him. Hands tied, she couldn't do anything to encourage him to take her though. Except talk.

"Come on, bad dog. Fuck me."

He closed one meaty fist around the base of his cock, sliding smoothly to the tip and then back again. Even doing it himself he closed his eyes and smiled at the sensation. For a moment Babe watched him pleasuring himself before saying anything. But finally enough was enough.

"You going to share that?"

Al opened his eyes. "I might do that. But you'll have to say please."

"Please share that?"

He grinned. "Lift your legs, Babe."

With Al's help she managed to get her feet onto the seat and push her bottom toward him. Al held her firm and opened her wider and as soon as he had the angle right he plunged into her.

Babe moaned at the sweet invasion of her flesh by his. "Yes..."

With the dashboard at his back Al couldn't move the way he wanted to. Instead he lifted Babe, sliding her up and down his shaft. Hands still tied behind her head, she could only move as he directed her. The loss of control was a little scary but effective. Quickly Babe felt one orgasm after another rise in her. She gave in to each wave, letting them wash over her and sweep away the nagging need within her.

Al did this to her. He satisfied her sexual needs, withholding his own gratification until he knew she'd had enough. Then with a roar he came, surging even deeper inside her.

In the aftermath Babe leaned into him. No one was like Al, who seemed to know just what to say to her and just what to do. She was becoming reliant on him and that wasn't a comfortable thing to think about.

Barbara wasn't used to depending on anyone. Taking Al into her confidence had been hard. Relying on him was even harder. But she had to. She needed to find her sister and she couldn't do it without him to keep her sexual needs under control.

Maybe she could have done without him if she hadn't already experienced what he could do for her. But not now. No battery-operated toy would be enough. She needed the "bad dog" to scratch her itch.

That was the main reason she was with him. At least that's what she told herself. Sure he was attractive for all kinds of reasons but the main reason was that he was completely available for her.

Al was a nice guy and a reasonable man with the ability to handle odd situations well. He was also handsome in his own way and there was something kind of devilishly attractive about that "bad dog" persona he liked to project.

He was also really good at sex. Really, really good in ways she'd only dreamed of before.

"How are you now, Babe?"

"I'm good."

"Good?"

"Okay. Better than good."

Reaching above her, he freed her hands from the bungee cord. "I would hope so."

Babe leaned into the back of the seat.

Al watched her. "Maybe we'd better get back to hunting for your sister."

"What would you suggest?"

"I think we should look through that stuff we got from your sister's car."

Barbara and Al started going through the rest of the items. Outside the anomaly of the scuba gear, only the boxes were unusual. Tammy's small suitcase held some clothes and her bathroom kit but little else.

Al grabbed the garment bag but Barbara tried to take it from his hands. He stared at her until she finally released it to him. "I'm sure it isn't what it looks like."

Al opened the zipper and stared inside. "What it looks like is a fur coat," he said with absolute distaste in his voice.

Barbara shrank under his tone. Most parafolk detested wearing the skins of fur-bearing animals. Leather was different when it came from a meat-giving creature but no shifter would ever own or wear a fur coat other than his or her own.

"I'm sure there is a reasonable explanation. Maybe she was carrying it for the studio she works for."

Al shook his head. "Fly By Night uses fake fur...it looks just as good on camera." Leaning forward, he took a deep whiff of the fur then strangely burst into a grin. "Or, maybe she was holding on to it for someone else. I don't think it's hers after all."

Barbara took the garment bag from him and breathed deeply. "I don't understand. It smells like the ocean."

"Like kelp. I think it belongs to someone who wears it when swimming."

"That doesn't make any sense."

Still looking mysterious, Al zipped the fur back into the garment bag. "It will eventually. Let's look at the boxes."

With a shrug, Barbara tore open one of the boxes of flyers. "She must be doing something with this group. I can't think why else she'd have boxes of their promotional materials."

Inside the box was an invoice. Al took it and seemed to read it carefully. "I think she's more than a little interested." He handed it to her.

Barbara noted that Tammy's name was on the invoice and the credit card was in her name. "You're right. One or two flyers is interested. Two thousand of them on her credit card is serious involvement."

Al picked up one of the tri-folded brochures and read it aloud. "Oceans Forever—Preserving the sea depths for the future. What is this, some kind of preservationist group?"

Babe waved one of the brochures with the image of a killer whale on the front under his nose. "Tammy can be a bit of an idealist when she's in love. It isn't too hard to imagine her getting involved with a group like this, particularly if that's what her boyfriend is into."

"So you think she's been led astray by a man?"

"I know a man is involved. That's obvious from the signs in the car. But what has he gotten her involved in, that's what I'm worried about."

Al pointed to the address on the flyer. "These folks are in Santa Monica. I think it would be a good idea to drive over there and find out what's going on."

Chapter Five

Oceans Forever's headquarters was a small storefront on a back street of Santa Monica located about five blocks from the beach. It didn't look terribly busy from the outside but the door had a sign reading "open" so Al and Barbara went inside.

No one was initially visible. A couple of racks of literature similar to the flyers they'd found in Tammy's car were by the front door and the walls were decorated with posters of undersea life. The furniture looked secondhand at best, a battered desk in one corner and several chairs scattered along the walls being the only furnishings. A door at the back of the room stood open. Through it they saw file cabinets and more desks and tables.

Al gave the place a long look around. "They don't put up much of a front."

"I'm guessing there isn't a lot of money in this kind of organization if they're on the level."

Through the door at the back a tall skinny man came into the room. With one sniff Al recognized him as a norm.

"Hello. Can I help you with something?"

Barbara took the flyer she'd taken from one of Tammy's boxes to him. "I'm looking for information."

"About our organization?"

"To start." She held out the flyer. "I got this from my sister."

"Your sister?" He peered at her closely then suddenly grinned. "You mean Tammy? Yeah, I can believe that. You look like her." Suddenly all friendliness, he held out his hand and shook hers, then Al's. "I'm Thompson. I run this place."

Al nodded at him. "Al Lupas, and Babe...that is, Barbara Grisloup."

"Glad to meet you. Any friends of Tammy's are friends of mine."

Babe spoke up. "So when did you see Tammy last?"

He nodded at the flyer. "Not for a few days. She was supposed to drop those off yesterday. Are you doing it for her?"

"Yes...I mean no. We have the flyers but Tammy didn't give them to me. We found them in her car. She's...disappeared."

A look of shock then worry took over Thompson's face. "What do you mean 'disappeared'?"

"Someone snagged her and her boyfriend out of her car at the beach last night."

Thompson's face cleared. "You found the car abandoned? Maybe they just went for a swim."

He looked too relieved, Al thought, like he knew that an all-night swim wasn't just a reasonable explanation but a very likely one. Given werewolves' antipathy for the water, how likely was it a werewolf woman would go swimming at night? Plus there was the evidence. "We don't think they went for a swim. Not leaving blood behind. It looks like someone darted them with tranquilizer and hauled them out of the car."

Thompson's relief evaporated. All trace of initial friendliness disappeared and he looked like he wanted to shove them out the door, lock it and run away as fast as he could.

He licked his lips nervously. "I'm sorry to hear that. Strange goings-on but like I said, I haven't seen Tammy in a couple of days. Or her boyfriend. No reason to look for them here."

"Who is Tammy's boyfriend?" Babe asked.

"Kevin, I think. Or Kyle. Something like that. I never got a last name." Thompson looked nervously at the back door. "Listen, I don't know what's going on here. Tammy had a lot of interests and I'm sure that there's some reasonable explanation for what you found."

Al wondered just how anxious Thompson was to get rid of them. "So should we bring the flyers in?"

Again there was that startled look in Thompson's eyes and he hesitated. "Uh, maybe you should hang on to them for a while."

Al shrugged. "Okay. They're in the back of the car. I'm sure no one would look there for them." But of course if they were found that would lead whoever was searching right to Thompson's door as it had them, something the other man was quick to figure out.

"On second thought, might as well take them off your hands. Bring them inside." Thompson headed for the door. Babe started to follow him but Al stopped her. "Why don't you let us get them while you wait here. Those boxes are pretty heavy."

Babe stared at him as if he were crazy. She could lift boxes five times heavier without breaking a sweat and he knew it. But then she must have realized what he up to. "Okay. I'll let you men handle it."

Al led Thompson to the car and opened the trunk. Inside was the scuba gear in addition to the boxes and Thompson blanched when he saw it. "So that got left behind as well. No wonder you don't believe they went into the water."

"Yeah. Didn't know Tammy did a lot of scuba diving."

"Since Kurt came around she has."

"Kurt is it? Not Kevin or Kyle?"

Thompson's face showed that he knew he'd been found out. "Okay, yeah, it's Kurt. Kurt Murphy. Didn't want to say much in front of her sister but Kurt's an okay guy. A little off the beaten track though and from what I've heard Tammy's sis wouldn't exactly be keen on him."

"Because of who he is...or what he is?"

Thompson's face showed he knew Kurt wasn't quite as human as he appeared. He shrugged. "He's just different."

"Different as in he doesn't need scuba gear to dive?" Al had guessed that Kurt wasn't the usual sort of shapeshifter, nor was he human. It didn't bother him but he had his own reasons for not caring what kind of man Babe's sister was dating.

A slight smile came over Thompson's face and he seemed to relax a little. "Yeah. That kind of different."

Al nodded. "So you still aren't going to tell me what Tammy and Kurt were doing for your group that might make them targets for kidnapping?"

Thompson's smile disappeared. He shrugged. "There's nothing to tell."

Al simply shook his head. "Okay. I just thought it polite to ask. We'll find out eventually."

"You'd be better off minding your own business."

"Ah but that's the problem. It's the lady's sister and her business is my business."

The slight smile returned. "Well then, good luck to you."

Lifting one of the boxes out of the trunk, Thompson stepped back and took a long appreciative look at Al's car. "Now that is a nice piece of machinery. What is it, a '68?"

Al smiled and launched into what up until yesterday had been his favorite topic, his vintage GTO. Now, he had to admit, Babe had displaced his car in his affections. But he still loved his car and Babe needed the time to check out the back office.

"Close," he began. "It's a 1969 Pontiac GTO. I found it in one of those used car lots out in the valley about six years ago..."

* * * * *

Barbara watched the men talking through the window and turned to examine the now empty room around her. Al knew she could bench press at least two hundred pounds. Those boxes weighed next to nothing as far as she was concerned.

But this gave her a chance to look around while Al kept Thompson busy.

Quickly she moved into the back room, which seemed to be used mostly for storage although there was a small workbench set up with laboratory equipment in one corner. There were record books that would take time to search as would the file cabinets and the fairly modern computer on the desk. They'd need more time than she had now.

She checked how difficult it would be to break back inside later on. There wasn't any kind of alarm system and while the lock on the front door seemed reasonably substantial the one on the back door leading to the alley was rudimentary at best. She should have no problem getting it open later.

With her shifter-enhanced hearing Barbara heard the trunk door slam shut and made it back to the front before the two men came in, lugging the boxes of flyers. They

seemed to be on pretty good terms when they came through the door, clearly having done a little male bonding over something. The car, she suspected, given that they were still talking about valves and timing as they came through the door.

Al stacked the box on top of Thompson's by the front desk. "I guess we'll be going."

Barbara pulled out one of her business cards and handed it to Thompson. "That's my cell phone number. Call me if you hear from Tammy...or if there's anything else you can think of."

Reluctantly Thompson took the card. "I'm sure you'll see her before I do but I'll keep it on hand." He stuck it on the bulletin board on the wall behind him.

On the way to the car, Barbara looked at Al. "So did you learn anything?" she asked quietly.

"Not much more than I knew already. Except that your sister's boyfriend has a name – Kurt Murphy."

"Murphy." Barbara mused the name over. "Unusual name. I'm not sure I've ever heard of a shifter named Murphy."

Al gave her a sidelong glance. "There aren't many of them around."

"Irish?"

"Probably at least in part. But Thompson says he's an okay guy." Al hesitated then put his big hands on her shoulders. "Listen, maybe we should rethink this. I think that there could be danger in going after your sister."

Barbara couldn't have been more surprised. "You want to back off and leave Tammy in the hands of whoever took her?"

"I didn't say that. But at the very least we need to be careful."

Sudden anger took hold of her. "If you don't want to help me then you don't have to. I can do it on my own."

Al gave her a brief shake. "That's not at all what I'm saying."

"I have to help her."

He looked frustrated. "Not at the risk of your life. Look, it isn't your fault she got grabbed."

"Maybe if I'd followed her that night I could have prevented it."

"No, Babe. Don't do that to yourself. All you knew that night was that your sister was running around with some guy. You had no idea of what she was into." With one hand he lifted her chin, forcing her to look into his face.

"A shifter's heat is nothing to mess with. It is normal and nothing to be ashamed of but it needs to be taken care of. You were in serious need, Babe. You don't need to feel guilty about that." His eyes narrowed. "You don't regret...coming to me, right?"

Did she? No, not really. Al wouldn't have been her first choice of a temporary mate but now that she was with him... No, not at all. He was just the right man for her.

For now.

She forced a smile onto her face. "I don't regret being with you."

"Good then. I don't regret it either. And we will find your sister. But we're going to be smart about it. We are dealing with dangerous people here, the darts prove that."

Barbara nodded. "Whoever took Tammy knew enough to use an animal tranquilizer on her. That means they know she's a shifter, and that alone is worth worrying about."

"What are the chances the Watchers are involved? Has your sister run into them before?" For years the Paranormal Watchers society had spent their time and money trying to prove the parafolk existed and they'd resorted to kidnapping before. A while ago they'd even attempted murder by exposing a nightwalker to sunlight, only to have her rescued and replaced with a human stuntwoman look-alike. That had discredited the organization for a while but there were rumors they were gaining ground again.

Barbara shook her head. "Not that I know of but it is becoming clear there's a lot I don't know about Tammy. Even so, I think it more likely Oceans Forever is the real reason."

"Something Thompson said?"

"More like what he wasn't willing to say. He told you Kurt's name but didn't want to admit that Tammy and Kurt were working for them. He must think that whatever they were up to must be the reason they were snatched."

Al looked impressed. "Good reasoning. So what do we do now?"

She looked at her watch. Nearly four o'clock and the storefront wouldn't be closed until six. They'd need to wait for dark before breaking in. "Still have some time this afternoon. Maybe we should follow up the lead on the camera."

"Return it to Fly By Night?"

"That's what I had in mind. Perhaps Tammy mentioned what she wanted it for when she checked it out."

Al waved her into the car. "Well then, let's head over to the studio. There should be someone there this time of day even if they normally don't begin shooting until after dark."

Barbara smiled at him. "When their primary star is available, right?" Cleopatra Lutz, co-owner of the studio along with her bloodmate Michael Brown, was the studio's main star although a number of other vampires, better known as nightwalkers, had taken the opportunity to join her in making the latest rage in realistic horror movies.

Being a nightwalker had its disadvantages in the movie business, as Cleo had found out when she'd been turned into a vampire back at the height of her career, early morning shooting schedules being the foremost. It had been Michael's idea to build a studio that could cater to the odd hours nightwalkers and other parafolk needed. When Cleo had made him her bloodmate, her one source of the life-giving blood she needed to survive, he'd made her a partner in the business as well as its star.

After eighty years in the movie business, Cleopatra Lutz was queen of the horror films again.

Al started up his car, the GTO's engine roaring into a throaty purr. He grinned as if a trip to the movie lot was a great treat. "Fasten your seat belt, Babe. We're heading for the freeway to North Hollywood."

Chapter Six

Fly By Night Films was located on what had been the Eagan Brothers lot in North Hollywood, one of many small film companies that had gone out of business with the rise of the big studios. It wasn't large but just the right size for a company that specialized in horror movies and some highly specialized visual effects work for other film companies.

What those other companies didn't know was that some of those visual effects weren't much more than setting up a camera and letting a shapeshifter, nightwalker or magic user "do their thing". When magic was real, movie magic became very easy.

The guard at the studio gate was a shapeshifter that Al knew well so there was no problem with them getting onto the lot. All that was needed was for the guard to call in to the office for them to get assurance that someone was there for them to meet with.

A tall, broad-shouldered man with dark brown hair opened the door when they parked the GTO outside the studio office. After an admiring look at the car he smiled broadly at them.

"Welcome to FBN," he said, holding out his hand. "I'm Michael Brown."

Al reached him first and shook his hand. "Al Lupas, and this is Barbara Grisloup."

Her name gave the other man pause. "Grisloup? Any relation to Tammy Grisloup?"

"My sister, Mr. Brown."

Michael smiled broadly. "For Tammy's sister, my name is Michael. What can I do for you?"

"You can tell me what you know about what my sister was doing with one of your cameras."

Al went to the trunk of the GTO and retrieved the underwater camera they'd found in Tammy's car and gave it to Michael. He took it and examined it carefully.

"It's our camera all right. Where did you get it?"

"We found it in Tammy's car, which was parked next to the beach." Barbara hesitated. "There were signs that Tammy and a man were abducted last night."

Michael's face grew serious and he indicated the door to the office behind him. "Perhaps it would be better if we talked inside."

Al and Barbara followed him into the office, which turned out to be just a desk and a couple of chairs. Behind a clear partition she saw the padded interior of a soundstage, one wall painted a deep blue. The floor in front of the wall was covered with sand.

Michael noticed where she was looking. "We're doing a set of horror pictures set next to the ocean. Kind of like the old ones with teenagers on the beach and monsters

coming out of the surf? Cleo always wanted to be in one and with bluescreen technology we can make it appear she's actually on a beach in broad sunlight. The first one is already in previews and the audiences have been very enthusiastic."

Barbara shook her head. Vampires doing beach blanket movies? That was almost as strange as the idea of her werewolf sister scuba diving. After all, werewolves were terrible swimmers so the ocean was a dangerous place for them. But somehow her sister had managed to overcome that problem and become an excellent swimmer, even winning a few medals on the high school swim team—much to her mom and dad's horror.

Barbara had always assumed upsetting her parents had been her sister's reason for taking up the sport but why would Tammy be scuba diving when her parents knew nothing about it? Nothing about that made sense.

But she could understand Cleopatra's desire to do something as ordinary as going to the beach when she wasn't able to be out in the sun. The dangerous and forbidden were always a powerful attraction. Perhaps that was why Tammy was attracted to the ocean when most shapeshifters didn't want to do more than run along the shore.

It was the call of the wilder side. Perhaps that's what she found so enticing about Al, with his less civilized ways. She knew he wasn't the kind of shapeshifter her parents would approve of but that didn't lessen his appeal. In many ways it just added to it.

In many ways she wasn't any different from her little sister. She too was attracted to the dangerous and forbidden.

The sex so far had been incredible, far beyond anything she'd ever experienced in the past, and she knew the bad dog in him was responsible for that. Barbara caught herself smiling a little at that. A woman could get used to having a man like Al around.

As if drawn by her thoughts, Al came to her and put one arm around her waist. She gazed up at him and saw the interest in his face. Not love, perhaps. At least not yet. But she knew she fascinated him. Perhaps she wasn't the only one feeling the call and that it was more than just sex and her being in heat that drew them together.

She'd like to believe that.

Michael led the way over to a desk in the small office, perched on its edge and gestured to the chairs in front of it. "Sit down and tell me what happened."

The man's serious expression grew grimmer and when Barbara mentioned the dart they'd found laced with tranquilizer he switched from concerned to angry. "Ketamine. That means whoever took them knew what Kurt and Tammy were... Either that or they were willing to risk their lives to take them prisoner. That's not a good thing."

"Did Tammy tell you why she wanted the camera? We were hoping that would lead us to whoever took them."

Michael shook his head. "Unfortunately I don't know what they wanted it for. Tammy wasn't even the one to actually borrow the camera. Kurt did that a couple of weeks ago. What he said he wanted it for was to scout new locations for our beach

monster movie. He's done a lot of underwater camera work for us so that makes sense. I can't see why that would have led someone to kidnap him and Tammy though."

"Kurt was the photographer?" Barbara frowned. "But there wasn't a wet suit for him in the trunk."

"A lot of people swim without wet suits," Al broke in and, while Michael looked surprised at the interruption, he kept silent. Barbara wondered if there was something about Kurt that Al knew and she didn't. This didn't seem to be the time to find out what that was though.

Al pointed to the camera. "Is it possible for us to get a look at whatever it was they were taking pictures of?"

Michael nodded. "We can do that. But if the camera was involved, why wouldn't whoever took them taken it as well?"

"Perhaps they didn't know about it." Barbara said. "It was buried under a lot of stuff in Tammy's trunk. Anyone seeking it would have had to search pretty thoroughly and I don't think that happened. They were snatched in the parking lot of a public beach and even late on a Friday night there would be people around."

"I don't suppose anyone saw anything."

"If they did they haven't come forward. The shifter patrol is looking into that."

Michael grimaced. "I suppose I'm going to have a visit from them as well?" Barbara thought he didn't seem at all enthusiastic about that possibility. No doubt the shapeshifter purists who made up the patrol had been unpleasant to deal with in the past.

"We've kept the camera and other things we found in the trunk from them so far," Al reassured him.

"Well that's a relief." Michael picked up the camera and headed for a computer in the corner. "Let's see if there isn't something on here. Perhaps there's a clue to what they were doing that might make someone upset enough to snatch them."

What he did to download the pictures Barbara couldn't quite follow but she decided that she'd have to find out later how to do it. Since the shifter patrol wouldn't let her join them she'd considered starting a private detective agency. Only worry about her mother's health had kept her from pursuing the idea.

A class in digital photography would be useful. A private detective needed to know how to use the tools of the trade and that would include cameras.

Within a couple of minutes Michael had a set of pictures displayed on the computer's screen. He frowned at the images. "That's interesting."

Al and Barbara crowded closer. "What is it?" she asked.

"Well I thought they were scouting film sites but they clearly used it for more than that." He pointed to one picture that was of squat building sitting on dry land with a tall fence around it. A sign on the front of the building said "Disposahaul" and parked in the driveway behind the fence was a large garbage truck.

"My sister was taking pictures of a garbage company?"

"That's what it looks like. Since we were doing a beach film, I wonder what they were doing."

"That's an underwater camera," Al said. "These were all taken on dry land." He pointed to several shots of close-ups of the Disposahaul sign with its name and logo, and similar signage on the side of truck. "They seem to have been mostly interested in the company's signs."

"So why take shots of a garbage company sign with an underwater camera?"

"Maybe because that's what they had to work with. There were probably other shots they took underwater and those have been erased." Michael looked at the camera. "These pictures were taken just yesterday. If the other shots were just recently deleted I have software I can use to find them on the camera's disk."

"Would you mind doing that?" Barbara asked.

"Not a problem. Tammy and Kurt are friends as well as fellow parafolk. We take care of each other."

Barbara couldn't help compare that with how the shifter patrol tended to only help other shifters...and not all shifters at that. They'd probably work hard to find Tammy because of who their father was but wouldn't have lifted a paw otherwise.

Michael led them to the door. "I'll let you know if I find anything. What are your cell phone numbers?"

He noted them down and walked them to their car. While they'd been inside it had grown later and the sun was just barely above the horizon. Michael nodded at that and smiled for the first time since hearing Tammy and Kurt had been taken.

"My lady will be up soon and I'll need to be there for her. She's been sleeping in our apartment in the studio recently."

They said their goodbyes and Barbara watched him hurry back inside. From what she knew about nightwalkers and their companions, Michael would be doing more than feeding Cleo for the next little while. They would be enjoying hot sex very soon.

Cleo's body thrummed at that thought. Sex, even vicarious sex, sounded overwhelmingly good. It seemed like hours since they'd made love in the hills. But they really should be looking for her sister. This was why she needed Al with her, to quiet the craving for sex that her heat was generating. Maybe she needed a sex break to get herself under control again.

"We should check out the garbage company, I suppose," Al said quietly but the look on his face made her wonder if he could read her thoughts. Or maybe her scent was telling him what was going on. Either way, his eyes had that glow in them she recognized as meaning he wanted her.

Convenient, because all she wanted was him.

"Probably. But I'm not sure I'm going to be able to concentrate."

Suddenly inspired, Barbara grabbed Al's hand and tugged him back to the door of the soundstage. It was unlocked and they were back inside and on the simulated beach set. The sand made soft crunching noises under their feet, the only sound in the deserted building. Somewhere in their private apartment, Barbara knew, Michael was holding his nightwalker woman as she woke up, and would soon be making love to her. The rest of the studio would be deserted until much later.

She found a pile of blankets on a table nearby and grabbed one. Turning to Al, she found him grinning at her as if recognizing what she wanted to do.

"Ever made love on the beach?"

He shook his head, his grin going wider. "Nope but this sounds like a fine time to try it out."

Chapter Seven

Al smiled as Babe spread the blanket onto the sand and beckoned for him to join her on it. There was the remote possibility someone might discover them here but this was a sound stage with lots of noise-proofing insulation.

Besides, the possibility of getting caught only added a bit of spice to proceedings. First they'd made love in the car and now using the set at the studio. Babe was in heat but he suspected she rarely allowed her inner wolf-bitch to govern her actions.

Maybe being with him was allowing her the freedom to be herself. He might be the bad dog in their relationship but Babe was revealing a wild side that he found intriguing.

Very intriguing.

Almost as intriguing as when Babe slipped her pants off to reveal that she hadn't put her panties back on after they'd made love in the car. Well, they hadn't been wearable after he'd ripped them off her.

