

The Heat© 2009

By Heather Killough-Walden

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Thank you...

**To my husband, for his unending support
and to Eroticarepublic, for helping me get my start.**

Prologue

"Open your legs."

She pulled against the handcuffs that secured her to the headboard railing, testing them. She was nervous now. A change had come over him, it seemed. She wondered whether she should have told someone where she was going –

"I said spread your legs," he repeated, a hard edge to his tone.

She stared up at him, trying to figure him out. *It's part of his game*, she told herself. *Just let him get his jollies off. He's gonna let you go and you won't have to spend the night in the joint. Whatever it takes.*

She opened her legs, allowing each ankle to drop off of the sides of the hotel room bed. Cold air wrapped around her thighs, chilling her thoroughly.

He nodded once – approval. "Good girl, Lily."

"My name's not Lil-"

"It is tonight," he corrected as he leaned forward and placed his forefinger to her lips. She stilled beneath him. "Understand?" His eyes glittered unnaturally.

She nodded her compliance.

Chapter One: The Boy In Blue Wears Black

"Tabitha, shut your dirty mouth and hand me another beer." Lily laughed and held out her hand. The black-haired woman grinned wickedly and pulled another beer from the depths of the ice chest. Chunks of melted ice fell away as Lily twisted the top off of the bottle and placed it to her lips.

Tabitha sighed and shook her head. "So enough about men. For now." She took a drink, swallowing as she said, "Tell me about the Lone Star state. What's it like in the land of rattle snakes and belt buckles?"

Lily had moved from Baton Rouge to go to school in Texas after she'd graduated. She finished taking a swig and shrugged. "Where I was, it was drier." She paused. "Hotter." She sat back on the couch, her thoughts turned inward. "There are no trees, so the construction workers hide under the bridges to cool off."

Tabitha whistled low. "Hotter than it is here?" she asked, incredulous.

"By about twenty to thirty degrees, believe it or not."

"You're tellin' me it's a hundred and eight degrees there?"

"In the summer, yeah. The streets can actually melt. Your shoes stick to the tar and cars always squeal when they pull out, even if they're going slow. It's hot." She shook her head and took a big drink. Just thinking about the place had overheated her and she needed to cool off.

Tabitha joined her in shaking her head. "Well girl, to be honest, you didn't miss much while you were gone."

Lily frowned. "What do you mean?"

Tabitha's expression took on a mournful cast. "Right after Katrina, our population just about tripled. Crime shot through the roof." She sighed. "Danny was way overworked, trust me." She referred to her brother, Daniel – the police officer. Lily remembered him. He was hard to forget. "People got mean," Tabitha went on. "Drivers got nasty – stopped letting others cut in front in traffic. Everything went up in price. Racial slurs were constant. It was... not nice."

Lily was quiet for a moment. Out of respect.

Then she asked, "How long did it last?" Since she'd been back, she'd been treated with nothing but the slow, easy kindness that she remembered so well. It was the southern hospitality she'd grown accustomed to while growing up in Louisiana. Ask someone where you could get a cab, and the person would shake their heads and offer you a ride. "Goin' that way anyway...."

If you needed change for a phone call, someone was sure to let you use their cell phone instead. And if you inquired as to where you could get a good plate of Jambalaya, a Baton Rouge citizen was sure to come forward and invite you over for dinner. That's just how it was done.

Tabitha sighed. "Until just recently, actually. I've noticed that things are getting back to normal. It's like people are *finally* settling down into their lives again; rememberin' who they were. Who they are." She shrugged and took another long pull on her beer.

Lily digested this information and the two young women fell into a

companionable silence. And then Lily took a deep breath and let it out in a contented sigh. "I really missed the rain. I had the constant urge to pour Dasani bottles out over the parched land in Texas." She laughed. "Or, at least pee outside." Tabitha's laughter joined hers. "Even in the quote-unquote-rainy season, it hardly ever-" But there, she stopped. A sound had brought her to a halt. It was a wonderful, thunderous sound, deep and true. She would recognize it anywhere.

"Is that a Harley?" she asked.

Tabitha's brow drew together. "Yeah, it is. It couldn't be..." She stood and turned toward the kitchen, where a screened door looked over an asphalt veranda beyond. Lily followed her gaze, standing as well.

A rider pulled onto the black-top outside, his lean silhouette outlined by the lamplight and the full moon above. For a Louisiana night it was surprisingly clear. Lily found herself moving with Tabitha, floating toward the screen door, drawn by the classic figure – a man, hard as steel, atop a thundering stallion of chrome.

The engine idled as the man lowered one boot to the ground and seemed to gaze at the two of them through the full-face shield of his dark helmet.

"Well I'll be damned," Tabitha whispered, her lips drawing into a smile as she unhinged the chain lock on the door and began to swing it open. "Big brother's come to call."

Lily's eyes widened. "Big brother?" She stared at the tall figure on the soft tail Harley. That was Tabitha's brother? "You mean Daniel? *Holy...*"

Tabitha grunted in something like derisive agreement and stepped down onto the back porch. Lily followed, placing her beer on the counter before she let the screen door swing shut behind her.

The rider pulled the helmet off his head and kicked down the stand, which Lily noticed was topped with a skull and crossbones. He slowly dismounted and walked toward them. Lily noted his height, which had been tall when they were in high school but seemed even taller now. What was he, six-two? Six-three? Six-foot-three-inches of muscle. Tight black jeans outlined what looked like hard and toned quads, and a tight black t-shirt hugged well-honed biceps tanned from the sun. From riding.

Raven-black hair fell in loose waves to his shoulders. Blue eyes glittered like sapphires beneath the street lights as he made his way toward them. Lily tried not to let her jaw hang open. She clamped her mouth shut tightly. She refused to lick her lips.

The man was very nearly on fire.

"Well, howdy big brother. What miracle of fate has transpired that would grace us lowly family types with your mighty presence this night?" Tabitha drawled at her brother, standing, hands-on-hips a few yards away. Daniel Kane grinned broadly, flashing perfect white teeth in that smile that Lily fell for ten years ago as a senior in high school.

"Now, now, there little sis. No need to go hostile on me. I'm a busy man; you know that cher." His southern drawl was deep and sexy and Lily suddenly felt the absence of the beer she'd left in the kitchen.

Tabitha shook her head but smiled, finally, and threw up her hands in defeat. "Damn, it's good to see you, Danny." She moved forward and he embraced her in a warm hug. The muscles of his arms corded as he did so and Lily felt heat rise to her cheeks.

Daniel's eyes found her and peered at her over his sister's shoulder, suddenly pinning her to the spot.

"And could that be little Lily?" he asked, his eyes taking on a strange gleam, his smile turning impish. He gently pulled away from his sister, whom he'd had to bend to hug. His sparkling stare turned intense and Lily hugged herself, for some reason suddenly uncomfortable. There was a depth to the man's gaze that was almost intrusive.

"Hi Daniel. Long time no see," she said.

Kane eyed her for a long moment, his gaze sliding down her body and back up again in the typical openness that southern men were not afraid to flaunt. At once, Lily felt conspicuous in the light white sundress she'd chosen to wear that night. It was hot and the sundress was a thin cotton fabric. It had felt easy, cool, and just right for hanging out with her best friend. Now she was regretting the choice.

"My, my, cher. But you've grown." He shook his head slowly, patent admiration apparent on his handsome features. And then he came forward and Lily forced herself not to step back.

"I could say the same for you." Lily's gaze skirted from him to his bike, several paces away. "Since when do you ride?"

"Since forever, cher. I was born in the wind." He shrugged and chuckled softly, the sound sending a delicious shiver through Lily's body.

Tabitha moved up behind him, catching Lily's attention. "Don't pay him no heed, Lil. Once a womanizing creep, always a womanizing creep, respectable job or not." She shook her head admonishingly, rolling her eyes as she spoke.

Daniel stopped a few short feet away from Lily, grinning down at her. "Now, now, Tabby. Is that any way for a repeat offender to treat the Chief of Police?"

Lily blinked up at him. As did Tabitha.

"What the hell you talkin' about Danny? You get the job?" Tabitha asked incredulously. Daniel didn't look at her for a long moment, his eyes locked onto Lily's. But then his grin broadened and he turned to face his sister. "Yep."

Tabitha's eyes got really big and her dubious expression became one of mixed surprise and joy. "Holy shit, big brother! You better not be yankin' my chain!"

"I swear by all that is unholy, little sis." He chuckled and raised his right hand, as if swearing on a Bible. "Word came down from the Mayor's office this morning."

Tabitha hugged her brother again and then pulled back, shaking her head. "You're like, *twelve*, Danny! Don't you have to be ancient to get that job?"

Daniel cut his gaze to Lily, who hadn't yet said anything, and she couldn't help but feel that he was checking for her reaction to the news. "Well, now, it's true that I'll be the youngest Chief Baton Rouge has seen. But I've been on the job for fifteen years." He looked back at Tabitha. "I guess the Mayor felt I'd earned it."

Tabitha could only continue shaking her head. "I don't believe it. What are you gonna do with all that power, Danny?" She smiled ruefully. "Oh, but did they ever make a mistake this time."

Daniel laughed again and then turned his attention back to Lily. She blushed beneath his constantly returning scrutiny. She couldn't help but feel she was intruding on what perhaps should have been a private moment between two family members. But she was also in a unique position at the moment. Because though she hadn't actually seen him in many years, Daniel Kane had been visiting Lily in her dreams for a long time. Since high school. And he'd only improved with age.

He was four years Tabitha's senior. That made him almost five years older than Lily. Lily had first crushed hard on him when she and Tabitha and their mutual friend, Alexis, had been freshmen "bulldogs" together at East Baton Rouge parish's Magnet High school. Everyone of his friends and admirers – and there were more than a few of those – knew that he wanted to go into the police force. He'd never failed to make that clear.

When he graduated, amongst the raucous cheers of his buddies and the silent tears of many female devotees, that was exactly what he did. He went into the force. Lily hadn't seen him since then. She'd been out of the city since graduation and had actually held prime residence in New Orleans until, as luck would have it, just before Katrina hit and she'd moved to a small town in West Texas. Plus, she always abided by the law, so truth be told she'd had rare occasion to cross paths with *any* police officer, much less Kane.

Five years ago Tabitha had told Lily that her big brother had been promoted to Sergeant. Lily was pretty sure that was the only thing, good or bad, that she'd heard about the man for more than a decade.

And now, here he was. Tall, strong and handsome as ever. He looked as if he simply didn't age. And he was the Police Chief of Baton Rouge.

Instinctively, and without meaning to, Lily's gaze slid to his left hand. No ring. Gay? She glanced back up at his face and was immediately caught up in his gaze. It was like blue fire, warm and promising.

Nope. Not gay. Immediately, she fell back on the old given law of straight, handsome and unhitched males. He was afraid of commitment.

Of course, that probably wasn't *exactly* true either. He was a cop. He was obviously committed to his job, or he wouldn't be standing there before them, telling them that he'd just made Police Chief.

And, it wasn't exactly a fair thing to assume, either. After all, she herself wasn't the most romantically committed individual in the world. To be honest, she had enough responsibility to deal with without the added pressures of family planning. At twenty-eight, she wasn't yet hitched, and it wasn't because she was ugly. And it wasn't because she was gay.

"So, what will it be, cher? You got no words of congratulations for your new Police Chief?" Kane smiled down at her, his eyes twinkling mischievously, his smile on the

verge of teasing.

"Congrats, Daniel. I'm happy for you." She smiled back up at him, hating the fact that she blushed at the slightest provocation. But he was too close and his nearness was having a chaotic effect upon her body. She could almost feel his skin against hers, even though there was a good two feet of space between them. He'd filled that space somehow. With black magic, she was pretty sure.

Lily knew what she would be dreaming about that night.

"Why thank you, cher." Something flashed in his eyes, there one instant and gone in the next. Lily blinked, unsure what it was she thought she'd seen.

"Danny, we were just having a drink. Join us?" Tabitha asked.

Kane gazed at Lily for several more long moments, and just before the silence would have stretched into discomfort, he pulled his gaze away and leveled it on the house a few yards away. "Why, I do believe I will. You ladies alone?"

"It's ladies night, big brother. But we'll make an exception for the commissioner. And, by the way, what the hell do you mean by 'repeat offender'?" Tabitha grabbed her brother by his elbow and began to stride toward the house. Lily fell into step beside them.

"Tabby, I'm a cop. You don't think I know about your need for speed?" He was still smiling, but now the smile had taken on a reproachful edge. Lily watched the exchange with interest. Daniel Kane was very much the older brother, and every bit a police officer. "If it weren't for the fact that you have family in the House, you'd have lost that license of yours three tickets ago, little sis."

Tabitha made another derisive noise and pulled open the screen door. Kane waited for the girls to enter before him and then shut the screen behind him.

The three of them moved to the couches in Tabitha's living room and Tabitha handed her brother an ice-cold beer. He shook off the ice and twisted off the top, tossing the lid onto the coffee table, where the girls had placed the others. Then he sat back, took a long pull from the bottle, and laced his right arm over the back of the sofa. Lily sat facing him. Tabitha stood near the piano, which had been her mother's many years ago.

Daniel eyed Lily. "What are you driving these days, cher?" He smiled and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, both hands wrapped easily around the dark bottle. "Is that your little Dodge out there?"

"Yep, that would be mine." Lily wasn't rich. She owned a two-door, black '98 Dodge Neon. It was a stick and it weighed next to nothing, so its 130 horse power engine was fast enough. More or less. Most days.

"It's cute. And a stick." His smile became reckless. "I like a girl who can handle a stick."

Lily did not miss the entendre. But she refused to acknowledge it. She switched directions. "It's nothing like the Night Train you've got out there. Nice bike."

Daniel's brows rose. He blinked. "You got a dark and dangerous side to you, cher? Nice girl like you knows her bikes?"

It was Lily's turn to smile now, and she did, as she brought her bottle to her lips

and took the swig she'd been wanting to take for the last ten minutes. Daniel watched her carefully as she drank. His sapphire eyes shimmered with secrets.

Then, in a low tone and a voice that made her nerve endings come deliciously alive, he asked, "Want a ride?"

Lily nearly spit out her beer. Did she want a ride? Like nothing else she could think of at the moment. The instant she'd heard – and felt – the engine, she'd longed to get on the bike. What girl didn't want that kind of power between her legs?

She swallowed the beer and glanced at Tabitha. Tabitha's eyes were narrowed. "You're incorrigible, Danny. Leave the girl alone."

"Yes, I want a ride."

Tabitha's eyes widened and Kane grinned. He put down his beer and stood, offering Lily his hand. She bit her lip, considering for a moment. And then she put down her beer as well and reached out for Daniel's hand.

His fingers wrapped around hers, warm and secure. Her blush was back, but she ducked her head, hiding it as she maneuvered her way around the low coffee table to his side of the living room.

"Um, Lily..."

"Now, now, little sister. The lady's made up her mind."

"Shut up, Danny." Tabitha brushed past them as they exited through the kitchen and the screen door slammed shut behind them. The Night Train sat waiting, its polished chrome flashing invitingly beneath the tall street lamps. "Lily, you want some pants? I got some jeans."

Lily looked down at her dress. She wondered whether it was worth it to take the time to change right now, knowing that if she waited for very long, she would lose the nerve to get on the saddle behind Baton Rouge's newest Chief of Police. She looked up at Daniel, who was watching her with interest, his expression ever so slightly amused, his eyes flashing mischievous intent.

Was he a safe driver? He was a cop. Did that make him a safe driver? No telling. Though, he'd said he had been riding for a long time.

And if they had to lay the bike down, would jeans be important? Save her from a little more road rash than the dress would, for sure. At the moment, though, she was more concerned with her lack of a helmet. Daniel only had one.

"You'll be fine, cher," he said softly. His tone was low, reassuring, and held an authoritative note that he must have acquired on the job. "Take the helmet." He handed her his helmet and mounted the bike, the movement smooth and practiced. Lily just stood there watching him as he started up the engine and it roared to life.

"Lily, you be back within the hour, you hear?" Tabitha came to stand between them, suddenly blocking Lily's view of Kane. Lily looked her friend in the eyes. There was something in the depth of Tabitha's expression that struck Lily as... alarming. Warning bells went off in Lily's head.

Tabitha leaned in close and whispered, "Girl, you don't take any guff from that man, okay?"

Lily didn't have a chance to answer before Tabitha whirled and fixed her brother

with a hard stare. "You behave yourself, big brother. *I mean it.*"

Daniel smiled, but that something strange flashed once more behind his blue eyes. He raised his fingers in a lazy salute, cocking his head to one side as he revved the engine into a deafening roar. "Yes ma'am."

And then Tabitha moved aside and Daniel's gaze fell on Lily once more. Without allowing herself to consider her actions any further, she put the helmet on. Then she slid her arm around Daniel's neck and mounted the bike, hiking her dress up to her mid-thigh as she did so. She was glad she favored closed-toed flats to sandals. A dress was bad enough, but the idea of riding a motorcycle with bare toes just gave her the willies.

She settled onto the leather as Daniel took both of her hands and pulled them tight around his iron-hard mid-section. "Hold tight, cher. And don't go leanin' to either side."

She knew that. It wasn't her first time on a bike. But she nodded, knowing he could feel the movement against his back.

Tabitha stepped back, her hands on her hips, shaking her head. Daniel nodded one last time at his wary sister and pulled the bike out of the driveway.

Chapter Two: Where You Goin' in Such a Hurry?

Daniel knew that Lily would never guess it, but he could hear her heartbeat. He had very good hearing.

But his sense of smell was even better. Despite the speed with which they were traveling, and despite the fact that the wind blew her scent behind her, he could smell the shampoo in her hair. The very light scented perfume she'd placed on the insides of her wrists. The blood she'd shed that morning, most likely shaving her legs – or maybe slicing an apple... and something else. Something that rode beneath her surface, deep and taunting.

He'd scented it on her when he'd first met her in high school. She didn't smell like the other girls. This was different. It was *promising*, for lack of a better word. He'd found her attractive as it was, but that special scent made her all the more appealing.

Daniel stayed away from her, though. Under strict orders from little sis. Tabitha had told him, in no uncertain terms, that he could have anyone else – but to leave her best friend the hell alone. And though he wasn't one to take orders from many people, the truth was, he could tell that Tabitha had truly meant it. He didn't want her to hate him for god only knew how long just because he couldn't keep his dick in his pants. Tabitha could really hold a grudge. So, he'd kept his distance.

As Lily's high school years progressed, he'd pretended not to notice. But he watched Lily grow into a breathtaking young woman. She was tall and lithe, with golden hair that fell in waves down her back and almond eyes with gold specks that shimmered in the sun. Hell, he'd noticed, all right. He hadn't known it at the time, but his frustration over not being able to have Lily had sent him down a dark path.

As soon as each of them had come of age, he'd bedded *all* of Tabitha's other friends. He'd gone through them like matches in a book, burning them up one by one. He'd done it as if he *had* to. As if a demon was riding him and wouldn't let up. For any normal man, it would have been bad enough. But he wasn't normal. And his hunger was a little bit... stronger.

Getting them into bed was almost too easy. He was well aware of what they said about him when they didn't think he was listening, when they didn't think he could hear. Oh, he could hear. They wanted him far worse than he wanted them. So he gave them what they wanted. All of them, that is - except Lily St.Claire.

Even if she hadn't been off limits, the truth was, he had no idea what Lily wanted. While her friends were quick to share their longings with her, to giggle over their naughty dreams, Lily was a little quieter about her own. She kept secrets behind those gold-flecked eyes. Those secrets would have driven Daniel mad if she hadn't graduated and moved away when she had.

Ten years of separation had been just what he needed to get her out from under his skin. Daniel had moved on. Figuratively speaking, that is. He'd had a lot of women in that time. He'd achieved a career. He'd made some good investments. He'd grown up.

But though he laughed easily and turned a quick joke, he often felt himself

growing empty inside. A touch cold. A bit anxious. Time moved slower for him than for most men. But it moved, nonetheless. And a part of him had grown restless.

He knew what it was. The urge was growing. The need was taking over. His kind had been driven by it for thousands of years. He'd had no choice but to try his best to ignore it, but it was like his shadow. It couldn't be outrun. It followed in his footsteps, a vigilant reminder of who he was – *what* he was – and what his blood wanted him to do.

Lily.... He twisted the bike's throttle and the hog rocketed down another long stretch. Lily hugged closer and Daniel grinned, flashing predatory whites. She was even more beautiful than he remembered.

Tabitha, of course, had kept in touch with her best friend for the last decade and though Lily had been out of state, Tabitha had gone to visit a few times. Every once in a while, if Daniel was lucky, Tabitha would mention Lily to him. More often than not, it was when his little sister had been drinking or forgot herself. In those times, she told him where her best friend was living and what she was up to. She told him that Lily had become a and sometimes worked herself ragged with horribly depressing cases. She admitted that Lily often didn't sleep at night.

Daniel had listened with interest, but with resignation. It was like someone checking up on an old crush. Fun, but pointless. Lily St.Claire had always been a kind soul; the first to stand up to bullies, the one who rooted for the underdog. She was beautiful on the inside as well as on the outside. There was nothing about Lily St.Claire that was not to be admired. Still, he had more important things to concentrate on than an impossible relationship with someone from his past who didn't even live within his proximity.

He really hadn't expected to see her again.

But when he pulled up on his bike and watched her step out onto that lamp lit porch in that gauzy white sundress, her golden hair cascading like sunshine around her shoulders to her small waist, he was completely thrown. In a word, stunned.

Oh, little Lily.... She had no idea what she'd done. She'd come wandering innocently back into his world – like Little Red Riding Hood.

Promise to his sister or no promise, there was no hope for Lily now. Not now that he'd caught her scent again. And this time recognized it for what it was.

He wondered if she was seeing anyone. That would be easy enough to find out. And remedy.

Daniel Kane wanted Lily St.Claire with every fiber of his supernatural being. Hell, he'd wanted her for more than ten years.

And he always got what he wanted.

* * * *

He smells good, Lily thought to herself as Daniel pulled out of the lot and headed for the road. Even through the helmet, she could scent the leather he wore and the faint remnants of aftershave. *He feels good, too*. She remembered how, in high school, she and her friends would talk about Daniel Kane behind his back. They all had their own dreams or wishes concerning him. Alexis, the little she-devil who

pretended to know squat about Wicca craft, dreamed of one day tying him to a bed in some dark room and having her merry way with him. Meagan wanted to take him to prom and see if he could dance as well as he moved in everything else he did. Sherry, the athlete of the group, was very impressed with how fast Daniel could run; he'd set every record in their high school track team. And he'd done it without breaking a sweat. Sherry dreamed of beating him one day and having him congratulate her with a kiss.

Lily had dreams about Daniel too. Only her dreams were *real* dreams; at night, in bed, behind the curtains of sleep. And they were strange. They were disquieting enough that she kept them mostly to herself. The only person she'd ever shared them with was Daniel's sister Tabitha. Lily's very best friend.

She remembered that day and that conversation quite clearly:

"You know, Tabby," Lily began, speaking around the bite of sandwich she'd just taken. "I had the strangest dream about your brother last night."

"Yeah?" Tabitha looked at her curiously, her brows slightly drawn together. "You sure you wanna spill?" She popped a fry into her mouth and waited. "It's not gonna make me puke or anything, is it?"

Lily blushed. "No," She shook her head. "You'll probably just laugh, so what the hell. It wasn't dirty or anything. I just dreamed that he was in the woods out behind the school." She paused, recalling the image in her mind's eye. "One minute he was standing there, and his blue eyes were glowing like they had lights behind them... And the next minute, he was gone and there was this huge black wolf standing in his place."

Tabitha gave her the strangest look then. Lily couldn't tell exactly what it meant. Did her friend think she was crazy? Some sort of demented freak? Did she even believe her?

"A wolf, huh?" Tabitha had finally asked, her tone low. Something strange flashed in the hazel blue of her eyes. But then it was gone and she was making a derogatory sound. "He wishes." She shook her head, smiling wryly. "You are a bizarre creature, Lil. You got an imagination to die for, though. Wish I had it. Would have helped with that damned short story assignment in English."

Lily'd had that same dream, in different variations, many times since that night. But she hadn't mentioned it again. Mostly, she just smiled and agreed and laughed along when her friends mentioned Daniel Kane and his unlawful hotness. There were other boys the group talked about, of course. They had been teenage girls, after all. But it always came back to Daniel. He was just too perfect.