But seeing her pretty pussy flushed hot pink, the labia swollen with the need her heat had imposed upon her, Al couldn't help but appreciate that nothing hid her from his sight. She leaned back onto her elbows on the blanket, knees up, and spread her legs invitingly. "What are we waiting for?"

Cock already hard enough to break rocks, Al fell to his knees in front of her and spread her knees wider. Even without the overhead lights on in the studio there was plenty of light with his enhanced vision and he took the moment to really admire her sex. The folds glistened with her arousal, the deep rose of her clit peeping impatiently from its protective hood, looking very much like the proverbial rosebud of Citizen Kane fame.

He must have looked too long because she squirmed impatiently. "Al, we don't have all night. Someone could come in at any moment."

He responded by reaching over to touch her clit gently, barely a nudge, but in Babe's enhanced state of excitement it was enough. She arched her back, letting out a squeal that carried throughout the room.

"If you don't want to get caught you'll have to be quieter than that," Al said. He touched her again and this time Babe bit down on her lower lip, willing back the scream trying to erupt from her throat.

This could be fun, making love to Babe and making her try to control her reaction. When she finally was able to climax she'd go off harder and faster than before.

From the way the day was playing out, they weren't going to have a lot of private time to spend working on giving her sexual relief. If it were possible he'd rather confine

her in his apartment for the next couple of days, keeping her satisfied and out of harm's way. But Babe was too worried about her sister for that to be a viable plan. Like earlier in the car, they were going to have to improvise places to have sex.

Using the beach set was a great idea. Too bad they were going to have to be fast about it because Babe was right, someone was likely to show up pretty soon and find them. It wouldn't bother him too much to get caught with his pants down but being discovered making love would likely embarrass his woman and that was not okay.

The urgency of the situation caught up with him. Al decided to forego further teasing of Babe and instead focused on using his hand and then his mouth to give her first one orgasm and then another one. She used the back of her hand to muffle her cries and all that emerged were soft squeaks.

Al thought they were the most endearing squeaks he'd ever heard. She was so sexually responsive, so wild beneath the designer suit she'd worn like armor the day before, and yet so nervous about it. Al loved how she responded to his lovemaking, as if she'd never experienced anything like it in the past. It was heady to have a woman react the way Babe did in his arms.

Without being in heat, would she be the same? Al wanted to know and wondered if he'd get the chance. Not likely but you never knew. Perhaps if he could bind her to him through sex she'd be willing to give a real relationship a chance.

"Al, please." Dainty hands were pulling on his shoulders with surprising strength, tugging him up and over her. "Time to fuck."

The coarse word coming from her ladylike lips made him smile but he did as she beckoned, fitting himself to her pussy opening and sliding inside with one push. He filled her and as he did he heard her sigh of relief and pleasure.

"You feel so good there," she whispered.

Feels like home, he thought but didn't say. Babe was becoming like home for him. Dangerous for him to think that way given that she was only bound to him for a few days. But there it was. Fucking Babe was as comfortable as being home. He pulled out and thrust inside again and this time her sigh was tinged with passion. Her hand went over her mouth again but he brushed it aside.

"Let me," he whispered and covered her lips with his own on the next stroke, muffling her cries with his mouth. He did the same thing as he continued to pound into her. Babe's legs wrapped around his waist and she lifted her ass with each thrust, pushing their bodies together.

It was their wildest ride yet, all force and need. Under them the blanket shifted on the loose sand and Al's hand slipped. They rolled and it was Babe on top now.

She grinned down into his face. "My turn."

Sitting up over him, she began lifting her body up and down, riding his cock. Al glanced down to where they were joined and saw how she rode him, her body taking him in, his cock glistening from her juices and his.

It was the most erotic sight he'd seen, particularly when Babe threw back her head and nearly howled her release. There was no keeping quiet now and Al joined her, vocally and physically, pushed over the edge into orgasm by her pussy's tight grip on his shaft.

His cock erupted within her, hot and pulsing.

As Al gathered his scattered thoughts, Babe leaned over him, her face flushed and pleased. It occurred to him that perhaps this was what Babe really needed, to be shown her wild side and to learn to embrace it. There was no sign of the uptight high-class werewolf bitch who'd walked into his bar, loaded up on a hormone suppressor.

This was a werewolf woman in her prime, sexually ready and aware and enjoying the heat that made her that way. He doubted she would ever see her heat the same way again.

He wasn't sure *he'd* ever see it that way again. Being with Babe like this was...extraordinary.

Babe collapsed on top of him, her heart beating strong and fast, and purred quietly in his ear, "That was amazing."

Al's enhanced hearing picked up a low chuckle coming from the doorway near the office. He twisted so that Babe was behind him and somewhat hidden from view. Lifting the blanket, he managed to cover her, although he knew already that they'd lost the battle to avoid getting caught.

In the doorway stood Michael with a slender dark-haired woman he recognized instantly as the movie star Cleopatra Lutz. She looked like it was all she could do to not laugh out loud at their predicament.

Michael's face looked somber but Al thought he saw a twinkle in the other man's eyes. "I thought you had left."

"We got distracted," Al told them. Behind him under the blanket he could feel Babe twisting about, probably trying to put her pants on.

"So I see." Michael frowned. "Do you really think our sound stage is the proper place for sex?"

Cleo lost the battle to control her composure and burst out laughing. "But Michael, it is scarcely the first time..." Her voice trailed off into a burst of giggles.

The stern expression on Michael's face dissolved and he too laughed.

Babe tossed the blanket off and emerged wearing her pants. While Al redonned his clothes she went up to Michael and Cleo. "I'm so sorry about this. You see—"

"You got carried away," Cleo took her arm and pulled her to the side. "I understand completely." She cast an admiring eye on Al as he got dressed and Barbara found herself irrationally jealous of the other woman's attention.

Cleo was a big movie star and clearly totally attached to her companion Michael. She could have no real interest in Al so Barbara had no reason to be jealous...but she was. Suddenly she didn't want any woman making eyes at her man.

Even if he was only her man for the duration of the next few days, he belonged to her. She held her tongue but when she looked at Cleo, the woman had an understanding smile.

"It is interesting, those first few days of a relationship. Very exciting but scary at the same time. So much to worry about." She patted Barbara's arm. "I envy you almost as much as I feel sorry for you. But I think you'll see your way eventually."

Al showed up at her elbow, carrying the blanket. With a hint of sheepishness he started to hand it over to Michael but the man shook his head. "Take it with you. I expect it will come in handy."

"Thank you," Al said and Barbara echoed him.

"Now get off of my sound stage," Cleo said, clapping her hands together, sounding as imperious as in any queenly role she'd ever played. "Michael and I have a night of shooting to set up for."

Al and Barbara bowed. "Yes ma'am."

Chapter Eight

Once outside Al threw the blanket into the back of the car before strapping down his seat belt.

Babe climbed into her side of the car and shook her head ruefully. "So much for not getting caught."

"I don't think they minded," Al said.

"You're right. I think they make love on that sound stage themselves now and then."

"Probably." Al grinned at her. "Can you think of a better place to role-play? So where to now?"

"Follow the clues," Babe said. "Let's head over to Disposahaul."

"What do you expect to see? This late on a Saturday they're bound to be closed for business."

"I don't know. But maybe we can get a feel for the place and figure out why Kurt and Tammy would want pictures of it."

Twenty minutes later found them outside a set of industrial buildings they recognized from the pictures. It wasn't dissimilar from any other complex in California except for a tall, electrified fence that protected the parking lot and stretched around the perimeter of the buildings. Warning signs both for shock and the presence of hazardous waste decorated the fence.

The Disposahaul sign across the front of the building told them they were in the right place.

The parking lot was empty and there didn't seem to be anyone around although Al noticed that cameras were mounted near the roof at the front of the building and the corners. A chill went down his spine.

Normal shapeshifters didn't have psi powers but he wasn't completely normal either. He could swear that someone was watching them right now.

* * * * *

"Hey, Bob. Looks like we have company."

Bob lifted his head from his sex and crime novel, muttering over the interruption. He'd just gotten to a good part. "Cops?"

His partner peered at the screen. "No. Might be someone is lost. Or maybe looking for a quiet place to make out."

Bob leaned over and examined the monitor screen. "Interesting. Pretty unusual car to see in these parts. Classic GTO. People who own that kind of car usually have someplace better to make out than in front of a garbage company."

They both watched as the car moved slowly across the front of the building then turned and drove by again. The window went down and a pale face looked intently at the building.

All of Bob's instincts went on alert. "They're checking us out."

"Nothing for them to see."

"True enough. But the fact they're interested in looking is enough. We're to call in case of trouble." A couple driving a classic GTO didn't necessarily mean trouble but he wasn't paid to take chances. Bob reached for the phone. "Get their license plate number for me. Maybe we'll have someone keep an eye on them for the rest of the evening."

* * * * *

Al didn't like the look of the quiet buildings but there wasn't much they could do about it. There were too many high fences and too many locks to defeat, particularly given the cameras which he could almost swear were inspecting them. He watched as Babe rolled down the window and tried to sense something to tell her if Tammy was there.

"Anything?" he asked.

"No. No sign." There was no scent of her sister in the air.

Apparently heading for Disposahaul's headquarters was a dead end. They couldn't even get close to the buildings without climbing the fence and they weren't going to risk a shock without proof that her sister was in the building. It would be better to come back when they might be open for business.

"What do you want to do now, Babe?"

She shook her head. "This isn't a small storefront with easy-to-defeat locks and no security. We'd have to be desperate to go after these people...or far more certain than we are."

Al nodded, enjoying for the moment her inclusion of himself in the "we" part of that statement. Babe leaned back into the seat and admitted defeat.

"I don't think we can do much more tonight."

"Okay. So where to now?"

"I'm not sure." She laughed bitterly. "I think I could use a drink."

Al agreed. "You and me both. So where do you want to go?"

Babe stared at him for a moment. Then she smiled. "I know," she said. "I want to go to the Asylum."

Al hoped he hadn't flinched as he put the car in gear and directed it out onto the street.

The Lunatic's Asylum was the trendiest and most exclusive shapeshifter club in Los Angeles. Its clientele was of the most upper crust in shifter society...others were accepted as guests of accepted members only and no other parafolk need apply.

It wasn't the cost of the place that bugged Al as much as the exclusivity. He knew that going to such a place would be difficult for him, even if Babe didn't. But they were rumored to have a terrific kitchen and if that was where she wanted to go then he'd be happy to accommodate her.

This could be a kind of test. After all, women like Babe lived for places like the Asylum and maybe she was worried he wouldn't fit in. Proving he was capable of moving in her circles might go some way to making her a more permanent part of his life.

It was a test he knew he was likely to fail once they pulled into the parking lot of the Asylum. One look at the supercilious parking attendant who rushed forward to open Babe's door and Al suspected he was going to end the evening punching someone out, possibly starting with the man whose hands were all over his woman.

Damn, she was still in heat and from the look in the young shifter's eye he knew it. Probably at one time or another he'd been called upon to deal with the needs of some female aristocrat, given the anticipatory look in his welcoming grin.

Al eyed Babe suspiciously. She didn't have any plans for a threesome did she? He was a one-woman, one-man kind of guy and didn't want to play sex games that included more than just her and him. Babe startled as the young shifter leaned forward to whisper something in her ear and Al had to resist the urge to charge in fists swinging. She shook her head and pulled away before Al reached them. Grabbing the keys from him, she handed them to the parking attendant.

"Keep it close by, Raoul," she told him after a quick glance at Al. "We probably aren't staying long."

Given Al would really rather take her home and make hot love to her than hang out in an exclusive and probably overrated nightclub, that was definitely true. Al followed her into the building, fully prepared to exit, stage whatever, as soon as possible.

He had to admit though, the Asylum certainly lived up to its glitzy reputation. It was worth coming just to see the decorating scheme of the interior, a combination of Hollywood glamour and shapeshifter chic. Classic monster movie posters lined the white walls, separated by Greek-styled columns that could have come straight from an old epic black-and-white movie. Inside some archways were murals with stylized images of the deep woods they all yearned to run in, and other scenes equally inviting.

Even the smell of the place soothed his senses, the smells of nature mixed with something just a little more exotic. It overpowered all those other smells usually found in a city, the scents of diesel and gasoline, rotten food and the intense smell of man.

The result was odd but Al liked it.

What he didn't like was the way the maître d' stared at him as if he'd stepped out in public wearing only his underwear. Al glanced down at his black jeans and black

muscle shirt, perfect for their investigating Babe's sister's disappearance. No, it wasn't a designer suit, but this was West Hollywood for heaven's sake – what he wore was close to eveningwear in some circles.

Apparently not at the Asylum it would seem. Babe was also getting a funny look, as if her clothes were also out of order. The *maître d'* even had the nerve to sniff.

He knew she wasn't wearing underwear and had been fucked several times today but no shapeshifter should be sniffing her like that. It was rude to notice.

But then he realized it wasn't her clothes the man was looking at and his sniffing was an affectation. The man was looking down his long nose at the two of them as if wondering why she was with him. All of a sudden Al knew that the man knew who and what he was and clearly wondered what Babe was doing on his arm. He braced himself for another scene like the one on the beach with the shifter patrol.

Barbara took in the way George was staring at her and was initially embarrassed. It had been ages since she'd been here. The last time had been one of the many charity events her father insisted was a better use of her time than the detective work she enjoyed so much. That night she'd worn a designer gown and played the part of a werewolf lady of high society.

So her garb this evening wasn't exactly *haut couture*. George had no business giving her the evil eye because of it. Her chin went up one notch in response and she resolved that she wasn't going to be driven away by a haughty headwaiter. "We'd like a table, George."

He glanced at his book but she doubted he really needed to read it. He knew she didn't have a reservation but this early in the evening there should be tables open. No, he was buying time, wondering if he'd really have to find a place to put her and Al or if they would get the message and leave.

Barbara was in no mood for that kind of nonsense. Frustration over not immediately finding her sister and having to wait to investigate the Disposahaul facility – not to mention how she was still in heat – had her more than a little antsy. Sure she could go someplace else with Al and have a martini but she was dogged if she was going to let this pipsqueak get away with turning her away.

Instead she folded her arms and narrowed her gaze at him. "I'm sure that there must be a back booth open at this time of day. Why don't you check and see, George?"

George must have picked up on her mood for his attitude changed immediately. "Right this way," he said with another sniff and led the way into the back of the club where those wanting seclusion usually sat. Barbara hadn't ever been in this area but she knew that the rich and famous were usually seated there, sometimes even a rare human movie star. They were there to be kept out of the public eye.

She and Al were being put there for the same purpose – just not the same reasons. That would have upset her more if she hadn't wanted a drink so bad. Barbara felt so wound up that she like she was ready to jump out of her skin.

Al gave her a suspicious look as they settled into the booth at the far end of the room, the only illumination inside from a small flickering scented candle in a jar. The scent was a heavy floral one used to mask the earthy odors of shifters who'd been recently engaged in sex. Not only did George want her out of the public eye, but out of the public smell.

It was romantic in a way—but her blood boiled over as Al's gaze grew knowing and she realized that her problem stemmed more from her condition than George's insolence.

"It seems that the relief you got from our session this afternoon has worn off," Al said quietly, moving to sit closer to her on the bench seat. He rested one hand on her thigh, the firm weight both a comfort and a sensual distraction.

She shook her head in dismay. "I guess this wasn't such a good idea. We should have gone back to your place."

Leaning back, Al gave her a wicked grin. "Oh, I don't know. This could be kind of fun, taking care of you in a public place like this."

Barbara felt her eyes widen. The sound stage where they could have been walked in on at any time had been bad enough, particularly when a nightwalker and psi with keen senses were about, but there at least there'd been the semblance of privacy.

"We couldn't—not here! There are shapeshifters everywhere. They'll hear..." The super-plus hearing of a shapeshifter could pick up any increase in breathing, much less any sound she made.

"Not if you keep very quiet. Besides," he nodded at the end of the room where there was a small stage and a band settling into their seats and tuning their instruments, "I predict once they start playing no one will be able to hear a thing."

Sure enough, once the musicians started playing they drew the attention of all present, and as music filled the room Barbara relaxed a little. Maybe this wasn't such a bad idea.

Then Al slid his hand into the cleft of her thighs. Without thinking Barbara spread her legs, giving him better access, and he delved deep into her pussy.

Oh my.

"You are so wet," he whispered into her ear.

Yes. Barbara spread her knees further apart and caught her breath as he teased her clit into full awareness. Her jaw clenched with the strain of keeping her mouth shut but she didn't make a sound.

Al loosened the top of her pants so he could get direct access to her skin. The swollen flesh of her nether lips was hot and slippery with arousal. He dipped his fingers between the heated lips to find her opening, equally hot and wet, and stroked deep inside. His thumb teased her clit and she wiggled against his hand. One of her hands clutched his arm, her nails digging into the skin.

And yet no sound erupted from her. Not a cry or even a moan. She was silence itself. Only her body reacted to his sensual torture, not her mouth.

It became a game of sorts. He tried to get her to react but she wouldn't.

She didn't make a noise but the scent of her body, aroused and needy, filled the air in the small booth. Close as he was Al couldn't help but react. He kept to the need for silence but it was a hard thing to do as his own arousal took over. His cock grew hard and heavy for her. He wanted nothing better than to pull her back further into the shadows of the booth and push her forward onto her knees, pull her pants down further and take her hard and fast from behind.

In the booths around them were others like themselves, other shifters there to enjoy the music and in some way enjoy each other. He had to keep silent to keep their neighbors from knowing what they did. Babe was his mate for the moment and he wouldn't embarrass her in front of her peers. At least with the overwhelming scents of the place no one could possibly smell their arousal.

The bad dog had to behave himself in this place at this time. He might not like it but he couldn't hurt his woman that way. His cock would simply have to stay in his pants.

Babe's hand brushed his cock and thoughts of keeping silent fled his mind for a moment. He growled low in his throat, only at the last moment remembering to turn his face to bury his mouth against her neck.

Al gave Babe's neck a small nip. "Don't touch, Babe. This is all for you."

She gave off the smallest of whimpers but then returned to silence. Fighting his own sexual hunger, Al returned to stroking his fingers deeper and deeper within her, feeling the sheath tighten around his fingers until it was difficult to move. Then he felt her inner walls ripple against his skin, milking his fingers the way they did his cock when it was within her. That and the tension in her body were the only signs she was coming, a hard fast orgasm that took her by surprise.

He knew because of the look in her eyes when she opened them to stare into his. Bright and astonished that she could have released so hard in such a short time and in a place she'd normally not be at all uninhibited in.

Al could have shouted his triumph but kept as quiet as she did. Only his satisfied and possibly a little smug smile told her how pleased he was.

Babe had trusted him to touch her here and that he'd be able to satisfy her without causing a scene. Having her trust was almost as good as having her commitment for the future.

If nothing else, it was sign of something growing between them that was far more than the sexual relationship they'd undertaken. He might have known Babe for less than twenty-four hours but he was very close to falling hard for her.

From the look in her eyes she might be thinking something very close to the same thing. For the first time in years Al wished he might have taken a little more after his mother than his father. He would have loved to know what was on Babe's mind.

By now the first song from the band had ended. Babe had had at least two orgasms and was finally able to look at Al without thinking about tearing his clothes off and fucking him on the seat in the booth.

Barbara leaned back against the red velvet, panting, trying to catch her breath. Al grinned at her knowingly. "Maybe we should continue this back at home?"

Maybe. "I still haven't gotten my drink."

Al looked about. "I can't say much for the service here."

"Neither can I." Usually at the Asylum she'd be served within moments of arrival. Maybe it was their position in the back of the room but tonight the waitstaff seemed bent on ignoring Al and her. Not that she'd really have wanted them to interrupt them earlier but the neglect had become ridiculous. Now that she wasn't distracted the band was too loud and not even very good.

Barbara grabbed her bag. "Let's go, Al. If they don't want us here then we should oblige them."

He grabbed her arm and helped her out of the booth. Not that she needed it. Well, except that her legs did wobble a little when her feet met the floor. Heart-stopping orgasms did that to a woman sometimes.

Again she caught the self-satisfied look on his face and resisted the urge to grin back. The man was very full of himself tonight. Deservedly so, she had to admit.

"Would you like to go someplace I suggest?" Al asked.

"The Dog House?"

Al shrugged. "No...even now I wouldn't trust those horny dogs around you—I'd be beating them off you with a stick all night. Not a very relaxing way to spend an evening. I have a better idea."

She decided that she wouldn't even question what he had in mind. Instead she took his arm and let him lead her back to the front, ignoring George's hasty attempt to speak to her as she passed.

Al went ahead to get the car while she waited at the door and George finally caught up with her. "I'm sorry you must leave so soon, Ms. Grislop. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening and that we'll see you again soon."

She stopped at the door and turned her haughtiest glare on him. "No, George. I'm pretty sure that I won't be back for quite a while."

"But, Ms. Grislop..."

She turned to face him. "Listen, George. I've probably been as guilty as anyone when it comes to making quick judgments about people. I know Al isn't the kind of man that I usually hang out with. But you know something? I'd rather be with him than the kind of man I normally see." She looked the dapper young shifter up and down. "And that includes someone like you. Al is a gentleman in all the ways that count."

And with that she left, leaving the man's jaw to drop in her absence.

Chapter Nine

Al enjoyed how Babe's eyes lit up when they drove into the parking lot of the Dark Water Tavern. The seaside bar and restaurant was his favorite watering hole, next to his own place, of course. Run by Jonathan Knottman, the parafolk city chief, along with his wife and bloodmate Sharon, it was everything a good bar should be—good food, good drink and good times for all.

Unlike their previous stop, the Dark Water Tavern was also open to anyone who cared to show up, be they fur, fang or psi...or even just plain normal. Jonathan and his people didn't care what you were so long as who you were was in their opinion "good people". They considered Al good to know—he knew they'd love Babe.

Just as he was beginning to believe that he loved Babe. For better or for worse, whether or not it was wise to fall for a woman not in his class, she was the woman he wanted.

Swinging along the front, he found a place to stop near the edge of the road. There was no parking attendant...instead Jonathan made sure there were plenty of parking spots for his guests.

Babe came to a halt once inside the place, looking about with obvious delight. "It looks like a club from the twenties." The interior was all chrome and glass, with art-deco painted walls and stained glass windows, except for the long set of windows on the wall facing the sea. That gave a view of the ocean, restless and moving.

A shapeshifter Al knew bounded over to them, a welcoming grin on his face. "Al, great to see you. And your friend." He gave Barbara a long look then leaned in a little closer, obviously taking in her condition. He quickly backed off at Al's low growl.

He held up his hands in surrender. "Not to worry. I can tell she's your meat. So how about a table for two? Near the window, good view of the stage? Sharon is performing in about fifteen minutes so your timing couldn't be better."

Moments later Barbara took her first sip of a perfect vodka martini flavored with just a hint of wolfsbane and relaxed into the comfortable bench seat. A little while later their dinner arrived, steak tartare for Al and a barely-touched-by-flame salmon steak for Barbara. After the day they'd had, running around and sexual exercise, they dug into their dinners and consumed them with the gusto only a shapeshifter could feel.

Barbara and Al finished their meals and ordered coffee. When it came Barbara settled back in her seat to enjoy the rich, freshly made cup.

She looked about and smiled. "Now this is what I call a good joint."

"Yeah, me too. Sometimes I wish the Dog House could be this classy."

Barbara leaned closer. "It does good business, right? Appeals to your clientele?"

Al shrugged. "Yeah. We do good business. Plenty of shifters about who'd rather go there than here. For one thing it's cheaper. Still, we could use a little sprucing up."

"Maybe you could offer something that the Dark Water Tavern doesn't have. Like karaoke?"

Al laughed. "Have you ever heard a bunch of shifters sing? It is too scary for words."

Babe shrugged. "It was just a thought. The point of karaoke is more to have fun than to produce great music. Not that I have anything against great music."

Just then a soft guitar chord sounded over the crowd noise and everyone at the tavern's tables grew silent. A spotlight lit the corner stage and there was a slender blonde woman holding an acoustic guitar. From the mellow sound of the chord still hanging in the air, a very good guitar.

Al smiled and leaned back. "If you want great music, Babe, we've come to the right place. That's Sharon."

With a welcoming smile the singer introduced herself and began a folksong, an old favorite of the crowd from the murmured approval and applause once she was done. Her voice was mellow and rich and Barbara warmed immediately to the singer.

From there she moved into other songs, some Barbara recognized, others she didn't.

"She writes her own music," Al told her when she asked about one song, where the lyrics were about werewolves singing under a full moon.

"Very talented."

"Yeah. And a very nice lady too."

After much applause Sharon finally said into the microphone, "I understand we have some special guests tonight. I'd like to dedicate this next song to them." She began a low chord in a minor key in a slow rocking rhythm that reminded Barbara of the ocean. She wasn't surprised to hear when Sharon began singing that the lyrics were about the sea outside the window.

"The water of the ocean
Is blue and green and cold
I live sometimes above it
I live sometime below

It's in my blood to love it
It's in my heart to care
My love she understands this
And my ocean love she shares

We spend our time together
In her world and in mine
But making love is sweeter
In water made of brine

Though I live my life on land
Though along the sand I roam
I can't forget the ocean
For the water is my home."

Her song ended and was greeted with great applause but in particular from a corner of the room where Barbara saw a large group of people stand up to give the singer their approval. Sharon smiled and nodded to them and Barbara understood that was the group Sharon had been honoring with her song.

"Do you know who they are?" she asked Al.

For once he seemed uncomfortable but he answered her. "They're selkies."

"Selkies? I've heard of them but I thought they were just legends."

"No more legend than we are. Originally they came from the British isles. They are parafolk, like us. People who live in the ocean. There they look like seals but can change to human form when they want to."

"So they're shapeshifters?"

"Kind of. But unlike us, when they change to human their skin slips off."

"Their skin slips off? You mean like a fur coat?"

Barbara froze in place but inside her mind thoughts whirled. She thought about Kurt, her sister's boyfriend, the one with the strong interest in keeping the ocean clean. She thought of the way her sister had developed a similar interest to the point of learning how to dive. But there was only scuba gear for one, Tammy.

Apparently Kurt didn't need dive gear. But he did need the contents of the garment bag—the fur coat that smelled of the ocean.

She felt a flush come over her, but hot as her cheeks became a cold pit grew in her stomach. She turned to Al. "Kurt is a selkie, isn't he?"

Al sat still but he only hesitated a moment in answering. "I suspect so," he said reluctantly.

Barbara couldn't believe her ears. "You knew this? That she was dating a-a..."

"A selkie? I didn't know but I suspected once I saw that coat." Al gave her a worried look. "Does it bother you that much that he isn't a werewolf?"

"Of course it bothers me!" Barbara cried. "From the sound of it they are actually dating. Tammy shouldn't be doing that with someone outside her kind. Suppose she falls in love with him? She couldn't marry him!"

Al folded his arms and stared at her. "Why not? If they love each other why couldn't they get married?"

"It's not done. We can't marry outsiders."

"Why not? The other parafolk marry outside their kind all the time, like nightwalkers and their companions."

"But not us. We need to think about the next generation, Al. Her kids...they'd be half-breeds. Not shifter, not selkie."

Al stared and Barbara felt his disappointment. "They'd be children," he said softly. "If their parents love each other the children would be loved as well. They'd grow up to be parafolks one way or another. Does this matter that much to you?"

"Of course it does, Al. We can't have mixed parafolk marriages. Shifters have to marry each other to keep the bloodlines pure. We aren't like nightwalkers who can't reproduce. They can marry anyone they want. Our cubs are our next generation. We can't be diluting it with non-werewolf genes."

Al's lips tightened and she saw the grimness in his eyes. "I see you really feel strongly about this. I'm sorry."

Barbara shook her head. "When I get hold of that sister of mine I'll give her something to think about. Our parents will have a fit if they ever find out."

"Well I guess that gives us another good reason to look for them," Al said quietly. "To keep your folks from knowing their daughter is dating someone they wouldn't approve of." He gestured to the waiter for the check. "I think we should pay another visit to Oceans Forever."

She nodded. "No one will be there this time of night."

"I know. And that will make looking for answers a whole lot easier. We'll stop at my place to trade cars just in case someone is watching who saw us earlier. Also we should change clothes." He looked her up and down. "I think we need to dress a little less conspicuously."

Chapter Ten

The alley was very dark as they slowly drove Babe's car down it. Since no one around there had seen her smaller car, they'd decided to use it instead of Al's far more memorable GTO. Al had locked his car in the garage for safekeeping, Tammy's gear and that mysterious fur coat still in the trunk.

Keeping to the center of the smelly and narrow alley, Barbara eased the car to a stop outside the back door to Oceans Forever.

She climbed out of the driver's seat and the oversized black t-shirt she wore rode up, giving Al a chance to admire her tightly clad rear end. Babe was one woman who wore a pair of black leggings well. He shook his head as his cock admired it too. Even with their morning, noon and late afternoon sexual encounters that part of his anatomy was still interested. He imagined entering her from behind and it jumped in agreement.

All the sex they'd had and they hadn't gotten around to doing it doggy-style yet, his favorite position. Funny thing about that. At least it always had been his favorite, but with Babe he had to admit he liked seeing her face, particularly when she was close to coming. The ecstasy in her eyes, the way she smiled just afterward...he liked that.

Maybe a little too much. He was falling for the lovely Babe and now he knew just how much he wasn't her type. It was possible that once her heat was over and she was back to normal she'd think about expanding her type to include him but he wasn't counting on it.

He hadn't had that much luck with ladies before...or any other kind of woman for that matter. At least not once they'd met the rest of his family.

Al resisted a sigh. At least he'd probably be able to avoid that confrontation with Babe. Not much reason for him to introduce her to his mother while they were trying to find Tammy. Now that he knew her feelings about mixed marriages and the offspring they produced he had no intention of letting her get anywhere near his mom.

He had no illusions about having any future relationship with Babe. It just wasn't going to happen.

Now he followed her down the alley to the back door. There was a momentary clatter of metal and he realized she'd pulled out a set of lock picks. But when she shone her narrow beam flashlight on the door, she gasped.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Someone has been here already. The lock is smashed."

Quickly Al moved to her side. Sure enough the doorknob hung askew, as if someone had taken a hammer to it. When Al gave the door an experimental push it swung open.

Babe started to go inside but Al put one hand on her arm. "Let's be cautious. Listen close and make sure no one is still here."

Using his hypersensitive hearing, he detected the soft sound of a clock ticking but nothing else. No telltale breathing of whoever had broken the door's lock.

Finally he nodded the all-clear to Babe and she moved through the door as silently as a werewolf could move. Al followed her just as quietly.

Al looked around the place, noting what seemed to be new disorder, boxes torn open and the brochures they'd brought thrown all over the place. "Looks like we were right about the reason for the attack on your sister. No reason to do this unless someone was looking for something."

Once inside Babe went immediately to the narrow workbench on the far wall. A blank space showed where a large piece of equipment had been and no longer was.

Babe frowned. "This isn't what I saw earlier today. More than just the computer is missing. Someone moved things and took stuff. There were racks of test tubes and record books. Those are all gone now."

He joined her at the bench, noting the empty space. "We should have pressed Thompson this afternoon. Found out what was going on and gotten what we needed."

With a sigh Babe settled onto the tall stool next to the workbench. "We can still find Thompson and ask him about what Tammy and Kurt were doing for them." She waved a hand around the mess that surrounded them. "He can't very well tell us that their disappearance isn't involved. Not after this."

"Assuming we can find him."

"There is that. Thompson might run and make it difficult for us."

"Or I might not be that hard to find at all." The lights flickered on and Babe and Al both leapt to their feet. Thompson stood in the doorway from the front of the building, blinking at them in the harsh glare of the overhead light.

He glared equally harshly at them. Glancing around the disheveled contents of the room, he looked totally pissed. "And did you find what else you were looking for?"

Al held up his hands. "We're not responsible for this."

"Of course not. How silly of me to think otherwise."

Barbara stood and walked over to him then grabbed his arm. His anger moved to shock as she used shifter strength to pull him over to the door. Al stepped back and let her handle the situation.

Pointing to the broken lock, she growled at him. "If we'd opened that door we'd have used something other than a hammer to do the job. Nor would we have made a mess like this." She grinned up at him, showing all of her teeth, and he actually looked worried.

An annoyed female werewolf could show a lot of teeth when she wanted to.

"So if you didn't do this..."

"Someone is sending you a message," she hissed into his face. "Someone I think is involved with the snatching of my sister and her boyfriend. Since they meant this message for you, I think you must know who they are and what that message is."

She pushed him hard against the wall and leaned in, holding him in place with one arm. "Maybe you should share that information with us."

Thompson blinked at Babe in astonishment and Al shared his surprise. He hadn't seen Babe this angry before. Some of it was her hormones but not all of it—she really cared for Tammy and wanted to rescue her. He liked how deep her feelings went for her sister and wondered if she'd ever feel that way about a man. Not that she'd ever care about him that way.

He was also surprised at how turned on he got at seeing her angry. It made him want to put all the energy she put out into productive activities—like making love with him.

At the moment though, sex seemed to be far from Babe's mind. She growled into Thompson's face until the man looked fearful for his life. He glanced over at Al, clearly hoping someone would rescue him. To make certain the other man knew just what kind of trouble he was in, Al waited a few moments before walking over to them.

He put his hand on Babe's arm. "Maybe you should give the man a chance to catch his breath. Hard to talk when you're scared shitless."

If anything Babe's vicious grin widened. "He hasn't soiled himself yet."

Thompson's eyes grew bigger and he actually looked like he might embarrass himself that way. She reached out her free hand and let her fingers grow into claws. Al thought they looked dainty compared to his own shifted paws but her victim didn't seem to share his opinion. One super-sharp claw scratched a thin red line down his cheek.

Al sighed. Good shapeshifter, bad shapeshifter—why was it he usually had to be the good shapeshifter? Being bad always looked like more fun.

He seized Babe's transformed hand and pulled it away from Thompson's face. "Don't damage him where it will show, sweetheart."

Babe pointed to the man's crotch. "It won't show there."

Thompson looked on the verge of panic and Al decided things had gone far enough. "You ready to talk to us?"

The other man swallowed hard. "Yeah, sure. Just let go of me."

"Hear that, Babe? The man wants to cooperate. You can let go of him now."

She actually looked sulky and Al wasn't completely sure she was putting it on. Grumbling, she released Thompson and let him collapse against the wall. She crossed her arms and glared at him.

"So talk. Who took my sister?"

Thompson rubbed his throat. "She and Kurt were doing some investigative work for us."

"Investigating who?"

The other man sighed. "A couple of months ago Kurt discovered a fish kill-off in Santa Monica Bay. It was too small to make anyone take notice even after he reported it to the authorities so he came to us."

"My sister got kidnapped over some dead fish?"

"It wasn't just that. The fish kill was small but we knew it was most likely only the tip of an iceberg. Something like that only happens when someone gets careless...or is careless on purpose. So we investigated and sure enough we found out it was the latter."

"What do you mean, 'careless on purpose'?" Al asked.

"I mean it wasn't an accident. Kurt and Tammy found it was due to an illegal dump of toxic waste. They had to dive pretty deep but they found some barrels on the seafloor with a company logo on them. It took some doing but we tracked them to a waste management company called Disposahaul."

Babe looked thoughtful. "That explains the pictures they took. Some were of the front of the company's building, showing the logo. They must have found the same logo on the barrels."

"This company dumped barrels of hazardous waste into the sea?" Al asked. "There are plenty of laws against that. Why not call the police?"

"We were going to but we needed enough evidence to make a clear case against them. When we first went to the EPA those we talked to told us that Disposahaul has some important government contacts. It would be our word against them and we needed more than a few abandoned barrels. They could always say that the barrels had been sold to someone else or stolen from one of their storage yards. We needed more proof. If we knew they were dumping on a regular basis we could catch them in the act and take pictures or video of their actions."

"So you had them stake out the area and watch for suspicious boats?" Hence the underwater camera and scuba gear that they'd found in Tammy's car. This was starting to make a certain amount of sense, Al thought.

"Something like that."

"But they must have become obvious after a while. Someone must have caught sight of Tammy and Kurt when they were out scouting for evidence and kidnapped them to stop them from giving it to the authorities," Babe said.

"There is a lot of money in these hazardous waste contracts and if the Environmental Protection Agency finds out a company is disposing of waste by dumping it illegally then they can be put out of business indefinitely." Thompson looked around at the mess surrounding them. "Of course now they have the evidence we collected."

Babe didn't look appeased at all. "I still think it was stupid to put a couple of kids in danger over a few dead fish."

"You wouldn't feel that way if it was your next meal these people were poisoning. The ocean is home to many species and they deserve a decent place to live."

"You're right," she said. "It isn't my home. I don't eat that much fish, I don't swim in the ocean and I don't care that much about what happens to it. My sister's the odd one in the family that way."

Al decided to jump in before the argument got hotter. "Babe, if someone was dumping poison in the Chatsworth Hills you know you'd be doing just what these folks were doing." He deliberately picked one of the places he knew shifters like Babe's family went during the full moon to run free. His point struck home as some of the anger disappeared from her face and a more thoughtful look took its place.

"Kurt has the right to be protective of his home," he finished.

"He doesn't have the right to drag my sister into danger."

"No," Al agreed. "But she has the right to choose to follow him there."

He could tell from her expression that Babe didn't like that answer but she didn't argue it. Finally she nodded. "Okay, so we think they were kidnapped by this garbage company."

"You really think that Disposahaul would abduct someone? Breaking and entering is one thing but that's..." Thompson's voice trailed off.

"All I know is that they are missing and they were working to get evidence on the company," Al said. "That can't be a coincidence. Trouble is, what are we going to do about it?"

Thompson shook his head. "I could try going to the police about the break-in but they'll just say it was kids looking for something to steal to buy drugs. That happens a lot in this neighborhood. With the evidence we collected gone we can't prove it was Disposahaul."

"Did they really get everything?" Al asked.

"Pretty much. I have some backups at home and the company we used to analyze the water samples probably has records as well. But nothing is left that would be conclusive enough to take to court."

"If they've abducted Kurt and Tammy then dumping toxic waste isn't the biggest crime they've committed," Babe said grimly. "It is the one that will get them into the most trouble."

Al slipped one of the Dog House's business cards into Thompson's hand. He'd penned his cell phone number on it. "You'll let us know if you think of anything else." At the man's nod, Al pointed toward the door. "Let's go, Babe."

She looked like she wanted to argue but finally shrugged and led the way to the back door.

Al opened it and stepped out into the alley.

The first shot was high, bouncing off the wall to the left of the doorway, but the next one hit closer, taking a deep slice out of Al's arm. He shouted and grabbed Babe,

intending to push her back into the office, but a third shot rang out and he saw it strike home in her shoulder.

They landed on the floor and Thompson shoved the door closed, jerking a file cabinet down to hold it in place.

Babe screamed, her hand clawing at the blood-soaked spot on her shoulder. "Silver," she gasped just before passing out.

Silver bullets? Al groaned. Whoever these people were they knew way too much about who they were dealing with. With his shifter hearing he listened at the door until he heard the sounds of car doors slamming, an engine start, and then tires squealing as a car pulled away fast. Apparently their attackers were happy with their two hits, figuring the silver would do the job. Either that or they didn't want to hang around for the police to show up.

"They're gone," he announced to Thompson. Turning, he found the other man examining Babe's shoulder before grabbing a first-aid kit out of a filing cabinet. Thompson pulled out a large roll of gauze to hold against the wound.

"I guess we can safely say that whoever we're dealing with might stoop to kidnapping. They don't seem to draw the line at murder either," Al said. "You know what you're doing?"

"Two years as a medic in the military. Mostly non-action but it did leave some skills." Thompson started taping down the roll of gauze. He pointed to the phone. "You should call an ambulance. I can probably keep the bleeding under control but the bullet is still in there and she needs a doctor."

"No," Al said. "We can't go to a regular hospital." He shook his head, trying to clear it, rubbing where his own wound was. It was slight enough for him, even though the bullet had been silver and had left traces in the wound. But silver wasn't as big a problem as it would be for his lady.

Babe needed attention but a hospital wouldn't do. Fortunately there was a local alternative.

Hauling away the cabinet to open the door, Al lifted Babe into his arms. "You get the police here and show them what happened. Someone taking shots will get them to take this robbery seriously."

"What about her?" Thompson pointed to Babe, still unconscious in his arms.

Al sighed, accepting the inevitable. "She'll be okay. I know just where to take her."

Chapter Eleven

When Barbara awoke it was in a soft bed, in an unfamiliar room, wearing an unfamiliar flannel nightgown. Lifting her head, she saw flowered wallpaper decorating the walls and daylight streaming in through the curtained window.

The burning pain that she remembered from the night before was just that, a distant memory. Sitting up, she tugged open the top of the nightgown to bare her shoulder. The area looked nearly healed but she could still see the mark of a bullet hole on her skin. She checked the other side but there wasn't an exit wound.

She'd been shot with a silver bullet that had stayed in her body...the worst possible scenario for a shifter. But somehow she'd survived.

Not only had she survived but she felt terrific, better than she had in days. Perhaps Al had taken her to one of the small private hospitals that the parafolk ran to take care of their own in the case of injuries that couldn't be healed without help, but she didn't think so. No hospital she knew of had wallpaper.

Nor did they provide flannel nightgowns or fuzzy wolf-headed slippers like the ones she found next to the bed when she decided to get up. Nor was there any faint taint of disinfectant that even the best place of healing would have.

No, this looked, smelled and felt like someone's home, not an institution.

Particularly the smell since, unless she missed her guess, that was bacon cooking.

Mouth watering, Barbara donned the robe she found on a hook inside the door, like the nightgown just a shade too large, and opened the door to find out where the tantalizing smell was coming from.

She followed her nose down the hall and then the stairs, which ended in a large family room just off a modern kitchen. A short pleasantly plump woman with dark wavy hair in a stylish cut was bustling about in front of a gas stove, taking turns between turning the bacon frying in a pan and flipping pancakes.

"Don't just stand there. I could use some help," the woman said without looking over her shoulder. Given that Barbara had entered the room as quietly as a shifter knew how to move, she knew the other woman had to be some kind of parafolk.

She wasn't a shifter though. Barbara knew that from the human scent that even the cooking smells couldn't cover. It was broad daylight so the woman wasn't a nightwalker either, since she'd be dead to the world otherwise.

So that meant the woman was most likely a Psi, which was probably also why she knew Barbara was in the room.

With a grin Barbara stepped briskly into the kitchen and took over cooking the bacon. Like most shifters, Barbara enjoyed her meat either raw or only slightly cooked,

but she loved cooked bacon and had a sweet tooth as well and pancakes was one of her favorite meals.

The women worked peacefully beside each other for several minutes before Barbara finally ventured to speak. "I'm Barbara."

The woman looked at her and smiled. "So I was told. My name's Martha."

"Hello, Martha. Did you... That is, were you the one who healed me?"

Some of the other woman's cheer faded and she turned her attention back to her pancakes. "Yes. But perhaps we better wait for explanations until after breakfast."

"But Al..."

"Al brought you here last night."

"He got me here? But he was hit as well." Even a slight wound by a silver bullet should have incapacitated Al.

"Not as badly. The bullet only grazed him. He was mostly healed by the time he got here."

Mostly healed? Then perhaps the other bullet hadn't been silver. She started to ask another question but Martha pointed to the pan. "I'm pretty sure you aren't going to want burned bacon."

Flushing, Barbara busied herself with finishing the bacon while Martha looked on. Finally the other woman smiled, clearly reading her anxiety. "Albert is fine. As I said, everything will be explained later." She leveled a steely glare at Barbara. "*After breakfast.*"

Biting back the rest of her questions Barbara helped Martha set up the table in the corner of the kitchen to eat at, plates, silverware, glasses and cups, place settings for three. Clearly someone else was expected to join them for breakfast.

Al, she hoped.

The food was put in place and Martha was indicating a chair for her to sit in when the third member of their breakfast clutch wandered down the stairs. It was Al, of course, looking like he was awake under protest. He was unshaven and wearing a plain white t-shirt and worn-through-the-knees sweatpants that appeared a size smaller than they should have been. Barbara looked for signs that he'd been injured the night before. The only signs that something was amiss were the scowl on his face and the dark bags under his eyes, denoting his lack of sleep.

When he saw Barbara he walked faster into the room and pulled her into his arms. For a long time he just held her and Barbara relaxed into his hold, finding comfort in being held.

"I'm so glad you're all right," he whispered into her hair.

"Thanks to Martha, I guess," she murmured back. "Somehow she healed me."

From where she was seated at the table Martha clapped her hands, regaining their attention. "As I said earlier, *breakfast is ready*. No discussion until after we eat."

With a slightly crooked grin, Al released Barbara and led her to the table, seating her opposite Martha then taking the seat between them. The older woman took Al's hand and reached across the table for Barbara's.

"Over this food we meet in peace. Blessings be."

"Blessings be," Al responded and Barbara echoed him. The words came easily from him, as if he'd frequently said blessings over his meals, although this was the first time she'd seen him do so.

Perhaps it was only when he was in Martha's house. Obviously from the blessing and the way she'd healed Barbara, the woman was some kind of spellcaster.

Barbara watched Al and Martha's easy camaraderie, curious and more than a little envious of this woman and the mysterious relationship she had with her Al. After all, the man was her mate, temporary as the position was.

Barbara wasn't jealous, exactly. She didn't think that Al had a physical relationship with Martha.

It wasn't just the age difference. She figured Martha was close to middle age for a human although she was well-preserved if she were that old. The other woman was very attractive and many men would find her so. But Al didn't behave like Martha was an ex-lover of any sort.

He did act like he cared for her and Barbara could see that Martha cared for him. That was very clear.

Barbara gave an inward sigh and pushed her attention onto the plate of pancakes, syrup and bacon in front of her. Martha had said there'd be no explanations until after breakfast and Barbara knew the woman meant it.

Besides, she was hungry. Being in heat and injured as well had put a strain on her body. She needed the extra calories to make up for those that had been used in healing.

Martha encouraged the both of them to "dig in" and, given the pile of food on the table, there was no reason for either Al or Barbara to be shy. They ate close to two normal people's daily intake of calories in bacon, pancakes, butter and syrup before each of them were sated.

Meanwhile the cook sipped her tea and watched them with quiet satisfaction, helping herself to only a couple pancakes and one piece of bacon.

Barbara leaned back in her chair away from the table. "That was good, Martha."

"Yes," Al hastily interjected. "Thank you."

Martha waved her hands. "I love cooking for healthy appetites," she said. "As you well know," she said to Al.

He said nothing, and again Barbara wondered about Al's relationship with Martha.

She swirled the remains of coffee in her cup, wondering how to ask about it. Meanwhile Martha was giving them both a long hard look.

"Last night there wasn't time to talk about it but perhaps you'd like to tell me now how a man who is supposed to be a bartender managed to get shot with silver bullets?"

"I suspect it's because of my sister." Barbara explained to Martha how they were attempting to find the people responsible for kidnapping Tammy and her friend Kurt.

Martha was concerned. "So you think that these people who own the waste company are involved? But why kidnap your sister? They'd never get away with holding them for long."

Barbara nodded. "Maybe they only intend to hold on to them for a while. Whoever snatched them knew they were parafolk. If they keep Tammy until the next full moon they could take movies of her changing then use that to blackmail them into silence."

"Of course Kurt won't change," Al said. "That may make them think he isn't a shifter at all." He brooded over that. "Of course that doesn't mean they won't hurt him anyway."

"Either way we know how serious they are. They tried to kill us, there's no reason to believe they won't do the same to Tammy."

Al reached for her hand. "We won't let that happen, Babe. I promise we'll find her."

Martha's cup came down with a clatter on the table. "You're going after them again, even though they tried to kill you?"

"We have to."

"Albert George Lupas, you cannot be that foolhardy."

George? Al's middle name was George? And why was this woman scolding him like she was...his mother?

His mother? Barbara grew cold inside and stared at the similarly colored hair and features and even more similarly belligerent looks on their faces. "Martha Lupas?" she asked.

Martha turned to her. "Yes?"

Barbara stood. "You're his mother?"

"Of course." Martha and Al turned to her, a wary look on his face, surprise on hers. Martha turned disbelieving eyes on Al. "You didn't tell her about me?"

"It didn't come up," he said.

Barbara stepped away from the table. More than once she'd worried about her sister being involved with a man other than a werewolf. Here she was actually mating with a half-breed.

He knew how she felt about that and yet he'd said nothing. She felt ill. "I need to go...lie down. I think."

Barbara fled upstairs to the room she'd woken in, ignoring Al calling after her.

Downstairs Al turned to his mother and sighed. "Well, that went well."

She stared at him. "I never realized that you were ashamed of us."

"I'm not. Not at all. That's not why I didn't talk about you. I just met Babe a few days ago."

"And yet your aura is all over her," Martha said dryly. "That's more than a casual acquaintance."

Al scrubbed his face with his hands. "I probably should have said something to her yesterday. But things have moved so fast. I knew she wasn't going to take the news well."

"That your mother and sister aren't shapeshifters?"

"No, Mom. That I'm not a purebred. That I'm a mongrel, as her kind so nicely put it."

"Her kind." Martha sighed. "So she's a purist?"

"Yes," Al said quietly. "But try not to hold that against her."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Because it's my own fault for not telling her what I was in the first place. She had no reason to believe I was anything but just another werewolf."

"That shouldn't matter."

"It does matter. Barbara's family has strong feelings about mixing parafolk breeds. She can't help the way she was brought up."

"You can't help what your mother is either."

"And I wouldn't have anyone for a mom but you." Al leaned back in his chair, returning his attention to his coffee. "Don't worry about it. We'll work it out."

Martha watched him for a moment and then slipped up the stairs.

Barbara stared out the window at the street below. Pleasant homes faced with yards of grass and flowerbeds were on either side of the house and across the street. In the early Sunday morning it looked like a typical suburban neighborhood.

It looked like a nice place to grow up. It was the home Al had known, with his spellcaster mother and werewolf father. She sat on the bed, her stomach in turmoil. The man she'd made love to over and over again during the past two days wasn't pure werewolf. Even worse she suspected everyone but her knew it.

Richard had called him a mongrel and most likely knew what Al was. That's why he hadn't liked seeing her with Al.

There was a knock on the door. Barbara didn't want to face anyone but she couldn't hide in Al's mother's house forever. Sooner or later she'd have to talk to Al.

"Come in."

The door opened but it was Martha who entered. "I think we should talk," she said, closing the door behind her.

The tone in the older woman's voice was decidedly unfriendly and Barbara stiffened. "I didn't mean to offend anyone."

"No, of course not. You're too well bred for that. Al told me your name and I know who your parents are. I can imagine how you were raised. I'm not sure why you are with my son..." Her voice trailed off.