And in ten years, he'd only gotten better. *If only they could see me now*, Lily thought, smiling slyly. Daniel picked up speed on the Harley and the wind began to roar around them. Lily ducked her head and laid it against the back of his leather jacket. *I hope he doesn't mind*, she thought. She couldn't help herself. She sort of wished the helmet wasn't in between them. He felt so good against her. So strong.

So safe.

They rode in deafening silence for several more minutes, Daniel handling the road as if he truly had been riding forever. His expertise put Lily at ease and she found herself melting into him, though she still held tight.

Eventually, she realized that they were back on the main road that led to Tabitha's house and a wave of disappointment washed over her. She squelched it, though, mentally reprimanding herself for having the hormones of an adolescent.

Tabitha came out the door and onto the back porch when they rode up and Lily put some distance between her chest and Daniel's back, suddenly self conscious.

When he finally shut the bike off and kicked the stand down, Lily immediately pulled off her helmet and began to climb off of the bike. In front of her, Daniel reached back, quick as lightning and grabbed hold of her wrist.

Lily stopped sliding off and looked up at him. His action had been so fast, she'd barely seen him move. He held her tight, his fingers firmly wrapped around her slim wrist.

She had to admit that his touch gave her a strange sort of thrill. The heat from his hand snaked up her arm and seemed to wrap around her chest, making it hard to breathe. But he'd grabbed her so fast and his grip was so firm.... She held her breath and stared at him questioningly.

Almost as swiftly as he'd grabbed her, he let her go. He paused a moment, as if collecting himself, before he softly spoke. "Be careful you don't touch the pipes with your legs, cher." His stark blue gaze seemed to lock her in. "They're hot."

"Oh," she stammered. "R-right. Thanks." She nodded, realizing that he'd only wanted to prevent her from harming herself. She was an idiot. Why was she letting him get to her like this? She wasn't eighteen! *Snap out of it*, she told herself.

She continued to slide the rest of the way off of the bike and then pulled her dress back into place. Tabitha was there beside her in a heartbeat. "Have a good time?" she asked, her voice laced with suspicion.

Lily turned to her and wondered at her friend's strange behavior. She also hoped that the darkness of night at least partially hid her blush, because though there was no real reason for it, she felt slightly guilty. "It was wonderful," she said softly. Then she turned back to Daniel and added, "Thanks for the ride, Daniel. It was just what I needed."

Daniel Kane said nothing for what seemed like a long time. And then he nodded once at Lily, offering her a knowing smile. "Any time, cher. It's my pleasure."

He then let his gaze slide to his sister. "I'll be off now, little sis. But you and I got some catchin' up to do." He let this sink in, his gaze hard, his expression unreadable. "I'll be in touch." With that, he took the helmet that Lily handed him and slid it onto his head. He latched it beneath his chin, nodded once more to them both, and then started up the motorcycle.

Tabitha and Lily stood side by side as Daniel roared out of the lot and disappeared into the night. Then Tabitha whirled on Lily. "Girl, tell me he didn't try nothin' on you."

Lily blinked at her friend. "What?" She looked at her incredulously. "Tabby, we didn't even stop! We just rode! He was a perfect gentleman and a very good rider."

Tabitha eyed her for a moment more and then blew out a sigh.

Lily sighed as well. "Okay, what's going on? Don't think I didn't notice the warning look you shot him before I got on the bike. I see people pull all kinds of body language with each other in my line of work. What is it you've got against your brother having anything to do with me?"

It was Tabitha's turn to look shocked. But then her shock melted into guilt and she threw up her hands in defeat. "Okay, okay. You're right. I'm sorry. I just know what a damned man whore that boy is and I don't want him to do somethin' to you that comes between us. That's all."

Lily eyed her warily. There was something in the depths of Tabitha's hazel eyes that looked suspiciously like a secret. She didn't want to let the subject drop, but she could tell Tabitha wouldn't talk about it any further. Not tonight.

"Fine," Lily let it go. For now. "I understand." A wind picked up and rustled the Spanish moss dangling from the oaks overhead. She hugged herself, feeling unusually cold. "Let's head inside and I'll make us some tea." She turned to lead the way back to the porch door. "I think a storm's coming."

"I think so, too," Tabitha agreed.

As Lily entered the house, she glanced back to find her friend looking over her shoulder toward the dark road where Daniel had disappeared. She gazed down that ribbon of black as if expecting the very devil to come walking back down it.

Chapter Three: By The Book

Lily rolled over quietly and peered out the window. The storm had come and gone, as Louisiana storms were wont to do in early June. This time of year the gales were quick and dirty and green with heat lightning. They lit up the sky like electric temper tantrums, dumped a million gallons of water on the bayou and then ran away, sated and silent, leaving a sticky, humid swamp buzzing in their wake.

Now, the moon was three-quarters full and illuminated the rolling grass lawn of Tabitha's house with a blue glow. If Lily concentrated and squinted her eyes, she could just make out the on and off flashing of a few, precious lightning bugs – or, fireflies – within the darkness of the hedges that bordered Tabitha's land. There weren't as many as there used to be, it seemed. Their population was changing, along with everything else in the South.

Lily sighed. She couldn't sleep. She'd been laying there for hours, her body unnaturally hot and then cold, her nerve endings so alive that she'd kicked off all of the covers long ago. She'd been thinking about her return to Baton Rouge.

A lot can happen in a short period of time – and Lily had been gone for a rather *long* period of time. Within that decade-long spell, the towers had come down in New York, a war had been started, and a hurricane had ripped through Louisiana, forever changing the face of a state once known only for its Zydeco and Crawfish, its gospel hymns and Boudin.

Lily thought back to her discussion with Tabitha earlier that night as she gazed out at the heated mist now rising from the cut grass and forming dew. She had to admit that, though she was glad to be back in the lap of liberal Southern kindness, she was just as bowled over by the changes as she was grateful for what had stayed the same.

There used to be a playhouse on College Drive where Lily and her friends paid \$15 a piece every Friday night to watch really good and really poor actors and actresses perform drama by Mark Twain and Shakespeare. The playhouse had been situated in a strip mall that also contained a twenty-four hour café where LSU students stayed up all night eating beignets and drinking dark-brewed Louisiana coffee as they studied for upcoming finals. It had smelled like heaven.

The mall and its beignets and coffee and fifteen-dollar plays was gone now. In its place stood a Wal-Mart.

There were things in the city that seemed to have been untouched by time. A small secondhand store off of Burbank still stood in the same location that it had stood in for more than twenty years. *Here Today Gone Tomorrow* was where Lily had purchased all of her clothes while she'd been in high school. She remembered when it had dirt floors. And it was still there.

Highland Park looked virtually the same as it had a decade before.

Her parents' apartment on GSRI was still standing, and it was still painted pink. Her parents were long gone, having moved to Oregon five years ago. But the apartment was still there.

But so much had changed, and change was hard. There was comfort in

recognition. In repetition. It was good for the soul to know that some things would never go away. When it turned out that they would go away after all, the soul had to adjust. And adjusting one's soul was a little like learning how to swim by jumping into the deep end. The simple act of keeping your head above water was painful. And, at times, it was just plain hard to breathe.

Again, Lily sighed. Not for the first time since her return, she wondered whether she was making the right move. She wasn't a weak woman. She was raised by good parents. They loved each other, and their daughter, deeply. They knew the difference between right and wrong. And they'd instilled this knowledge – and the need to fight for it – within their little girl. Lily was one of those extremely rare, extremely lucky individuals whose parents encouraged bravery, but offered comfort when things didn't go as planned.

Lily wanted to help the people in her hometown when they needed help the most. From what she'd seen in the last few days, that time was now. Baton Rouge was inflating beyond its capacity, like a balloon threatening to pop. And Lily didn't want its people to detonate right along with it.

Lily blinked, realizing that she'd been staring at the same spot for several long minutes and that her eyes were burning. Then she sat up, grabbing the hardback book that was on the bedside table. Barefoot, she tiptoed to the door of the guest room and then quietly opened it. At one point, it creaked a little and she paused. When she heard no sounds coming from Tabitha's room, she opened it the rest of the way and stepped out into the hall.

She managed to make it to the stairs and then down to the first floor without any more creaks. When she was in the living room, she stole the throw off of the rocking chair and sat down on the plush couch, wrapping the fleece tightly around herself. Then she stared down at the cover of the book she'd set down beside herself.

Intense green eyes gazed out at her from a black background. She knew whose eyes they were. They belonged to the man on the back cover – the author of the book, Malcolm Cole. He was an unbelievably handsome man. His hair was thick and dark brown and nearly as long as Daniel's....

Daniel....

Tabitha's big brother had been haunting her all night. She shook her head to clear it. She concentrated on the book again. Cole's eyes were so emerald green that they almost seemed to glow. Lily had never seen another person with eyes like that. They were nearly unnatural. Maybe contacts? She doubted it. They seemed to fit in with the rest of him too well.

He wrote mysteries and he was so good that Lily'd been hooked for years. She wasn't the only one; he had a following that had made him a very wealthy and famous man. Once Lily started reading one of his books, she had a very hard time putting it down. There was something about the way he seemed to get into his characters' heads. Especially the bad guys. He knew them inside and out; their thinking processes, their desires.... It was like he was there beside them, watching them as

they progressed through their iniquitous acts, one evil step at a time.

Sometimes, when Lily was reading, she could imagine that she heard Cole's voice whispering the tale into her ear. She'd heard his voice once on an interview; he sounded like Rupert Everett. A British bad boy, wicked and delicious.

She even dreamed about him. In fact, there were only two people in the world that Lily dreamed of over and over again. One was Daniel Kane. The other was Malcolm Cole.

Lily reached out and turned the book over, gazing down at the impossibly gorgeous man on the back cover. "Hey, good looking," she muttered softly. He seemed to smile back at her. But there was something a little strange to his smile. It was.... Machiavellian. Like there was a secret he was keeping from the world and it amused him.

She blinked down at him. "Well, whatever that secret is, I hope it's not that you're actually five-foot-one and weigh four hundred pounds."

Malcolm Cole was coming to Baton Rouge the next day. He would be at Barnes and Noble for a book signing. She'd been looking forward to the event for weeks. A thrill went through her at the thought. Just a few hours to go.

In one week's time, she would start work at the hospital in town and her career would again claim her life. She wanted to thoroughly enjoy what free time she had until she was once more in over her head with abused children and wives and unwanted babies and drug addicts who, in her opinion, had good reason to be drug addicts.

Until that day, her time was her own. Going to Malcolm Cole's book signing was just about at the top of her list of fun things to do. Her friend, Alexis, called her a fuddy-duddy, but her real life was enough like riding a roller-coaster that she appreciated taking it slow in her down time.

Lily picked up the book, turning to her bookmarked page. In a few moments, she was so engrossed in the book that all of her other thoughts began to melt away.... The killer was systematically destroying any evidence that would point to his involvement. He'd created very little to begin with, so it was easy. His movements were precise and well thought out, executed with a calm deliberation that chilled Lily to the core.

So enthralled was she with the words on the page in front of her, that when Tabitha stepped down from the last stair on the landing and the floor creaked noisily, Lily screamed and very nearly jumped out of her own skin.

In turn, Tabitha screamed, jumping back into the wall and knocking a painting askew. She caught it and straightened it in time to keep it from falling. "*Jesus, girl!* What the *hell!*" Tabitha placed one hand to her chest and breathed hard.

Lily was standing now and once she processed everything, she let out a shaky breath and sat back down on the couch with a huff. "You scared the crap out of me, Tabby." Her own heart was dancing.

"*I scared you?* Lil, you almost gave me a heart attack!" Tabitha pushed away from the wall and came the rest of the way into the living room to sit on the smaller

couch across from Lily. "What on earth are you doing down here, anyway? Couldn't sleep?" She gestured toward the book that Lily had dropped on the rug beneath the coffee table.

Lily shook her head. "No, I couldn't. Sorry I scared you."

Tabitha shrugged, tossing a long lock of blue-black hair over her shoulder. "S'okay, sweetie. What are you readin', anyway?"

Lily handed her the book. Tabitha took a good long look at the cover and then turned it over. She froze.

"He's hot, isn't he?" Lily asked. "He's coming to Barnes and Noble at CitiPlace tomorrow. Wanna come with me and meet him?" Lily smiled slyly.

Tabitha still hadn't looked up from the picture.

"Tabby?"

Tabitha's head jerked up. Her hazel eyes seemed distant. "What?"

Lily blinked. "I said, he's coming to town tomorrow. For a book signing. You're obviously smitten," she smiled again. "So, would you like to come?"

Tabitha's eye brows knit together. She put the book down on the coffee table and Lily noticed that her hand was shaking. "I'm sorry, Lil. I'm just tired, is all. I actually just came down for a glass of water. I can't think straight without enough sleep an' I've gotta get to work real early tomorrow." She stood then and moved around the coffee table, heading for the kitchen.

A few seconds later, she came back out with a full glass of water. "I'm heading back to bed. See you in the mornin'."

Lily frowned, confused by her friend's sudden strange behavior. But she nodded and waved Tabitha up the stairs. "All right. Good night."

* * * *

Tabitha closed the door to her room, trying to sound unhurried about it. But once she was alone, she put the water down and raced across the room to the bedside table, where her cell phone rested. She turned it on and waited for a signal, her mind racing a thousand miles a minute.

Tabitha's parents had been killed when she was only eight years old; Daniel had been twelve. Lily St.Claire had seemed to be able to truly understand how confused and lost and bewildered Tabitha was when no one else in the world could. There was just so much inherent empathy in Lily, and Tabitha clung tightly to it.

Tabitha and her brother went to live with their grandparents across town and it was their grandparents who had taught them the ways of their kind. At first, Tabitha hadn't believed any of it. But there was only so much proof one could ignore.

And then, as far as Tabitha was concerned, the worst thing that could possibly happen to her already fucked up world actually happened. Lily told her about her dream with Daniel and the wolf.... And Tabitha knew what Lily was. With that knowledge came the knowledge that if Daniel knew too, he would try to take her best friend away from her.

She couldn't let that happen. Tabitha had nothing else in the world; she wasn't overly fond of her big brother. She understood that it was supposedly the fire in his

blood that made him the way he was, but she still thought he was a slut. And she knew that if he ever found out about Lily, there would be no stopping him. Even her grandparents would defend his right to her.

So, she'd demanded that he stay away and, figuring that she was just being her weird little self, her brother agreed.

Tabitha rubbed her hand over her face. There was little doubt that he knew all about Lily now.

When her phone showed that she had the signal, she dialed her brother's number and again waited. He picked up on the first ring.

"What is it?"

"Daniel, it's me."

"Yeah, I know little sis. I have some pretty good caller I.D." He sounded impatient. He sounded pissed. That made sense. He was probably livid with her for keeping Lily's secret from him all these years.

"Danny, it's about Lily—"

"Not now, Tabitha. We'll discuss this when I get off work today." In the background, Tabitha could hear what sounded like papers rustling, copy machines working, and people talking in subdued voices. Daniel was at work. At 3:00 a.m.

"It can't wait, Danny. She's in danger."

There was silence on the other end. Then a door was slammed shut and the background noises came to a halt.

"Go on," he ordered.

"It's Malcolm Cole. He's coming to town tomorrow." She paused to let the information sink in. "He has a book signing – and Lily's a *big* fan."

Again, there was silence on the other end. And then Daniel was swearing vehemently and the muffled quality of his voice told Tabitha that he was holding his hand over the receiver. In a moment, he was back on and there was a hard edge to his voice.

"Stay by her side as long as you can." He hung up.

Tabitha looked at the phone in her hand and then sat on the edge of her bed. Fear coiled itself around her heart and squeezed like bands of ice. She shivered. *Cole.*

This was very bad.

* * * *

Daniel Kane shut his phone and then stood statue still, his blue gaze claiming the darkened city beyond his office window.

Malcolm Cole.

The man's timing was so impeccable, Daniel would almost believe that he'd chosen it on purpose. That he knew about Lily St. Claire.

But that was impossible. This was coincidence and nothing more. It had to be - horrible, dangerous coincidence.

Daniel looked down and realized that he'd squeezed his phone into oblivion. He

released his grip on the device and chunks of plastic and wiring crumbled to the floor. He gazed down at them, barely seeing them.

It was time to ratchet things up a notch or two.

Daniel walked to the trash can beside his desk and dropped what remained of his phone into its depths. Then he pushed an intercom button on his larger desk phone. "Jennings, get me a new phone," his voice was deceptively calm. "And I need you to run a check on someone for me."

A few seconds later, there was a knock on his door. He glanced up and called out, "Come in, Jennings."

The door opened and a young man stepped in. He was tall and well built, though not as finely cut as Daniel. He had American good looks, with dark brown hair and stormy blue-gray eyes and a strong chin.

Daniel had known him since high school. At that time, Allan Jennings had been somewhat of a geek, much smaller in stature than he was now, and he'd worn glasses. Daniel assumed he wore contacts now, or perhaps had ditched out for that Lasik eye surgery business. Either way, these days Allan was spectacles-free and had filled out his uniform in a way that most of the female officers in the department noticed.

In high school, Jennings had irritated Daniel. There was just something so... *irritating* about him. It hadn't helped that Jennings had so obviously had a crush on Lily St. Claire. That was something that, despite his promise to his sister, Daniel had taken it upon himself to rectify.

However, that was all in the past and Jennings seemed to have forgotten all about it. He'd been with the police department for almost as long as Daniel had and had proven himself worthy of Daniel's trust time and again. The man had grown. He'd morphed from a soft-spoken know-it-all into a seasoned police officer that Daniel valued above every other human officer working for him. He was one of the very *few* humans Daniel trusted.

Allan Jennings now stood before Daniel, a paper pamphlet in one hand, a pen in the other. He eyed his Chief expectantly and the pen hovered above the pad. "Phone specifics, sir? Same as last one or upgrade?"

"Same. Make sure my voice mail doesn't disappear."

"Yes sir. And you need me to run a check on someone?"

"Yes." Daniel's expression darkened. How to put this delicately? He considered his words for a moment. "There is an author coming into town for a book signing."

Jennings thought for a moment. "Malcolm Cole?"

Daniel cocked his head to one side. "You know of him."

"Great author. Great books – I've read them all. He's really got the crime scene thing down."

You have no idea, thought Daniel. "Right," he said, simply. And then he took a deep, calming breath. "Jennings, I need to know when he gets in and on what flight, which hotel he's staying at and what room, what his itinerary looks like for the duration of his stay, and when he's leaving, along with his departing flight info."

Jennings dutifully wrote it all down, but his brow had furrowed into a frown. "Not a problem, Chief. But, mind if I ask what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on, Jennings," Daniel said, calmly. "Just curious, is all." He smiled a smile that said, *I'm lying, but I'm not going to tell you, so don't ask again*, and Jennings nodded in understanding.

"Got it." Jennings recapped the pen and straightened. "Chief, while I'm here, I might as well get confirmation on a couple of things."

Daniel turned toward his desk to rifle through the papers and folders atop it. "Shoot."

"We need a rep for a neighborhood watch that's starting in district three. Any suggestions?"

Daniel thought for a moment. Reps needed to be outgoing and personable. "Send Tate. And have him take Margaret with him. They make a good pair."

Jennings nodded, uncapped his pen, and marked something off of his list. "Noise complaints have reached an all-time high in Tiger Town. Haven't died down since graduation. Do we need to do a sweep?"

Daniel sighed, read something over on one of the sheets of paper he was holding, and turned to another page. "No. But park a few marked cars at intervals along Highland and GSRI. Do a random for about a week or two. See if that helps."

Again, Jennings nodded and checked off another item on his list. "The canine unit reported that one of the dogs is sick. Which vet?"

Daniel looked up. "Which dog?"

Jennings blinked. "Um, I'm not sure, sir."

Daniel's gaze narrowed. "Each dog has its own doctor, Jennings. How would you like someone to call in a random doctor for you if you were ill? Don't you have a PCP?"

A bit of the color ran from Jennings' face, but he nodded. "Um, right. I'll check then, Chief. I'll take care of it myself."

Daniel nodded. "Okay, then." He realized he was being a jackass, but this Cole business was under his skin and he did have a soft spot for the dogs. These issues were things that other officers could handle. What he really wanted to know – right now – was where Malcolm Cole was and what the hell he had planned for Lily St. Claire.

Jennings cleared his throat. "Just one more thing, sir. The East Baton Rouge Parish school board would like to initiate an outreach program for next year."

"Give that to Tate, too. He loves that crap. Now, go run that check on Cole, Jennings, and make it quick. Let me know as soon as you have the intel."

Jennings nodded and spun on his heel.

When he'd left and closed the door behind him, Daniel sank into his chair and let out a long, slow breath through his nose. He didn't feel right. He felt itchy. Uncomfortable. Uneasy. He didn't want to be sitting here, waiting on information.

He wanted to be outside. *Hunting*. It would give him the release he needed to

think straight. He needed to find Lily. He needed to track her down and talk with her. And he wouldn't be able to do any of that from behind a desk.

Daniel stood, pulled his key from the bowl at the end of his desk, and strode to the door of his office, flinging it open to march through the rest of the precinct beyond. As he passed one of the officers' desks, he paused and glanced down.

"Mayfield, let me borrow your phone."

The officer reached into his shirt pocket and extracted a small cell phone and handed it to his chief.

"Make sure Jennings knows to contact me on your line if he needs anything – and as soon as he has the information I've asked him for," Daniel instructed.

"Right, Chief."

"Thanks." Daniel pocketed the phone and left the building, heading for an unmarked car that waited at the front of the lot.

Chapter Four: The Thin Blue Line

Lily sighed a contented sigh. The early summer day was shaping up to be a rather cool one, maybe topping off in the high seventies. There was a gentle breeze. It had that special, recognizable taste of rain to it and Lily smiled at the thought of the thunder storm that would undoubtedly lay claim to the day's late afternoon.

She loved those storms. She knew it wasn't normal to like a rainy day more than a sunny one. But she'd never been quite – *normal*. In high school, she'd been what she, herself, called a "leftover." Those kids who weren't preppy and weren't geeks and weren't cheerleaders and, though they might enjoy Ozzy and Metallica as much as the next metal head, they weren't rockers..

They were leftovers. That's what Lily was.

That wasn't to say that she didn't have her share of friends. It was just that they were a rather eclectic band of friends. They were not quite as monochromatic and uniform as the shining, level ponytail line of the cheerleaders at their cafeteria table. They weren't quite as palpable as the sadly reflective procession of eye glasses at the geek's table.

They were a blonde girl and an African American girl and a pale girl with blue-black hair, an athletic girl, and a petite, somewhat shy Jewish girl with copper-red hair that frizzed a little too much until the African American beauty queen taught her how to use hair product. And none of them minded that the blonde loved thunder storms, despite her "sunny," So-Cal appearance.

Lily smiled at that thought. Yes, she did love a good storm. They were one of the two things she'd missed most about Louisiana during her absence. The other, of course, was the company that was now situated around her at the large round table on the outdoor patio of a burrito restaurant on Corporate Boulevard. It was called IZZO's Illegal Burrito, and as far as Lily could recall, it hadn't been there ten years ago. In fact, she was pretty sure that most of the shops in Town Center were new.

It had been a long time since she'd had all of her closest friends around her at once. The feeling was warm and comfortable. Like mashed potatoes and gravy on a sore throat. She sat back in her chair and slowly sipped at her iced tea, listening to their familiar banter.

"Could you please dress a little sluttier next time, Alex? I don't think your nipples are quite showing." Meagan swilled the margarita in her glass and gestured to her friend's tight top.

Alexis tossed a bunch of long, sleek braids over her shoulder and fixed Meagan with her yellow-gold eyes. "Sorry, hon', but you bought all the tents up during your last shopping spree." She nodded at Meagan's somewhat looser t-shirt.

From across the table, Sherry grinned at Alexis. "You seriously can't figure out why you get along with guys so much better than girls, Alex?"

"Yeah, there's a mystery." Meagan blew a raspberry and took a swig of her drink. "Girls all hate her 'cuz she's so gorgeous. Me included," Meagan muttered, shooting Alexis an exasperated look.

"You don't hate me, girlfriend. You love me." Alex gave Meagan a squeeze and

Meagan suffered it with an eye roll. Then Alex turned to Sherry, pointing one long manicured finger at her. "And you? You're just jealous because you have to take your white ass to the gym for four hours a day to get it to look anything like mine looks *au naturale*," Alexis turned to the side and pointed at her blue-jeaned bottom. It truly did seem to defy gravity. Always had.

Sherry chewed on the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling again. Then she narrowed her gaze on Alexis. "Okay, you got me. I'm jealous. And I kind of hate your guts too."