"He's helping me find my sister."

"That's not all he's doing. I know shifter passion when I see it. I was married to a werewolf for fifteen years. You don't think I would have learned something about shifters in that time?"

"Of course. I didn't know you were married that long."

"Or married at all, I suspect. A mixed-parafolk marriage like Robert's and mine is unusual enough now, much less thirty years ago. But that didn't stop us from loving each other – or our children."

"No. I guess not."

"Al takes after his father for the most part. His sister Abigail takes after me. This is her room. She's up in Los Niños training with the coven up there. But I didn't come up here to discuss my family with you, Barbara. I'm a spellcaster and I did you a service last night."

Barbara met her stare. "You're saying I owe you."

She looked Barbara up and down. "Why are you with my son? You aren't his type and I doubt you'd be with him unless you had to be. What was it? Were you in heat?"

"I still am..." Her voice trailed off as she saw Martha shake her head slowly.

"You were shot full of silver and I had to do some heavy duty healing to remove it. The hormones involved with heat went with it."

Was that true? She didn't feel that different. Wanting to be intimate with Al, even knowing what he was, hadn't diminished. She still craved him.

"I still need him to find my sister."

"And after that, what will you do?"

Barbara didn't know how to answer. What was she going to do when this was over?

Martha continued. "I healed you. Al saved you by getting you here in time. But you can take that up with him later. As you know a spellcaster does not work without payment and you owe me for the healing spells."

"I'm sure I can come up with payment."

"There's only one thing I want from you, young woman. I want your promise that once this is over with finding your sister, you'll break it off easy with my son."

Barbara stared. This was not how she'd expected this conversation to go. "You want me to break up with Al?"

"If you can't give him what he wants I don't want you in his life. He's been hurt enough by women of your kind judging him for things he's not responsible for."

"It wasn't my plan to hurt him."

"Good. Your promise?"

Barbara's chin went up. "I can't promise something like that. Al is a grown man and I'm a grown woman. He wouldn't let you pick his mate for him any more than I'll let my family pick mine. I agree I owe you, and I'll find some way to satisfy you. But it won't be with a promise like that."

For a moment Martha stared at her, angry, but Barbara thought there might also be a bit of respect in her face.

The doorbell rang below, followed by loud knocking on the door. Barbara looked out the window to see Richard on the front doorstep, pounding again on the door. He looked angry and worried.

Al opened the door and their conversation came through the window.

"I want to see Barbara," Richard said.

"What makes you think she's here?"

"I know she's here. You had to take her to your mother after she was shot. She's the only spellcaster around who knows how to deal with silver poisoning."

She stepped back from the window. "What is Richard doing here? And how did he know about the shooting?"

She turned to Martha. "I think I may need something else from you. I'll pay what it takes."

Martha shrugged as if the question of payment had never come up in the first place. "What's that?"

"A tracking spell. If possible could you put one on the man downstairs?"

"I suppose so."

Barbara looked in vain for what she'd been wearing last night. No doubt her t-shirt and other garments had been full of bullet holes and stained with blood. But she couldn't go out in just a robe. "Also, can I borrow some clothes?"

Martha pulled underwear, some oversized sweatpants and a t-shirt from one of her daughter's drawers. "These should fit."

"Thanks. I'll pay you for this. Perhaps you could give me some privacy?"

Martha turned to leave but paused in the doorway. "One more thing though."

"What's that?"

"The reason Al was able to save you last night is in part due to being part spellcaster." She held up her arm, covered in silver bracelets. "He was shot too, but while silver bullets can hurt him they don't incapacitate the way they did you. He isn't as sensitive to silver as a regular shifter."

Barbara stopped dressing and stared at her. "That could be pretty handy."

Martha looked amused. "Glad to hear you think so. There could be hope for you yet." She left Barbara to finish dressing.

There was a serious argument going on downstairs when Barbara left the room. Al was telling Richard just what he could do with his concern and it wasn't a pretty suggestion. She decided to head the men off before an actual fight broke out in Martha's living room.

"Richard, I didn't expect to see you this morning!"

Barbara saw the look of relief on the man's face. He really had been concerned about her. She walked quickly to his side, ignoring the glare Al was giving them.

"I was worried when I heard what happened." Richard shot a hard glance at Al. "I'm only glad to see you're all right."

"As right as anything. No permanent harm done, as you can see." She spared a fast smile at Martha. "Maybe even a little better than new under the circumstances."

Richard's relief was palpable. "So are you ready to leave?"

"Not quite yet. But I should be ready in a few hours." She patted his shoulder. "I tell you what. Why don't I meet you someplace later tonight? It *is* the full moon you know."

She had to ignore Al's growl at the implicit invitation to Richard to spend the full moon with him that night. If she didn't calm him down soon her part-werewolf lover was going to hurt someone.

For a moment Richard looked uneasy but then he agreed to meet at the beach later and left. As soon as he was gone Al growled again and grabbed her arm.

"What do you mean you're meeting him later? You are still bound to me. Or is that one of those promises you don't intend to keep?"

She met his glare with one of her own. "I keep my promises, Al, but I have reasons to make him think I'll meet him." Barbara looked over at Martha. "Do you have the tracking spell in place?"

"Oh yes. You'll be able to follow him wherever he goes." She handed Barbara what looked like a small compass, but the needle was pointing nowhere near the North Pole. "Just follow this and you'll find him."

Al looked at the pair of them, confusion in his face. "I don't understand. What do you need a tracking spell for?"

"To follow Richard. My old friend knows far too much about what happened last night. We weren't with other shifters and no one knew we'd gone to see the Oceans Forever group. The only way Richard would know I'd been shot with silver —"

Sudden understanding lit up his face. "The only way he'd know is if he was party to it."

"Or heard something from someone who is. Either way, we need to keep track of him." Barbara held up the compass. "We follow Richard and there is some chance he'll lead us right to those who took Tammy."

Chapter Twelve

Al drove Babe's car while she watched the needle of the compass. "Turn left here," she said. Al made the turn and glanced over at her. Her face was screwed up in concentration.

"You doing okay?" Given that she'd nearly died last night, and today had learned something very disturbing about her lover's heritage, Babe was looking pretty good. All of her attention was on the compass his mother had set up as a tracking device locked on to their target, Richard.

"I'm fine," she muttered, then let out a curse that surprised even him. "I just wish your mother was a little more with the times. Spelling a GPS device to follow Richard would have been a whole lot more convenient."

He chuckled. "I'll mention that to her. Of course then she'd have to have one of those lying around and I'm sure compasses are a lot cheaper to keep on hand."

"Yes, but they aren't nearly as easy to follow. Another left. And then another."

Al followed her instructions for the next hour but eventually they found themselves in familiar territory. He slowed down, leaving Babe to look up from the compass. "Why are you stopping? He's just ahead."

"I don't need to keep following. I know where he is." Al pulled the car to the curb. "Take a look."

Babe checked where Al was pointing and muttered another curse.

They were back at the Disposahaul company quarters.

"So what business does a shapeshifter like Richard have with a garbage company?" Al said.

"None I can think of," Babe said.

"It's unlikely they have any affiliation with the shifter patrol."

"Very true. And the only link between the two we know of is Tammy and the investigative work she and Kurt were doing for Oceans Forever." Al thought for a moment. "Is it possible that the Patrol could be helping Disposahaul hide their illegal dumping activities?"

"Maybe not the Patrol in general but a subgroup of it. There is a large part of the Patrol who are purists and they might be behind this." Babe looked troubled. "Richard is a member of that group as well and they wouldn't like Tammy hanging out with a selkie."

"Your sister is a Grisloup. That is very close to royalty for shapeshifters. You saw how they reacted to your being with me and I'm at least half-werewolf."

If possible Babe looked even unhappier with that idea. "You think that Richard would betray my sister just because of Kurt?"

"He clearly knows more about what's going on than he's told us."

"Since he's told us nothing, that's not hard."

"I think we need a little chat with him, alone. We'll wait here until he leaves and then see if we can catch up with him."

They didn't have long to wait. Richard left the building and all but ran to his car, slamming the car door with enough force for the noise to carry to them down the block. He gunned the car's engine and roared out of the parking lot.

"He seems angry," Al said, starting their car and putting it into gear to follow.

"Certainly does. I wonder what could have him so upset?"

"He didn't like it that you got shot last night. Perhaps he and his garbage buddies have had a falling out over that?" Al gave her a sidelong glance. "You had history with him?"

Babe was suddenly far too interested in watching the compass needle even though they knew exactly where Richard was, three cars in front of them. Finally she sighed. "Our families have known each other forever and Richard and I kind of grew up together. He asked me to be his mate back in high school."

Al understood that very well. The Grauers were another of the old shapeshifter families, like Grisloup, and two kids from those families would be obvious choices as mates. A marriage between the Grauers and the Grisloups would be as much a matter of joining dynasties as two kids falling in love.

"Trouble is," Babe said softly, "I didn't fall in love with him and I wanted more from a mate than I thought he could give me."

Al wondered if he could ever have been what Babe was looking for. Now that she knew the truth about him, it was of course a lost cause.

"So you told him no and I imagine that pissed him off. The prince rarely gets rejected by the princess."

Babe glared at him but then laughed ruefully. "I guess that is one way to look at it. There is always a lot of tension when we see each other now."

"I can imagine." In fact he didn't need to, he'd seen evidence when they'd encountered Grauer at the beach yesterday morning. "Even so, he probably doesn't want to see you get hurt."

"No, he wouldn't. He's too much of a 'prince', as you put it. It would be against his code of ethics to work with those who would try to kill any of our kind."

"But it doesn't look like he has a problem working with someone willing to kidnap your sister."

Babe gave him a worried look. "I find that hard to believe but it is what appears to have happened. Perhaps we should catch up with him and ask what's going on."

Al sped up, keeping his eyes on the white car carrying Richard Grauer. "Sounds like a plan. It could be time for a confrontation."

* * * *

They followed Richard's car until it turned into a parking lot at the edge of the beach. Interestingly, it was the same parking lot where they'd found Tammy's car yesterday.

Coincidence? Somehow Barbara didn't think so. She watched as the white car moved to the same isolated part of the lot and stopped. Richard climbed out of the car and after a moment stepped out onto the beach. He moved to one of the picnic benches and sat down.

Al parked nearby and turned off the engine. They both sat watching Richard, who seemed to be intently watching the ocean across the wide stretch of sand, paying no attention to the car that had pulled in behind him.

Al growled. "Prince Richard doesn't strike me as someone who would like the beach."

Barbara shook her head. "He doesn't. I'm not sure why he'd come here."

"He came here on purpose."

"What purpose?"

"He spotted us tailing him, probably back at Disposahaul. And so he's led us here."

"Why would he do that?"

"Perhaps to talk to us?"

Their answer came in the form of action. All of a sudden Richard stood and stripped off his clothes and dropped to the sand on all fours. Shifting into a wolf, he took off across the beach before either of them could react.

Al looked grim. "Or he could want a good chase. You stay here, I'll find out what his highness has to say." He dove out of the car and his clothes landed next to the door. Barbara stared as the black wolf chased the gray one down to the shore, heading for the rocks where the beach ended.

"The hell I'll stay," she muttered to herself. Moments later her clothes were locked into the car and a slender tawny-colored wolf was making her way around the rocks at the end of the beach. At first it seemed like a dead end but she knew the other wolves had come this way and it seemed unlikely that they'd gone into the water.

Barbara used her supersensitive nose to determine where the male wolves had gone. With the overlaying scents of the ocean, salt, drying seaweed and sand it was difficult but she quickly picked up that the other two shifters had headed up a narrow trail leading away from the water. The coastline here was a series of short coves with stretches of sand ending in narrow points of rocky shore. The trail she was on led to the next small cove down the coast, more secluded than the beach they had parked at.

Good thing it was secluded, Barbara thought. She and Al needed to ask Richard some serious questions and they would want to do it using human language. That meant they would have to return to being human. Which would be okay but they would be humans without clothes on.

As a shapeshifter she didn't mind being naked but she wasn't happy about doing so with the kind of audience they would have had back in the parking lot or on the beach where the early morning surfers would get an eyeful.

She liked being naked with Al just not when other people could see them. Speaking of which, she was beginning to need to get naked again with Al very soon. His werewolf smell was making her hot again, even though she knew her heat was over, and even though she was in her wolf form. Which was strange because she never wanted sex when she was shifted.

Or at least she hadn't in the past.

A set of growls from in front of her told her she was close to the men. Then the growls shifted to angry voices and Barbara sped down the trail to where it dropped down to the sand. For a moment she wondered where the men had gone then she smelled Al's distinctive scent coming from behind several large rocks. They formed a natural cave on the shore and there she found Al and Richard, both shifted back to men, wrestling on the sand.

Wrestling naked on the sand.

It was like looking at images from an ancient Grecian vase of two athletes in combat, blond Richard's lean athletic build against dark-haired Al's more muscular bulk. They seemed well-matched for a moment until Al whipped one leg out and tripped Richard, landing on him to force him into the ground.

"Got you," Al whispered into the other man's ear.

Barbara changed back into her human form and clapped her hands, trying to keep her amusement over the situation from showing on her face. It pretty funny watching them fight naked.

Both Al and Richard seemed to forget their battle at seeing her. Richard's jaw dropped and his fair skin colored while Al's eyes narrowed. "I thought I told you to stay in the car."

She shook her head slowly. "That wasn't going to happen."

He turned to glare at Richard, who was still staring at her. "Don't you look at her," Al growled.

Richard held up his hands. "She's kind of hard not to notice."

Al grabbed Richard and shoved him hard against one of the rocks, one hand around the man's throat. "I said, don't look at her."

Barbara put her hand on his shoulder. "Stop it, Al. Richard's seen me naked before." When he turned to glare at her she shook her head. "Not like that. We're shifters – we grew up together."

Young shapeshifters often ran in packs during the full moon and Barbara and Richard had shifted back from their wolf forms many times together. Of course he'd seen her naked in the past, if not in the last few years.

Barbara knew that some of his staring had to do with how she'd matured since the last time he'd seen her. She'd still been a gawky girl the last time she'd run in a pack with him and her feminine self was secretly pleased that Richard had finally noticed she wasn't the young woman she'd been anymore. Not that she wanted his interest anymore but it was gratifying.

It had been a bad idea to tell Al that Richard had asked her to marry him but the whole thing was so long ago that she hadn't thought it would make a difference. She knew that the main reason Richard had asked was because of her family's position. He was ambitious and had wanted a high-ranking mate.

Even though they'd known each other for years, the pair of them had never gotten close the way mates should.

Al wanted her for herself. Trouble was that while Al might only be half shapeshifter, he was all possessive male, regardless of who his mother was. As Martha had said, Al had truly taken after his father.

In retrospect it hadn't been such a good idea to follow them, particularly since she now had to stay human. Al was bad enough when she was near another man. Her being naked near another man wasn't likely to make the big man's instincts to shred his rival any easier to resist.

Some of the tension eased in Al shoulders and after a moment he eased off, allowing Richard to pull away from the rock.

Al didn't bother with pleasantries. "Where are Tammy and Kurt?"

"What makes you think I know?"

Al clenched his fists. "Because you are clearly in with those who took them."

"I'm not part of that group." Richard looked beseechingly to Barbara. "You can't believe I'd be part of kidnapping your sister."

"No. But I can believe you'd be part of a plot to break her and her boyfriend up."

He shook his head. "It isn't like that."

Barbara crouched on the sand. "Then perhaps you better tell us what was up."

"Some of us have been watching the selkies for some time. They've been infiltrating the parafolk ranks without identifying themselves. That Kurt is the worst, taking advantage of a young shifter like Tammy..."

Al growled. "Very few selkies ever leave the water for long but I've rarely known one to hide what he is. Tammy is the only shifter I've ever heard of who was a scuba diver. I'm sure she knows what Kurt is."

Richard's mouth dropped open. "She *scuba dives*? That's ridiculous." He looked to Barbara for confirmation but she shook her head with a bemused smile.

"I'm afraid it's true. We found the tanks and suit in her car."

Richard shuddered as if someone had doused *him* with water. "Why would she do that?"

"So she could go swimming with her friend," Barbara said.

"Her friend?" Richard's eyes narrowed. "I don't think that's all he is to her."

That was very likely true. From what little she'd seen of Tammy and Kurt together the pair had been much closer than simply friends. Could her little sister really love a man as different as a selkie?

All Tammy's life she'd loved going to the beach and swimming in the ocean. She'd even taken up surfing for a short time, earning her the nickname of "little surfer wolf" in the family. Barbara had always thought it was a matter of her rebellious sister wanting to demonstrate how different she was but maybe there was another reason.

Maybe her sister had known Kurt for a lot longer than anyone suspected.

"You're right. It does look like she cares for him."

"You can't approve of her being with someone like him," Richard said.

"It isn't for me to approve or disapprove. Tammy is her own person and over the age of consent." She put her hand on Richard's shoulder and her voice grew softer. "We can't help who we fall in love with."

He flushed, clearly understanding what she was telling him. She hadn't loved him enough to become his wife when he'd asked, even under the pressures of both their families. Richard had been everything she should have wanted in a mate, strong, handsome, from a good family and a solid provider. He was, as Al had put it, a prince among shapeshifters. Trouble was he wasn't the prince for her.

Which meant she had to ask the question about Al. Was he the man for her? Finding out about his heritage had been a shock. She'd seen his concern when she'd spoken against mixed marriages but hadn't realized he was the result of one. He'd said that a child of such a union would be a child to be loved. She had no doubts that his parents had loved him but Al was a man who wasn't accepted in many places in shifter society. She'd wondered why George at the Asylum had been reluctant to seat them and had figured it was because of the way they'd been dressed. She hadn't known that Al's mixed blood would have been the problem.

Now she knew the truth. He was exactly the kind of man that she didn't want to be involved with, a mixed-blood shapeshifter. If they mated their children would also be mixed blood and her bloodline was pure werewolf going back generations. It was bad enough her sister was dating a man who wasn't even a shifter but Tammy had always been a little wild.

How could Barbara, the daughter her parents relied on for common sense, even continue with her current arrangement with Al as a temporary lover? She'd given him her word that until her time of heat was over she'd stay with him and now that excuse was gone. At the moment she still wanted him, but it was unreasonable to consider anything past this time.

Anything long term didn't seem possible. She knew that and she expected that Al probably understood it as well.

So how was it that the idea of leaving Al brought nothing but pain to her?

The good thing was that nothing needed to be decided right now and in the meantime she felt the need to get him back to bed, heat or no heat. She didn't have to make any decisions about the future now.

It was Tammy whose future they were concerned about now. They needed to find out where she was and that led back to Al's original question. "So you don't know where Kurt and Tammy are. Why were you at Disposahaul?"

"I was looking for Herz."

Al shook his head, his face showing his disbelief. "Herz? Leader of the Pack, Herz? He's in charge of the shifter patrol. What would he be doing at a garbage company?"

A humorless grin appeared on Richard's face. "Would you believe he's one of the owners?"

Al leaned back against one of the large rocks. "Herz is an owner? That doesn't sound like him." Barbara agreed. A contemporary of her father's, Roland Herz was outspoken about just about everything to do with shifters staying with their own kind. To Barbara's knowledge he was aggressively against involvement with any kind of businesses that weren't in the shifter community and a garbage company didn't seem like something that would be shifter owned. The smell alone would be a deterrent. It didn't make sense for him to be involved with Disposahaul.

Richard responded with a shrug. "Sometime last year he added the company's properties onto our regular patrols, telling me he had purchased a share in the company. That's how we found out that Tammy was hanging out with the selkie. We spotted them taking photographs of the place and I reported it to Herz. But that's all I did. I didn't have anything to do with their disappearance."

"So how did you know that Babe got shot last night?"

The other man colored, a flush that spread from his face and across his bare chest. "So that's why you followed me. I was wondering what made you take off after me like that. Herz called me and told me about it. He wanted to know if I knew where you'd been taken. He'd been checking with our healers and there was no sign of you. I knew Barbara was with you and that you'd probably take her to your mother."

Al and Barbara exchanged meaningful glances. "So the question really is how Herz knew," she said quietly.

Richard stared at them then his jaw dropped. "You think *Herz* had something to do with your getting shot? That's ridiculous!"

Al bore down on the man. "How did he hear about it then? My mother was the only one who knew other than the man who was with us at the time and he's a norm. Unlikely he would have contacted Herz. The only other people who'd know would be those who pulled the trigger or were with them at the time."

"Unless Herz is having us watched. But in that case why would he have to ask Richard where we were? If someone were following us they'd have just told him where we went."

Al nodded grimly. "The way I was driving last night it wouldn't have been hard to keep up with me."

"So that leaves the idea that he's somehow mixed up with whoever our adversaries are. And we know he has a tie-in with Disposahaul, just like Tammy and Kurt."

Richard was shaking his head but he no longer looked as adamant as he had been. "I don't think you're right but I have to admit I can't explain where he got his information. But Barbara, you know Herz. Can you see him authorizing a hit on a pair of shapeshifters, especially when one of them is you?"

"No, I can't," Barbara said. "But that doesn't mean he didn't find out after the fact, from the people who did shoot me. That's what I think must have happened. It could be that he wasn't too happy about it and that does sound like Herz. He hates to not be in control."

Richard didn't look like he agreed with their analysis but he didn't argue it. "So what do we do now?"

Al answered for her. "We need to find Herz. Can you tell us where he is?"

If anything Richard's frustration level seemed to go up. "I don't know. I was looking for him myself. I called his home but his housekeeper said he wasn't there. That's why I went looking for him at the garbage company and he wasn't there either."

Barbara stepped forward. "We need you to do us a favor. Could you call and tell us when you find him?"

Richard looked warily at Al. "What are you going to do when you find him?"

"We just need to talk to him." She shrugged. "Most likely you're right and he wasn't involved with Tammy's kidnapping but he might know more about those who were." Barbara forced a grin on her face. "It isn't like we're going to hurt him."

"Just give us a call when you find him." Al rattled off a phone number, which Richard repeated back to him to show he'd memorized it. When he was done Barbara put her hand on his arm.

"Thank you, Richard. I knew you couldn't be involved in all this."

He nodded at her and cast a glare at Al, who didn't look the least bit repentant over the roughing up he'd given the other shapeshifter. He even growled when Richard went to give Barbara a one-handed hug, clearly taking exception to him being so close to her when they were both naked.

With a grimace Richard stepped away from them and, after shifting back to wolf form, headed back the way they'd come across the beach. Barbara was going to shift and follow him but Al put his hand on her arm.

"Just a minute. I want to talk to you."

"About what?" she said. She noted the dangerous look in his eyes and began to step back. Al caught her hand, keeping her in place, and her breath caught.

"About this." He pulled her roughly into his arms and kissed her hard.

Chapter Thirteen

Al kissed her with all of the frustration he was feeling. Babe was his mate. She'd agreed to it, made the bargain in exchange for him helping her keep her equilibrium during her heat. This meant that she'd be faithful to him and defer to him as her mate.

Babe hadn't done that. She'd followed him when he'd told her to stay put and she'd let another man see her naked. Yes, the man had seen her that way before but that didn't improve things.

Al was still plenty mad and he was intent on making sure Babe understood just how angry he was. Angry, furious and wanting. Beyond wanting for this woman. His woman, his mate, the one he wanted for more than just this brief moment in time.

He wanted Babe forever. He was the Bad Dog and she was his Babe now and always.

The tragic thing was that he was the only one who recognized it. She didn't understand and wouldn't agree with it, particularly now that she knew his heritage. Just his luck that the woman he most wanted was least able to accept his mixed blood. He'd lost women due to being a half-breed before but none of them had meant the same to him. They hadn't moved him like Babe did.

She was special, unique among women. And hopelessly out of his reach.

But not right now, this moment. Right now she was in his arms and returning his punishing kiss, accepting his dominance over her.

Right now she was anywhere but out of reach so he took full advantage and strengthened his hold around her waist.

Babe seemed to recognize the anger in him and give in to his need to dominate. She leaned her head back, opening her throat to him, the universal show of submissiveness among dogs, wolves—and their kind. Al growled and leaned in to nuzzle her bare skin, his tongue running along her pulse, tasting her. She squirmed beneath him, her bare breasts pressed hard against his chest, the short curls covering her mound teasing his erection.

He was hard for her and he let her know it, rubbing his cock against her. She whimpered, the sound sweet in his ears. It wasn't the sound of pain but her need for him. He knew it was at least in part her seasonal heat making her crave him, the man she regarded as her mate.

Him.

He responded to her need, his body wanting hers, his cock hungry to plunge inside her and give her what she wanted. But not quite yet. He was still angry that she harbored a prejudice of half-breeds like him, the not-quite-pure members of their

society. He'd run into that prejudice too many times before and couldn't accept it in the woman he'd claimed as mate.

The woman who'd claimed his heart. Somewhere in the midst of their short relationship he'd fallen in love with Babe and to have her reject him now over something he'd lived with all his life was unbearable. He needed to brand her with himself, with his cock and his need for her.

Later she might reject him—in fact most likely would. But when she did she would know she was turning down the best lover she could ever have. He'd use every trick he knew to make sure of it.

Her whimper grew deeper, the need in her growing stronger. She was no longer squirming but rubbing herself against him. She kissed his neck, eyes closed, her hands reaching between them to seize his cock, obviously trying to take some measure of control over their lovemaking. At the touch of her soft hands on his shaft something inside him came loose and fury filled him at her audacity.

Beyond angry, he used his full strength to tear her hands away and push her from him. She fell to the sand at his feet, staring at him, mouth open. The expression in her eyes showed her shock and even a little fear.

Part of him rejoiced in that. She should fear his anger. He might not belong to any real pack but he was a born alpha male of his kind and inherently dominant. Knowing that his dominance over her was limited by time and that he wouldn't be able to keep her drove him mad.

But another part of him hated that fear. She was his mate even if only for this brief time, his to protect and while he could dominate her she should not be concerned that he would ever actually hurt her. No real male ever hurt those in his protection as she most certainly was. His to protect and cherish even if it was for only this short time.

Al reined in the madness that filled him and forced his unruly emotions under control. He wouldn't make love to her this way, like a madman bent on revenge, using her sexual need to keep her compliance.

Taking deep breaths, he regained control and reached for her, lifting her gently to her feet. He pulled her into his arms and hated the trembling that swept through her. "Forgive me, Babe. You bring out the madness in me."

She gazed up at him and there was the hint of a smile on her lips. "No one has ever said I make them crazy before."

He couldn't return her smile but kissed her instead, this time without the fury of before.

Emotions under control once more, Al turned her from him and pushed her gently toward the rock face of the cliff next to them. She braced her hands against the rock as his hand slid between her legs, sliding into her folds and finding her clit, hard and throbbing against his fingers. She moaned as he touched her then gave a sharp cry as he fingered her, stroking her quickly into orgasm. An easy one, just to take the edge off her

need. She shuddered against the rock and might have fallen but he slid his other hand around her waist to support her.

Again he touched her and stroked her and she muttered something unintelligible. The sound of the waves crashing on the rocks behind them swallowed most sounds but he felt her quiver against him and knew she was close to climax again.

This time he didn't let her complete but pulled back, finding her opening instead and delving deep within. He leaned forward to bite the back of her neck, just a nip as she struggled against him. He felt her whimper and then moan again. Two fingers slipped inside her then three and she was on her toes, moaning loud enough to be heard over the surf.

He used his arm around her waist to lift her onto her toes, high enough for his cock to slip into the crack of her ass, past the beautiful rounded globes of her buttocks. They hadn't yet gotten to this kind of entry and he hadn't realized how much it would turn him on, having Babe's ass in his grasp. His cock felt hard and heavy as it slid into the welcoming space between her legs. She was so wet that he slid smoothly between her folds.

The tip of his cock hit her clit and again she shuddered and cried out, brought to orgasm just by that small touch. Al schooled himself and waited until her body quieted before moving again. He leaned forward to whisper in her ear. "Ready for me, Babe?"

She didn't seem to be able to speak. A nod was his only answer.

He didn't mind. It had been a while since he'd been able to fuck a woman senseless...and they hadn't even gotten to the best part yet. Lifting her again, he positioned his cock to slide inside her, the way smooth with her arousal and his. Al gritted his teeth and kept his control. He wasn't going to come quickly this time.

He pulled out and then came in again and repeated the action. He felt Babe's moan through her body and she cried out over and over again. At some point he noticed that his pace matched the sound of the surf behind him.

Two age-old tempos briefly combining into one and it felt natural to be like this, naked and loving on a beach with the ocean in the background.

But then she tensed again and he knew he had to speed up and take her further toward the goal. Her cries increased as one after another waves of orgasm sped through her and in moments he knew he'd reach his own peak.

He drew it out as long as he could but she gave one last cry and collapsed in his arms and he couldn't resist any longer. He shouted as his cock erupted inside her, filling her with his cum and once more branding her as his.

They stood there against the rocks for what seemed like hours but was probably no more than a few moments. Finally Babe turned and threw her arms around him, buried her head in his chest and, to his complete astonishment, burst into tears.

Chapter Fourteen

Babe cried into Al's shoulder, beyond caring that she was giving in to feelings she usually repressed. She hated crying, hated the feeling of helplessness it came from, the raw emotions she couldn't control. It was rare she allowed herself to break down and then only in the privacy of her room, never in public, never where someone could see her.

But with Al, with this man she couldn't really have, not for any long term, it felt so right to be in his arms and giving in to tears. In some ways it felt more intimate than making love with him. Here she was really naked, no gloss of confidence masking her true feelings.

She cried for her sister, little Tammy who always wanted to do the right thing, caught up in forces beyond her control and now possibly in jeopardy of losing her life. She cried for how her parents would find out about her sister's relationship with Kurt, a selkie and someone they could never approve of.

And she cried for herself, for how she felt about Al and the promise his mother had tried to force her into. His own mother knew she wasn't a good choice for him. She'd only bring pain to his life. Al was a man with his own place in the world and she couldn't be part of it. She could never bring him into her circles...that much had been clear from when they'd tried to have drinks at the Asylum.

They each had their own worlds and while at this time those worlds intersected, that couldn't last. Eventually they'd each have to go their own way.

But it wasn't fair. She wasn't even in heat anymore and she still wanted him.

Gradually her tears subsided and as the storm of emotion passed she felt Al's arms holding her close and his hands rubbing her back, his voice a soft whisper in her ear, saying soothing words. "It's okay, all right."

She leaned back to look in his face and saw the surprise and confusion there. "I'm sorry," she stammered.

He hugged her closer. "No need to be. It's been a rough couple of days. You were due for some release."

She gave a short laugh and rubbed her head against his chest. "I thought that's what the sex was for."

Al didn't join her laughter. "There are all kinds of release, Babe. Sex is great but sometimes we need more than that." He kissed her forehead. "Sometimes a woman just needs someone to talk to. Or a shoulder to cry on."

Barbara couldn't help but smile. "How did you get so smart about women?"

"Well you might have noticed I have a mom and a sister. One of my aunts runs a clothing store in Beverly Hills and I help her out sometimes. I'm around women a lot." He grinned at her. "Besides, I'm the Bad Dog. Women like me. Makes sense to understand them."

Now that the storm of emotions was over, Barbara felt strangely better. Lighter, like a burden had passed. The tears had been as much of a release as sex was.

"We still need to talk to Roland Herz and find out what his connection to Tammy's disappearance is. Richard said he'd call us when he finds him."

"So we better get back to the car. The number I gave him was my cell phone and that's with my clothes," Al said. He ran his hand along the side of her face. "Much as I love standing out on a beach being naked with you, it's time to return to civilization."

Reluctantly Barbara stepped out of his arms and slipped back into her wolf form, the familiar shift of bone and muscle nearly painless, the itch of the fur sliding over her skin a warm comfort against the cool ocean breeze. When she was finished she stood there, a tawny wolf, next to the solid black-coated wolf Al had become. As she followed him across the rocks and to the beach, she wondered for just a moment if the black color would carry over to his cubs. Black coat genes were said to be dominant...and she could imagine a couple of young boys with pitch-black fur at their first turning.

Barbara stopped dead in the middle of the trail. Why was she thinking about Al's cubs? She couldn't have any plans for being around him after they'd found her sister.

Barbara shook the idea out of her wolf-shaped head and continued to follow Al to the car.

Not surprisingly, Richard's car was gone when they arrived back. Using the car as concealment they shifted to human and Barbara fetched her spare key from the magnetic box under her rear fender and then, using the car as concealment, she and Al dressed quickly. Not for the first time Barbara considered how buying a van might be a better choice for a shifter than her little car, given the difficulties of pulling pants on while sitting in the front seat.

Maybe one of those minivans suitable for a family... And there she went thinking about cubs again. Again Barbara shook her head. Where was her mind going?

She needed to stay focused on their objective—rescuing her sister.

Dressed, Al was checking his cell phone. "No messages so far."

"So what do we do now?"

Al thought for a moment. "You know who we haven't tried talking to."

"Who?"

"Kurt's people. He's missing too, and I'm sure they're looking for him."

"You want to talk to the selkies?" Barbara couldn't help the distaste in her voice.

The look Al gave her was hard. "You might as well face it that your sister is involved with one of them. Ignoring it won't make it go away. And besides, they might

have information we don't. Talk to them, Babe. You'll find they're people too, just like us."

People just like us. Parafolks for certain, but just like a shifter? Not really. But she had to admit he was right in that they might help with the investigation and she really couldn't afford to ignore any option. Her sister's life could depend on it.

"So how do we get in touch with them?" she said.

"Just offhand, I don't know," he said thoughtfully. "But I know who might." He indicated the road. "Let's head into town."

Following Al's directions, Barbara drove into the hills above Hollywood and up to the closed gate of a large estate. A speaker box was mounted next to the driveway and Barbara noted a camera discreetly mounted at the top of the pillar. She pushed the button on the speaker at the gate and after a few moments a deep male voice answered.

"Hello. May I ask who's calling?"

Al leaned over Barbara. "It's Al, Harold. Can we come up to the house?"

"Al Lupas?" The voice over the speaker lost some of its haughtiness. "Of course. One moment, please."

The gate smoothly slid to one side and they drove up the long driveway to the front of a well-kept mansion, more than a little imposing. The home she shared with her parents was large but this went far beyond that. More, it exuded old wealth, like that of a European aristocrat now a Hollywood millionaire. Barbara pulled into an open spot amongst the expensive cars parked along the front and stopped.

Al looked over at her, his face amused. "I guess you haven't been here before," he said wryly.

"Why would you think I had?"

"Because your family is prominent in the shifter community. It would make sense to have visited the home of the parafolk chief. Jonathan and Sharon throw several parties a year for all of the parafolk in the area."

So this was the city chief's home? Barbara felt her cheeks heat. It was true that her family avoided interaction with other parafolk to the point of not socializing with any of them in spite of the multiple yearly invitations to events here. The other night at the Dark Water Tavern had been the first time she'd even seen the vampire who was technically the parafolk leader.

That slight was sure to have been noted and she wondered what her reception would be, particularly since they were here looking for help. "You think they know how to contact the selkies?"

"If they don't they'll know who does."

"But it's early morning. Won't the city chief and his wife be asleep?" She knew nightwalkers were unconscious during the day.

Al ushered her toward the front door. "That's why we're going to talk to his assistant. He's in charge while the boss is unavailable." On the way there he stared at a large painted van parked near the front. "That's interesting."

Barbara examined it herself. It looked like a throwback to the sixties with waves, flowers, tropical fish and even a couple of whales painted on the sides. She all but rolled her eyes. Did all of the parafolk have a penchant for old cars? "Who does that belong to?"

Al grinned. "If I have my guess right, I think we may be in luck."

Suddenly eager, he knocked on the door. The man who answered might have been an English butler, so proper did he look in a black suit and very white shirt. Only his eyes twinkled as he nodded his smooth hairless head at Al after a short glance at Barbara. He ushered them into the large and nicely appointed entryway, all marble and shine, before holding out his hand.

"It is good to see you again, Mr. Lupas."

Al grabbed the other man's hand and shook it briefly. "Knock it off, Harold. You know my name is Al."

Harold gave an exaggerated sigh. "Of course, Al." He turned, all dignity, to Barbara. "And who is your lovely friend?"

"Barbara Grisloup," she said, also shaking his hand.

One shaggy gray eyebrow rose. "Indeed. Of the Los Angeles Grisloups?"

Barbara bit back a sigh. "I'm afraid so."

The other shaggy gray eyebrow rose. "I see," he said and Barbara knew the man was wondering why she'd be here when her family normally would have nothing to do with the other parafolk, even those who were shifters, if they worked for those who weren't. And Harold was clearly a shifter in spite of his bald pate.

Harold was all politeness though. "Well, it is very nice to finally meet you, Ms. Grisloup."

"Please, call me Barbara."

A slight smile softened his lips. "Thank you. I will."

Al stepped in. "So why aren't you up in Napa with Sebastian?" He turned to Barbara. "Normally Harold is the man of all work for the nightwalker who is prince of California Nightwalker's Association."

Impressive. The CNA was pretty much the ultimate authority in the mostly ungoverned parafolk world and while Barbara had never met Sebastian Moret she'd heard a lot about him. Even her father respected Prince Sebastian.

Harold shrugged. "Our prince is on an extended book tour with his wife, which left Rebecca and me at loose ends. We decided to make ourselves useful to Chief Jonathan during their absence. Besides, our daughter needed more space." He smiled at Barbara, a more natural and heartfelt smile than the earlier one she'd gotten. "It is difficult to keep a two-year-old happy in a hotel room."

Even though her experience with young children was limited Barbara could sympathize with what the man was saying. "Little girls need room to run just like any other child."

"Particularly shifter children." He led them into a beautifully appointed room with dark red carpet and original oils on the walls. The furniture was antique but comfortable looking, understated elegance that managed somehow to be homey.

It was a room designed to make people feel at home and its magic worked even on Barbara with her overwrought nerves. She sat on one of the couches but couldn't completely relax, leaning forward, her hands on her knees. Harold seemed to take note of her posture but he said nothing. "Could I offer you something? Tea, perhaps?"

A civilized cup of tea sounded so good Barbara almost moaned her acceptance. With a curious smile Harold touched a speaker panel on the wall and requested a pot and several cups to be brought to the drawing room. He then looked over at Al. "Can I offer you something else?"

Al sat on the couch next to Barbara and shook his head. "No, tea will be fine."

Harold took a seat on one of the chairs. "So, as our city chief's daytime representative, what can I do for you?"

Barbara opened her mouth but before she could get a word out Al spoke instead. "Actually, could you tell us who owns the painted van in front?"

Barbara's surprise was echoed in the other man's face. He raised one gray eyebrow. "This is relevant to your visit?"

Al smiled. "I think it might be."

Harold shrugged. "Although unusual, the situation isn't a secret. The city chief is hosting a delegation from our sea-dwelling neighbors, the selkies. They rarely come on land for extended stays and so don't have access to accommodations that would fit their needs so Chief Jonathan and his wife insisted they stay here." He smiled cryptically. "The pool has been quite lively the past day or so."

"I can imagine," Al said. "And that's what I figured. I thought I recognized the van as belonging to Princess Annette."

"Indeed, the princess is one of those here. Do you know her?" At Al's nod Harold smiled. "A lovely woman." He glanced over at the clock. "Our guests were up late last night but the princess at least is an early riser. I believe she might be in the pool. Did you wish to speak with her?"

"If at all possible, Harold. And I think she may want to talk to us as well."

Harold rose to his feet. "Very well, I'll see if she's available."

Al stood up as well. "We won't mind talking in the pool area if that's where she is." He indicated their clothes, which were somewhat disheveled from being donned in a car. "We just got back from the beach ourselves."

In best English butler tradition, Harold nodded and left. As soon as he was gone Barbara turned to Al.

"Princess Annette?"

Al grinned at her. "Didn't know I was acquainted with royalty, did you?"

"But how?"

"Actually, we met at an antique car show. Turns out she loves the old beach wagons that were used to transport surfboards back in her day. I'd heard she'd bought a van so I thought the one in front might belong to her."

"In her day? You mean she's older?"

Al laughed. "Well with parafolk there's older and then there's older. Selkies live a long time, just like us."

Barbara felt her heart sink. "So she's older but still young-looking."

Al's eyes filled with astonishment and his mouth drew back into a grin. "Babe, are you jealous?"

Was she? Well perhaps she was. She didn't like the idea of Al hanging out with royal seagoing ladies even if they were old enough to be his mother.

After a couple moments Harold returned and ushered them down several long hallways to a patio that opened onto a large pool that was empty although the water still sloshed about like someone had been actively swimming in it. Beyond the pool was what looked like a separate guesthouse and wet footprints led from the pool to the guesthouse door.

A young Asian woman that Barbara recognized as another shifter was setting up a tea service on an umbrella-shaded table. She smiled at them and Harold. "My wife, Rebecca," he said.

Barbara shook her hand. "Very glad to meet you."

"And you," the woman's musical-toned voice replied. She glanced at her husband. "I must return to the kitchen. Our child, you know."

"So I've heard. She must keep you busy."

"Oh yes." Rebecca laughed. "Very busy, busy, busy." She was still laughing as she headed back into the house.

Harold smiled after her then turned to them. "Shall I pour?" He handed around cups filled with a fragrant tea that Barbara recognized as a special blend made for shifters, just the barest hint of the special herbs they were particular to. Her mother's favorite blend in fact, and Barbara reflected how nice it was that a nightwalker like Chief Jonathan would keep it on hand for his shifter friends.

They had just settled into their chairs when a slender figure wrapped in a huge robe stepped out of the guesthouse and came around the pool toward them. The woman was lovely, with a delicate face, and she had long blonde hair that even damp glowed in the sun as it fell down her back. She walked gingerly, as if she weren't used to it, but there was grace in her gait.

As she came closer Barbara noted that she wasn't as young as she'd first appeared, possibly ten years older than they were, and when she was close enough she recognized

the woman as one of the group that Al had identified as selkies who'd been at the Dark Water Tavern the night before.

The woman smiled at Al. "We have met before."

Al came to his feet. "Indeed, Princess. At the show last year."

Her smile broadened. "Where I bought my beautiful van! And do you still have that stunning convertible of yours? You promised me a ride someday."

"Whenever you wish, your highness." He turned to Barbara. "I would like to introduce Barbara Grisloop."

The princess's eyes narrowed and her face grew wary as she took a seat at the table and accepted a cup of tea from Harold, who'd added a teaspoon of salt rather than sugar. She sipped carefully from the cup and smiled appreciatively before returning her serious gaze to Barbara.

"Grisloop? I know this name." She examined Barbara suspiciously. "And your face is familiar as well."

"I don't think we've met before," Barbara said.

"No, not you," Princess Annette replied. "But someone who looks like you."

Al sighed. "That's what I thought. Princess, do you know a Kurt Murphy?"

The older woman's spine stiffened. "Yes, of course. Kurt is my nephew." She frowned at Barbara. "He keeps company with a shifter named Tammy Grisloop."

"Tammy is my sister."

"So she is." All pretense of friendliness was gone from the princess. "Your sister has led my Kurt into trouble, I think. That is why we are here. He's been missing for days."

Shock at the accusation made Barbara's mouth drop open. "It is your Kurt who got my sister kidnapped because she was involved with him. She shouldn't have been hanging out with him anyway."

"I agree. It is wrong for Kurt to be with someone not his kind. I tell him this but he ignores me. He thinks he is in love with the hairy girl."

The insult made Barbara angry. "My sister is not a 'hairy girl'. She's a member of one of the best shifter families and any shifter male would have been proud to be with her."

After exchanging glances with Harold, Al stepped in. "Ladies, this is getting us nowhere. How you feel about Tammy and Kurt dating doesn't solve the problem at hand."

Barbara took a deep breath and worked to calm down. "Al's right. I agree that my sister had no business being with your nephew but we can deal with that later. The pair of them was abducted yesterday morning and we need to rescue them before the full moon tonight."

The princess sat back in her chair. "You know they were abducted?"

Barbara nodded. "We found Tammy's car at the beach." She told them about the darts and what had been in Tammy's trunk—the scuba tanks, flyers and Kurt's selkie skin. That in particular made the princess's eyes flash.

"You will return the skin to me at once!"

"It is safe for now," Al said. "In the trunk of my car, locked in my garage. We can get it for you later on."

Harold had grown more serious as she spoke. "This is very bad," he said, putting down his cup and shaking his head. "It is bad enough that the couple was taken, but it is being investigated by the shifter patrol and yet this is the first I've heard about it. I can't believe Chief Jonathan knows or he would have said something to you, Princess."

Al put aside his barely touched cup and frowned. "So that means the Patrol isn't keeping our city chief informed? That can't be right, not when someone is using ketamine to capture parafolk."

"But why would someone have taken them?" the princess asked. "My Kurt has done nothing I know about."

"I think it has to do with illegal dumping by a garbage company," Barbara said. She explained about how they'd gone to Oceans Forever's headquarters and what had happened then. Both the princess and Harold were aghast when she explained how she and Al had been shot just the night before.

"And yet today here you are taking up the hunt again?" The princess shook her head. "You are either very brave or very foolish."

"I am neither but I love my sister very much."

"Enough to risk your life? Enough to risk his?" She indicated Al and for the first time it occurred to Barbara that Al was risking his life along with hers to help her find her sister, someone he didn't even know. It was bad enough that she'd involved him in keeping her heat under control. Not that she was still in heat since the cure for silver had wiped it out. Or...another thought occurred to her.

Perhaps her body had decided she was mated to Al and so the need was no longer on her. Mated shifters didn't go into heat. They'd agreed to be temporary mates but sometimes that happened. Sometimes temporary became permanent without the participants ever formally agreeing to it.

Could that be what had happened between them? Disturbed, Barbara took another sip of tea, but didn't enjoy it the way she had before. She had to find a way to limit her exposure to Al or it was possible she'd be bound to him permanently.

She watched Al out of the corner of her eye. The princess's accusation hadn't seemed to upset him. Instead he shook his head.

"I'm with Babe because she needs me. It's my choice to help find her sister. After last night we'll be taking no more chances though." He gave her a look that she felt in the tips of her toes. "I won't risk her life again. That's one reason we're here, looking for help. Whoever shot us and used ketamine on Tammy and Kurt isn't playing around."

Princess Annette leaned toward Al and put one delicate hand on his arm. "You can count on my people's help. What can we do?"

Barbara had to fight the urge to growl possessively at the woman but Al merely patted the princess's hand with the affection he might show a favorite aunt. "For now, we need to keep an eye on the garbage company. If, as we suspect, they're doing the dumping then they must have at least one boat somewhere, probably down in San Pedro Harbor."

"I can believe my Kurt would want to stop these people and that he might have involved your sister," she said to Barbara. "So we must help to find them. We will find out where this company keeps its boats and watch them." She turned to Al. "In the meantime I suggest you both stay somewhere safe."

"And I agree," Harold added. "As soon as Jonathan wakes we'll take up the hunt and in the meantime I'll help the princess locate the company's boats. For now both of you should stay here."

Just as he finished, Al's phone rang. He answered and pulled a notepad from his pocket then wrote something down. Thanking whoever had called, he turned to Barbara.

"I'd love to have Babe stay here but I need to go."

"Oh? Something come up at the Dog House?" Barbara said with a smile.

"No. That was Richard. Roland Herz has surfaced and wants to talk."

Chapter Fifteen

Al had known it would be useless to argue Babe stay at the city chief's mansion once she knew where he was going but he had to make the gesture anyway. Her point was that Herz knew her and probably would be more open with the daughter of his old friend and Al couldn't argue with that. Also the place they'd agreed to meet was a public restaurant, one that catered both humans as well as shifters, so they'd be safe enough.

Besides, he just liked having Babe with him. He hadn't expected Annette to be so hostile but apparently Babe wasn't the only one with deep concerns about mixed relationships between shifters and other parafolk. He didn't like leaving Babe where the princess could continue to insult her, nor did he like the idea of the older woman supporting Babe's narrow-minded views. He was still trying to make her see the folly in putting limits on who someone was allowed to fall in love with.

Particularly when he knew how much he'd fallen for Babe. She'd cried in his arms, something he felt sure she didn't do for anyone. Babe wasn't a woman who showed her emotions easily but she'd come apart at the beach and for just a brief moment he'd seen the vulnerable woman she really was. She held beliefs that had come from her parents, beliefs that would separate her from him but at her heart she was a compassionate woman who loved deeply. She loved her sister enough to overcome her distaste for the origin of her boyfriend.

Perhaps given time she could learn to love a man enough to overcome her concerns about his parentage. There might still be hope for them.

It was that hope that buoyed his spirits as they drove into the tiny crowded parking lot of the Santa Monica deli called Harry's. Originally a place selling New York-style sandwiches and the best matzo ball soup in Los Angeles, a few years ago Harry's had been sold to a pair of pastrami-loving shifters who'd added several new items not usually found on a deli menu.

Their thin-sliced raw pork and kosher dill pickle sandwich on a sesame bun was to die for. It had been hours since breakfast and Al's mouth watered just thinking about it. He found a place to park and got out. Looking around the parking lot, he spotted a couple of vans bearing logos of companies that he knew belonged to shifters and immediately went on alert.

Perhaps they were here looking for an early lunch—or maybe Herz had called in reinforcements.

Whatever their business here, he needed to be careful. Babe tensed and narrowed her eyes as they passed the vans heading for the front door, which told him she'd noticed who they belonged to but after a quick glance at Al she said nothing.

Okay, they'd both be careful.

He followed her through the door and after their eyes adjusted from the brightness of the light outside he saw Herz already seated at one of the booths at the far end of the restaurant, near the back exit. Interesting placement, as if the man wanted to be certain of a quick getaway. There were several empty tables in the area so it wasn't as if he hadn't other places to sit.

The man was sitting alone and the empty tables did suggest that he wanted privacy for their talk. Al took a glance around but only saw a few shifters, none of whom belonged to the vans in the parking lot. That made him edgy, wondering where those folks were. He couldn't say the place felt like a trap—but it didn't feel right either.

If Babe was nervous she didn't show it. She lifted her chin and marched to the back of the room and Herz's table as if she was unaware of any possible danger. Al followed her, keeping a sharp eye on the people around them as they moved past.

Babe seemed to relax as she came up to the gray-haired Herz. A handsome man who looked to be in his late fifties although Al knew he was at least twenty years older, Herz rose to his feet. His gray hair was combed neatly and his clothes were as precise as his manner. From Germany originally, he still held a lot of the Old World mannerisms of someone who believed he was born to rule others.

Al stiffened at the disdainful glance the man gave him while he greeted the daughter of his old friend with obvious delight. When she offered her hand he held it rather than shaking it.

"Barbara, what a pleasure to see you. You are possibly even more lovely than the last time I saw you."