Sammy, Alex's older brother, leaned forward then, his huge biceps stretching the taut material of his gray t-shirt as he placed his elbows on the table and fixed Meagan with a heated gaze. All eyes were on him as his attention honed mercilessly in on the rather smallish red-haired young woman. "Now, as for me," he drawled, smiling a very white smile, "I *like* 'em kinda shy." He let his gaze trail across her lips to her chest and then back up again. "Just makes me wanna see what goodies they're hidin' under there. What do you say, cher?"

Meagan blushed furiously and then began choking on her margarita.

Everyone at the table laughed, including Lily, as Alexis patted her friend rather violently on the back. "Yeah, you're all bark and no bite, girl," Alex scoffed, shaking her head.

"Hey, you guys ever notice how, when women are wearing dresses, men are more likely to open doors for them than when they're wearing pants?" Lily suddenly asked. She'd been people-watching as she'd listened to her friends' banter, and, as she was sometimes wont to do, she blurted out her thoughts without filtering them. It was a complete and utter change of subject, and it should have thrown everyone at the table, but they knew Lily well and old habits were quick to remember.

Alexis shrugged. "Sure, girl. It's that old brain thing in a man's head. A woman in a dress automatically looks more feminine – hence, more helpless. *Hence*, a man wants to help her."

"Lily, where the hell do you come up with these observations?" Sherry asked. "And Alex, I disagree. A woman doesn't have to wear a miniskirt and a half shirt to look sexy."

"Uh-huh. You would take the defensive. That's a sore spot with you, isn't it, sweetie?" Alexis turned a raised brow on Sherry. "'Cuz you're scared to show off that great body you work so hard for. Girl, why do you even *bother* with all that cardio?" Alexis asked, taking a tangent for a moment. Then she blew out a sigh and continued with her original train of thought. "And I didn't say 'sexy,' just so you know. I said *feminine*. I also didn't say *miniskirt and half shirt*. I said dress, 'cuz that's what Lily suggested." Alexis took a sip of her drink and managed to look like she'd just won a prize for biggest fish.

So there.

"Lily comes up with these things because she's always watching people, cher," Sammy said, returning to Sherry's question, perhaps in order to spare everyone at

the table from the pseudo-argument he could sense coming from Sherry and Alexis – the two hottest heads on female bodies that Lily knew. “She’s always on the look out, aren’t you, Lily. Keepin’ an eye on the world so you can save it.” He smiled at Lily, and she felt herself Blush.

“That’s Lily. Our seer. Our Mother Freaking Theresa,” Meagan agreed – and then hiccupped. “I need another drink.”

Alexis looked like she was about to say something regarding that when, suddenly, she froze, staring somewhere over Lily’s shoulder. “Oh lord have mercy....” Her gaze took on a dreamy look. “Don’t look now, girls, but here comes a tall, cool drink of trouble.”

Of course, everyone looked.

Daniel Kane shut the door of his unmarked squad car and strode in their direction. As he had been the night before, he was dressed in black from head to toe. Mirrored shades completed the outfit. The man was lucky it was a relatively cool day for that time of year.

The chief stepped up on to the restaurant’s patio and pulled off his shades. Lily froze in her seat when his stark blue eyes immediately found her form and locked on. They rested there for perhaps a moment too long as he made his way to their section. And then he turned to scan the other faces at the table. It wasn’t only Meagan who was blushing now. Even Alexis, as shameless as she was, seemed a little befuddled.

Daniel nodded respectfully. “Ladies,” he greeted.

At once, every woman at the table except for Lily greeted him back, each mumbling something incoherent. Lily bit her lip to keep from smiling.

“Sammy,” Daniel nodded at Alex’s brother, who stood up as Daniel approached.

“How you doin’ man,” Sammy replied. The two men exchanged some sort of hand shake. Lily was always bewildered by those “manly” hand shakes. How did men always just know how to do it right?

“Am I interrupting anything in particular?” Daniel asked in that languid Southern drawl that made Lily’s stomach tighten.

Again, the women at the table rushed to assure him that he wasn’t, and in their hurry, they spoke over one another. Again, they blushed.

Sammy coughed into his fist and reclaimed his seat.

Daniel didn’t even try to hide his smile. It was a killer smile. He wasn’t afraid to use it.

Beside Lily, Tabitha watched him expectantly. He could smell his sister’s fear. She was upset over Cole. It was time for Daniel take matters into his own hands.

“Lily,” he spoke softly.

She looked up at him amidst the friendly smirks of her companions. Much to the satisfaction of his male ego, she immediately became more uncomfortable under his scrutiny. She crossed her legs and shifted in her seat. She blushed.

His smile was almost cruel as he put his palms on the table and leaned over it so

that he was basically pinning her to her seat with his gaze. "I'd like to have a moment alone with you, if you don't mind, cher." He glanced down at the place setting in front of her. It was empty, so she hadn't eaten yet. "I'll buy you lunch."

Lily tried to swallow, but he could tell her throat had gone dry. She almost coughed instead. But she did manage a nod.

He straightened and offered her his hand. She pushed her chair back and took it, and he led her around the table.

"She'll catch up with you all later, ladies," he told them as he pulled her purse off of the back of her chair and draped it over her shoulder. Lily's heartbeat sped up; he could hear it. She must have just realized that she was about to be alone with him.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

He took his time in answering as he led her to the car and opened the passenger-side door for her. Not until after she'd gotten in and begun to buckle herself did he say, "My place."

Lily's eyes widened. Daniel closed her door. Through the windshield, he could see that she'd paused with her hands over her buckle. He pushed a button on his key fob and her door locked from the outside.

Her eyes grew wider and she felt the door handle. He knew he was scaring her half to death, but it couldn't be helped at the moment. He strode to his side, opened his door, and froze. A breeze brushed through his hair. It carried a scent with it, and that scent confirmed Daniel's fears. Cole was nearby. Which meant he knew about Lily after all. Daniel's jaw clenched as he automatically scanned the street and buildings beyond, searching for the other man.

Of course, he didn't find him. He hadn't expected to.

Daniel slid into the driver's seat. "Calm down, cher," he said, using his best negotiating tone as he closed his door and started up the car. "I'm not gonna bite."

Yet, he added mentally.

"Daniel, what the hell is going on?"

He turned and studied her carefully. She knew an abduction when she saw one and she was about to go into fight mode. And if she did, then so would he – and he couldn't have that right now.

He sighed and sat back as the car idled. "Okay. The truth is, we need to talk and I can't have you run off before I've said what I need to say."

He continued to watch her as emotions chased each other across her lovely face and she processed his words. He could tell that she was weighing everything carefully: Her friendship with Tabitha, the fact that he was a cop and one of the "good" guys, the fact that everyone she knew had seen her leave with him – *everything*.

Finally, she took a deep breath and seemed to relax a bit. "All right," she said, her voice only slightly shaky. "What are we going to talk about?"

He put the car in reverse and pulled out of the lot. "I'll tell you when we get there."

* * * *

Lily watched Daniel screw the top off of the bottle of Coke and hand it to her. She took it and put it to her lips. Her mouth and throat were dry and she swallowed

eagerly.

He sat across from her. "I'll get right to it, Lily," he began, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, holding his own Coke the way he'd done with the beer the night before. "What do you know about Malcolm Cole?"

Lily blinked. "The author?"

Daniel's gaze darkened. A shadow crossed his face. "Yes. The author."

She blinked again. "Well.... I, um, I know he's coming here tonight. Actually, he's probably already in town, come to think of it."

Daniel put the drink down on the coffee table in front of him. "He isn't just an author, cher. He's a killer."

Lily stared at him. She opened her mouth. And then shut it again. She frowned. "What?"

"It's best to write what you know, Lily, and Cole does just that." He sat back, watching her carefully.

And then his cell phone beeped. He pulled it from his front pocket and glanced down. His expression was unreadable. He looked back up at Lily and then stood slowly. Without taking his eyes off of her, he moved around his couch to the hallway and flipped the phone open, placing it to his ear.

Lily watched him from where she sat on his love seat. He was behaving so strangely. Cole was a killer? That was bewildering news. Where was it coming from? And if Cole was a killer, why hadn't he been arrested? Why would Daniel be here telling her this instead of at the court house, getting a warrant or something? What was going on?

Daniel spoke softly into his phone, his tone adamant, his eyes never leaving her form. They'd gone from ice blue to the color of sapphires and now they glittered with a strange light. Lily was growing more uncomfortable with each passing second.

Finally, she stood. Daniel closed the phone and turned toward her. His expression was dark. "I'm sorry about this, cher, but I have to go."

"What happened?" she asked, trying to steady her nerves.

"Triple homicide on Bennett Drive." He shoved his phone back into his pocket and moved toward her, his stride determined. She took a step back and bumped into the love seat. "I didn't want to do things this way, Lily, but I have no choice." He stopped a foot away from her and then he reached out and opened the drawer of the side table that rested next to the love seat. A pair of hand cuffs slid forward. He snatched them up.

Lily's heart hammered once, painfully hard, against her rib cage and then she sprang into action. But he must have been expecting her to run because his other hand snaked around her upper arm, jerking her to a halt.

"Daniel, let me go! What the *hell*!"

"No doing, cher. I'd give anything for time to explain things to you right now, but I haven't got it. And you have no idea how much danger you're in." With that, he yanked her around and bent, lifting her over his shoulder. She cried out as she was suddenly upside down and being carried like some sort of prize meat.

"Daniel, put me down!" Fear coursed through her, thick and potent now. Her mind raced.

He took the stairs two at a time, carrying her as if she weighed nothing.

Then he was moving through a doorway and tossing her onto a bed. She bounced once and tried to gain her bearings. But he didn't give her time before he was snapping the cuffs onto one of her slim wrists and wrapping its other end around a thick metal bedpost.

Lily gasped and immediately tried to yank out of the cuff, but Daniel's strong hand was suddenly around her throat, squeezing gently but threateningly. She instantly stilled.

"*Don't* do that," he growled at her. His voice had lowered menacingly and there was a strange, animalistic note to it. "It'll only cause you harm, understand?" His eyes cut her to the bone. Her breathing was coming so quick and shallow now, dizziness swept through her. But she forced herself to nod. He released her throat.

Then he was off of the bed and she followed his form as he moved around the room with swift and determined purpose. She took a few hurried seconds to sort out her surroundings. The bed was king-sized and draped in black sheets; the rug was white, the walls a charcoal gray. The room was tastefully, if minimally, decorated.

Daniel Kane's bedroom.

A few seconds was all she had because he was turning back toward the bed then, a second set of cuffs in his left hand, a pocket knife in the other. Her fear notched up into terror and panic flooded her system, bubbling up into a scream that Daniel ignored. The house was set back from the road; no one would hear her.

In the back of her fevered brain, Lily wondered how many women had screamed in Kane's bed. Black was a good color for hiding blood....

Daniel had stilled beside the bed and was watching her now with an expression that looked half determined and half pained. He seemed almost torn. "Lily, I know you're scared," he said. "But you know I would never hurt you. Listen to what your gut tells you."

Lily heard the logic of his words and that calm and still part of her brain that always came to the fore when dealing with crazed family members or alcoholics told her that Daniel Kane was a good cop, an old crush, and her best friend's big brother. He wasn't going to hurt her. He didn't have that feel to him. Her logical brain chanted this to her like a mantra.

But her terrified brain was screaming hysterically and the sound was drowning out her other thoughts.

Daniel moved over the bed and Lily was struggling again, unable to stop herself. With a skilled and practiced ease that made her head spin, Daniel grabbed her other wrist and cuffed it securely to the opposite bed post so that her arms were stretched out to either side. He didn't even give her the option of kicking him, as he straddled her, effectively pinning her legs to the bed.

She watched with eyes that were blurring with tears and dizziness as he pulled a wicked blade out of the pocket knife and held up his left hand. Quickly, he drew the

blade across his palm, slicing deep and clean. Dark blood welled up around the wound.

Then he turned his gaze on her once more and she was caught up in it like a deer in headlights. Her breathing was so harsh and ragged that it filled the otherwise silent space between them. She could only watch helplessly as he stared down at her.

He's so gorgeous, her crazed mind thought. How can he be so handsome when he's doing this to me? He's going to kill me.

As if he could read her mind, he shook his head once. "Christ, Lily. I'm not gonna kill you, cher." His voice was barely above a whisper. His expression was still guilt-ridden, but his pupils had expanded, engulfing most of the blue in his irises. He looked like her cat used to look right before he would pounce on something. "Not in a million years."

Then his hands were moving and she barely managed to rip her gaze away from his as he placed the blade against her right forearm.

"No! Daniel, please—" With renewed vigor, she fought against the cuffs, writhing beneath him. The movement caused the cuffs to bite into her skin and bruise against her bones. She barely noticed the pain, but Daniel swore softly and quickly pulled the blade away from her arm. He set it beside her on the bed and sat back, his jaw set, his eyes flashing.

"Lily, look at me."

Lily felt her chest tightening. Stars swam in her eyes. She was hyperventilating. But she did manage to look at him.

"You have to trust me, cher. I don't have the time to explain this to you, but I swear on all that is holy that I'm trying to protect you. This has to be done."

"D-Daniel..." She tried to breathe, suck in air for another word or two. "I'm scared! What's going on?"

Daniel considered her in silence for several more heartbeats. And then he reached out like lightning and grabbed her by the nape of the neck with his un-injured hand. He pulled her head back and covered her lips with his own in a harsh, demanding kiss.

Lily bucked against him as she was at once overcome with a flood of warring sensations. Fear and confusion wailed at her senses, but as Daniel opened her up beneath him, his tongue delving deep, the fear began to recede and a deep, inescapable pleasure slaked through her like fire. Heat spread across her chest, coiled in her belly, and snaked lower. It was wholly unnatural.

But she couldn't break free.

Lily was weakening. She could feel the strength being sapped from her limbs as if by magic. Daniel deepened the kiss and a growl rose from somewhere within him, wrapping around her like thunder. She felt like he was drinking her in, slaking a thirst he'd had for too long, and she began to feel well and truly drained.

Eventually she stopped fighting. There was simply no strength left in her body.

She gave in to Daniel, offering no resistance as his grip lessened and his fingers dropped to gently brush against the back of her neck. He seemed to tremble against her and, somewhere in the back of her mind, she registered a change in the way he felt on her tongue. It was his teeth.... The canines seemed longer. Sharper.

But she barely cared. She felt drunk. She wondered if she'd been drugged.

So this is what it's like, her inebriated mind whispered. *This is what it's like to kiss Daniel Kane.*

It was a full minute more before he broke the kiss. When he finally did, Lily's breathing had become shallow and slow. Her body yearned for his in a way she never could have imagined. Especially not now, under these circumstances.

She watched through half-closed lids as he slowly pulled away. There was no blue left in his gaze; his pupils had expanded entirely, mirroring the black of his hair, and she now knew what hunger looked like up close and personal.

He gazed at her for what seemed like a short eternity before he picked up the knife once again and this time, he did not pause before he placed it to her forearm and quickly drew it down across the taut, pale flesh.

Lily winced against the quick flash of pain and let out a small gasp. But there was no real fear. His kiss had drained it away.

Daniel's pitch black eyes found hers again as he then dropped the knife and wrapped his bleeding hand around her arm, covering her wound with his own.

Lily let her head fall back onto the steel frame of his bed as the pain in her forearm almost instantly melted into a strange sort of heat. That heat snaked up her arm and across her body like fingers of flame. It licked at her breasts and she felt her nipples harden against her thin dress. Then it trailed across her stomach to that moist place between her legs and she moaned and closed her eyes. It was like being kissed all over again.

She could feel Daniel lean into her, could feel his lips lower to her ear.

"You have no idea how much I want you right now, cher. Your need is nothing compared to mine." His voice had changed completely. It was now much, much deeper and it resonated through her body, caressing her from the inside as if it were a living, breathing thing.

Daniel's grip tightened around her arm as he once more claimed her lips in a kiss. Lily moaned into his mouth as her body convulsed in an orgasm and her mind went reeling into forbidden bliss. Darkness wrapped itself around her, warm and tight, drawing her in like a pulling tide. She rode the last wave of her orgasm into that waiting blackness and slipped into unconsciousness.

Daniel Kane very slowly pulled out of the kiss and opened his eyes to gaze down at the young woman cuffed to his bed.

Need was riding him like a demon. It was a pain unlike any he'd ever known. It was merciless and cruel beyond measure, nearly bringing tears to his eyes.

With a strength he hadn't known he possessed, he released his grip on her arm and sat back, putting a few precious inches of distance between them. His breathing

was ragged and uneven. He fought to get it, and his body, under control. His head dropped back and with tremendous effort; he forced his fangs to recede. When they were gone, he looked at Lily again. His gaze slid from her sleeping face to the mark he'd left on her arm. Where there had been a knife cut only moments before, there now rested a symbol. It was blue and intricately knotted and it entranced him to see it there, on his chosen mate.

Out of curiosity, he glanced down at his own hand. The same mark etched across his palm where he had sliced it. Both wounds were gone, as if they had never been.

It's done, he thought. *She's marked*. With fingers that trembled, he gently brushed a long lock of her golden hair from her neck and traced the outline of her collarbone. *She's mine*.

It was the best he could do for now. It would protect her, at least a little.

He let his hand drop to his lap and took a deep, shaky breath. He had to go. The Mayor and his family had been killed. He knew who the killer was; he didn't even have to visit the crime scene. He knew he would smell the other wolf the second he entered the Mayor's home. Malcolm Cole had done this. He was a smart man. He knew it was the only way Daniel would ever leave Lily alone. The murder had to be drastic; televised enough.

Daniel had no choice but to put in an appearance. He was the new Police Chief. The media would be there. And Lily would be alone. And Cole was waiting for just that.

This was a fucking nightmare.

He'd had to steal Lily's strength and put her to sleep with his kiss and that was *not* what he'd wanted to do the first time he kissed her. She would be confused when she awoke. Then she would be pissed. She would almost certainly try to run.

He would put a blue-and-white out front and make sure Tabitha was here. There was nothing more he could do.

Slowly, he pushed off of the bed and unlocked each of the cuffs around Lily's wrists. Then he lifted her and repositioned her sleeping body so that she lay in the center of his bed. He gently covered her with the sheets and stepped away. Her golden hair spilled all around her, stark against the black of his covers.

He was still hurting. *God*, he was hurting. But he could get it under control in time. With another shaky breath, he pulled his cell from his front pocket and dialed it. Tabitha picked up on the first ring.

"Get to my place, Tabitha. She's sleeping. I want you here with her when she wakes up.... Tell her I'm sorry."

He hung up, not waiting for a response. Then he strode to the door, taking one last glance at the thin blue line that graced Lily's right arm before he left the room.

Chapter Five: CSI – Baton Rouge

"I'm a little surprised by your methods, Jennings, but I must admit that I can see the benefit of your actions."

Jennings was quiet for a good, long while before his voice cracked in answer as he spoke into his cell phone. "Yes sir. It seemed to make sense, sir. He'll be confused now and you've taught us to weaken them however possible."

Another long pause, but this from the other side.

"Yes. I see." The voice was calm, the tone low. And though it filled Jennings with a sense of respect, it also gave him the creeps. In the background, he could swear he heard what sounded like the pinging of elevators, the distant chink of glasses.... Bells on slot machines?

"Jennings, you have a chance to make a real difference here. To do something good for the world. To rid it of real evil. Make the most of it and don't fail me. You've done well so far and you've been given an in that others in your position are not given. You can set these demons against each other."

"Yes sir," Jennings replied. "The thought had occurred to me, sir."

The voice on the other end continued. "Now, I happen to know that you have a personal interest in this matter, and I can understand that."

A brief pause.

"However, I need you to keep a clear head. In the end, it is our objective that matters. Not our personal desires. Don't let them interfere with your job. Do you understand?"

Jennings swallowed and he knew that the man on the other end of the line most likely heard it, it was so loud. The lump in his throat was too big and too dry. "Yes, sir. I understand."

"Good. I won't be contacting you again. I don't want to hear from you until you've completed this task."

"Understood." Jennings heard the line disconnect and he closed his phone, pocketing it with shaking fingers.

* * * *

Yellow tape had been draped across both ends of the neighborhood street, so Daniel parked at the end of the road and another officer lifted the tape for him as he ducked beneath it.

Already, Daniel could smell the blood, and the Mayor's house was still several hundred yards away. From behind the mask of a pair of mirrored sunglasses, Daniel cocked his head to the side and lifted his nose ever so slightly. He'd expected to catch Cole's scent right away. After all, if he'd been able to detect him on a busy city street such as the one beside the cantina where Lily and her friends had been dining, then surely he'd be able to pick it up outside of the scene of a bloody crime that Cole had committed.

But his scent wasn't there. At least, it wasn't discernible yet, anyway.

Daniel's teeth clenched and a cold sensation settled at the base of his spine. Surreptitiously, he scanned the area around the crime scene. The coroner's van was

parked near the curb, behind it was an ambulance, its lights flashing but its sirens silent. A fire truck effectively blocked entrance and exit from the other side of the street, its long shining red body nose to bumper from sidewalk to sidewalk.

Civilians had gathered all along the perimeter of the scene; frightened and curious neighbors, some of them pillars of high society. Daniel would have to deal with them himself. When it came to those whose money was the life blood of Baton Rouge, public relations required a certain amount of personal finesse.

A news crew had already arrived. Daniel could hear them with their rapid-fire chirping of questions, directed toward any officer who was careless enough to meander within ten feet of the woman with the microphone.

Several more news crews were undoubtedly on their way. Daniel sighed and his gut clenched. It was bad news when the media arrived at the scene of a crime before the Police Chief did. He would have to come up with some kind of excuse. He seriously doubted that, "Sorry, I had to mark my intended mate" was going to fly with Channel Nine or the six-o'clock viewing public.

A medical team was just exiting the Mayor's mansion. As they stepped out the double front doors, they peeled off latex gloves and the small blue-white booties that they'd had pulled over their shoes. Daniel approached them and the coroner looked up. "Chief," he said. Daniel nodded once in greeting. It was a somber greeting for a somber occasion.

The coroner's gray-white hair was slightly frizzy in the post-storm humidity and his contacts were easily discernible against the bloodshot, yellow-white of his tired eyes. His face looked like a road map of forced, sympathetic smiles and deep, sincere frowns. His name was Jeffrey Hershel and he'd been the coroner for twenty-nine years.

Daniel had noticed, over the years, that people tended to start to look a lot like whatever it was they did for a living. Pastry chefs always got fat and smelled like chocolate. Rock stars began to dress and dye their hair until they were as colorful as their lyrics. Plumbers always started to look like shit, eventually. And after being around enough dead bodies, Jeffrey Hershel had begun to take on the appearance of a corpse. Not an easy job. It made Daniel wonder whether, as a peace keeper, he himself walked around looking like living, breathing crime.

Detective Aiden Knight sidled up to stand next to the coroner. He was a ruggedly handsome, tall, well-built man, nearly the same height as Daniel. His shoulder-length, brown hair was carelessly trimmed. He had stark amber eyes, but there was a darkness around them and the stubble on his chin lent him the air of one who hadn't enjoyed the luxury of sleep or a shave in quite some time. He had a small black notebook in his hand. "Chief," he greeted Daniel.

Again Daniel nodded. He sighed, glancing once toward the front door behind them and the horror that waited inside. "What have we got, gentlemen?"

"Housekeeper and piano teacher found the body this morning at around eleven thirty a.m. Housekeeper arrived to find the piano teacher sitting on the porch, waiting to be let in. Apparently, she'd had lessons scheduled for eleven. Housekeeper has a

key." Detective Knight gestured to a pair of women who stood off to one side, next to the yellow tape, their shivering forms wrapped in blankets, despite the midday warmth. They were clearly in a state of mild shock.

"Have you had a medic tend to them?" Daniel asked.

"Yes, sir. They were each given a sedative, but we've asked them to remain on site for questioning."

Daniel nodded again. He could sense, at this point, that he was delaying the inevitable. He didn't want to go inside. The Mayor hadn't been the closest friend Daniel had ever had – but he was close enough. Daniel had enjoyed dinner with his family on more than one occasion, and every holiday season they exchanged gifts in the warm and friendly environment of the Mayor's home.

It wouldn't be a warm and friendly environment now.

As if sensing his boss's hesitation, Detective Knight leaned over and spoke softly near Daniel's ear. "Everything has been photographed and tagged, Chief. All we need is your eye and your statement."

Daniel nodded. He took a deep, steadying breath and nodded again, as if to reassure himself. The detective handed him a pair of gloves and booties and Daniel slipped them on. Both men then stepped to the side and Chief Daniel Kane entered the Mayor's home.

From the first sound of his muffled boot on the marble tiles of the foyer, Daniel sensed the immense difference that death brings into a home. It isn't just the silence where there should be music and the clanging of pots and pans, a television or stereo playing, a child's laughter. It was not just the smell, which for him was particularly telling. Instead of cinnamon potpourri or the lingering cloy of honeysuckle stuck to the bottom of someone's shoe, it smelled like flash bulbs and silicone and the graphite of pencil leads. It smelled like blood and urine and fear and gunpowder.

But it wasn't just the smell, either.

No. It was something else. There was almost a new vibration in the air. Or, a lack thereof. It was as if life itself had resided in the home, an entity reminiscent of waves of light and sound – and now it was gone. And the air was bare. Empty. Stale.

It was almost unbeatable. Daniel found himself holding his breath as he marched, like a man on the green mile, down the hallway to where the stench of death became strongest.

It was the little girl he saw first, and Daniel froze in his tracks, instantly recalling the feel of her weight on the tops of his boots as he'd danced with her last Christmas. He instantly heard her laughter. And he was almost undone.

"Chief?" Knight was beside him; the two were alone, but for the bodies of the fallen in the living room around them. "You okay?"

Daniel shook his head. Once. But he said nothing. His gaze skirted from the sleeping child to her mother and then to her father, the Mayor.

He could smell them all here. Not just their blood, but them. The people that they once were. He could smell the Mayor's aftershave and his wife's perfume and his daughter's bubble gum.

Layered over these scents, like sand solidifying fossils, were other scents.

Gunpowder. Daniel spotted the gun, where it had been tagged and bagged beside the Mayor's body. He knew, even without looking at it closely, that the chamber was empty. There was enough gunpowder residue along its barrel and coated, like invisible dust over the furniture and floor in the living room to tell him that much.

There was the remnant scent of the police officers who had come and gone, their tired sweat, the starch of their uniforms, the deodorant they kept in their lockers at the station. He could smell traces of the medical team that had investigated the scene. Their plastic gloves and disinfectant. And even the carbon from the flashes used by the crime scene photographer left a faint signature.

The scent of one officer, in particular, was of interest to Daniel. "Jennings is here?" Daniel found himself asking. His voice sounded dead, even to his own ears.

"Yes, sir. He and Mayfield were the first on the scene. They're outside. Jennings said he had some information for you anyway, so he'd wait to talk to you."

Daniel nodded. Or he thought he did, anyway. It was difficult to tell. As he gazed down at the bodies of the family he'd known so well, his body felt far away and foreign.

He was losing it.

He turned, slightly, as if to speak to Knight alone, and barely managed to pull his eyes off of the blood-splattered Hello Kitty doll that rested a few inches from the little girl's deathly still fingers.

Though he spoke in a whisper that only the detective could hear, the tone of his voice was so low, so dangerously angry that anyone hearing it would have paled at the sound. "I can't smell Cole here." It was a statement, simple and hard. "Can you?"

Detective Knight frowned. He thought for a moment. "Do you mean Malcolm Cole?"

Daniel nodded.

"No, Chief. I don't scent him here. You think he had something to do with this?"

"I just handcuffed and marked my mate against her will and without any kind of explanation and then had to leave her alone in my bed because Cole shows up in town at the same time that she does. *Coincidence?*" He whipped off his mirrored sunglasses, and gazed at the detective. "I seriously fucking doubt it. So why can't I smell that British bastard here?" he hissed, furiously. "I *know* he's here. I *know* he did this." Daniel roughly gestured to the mess around him. "He did this so that he could get to Lily when I have no choice but to leave her alone and unprote-"

At once, Aiden ripped the shades out of his chief's grip and opened them back up again, sliding them over Daniel's ears and slamming them back into place. Daniel winced slightly when the metal hit the bridge of his nose, but it seemed to snap him out of whatever had taken hold of him. He blinked, realizing that he was trembling with some unfamiliar emotion.

Aiden glanced around them, making certain they were alone before speaking. "If you left her alone, then assign someone to watch over her and don't waste time about

it, boss. As for where Cole is and why we can't scent him here – we'll deal with that right after we tend to the Mayor's relatives and the media." Aiden leaned in close to peer directly into the mirrored darkness behind his boss's shades. "You need to *breathe*, Chief," he said. "Reign the wolf in. Your eyes are glowing."

Daniel gazed at his friend for a long, silent moment. And then he straightened. After a moment, he nodded. Aiden was right.

This wasn't Daniel's first rodeo. It *was*, perhaps, his roughest. But not his first.

He could handle this. He just had to think. Take care of business. He took a slow, deep breath and ran a hand through his thick blue-black hair. He *had* planned on putting an officer out in front of his house. But in his haste to get to the Mayor's mansion; in his harried state of – *discomfort* – and anger, he'd neglected to do it.

At least Tabitha was there. Or, should be anyway. He hated to admit it, but despite the fact that his sister had kept Lily's secret from him for all of these years and he was definitely peeved at her for it, he was certainly depending on her a lot right now. If Lily woke up while Daniel was gone and Tabitha was there alone with her, his little sister would have to explain.... *Everything*.

"I'm going out to speak with Jennings. Try to find some way to deal with the media until I can get there," he told the detective. He would get the information he needed from Jennings and then send Jennings and Mayfield to the house.

The detective nodded and stepped aside so that Daniel could pass.

Outside, the crowd had thickened and all of the other news crews had arrived. When they saw Daniel coming out of the mansion, they began shouting at him almost at once. They were sharks and they had smelled blood in the water and they wouldn't be held off for long. Daniel's jaw tensed and his gums ached where his fangs had been dying to make an appearance for the last hour.

He kept them at bay and made his way to where officer Allan Jennings stood, waiting inside the yellow tape beside an ancient, moss-draped oak tree. He held a white coffee cup in each hand and when Daniel approached, he held one out for him.

"I'm sorry, Chief." Jennings spoke softly. "Rough day." His expression was one of genuine regret.

Daniel nodded and took the cup. "Thanks." He could smell the coffee, deep and black and free of cream or sugar. He could smell other things, as well.

He could scent the Mayor on Jennings. There was the incredibly faint but cloying scent of the Mayor's aftershave and the starch of his tailored suit hanging around the officer.

It made sense. Knight had told Daniel that Jennings was the first to arrive on the scene.

Daniel looked down at his coffee. He considered taking a sip, but his stomach turned a little at the thought. There was too much going on inside of his mind – and his body – at the moment. So, instead, he held the coffee in his hand and asked, "You were the one to find the Mayor and his family?" He wanted to ask about Cole. It was all he really wanted to know. But he was the Police Chief for a reason, and his

job took precedence. The Mayor had been murdered. There was a protocol to follow.

"I responded to the call, sir. I was just down the street when the maid and the piano teacher found the bodies."

"And Mayfield?" Daniel asked. Mayfield was Allan's partner and the two were nearly inseparable.

"He was at the bagel shop," Jennings answered, a little sheepishly. "We made a bet and he lost, so breakfast was on him. He'd been gone about ten minutes when the call came in."

Daniel mulled this over for a moment, his gaze focused on the ground. "When did you get the coffee?"

"Just now, sir," Jennings answered. "Starbucks around the corner. Figured you could use the warmth."

It was midday in June and the humidity was choking sweat out of everyone on the street, but Jennings was right. Daniel felt cold. It was the mark of a good cop who could understand such things.

Daniel nodded and turned to face him, now prepared to ask what he'd wanted to ask all along. "What did you learn about Cole?"

Jennings turned and started to walk toward the yellow tape a few yards away. "I've got everything here, Chief."

Daniel followed him as he ducked under and headed toward the marked car nearby. Jennings opened the car door and nodded in at officer Mayfield, who was seated in the passenger seat, the CB radio in one hand, a pen and legal pad in the other. He nodded at Daniel and Daniel nodded back.

Jennings reached in and pulled a manila folder off of the driver's seat and handed it to Daniel, closing the car door behind him. "His itinerary, flight numbers and times, hotel numbers – it's all here, Chief."

Daniel flipped it open and started reading. "Good. Now I need you and Mayfield to get to my house, Allan. Park yourselves out front. Lily St. Claire is inside and she's not well at the moment. I need you to make sure she doesn't go anywhere, Jennings." He looked up and pinned Jennings with a hard stare from behind his mirrored shades.

It was clear from the officer's immediate uneasy expression that he could feel the weight of that gaze, even through the sunglasses. "No problem, chief." Jennings turned and climbed back into the car and Daniel stepped out of the way as the engine started up. He watched the vehicle back up and then inch through the mulling crowd until it was down the street and out of sight.

And then Daniel took another deep, calming breath, squelched his nausea, and turned to face the waiting news crews.

Chapter Six: House Arrest

Tabitha nodded at the cops sitting in the marked car across the street from Daniel's house. They nodded back. She unlocked the front door and went inside. It was quiet. She looked around and noticed Lily's purse on the love seat. There were two full bottles of Coke on the coffee table. The side table drawer had been pulled and left open. It was empty.

Tabitha knew what Daniel usually kept in that drawer. She groaned and closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. She set down her own purse and headed for the stairs, taking them quickly but quietly. Daniel's bedroom door was ajar. She slowly pushed it open the rest of the way and Lily's sleeping form came into view.

Tabitha stood there in the doorway and took in the bruises around her best friend's wrists and the scratches around the bedposts and she knew, instantly, what had transpired. The cuffs were gone now, but it didn't take a genius to guess that if a cop had to tie someone down in a hurry, he would go for those.

"Christ, you really made a mess of this, Danny." She shook her head and came forward to sit on the edge of the bed. She watched Lily's breathing. It was still very deep and slow; she wasn't about to wake up.

And then Tabitha noticed the blue knot symbol on Lily's right forearm. A tattoo? Gently, she took her friend's arm and turned it over. A beam of light cast through the window and seemed to shimmer off of the entwined line of intricate blue. It was the exact color of her brother's eyes.

Not a tattoo.

"Holy shit, big brother." She dropped Lily's arm and let out a shaking breath. "She's gonna kill me."

Tabitha had known that he would do something to protect Lily, but she'd kind of figured on him stealing her strength with his kiss or even going the human route and drugging her up some how to keep her in his house. She hadn't figured on this. It made sense, in a way. And Tabitha knew how badly Danny would want Lily.

"You just couldn't resist, could you." Again, she sighed, and wondered how long Lily would sleep. The longer, the better. Daniel's home was one of the few places Malcolm Cole couldn't enter. Alpha werewolves could not enter one another's territory. Like a vampire trying to infiltrate a human's home without an invitation, Cole would simply stand at the threshold and not be able to move. And, so, he wouldn't even try.

Lily was safe here, and as long as she slept, she wouldn't try to leave. But Tabitha knew that the moment she woke up – the moment Tabitha tried to explain the situation to her – Lily would bolt. She supposed that was the reason for the cops out front. For whatever good it would do. Tabitha knew her best friend, and when Lily St.Claire got it into her head to do something, she went at the task with a relentless determination. She'd saved a lot of abused wives that way. And a few kids.

A wave of fondness for her best friend swept over Tabitha. Gently, she brushed a lock of golden hair from Lily's forehead. Lily frowned. Her breathing became more shallow.

Holy crap, Tabitha thought. She's waking up. The girl is stronger than either of us thought.

"Tabby?" Lily's voice was soft and scratchy. Her eyelids fluttered a little and then opened. She blinked several times.

"I'm here, girl." Tabitha knelt beside the bed. "Thirsty? Can I get you a drink?"

Lily tried to focus on her friend, but her vision was blurry. Her throat was a little tender. Like she'd spent an evening cheering on the Penguins; she always screamed too much while watching a hockey match. She nodded, her cheek brushing the soft sheet beneath her. "Yes, please."

Tabitha stood and Lily could hear her leave the room.

The room.... *Where am I?* Lily rolled over slowly and stared up at the ceiling. It was charcoal gray. Her gaze slid from the ceiling to the walls and then to the dresser against one side, and then to the bed.... She turned on her side and glanced up at the stainless steel headboard and bed posts, the black sheets and pillow cases.

This was.... Daniel's room, wasn't it? She couldn't quite remember. Her head was so fuzzy. What was wrong with her?

"Here you go, girl." Tabitha set a glass of water on the bedside table.

"Tabby, where am I?" Lily asked as she tried to sit up. A strange, languid weakness licked at her limbs, begging her to lay back down. She acquiesced and relaxed; the bed felt too good. It was like she'd taken two Xanax and chased them down with a beer.

"We're at my brother's place," Tabitha said. "Just rest and take it slowly, Lily. The more rest you get, the better."

"Why?" Lily asked, again trying to focus on her friend. Slowly, the fuzziness around her friend's familiar face was smoothed out.

"Um...." Tabitha seemed to pause in answering, as if not sure what to say.

And then a memory flashed through Lily's mind like a camera bulb in a dark room.

Hand cuffs. A knife.

Lily blinked. She felt the blood drain from her face. "Tabitha, why am I here?" she asked. Her tone had dropped into absolute seriousness.

Her friend sighed. "Okay Lily, I'm gonna spill and I need you to promise me that you won't flip out and do something stupid."

Another memory flashed before Lily's eyes. Daniel's face. His staggering kiss. And *fangs?*

Lily found the strength to sit up, this time ignoring her body's drowsiness. The flashes were coming faster now. She barely heard Tabitha's words.

"Remember that dream you had in high school where you saw Daniel turn into a wolf?"

Lily nodded distractedly. In her mind, Daniel was cuffing her to the bed. Her gaze slid to the bed posts. There were the scratches. It had really happened.

"It wasn't a dream, Lily. What you were seeing really happened. Daniel is a werewolf and you saw him in his true form. You saw him like that in your dream because you're meant to be his mate."

Lily's gaze dropped to her wrists. They were red and bruising. And then she saw something shimmer on her right arm. She turned it over and stared down at the strange but beautiful marking that graced her inner forearm.

"Lily, are you listening to me?"

"He cut me," Lily said it without thinking. She could remember it quite clearly now. "He cut himself and then he cut me.... But there's no cut here." *Just this mark.*

"Shit." Tabitha stood and sat beside Lily on the bed. Gently, she turned Lily's head so that she was looking at her again. "Lily, please hear what I am saying. I will explain everything to you, if you only give me the chance. Please stay with me here." Tabitha's tone was commanding and calm, as if she desperately needed Lily to acknowledge her right now.

Lily recognized that kind of desperation. She'd heard it enough times. She gazed into her friend's eyes and nodded.

"Good. Now just listen carefully, and don't do anythin' stupid, okay?"

Lily shook as a chill coursed through her body. "All right."

"Daniel is a werewolf. He was born that way. The trait is passed down to the males in our families. And you are most likely supposed to be his mate, Lily. You dreamt about him in high school in his true form. Only Dormants dream about wolves in their true form."

Lily's gaze narrowed. She pulled back from Tabitha, suddenly much more alert as the last of the strange drowsiness left her body and the fuzziness slipped from her mind. "What?" she asked. "What the hell are you saying?"

Tabitha took a deep, calming breath and cocked her head to one side. "How long have we been friends, Lily?"

"Forever." Lily replied. "So why are you filling my head with bullshit?"

"It's not bullshit Lily, and," she paused, grabbing Lily's arm and holding it up to the light. "I think you know it. In your heart."

Lily's gaze slid from Tabitha to her arm and then back again. "He cuffed me to his bed and sliced me open and now you're defending him?"

"Nope," Tabitha dropped her arm and shook her head. "I'm not defendin' him. I don't think he should have marked you." She seemed to mull that over for a second and then added, "Maybe. But he did anyway. Yes, he cut you. But the wound healed almost instantly – probably the second his blood was mixed with yours. It's not there now, is it?"

Lily didn't have an answer to that.

"And this mark?" Tabitha pointed to it. "It's what remains when his blood claims yours and takes over. He's basically telling our kind that you belong to him."

Lily gazed at her friend for a long, silent while. Things seemed to be both spinning wildly in her head – and standing utterly and completely still. It was like having vertigo of the brain. She remembered everything that had happened that

morning: Daniel coming to the restaurant, her ride to his house, him carrying her upstairs – *everything*. Even the kiss... And the orgasm she'd had as she slipped into unconsciousness. None of it was natural; none of it made any sense.

Unless Tabitha was right.

And everything Lily had ever thought she'd known about the world was dead wrong.

"Werewolves are real." Lily said it, not so much as a question as a restatement. She said it just to hear herself say it. So she could hear how insane it sounded.

Tabitha just nodded.

But as insane as it sounded, Lily had no explanation for the strangeness of that morning. Or for the mark that now graced her arm. Another chill raced through her body. She hugged herself. Tabitha took the sheets from the bed and began to wrap them around her shoulders.

"Okay," Lily said softly. "I'm listening."

Tabitha sat back down. "All right, now bear with me. I never thought I'd have to explain our entire existence to someone one day." She seemed to collect herself for a second. Then she said, "Werewolves have existed for thousands... oh hell, probably hundreds of thousands of years. I don't honestly remember, to tell you the truth. Gramps once told me some of our history, but I was a teenager and I ignored him like all good teenagers do."

Lily hugged the sheets closer, wishing she had a comforter to go with them.

"Only the males get the gene. It's utterly unfair. Sort of. I mean, along with their powers comes a price."

"What powers?" Lily found herself asking.

"Well, they're very strong. I mean *very* strong. We're talkin', lift-a-car-with-your-bear-hands kind of strong. And they're fast. Some werewolves can move so fast that their forms blur to the human eye. They don't age as fast as humans do, either. Once they reach their optimum age – usually around twenty-seven or twenty-eight – they get older about half as fast as humans do. Sometimes even slower."

She bit her lip as if trying to remember everything. "They heal really quickly. A cut only takes a few minutes to heal up. I was really jealous of Danny for that one. I was always scarring up my knees when I was little and Danny hasn't a scar anywhere on his damned body." She scowled at that and then blinked and continued. "Their kiss can have several effects, dependin' on what they wanna do. As you most likely learned, it can steal your strength, sap it right out of you. They can put you to sleep with their kiss. And...." Tabitha blushed suddenly, as if she wasn't sure she should say any more on the subject.

But Lily pinned her with her gold-flecked gaze. "Go on."

"Well.... They can make you feel, you know... *good*."

It was Lily's turn to blush now. That would explain the orgasm she'd had as she'd fallen into unconsciousness.

"Ah. You know about that one too." Tabitha nodded, pulling her lips in to keep

from smiling. "Okay, moving on." She adjusted on the bed a little and continued. "They've got great senses. They can hear and smell and even see better than humans or even wolves can. It's not a natural thing at all. They can also change any part of their body between human and wolf form whenever they want to. When I was six and Danny was ten, he went as a vampire for Halloween and everyone just thought he had these great make-up artist fangs on. But they were real. He loved it."

She paused then and chewed on her cheek. "Of course, sometimes they can't control all of these changes. There are sicknesses that only hit werewolves; human illnesses don't affect them. When Danny was sick with a bad fever once, his fangs stayed out the whole time. Our parents kept him home from school, as you can guess."

Lily noticed the shadow that crossed her friend's features at the mention of her parents. They'd been killed when Tabitha was eight. Murdered on a camping trip they'd taken to celebrate their anniversary. No one had ever found the killer.

Lily reached out and took her friend's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. Tabitha looked up. Their eyes met and it seemed to give Tabitha the strength to go on. "Only a few things can kill a werewolf. Like the Highlander, if they lose their head they're a goner. I think the same thing goes for fire. And werewolves can kill each other; their wounds don't heal but at a normal pace. That's why it's against clan law for a werewolf to attack another of our kind unless in self-defense or in the defense of family." She glanced down at Lily's arm. "That includes defending mates."

Lily took another shaky breath and let go of Tabitha's hand. She turned to stare straight ahead for a minute, attempting to smooth everything out in her head. To compartmentalize it and make sense of it all. To her, it sounded a lot like Tabitha had just told her that Daniel Kane was from planet Krypton.

"Is there anything a werewolf *can't* do?" she asked softly.

"Well, there is one thing."

Tabitha's tone was so soft that Lily couldn't help but turn to look at her again. "What is it?" Lily asked.

"They can't get anyone pregnant – anyone but their chosen mate," Tabitha told her solemnly. "And until they find that mate, the need to track down that one special person can drive a werewolf mad. That's the price I was talking about."

"And you think that I'm Daniel's mate?"

"I don't think it, Lily. I know it. You dreamed about him – you saw him – changing into his true form. You were born to be mated to an alpha werewolf and I shouldn't have hidden you from Daniel all of these years. It's just that..." she trailed off, becoming irritated. "Well, you were fourteen and I could just see my best friend, at fourteen years old, walking around with a belly the size of a whale and I had *no one* else, Lily. The thought made me sick. So, I..." She sighed. "I told him to stay away from you." She looked back up at Lily again and her expression was apologetic. "And he did."

Lily stared at her friend with wide eyes. All this time, she'd just figured that Daniel wasn't interested in her. Didn't want her because she wasn't easy. Or maybe

because she was too plain. Or *something*. But whatever it was, she'd assumed she just wasn't Daniel's type. And then she'd come back to Baton Rouge and suddenly his attitude toward her was worlds different.

"He's not staying away now," she said absently.

"No," Tabitha agreed. "He's not. He's always wanted you, Lily. I could tell it drove him crazy that he had promised to leave you alone. And when you came back? Well, he probably took one look at you and threw his promise out the window. And then there's the scent thing-"

"What scent thing?"

"Dormants carry a certain scent so that a werewolf can recognize one when they meet one. Danny probably caught yours right away and made up his mind on the spot." She sighed deeply. "Accept it, Lily. You're meant to be his."

"His?" Lily suddenly felt angry. She wasn't sure which crazy direction the anger was coming from, there were so many to choose from. But something was rubbing her way wrong. This whole situation was abrasive in the worst way. "I'm meant to be *mine*, Tabitha. I don't belong to anyone else."

"I'm sorry," Tabitha hurried. "I didn't mean it to sound that way-"

"And what if this... Dormant, or whatever you call it, doesn't want to be a mate? What if she falls for a human instead and doesn't want to give birth to a litter of puppies?" Lily went on.

Tabitha blinked. "Are you tellin' me you don't want Danny?"

"No!" Lily answered, her cheeks burning red. "I'm not telling you that. I just don't think it's right for someone's fate to be mapped out like this. Doesn't a person have some sort of say over what they do with their own lives?"

Tabitha sat back and eyed Lily for a moment. Then she stood from the bed and began pacing. "As far as I know, there isn't a mate in our history who hasn't wanted to become one. Maybe if you're not meant to be with someone, you just won't feel anything for them. And you definitely have feelings for Danny. Don't tell me you don't."

Lily threw her friend an exasperated look and then turned away to look at the floor. She pulled the sheets even tighter around herself and could actually smell Daniel's cologne on them. A wave of anticipation washed over her, tightening her belly. It was powerful. *Too* powerful. Everything Tabitha said made loads of sense. It was mind-blowing.

"By the way, he wanted me to tell you he was sorry," Tabitha said.

Lily blinked and looked up at her.

"For the way this went down, no doubt."

Lily considered that a moment. In the end, she realized she didn't have anything to say to it. But her chest felt heavier now. "So why am I here?" she eventually asked. "Why did he kidnap me and bring me here and put this – whatever it is – on my arm?" She looked down at the vivid blue knot on her arm. Again her stomach tightened. Warmth flooded her and pooled between her legs.

Tabitha didn't seem to notice. In fact, when Lily looked up at her friend, it was to

find that Tabitha had gone very pale. "Lily, you know that author you like so much? Malcolm Cole?"

Lily nodded, frowning.

"He's a werewolf too. And, somehow, he knows about you. He's come here to claim you and he's a very smart, very powerful werewolf."

Lily recalled everything that Daniel had told her about Cole that morning. "Daniel said he was a killer."

"Yes. He's killed countless times. But by clan law, if you don't catch a werewolf in the act of killing, you can't bring him to justice. He knows how to cover his tracks so that humans never suspect him. And of course human law is just not adequate for dealing with our kind. So he goes scot-free."

The warmth that had engulfed Lily only moments ago was slipping away, and in its place settled an uneasiness. It almost made her queasy. "Why does he kill?"

"For his books. And because he can."

"Oh my God." Lily thought about how much she'd enjoyed his work, how much she'd gotten into it, and she really did start to feel nauseated. "He's a monster," she muttered. "Christ, *I'm* a monster. I love his books."

"No, Lily. *He's* a monster, and he's also a good writer. Why do you think he's sold so many books? Why do you think he's so famous? What you need to concentrate on right now is protecting yourself from him. He can't come into Daniel's home. They're both alpha males and can't cross into one another's territory. That's why Danny brought you here. And he marked you because as long as you bear the mark of one alpha, you can't be claimed by another."