To Al Babe's smile looked natural. "Thank you, Mr. Herz."

"You must call me Roland, please! You are far too old to be calling me 'Mr. Herz'." He grimaced. "You will make me feel like an old man."

Al almost growled. Roland was an old man and he was still holding on to Babe's hand like it was a fat juicy steak. If the man put his mouth anywhere near Babe's hand, Al swore he'd knock his fangs out.

Fortunately Babe managed to extricate her hand from Herz's and took a seat on the opposite side of the booth. Al slid in after her, keeping close enough that Herz would have to be blind not to see they were a couple.

Herz saw and as expected didn't like it. But he continued to ignore Al and talk only to Babe. "Richard tells me you wanted to speak to me."

"Yes. We're looking for my sister and were hoping you could help."

"Tammy?" A look of deep concern filled the older man's face that if Al hadn't known better would have seemed genuine. "I had heard she's missing. I have every available member of the shifter patrol searching for her." He patted her hand. "Believe me, Barbara, all that can be done is being done."

"That's interesting," Al said, "since we were just at Chief Jonathan's headquarters and they'd heard nothing about it. Don't you think it would help to take advantage of all possible parafolk resources?"

For the first time Herz condescended to acknowledge Al. Sitting back in his seat, all signs of the benevolent grandfather disappeared. His eyes narrowed into slits and his voice dripped with ice. "I don't believe that bringing in outsiders would be advantageous. We shifters are able to handle our own concerns."

"It's hardly bringing in outsiders to ask the local city chief for help," Babe said. "My sister was shot with ketamine. Whoever it was who took her knows what she is and that alone makes it a parafolk problem."

Herz shook his head. "I'm sorry to hear that you went to Chief Jonathan and his people. We could have managed without the rest of the parafolk in this case." He gave Babe a long look. "I'm surprised that you feel otherwise given how delicate a matter this is."

"A delicate matter?" Babe shook her head. "I don't know what you mean."

"I'm speaking of the man your sister was with. Not a werewolf but one of the others."

"You mean Kurt?"

The old man's eyes blazed. "That is who I mean. He isn't one of us."

"No, he isn't," Babe said quietly. "But that only gives more importance to bringing in the rest of the parafolk—" She started to say more but Al grabbed her leg under the table and squeezed. Most likely she was going to tell the man that Kurt wasn't just another shifter but a selkie and that his family was also looking for him. Possibly Herz didn't know that Kurt was royal, or even that he was a selkie at all.

More and more Al was becoming convinced that Herz had some involvement in the abduction and the less he knew about who he'd kidnapped, the better off they'd be. Babe looked questioningly at Al but she didn't say anything more.

Fortunately Herz didn't seem to notice that Al had cut Babe off. He waved his hands in the air. "I just feel it best that we keep this incident as quiet as possible. After all, your parents would hardly like a scandal such as their youngest daughter's involvement with someone so inappropriate to be made public."

Herz reached out as if to pat Babe's hand but she moved it off the table and into her lap too quickly for him to touch her. Herz frowned and gave Al another disdainful glance. "Perhaps you don't agree because of the company you are keeping. You should worry more about what your parents would think about that."

Babe's chin went into the air. "I'm a grown woman, Roland, and I can pick whoever I want for company."

Herz slid out of the booth and rose to his feet. "Perhaps you should pick more wisely then." He glanced between the two of them. "I thought your parents raised you better than this. I'm sorry to see you fall so far."

Babe colored but didn't let her expression change. "My parents might agree with you in some ways but I've learned that it is often better to appreciate people for what they are...not who their parents were. Al is a better man than most."

The pleasure her defense gave Al was tempered by knowing that Babe was angry and probably would have said the same thing about anyone Herz dared to criticize. Even so, Al let her support wash over him.

"Before you leave, Herz, I would like to ask you about the garbage company," Al said.

The man's spine stiffened so fast Al was surprised he didn't hear it snap. "What garbage company would that be?" he asked carefully.

"Disposahaul. The one Tammy and her friend were investigating."

"I don't know what you're talking about, young man. I suspect you don't know either."

"What I know is that you have an interest in that company and I suspect that's why Tammy and Kurt were snatched, to keep what they know about Disposahaul's illegal dumping from being made public. What I wonder is if that's why you're going to such lengths to keep their kidnapping from being investigated properly."

Still standing, Herz leaned over the table and glared at Al, hostility replaced with a cold hard fury. A long low growl erupted from his throat. If Al had been prone to fear he'd have been afraid now. As it was, he stood slowly and let the man's glare wash over him like it didn't matter at all. Better men than this old shifter had tried to make him tuck his tail and he wouldn't submit now.

Maybe Herz recognized that he couldn't intimidate Al. He pulled back a little, as if reconsidering. "The only garbage I know of is here at this table," he snarled. "Both of you." He then turned and stalked out of the restaurant.

Babe looked aghast. "I don't believe he behaved like that. I've never seen Herz lose his temper before."

Al shook his head grimly. "I believe it. When I was a cub I saw him tear into a young shifter who'd made some little mistake while on patrol with him. I never heard what had happened but my dad was furious over it. I remember him talking to my mom later about how he'd had to make Herz apologize to the kid. That wasn't too long before my dad was killed."

Al didn't like where that thought led him. He'd often wondered why it was someone had been shooting silver bullets the night his dad had died. He moved into the booth opposite Babe and signaled over the waitress, who had clearly been staying away from the corner where the shifter patrol's leader had been so furious with his tablemates.

"What are you doing?" Babe asked, still obviously upset.

"I don't know about you but I'm eating," Al told her. He took a menu from the waitress and handed it to her. "I'm having the pork and pickle sandwich."

Babe stared at him for a moment. "Roland really didn't get to you."

"That old shifter? Nope." He looked at the waitress. "Pork and pickle, and whatever you have on draft."

Babe sat back as if astonished and suddenly her face cleared. She even grinned. "I'll have the same."

* * * * *

Herz's voice was a growl on the phone. "Whatever you are going to do had better be tonight. There are others interested in what happened to that little bitch now, and they aren't the kind you want chasing you."

"I thought you had all that under control."

"I did before you decided to take things into your own hands. Shooting the sister was stupid. It only made them more desperate to find them. She's the one who brought in the others. She and that half-breed mongrel she's mating with."

The man stared thoughtfully at the phone. Unlike his hotheaded partner, he never made a decision in anger. "Perhaps we should take care of everything at once," he said quietly.

Chapter Sixteen

Caught up in her thoughts, Barbara didn't argue when Al insisted on driving back to his place. Lunch had been good, better than she'd expected even given Al's enthusiastic description, but their meeting with Herz had bothered her more than she wanted Al to know.

The genial older gentleman she'd thought she'd known was a fraud. She'd seen the real Roland Herz when he'd leaned over the table and called her and Al garbage. He'd meant every word, and not for any good reason but just that she and Al were sleeping together.

Shifters were sensual people and there was no prohibition about taking a lover if you weren't mated so Herz should have had no objection to her being with Al. Only his parentage could have led to the man's comment. And Al's father had been a chief of the shifter patrol so only Al's mother was the problem, the lovely woman who'd saved Barbara's life last night. Al's mom wasn't a shifter and that apparently was enough for Herz to hate Al.

The older man's comment had shown a disgusting prejudice. It was even more disturbing to realize that her parents sometimes shared the same narrow-mindedness and she'd even professed similar sentiments in the past.

She knew better now but the fact her parents shared Herz's prejudice meant they weren't going to be happy to meet Al. Her mother had been suffering for a long time with depression to the point of occasional hospitalization. Her oldest daughter dating a half-bred shifter wasn't going to make her mother better.

But then again, could she really continue to try to live her life trying to keep her mother content? At some point what she needed was to see to her own happiness.

Then again, she didn't know if Al even wanted to continue their relationship past finding her sister. She thought he might but she'd been wrong about men's desires in the past. Not his desire for her right now, that was clear enough, but what he wanted for the future wasn't.

Perhaps he looked at their relationship as only for the short term as well. That thought made her stomach clench. She wanted more than that but how could she expect him to commit to a full relationship when she couldn't do the same?

They arrived back at the Dog House and parked. All the way upstairs to Al's apartment Barbara argued with herself over what she was doing. It had been hours since they'd last made love but she didn't feel deprived at all. If anything her body felt sated, content.

She was over her bi-yearly heat so she didn't need to stay with Al any longer and could leave. Possibly she should for his safety. After last night's shooting she couldn't ignore the possibility that she was putting Al into danger. But Al knew what they were up against and it hadn't stopped him from staying with her and continuing to help.

He stopped at the top of the stairs and looked closely at her as if trying to guess her thoughts. "You're awful quiet."

"Sorry." Barbara shook her head. "I've been thinking that this has become too dangerous. Perhaps we should back off."

Al's eyebrows went up. "Quit looking for your sister?"

"No, not quit." She raised her eyes to meet his gaze. "But there's no reason you need to be involved."

"If you're involved then so am I."

"Al, this is becoming dangerous."

He gave a short bark of a laugh. "Becoming dangerous? They've already shot us once, Babe, and with silver bullets. No, I'm not going to leave you alone to face them. You need me."

Al pulled her into his arms, his mouth inches from hers. "You need me and I'm sticking with you for as long as you let me." Then he closed the gap between them and his kiss forced all thoughts of arguing further from her. Al's kiss was potent stuff and like a drug took over her body and consciousness.

They were inside the apartment before she even recognized that he'd stopped kissing her long enough to open the door, and they were in his bedroom shortly after that. He backed her up to the bed, caressing her body and removing articles of clothing as he went.

Perhaps she wasn't in heat anymore but Al certainly hadn't lost his lust for her and strangely enough that was all it took for her to respond in kind. An electric thrill shot down her spine as he leaned in to pull one bared nipple into his mouth. Not to be outdone, she pulled his shirt off over his head and threw it to one side. Al chuckled deep in his throat.

"You want me naked?"

"You bet I do."

"Well then." He undid his pants and let them fall to the floor, his freed cock standing straight from his body. Babe stared at it, her mouth watering, and then got an idea.

She'd been so focused on getting that cock inside her the past few days she hadn't taken the time to get to know it better. Now that she wasn't quite so desperately in need she could touch and taste him. She started by sitting on the edge of the bed and leaning in to take in his scent, the earthy smell of a shifter man coupled with the heady aroma of his arousal, rich and musky. The potency of the combination nearly made her swoon

and she was grateful she hadn't done this before when she'd been even more susceptible to him.

Fainting in front of the man wouldn't have done anything to support her need to be seen as an independent woman. Instead she gave the swollen head a gentle kiss.

Al reacted by sucking in air with a whistling noise. She looked up to see him grinning at her, his eyes bright. "Oh, you can do that again if you like."

"I like," she said, and followed up by running her tongue down the tip of his cock, letting it pick up some of the flavorful pre-cum seeping down the crack. Again Al reacted with a low growl and when she looked up at him the amusement had been wiped from his face.

He took a ragged breath. "You sure this is what you want, Babe? Not that I'm complaining but this is delaying getting to your satisfaction."

She took firm hold of his cock and used it as a handle to draw him closer. "I'll let you know when I want satisfaction. In the meantime let me have my fun."

Taking the bulk of his cock into her mouth easily, Barbara worked up and down his shaft. He seemed to swell even larger than before, filling her mouth. His taste was intoxicating.

She was happy to hear no further argument from him. Instead Al spread his legs and gave her full access to him. Sucking him deep into her throat, she took advantage of that, letting her free hand reach in to fondle his balls. Under her ministrations they tightened and filled her hand.

Al sucked in several hard breaths and his hands rested lightly on her shoulders as if he were afraid to hold her too firmly. Barbara continued to work his shaft until his hands tightened and finally he pulled her back.

"I'm going to come, Babe."

She smiled at him. "Then come. I don't mind. In fact I look forward to it."

His eyebrows rose and seemed to meet. "Who am I to deny the lady?" he said finally and he released her shoulders.

Barbara returned to sucking his cock and soon she felt the first signs of his climax, his balls tightening further and the first sweet gush of cum filling the back of her mouth. She kept up the pressure and Al groaned and his cock pulsed under her hand and then her mouth was flooded by his essence.

She drank every drop from him, sucking him until he was leaning over her. Feeling wild and wanton, Barbara pulled back from him and licked her lips. As she'd expected Al was delicious...in all possible ways.

His cock was still hard as he pulled her up into his arms and his mouth closed over hers. Lifting her, he pulled her legs around his waist.

"And now, it's my turn," he said and he plunged his cock into her to the hilt.

Barbara moaned as he filled her and the fact that she wasn't in heat anymore was unimportant. She might not crave sex but she certainly still craved Al, and particularly his cock inside her.

Just where it was now, long and hard, filling her to the max. Her pussy contracted around it, spasms running along his hardness in the most delightful way. He felt wonderful.

And yet it wasn't just physical. Heat-inspired sex with Al had been fabulous. This...was different. She looked into his eyes and what she saw there heated her as much as her hormones had.

She might no longer crave sex but she craved Al and wanted him to make love to her.

And fortunately Al was happy to oblige.

He held still for a moment, as if relishing her. Under her hands his muscles bunched, his skin slickening with sweat with the effort. "I want this to last."

He felt it too, the worry that they were close to the end of this relationship. Or perhaps it was just that he loved the feel of her. She hoped it was the latter. She wanted him to want her the way she wanted him.

And right now he was again moving inside her and she was clasping him close and that was the way she wanted him, hard and thick inside and warm and loving on top. Barbara moaned and whined at him.

It was wild, as wild as before but sweeter as well. Barbara screamed as she came, and then another climax was on her, then another. She'd never come that fast before or that often.

It was Al doing this to her, the way a mate did for his woman. Hard and fast and so good. Breathless, Barbara couldn't even scream as the last wave hit and Al slowed down, his body tensing.

He was going to come too now, deep within her, and Barbara knew that again would push her over the edge. He slowed to the point of almost stopping and then with a roar he sped up again and this time his body seemed to erupt inside her. Hot cum pulsed into her pussy, heating her inside and pushing her over the edge. Barbara's senses swam and for a moment everything went dark.

She came to wrapped in his arms, an astonished look on Al's face. "Did you just faint?"

Barbara couldn't help but laugh. "I guess so," she said, making herself comfortable next to him on the bed. Early as it was, she was tired and suddenly a nap seemed just what she needed.

Al lifted his head to stare at the lightly dozing woman tucked under his arm. He caressed her face and Babe opened her eyes. "Hi," she said quietly, a gentle smile on her face.

"Hi yourself." Al didn't want to bring this up but he knew he had to. "You aren't in heat anymore."

She tilted her head to the side and her smile turned wary. "How did you know? Wasn't I passionate enough?"

Al couldn't help barking a laugh. In or out of heat Babe was the most passionate woman he'd ever known. "Nothing wrong with the way you make love," he reassured her. "But taking time to go down on me...that was new. You have been pretty single-minded up until now."

"Oh." Babe blushed and Al thought it was the cutest thing he'd ever seen. Who would imagine she'd look so charming when embarrassed.

"The thing is," he said, "I was wondering why you didn't tell me."

"I wasn't sure at first at first. Does it matter?"

"Not really. But I expected that when you weren't in heat you wouldn't still be interested."

"Interested in sex?" Babe's smile faded. "There is nothing wrong with the sex between us, Al."

"And that's all it is? Just sex?" He hated himself for pushing the subject but he had to know where he stood, even though he didn't think he was going to like the answer.

Babe hesitated, her gaze not meeting his, and he knew he wasn't going to like it. Finally she shook her head. "It isn't just sex. But I'm not sure what else it can be right now. We haven't talked about this."

"Maybe it's time we did."

She nodded. "Maybe it is. I...care for you. More than I want to admit. But I'm not sure I want a permanent mate yet."

"At least not one like me."

"What you are isn't part of this," she said. "Maybe earlier it was important but not anymore."

"My being a half-breed isn't important?" A surge of hope filled him. "Then what is the problem?"

"I've been thinking about this. I've never been on my own. Never lived away from home, never been farther than a short drive from my family."

"What does that have to do with us?"

"I want to feel independent, Al."

"And you couldn't be that with me?"

She shook her head. "It isn't just you. I can't be that with anyone. I want my space, Al, to be on my own, without a family or a mate."

Al stroked her cheek. "So what would you do?"

"I've thought about opening a detective agency specializing in parafolk problems. I think I'd be good at that."

He did know she'd be good as a PI. Al figured Babe would be good doing anything she put her mind to. The fact that she wanted to do it on her own bothered him, particularly the part about not wanting a mate. But at least she wasn't outright rejecting the idea of having him in her life or at least the excuse she was using didn't have anything to do with his family history.

So maybe there was a chance that someday they could be together, if not now.

From somewhere he summoned a smile. "I know you'd be good at it."

She smiled at him. "Thanks, Al."

Her smile turned mischievous. "You know, I was thinking. It will be the full moon in a few hours. Perhaps we can drive up into the hills and run together."

That was an intriguing thought.

The phone next to the bed rang and for a moment Al was tempted to let it go to his answering machine but the ring was the special one he used for the phone in the Dog House. He reached over Babe to pick it up.

Chet's voice was strained. "Boss, you better get down here."

"What's up?"

"A couple of shifters, guys I haven't seen before, are making trouble. They're big and mean, and we've got our usual Sunday afternoon crowd."

Al closed his eyes and groaned. The usual Sunday crowd meant an older crowd, shifters and a few norms from the neighborhood. Sunday was a slow day so the Dog House offered half-priced drinks for seniors all afternoon and early evening along with a selection of board games, so the place was usually packed.

It was not a crowd into which to drop a pair of rowdy shapeshifters looking for trouble. One of his elderly customers could easily get hurt.

"I'll be right down." Grimly he hung up and grabbed his clothes from the floor, having to hunt to find one of his shoes, which had landed behind the bed. He didn't even bother to look for his socks, slipping the shoes onto his feet without them.

"Should I come?" Barbara asked from her place in the bed, not looking at all interested in getting up. Al shook his head.

"I just need to bust a couple of heads and toss them out of my bar. No point in you being there."

She stretched and grinned at him. "In that case maybe I'll take a nap."

Still shaking his head, Al headed for the front door. A nap sounded pretty good to him too. The sooner he dealt with the bozos in his bar, the sooner he could get back up here to nap with her.

As soon as he reached the landing at the top of the stairs Al felt the hot shrieking pain of silver bullets entering his shoulder and thigh and he hit the stairs hard, tumbling past his attackers to the second-level landing. They'd been waiting on the stairwell landing and shot faster than Al could react.

Al struggled to pull air into his lungs, the impact having knocked the breath from him. Sound from the guns still echoed in the stairwell but he heard Babe scream from the apartment above. There was sound of a struggle and a sharp screech that cut off. No gunshot though. Al's brain, fuzzy with pain and shock, managed to register that. At least they hadn't used the same gun on her as they had him.

He needed to get to her. If he could only stand. Al tried to pull his feet under him.

Two men came down the stairs from his apartment, one of them carrying Babe over his shoulder, wrapped in a sheet. She hung limp and for a moment fury gave Al the strength to stand.

The leading man struck him and, weakened by the shock and the silver, Al went down. The cement floor of the stairwell landing was cold under Al's cheek and his head rang from the blow. Only a shifter had that kind of strength.

A shifter armed with silver bullets, aiming his gun at Al. "Should I finish him off?"

"Don't waste the ammunition. He's dead already. The silver will finish him off before anyone finds him." The man carrying Babe brushed past him. "We better get out of here before someone comes to investigate those shots." They left, the door at the bottom of the stairwell clanging shut moments later.

It took nearly five minutes of struggle but Al managed to drag himself back into his apartment. The smell of ketamine told him what had happened to Babe and for a moment he whispered a prayer of thanksgiving. They'd knocked her out, not killed her.

He pulled the phone to him and dialed, forcing consciousness until he heard Harold's voice on the line. "Help us. They got my Babe," he managed to get out.

Then everything went black as for the first time in his life Al "Bad Dog" Lupas fainted.

Chapter Seventeen

His world was dark and warm and safe. He seemed to float in a pool of peace and security, and could have stayed there forever but for the loud voices arguing nearby. Perhaps he could have tuned them out and go back to unconsciousness but he heard Babe's name and his heartbeat raced. She was in trouble and he needed to help her.

Reluctantly Al opened his eyes and joined the conflict already in progress.

"I don't care if he is asleep. I want to know where my daughter is and he has the answers. Wake him up." A tall, distinguished man with gray hair at his temples glowered at City Chief Jonathan's majordomo. They were standing in the informal parlor of Jonathan's mansion.

The man was looking for his daughter? Al studied him. Yes, this could be Babe's father, Wilson Grislop, the man who'd taught his daughter that half-breed shapeshifters weren't good enough for their kind.

Harold glowered back. "We want to know as well. Unfortunately all we know is that she was taken from Mr. Lupas' apartment, there was the smell of ketamine in the air, and Al himself was unconscious with two silver bullets in his chest."

"Silver bullets?" The man looked shocked. "He's lucky to have survived."

"Yes, I am," Al said, catching the other men's attention. Al lifted his head from the couch he was lying on, dislodging the blanket covering him. He was naked from the waist up, white bandages covering two aching spots on his chest, where the bullets had been he supposed. The bandaging was clean and precise and he recognized Harold's wife Rebecca's handiwork. The lady shifter was a former nurse, which came in handy on a regular basis among the parafolk.

He also smelled his mother's spell-casting herbs and knew she must have been here as well. Witchcraft and modern medicine, a powerful combination and he was lucky to have it on his side.

Under the men's scrutiny Al struggled to sit up. He was not going to discuss anything with Babe's dad while lying down.

Harold lifted one eyebrow in obvious disapproval. "If you tear those stitches Rebecca will be most unhappy."

"You know as well as I do that they'll heal tonight after I've shifted." Tonight was the full moon, with moonrise about nine-thirty, and he'd be in wolf form and healthy by then. The effect of shifting in moonlight would heal his wounds unless there was lingering silver in them.

Knowing how thorough his mom was, that wasn't likely.

"They may heal then, but not if you don't take care of them now."

"I'll be careful, Harold." Al decided not to attempt standing quite yet. Fortunately Harold grabbed a chair and pulled it over toward the couch and, following his lead, Wilson Grislop did the same. With the other men sitting Al didn't feel as uncomfortable about his position.

"So tell me what happened to my daughter. You said someone took her?"

Al explained about the phone call from the bar and that he'd been ambushed on the stairwell. "The fight in the bar was probably staged to get me out of the apartment."

"Two men in the bar and two more on the stairs. And they were shifters?"

"All of them and at least the ones on the stairs weren't known to me. My guys didn't know the ones in the bar and we get most of the shapeshifters in the area." Al gave a wry glance at Babe's father. "Present company excepted, of course."

"No. I haven't been to the Dog House." Wilson Grislop's face twisted in disdain. "Where did you meet my daughter anyway?"

Al couldn't help the grin on his face. "At the Dog House. She came in looking for her sister."

Wilson Grislop's eyes seemed to bulge from his head. "My daughters were both at your bar?"

"Yep. Irony, isn't it?"

"Tammy is too young to drink. She shouldn't even be in a place like that."

"She looks old enough and didn't order anything she shouldn't so we didn't card her." Al shrugged. "When someone doesn't cause trouble, we don't really have any call to ask them to leave. Anyway, she was there but left before Babe could talk to her. The next day they found her car near the beach."

"Yes, I was told about that. The shifter patrol is looking for her now."

"So were Babe and I and we were getting close to finding her. That's why I was shot and she was taken." He explained about Tammy's involvement with the environmental group Oceans Forever and the investigation of Roland Herz's involvement with the company Disposahaul. He glossed over Herz's calling Babe "garbage" due her involvement with him but he did tell them that the man seemed dangerously angry over their investigation.

"You think Roland Herz is behind this?" Wilson Grislop looked like he didn't know whether to be outraged or laugh. "The man is a pillar of our society."

"Perhaps so but he has been acting erratic for years," Harold said. "He's the most resistant of all the shifters when it comes to dealing with non-shifters in the parafolk world."

"But you are accusing him of kidnapping my daughters. He's known them since they were cubs. He's always been so fond of them, particularly Barbara. It's ridiculous!"

"Perhaps not so ridiculous," a soft feminine voice broke in and Al looked up to see an older version of Barbara step into the room. Mary Grislop looked a great deal like her daughter but for the touches of gray in her tawny hair and the softness of her

features. There was also a sadness in her face that wasn't in Barbara's, as if life had more than once disappointed her.

The men jumped to their feet but when Al started to struggle to his, she held up her hand. "Please remain where you are, Mr. Lupas. I don't want to be responsible for undoing the fine work of others." She took a seat on the other end of the couch near her husband's chair.

"What did you mean it isn't so ridiculous?" Al asked once everyone was seated again.

Mary seemed to hesitate. "It goes back a long way. Roland has always had so much but always seemed to want more. When we were younger he wanted me but I was Wilson's mate instead. I knew he was disappointed but seemed to accept it...except that more than once he'd hint that if I wanted something more than friendship he'd be happy to give it."

Wilson's eyes narrowed at his mate and wife. "I'm sure you're mistaken."

She smiled sadly. "I knew you wouldn't believe me so I never said anything. But he approached more than once. But not lately I should say." She shook her head. "I've grown too old I suppose. The last time he came it was Barbara he hinted he wanted."

"He's twice her age!" Al broke in.

Wilson's face turned bright red and he sprang to his feet. "Roland has been propositioning you all this time, and then our daughter, and you didn't tell me?"

"I tried to several times, my dear. But you wouldn't hear me."

"That's ridiculous. You must be wrong—" His voice broke off as if he heard what he was saying and recognized it for what it was. The color left his face and he sat again, his anger gone. "I didn't listen to you, did I?"

She sighed and took his hand. "I'm afraid not—about a lot of things. If I'd told you before you'd have said it was all in my head. But there is something not quite right about Roland."

"You have said that before. I should have listened." Wilson shot a hard glance at Al. "And you believe he has both our daughters?"

"I believe the people working with him have them."

"As well as my nephew." Another female voice broke in and they looked up to see Princess Annette enter the room, followed by City Chief Jonathan Knottman. That told him how late it was, that the sun was already down and the nightwalker was awake. He'd lost several hours after Babe had been taken.

Behind Jonathan came his wife and bloodmate Sharon, Harold's wife Rebecca and last but not least his mother Martha. Al pulled the blanket up higher to cover his bandages but it was no use, Martha came directly to his side and glared at him.

"What are you doing up?"

"I'll be fine, Mom. Besides, they have Babe."

She studied him. "She's trouble, Alfred, and you know it. You've been shot twice since you got involved with her."

"Twice?" Wilson stared at him.

His mother folded her arms and turned to the shifter. "Twice I've had to patch him up, although it was a flesh wound last time. Lucky thing since I doubt your daughter would have survived her wound if he hadn't gotten her to me in time."

Wilson and Mary gripped each other's hands and stared. "Barbara was shot as well? Didn't you report it to the shifter patrol?" the man asked.

"We didn't have to. Richard already knew," Al said.

Wilson frowned. "He was there when it happened?"

"No. Herz told him."

"And how did Herz know?"

"We believe because he ordered the shooting," Jonathan said quietly in his soft European accent. "Either that or he was told about it later by whoever did order it. Either way, we know he's involved, and not because he's head of the shifter patrol."

"It all comes back to what Tammy and Kurt were investigating," Al said. "They were intent on proving that Disposahaul was doing illegal dumping off the coastline and poisoning the ocean as a result. Since Herz has a financial interest in the company he'd be against their investigation."

"As would anyone else involved with the company," Jonathan pointed out. "Herz isn't the only shareholder and it may be he has partners who are even more ruthless than he is."

"The point is that someone working for them probably has Tammy, Kurt and now Babe," Al said. "And these people know that the three can identify them."

"They will have to kill them," the princess said, her voice grim.

"Perhaps. But if they'd wanted Babe dead they could have killed her last night. They wanted her alive for some reason."

"Perhaps they want it to look like an accident?" Sharon spoke up for the first time. "That way it can't be traced back to them?"

Al considered that. It fit everything else. "No proof of their involvement. That could be. They've already stolen all the proof that Tammy and Kurt had collected. But how would they get rid of them?"

Jonathan looked grim. "You say they have boats, and that Tammy and Kurt are divers."

"Well, technically Kurt doesn't dive," Al said. "He's a selkie so he just slips into his skin and swims with her."

Jonathan waved his hand. "But they don't know that do they? I wonder if Herz knows what Kurt is?"

"I'm not convinced he knows," Al said grimly. "He told us earlier that Kurt was a shifter just not a werewolf."

Jonathan nodded. "I'm not convinced they know. If they knew they were dealing with selkies they'd be more worried. They know that ketamine didn't kill him so they'll think he's just another shifter. Not too many know that ketamine has the same effect on selkies. So let's believe that they don't know. Tonight's the full moon and all shifters take their alternative form. Suppose they took the three off onto a boat and waited for them to shift. Then they dump them off the boat..."

A sharp cry came from Mary and her husband moved to the couch and pulled her into his arms. He glared at them. "You've upset her."

"We're all upset," Jonathan said precisely, "but we must face facts. There was a reason for kidnapping your daughters and young Kurt and I do not believe these people wish them well."

"But you said they were shifters. How can they do this to their own kind?"

"For the same reason they can shoot silver bullets into Alfred," Martha spoke up. "Just the way my husband died, all those years ago. Because some shifters are purists and don't like seeing others of their kind mixing with the rest of the parafolk. Herz will do anything to keep werewolves from mating those not their kind, even kill."

"It was never proven Herz was involved in your husband's death."

She smiled sadly. "Not proven. No. But he was. *I* know it."

Jonathan placed his hand on her shoulder. "I wish we had proof of it, but it wouldn't bring him back. Perhaps this time we can make an accusation stick."

"That would be satisfying. To see him taken to justice."

More than satisfying. Al struggled to keep his fury under control. The man who was very likely responsible for his father's death had been right in front of him this afternoon and now he had his hands on Al's woman.

"I want justice for my father but that isn't and shouldn't be our primary goal." Al sat up further and let the blanket slip down to his waist. "These people have three of our own and we have to find them before they do whatever it is they are planning."

"I agree," Babe's mother spoke up. "They have my girls. I want them back safe."

"And my nephew," Princess Annette added.

"Rescuing our people is our top goal," Jonathan nodded. "I would suggest we split up and search the places we suspect they might be held."

The princess stepped forward. "We know where they keep their boats, at a private dock near San Pedro. I will take my people there."

"That's a good idea," the city chief said. "You will be the most comfortable with the boats. There is also Roland Herz's house..."

"I'll go there," Wilson said.

"I'm going too," his wife spoke up.

"No, Mary. That's too much for you."

Al saw the seemingly fragile woman's backbone stiffen and she glared at her husband. "Too much when my girls are at stake? I don't think so. At the least I'll be able to distract him."

"No one should be going out alone," Jonathan said. "For one thing there will be a full moon in a few hours and the shifters will be in their alternative forms. That works for us because most of Herz's allies seem to be shifters themselves."

"Yeah," Al said. "At least they won't be able to fire any silver bullets. No hands, no guns."

"True enough. But our shifters won't be able to drive cars either, or talk on a cell phone. So every group with shifters will need at least one non-shifter with it." He looked at the Grisloups. "I will go with you. If Roland Herz is at his home I want to talk to him."

"And I'm going with you," his wife Sharon broke in.

"I'm going to the Disposahaul headquarters," Al said. "There was something about that place that felt wrong."

Al's mom shook her head. "Al, you're still injured."

"I'll heal quickly. And I can't just stay here." He took her hand and squeezed it hard. "Babe means too much to me, Mom. I can't lose her."

She stared at him for what felt like a long time. "Very well. But if you're going, I am too. I'll be your designated non-shifter."

His mother coming along to rescue his mate? She was a powerful spellcaster but she was also his mom and it seemed wrong to take her along on what could be a dangerous mission. Al opened his mouth to object but before he could argue Harold broke in, "I'll go as well."

"And I will send two of my warriors with you, as well as with our city chief," Princess Annette said.

Jonathan clapped his hands. "Excellent. We have three teams to search and about two hours before moonrise changes our shifters. Let's make the best use of it."

* * * * *

Barbara came to in a world that was cold and hard, with the feel of scratchy fabric under her cheek and a burning sensation around her ankle. Her head ached and it was difficult to put together more than the simplest thoughts.

She'd been drugged, that was the answer to the dryness in her mouth and the ache in her temples. Drugged, and she was as naked as she had been when they'd taken her from Al's apartment. Just peachy.

Barbara lifted her head and groaned.

"Oh thank goodness," a familiar voice said. Barbara peeled her eyes open to see a metal screen and on the other side her sister sitting on a metal cot similar to the one she was on, a slender chain leading from her ankle to a hook set into the wall.

They were both in what looked like individual cages like you might find at the pound, bare concrete floors with drain holes, metal fencing and doors latched with padlocks. The only concessions to non-animals in the cages were the metal cots and buckets in the corners that were probably intended as temporary latrines.

If she could get her hand on the padlock on the door she could break it with one hand. But so could her sister unless the chain was too short to let her get to it.

Which it probably was.

Disheveled as she was, Tammy looked uninjured, and relief sped through Barbara. Even so, she had to ask, "Tammy? Are you okay?"

"Outside of being chained with silver in this cell for the past two days? Sure, I'm fine. How are you? You were so still when they brought you in I thought they might have killed you."

Barbara sat up and wrapped the thin blanket around her body to give her some semblance of modesty. She rubbed her head. "Outside of the headache from hell, I'm okay." The burning sensation around her ankle got worse and she looked down to see a silver-plated cuff with a chain leading to another hook in the wall. "That's not a lot of fun though."

"Tear off a strip of blanket and stuff it around the inside of the cuff," Tammy said. "That's what I did. Keeps it from burning the skin."

Barbara followed her sister's suggestion, hissing a couple times as the silver burned her fingers, but once the blanket strip was in place it did stop her ankle from being burned by the silver. "They could have done that before locking it on me," she muttered. "And they might have left me something to wear."

"I don't think our good health is what they have in mind," Tammy said.

"What do they have in mind?"

Tammy wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, her blonde head bowed. "I don't know," she said miserably. "But it isn't going to be good. And now you've been dragged into it as well as me and Kurt."

Yeah, Tammy's selkie companion who was the reason she and Al were in this mess. *Al... What had happened to him?* Barbara shivered under the blanket. There had been shots in the stairwell before the two men had burst into the bedroom with the tranquilizer gun.

What had happened to Al? Was he hurt? They must have done something to incapacitate him or she knew he'd have fought them taking her.

Could he even be dead?

No. She couldn't think that. Al was or would be okay. He had to be.

"Where is Kurt?"

"On the other side," a male voice answered. Barbara looked through the front of her cage to see a similar arrangement of cells were on the opposite side of the narrow aisle. Inside the one opposite Tammy was a young man with very short blond hair. He also was chained to the wall.

He waved at Barbara. "Nice to meet you," he said, but the words sounded ironic.

"I'm sure." She stood up, testing her balance, and moved as close as she could to the front. As she expected, the chain was just short enough to keep her from reaching it. Experimentally she tried stretching the silver chain but it didn't break.

She could see several more cells stretching up and down the hallway and doors at either end. There were no windows and only a few dimly lit bulbs providing light. "What is this place?"

"From what I can tell, an old animal control facility," Tammy said. "I can smell the dogs that were in here but it's been a long time."

Barbara sniffed the air using her shifter senses. There was the smell of long-ago dog and a staleness in the air from long disuse. "I think we're underground as well. It smells like a basement."

"We are far from the water," Kurt said, his voice melancholy. "Very far."

"Are you bound by silver the way we are?"

"No. I could break the chain if I needed to, but I haven't." He lifted the slender length of chain and she heard it jingle in hands. "I'm not strong enough to break open the lock or the cage walls, and I don't want them to know I'm not sensitive to silver. They think I'm a shifter and that has to be good for something."

"They'll know in a few hours when the moon rises and you don't change."

"Is it that close to the full moon?" Tammy looked shocked. "I guess it is. I can feel the pull now that you mention it."

For the first time Barbara wished that Al with his resistance to silver was with them. He'd be able to break the chain and get them out of here.

"I wish I knew what they were going to do with us," she muttered. Could there be anything worse than being chained in a dog cage with no inkling of what was going to happen to you?

From down the hallway came the sound of voices and then heavy footsteps and immediately Barbara wished she could take back her words.

If there was a worse thing than not knowing your fate, then experiencing that fate was very likely it.

Chapter Eighteen

"I don't like the feel of this place." After parking at the curb outside Disposahaul Al's mother peered over the steering wheel of her minivan, which she'd insisted they use. Since neither Al's or Babe's cars were available, both of them having been left back at his place, Al couldn't very well complain, although he would have preferred to drive until he'd actually changed form.

Unfortunately his mom had also insisted on driving and so he'd had to put up with her law-abiding careful pace through the early Sunday evening L.A. traffic. Only the presence of Harold and the two selkies that Princess Annette had sent along kept him from arguing with her. It was all he could do to avoid asking her to hurry up and he had breathed a sigh of relief when they finally arrived outside the forbidding electrified fence.

Martha shook her head. "The aura of this place is all wrong. Evil has happened here. Death has happened..."

"Death?" Al's heart raced. Were they too late?

His mom shook her head and reached over to pat his hand. "Not recently. The death I feel is very old, in the past. But this place doesn't feel right even now."

They got out of the car and headed for the closed gate across the empty driveway. Gingerly Al tested the metal gate, expecting to feel an electric shock, but there wasn't one. "The gate isn't electrified."

He and Harold looked at each other and nodded, then charged the gate with full shifter speed and strength.

The lock held only for a moment before the gate popped open. Al rubbed his shoulder but grinned at his fellow shifter as they led the way onto the property. His mother passed them, shaking her head. "You better not have opened those stitches."

"Only a couple hours left until I shift, Mom. I'll be fine until then."

The front door was also locked, but before Al and Harold could break it open Martha waved her hand over the mechanism. Al knew she was manipulating the interior of the lock, moving the tumblers with her mind. Sure enough the door opened smoothly.

Inside were two guards armed with rifles aimed at them. "Stop right there—"

That's all they managed to get out before Martha waved her hand at them and took possession of their minds. Both men stared slack-jawed at them as Al and Harold disarmed them and fastened their wrists with silver-core zip ties from the supply Chief Jonathan had given them.

She shook her head. "Norms, and weak-minded ones at that."

"So where are the shifters we expected to see?"

Martha held up her hand again and closed her eyes. "I don't feel anyone else right around here. Perhaps downstairs."

"Downstairs?" Al said, but he followed her as she led the way to a door in the hall. She opened the door, which led to a stairwell going down.

Then he smelled it, the scent of shifter. Even more important, he smelled *her*, the smell of his mate. Babe had been here.

Al raced down the stairs ahead of them only to find another door. This one was also locked but he didn't wait for his mother to catch up and unlock it. Two kicks and it lay in broken pieces on the floor.

Ahead was a long narrow room with metal cages running along either side. The smells of shifter and Babe were strong, as well as the slight fishiness that he'd associated with Tammy's friend Kurt and the other selkies.

But the cage doors were open and they were empty, even the one where he found a torn blanket that smelled strongly of his mate.

Martha caught up with him as Al held the blanket to his nose, relishing her smell. She had been here, not too long ago.

"This is where I sensed the badness. This used to be a pound." She nodded at the door at the end of the hallway. "Probably that's where they killed the animals they couldn't find homes for..."

Al was down the hallway in a flash and kicked in the door at the end. But the small room he uncovered was empty and there was no scent of his mate inside. He leaned against the doorway, both relieved and disappointed. He'd found where they'd taken her and she had been here not so long ago. But where was she now?

His mother's hand came down on his shoulder and when he turned to face her there was sympathy in her eyes. "At least we know where they were and we couldn't have missed them by very long. Let's finish searching the building and call in to the others. Perhaps they're being taken to one of the other places we're watching."

Again Al led the way, using his sense of smell to follow Barbara's trail up another stairwell and to the back of the building where they saw several garbage trucks parked.

And...one empty spot where a truck was missing. The scent trail led to the back of that space and the smell of burned diesel was fresh in the air.

Martha pulled out her cell phone and dialed Jonathan's number. "They were here not much more than an hour ago and we know what kind of vehicle they're in. I doubt they're headed for Herz's place...not with a garbage truck."

Al hit one of the trucks, denting its side. "Only a couple places they could go with a garbage truck this time of night and not stand out. The dump—"

"And where they keep their boats," Harold finished.

"But how do we know which?"

"Well," Martha said. "There are those two guards we tied up. Perhaps they know."

It didn't take her long to get the truth from the terrified men and the answer was the marina. Al grimaced knowing that the plan was to dispose of his mate and her sister by drowning them. Werewolves were terrible swimmers, particularly in wolf form, as the women would be after moonrise. Kurt probably could swim better, even without his selkie skin.

Of course with it he'd be able to help both women swim to safety. That gave Al an idea. "Mom, I need you to drop me off at my building."

"Your building? What do you need there?"

"I need to get my car."

"I know you don't like the van, Al, but —"

"No, Mom. It isn't really the car." Well it was also the car but she didn't need to know that. "But there is something I need to get that's inside."

* * * * *

The back of the truck smelled just the way Barbara expected a garbage truck to smell. Awful.

The truck had in theory been hosed out but this close to the full moon and her shifting she was supersensitive to smells of any sort and this was just bad. Add to that the fact that she was sitting naked on the unclean metal floor of the truck and her misery was complete. The shifter man who'd dragged her out of her cell had stripped the blanket off and left it behind. He'd even had the audacity to grin at her as he checked out her breasts. *Bastard*.

Only the silver-plated bullets the two non-shifter men had threatened to put into her sister's head if she didn't obey them had gotten her into the truck.

But at least she could touch her sister, especially now that they were chained together, again with silver-plated cuffs and chains. The garbage business must be pretty good, Barbara thought wryly, to be able to afford such expensive equipment. But then, they hadn't seen much of a shortage of silver bullets either.

She sat with one arm wrapped around Tammy, the pair of them miserable while Kurt looking on sympathetically.

Wouldn't you know that selkies just weren't that sensitive to smells, at least not in their human form? But he had other issues, the enclosed environment of the truck bringing out his claustrophobia. As she gradually got used to the smell she realized he was growing paler the longer they stayed in the truck.

For a person whose normal environment was the deep ocean it wasn't surprising that he didn't like confined places.

"How did you deal with the cage?" Barbara asked as Kurt grew more and more anxious.

"I tried not to think about it."

"We talked," Tammy said and she moved closer to where he sat on the floor of the truck. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her gently.

It was a sweet kiss—that of a boy for his girl, and not the lover's kiss that Barbara usually shared with Al. Maybe their relationship wasn't as serious as she thought...

But no. She saw the way they looked at each other and inwardly Barbara sighed. Tammy was in love with Kurt and he with her.

Looked like there were going to be half-selkie, half-shifter kids in the family...assuming they could even have children.

But legend had it that selkies had been having children with humans for centuries so it would be surprising if they weren't fertile. She was likely going to be Aunt Barbara to children who learned to swim before they could walk.

Unless Uncle Al taught them to call her "Auntie Babe" instead.

Auntie Babe. In spite of everything Barbara couldn't help chuckling over the nickname Al had given her. He thought she was a "babe", a woman too lovely for her own name.

He made her feel that way as well, as if she was some kind of babe and not just boring old Barbara Grislop, oldest daughter of the self-righteous Grisloups who were too good to associate with those of lesser birth.

She'd told him earlier tonight that she wasn't interested in a long-term relationship, that she wanted to be independent instead.

She was independent now and it wasn't at all a pleasant feeling. She wanted Al's arms around her and his half-bred self by her side.

She wanted Al coming to her rescue. But how was he to do that when he didn't know where she was? She didn't even want to think about him being unable due to injury. He had to be all right. She'd know it if he weren't.

Barbara hugged her knees and let that comfort her. She would know if Al had been too hurt by the others. He was her mate and mates always knew that sort of thing.

Chapter Nineteen

The growl of the GTO's engine was the only sound in the car as Al drove down the freeway on the way to San Pedro. Harold, riding shotgun, stared either straight ahead, or at Al from the corner of his eyes.

If Al hadn't been so focused on getting to the harbor ahead of the garbage truck with Babe and the others he would have found the usually stoic shifter's nervousness hilarious.

Instead it was just another strangeness in the already strange situation he found himself in. For so many years he'd taken great care to keep his environment safe, from people who might disapprove of him, from relationships that might hurt him. He'd been so wary of letting anyone close enough to care about.

Now all he cared about was that he needed to keep whatever nastiness planned by those who had his Babe from happening. All he cared about was her, whether or not she cared about him.

He needed to save her.

Harold broke his self-imposed silence. "Don't you think you're driving a little fast?"

Al shifted gears and lanes at the same time, dodging around a semi truck with ease. "Not really."

"I'm just a bit concerned. The moon will be up in less than half an hour."

And it was going to be a bitch to drive as a werewolf. Al already knew the situation. "All the better to hurry then."

"I'm just thinking...if you were going slower we might have a chance to escape an accident when we shift."

"Perhaps you should have gone with my mother."

For reasons Al wasn't clear on, Harold had chosen to ride with him instead of in the van with Martha and the two selkies after they'd swung by his building to pick up his car. Al's reasoning for getting the GTO was the contents of its trunk. He still had Kurt's selkie skin and if they were going out on a boat having that to offer Kurt would be an asset. If the intention was to drown the three prisoners, Kurt could probably save them if he could switch to seal form.

But his mother's driving has been cautious enough to make them later to his building than he'd liked and now they barely had enough time to get to San Pedro before the moon rose and he shifted form. He probably should have taken one of the selkies with him instead of fellow shifter Harold.

Except that while both of the selkies were exceptional warriors, it turned out that neither of them could drive. Apparently when you lived in the ocean getting your driver's permit wasn't a top priority at sixteen.

Al hesitated to guess what did take the place of that rite of passage. Hunting down your first great white shark perhaps? Whatever it was, he was sure it was manly and involved some sort of under-the-sea activity. Too bad they hadn't learned to drive, otherwise he would have been happy to have one of the selkies sitting shotgun in his car.

Not driving. No, no, no, not that. No one other than him would be driving his GTO for as long as he had fingers to clutch the wheel with.

Which by his reckoning was going to be another twenty-five minutes and he was probably twenty minutes from the harbor. Fortunately he had Harold to navigate for him.

Who still had his eyes closed, zoned out into a happy place where he wasn't going to die in a car accident anytime soon.

"Harold, I need you to steer me to the dock."

From the other seat came a deep sigh but when Al glanced over he saw Harold had returned to the here and now and was consulting his map. "You want the next freeway exit," he said after a moment's study.

Excellent. Now all he had to do was negotiate surface streets for the next five miles to the seashore before the moon rose in...now twenty minutes. Piece of cake.

Especially at the speed he was going.

Al took the turn-off at record speed, the squeal of his tires on the curve making even him a little nervous. But he was going to make it to the marina before anyone else.

Well, maybe not. There was far more traffic on the surface streets than he'd expected and he seemed to hit every red light there was. Al was fuming by the time he neared the marina.

He saw Princess Annette's refugee-from-the-sixties van sitting outside the gate to the marina and realized he wasn't going to beat the selkies to the action.

But that wasn't the worst of it because he also hadn't beaten the moon, which rose above the mountains behind him at the same moment he reached the closed gates. The shift happened, his skin crawling with the onset of fur and bones shifting and digits fusing as he fought to maintain control of the car. As his feet turned into paws and left the pedals, the psychedelic van loomed in front of him as if the bright flower design on its backend was a target.

Just before his hands finished shifting Al grabbed the emergency brake and pulled on it, hard. The car slowed and was barely going more than twenty miles an hour when it hit the back of the van, pushing it into the locked gates and popping them open. Both vehicles eventually came to rest just inside the fence.

Al pulled his paws beneath him on the seat of the GTO and looked over at Harold, also now in wolf form. The other shifter looked shaken and there was more than a touch of anxiety in his eyes.

Al cocked his head and shrugged his shoulders. *Well...at least we survived*, he said in the shifter language. A mixture of sounds and gestures, it was almost as rich in meaning as normal language and like all shifters Al switched to it as soon as he became furry.

As did his wolf buddy. *Yeah. For now*. Using his teeth, Harold extricated himself from the seatbelt and opened the door. They both left the car and met outside, examining the damage done to the front of the GTO and the van.

The van had taken the worse of it, although Al cringed at the crumpled hood of his car. His beautiful GTO had taken a beating.

Harold shook his head. *Trick will be surviving what the princess will do to us when she sees what happened to her van*.

The rumble of a large truck interrupted them as it came up the road behind, brushing past the van and GTO as if they weren't even there.

On the side of the truck was the word "Disposahaul".

Al hit the trunk release and pushed Harold toward the back of the car. *Get the garment bag and meet me on the wharf*. Then without a backward look he took off after the truck at a full run.

Al raced along the pier as the truck turned and backed up slowly toward the single ship docked at the end. The ship was meant to hold garbage, was long and low near the center, where the contents of the truck would normally be dumped, Al guessed.

The difference was that while the truck backed up to the ship, the back didn't tilt up to empty its contents. Instead the doors to the cab of the truck opened and three large wolves exited, followed by a pair of men wearing the same uniforms as those back at Disposahaul and carrying rifles.

The guns were raised and ready as one man opened a panel on the back of the truck and dragged two smaller wolves and a human out to stand on the pier. The wolves were both tawny in color, one with the deep gold of his Babe's hair. Al recognized her immediately. Every hackle he had rose to attention and it was all he could do to not charge to her rescue. Only the men with guns kept him from anything that stupid, especially since three full-grown male wolves backed them up. Al might be able to take the men with guns or the wolves but not both.

Getting himself killed wasn't going to help Babe. Slowly Al snuck along the boxes and barrels lining the pier, keeping out of sight. Fortunately between the wind coming off the ocean and the stink of the garbage truck, his enemies couldn't smell him coming. He halted a mere fifty feet from the truck, where the last barrel gave him cover.

The men were arguing and Al picked out from their conversation that they weren't happy to see that the captive man was still a man. They had expected to find three animals in the truck once the moon had risen and a non-shifted man grinned at them.

They must not have realized that Kurt wasn't a shifter...or at least not any kind of shifter they were used to.

Al saw the glint of silver around the young man's neck, something he knew the selkie could have easily broken but he'd left it in place anyway. The young man must have been pretending to be sensitive to it since normally a silver chain wouldn't hold a selkie. Clever, making them think he was a shifter so he could stay close to Tammy. It also meant that the captors didn't know that Kurt's ability to swim would be far greater than they could expect. That could only work in their favor.