Lily's head was spinning. "You think that Cole would come after me?"

Tabitha made a bewildered face, but nodded and shrugged. "It seems like a bit of a coincidence – you here at the same time that he is."

A pregnant silence stretched. Finally, Lily asked, "If I'm marked, then I'm safe. Why should I have to stay here?"

"Just because you're marked doesn't mean you can't be kidnapped. And being marked has its nasty side effects where other alphas are concerned I'm afraid."

Lily's gaze narrowed. Her teeth felt like they were vibrating in her skull. "Like what?" she ground out.

"Well..." Tabitha sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed again. "Just stay here, okay? If you leave, all bets are off."

"Jesus, Tabitha! How freaking long am I stuck here for?"

"Until Daniel can figure out a way to deal with Cole."

Lily's heart sank into her stomach. "And how long will that be?"

Tabitha shook her head, her look sullen. "Cole's been searching for a mate for more than seventy years. He's got a few on Danny and, like I said, he's a real bright man. He's probably real damned determined too, so this could take some time."

"Did you say he was seventy years old?"

"No, I said he'd been searching for a mate for seventy years. He's at least ninety years old."

"He looks Daniel's age," Lily said in wonderment.

"Didn't I tell you? They age half as fast, remember? Some lucky ones age even slower; about a third as fast as a human, maybe less. He's one of those lucky bastards. He's a very powerful alpha, Lily." Tabitha shivered and added, softly, "He scares the bejesus out of me."

Lily noted the shiver and tried to swallow, but her dry throat wouldn't work past the lump. She grabbed the glass of water beside the bed and took several big drinks. Then she replaced the glass. "Tabitha, how does Cole even know I exist? How did he find me?"

"I don't know, girl. I was wondering about that too. But he's resourceful. And Dormants are rare these days. I guess he found a way."

The two fell into a companionable silence then, each with their own dark thoughts. The room filled up with quietness until finally, Tabitha stood once more and ran her hands nervously over her jeans.

"Look, are you hungry? It's like five o'clock. You must be starving."

Lily thought about it for a moment. The truth was, she was so shocked that food sounded somewhat repulsive to her. But she knew she should eat. It wouldn't do to begin starving herself when her body might need its strength more than ever.

"Yeah, I guess I could eat."

"Okay. Daniel doesn't eat at home, so.... There's a Subway just three houses down. I'll get us some sandwiches and be right back." She paused at the door. "Stay inside, okay?"

Lily nodded and Tabitha left.

It was a while before Lily finally dropped the sheets from around her and crawled off of Daniel's bed. It seemed to pull at her, to want her to stay, and she knew that she had it bad for him.

And he's a werewolf.

She shook her head to clear it. Then she stood and walked to an adjoining door against one wall. It was either a closet or a bathroom, and she was hoping for either one. She had to relieve herself and she was also cold enough that she felt no shame in stealing one of Daniel's sweaters.

It was a bathroom. She used it and then found the closet, which was a walk-through wrap-around, connected to the bathroom. It was nice. She was jealous. He didn't have enough clothes or shoes to fill up even a quarter of it.

She did manage to find a thick, warm sweater, though, and she didn't hesitate in pulling it on. The fleece brushed enticingly against her skin and it smelled like him. She closed her eyes and breathed him in. There was that warmth again. "Hell," she muttered. "You're making me nuts, Kane."

When she exited the closet and the bathroom, it was to the sound of her cell phone ringing. *Hungry Like the Wolf* buzzed through her purse in muted cell phone tones. When she realized what the song was and that she'd chosen it without hesitation, she began to wonder if Tabitha might be right. Maybe she was supposed

to be with Daniel. Maybe she'd known all along, and somewhere deep inside, that she was tied to the wolven world in ways just as complex and inescapable as the blue design now marking her inner arm.

She unzipped her purse and pulled the phone out. The screen flashed an unknown caller. She opened it and placed it to her ear without thinking. "Hello?"

"Well, hello luv." Rupert Everett's voice, deep and intoxicating.

Cole.

Horror gripped Lily and the world tilted on its axis. She reached out to steady herself, grasping the wall for support.

"I want you to come to me, Lily. Right now. And so does Tabitha." There was a pause on the other end and then Lily could hear muffled sobs. "Don't you, Tabitha." There was a muffled cry, as if someone was screaming through a gag, and then more sobs.

Lily's fingernails dug into the paint on Daniel's wall. Her knees gave out and she fell to the carpet, barely managing to continue holding the phone to her ear.

"Please," she whispered weakly. She was having a hard time pushing air through her vocal chords. Terror had her so hard that she was dizzy with it. "Don't hurt her."

"Bluebonnet and Hillmont, luv. You've got fifteen minutes."

And the connection went dead.

Chapter Seven: Honestly Officer, I Only Had One

Lily was thankful, at least, that she didn't actually have anything in her stomach at that moment, because if she had she would have thrown it up.

Fifteen minutes.... Fifteen minutes.... Bluebonnet and Hillmont.... "Fuck!" She'd been out of town for a while and her memory of the street layout was vague. She did a quick scan of the room and found no computer. She ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time. She clumsily pressed the #2 and the "Talk" button on her phone as she went. The call went straight to Tabitha's voice mail. Lily reached the top landing, closed the phone, and hurriedly looked around.

There were three rooms upstairs. One was Daniel's bedroom – no computer. One was a weight room containing what looked like an impossible amount of weights. No computer. The third was a guest room. Again, a bust.

She stood and spun in place, closing her eyes and pressing on her temples with her fingertips. Her thoughts felt like scattering ants, entropic and impossible.

"Bluebonnet, Bluebonnet, Bluebonnet...." She recalled that one fairly quickly. A larger road, headed South East off of Airline. "Hillmont, Hillmont.... Where the hell is Hillmont!" She vaguely remembered that name. Something to do with construction. Relatively new?

"Rollerblading!" she exclaimed, recalling that the new roads around Bluebonnet in the newer construction areas were perfect for rollerblading, which she and Sherry had done often before Lily had left Baton Rouge years ago. Okay, so she had a general idea of where she was going.

Now, how to get there?

Her mind was working triple time. She was at Daniel's house. He was driving a squad car. Which meant that the bike was either at the police station – or here in the garage. In an instant, she was running through the kitchen to the garage door. On the way, she ran by a front window and noticed the blue-and-white parked out front. Two young men sat inside of it. One was drinking a bottle of what looked like Nestea. The other was eating something in a white wrapper.

She almost swore again, but saved her energy. Instead, she grabbed the garage door handle and flung it open. A cavernous darkness greeted her beyond. She searched along the wall for a light and finally found it, flipping it on.

Long strings of fluorescent lights buzzed and flicked overhead until the room was flooded in harsh light. Lily blinked a few times and then focused on the two vehicles parked in front of her. One was a giant black pickup truck with big tires and dried mud all over it. The other was the Harley Night Train.

Immediately, she began looking for the key. Surely, he would leave it here close by. *Please let it be here and not on his key chain!* And then she found it, hanging on a hook against one wall above a work bench. She snatched it off and headed for the bike.

Once she stood beside it, she paused, unsure of what to do next. There were cops out front, most likely put there by Daniel with instructions not to let her leave the house. If she allowed them to stop her or let them follow her, Tabitha would be dead.

She knew that with every fiber of her being. No cops. It was why she hadn't called Daniel. Cole had no reason to be forgiving.

She bit her lip. Well, at least that was one thing that a Harley Davidson motorcycle was notoriously good at. Outrunning the law.

But she had to time this right.

On the wall beside the light switch was another switch for the garage door.

She pulled off the sweater she'd taken from Daniel's closet and threw it onto the hood of the truck. She didn't want its bulkiness encumbering her movements. Then she ran to the garage door switch and flicked it up. The door began to slide noisily upward. Hurriedly, she mounted the bike from the left side, hiking her dress up to the thighs of her long legs. Offhandedly, she swore she would never wear another summer dress again. She didn't care how friggin' hot it got, she was going to traipse around wearing jeans and motorcycle boots and full leather body armor twenty-four seven, for the rest of her life.

She put the key in the ignition, turned it, and waited for the lights. She kicked the gear shift all the way down, then half a click up and put the bike in neutral. Then she pressed the red start button. The bike roared to life and she went through the motions, thanking whatever lucky star it had been that had given her a boyfriend with a motorcycle for two semesters in college. He'd taught her to ride and she'd even used his bike to get to and from class twice a week. Everything was coming back to her now; it was like second nature.

The garage door had opened about three quarters of the way and Lily could make out the legs of the police officers as they made their way across the street toward the house. She figured they would do that as soon as the garage door started opening.

She waited another few seconds, eased the bike forward a little, looked left and right for cars, and then, just as the men's faces became visible behind the rising white door, she kicked the bike into first, twisted the throttle, and rocketed past them.

Behind her, the garage door finished opening, and Officer Jennings and Officer Mayfield stood in the driveway of their chief's house, staring slack-jawed at the disappearing image of a woman in a dress riding off on a Harley Davidson.

Jennings pulled the radio off of his belt and pressed a button. "Uh, someone might wanna tell Chief Kane that his girl's gone rabbit," he said, as he spun around and he and Mayfield headed back toward their car. "And she's on his bike."

"Copy that. Do not pursue. I repeat, do not pursue."

"Ten-four." Jennings glanced at Mayfield questioningly. Mayfield shrugged. "He probably left the order 'cuz he doesn't want her to get killed tryin' to outrun us."

Jennings nodded once. They each opened their doors and slid into their seats. Jennings put the radio to his mouth again. "Dispatch, get ready to copy a BOLO to all units. Suspect is white female, late twenties, blonde hair, brown eyes, last seen on Fairhaven, headed East. Vehicle make Harley Davidson motorcycle, color black, license plate..." he trailed off. He hadn't had a chance to catch the plate. He chewed

on the inside of his cheek. "Well, it's the chief's bike," he added, a little mystified. "He'll know."

* * * *

Lily knew she was breaking about a thousand laws at that moment. She was speeding, she was crossing double lines, and she had barely paused to make sure no one was coming when she stormed through a red light. Or three.

The traffic was unbelievable. It hadn't been like this ten years ago. Tabitha must have been right about the population tripling. It certainly seemed like it at the moment. She'd passed a few police vehicles, but much to her astonishment, none of them had popped their sirens and taken chase. She wondered at that, but in her world of worries it took a back seat to the bigger ones. She didn't have a watch and had no idea how many minutes had passed since Cole had called her cell phone. And she was terrified.

Thoughts flitted about in her brain, hari-kari and scattered. She noticed the general lack of huge, ancient oaks where they used to lord over the streets, their branches draped in Spanish moss, blocking out the sun. She noticed the new developments everywhere – it seemed Wal-Mart had purchased the city, bulldozed it to the ground, and then gone into business with chain restaurants to rebuild over the leveled culture and history that was once Baton Rouge.

Lily hadn't really had a chance to explore much since she'd been back into town. Now, the newness of the place – the vast, sweeping reconstruction – was throwing her for a loop. It was, to a large extent, unrecognizable. She began to fear that she wouldn't remember which street was where. Jefferson didn't look like Jefferson any longer. It had always been busy, but now it went from being identifiable to extraordinary, as entire new neighborhoods cropped up and buildings she thought she remembered were no longer there.

When she turned off of Jefferson to Bluebonnet, she gunned the bike and took up residence on the slim and patently dangerous shoulder of the road. Potholes threatened and vegetation had forced cracks in the asphalt that played Russian Roulette with the motorcycle's wheels.

But Lily kept her eyes forward, her head straight, her right hand and foot ready on the breaks, and her left hand choked on the throttle.

Cars honked and men whistled. She weaved, desperately, around orange construction barrels on the corner of Bluebonnet and Perkins and an old African American woman at the Circle K cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled at her, "You crazy, honey! Slow down!"

The world had become a circus of industry around Lily, but all that she could really think about was how much time had passed. All she wanted was Tabitha's wellbeing. If she could just get her friend out of this mess alive.... Well, that would be good enough.

Lily figured that she, herself, was as good as done for. What could she do against a werewolf? And especially one as supposedly powerful as Malcolm Cole? Not a damned thing. There came a point in any battle when you had to admit that

you'd lost. Surrendering before any more of your people were killed was the very best thing you could hope to do. And that's exactly what Lily intended. If it would save Tabitha, then so be it.

It seemed like forever before Lily was finally roaring toward the newest housing areas. The homes became larger and less densely packed down here, with bigger yards that, as of yet, consisted of nothing much but grass. The trees were new and skinny, held by string and yard stick, and hadn't yet had a chance to age to their full Louisiana splendor. It would take decades.

Lily followed the newly paved roads, slowing down so that she could read each of the street signs.

At last, she came to one that read "Hillmont." Four houses waited on the intersection corners. Which one was Cole's?

Lily pulled the bike further over on the shoulder and put her left foot down, keeping her right on the break. She scanned the expanse of neighborhood around her as her heart beat hard against her chest and her ears strained to catch even the slightest, familiar sound. Someone calling her name, maybe. *Anything*.

A flash of silver caught her eye and Lily turned in the saddle as a silver sedan with black tinted windows pulled up at the stop sign perpendicular to hers. It edged to the shoulder, just as she had done, and then idled. Waiting.

Lily's heart skipped. Her gut clenched. She narrowed her gaze and looked closer.

Somehow, she just knew that car was there for her. With a sickened resignation, Lily turned off the bike and kicked down the stand. She took the key in her hand and began walking quickly across the streets in front of her, heading toward the waiting silver sedan.

When she was within about twenty feet, the back door on the opposite side of the sedan opened and a giant black man stepped out. Sammy, Alex's big brother, had nothing on this guy. His biceps seemed like they would rip right through the fabric of his gray t-shirt. He was bald and wore mirrored sunglasses.

Lily stopped in her tracks, now so full of fear that there was literally no room in her body for any other emotion. She eyed the man and he took off his glasses. He nodded to her once.

"Miss St.Claire?" He called across the short distance.

"Yes." Lily nodded.

"We work for Mr. Cole. Please come with us."

Lily took a shaky breath and continued across the pavement. When she was close enough, the other back door of the silver sedan opened and a second man stepped out of the car. He was not as burly as the black man, but he was tall and well built, dressed in a black t-shirt and black dress pants with black dress shoes. A wicked scar ran down his left arm from his shoulder to the inside of his elbow. A second, thin scar graced his left cheek, barely missing his eye. Those eyes were as silver gray as the sedan. His black hair was streaked with gray at the temples and his

lips had a slightly sensuous fullness to them. It was a handsome man; the scar seemed to only accentuate his attractiveness. It made it seem a bit more... *dangerous*.

Those sensuous lips curled up at the edges as Lily approached.

He stepped to the side, gesturing for her to climb in. "After you, Miss St. Claire."

Lily ducked down and crawled into the back seat. There was a black sports coat draped over the side nearest to her and she figured that belonged to the scarred man. She managed not to touch it and sat in the middle of the long seat, hugging herself tightly. Almost at once, the black man lowered himself onto the seat next to her, closing the door. He smelled of expensive European cologne. The car smelled of new leather.

On her other side, the man with the scars reached in and retrieved his sports coat, pulling it smoothly over his body. Then he, too, got in beside Lily, effectively trapping her. Luckily, the car was quite large and there was ample room for the three of them.

Immediately the car pulled out into traffic once more and Lily tried to get a look at the driver. All she could see was the back of a head of blonde hair and an earring in one ear. There was no one seated beside the driver.

They were all in the back with her. She was so lucky.

Once they'd driven through the intersection, gone South on Bluebonnet a ways, and turned onto Nicholson, the black man leaned forward and pressed a button on the storage compartment between the two front seats. It slid open and presented a bottle of some kind of liquor and a single glass.

"Mr. Cole would like you to have a drink, Miss St. Claire." The man pulled the bottle out of the box and retrieved the bottle opener behind it. He expertly popped the cork, picked up the glass, and smoothly poured the clear liquid into the crystal goblet.

"I don't want any," Lily found the strength to say.

From beside her, the man with the scars spoke. "There is no negotiating this, Miss St. Claire." His voice was deep and a touch gravelly. She turned to face him. He smiled, flashing fangs. "Drink the wine."

Lily gasped and jumped back, bumping up against the black man's hard-as-steel body. She whirled around instinctively and the large man held the full glass out in front of her face. "Bottoms up," he said and smiled. He, too, had fangs. And something strange glowed in the recesses of his brown eyes, causing them to turn to amber.

Lily's heart felt as if it would literally burst through her rib cage. She put her hand to her chest. It was beginning to hurt.

"You two are scaring the hell out of her. I can smell her fear, for chrissake. You're gonna give her a heart attack." The driver shook his head as he turned a corner. His earring flashed in the sunlight. He had a younger voice; maybe in his late teens or early twenties.

The giant black man laughed a deep, genuine laugh. "Can't help it," he said. "She smells really, *really* good."

"A Dormant," the other man beside her agreed. Lily noticed that his eyes, too,

had a strange glow to them now, making them shine like silver in the moonlight. "It's been decades since I've scented one."

"Calm down, Miss St. Claire. We're not going to hurt you," the black man told her, his tone at once a practiced calm. He lightly placed his hand against her shoulder and though she jerked at the sudden contact, he was gently persistent. He softly pushed her back against the seat. "Just breathe and try to relax."

She looked from him to the other man and then to the driver, whose eyes she could now see in the rear-view mirror. They were gray as well, though not as stark as the scarred man's.

"Breathe, Miss St. Claire," the black man repeated.

She realized, then, that she had been holding her breath and her right hand had been squeezing Daniel's motorcycle key so tightly that it left an outline in her palm. With effort, she opened her palm all the way and dropped the key on the seat. Then she released what was left of her breath and inhaled deeply. Her lungs expanded painfully and spots swam in her vision. She closed her eyes against them.

"That's it."

She took a few more deep breaths like this and found herself relaxing, ever-so-slightly, into the leather of the seat. Then she opened her eyes.

The black man smiled a pleased smile, his fangs still prominent. "Now, you do have to drink the wine; you have no choice in the matter." He captured her gaze in his and held it. "But it will help settle your nerves."

Lily really did not want to drink the wine. She was a light weight and there was a lot of wine in that glass. Wine always worked too fast on her. It went straight to her head and she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. If she downed the contents of that glass, she would be hammered before they reached wherever they were going. Without her faculties, how would she at least be able to make certain that Tabitha was okay?

"Please —" she started to say, but the scarred man cut her off.

"Drink it, sweetheart," he told her, turning toward her so that her side was against his broad chest. "Your resistance is really only fueling the desire of every wolf in this car." He tenderly brushed the backs of his fingers down her cheek and she flinched when it sent a strange and not entirely unpleasant spark through her. "Is that what you want?" he asked, leaning forward so that his words brushed across her skin.

Lily shivered violently and took the glass, placing it to her lips. She swallowed and the wine burned down her throat. Warmth immediately spread across her chest.

The black man laughed. "You really know how to talk to a lady, James."

"James" hadn't taken his eyes off of Lily. She could tell because they seemed to burn into her. She took another big drink of the wine and resigned herself to her fate. In a few minutes, she'd managed to knock back nearly all of the glass and warmth and numbness were spreading like an analgesic fire through her middle. She felt its fingers slide inexorably lower, inching their way toward a growing moistness between her legs. Wine always did that to her. It was another reason she hadn't wanted to drink it.

When she felt it take full effect, she couldn't help the very soft moan that escaped her lips. She let her head drop back against the leather seat and ran her hands across her stomach to her legs. There, her fingers clutched at her dress as she pressed her legs tightly together.

"Shit," the black man said. "Get us there quick, Isaac." His voice had grown strangely husky and animalistic. "I don't want to die today."

Lily barely noticed his discomfort, and what she did notice, she didn't care about. She was too high. She let her head roll slightly to the side, where he cheek pressed against James's shoulder.

She blinked slowly. "Sorry," she said, looking up at him. But she didn't try to move.

He smiled. "It's no problem, sweetheart. I don't mind."

All inhibition went flying out the window when she then asked, in a soft, conversational tone, "How old are you, James?"

His smile broadened. "How old do I look?" His molten gray eyes flashed and shimmered.

"You look about forty. Maybe forty-five. But you're a werewolf." She blinked again and bit her lip. His gaze flicked down and then back to her eyes. "So, you're a lot older than that. Right?" Her speech was slowing, growing encumbered.

"I'm one hundred and twenty-eight years old," he told her softly.

"Wow," she said, and closed her eyes against a wave of intoxicated pleasure. When she re-opened them, she saw a muscle tick along James's jaw. "You have, like, a whole century on me." She laughed then, as this seemed very funny for some reason. And then she became all seriousness. "Do you have a mate, James?"

James waited several long, quiet moments before answering. Then he inclined his head once. "She died in 1956, in a fire."

Sadness swept over Lily. She suddenly imagined herself standing outside of a burning building, everything she had ever loved stuck inside, dying while she could do nothing to save it. It hurt. She'd always been too empathic. Too sensitive to other people's pain. And now was no different, despite the fact that the people were werewolves and that she was utterly sloshed.

"I'm... I'm so sorry." She told him, gently placing her hand to his cheek. His eyes widened almost imperceptibly. Something curious flashed in the depths of his silver gaze – there one second, and gone in the next.

Lily moaned again and let her arm drop. She writhed in the seat, the heat and moisture between her legs becoming uncomfortably demanding.

"I think you gave her too much, Thomas," Isaac called back from the front seat. "She's blitzed. Was that really the plan?"

Thomas, who was obviously the black man, seemed to consider her for a moment and then he sighed. "You might be right. It's hard for me to judge these kinds of things."

"That's because you weigh as much as an elephant, dude," Isaac replied. "She's a slip of a thing. And she's not a werewolf. And she's just been marked. She's weak."

She's going to cum and pass out before we even get there."

"We need to bring her back a bit," James said, his tone still low, his voice soft.

"We can't," Thomas said, "We can't kiss her, can we? Like he said, she's got Kane's mark on her." He gestured to the blue symbol on Lily's arm.

"We can give her some blood," James said.

The werewolves fell silent then and Lily licked her lips, closing her eyes against a wave of dizziness that bordered on uncomfortable.

"All right," Thomas said slowly. "You do it, James. She seems to like you."

Lily listened to the discussion with a sensation of being once-removed. As if she were watching a movie. And so, as she would ask a television, she asked, "Won't that turn her into a vampire?"

At this, Isaac and Thomas chuckled. James smiled and shook his head, his fangs having grown a little more since the last time he'd smiled. "No, sweetheart. No vampires here. Only wolves. And again, no. You won't turn."

She nodded, as if that made total sense, and then distractedly ran her hand over her thigh and between her leg. Both of the men in the back seat stilled, their eyes locked on her roaming fingers.

Lily moaned again. She was so warm... so wet. She wanted... *something*. She *needed* something. The mark on her arm tingled. She remembered the hand cuffs. The kiss.

Isaac cleared his throat. "Better do it soon, gentlemen. Before one of you goes off the deep end." He shook his head as a light turned green and he turned another corner. "We're almost there. Cole wants her docile, not comatose."

James sat up and shrugged his sports coat off once more. Then he raised his wrist to his lips and sank his fangs into the vein. At the same time, Thomas placed his left hand behind Lily's head to hold her still.

Lily frowned, wondering what was happening. And then James was placing his wrist to her mouth. "Drink," he told her.

She hesitated, but he leaned in and placed his lips to her ear. "Drink, Lily."

She opened her mouth then, and ran her tongue over the welling blood. It burned her tongue like 180 proof alcohol and she tried to jerk away. But Thomas held her fast and James pressed harder. In response, Lily instinctively swallowed, feeling as though if she didn't she wouldn't be able to breathe. The blood slid down her throat like fire, and she gasped. James removed his wrist after a single swallow. His wound immediately began to close.

Lily watched him move away and then she closed her eyes. Changes coursed through her. She felt as if she'd been flying and was now nearing the Earth once more. Her feet would touch down any second. The wine's influence within her began to recede like a tide and the ache between her legs lessened. But it didn't go away completely. She still felt weak, still groggy and heavy and incapable of quick thinking.

She still craved Daniel Kane.

But she could sense that she was, at least, more coherent. And, in a few seconds, the burning from the werewolf blood ebbed away as well. She swallowed

and tried to clear her throat.

"That's better," Thomas said, smiling a satisfied smile. "That's perfect."

"And just in time," Isaac said, as a garage door began to slide up in front of him and he pulled the sedan into the darkness beyond.

James said nothing. His mercurial gaze shimmered like melted platinum. In silence, he pulled on his sports coat.