Of course they knew he wasn't a shifter now and that wasn't in their favor at all.

From behind him Al heard the sound of someone padding on four feet along the wooden dock, the swish of something being dragged behind him. Harold dropped the garment bag and sidled up to stand next to Al.

I see we've found them. So how are we going to get Kurt's skin to him?

I don't know yet. But keep it safe.

Barbara lifted her nose and breathed deep. *Al is here.* As soon as she'd left the back of the truck she'd sensed his presence somewhere on this dock. For the first time since she'd been captured she let out a sigh of relief. He must be okay if he'd come to her rescue. Cautiously she looked around the men crowded between her and the barrels close by, hoping to get a glimpse of him.

"Move back." One of the men with a rifle stepped forward to nudge her back to the others. Without thinking she growled at him and his eyes widened and the knuckles of his hands gripping the gun tightened.

He wasn't a shifter and he was scared of her, and the others. That was one thing nice about the change...instead of being a naked woman she was now in her wolf form with a nice warm fur coat and big sharp teeth. Teeth that could rip this man's throat out, and if it weren't for the other three male shifters growling at her, she might actually have done that.

Perhaps she should have shifted earlier when in the cages but the fact they could have shot her full of silver without opening the cage door had prevented her. No point in having big sharp teeth if you couldn't use them.

The fur coat would have been nice though.

In Barbara's entire life she'd never had to bare her teeth at anyone but she was totally pissed off now. Being drugged, imprisoned with silver and transported naked in a garbage truck made a woman cranky. But cranky or not, she wasn't going to attack anyone when the chances of being killed as a result were a hundred percent, not even when there wasn't much of a chance of survival anyway. The silver they'd wrapped around her earlier had already weakened her to the point a silver bullet would likely finish her off.

She needed to stay focused on getting herself and the others out of here.

The men with guns were still discussing what to do about Kurt, who in spite of their expectations had not turned furry when the moon rose. They didn't seem to mind the idea of killing a shifter but a parafolk of unknown type apparently made them nervous.

Kurt's silence at their threats didn't help. One man struck the young selkie across the face and Kurt's eyes blazed but he held his tongue. Then the man aimed his gun at Tammy. "Perhaps a bullet in his girlfriend would make him talk."

The other man grabbed the gun. "We can't shoot them unless there isn't a choice. Remember what the boss said. It has to look like an accidental drowning."

Accidental drowning? Yeah, sure. Like she and her sister would normally go out on a boat and "accidentally" fall overboard. Their parents would never buy that story, even if Roland Herz told them that. Tammy might go out on the ocean but Barbara never would unless someone had a gun to her head.

Like now.

But at least they weren't going to shoot her unless absolutely necessary. Barbara looked down the length of the wharf and made her decision. If she was right about there being help assembling on the dock, making them catch her would give the others time to take action. It would also split the bad guys up and maybe allow Kurt and Tammy an opportunity to escape.

Besides, what did she have to lose?

Ducking under the man in front of her, she dashed down the wide expanse, heading in the direction of the tall boxes that she thought might shelter Al. From behind came shouting and heavy footsteps.

She was fast enough to elude the men chasing her but she quickly felt the presence of the wolves on her trail. Barbara raced to stay in front of them then, using her agility and smaller size she wove among the boxes stacked along the edges of the wharf.

Finally she made one turn too many and found herself boxed in by large containers. Two of the wolves cornered her, growling as she turned to make her stand. Just as the larger of the two charged in to grab her throat a dark blur of black fur came at him from the side, knocking the wolf into one of the boxes before moving between them.

Al in wolf form stood between her and others, head lowered, teeth bared, growling.

The other two looked indecisive, the wolf who'd been knocked into the boxes getting shakily to his feet. Al had taken them by surprise and while they apparently had no trouble ganging up on a smaller female, facing a large and angry male was something else. But they shook off their hesitation and charged Al at the same time, one going for his neck, the other his back.

Two against one. Just what to expect against a pair of lowlife wolves like these. Barbara attacked the wolf nearest her, clamping down with her teeth on his rear leg as he tried to savage Al's back. She bit hard, blood filling her mouth from the wound, surprising a yelp out of the wounded animal. He let go of Al and turned to snap at her but Barbara was ready for him, biting his muzzle before he could get close to her.

Meanwhile Al had his jaws clamped on the neck of the other wolf and was using his weight to roll his opponent onto his back. Whimpers and cries came from injured animals and they broke away. Torn and bleeding, the pair backed off from Al and Barbara.

She licked the blood off her muzzle and growled, Al standing by her side and doing the same. He wasn't free of injury. One ear hung with a jagged tear in it and blood dripped from the side of his muzzle where the skin was torn. He smelled of blood, his and the other wolf's, the scent maddening.

Her mate, wounded but standing strong beside her, injured in her defense. Barbara's chest filled with pride at his strength. What a wolf he was.

What a man. And he was hers. She gave a happy yelp before returning to growl at the wolves in front of them.

The pair they'd fought off looked close to turning tail and running. After all, they were only motivated by their jobs while Al and Barbara were fighting for their lives.

The other two wolves started to back up but the sound of an engine froze them in their tracks. A long black limousine drove up along the wharf and came to a stop.

The pair of wolves facing them looked at each other and stalked forward menacingly. Apparently the arrival of the limo had given them heart, or...

Or whoever was inside was scarier than she and Al were. Barbara hated to think that was the more likely scenario. She edged closer to Al, enjoying his warm, strong presence and steeling herself for the next attack.

The back door to the limo opened and another wolf jumped out, face grizzled with age. Roland Herz in wolf form. He stared at them, eyes glittering with rage. But the other wolves didn't seem to fear him as one of them glanced back nervously at the still-open door.

A man even shorter than Herz was in human form slid out of the back of the limo and stood for a moment. He was dressed all in black, a long coat almost like a cape draping from his shoulders. After a moment he strode toward them.

The wolves harassing Al and Barbara ceased their snarling and even seemed to tremble as he swept his dark gaze over them.

Even Herz flinched when he raised one eyebrow and frowned. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked in a quiet voice loaded with heat and menace. He raised one hand to point at Al. "I recognize this one as Al Lupas. I thought you'd told me he was dead."

Chapter Twenty

Al raised his head. So this was their true enemy, the brains behind the scheme they'd blamed on Herz. Al took a deep sniff, recognizing the strong odor of magic that surrounded the man. A spellcaster, a powerful one too. Someone his mother might recognize although Al in spite of all of his contacts in that world didn't. Maybe someone from out of town.

He should have known there was someone else involved.

Roland Herz had been difficult for Al and his family for years but he was more arrogant bully than someone likely to arrange the kind of attacks happening today. Killing a shapeshifter with a non-shifter family was one thing, but to arrange the kidnapping of shapeshifter aristocrats like Babe and her sister was going too far.

It should have been obvious from the start that there had been someone with more ambition than Herz behind the Disposahaul scam of dumping toxic waste into the ocean. The man would normally be too busy running the lives of the shifter patrol to come up with a scheme like that.

Now that he saw the spellcaster, he understood just what they'd been up against all along. The only question was, why would a powerful spellcaster be involved with a garbage company? It couldn't just be money...that was rarely the only motivation for evil acts. And this spellcaster wanted them dead.

One of the men carrying a gun ran up. "Mr. Salamon. I'm sorry, sir, she got away from us."

The spellcaster waved his hand. "It doesn't look like she got very far. But I'm more curious about the male. I thought you reported he'd been shot with silver."

"That's what Tom and Dick said." The gunman pointed to the wolves facing them. "They were the ones who brought the girl in. They shot him twice in the chest with silver bullets...he was dying when they left."

"But he didn't die. I've never known a shifter who was resistant to silver. A rare specimen." He shook his head. "Probably a result of his mother's blood. A shame we can't study him further but he and the others know too much."

Al crouched to spring at the man. No one was going to take him or Babe prisoner again, not even if he had to die trying to get them free. But Salamon raised one hand and spoke a few short words. Al froze in place, paralyzed, his muscles no longer under his control. Babe lurched after him only to be similarly fixed in place. Salamon held up both his hands and neither of them could move a muscle.

"You will find more silver chains in the trunk...and some iron chains as well," he said to his men. "Use those on the male."

His minions wasted no time in doing his bidding and soon Al and Babe were being hauled toward the ship. The paralysis faded slowly but Al could move once they got there. Unfortunately the iron chains were strong enough to keep him from breaking free.

Kurt was standing with Tammy by his side and Al was disappointed to see that even with only a couple guards left behind the pair hadn't tried to escape. He knew that had been Babe's plan, to divide their enemy up and give the selkie a chance to take action. He was surprised that Tammy hadn't tried something like her sister. From what he'd heard she was a feisty character. But then he noticed how Kurt was holding the fur at the back of her neck as if trying to keep her calm. He also noticed that Kurt was watchful but not worried and Al wondered what the young selkie knew that he didn't.

Either he was a fool or something was up. Al guessed that something was up because he doubted Princess Annette's nephew was any kind of simpleton.

And her van was parked just outside the wharf. Which meant...

"What is going on here?" A woman's voice rose over the sound of the ocean behind them and, as if he'd conjured her with his thoughts, on the deck of the ship appeared Princess Annette. She glared at the men with guns, the enemy werewolves and especially the spellcaster Salamon. "Why is my nephew in chains?"

Salamon pulled himself up to his full and not very impressive height. "Who are you to question me?"

"I am Princess Annette Margarita Angelina Coraline, titular head of the selkies. I rule the waters along this coastline." She raised her hand and from behind her came a dozen selkie warriors armed with spearguns. They aimed them at the enemy wolves and men on the dock, who looked alarmed.

The princess smiled slightly. "And who are you?"

Salamon must have figured his jig was up. He bowed to the princess. "I am but a lowly spellcaster, your highness. I was working with this shifter when I found out he was imprisoning other parafolk like your nephew." He indicated Herz, who being in wolf form had no way to dispute his version of the truth. Al couldn't speak in his defense any more than Tammy and Barbara.

But Kurt had no such problem. "I don't believe him, Aunt Annette. I smelled this man's magic in the cell they'd imprisoned me in. I heard them talking about what to do with us. They planned on drowning Tammy and me. I know he was involved in that."

"You were planning on killing my nephew?" The princess gave Kurt a wry glance. "I know the boy can be a pest sometimes but that seems extreme."

Kurt shrugged. "They were upset that we found the proof their company was dumping toxic waste in the harbor."

Suddenly all spearguns were leveled at Salamon.

"You have been dumping toxic waste in *my* ocean?" Princess Annette asked sweetly. "Perhaps you'd like to explain this to me."

Salamon eyed the spearguns and the clearly furious princess. "I don't know what the lad is talking about, Your Highness. It was the garbage company doing the dumping and I have nothing to do with that."

Herz snarled angrily at the man. Al understood the shifter's non-verbal language. Salamon was more involved than he was admitting to. Unfortunately for Herz the only other people who understood him were all in wolf form.

Fortunately neither the princess nor the other selkies were impressed by the spellcaster's protests of innocence and the spearguns remained leveled at him.

The princess narrowed her eyes. "I expect we'll find out the truth soon enough." A rope was produced and the spellcaster's hands were secured, keeping him from making any further spells.

Several selkies came forward to pull the chains off Al and Barbara, transferring them instead to the shifters who'd been helping Salamon. Herz was given two sets of chains, including the heavy iron one that had been used on Al. Kurt busied himself with removing the last of Tammy's chains, putting his arms around her.

"I knew they were here, sweetheart. I smelled my people as soon as we got out of the truck. That's why I didn't fight."

Tammy licked his face, obviously believing him and happy to be free at last.

Another car drove onto the pier, a black Mercedes convertible with the top down. The driver jumped out of the car without using the door, his female companion following more slowly. "Really, Jonathan, you needn't be in such a hurry."

Jonathan Knottman smiled at his bloodmate and wife and shrugged. "It does seem that things are under control."

A shifter trotted down the pier, dragging a garment bag behind him. He dropped it at Kurt's feet then came back to stand next to Al.

Kurt opened the garment bag. "My skin! I was worried something had happened to it." He pulled the dark fur out of the bag and stepped inside it. Within seconds a seal lay on the pier next to Tammy. The young female wolf nuzzled him and he barked at her.

Princess Annette glared at them. "Don't you two go running off..." But Kurt barked at her and headed at full speed to the end of the pier, Tammy close behind. A minute later and the pair of them dove off the end into the ocean below.

Babe yelped nervously and ran to the edge of the pier. Al joined her to watch as the seal swam away quickly, Tammy paddling after him. He nudged her shoulder.

She swims well for a wolf.

Babe rolled her eyes and gave a wolfie sigh. *Yes. She always has been at home in the water.*

He stared after them, part of him wanting to jump into the water as well. It was natural when in wolf form to seek freedom, the run, the chase, the switch to a wilder form. This time they were the animals they'd become and behaving otherwise was abnormal.

On the other side of the water was a beach with a long spit of sand leading to the breakfront that protected this part of the harbor. Under the full moon the white sand gleamed brightly.

He wanted to leave and take his mate with him. He wanted to run the beach that beckoned in the distance. *Let's go.*

Babe's head swiveled toward him. *Go? Go where?*

To the beach. We'll run in the moonlight. Let's go. They don't need us here. He nudged her with his muzzle then grabbed her by the neck, dragging her down the pier. Babe could have fought him but she didn't. Al released her and she shook her head, glancing back at the others on the dock. The selkies had taken custody of the spellcaster and seemed to be in a heated discussion with City Chief Knottman over what to do with him and the shifters. Her sister was already gone and there was no sign of her parents.

There really wasn't a reason for them to stay. Babe gave him a wolfie grin and dashed down the pier, Al in hot pursuit.

She paused when she saw his car. *Your beautiful GTO. It's ruined!*

It's damaged but I can fix it. A small price to pay for being there when you needed me.

Babe nuzzled him, licking his muzzle. *I do appreciate it.*

So how are you going to show me?

She gave him another wolfie grin and dashed off into the night.

Oh yes. Nothing like a sweet wolf lady on a full moon night. Al took off after her at full speed.

Chapter Twenty-One

They ran the busy city streets in wolf form, dark shadows that blended into the walls and were barely perceptible. There were humans about but they would hardly notice what seemed to be a pair of large dogs running the streets.

Barbara led Al along a road that paralleled the ocean and slipped through a break in a fence. From there ran a steep narrow path down to a wide white sand beach that spread out several miles, including a long spit of land jutting into the harbor with a jetty at one end. This time of night it was deserted so they could step along the damp hardened sand next to ocean and run as much as they wanted. After the stressful day and night, the chase game was more than relaxing. Al and Barbara played like the wolves they were when the full moon was up.

They reached the end of the sand spit and climbed up on the rock retaining wall that helped protect the harbor from high surf. The oceanside was damp with spray from the crashing waves and slippery. It was a challenge to move along the broken top of the wall and not fall.

It was fun too. Barbara couldn't remember the last time she'd done anything as daring as running a rocky breakwater under the moonlight. If she could have laughed she'd have done it out loud. As it was she gave a howl of triumph when she reached the end of the breakwater and its lighthouse before Al. The smell of the ocean was overpowering here but such a welcome change from the smell of the garbage truck.

Barbara breathed deeply, enjoying the freshness, while Al struggled along the final length of uneven stones behind her. He joined her at the end of the breakwater, yelping happily as he jumped onto her back and nuzzled her neck.

This was what shifters did with their mates, played chase games under the full moon. Barbara had never done this before, not as an adult female, and it was exhilarating. Why didn't her parents do this kind of thing? It was too much fun to be missed.

Al yipped at her. *So you won the race. What shall we do now?*

Barbara sat on the concrete and gave him what she hoped was her most seductive smile. She hadn't much practice seducing a man in wolf's clothing, at least not when she was wearing the same kind of coat. *Bay at the moon?* she suggested.

He grinned at her, a feral gleam in his eyes. *And attract attention? I had something quieter in mind.*

Quieter? She danced away from him, knowing what he was thinking. In all her time as a shifter she'd never had sex in wolf form. Never. It was...animalistic. It was something her parents would never approve of.

It would be degrading...and yet—

With Al, in this place, the wildness of the ocean on one side and quiet harbor on the other, it didn't sound wrong. It sounded exciting and it felt like something a shifter would do with her mate under a full moon.

She licked her muzzle, suddenly nervous. *Al...*

He nuzzled her neck. *I understand, Babe. We can wait until later.*

Al, she began again, *I don't want to wait. I want you now.*

He cocked his head and there was a light in his eyes that had nothing to do with reflected moonlight. *In that case I don't want to wait either.*

And so on a deserted breakfront with the sound and the smell of the ocean around them, under the light of a full moon, Barbara Grisloup broke the biggest taboo of her overly refined life.

And it was marvelous.

* * * * *

With the moon just above the horizon Al and Babe arrived back at his car, tired but happy. The princess's van was gone and there was no sign of anyone else.

The moon set and they switched to human form. The car was locked but Al found his extra key hidden in the wheel well. In the car were his clothes, which he offered first to Barbara. Gratefully she took his shirt, which was long enough to cover her, mostly. The black Dog House shirt fit tight across her breasts and Al had to tamp down his instant erection.

He might be a horny dog but he'd wait until he got her back to his place this time. He still couldn't believe she'd made love with him earlier. It wasn't his first time doing it in shifter form but having her that way had been so sweet. Like they were really mates, like this wasn't just a temporary thing between them.

Like they had a future.

He wanted her but he'd drive his wounded but still drivable vehicle back to his apartment before he'd do anything about it.

A note on the windshield caught his attention and he fetched it. Al opened it up and laughed. He read it aloud.

Al Lupas.

My van will be at your garage tomorrow. I expect it fixed by next Saturday.

P. Annette.

"I guess she's mad I rear-ended her van. I would have thought that saving her nephew's life was a worthy cause though."

Babe joined him in laughter as they headed back toward Santa Monica.

It was nearly dawn when they reached the building Al owned and he parked in his garage. They'd ridden in peaceful silence all the way, through the dark and deserted streets and with Al's one remaining headlight it had been a good thing they hadn't run into any police officers.

Parked in the alleyway was a low black luxury car and Babe startled when she saw it. She grew even quieter when a tall, distinguished man got out of the driver's seat.

Al went wary, recognizing Babe's father. Wilson Grisloup stared at her, his expression serious.

"I need you to come home," he said abruptly.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"Your mother." He shook his head. "She's had another of her spells."

Babe looked torn between going with her father and staying with him and that comforted him a little. At least Al knew she cared for him that much. But he also saw that her mother's needs came first.

She turned to him. "I need to go."

"It's okay. Come upstairs and get dressed."

Wilson spoke up. "I have clothes for you in the car." He glanced at Al. "You can fetch the rest of your things later."

Or he'd have someone else come fetch them, Al decided. But if Babe was going to come back she'd do so and forcing her to stay now wasn't the answer. He knew she'd have to cope with the disapproval of her parents but he also knew that if they were to have a future that was inevitable.

But the wolf in him wanted to keep her there. Every instinct told him he shouldn't let her go, that if he did he wouldn't see her again. But instead of arguing he took hold of her and kissed her gently.

"I'll bring your shirt back," she whispered.

Al forced a smile. "Keep it. I've got dozens of them."

He kept that smile until she was in her father's car and as it pulled out of the alley. He kept it until the car was out of sight and he knew she could no longer see him. Then his face collapsed as he leaned against his broken GTO. He'd told Babe he could fix the front good as new and he could. His heart—that would take a different kind of mending.

At this point he wasn't sure he'd ever be okay again.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Al scrubbed the top of the bar with a towel. It was a slower than usual Friday night at the Dog House, which meant that there were even a couple empty stools at the counter. He wasn't feeling like being sociable so he stood at the vacant place at the bar between orders.

He hadn't heard from Babe since she'd left Monday morning with her father...not that he'd expected to hear anything from her but it still hurt. He hadn't seen Kurt or Tammy in the place either, which was just as well. Given that he knew she was too young to be here, he'd have been forced to ask Tammy to leave.

But he could have asked about Babe if Tammy had come around, before kicking her underage ass out of his bar.

It had been almost two weeks since his lady had gone home with her father and as he'd predicted she hadn't come back for her things. No one had come for them even though he'd packed them into her suitcase and put it by the door. But Babe probably had plenty of clothes and for all he knew she didn't even remember she'd left them behind.

In fact he'd only really known her for little more than two days. Not long enough to really fall in love. Except that he had fallen for her.

No one who worked for him had the guts to ask him about Babe and that was just as well. He didn't really want to have to hire someone to replace them.

So things were nice and quiet. Just the way he liked them.

He had heard what had happened while he and Babe had been running under the moon that night. After a brief tussle between the selkies and Jonathan, Herz and his partner Salamon had ended up in the land-bound parafolk's hands.

The city chief had argued successfully that Princess Annette lacked the holding facilities for people who breathed air. The bloodthirsty princess didn't seem to think that was a big problem but Sharon had managed to talk her into letting the men live.

The fallout from the kidnapping and intended murder of two shapeshifters and a selkie prince had forced Chief Jonathan to take a hard look at the shifter patrol. With Herz removed as head of the organization Richard Grauer had been put in charge, promising a new beginning for the organization.

Richard had come by a few nights ago and asked Al if he were interested in being a part of the new shifter patrol, following in his father's footsteps, but Al didn't have an interest in law enforcement. All he wanted was to do what he was good at, running the best shapeshifter dive bar in Los Angeles.

And he wanted to be left alone to do it.

A shifter named Bob claimed one of the empty stools at the bar. "Another beer, Al."

Reluctantly Al poured Bob a tall glass and when the shifter didn't seem inclined to move, shoved a bowl of kibble next to the glass. Bob's eyes lit up and he grabbed a couple of the snacks and shoved them into his mouth.

"You always get the premium stuff. That's what I like about this place. It has class."

Al all but rolled his eyes. Bob thought the Dog House had class? He'd seen class. It was a highborn shifter lady who wouldn't be caught dead in his bar if she hadn't been looking for her sister. She'd been here once and would never be here again.

The door to the bar opened and closed but with Bob on the stool Al couldn't see who it was. Probably another shifter looking for a cheap beer and better than usual snacks. He turned his back to grab another glass, polishing it with a towel as he waited for the new customer to tell him what they wanted.

"What does a girl have to do to get a beer around this place?"

Al froze as the familiar voice registered, then turned slowly. Babe looked different, her hair a little wilder than he remembered, and the biggest surprise was she was wearing his oversized black Dog House t-shirt. It still stretched tight over her breasts, a fact Bob was clearly noticing.

The other shifter licked his lips. "New barmaid, Al?"

Carefully Al put down the glass and towel then, putting both hands on the counter, leapt over to land between Bob and his Babe's boobs. Clearly noting Al's proprietary growl, Bob grabbed his beer and the bowl of chow and took off.

He turned back to see Babe's shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. "What's so funny?" he snarled.

"You. What are you doing, Al?"

"Defending your honor."

She laughed out loud. "Really. It isn't like my breasts haven't been stared at before."

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought that would be obvious."

"You don't belong here, Babe. Can't you see that?"

Her laughter ceased and even her smile faded. "Why don't I belong here?"

"You just don't. You don't belong in a place like this, with a guy like me."

She grew really still. "That's too bad because I'm here with a business proposition for you."

"What?"

Babe leaned an elbow onto the bar. "I want to rent the space upstairs. The empty apartment."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Like I said before, I want to start a business of my own. A detective agency. But I can't run the business out of my parents' home. I need space of my own and I thought of that empty apartment you have. I checked what you're asking for it and I can afford it. Even better it's near this bar where shifters already gather so I'll have a built-in clientele."

Al closed his mouth. "You want to open a detective agency. In my building."

"If that's okay with you. You're the one who wanted me to break away from my family."

She wanted to break away from her family and start her own business? Did that mean she really wanted to break away from the rest of what they wanted from her? Could she really be willing to become part of his life?

"That's quite a commute from your parents' estate. So are you planning on living in your office?"

"I could live there. Put a folding bed in the corner or something. Or..."

He folded his arms. "You wouldn't be thinking of living with me, would you?"

Babe blinked innocently at him. "Would that be a problem?"

"Yes."

For the first time she looked shaken. "Don't you want me living with you?"

"Maybe." He took a deep breath. Best to find out right away how she felt about their future. "But I've decided the only way I want to be with you is if you agree to be my wife."

Babe stared at him for a long moment then a slow smile took over her face. Finally she held out her hand. "Sounds like a deal to me. Shake on it?"

Ignoring her hand, Al grabbed her and pulled her into his arms. "You mean it? You'll marry me?"

"Of course I will," she laughed. "I'm in love with you, bad dog."

She was? Everything he'd hoped to have was suddenly falling into his lap, in particular a mate who knew what he was and didn't care.

"I love you too." He howled. "I am the biggest bad dog in town!"

"That's fine because it makes me Mrs. Bad Dog, best private eye in town." She poked him in the chest. "And don't you forget it!"

"Never." Al grinned at her. "But can I still call you Babe?"

She snuggled into his chest. "I wouldn't have you call me anything else, Al."

The End

About the Author

Cricket Starr lives in the San Francisco Bay area with her husband of more years than she chooses to count. She loves fantasies, particularly sexual fantasies, and sees her writing as an opportunity to test boundaries. Her driving ambition is to have more fun than anyone should or could have. While published in other venues under her own name, she's found a home for her erotica writing here at Ellora's Cave.

Cricket welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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*Find titles by Cricket, written under the name Janet Miller, at Cerridwen Press
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