Lily turned to look out the window and when the car stopped, both Thomas and James opened their doors and stepped out. A few seconds later, Isaac did the same.

Lily stayed where she was.

Now that she was here – now that she was seconds away from meeting Malcolm Cole – terror once more bloomed inside her. And the wine didn't help matters. It effectively sapped away what strength that terror would have given her, leaving her simply scared and stupidly helpless.

Which is how I would have been anyway, she thought. He's a werewolf, after all. And he's surrounded by other werewolves and I'm a puny human and he has my best friend. I'm so screwed.

"Please step out of the car, Miss St. Claire," Thomas said. Lily looked up. All three werewolves had gathered to stand by the door on her left. James offered her his hand. With a shaky breath, Lily took it.

Chapter Eight: The Shield

"We've got her, Chief!"

Daniel spun around and strode to the screen where the seated man before it had been working furiously. "They took Highway ten to the East Bank and the signal stopped at..." The man at the computer zoomed in on the screen until the street names were visible. "South River Road and Bird Heights Avenue."

Daniel straightened and called several officers with him.

Half an hour earlier, traffic patrol around the city had managed to mark Lily's speedy progress through town as she'd fled his house. There had been reports coming in from all along Bluebonnet, seemingly all at once, about her rapidly changing location – and the laws she was breaking on her journey. Her speed and determination and frank disregard of the most basic safety measures told Daniel that she wasn't running from him. She wasn't that stupid. If she had a bone to pick with him; if she was rightly upset with him for marking her without her permission, then she would have waited and confronted him when he'd returned.

This was different. Several officers had claimed that she'd driven on the shoulder, didn't stop at traffic lights, and didn't care whether she passed marked police cars. If she'd been running from Daniel, she would most certainly have veered away from anything having to do with the police. She would have tried to attract as little attention as possible from the law. His police force were his eyes and ears and they stretched across the city with long arms.

No. Lily hadn't been thinking about him. Her mind was on something else.

And Daniel had pretty much known what it was.

After all, Tabitha hadn't answered her phone. Even as he'd driven to his home to confirm his fears, he would have been willing to bet a thousand bucks and his soul that Malcolm Cole had gotten to Lily and given her an ultimatum – and that it involved threatening Tabitha's life.

He'd been right of course, and in the space of thirty minutes, everything that Daniel held dear in the world had fallen into the hands of the man he hated most.

A few minutes after Daniel had made it to his house, the boys had located his bike on the shoulder of the intersection on the south end of Bluebonnet and Hillmont Avenue. It was amazing luck that the bike was still there, actually; it was a relatively new part of town and the traffic wasn't as heavy.

But the key – and Lily – were both gone.

Now, as he left the station, flanked by several accompanying officers, he'd never been more grateful that he'd had a tracking device installed in the key in case of theft.

He was worlds more grateful that Lily had taken it with her.

* * * *

Lily uncurled her long legs and stepped out of the silver sedan. Her movements felt uncoordinated and she had to concentrate very hard to remain steady. She knew it was the wine. She was so angry to be losing this way. She hated feeling helpless; it was eating her up inside and, at the same time, the tragedy of it was that the wine – and the mark on her arm – were blunting her emotions, causing her ire to flag.

Daniel had done something to her when he'd given her his mark. He may have meant to protect her or claim her or whatever it was that his male ego had decided was the caveman thing to do. But he'd done something else to her as well. He had inadvertently made her submissive. She could sense that it was a temporary weakness and yet, the timing could not have been more horrible. Cole must have somehow known about the mark. He seemed to know everything. He'd made her drink the wine to reinforce the mark's sedating effects. She was walking right into his well-laid trap like some brainless bombshell in a B horror movie who, for some reason, just *has* to go and check out that strange noise all by herself. In the forest. In her nightie.

Lily was not the submissive type. She'd been known to stand up to drunk, potbellied men who were waving kitchen knives and swearing about under-cooked pot roast. She'd taken down a wiry sixteen-year-old football player on meth who was violently swinging a baseball bat at her. *This* wasn't like her. Not at all. And it was infuriating. Or it would have been, had she had the *energy* to be infuriated.

As it was however, when she straightened in the car's doorway, she swayed ever so slightly, and James released her hand so that he could gently take her by her upper arms and steady her.

"I can't do this," she said. It just came out. She couldn't help it. Her knees were feeling weak. She was terrified.

James knelt to speak to her, placing his lips near her ear as if to have a private word. It was a pointless gesture, as the werewolves in the garage could have heard a whisper several houses down. He did it for her benefit and her benefit alone.

"I understand your fear, Lily," he spoke softly. His hands on her arms were warm, his grip secure. "Mr. Cole isn't going to harm you. You are the last person on Earth that he would see hurt."

"What about Tabitha?" Lily asked.

To that, James had no answer. He straightened and gave her another few seconds to compose herself before he gently urged her forward. He kept a steady hold on her so that she wouldn't trip or fall as he guided her up the set of stairs that led out of the dim garage. And also, Lily suspected, so that she wouldn't try to run.

At the top, they opened a door and ushered her through it.

They walked through a kitchen and then stepped out into a vast living room. It was devoid of furniture but for a single wooden chair. In the chair sat Tabitha. She had been bound with rope and gagged with a commercial leather gag. Her red cheeks were painted with tears. There were two other people in the room, one to either side of her chair.

A red-haired woman with an impossibly dark tan who looked to be in her late fifties stood to Tabitha's right.

Malcolm Cole stood to Tabitha's left.

Lily would have known him anywhere and in a heartbeat. She'd seen this man in her dreams countless times, and each time he'd looked exactly as he did now. He

was tall and well-built, with a thick head of dark brown hair. He was even dressed as he dressed in her dreams: tight blue jeans that hugged the muscles of his legs, and a long-sleeved white thermal shirt that had been shoved up on his arms to expose the leather bands around his wrists. He was exactly the same. It was staggering to suddenly be presented with a phantom from her imagination who was anything *but* a phantom. But what made her breath literally hitch in her chest and her heart plummet into her belly were his eyes.

Those impossible, stark green eyes...

When they found Lily's and locked on, she froze suddenly in place. She was simply unable to move any further. Those green eyes gazed out from a face so handsome that it was maddening. It was the kind of handsome that made women dig their fingernails into their palms and kick off all of their covers at night. A sleep-depriving kind of handsome.

She could barely stand to look at him.

Yet, he would not allow her to look away. The jade of his eyes darkened to a deep emerald and Cole's pupils expanded hungrily. "Lily," he spoke softly. One word and his deep voice reached out across the space between them and wrapped mercilessly around her. It was almost a physical thing, and Lily instantly knew that it wasn't natural. Daniel's voice had always been incredibly sexy; it sent shivers down Lily's spine and warmed her belly. But Cole's held very real, very potent power. She guessed it was yet another werewolf ability that he possessed and that other werewolves did not. Tabitha hadn't mentioned it, but she may not have known. She was right about one thing, however. Malcolm Cole was truly powerful.

With that thought, Lily summoned up a great deal of her own power from God only knew where and willfully ripped her gaze from Cole's. It almost hurt. She partly did it out of stubbornness and partly out of anger that he'd managed to pull her this far into his spider's web. But she also did it so that she could look at her friend once more.

Tabitha was watching her with very wide eyes; fear practically radiating from her. But there was pride in those eyes as well.

Lily clenched her teeth and pushed air through her vocal chords. "Did you hurt her?" she asked, her voice tight.

Cole's low laughter licked out and caressed her skin. All tension instantly fled Lily's body as he invaded her with that laugh and her eyes closed of their own volition.

When his laughter finally died and she opened her eyes again, Cole had closed the distance between them and was towering over her, smiling a very beautiful, very evil fang-filled smile.

She gasped and tried to take a step back, but his right hand snaked out like quicksilver and grasped her left wrist, staying her. She was struck mute, unable to do anything but gaze up at him. His pupils had claimed more of the green in his eyes. Just as she had done when Daniel had cuffed her to his bed, she stared up at her captor and wondered at his beauty. *He's so gorgeous... it isn't fair.*

"We will forego pretense, Lily," Cole said. "As you wish."

Oh, he was really getting to her now. It was all overwhelming her – the mark, the wine, Malcolm's presence, his hand wrapped so securely around her wrist – and his voice. She wasn't sure how much longer she could hold out before she just begged the man to strip off her clothes and take her right there on the living room rug.

No! She screamed at herself. *Don't you dare give in, Lily! You. Do. Not. Give. In!*

Lily suppressed the wayward moan that had been inching up her throat and instead, forced her gaze to narrow. Ever so slightly. It was enough that Malcolm Cole was impressed. His smile turned genuine, reaching the corners of his eyes, and he shook his head in wonder. "Never have I met your equal. Your strength is palpable, Lily."

Really? Lily thought frantically. *Because, right about now, I'd love to be both killing you and screwing you and all I can really concentrate on is the latter, so I wouldn't call that strong.* She said none of this, of course. Because he stole what was left of her breath when he raised his left hand and it brushed across her collarbone as he picked up a lock of her golden hair to rub it adoringly between his thumb and forefinger.

The mark on her right arm began to tingle uncomfortably.

"You know why you're here," Cole said. "You know what I want from you." He glanced at the hair he held. His searing gaze slid to her shoulder... her neck... to the slight swell of her breasts above the neckline of her dress. It flicked to her full lips and then once more captured her eyes. "I can hear your heartbeat, Lily," he told her softly – so softly. "I can smell your desire. You can't hide it from me."

Heat was coursing up her right arm. It was coming from Daniel's mark, as if to protest the way she was feeling toward Malcolm Cole. It was growing hotter and hotter, a steadily building pain that attempted to distract her from the lust that Cole was imposing upon her. But it was failing.

"You're hurting, Lily," he told her. He smiled a small smile, cocking his head slightly to one side. He knew what was happening to her. "I can take the pain away." Malcolm reached down, sliding his left hand along her right arm until he held her right wrist. He lifted her arm, and his fingers lazily grazed over the mark on the inside, sending jolts of both pleasure, from him – and pain, from the mark – through her. She bucked a little in his grip, but he was so close that she only managed to momentarily press herself against him. "But not as long as you wear this," he told her in that perfect British accent.

Lily whimpered softly; her arm was now on fire. And she couldn't even pull away from Cole enough to cradle it.

"I am told that all I need from you is your consent, Lily. And I can remove it." He slowly released her wrist and slid his hand back up the outside of her arm until it lightly grazed her shoulder, sending electric waves of unnatural pleasure through Lily.

Daniel's mark throbbed. She wanted it to stop. She ached for Cole; she was wet with need. Her mind was growing fuzzier. All she could hear was Malcolm's voice and

she just wanted the pain and longing to end.

Cole slid his hand to her neck and wrapped his fingers around it, lightly tilting her head up so that his lips whispered across hers. "Tell me, luv," he smoothly commanded, his words sending another jolt of pleasure through her. She shuddered, fighting a losing battle as he brought his hand to her face to tenderly cup her cheek in his palm. Then he leaned forward and, as he brushed his thumb across her jaw line, he drew her very close and placed his lips to her ear. "May I remove it, Lily?"

Uncompromising need swept through Lily. It was harsh and exacting and knocked her senseless. His voice had her like a vice; his breath on her ear like kerosene on the fire that was engulfing her. It was unbearable. She was unaware that her right hand had found his hard, trim waist and was fisting in his shirt. She was unaware that her ragged breaths filled the silence in the room. Her eyes were closed, so she didn't see how Cole watched her, willing her to surrender as he poured wave after wave of his power over her.

She opened her mouth and could not prevent the sound that came out of it. "Yes," she whispered. "*Please*."

At once, Malcolm's grip on her wrist tightened.

The sound of someone screaming into a gag sliced through Lily's world. Her eyes flew open only to be instantly claimed by Malcolm's once more. This time, his were all-pupil, that eerie, unnatural black of the predator before it takes its prey.

Where erotic pleasure had resided, fluxing through her body only moments before, fear now clamored its way back up from the recesses of her mind and gained a strong foothold. She tried to pull away. Malcolm smiled, showing her his fangs once more. "Allow me introduce you to someone, luv," he told her. His voice had changed, becoming more like a growl, as Daniel's had done in his bedroom.

The pain in her arm was receding now, but so was her desire. Her mind was clearing and she knew that Cole was reigning in his power, sparing her from its effects now that he had what he needed. He had her permission to remove Daniel's mark.

So that he could make her his own.

With that thought came the surge of strength that Lily had been yearning for. She jerked frantically in his hold, yanking at her arm as hard as she could, but Cole's grip was fast and she only managed to bruise herself in her efforts. Even as she fought against him, Malcolm calmly led her toward the center of the room, where Tabitha sat tied to the chair, now sobbing into her gag once more. The red-haired woman stood beside her, a horrible smirk on her over-tanned, slightly orange face.

"Lily, this is Eva," Malcolm told her, his tone conversational. "She is going to remove Kane's mark for us."

With that, he nodded toward the older woman and she straightened as if prepared to take charge. "Hold her down," she instructed. "This is going to hurt her, and I need uninterrupted access to the mark."

Malcolm immediately nodded toward Thomas, who came forward to help. James and Isaac still stood where they'd stopped as they'd entered the living room, their

eyes silently taking everything in.

Lily's heart slammed hard against her rib cage. Despair washed over her. *Oh God, no!* she thought. *What have I done? No, no, no, no....*

In a matter of short seconds, the two werewolves had her on her back in the center of the carpet, her arms and legs spread eagled. Thomas held her legs. Malcolm pressed each of her wrists into the rug. His eyes bored into hers. But she managed to look away. Dread was fueling her now and the one she dreaded had long red hair and baked skin.

"What are you going to do?" Lily asked her, dangerously close to hysterics.

"It's a complicated spell, I'm afraid," Eva told her as she went about placing candles around them on the carpet. "But lucky for us, I anticipated your consent and started it before you got here." The candles were a strange red-brown-black color and when the woman lit them, they smelled truly terrible.

It's blood, Lily thought. *I know it is.*

"Yes," Eva told her, a malicious delight lacing her words. "It *is* blood. Smells enticing, doesn't it?"

Lily watched with horror as the candles began to melt at the top and rivulets of thick red liquid dropped down the sides to pool on the white-beige carpet, staining it crimson.

And then Eva was kneeling beside Lily's prone form, her hands extended, palms down, over the blue line that marked Lily's arm and shimmered hopelessly in the candle light.

Thunder rolled outside. The sun was setting and a storm was coming in its wake.

Tabitha began to struggle where she was tied in her chair. Lily's eyes found hers and they locked on to one another in shared desperation. Lily had nothing left to bargain with; she realized that now. Once the mark was gone, Malcolm would simply claim her. There was nothing she would be able to do to stop it. It would probably be violent and Lily would never again know a moment of peace.

But what hurt even more was the knowledge that, with her consent, she'd given away any hope she had of bartering for Tabitha's freedom. She had no guarantee that he would let her go. In fact, why would he?

He was a killer. And he wouldn't want the werewolves interfering with whatever plans he had for her new future. He would kill Tabitha. And then he would find a way to kill Daniel too.

As if he could sense what she was thinking, Malcolm squeezed her wrists tighter, painfully, purposefully drawing her attention back up to him. He captured her gaze and held it; his dark look was a promise.

Lily sobbed.

Eva began to chant. They were words that Lily did not recognize.

Daniel's mark began to glow. Lily's eyes widened. She gazed at it, fascinated, until it began to sting. And then that stinging became a sharp, slicing pain – and that pain laced up her arm and across her chest, ripping a piercing cry from her throat.

She arched against the sudden torture and Thomas and Malcolm re-enforced their grips.

Eva continued to chant her horrible magic and another scream emanated from Lily's throat. It did nothing to alleviate the pain. Another scream – another racing agony – another roaring roll of thunder from outside that drew closer with each evil second.

Eva's chant ended, but she continued to hold her hands palms down over Lily's mark and the magic continued to work as the sickening smoke from the candles rose in red-black wisps and seemed to swirl into strange shapes before it dissipated entirely.

In the back of her mind, Lily became aware of a second rumbling sound. It wasn't the thunder. It was closer.

It's Cole, she thought, just before another wave of agony ripped another harsh cry from her throat. She looked up as she screamed and found Malcolm was no longer watching her. He was pinning Eva with his deadly gaze. His low warning growl echoed off of the walls of the house. He bared his teeth and hissed, "If she screams again, woman, you will be screaming along with her."

"Didn't I tell you that it would be painful?" Eva returned defensively. "It can't be helped!"

And then, suddenly, Eva froze and her head snapped up. "No," she said, anger etching the lines of her face into a mask of contempt. "Not now!"

The pain in Lily's body then began to recede. Her screams weakened and died in her throat, leaving her drained.

Malcolm's head snapped up and he snarled, a second, angrier growl escaping his throat and reverberating throughout the room. He looked to Thomas, whose fangs were prominent and whose eyes had gone black. And then they both turned to Isaac and James, who were also in supernatural fight mode.

Lily watched them with the dawning interest that can only come when a person is not in horrid pain. That agony that had gripped her in taloned hands was now ebbing from her chest and retreating back down her arm to pool once more around the intricate blue line that shimmered on her forearm.

"The spell is broken," Eva hissed, all disappointment. "He is near."

Malcolm let out an entirely inhuman bellow of animalistic rage and stood, dragging Lily up with him. Lightning flashed and thunder crashed, almost simultaneously. Thomas stood once more and watched his boss, ready to spring into action.

Lily was stunned at the sudden change and could not make heads nor tails of what was transpiring. But Tabitha had stopped sobbing, and there was a weird buzz in the air. Maybe it was the storm. Maybe it was something else....

Suddenly, Lily felt a familiar warmth wash over her. The mark on her arm tingled. Comfort spread through her. It was like being covered in fleece on a cold day. Like a rain shower on a scorching summer afternoon.

"It's Daniel," she found herself whispering. The corners of her mouth had turned

up into a very soft smile. Malcolm noted the smile with a look of pure darkness and Lily was almost sorry that she'd let it slip.

He pulled her to him, bending to lift her into his arms. Those arms were bands of steel around her slim form, holding her fast as he suddenly blurred into motion and Lily was struck with the vertigo that comes with moving too fast without warning.

She cried out as somewhere behind her, in the blur that had been the living room – and even the house – there was a crashing sound.

She heard shouts and fighting, gun shots, breaking glass. Lightning and thunder. But the sounds faded quickly. Rain pelted her painfully and the world spun faster and faster. She was forced to tuck her head into Malcolm's chest as he continued to move them both impossibly fast through the blurring, changing world. She had no idea where they were going. But as she waited to find out, she found herself crying, staining his shirt wet beneath her cheek.

Some of the tears were tears of fear – for her and for Daniel. Some of them were of relief – for Tabitha. And just one of the tears was for hope: For the mark that still remained stubbornly on her arm.

Chapter Nine: Take Down

James Valentine watched the scene unfolding before him with a growing sense of disquiet. He could not show this unease, of course. But it was there. He wouldn't have been able to mark the point in time that spiked this unrest within him. Whether it was Lily's useless struggle as Cole shamelessly exploited her weakness and poured wave after wave of his power over her, or her palpable regret and despair when she'd given in – or the screams of agony that issued from her throat as Eva Black's spell had coursed through her veins – somewhere and for some reason along the way, Valentine's fangs had elongated once more. His eyes had darkened. He barely suppressed the low, rumbling growl that had threatened its way up his throat.

Lily screamed again and, in a display that took James a little by surprise, Malcolm Cole threatened the witch. James was impressed by this show of compassion toward the Dormant. Impressed – but not surprised. Lily St. Claire was a very precious woman. The witch's fear of Cole was instantly detectable, a stench that rode even over the putrid reek of her bloody candles.

But when the red-haired woman insisted that it couldn't be helped, Valentine's right hand had balled into a fist. He hated this. He knew it then, in that instant. He hated seeing Lily suffer. And he didn't even know her.

And then something potent and unseen had sliced through the air; a scent and a strange buzzing. It claimed the instant attention of every werewolf in the room.

"No!" the witch hissed. "Not now!"

Cole's head snapped up and his gaze slid across the darkened windows of the living room. A storm raged beyond, lightning strikes illuminating the surrounding yard like flash photography.

James had slid into fight mode. He felt the flash coming on – that brief rip in reality that surrounded a werewolf's body as he transformed from man to beast. When the need was great, the flash of change was something that could barely be

kept at bay by the most experienced of werewolves. He was a very old werewolf and was only managing to withstand it.

He could sense them out there. He could smell them – even hear them now. Their breathing – their heartbeats.

Kane had come for his mate. And he'd brought his pack.

"The spell is broken. He is here."

Malcolm Cole roared with rage and stood, jerking Lily St. Claire to him as he did so.

Then the world dissolved into melted paints of chaos. Cole lifted Lily into his arms and blurred through one of the windows, shattering it as he disappeared. He was the only werewolf Valentine had ever known who could move so fast.

Isaac growled beside James and Valentine turned in time to see the teenage werewolf surrounded by a brief aura of white light that radiated outward and then collapsed within a split second. When it was gone, Isaac's human form was gone as well. In its stead stood a large light brown wolf with gray eyes. It bared its teeth, its hackles raised.

Thomas went next, flashing into a giant dark brown wolf with amber eyes.

As the front door to the house crashed open, along with two more of the living room windows, James allowed himself to transform as well. One moment, he was a tall man in black clothing – the next, a huge black wolf with molten mercury eyes.

When his eyes adjusted to the change, he made a quick assessment of the situation. Thomas had already been engaged by another werewolf, and the two were embraced in a snarling blur of brown and gray fur. Isaac bolted across the living room toward a brown wolf that had just crashed through one of the windows.

Someone had sliced a claw through Tabitha's bonds and the young woman was scooting back across the carpet, hurriedly pulling off her gag and the remaining rope fragments that dangled from her arms and legs.

Eva Black had pulled a gun from her bag of vile supplies and was holding it with shaking hands, her eyes bugging to golf-ball size, ridiculously white against the leather of her face. She wasn't sure who to point it at. She waved it at Tabitha, who eyed her with a death glare. Then she waved it at the wolves. It seemed she would shoot at anyone; he could scent her reason leaving her, along with what smelled like urine.

Valentine waited. He sniffed the air. His hackles rose.

He turned in place and came face to face with a second black wolf, nearly larger than himself, with piercing blue eyes that glowed eerily in the darkness. The blue-eyed wolf bared its fangs, its low, reverberating growl so ominous that it caused the kitchen cupboards to tremble on their hinges.

James Valentine knew an alpha male when he saw one. And Daniel Kane was one of the most imposing alphas he'd ever laid eyes on. He was also one of the angriest.

James had a few precious seconds to brace for the impact before it hit, and then Kane was on top of him and the two were rolling end over end across the living room

floor. Beneath the candles the candles doused by rain and rolling bodies. Blood matted in their fur and splotted across the carpet in a growing exhibition of grisly red stains.

James fought off Kane's attack for all that he was worth, but the younger alpha practically radiated determination. James was thrown into a wall and slid to the ground, only to be set upon once again by Kane's massive blue-black form. Blow upon blow reigned down on the older wolf – a draining bite here, a slam there.

At one point, he vaguely registered the distinctive sound of a flash as someone around him transformed from wolf to human. He had no time to wonder who it was or why. Kane would not let up.

And then, as he was thrown once more against the wall, he had the fleeting realization that Kane had yet to use his claws. He had yet to even attempt to rip the older wolf's throat out, as most enemies would do. Instead, he had been knocking him violently about, banging him up, draining him – weakening him.

As Valentine slid to the ground and registered the sound and light from another transformation flash, he comprehended what Kane was doing. He wanted him alive. And the sudden strong grip around his furry neck confirmed as much.

The air was quickly choked from his lungs and James could not prevent the change that flashed him back into human form. Instantly, his hands were around Daniel's strong arm, attempting to pull the younger alpha off of him.

But Daniel Kane was immovable. His eyes were burning an intense sapphire, and with a sinking feeling, James noticed the red spark in the center of their depths.

It was the red spark that could grow into the killing flame that possessed so many werewolves these days. Werewolves that went mad without ever claiming their mates.

"Where is she?" Daniel's voice had become that of a monster's, a deep, unnatural growl that clawed at Valentine's insides.

James gazed into that blue gaze of slip-sliding madness and gritted his teeth. He thought of Lily. Of her gentle touch and the empathy he'd seen in her gold-flecked eyes. "You don't deserve her, Kane. She's too good for you," he ground out, barely managing the air he needed to speak.

In response, Daniel smiled an utterly nasty smile, flashing his blood-stained fangs. His grip tightened on James's throat. But James was an alpha too. And he had more than a shred of determination running through his own ancient blood. He narrowed his silver gaze and went on. "You have no idea how special she is and you're obviously too stupid to protect her properly."

At that, Kane pulled James away from the wall and then slammed him back into it. The wounds James had suffered were not healing; they would not heal for weeks because they'd been created by another werewolf. He'd lost blood and his lungs screamed for air. But he was angry now. Fire flashed through his mind's eye. Love and loss and pain and hate.

"Where. Is. She." The red in Kane's eyes grew, casting an ominous violet glow into his once sapphire gaze. Valentine could feel the alpha's power rolling off of him.

It was most likely something that the younger wolf had not even yet learned to master. But it was certainly potent.

James pushed against it with a wave of his own. "I saw the bruises you put on her wrists, Kane," he growled. His fangs ached to draw blood. "*You hurt her.*"

At that, Kane blinked. The red flame at the center of his pupils receded a little.

"But she doesn't deserve to spend the rest of her life with Cole," James continued. "So I'm going to help you. On one condition."

Kane's grip loosened ever so slightly. His expression reflected the warring emotions within him. James held his gaze and waited, staring the alpha down.

From behind them came the sounds of continued struggle. James had no idea who was winning or what was happening. But he smelled blood. Not just from the candles – fresh blood and lots of it. He had heard gun shots. If he had to guess, he would estimate that there were a dozen werewolves in that room at that moment and that only three of them were not members of Daniel Kane's pack.

Kane was going to win this fight; that was a given to Valentine. But he didn't care. What he cared about, at that moment, was doing what was right. It was a liberating feeling, after all of these years, to finally care about something again.

And it also kind of sucked. It was like feeling pain after being numb. Having fears once more after having nothing to lose.

He cherished it anyway. And, in turn, he cherished the woman who had given it to him.

"What do you want?" Kane finally asked, releasing the death grip he'd had on Valentine's throat. James swallowed once, painfully, and then took that breath he'd been waiting for. His lungs expanded avidly, but he kept his calm. This was not his first rodeo.

"I want Guardian rights." That was what he wanted. To protect Lily St. Claire. Saying it out loud only reinforced his desire. Guardian rights would allow him to become the equivalent of a godfather to Lily. Only, within the werewolf clans, such a right came with great power.

Kane's expression darkened once more, the fire in his eyes leaping back to life.

Valentine did not back down. "If she runs from you again, Kane, she'll know, in her blood, to come to me. And you won't be able to touch her. Guardian rights. And I'll tell you where Cole has taken her."

Kane growled menacingly. "I can smell her on you, Valentine," he hissed. "More than the others." With an angry roll of power, Kane drew back his fist and slammed it through the wall beside Valentine's head. James didn't even flinch. "*Why is that?*" Kane demanded. "*What* did you do?" There was silence behind him. Apparently, the fighting had ended.

James just smiled at Kane. "I didn't give her bruises, if that's what you're asking." He could see the thoughts spinning in the other wolf's head. Once more, the fire receded and died down, leaving Kane's gaze a glowing blue.

This one has control issues, James thought. But if he knows what's good for

him, he'll agree.

"Give him the rights, Daniel."

James pulled his gaze from Kane's to find the source of the gravelly, heavily accented voice that had just spoken. A tall man with a head of mostly gray hair came into view. His eyes were ice blue and resembled the eyes of the raven haired alpha male in front of him. James knew who he was at once. Jonathan Kane, Daniel's grandfather.

A muscle in Daniel's jaw ticked. James watched him carefully.

The older man continued, "Daniel, *mon petit-fils*, consider it. If you are afraid to give another alpha Lily's Guardian rights, then it will appear as if you expect your mate to run. Why would this be, grandson?"

Valentine's smile almost broadened with those words, but he stifled the urge. Kane's grandfather was a wise wolf. James watched his opponent with a growing sense of triumph. He knew the moment that he'd won. It was something that flashed in the younger wolf's eyes.

Kane took a slow, deep breath and let it out through his nose. "Done," he said, simply.

With that single word came a surge of power through Valentine's body. It raced through his blood like quick silver and even managed to heal a few of his wounds. He sensed Lily's existence – distantly, but solidly. He could *feel* her, like an exquisitely warm, soft presence, huddled preciously in the center of his time-jaded mind. It was a rush, but he didn't let it show. Instead, he nodded in acceptance. Just once.

"Now, where is she." Daniel demanded once more. It was no longer a question – if it ever had been. The wolf wanted to know where his mate was. And now.

"Cole has most likely taken her to his private landing strip. They'll take his jet to another landing strip in New Mexico. He has a cabin there." As if to drive the importance of the point home, he paused before adding, "It is his territory, Kane. You will not be able to cross into it."

"No, but I can."

A woman's voice. A little shaky, but laced with bravery. James recognized it, of course.

Again, he looked over Kane's shoulder. The younger wolf turned as well, now unafraid to turn his back on the older alpha. Valentine smiled at this.

"Tabitha." Kane seemed to come to his senses suddenly. He rushed forward and grabbed his younger sister by her upper arms, inspecting her with eyes that grazed her body with purposeful intent.

"I'm fine, Daniel," she insisted, pushing him off of her. "But I *am* sore – right where you just grabbed me, actually."

That was when James – and Kane – both truly noticed that she had a gun in her right hand. James sniffed the air. There was gunpowder on the rim of the barrel. He could almost smell its heat.

He turned to peer at the others in the room. Aside from Kane, his grandfather,

and one other man, the other werewolves in the pack were police officers in uniform. Some of their uniforms had sustained damage and one man had wrapped his arm in bandages. All of the men were covered in blood, and most of it was not their own.

James turned his gaze to the bodies that littered the floor. He smelled death, but not as much as he'd expected to. His gaze fell on Thomas's unmoving, human form. He narrowed in, refocusing his sight as only werewolves could. Thomas was breathing. James looked to where Isaac lay, also in human form. The boy's clothing was torn, but he, too was breathing. Both men had been laid on their side and bound with handcuffs that looked normal, but were made for werewolves.

Valentine's gaze slid from them to the last of the unmoving bodies. The red-haired witch. She was not hand cuffed. Blood coated the carpet beneath her in copious amounts.

Tabitha swallowed audibly and glanced down at the gun in her hand. Every man in the room watched her in silence. Their expressions were wary but respectful.

Finally, she spoke once more. "She won't ever hurt anyone again."

At that, her grandfather came forward and pulled her into a tender embrace. Daniel Kane placed his hand on her back.

James Valentine was duly impressed. The witch had been the one to hurt Tabitha when Cole had made his phone call to Lily St. Claire and delivered his ultimatum. Eva Black had taken delight in it, actually.

It would appear that Tabitha Kane was not one to shy away from justice when it was due to her. No matter what form it took.

"You can't go wanderin' into Cole's territory, cher," her grandfather told her. "Not again. We'll figure somethin' out."

"This is my fault," Tabitha said. Her tone was resolute. "She came here to save me. It's only fitting that I should save her."

"No way in hell," Kane told her, flatly.

Valentine's brow rose. *Definite control issues.*

Tabitha whirled on her brother. "You have no control over me, Daniel! How dare you even *pretend* to have power over me! It's not enough that you flex your muscle with my best friend, handcuffin' her to your bed and slicin' into her with a pocket knife, is it!"

The other wolves in the room grew very still. James found his fists clenching at his sides again. *So that's where the bruises came from.*

He watched the alpha wolf carefully. He was not the only one who could feel Kane's power leaking out of him. Daniel had marked his mate and yet not changed her. He hadn't finished claiming Lily St.Claire and that had stoked the flames of madness within him. He was a very dangerous man at the moment. Tabitha was playing with fire. But James had to admit he admired her spunk. And, at the moment, he would gladly have helped her rip her brother's throat out.

"I did what I had to do," Kane told her, his tone so low, his voice so soft, it was nearly a whisper. "If I hadn't marked her, she would belong to Cole right now." He took a step toward her. "And you would be dead." He paced closer.

Tabitha raised her gun.

Kane smiled at his sister, flashing fangs. "You gonna shoot me little sis?" he taunted her, waves of fury lashing out of him like flailing whips. He took one last step, closing the distance between them. He held the barrel of her gun to his chest. "Would it make you feel better?"

Tabitha's hazel gaze narrowed.

"Yes." With that, Tabitha pulled the trigger. The gun went off and Kane jerked backwards, slamming into the wall behind him. He looked down at the wound in his chest. His blood spread across his black shirt like a dark stain, joining the other stains of blood that graced it and barely showed. The advantage of black.

Then, as the wound began to heal, leaving a hole in his shirt, he looked up at his sister. Her eyes were as wide as his. James knew that she couldn't believe what she'd just done. The other men in the room knew it too.

"You *bitch!*" Kane bellowed and leapt at her. At once, both Valentine and Jonathan Kane were between him and his sister.

"Settle down, Daniel. She's hurt and she's angry," Jonathan told his grandson. "She's not thinkin' straight." He eyed Kane with a frank, serious expression. "And neither are you. I know you're hurtin' and I know you need your mate. But you won't find her like this, *mon petit-fils*. You need to man up."

Kane stared at his grandfather. And then his gaze slid to James. James waited for an attack. He tensed for it. Just in case.

But Daniel Kane surprised him by instead by taking a step back. Without looking at her, he addressed his sister. "We're even, Tabitha," he told her, his tone remarkably calm. "Can you live with that?"

After a brief pause, Tabitha let out a shaky breath. Then she shrugged and handed her gun to the nearest officer, who took it quickly. "Yeah," she said. "I guess I can live with that."

Kane nodded once.

"All right, men, load up and move out!" he ordered. The men in the room mobilized with such speed that it was obvious they were grateful for a break in the tension. They lifted and carried an unconscious Thomas and Isaac to whatever vehicles were waiting outside. James wondered how many cars there were. He had not heard sirens approach earlier; Daniel Kane had been intelligent enough to keep to a quiet attack and to involve only the members of his pack.

"You'll lead the way, Valentine," Kane ordered. It wasn't a request, but the younger alpha had enough respect to incline his head with some amount of deference. After all, the two of them would have to learn to get along. Even if it killed them.

James nodded back. Then he led Daniel and his family out of the house and into the stormy night beyond.

Chapter Ten: Interrogation Room

Lily St.Claire dreamed. She knew she was dreaming. She was a lucid dreamer, so she'd always been able to tell the difference between waking life and the world she entered when she slept.

There was a strange buzzing in the air. It was familiar to her and it filled her with a sense of anticipation. And of fear. She knew who the subject of this dream would be; she could remember the heated feel of his eyes on her skin and the backs of his fingers sending electricity through her blood. But the sensation was muted and she knew that she would be an observer in this dream and not a participant. She wasn't sure whether she should be disappointed – or relieved.

The scene before her defogged and the dreamscape backdrop came into focus.

She was standing in the mud. It was raining and an acrid stench filled the air. She looked to her right and saw barbed wire reinforced fences. She took in the scene with a growing sense of despair. Of grief. It was cold here. Unnaturally so.

Her gold-flecked eyes scanned her surroundings with the slowness that comes with debilitating melancholy. Cabins waited in the mist up ahead. Their doors were barred shut with strong wooden beams. Despondency snaked through her soul at the sight of those cabins.

Time flashed and she moved forward, a blur of grayness all around her.

She was in a cabin now. It was claustrophobic and dim. Dank, wretched stink permeated the walls and matted bunks overflowed with immobile, skeletal bodies. Lily tried to breathe and found herself barely able to do so. Overwhelming sadness filled her, along with an inescapable sense of horror.

Mercifully, time flashed by again. She was standing in an office. The walls were wood. A window had been covered with long white curtains. A Nazi Germany flag hung from a tall pole topped with an eagle. Two men were in the room. One sat in a chair, his blonde hair graying at the temples, his face marked with the lines that came with the stress of war. His mouth seemed to rest in a scowl, his eyes permanently narrowed.

The other man, Lily could only see from behind. He was tall and had dark brown hair. He carried a uniform cap in one hand. With the other, he pulled one of the curtains aside and gazed out into the grayness beyond.

The man in the chair spoke quietly to him in German. The tall man replied, also speaking German. Lily recognized the voice. How could she not? It haunted her....

He turned and those green eyes flashed in the murkiness of the office. A swastika decorated the red band around his left bicep and several pins of military achievement adorned his chest. Even though she'd known it was him, seeing him standing there, in that uniform, caused Lily's head to spin and her heart to sink.

He looked young. In his twenties, maybe. And yet, he carried himself with an older air. War did that to people.

Malcolm Cole let go of the curtain and again spoke. Perfect German. Not a hint of a British accent.

Lily experienced a brief moment of panic as she stood there, watching Cole and

this other man. She was half afraid that he would look up and see her there. A ghost in the dream works machine.

But he did not. Instead, he saluted in that horrible way that she'd seen so many Nazi soldiers salute on television – and then he put the hat on his head and strode toward the door. Lily jumped to the side, afraid he would walk right through her. He opened the door and left.

Time flashed again and Lily found herself back in a cramped cabin. The cold and claustrophobia once more assaulted her, as did the rank stench. She hugged herself, but it did no good. This was a dream cold. Nothing within the reverie could warm it.

There was a scraping sound at the door and then it swung slowly outward, allowing some small amount of faint light to enter the dusky gloom. Lily watched as Cole, tall and sinister in his uniform of death, entered the murky cabin. He stood in the doorway and scanned its grisly inhabitants with those piercing green eyes.

He seemed to zero in on the emaciated form of a woman, her age no longer discernible, her gender only obvious by the thick black curls that fanned stubbornly around her. They'd been cut at one time, it was clear, as the black locks were all the same length and fairly short. But they were distinctly feminine.

Cole strode slowly across the room toward the woman. Some of the cabin's inhabitants stirred on their insufficient cots, their eyes wide with a wary fear as they watched the officer pass them by.

He paused by the woman's bunk and bent, placing his fingers to her neck as if to feel for a pulse. At once, her eyes flew open, deep black and rimmed with red. At the same time, she reached up like lightning and grabbed Cole's wrist, holding him fast.

Cole's green eyes widened.

Lily could see a tattoo on the woman's arm. She tried to look closer. It was swollen and black and looked like a series of numbers. But her attention was drawn back to the woman's face as the prisoner began to speak in a raspy language that was not German and that Lily still did not understand.

Cole tried to interrupt the woman, speaking German to her. But she would not be hushed. She bucked in her cot, arching her back against what Lily recognized as agony, all the while holding fast to Cole's wrist as she continued to hiss ancient-sounding words through clenched teeth.

And then, quite suddenly, the woman slumped back into her make-shift bed and her black eyes fluttered shut.

Malcolm Cole gazed down at the prone woman with something like shock on his handsome features. He glanced down at his wrist. His eyes widened further. Lily continued to watch, fascinated, as he hissed in pain, clutching his wrist with his other hand. And then a second painful sound was ripped from his throat as he turned both of his arms over and gazed down at his wrists.

From this distance, Lily could see that strange markings were etching themselves into his flesh. They were red and angry and intricate. In a few seconds, they were drawn and Lily could tell that Cole was no longer in pain. He still gazed down at the marks, one on each wrist, and his expression was one of bewilderment.

"Bloody hell," he uttered, this time in that British accent that Lily recognized so well. She frowned. What in God's name was she seeing? What was going on?

And then Cole lowered his hands with a shaky breath and leaned forward, placing his fingers to the woman's neck once more. His head dropped, his green eyes closing as he straightened. "*Christ*," he whispered, to no one and to nothing. And to Lily, who then began to recede as the image faded into warmth.

Light flooded the dreamscape, ripping it to shreds. A gentle heat touched her cheek. Softness embraced her limbs. Lily slowly opened her eyes. As she did, memories came rushing back to her.

The blurred rush through the Everglades, the private jet flight, the drive to this cabin.... She'd fallen asleep somewhere along the way, too overcome with exhaustion to deal with consciousness any longer.

She was some place in New Mexico, bordering the Gila Wilderness. But she couldn't remember where, exactly. Lily sat up in the large bed and rubbed her eyes as she took in her surroundings. The bed looked to be a queen-sized bed, draped in the finest white and beige sheets and quilts. The ceiling was crossed in white wooden beams and across from her rested a large hearth, empty at the moment. Not far from the hearth was a graceful polished wood stand with fine crystal atop it, the bottles filled with what was most assuredly liquor. Goblets rested beside the decanters, ready to be filled.

The room was very well appointed, but most striking was the room-length window to Lily's right. It stretched from wall-to-wall and beneath it rested a bookcase of the same length. Book titles in several different languages graced the spines of leather bound tomes. Lily barely gave them a glance. The view past the window was breathtaking.

She shoved her covers aside to rise and found that she was not wearing a single strip of clothing. Her eyes widened. She yanked the sheet out from beneath the quilt and hurriedly wrapped it around herself. Then she glanced nervously toward the bedroom door. It was shut. She heard no sounds on the other side.

Cautiously, she made her way to the massive window.

Once there, she stood in frank admiration at the picture it presented. She estimated that she was either on the second floor of a house built on a mountain, or she was gazing out from a window on a third floor. Beyond, a wilderness of dawning green and gold stretched to the horizon. Not another rooftop could be seen anywhere and she wondered whether this was Cole's private property or whether she was looking at the national forest.

Either way, it was beautiful. It had been a while since she'd been in the southwest. Though it was still technically "south," it was worlds away from the swamps.

"I thought you might be hungry."

Lily whirled around to face him, still clutching the sheet tightly to herself. She hadn't heard him come in, and yet he stood casually leaning against the bed post, his thick-muscled arms crossed over his broad chest. Beside him, on the divan at the

foot of the bed, rested a silver tray with food and drink. He watched her with those flashing green eyes, his lips curled up into the faintest of smiles.

Lily's gaze skirted from his eyes to the wide leather bands around his wrists. She thought of her dream. With a loud swallow and a stubborn roll of her shoulders, she fixed him with a hard stare. "How old are you, Cole?"

To that, his smile kicked up a notch and one of his brows rose in admiration. He pushed away from the bed and strode to the stand against the wall where the liquor waited.

"I see the submissive effects of Kane's mark are wearing off." He unstopped one of the fine bottles and poured a bit of very red wine into one of the waiting goblets. Then he turned and slowly lifted the goblet to his lips.

Above the rim of the glass, his emerald eyes glittered, watching her carefully.

She stared back. For a few seconds. And then she had to look away. But she had to admit that he was probably right. She felt much braver, much more in control of her faculties at the moment than she had the day before. So, as she stared steadfastly at the white plush rug, she repeated her question in the form of a statement. "I would like to know how old you are." Then, after biting her lip in hesitation, she looked back up and added, "Please."

At that, Cole's smile became a grin, perfect white teeth flashing over the glass as he lowered it and placed it back on the small table. "You are stunning, did you know that?" Cole asked her as he moved away from the wall and strode slowly toward her. Lily watched him move; it was the way a predator moved – measured and deliberate and graceful. Her heartbeat sped up. She knew he could hear it and that pissed her off a little. It was like being with someone who could read her mind.

She forced herself not to retreat. It was a brave act coming from someone in nothing but a sheet.

"To answer your question, I am ninety-four years old as of last October." His accented voice soothed her nerves and woke them up at the same time.

"Did you serve in World War Two?" she asked then.

At this, he drew to a stop and cocked his head to one side, his gaze narrowing slightly. "Why do you ask, luv?"

She cleared her throat. The air was getting thick, it seemed. She glanced down at the bands on his wrists. She remembered the markings.

"Why do you wear those wrist bands?" she asked next.

Cole studied her for a long, silent moment, taking a deep breath and letting it out through his nose. Then he slowly crossed his arms over his chest once more. "You're full of questions this morning, Lily." He scrutinized her for a few more long, tense moments, and she knew his green gaze was taking in every one of her breaths, every twitch of her lips, every flick of her eyes.

Finally, he seemed to come to a decision. He uncrossed his arms and moved to the window at the opposite end of the room, keeping precious distance between them. He placed his hands above his head on the window frame and leaned on them casually, his gaze lost in the distance.

"Yes, I served in World War Two. And as to your other question," he glanced at her over his broad shoulder. "I'm filled to the brim with curiosity as to what would make you wonder about such a thing, luv." He smiled. "They're only decoration."

"Not for you," Lily insisted. She was impressed with her strength this morning. Daniel's mark had really taken the best out of her the day before. "They're something more for you, aren't they?" She trusted her dreams. As far as Daniel and Malcolm Cole were concerned, they hadn't lied to her yet.

Something distinctly dangerous flashed in Cole's eyes. His gaze darkened. He straightened and strode toward her once more, this time with purpose. He didn't stop until he stood directly before her, a hand's-breadth away.

Lily thought her heart would leap right out of her chest at that moment. Or maybe climb up out of her throat and fly away. Either way, it hammered so hard that it hurt.

"Is there something you wish to tell me, Lily? Because if there is, I suggest you spit it out." His voice was barely above a whisper, but it still wrapped around her like black magic.

She tried to breathe, tried to steady her nerves. She was getting dizzy. Yet she fought for the will to ask one more question. "Do you speak German, Cole?"

There was no change in his expression. His pupils had expanded slightly with his nearness. "Since you seem to have forgotten," he said, "*my name is Malcolm.*" Though he still spoke softly, there was more force in his words. It was blatant and tangible. She could feel it embrace her, like a velvet cloak.

She had no reply. She could no longer speak. Submissive effects or not, his nearness was simply overwhelming. She cursed herself when warmth raced across her belly and pooled between her legs. Her mind did not want to respond to this man.

But her body felt differently.

His pupils continued to expand, though his expression still remained dark. Almost angry. "Drop the sheet, Lily," he commanded.

Her eyes widened. She felt like she was a crop of ripe wheat before the reaper when she shook her head. Just a little.

"Lose it," he commanded again. "Or I will help you lose it." His pupils expanded completely, until his eyes were deep pools of endless black. It was the hungriest look Lily had ever seen. Weakness coursed through her muscles, sedating her blood. And yet, she held the sheet in her tightly trembling fingers. Stubborn to the end.

Cole's movements were slow and calculated. He raised his right hand until it hovered over her collar bone, his eyes never releasing hers. Gently, his fingers grazed the smooth skin as he brushed a long lock of golden hair from her shoulder and it dropped behind her to cascade down her back.

Lily gasped at the contact. The mark on her arm began to heat up. She remembered the pain that it could cause and she found her voice. "Please," she whispered. "Don't touch me."

Cole gazed deep into her soul, a demon cornering an angel. "Drop the sheet."

She shuddered as he then softly trailed the backs of his fingers across her chest to the swell of her breast, just above where she was clutching the sheet so tightly

around her. She moaned against the fire that now throbbed in her arm – and the need that throbbed much lower. Ashamed, she pulled her gaze from his and nodded her compliance.

He stepped back.

Lily released another shaky breath and then dropped the sheet, exposing herself to his black gaze. A chill instantly rushed through her and she hugged herself.

And then he was upon her and she was being slammed back against the wall, his hand around her throat, his lips to her ear.

She cried out on impact, but was silenced as his grip tightened, cutting off her cry. His body was pressed hard against hers and she could feel the rock-hard bulge in his jeans that forced itself so promisingly against her wetness.

Wave after wave of painful need and, from her arm, just plain pain washed over her. Tears gathered in her brown-gold eyes.

"When Kane's mark no longer stains your arm, I am going to sink my teeth into your throat and drink you in," he told her, his tone harsh and animalistic. She moaned as he spoke. The pain was becoming unbearable, as was her desire. She found herself arching against him, wanting to have sex – to fight – to do *anything* but stand there, a prisoner beneath him, and be filled to the point of madness with hurt and desire.

He growled into her ear and squeezed harder, cutting off a little more air. The lack of oxygen only heightened her sexual craving. Her nails pressed into his chest, digging deep, twisting the fabric of his shirt beneath them.

"I am going to mark you and change you and then fuck you for days – for *weeks*," he promised. "Until you beg me to stop," he continued, "until you're *bleeding*." He growled again, long and low. He moved so that his lips hovered just above hers and his words licked at her sensitive skin, hot and promising. "*And then I'll drink that blood too.*"

In all of this madness, in all of this suffering, the most painful thing for Lily St.Claire, social worker and all-around good-girl was – she liked it. She wanted this. Her mind rebelled at the truth, but there it was. She *wanted* him to hurt her. She wanted the anger, the violence.

She realized, in that strangely lucid moment, that there was a great big, chasm-like difference between the violence of an overweight, pot-bellied man who beat his wife – and the violence that came when a man wanted a woman, and a woman wanted a man and that need filled them both with a harsh, relentless fire.

Malcolm Cole's fire was roaring at that moment. She could feel it in his sizzling touch. She could feel it riding his waves of wolfen power. She could hear it in his voice – and see it in his eyes.

She was trapped in that gaze. And there really *was* fire there. Small red flames of it, coming to life in the centers of his ebony pupils. She was mesmerized by it.

Malcolm stared back at her, his breathing harsh, his body trembling with a need that she somehow knew was worlds worse than her own. And then, in a protracted

and painful act that resembled peeling duct tape off of an open wound, he began to move away from her. An inch. Then two.

His grip on her throat lessened. Air flooded her lungs, making her dizzy. She closed her eyes. He stepped back slowly, removing his body from hers. Eventually she felt his hand leave her neck and she opened her eyes. He stood a foot away from her, gazing down at her through eyes that remained ominously black.

With the safety of this small distance came a regained strength for Lily. She fought to repossess some semblance of her sanity. Her body felt as if it were on fire, her right arm, literally. She glanced down at it to see the blue mark glowing angrily. She had to get Cole out of her head.

I have to get him out of my head!

She looked back up at him and forced the most repulsive, unattractive thought through her mind that she could muster. *He was a Nazi*, she told herself. **A Nazi!**

She wasn't actually certain, deep down, if that was true. He was British. And the dream had been a thoroughly confusing one. He'd seemed to be two men at once. He'd cared enough about the woman's life to feel for her pulse. She wasn't certain about Cole at all.

But, the thought of Nazis, in general, was sobering enough that it managed to do the trick. Her hunger and need receded like a waning tide, leaving her feeling cold and empty. She shivered beneath his black gaze and once more hugged herself.

Then she watched as Cole's pupils gradually dilated to normal, revealing the stark green of his irises once more. He knelt and lifted the sheet from the floor.

His handsome face an unreadable mask, he held the sheet out for her. She hesitated for only a second before roughly yanking it out of his hand and holding it in front of her body like a shield.

He answered this with a small, cynical smile. Then he turned away from her, strode to the liquor table and, ignoring the wine he'd previously poured for himself, he snatched up one of the bottles containing brown liquor and uncorked it, placing the entire bottle to his lips.

Lily watched as he drank the liquid down, barely flinching against what had to be some very strong alcohol. She wrapped the sheet more tightly around her and decided that if she was going to get any answers out of Malcolm Cole, it was now or never.

She took a deep, cleansing breath. "Where are my clothes?" she asked, putting some strength into her words.

He lowered the bottle and, without looking at her, he said, "They are being cleaned. You have others to choose from in the closet to your left."

Lily turned to look at the door on the other side of the bed. It led to a closet.

"Where is the bathroom?"

"Across the hall. That restroom is reserved for your use alone."

Lily bit her lip and swallowed, preparing herself. "What are you going to do with me?" she asked then. This was the one she really wanted an answer to. She bore Kane's mark. She couldn't be claimed by Cole, no matter what he wanted. And Lily

could sense that the witch had been left behind in Baton Rouge. So, what would he do? What *could* he do?

"Barring the use of magic, a wolf's mark remains on both a chosen mate and the wolf who marked her until one of two things happens," Cole said as he once more turned to face her. At the same time, he grabbed a second bottle from the table, this one containing a liquor that was nearly clear. He uncorked it and continued. "Either he dies and his mark disappears," he said, and then took a long swig of the alcohol. He gritted his teeth against this one; apparently it was a touch stronger. "Or *she* does, and though it doesn't really matter at that point, the mark disappears."

Lily digested this information with a growing sense of unease. "You're telling me that you're planning on killing Daniel." It wasn't a question.

"He's on his way as we speak," Cole confirmed, smiling a strange smile and taking another long pull from the bottle. When he placed it back on the table, his eyes were closed. Lily recognized that look. She knew the alcohol was burning its way through him. She wondered how much of an effect it would have on him. If she'd downed that much hard liquor, she would most certainly die of alcohol poisoning.

But a werewolf? What did it take for one to get drunk?

When Cole opened his eyes once more, they were so green, they were nearly glowing like traffic lights. He pushed away from the table and strode toward the door. "Don't try to leave the cabin, Lily," he told her without looking at her. He reached for the door knob and swung the door open. "It wouldn't be worth it to you, luv. So...." He paused, as if considering something. Then, still not looking at her, he finished with, "Just don't."

Then he left the room and closed the door behind him.

Lily gave it a few seconds and then went to the door and listened. It was silent beyond. She pressed her back to the cool, painted wood and tried to straighten out her thoughts. If what Cole said was true, then Daniel was most likely walking – or running – into a well-laid trap. She had to warn him. She had to stop him.

No matter what Cole threatened, Lily had to get out of that house.

She shivered; an aftereffect of the endorphins that had flooded her system with Cole's physical contact. She needed a shower. She was wet and sweat had broken out along her brow line and the stubborn part of her wanted to scrub Malcolm Cole off of her skin – scour him out of her head. She also wanted to masturbate about a hundred times, until she could no longer climax and could not possibly succumb to his malicious waves of sexual power *ever* again.

She slid along the door, sinking until her bottom was on the floor, and closed her eyes. *What can I do?* She had nothing. No phone. No computer. And she was almost certain that she wouldn't find them accessible to her in this house.

But she still had herself. And she still wore Daniel's mark.

With that thought, she sighed and stood again. She didn't necessarily want to waste any time, but the truth was, she was uncomfortable. She decided to take a quick shower to rinse off. It would give her time to come up with a plan.

She went to the closet door and flung it open to reveal a massive walk-in closet, filled to the brim with clothes of every fashion and color. She let her sheet drop and stood there for a moment, registering what she was seeing. It sort of shocked her. Especially when she finally moved forward and pulled down the two dresses nearest to her. They were both in her size. They were highly expensive brands. She blinked a few times and then shoved her surprise aside. So, he'd prepared for her. Of course he had. He had preparation down to an art. Which was another reason she needed to warn Daniel.

She dropped the dresses and at once began to search for jeans.

She found a pair of Lucky's and threw them over her arm and then began looking for underwear. After a few minutes of fruitless searching, she realized that there wasn't any. With a narrowed gaze and a few muttered derogatory words about men in general, Lily proceeded to hunt down a T-shirt. She found a dark gray one with the HIM symbol on the front and added it to the jeans. She didn't bother with a bra, because there weren't any of those either.

Then she looked at the assortment of available shoes. She shook her head in wonderment. What Cole had here, in this closet, would take every one of her paychecks for about a year. But the heels were out of the question. As were the sandals.

Finally, she located what she really wanted and she couldn't help but wonder what had made the man add the boots to her collection. Whatever it was, she was grateful. She picked up the pair of boots and found a new pair of white socks.

She took her bundle to the door of her bedroom once more. And, again, she listened.

No sounds. So, she opened it tentatively. The hall beyond stretched to either side and led to several more rooms and archways. The house was immense and exquisitely designed. Under different circumstances, she'd have loved a tour.

Much different circumstances.

She stepped out into the hall and turned the knob on the door across from hers. It opened to reveal a bathroom that was roughly the same size as the guest room. She stood there in the doorway for a moment, utterly blown away. It was gorgeous. *Christ*, she could have *lived* in that bathroom. Marble as far as the eye could see. A second window that peered out over New Mexico's desert mountains. An open shower that had something like twelve different shower heads.

She took it all in. And then she shook herself and stepped in, shutting and locking the door behind her.

* * * *

Malcolm smiled to himself when he heard Lily lock the bathroom door. Did she really think that could stop him? He shook his head and ran a hand through his dark hair, turning away from the liquor cabinet that he'd just visited for the second time in the last ten minutes.

He knew it wouldn't work. Not any more. Not any of it. He was stuck with the memories, stuck with the pain.

He growled then suddenly, and swung around, shoving his fist through the wooden beam that stood beside him. When he pulled his arm back out, he smiled sardonically, glad that he'd had the house reinforced in such a way that it could withstand the beatings he so often put it through.

And then he strode to the windows, stared out over the lands and eventually, as it always did, his gaze slid to the leather bands around his wrists. So many men wore these kinds of bands these days. They were *stylish*. He laughed a mirthless laugh. They were considered *manly*.

Slowly, he unfastened the ties on one of them and let it drop to the floor. He turned his wrist over to reveal the deep, blood-red marking on the inside.

For him, the leather bands were nothing but functional. The symbols etched on his wrists were ancient. They were powerful. And they had been his punishment for the last seventy years.

How does she know? he asked himself, bewildered once more by Lily St.Claire's questions. *How could* she know? He didn't understand. He wasn't daft, though. She'd asked about the war. Asked him about his wrists. About speaking German. It didn't take a genius to tell where it had all been leading. Somehow, she knew.

He closed his eyes and ran his hand through his hair again, leaning forward to rest his forehead against the cool glass of the window. Guilt assaulted him. He felt bad for what he'd done to her upstairs. But he'd been angry – and scared. And he'd wanted her to stop asking questions. He had used his power mercilessly and shamelessly, drowning her stubborn curiosity in nothing short of mental rape.

He exhaled a shaky breath and resisted the urge to break the glass.

Then, for the ten-thousandth time in his life, Malcolm Cole ruthlessly bullied the distressing emotions inside of him until they were cornered and helpless in a darkened recess of his mind. He then slammed the door on them and straightened. He opened his eyes, emeralds flashing. He bent and picked up the leather band and secured it once more to his wrist, hiding the brand beneath it.

Then he gazed out the window once more. Daniel Kane would come. And Daniel Kane would die. And then Malcolm would take Lily St.Claire and, for the first time in far too many decades, he would know some measure of peace. Some measure of relief.

A respite.

Salvation.

Chapter Eleven: Lie Detector

Daniel Kane had chosen carefully from the members of his pack, knowing that whoever he brought along with him would most likely wind up infiltrating Cole's territory in Daniel's stead.

In one of the large leather swivel chairs sat Daniel's trusted officer and friend, Lieutenant Michael Angel. The werewolf was seasoned enough; had been around the block a few times. He knew the lay of the land, so to speak, and was loyal to the end.

Across from him sat Major Jordan Stark, a black man who had grown up in New Orleans and had gone into law enforcement in order to help clean up his hometown. When Katrina hit, Stark's eleven-year-old niece had been separated from the rest of her werewolf family. Females were as helpless as humans most of the time, and especially when they were children. The girl had been raped repeatedly in the bathroom of the Superdome.

Stark had gone on a killing rampage, hunting down her attackers and ripping them to shreds with teeth and claws. Kane, who had been in New Orleans to help in the chaos, as had every other officer he knew, found the other werewolf in the middle of one of his kills. Daniel had had to make a decision then and there: Aid the rogue werewolf in destroying the evidence, or turn him into the Clan Council. He'd gone with his gut and had helped Stark obliterate any signs that these men had ever existed. Stark had been so grateful for the help, and for Daniel's silent understanding, that he had sworn an oath into Daniel's pack. There were few men in the world that Daniel trusted more with his life than Jordan Stark.

Across the aisle in another plush leather seat, sat Detective Aiden Knight, who had been in the force with Daniel for the last ten years of his law enforcement career. Like the others, he too was unfailingly loyal, and he was an incredibly strong werewolf. One worthy of his own pack, in Daniel's opinion.

Daniel had considered bringing others. His men had all volunteered. They'd negotiated, claiming that he needed all of the backup he could get. Cole was formidable and Kane was heading into the other alpha's territory. It was banking uncomfortably close to a suicide mission.

But he didn't want them to get hurt. A few of them were very young. He needed to know that the men watching his back were fully aware of what they were doing and knew how to keep from getting themselves killed.

At the moment, the cabin's inhabitants were pensively quiet. Angel gazed out the window. Stark sat back with his hands threaded over his six-pack of a stomach, his eyes closed in inward contemplation. Knight nursed a glass of iced tea and distractedly shuffled a deck of cards with one hand. He, too, stared out the window.

Aside from his men, there was Daniel's grandfather, who moved back and forth between the cabin and the cockpit. There was Daniel's uncle, William, who was piloting. There was Tabitha, who had stubbornly refused to stay behind. And there was James Valentine.

Daniel watched Valentine with the eye of an alpha who was all too aware that he was sharing his personal space with another alpha. *Hell, I'm sharing a long more than that....*

With that thought, a muscle ticked in his jaw and his teeth clenched. Then he straightened in his own chair and swiveled it slightly to the side, placing his elbows on his knees so he could casually clasp his hands before him. Valentine looked up.

"Tell us everything you know, Valentine. We've got a few hours."

James Valentine considered this for a few seconds and then nodded, taking a deep breath and letting it out as he, too, leaned forward.

"Why and how did Cole come after Lily?" Daniel started.

James chewed on the inside of his lip and then said, "Cole didn't choose Lily by random chance." He paused, and then added, "He chose her because she dreamed about him."

Daniel's brow furrowed. As did Tabitha's.

"That's not possible," Tabitha interjected. "She dreamed of Daniel. I know because she told me about the dream in high school."

"I'm afraid it *is* possible, *mon petite fille*," Jonathan Kane stood in the archway of the private jet that led to the kitchenette and bathroom beyond. He leaned up against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest. "Elena and I have discussed this issue with the Council," he went on. "Apparently there are so few Dormants alive now, each of them are dreaming about more than one alpha."

Daniel's blood went cold. The color drained from his handsome face. His throat was suddenly very dry. "What?" he asked, his voice scarcely above a whisper.

Jonathan Kane only nodded, his expression one of concern and sympathy.

Daniel tried to speak, couldn't, and cleared his throat to try again. "Are you telling me that there's a chance..." He couldn't even say it. The possibility was too sickening.

"Basically, what it comes down to," Jonathan said quickly, as if to spare his grandson the thought that there was a chance Lily was not meant to be his after all, "is this: the alpha who wins the Dormant over first is the one meant to be her mate."

The plane's inhabitants fell silent at this statement. It was a bombshell of information that manifestly took everyone by surprise. Everyone, that is, except Valentine, who continued calmly, "Cole used the witch to locate her, based on the dreams she'd had. The rest, you know."

"Actually, there is much we don't know, *Parran*," Jonathan said, using the Cajun term for "Godfather" to address Valentine. James accepted it with quiet grace. "Why didn't he do this sooner?"

Valentine smiled. "He didn't know he could. It was the witch, Black, who filled him in."

"And how did he find *her*?" Tabitha asked, a blatant aversion causing her lip to curl at the thought of the red-haired woman.

"It's an interesting story," Valentine replied. "Black came up to him during a book signing and told him that she knew what he was looking for – and that she could help him find her. For a price." He sat back. "Apparently, the other members of her coven didn't take kindly to her going off the dark end. They were after her, and she wanted protection. She knew that he could give it. He agreed."

"I'll just bet he did," Detective Knight said, his eyes narrowed.

Valentine smiled in acknowledgement. "In exchange, she tracked Lily down."

* * * *

Malcolm watched Lily St.Claire with a heightened sense of discernment. He seemed to notice everything. Especially when she thought she was hiding something

from him. Like the way she counted the doors, studied the locks on the windows, noted how high off of the ground they were and what there might be to land on if she jumped.

As if he couldn't tell?

It amused him. He also found it enticing. There was no better way to make a predator chase you than to run from him. He enjoyed the hunt. And little Lily seemed bound and determined to make a break for it one way or another.

He almost looked forward to it.

At the moment, they sat across from one another at the dining table, and he could smell the shampoo in her hair. Lavender and chamomile. He could smell the soap on her skin; the cinnamon on her tongue as she tried so hard not to devour the iced roll in front of her like a hungry animal. He knew she must be starving. But she ate quietly and slowly, her heart hammering away inside her fragile, human rib cage. Malcolm was hungry too.

Just not for food.

None the less, he sliced into the steak in front of him with marked deliberation, enjoying the way it felt to carve through the meat. As he forked the cut piece and brought it to his lips, he caught Lily glancing up at him.

She swallowed, watching him with a growing disquiet that he could both hear and scent. And then, as he chewed, he heard her heart kick up a notch. She was readying to ask him another question. He'd grown accustomed to the pattern.

"How did you know I was a vegetarian?" she asked, gesturing to her plate, which was filled with pastries and fruits and vegetables – so much different from his, which was anything but vegetarian.

He swallowed the meat and smiled, flashing fangs. He enjoyed the rush of fear and anticipation she experienced at the sight of his teeth. He was toying with her. He couldn't help himself. "I know everything about you, Lily."

She put down her fork, her jaw setting stubbornly. "How is that?" she asked.

Adrenaline was flooding her system. It always made the blood taste so good. Cole took his sweet time in answering, slicing off another piece of the rare steak and finishing it off before he finally smiled once more.

At this point, she was almost squirming in her chair, for he had yet to take his eyes off of her. He drew out the tension, taking a slow, languid sip from his goblet of wine and setting it back on the table. "I make it my business to know what I need to know," he told her. "Consequently, luv, you won't be a vegetarian for long."

At this, she paled. He hid his smile behind another drink of wine.

"What -" She swallowed hard and tried again. He knew what she wanted to ask. He could have spared her and simply filled her in. But the game was too fun. Watching the play of emotion across her lovely face was utterly fascinating. He waited.

"What are you going to do to me? How do I... *change*?"

At the thought of turning Lily St.Claire, Malcolm's crotch tightened. His grip on the glass tightened as well and he had to force himself to put it down once more before

he shattered it between his fingers.

He knew his gaze was darkening and that his pupils were expanding when she gasped quietly and sat back in her chair, her lips parting in quick, shallow breaths.

"You've heard the wives tale about being bitten by a werewolf, no doubt?"

Malcolm finally asked.

She nodded.

"It isn't a wives tale."

Lily blinked. "Oh."

He grinned and leaned forward on his elbows. He waited for her next question, which he knew was coming right up.

"You.... You seem more like vampires than werewolves," she told him truthfully.

He could understand her confusion. After all, she had yet to see any of them change into their true forms. "Where do you think the legends come from, Lily?"

"You mean that people have been confusing werewolves for vampires all this time?" she asked.

He laughed. He loved the effect his laughter had on her. She fought hard not to close her eyes and allow it to wrap around her like a vice. Finally, he leaned back in his chair and draped his arms over the arm rests. "Werewolves love the taste of blood. It soothes us, feeds us, gives us strength." He paused, spearing her with a hard look before he added, "It turns us on." He let this last bit drip from his tongue, his accent heavily laced with desire.

Lily bit her lower lip.

He continued. "Our eyes change, our teeth change, we age slowly and we heal from nearly all wounds. Contrary to myth, we can control when and where we change into wolf form, so most of the time – we don't. You can see where the vampire fables come into play."

She seemed to mull this over, all the while watching him with that stubborn wariness. "What do you do when people start to notice that you haven't aged in thirty years?"

At this, he chuckled again. "In the year twenty-twenty, Malcolm Cole the author will be in a horrible boating accident and his body will never be found." He paused, letting the information sink in before he continued. "There is an island home in the Pacific waiting for me. I will wait until a sufficient amount of time has passed, and continue with my life elsewhere."

"Is that what all werewolves do?"

"Generally speaking." His eyes darkened and his tone lowered as he added, "It is very easy for people to die, Lily."

At that, Lily's chin raised defiantly. Something flashed in the gold of her eyes. She seemed to be thinking of something in particular. He tensed, not liking the change in her expression.

"You would know all about that, wouldn't you, Cole?" she asked then, an impressive amount of bravery supporting her words. "You would know all about death. Killing, maybe? *Murder*." He could almost hear her steeling her nerves against

him. She was on a roll now. "How many people have you killed, Cole?"

"Again, it's Malcolm," he responded, his tone deceptively calm. "And I've lost count."

Her eyes widened and her body stilled. Her breathing quieted, freezing in her lungs.

Good, he thought. It was the effect he'd hoped for. He stood then, pushing his chair back. "You seem intent on delving into my past, Lily, so allow me to save you the effort of an interrogation and simply fill you in." He moved out from behind the table and approached her side, his long legs eating up the distance between them in three easy strides. She tensed in her chair, every muscle ready to spring into escape mode, but he had to credit her with staying put. She hadn't run. Yet.

When he reached her side, he grabbed her chair and spun it around, forcing her to face him. She cried out in surprise as he placed his palms on her arm rests, caging her in, and then leaned forward, pinning her with his green gaze.

He wondered how long her little heart could keep up its frantic pace before it finally gave in from exhaustion and stopped beating all together.

"Yes, I was in the war and yes, I was a soldier in the Nazi German army. Yes, I have marks on my wrists and yes," he hissed, leaning forward a bit more. "They are a curse. And, again, yes," he continued, gripping the chair until the wood moaned beneath his inhuman strength. "I have witnessed death. More than one such as you can ever imagine."

It was a good, long while before Lily St.Claire was able to do anything but stare up at the man – the werewolf – who hovered over her. But there was something in Malcolm Cole's gaze that brought her up short. There was heat there, to be sure. And passion. And anger and lust. Plenty of lust.

But there was something else, as well. She would recognize it anywhere; she'd seen enough of it in her short career. It was pain.

And as she realized this, Lily *knew*. She *knew* that he was lying. She knew there was much more to the story than he was letting on. Oh, he was good at hiding it. Very good. He'd had enough practice.

But this knowledge gave her the will to find her voice once more. "No you weren't," she said. It was scarcely a whisper.

Green eyes blinked. Once.

"You weren't a Nazi. You were a spy. For the British." She swallowed the dry lump in her throat and let out a shaky breath. *Keep going*, she thought. *The worst he can do is kill you and he's not going to do that. Probably. At least, not right now.* "But that woman in the camp – she didn't know that, did she? And she cursed you."

She could sense Cole's stillness above her. His expression was unreadable. But shock registered in the jade of his eyes. A muscle in his jaw ticked. To her left, the arm rest of her chair began to splinter.

And then, suddenly, he was rising, releasing the chair, and taking a step back.

She watched him in fascination as his dominance seemed to waver, to falter in the face of her knowledge, in the face of his memories. In a show of habit, he ran a hand through his thick hair and she noticed that it was unsteady. He turned away from her then, releasing her from his green gaze, and paced restlessly to the windows along one wall. They were a common theme throughout this grand house, and she could see why. The view was staggering.

When he reached the window, he placed his palms against it and leaned on them, his gaze skirting out over the vastness beyond. Lily slowly rose from her chair and, just in case, she inched toward the door.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Lily," he said softly, his gaze still locked on the nothingness in the distance. His tone was different; instead of resonating with the dominance he normally wielded over her, it was instead subjugated.

She froze where she stood and waited, feeling as if she was on the brink of something very important.

"You're right," he said and sighed. "I don't know how you know, but it doesn't matter." He shook his head and she could see his fingertips go white against the glass. "I had managed to get myself stationed at Dachau...." He trailed off, lost in a memory. "I'd just arrived and the general told me to have a look around. To get acquainted." He swallowed and Lily could tell that it was a painful, dry swallow. He closed his eyes and continued. "I wanted to know how bad it was. My superiors wanted real intel. So I entered one of the cabins that would later become a brick row house. The prisoners were already starving. The stench was overwhelming. I was surrounded with faint heartbeats. And no heartbeats at all...."

Lily listened intently. As he spoke, his British accent again wrapped itself around her, but this time, not in pleasure. In sadness. She was once more standing in her dream, amidst the very suffering of which he spoke. And she couldn't look away from the scene unfolding before her.

"One pulse was particularly erratic. It concerned me. I approached the woman, recognizing her for a Roma." Cole's eyes opened at this and he pushed away from the window to turn around and pin Lily with his green gaze. "A gypsy to you Americans. She was close to death. But not close enough."

Lily cleared her throat, swallowed, and as if sensing she was going to speak, Malcolm waited.

"She grabbed your wrist and said something," Lily ventured. "In another language. What did she say?" she finished softly.

Cole leaned back against the glass, crossing his arms over his chest. "She called me a soldier of death. A bringer of death. And then she said, 'If you love death so much, may you be its eternal witness.'"

Lily and Cole were both silent then. The space between them was filled to the brim with the growing discomfort that comes with new understanding and stark realization.

"What did she mean?" She finally asked.

Cole was silent for a moment, watching Lily intently. And then he blinked and,

moving so swiftly that he literally blurred, he came to stand before her and was ripping the leather bands off of his wrists.

Lily gasped and jumped as he held them up so that she could see them. Blood-red markings of ancient, cryptic origin marred the insides of his arms. They looked painful. Ominous.

"Every time an innocent is murdered with the same cold-blooded dispassion that was shown to that Roma, *these* come to life," he told her, nodding toward the markings. She could see that his teeth were clenched, his body rigid with pent-up anger. "One moment, I am here – and the next? I'm somewhere else. Standing over a woman. A child. An entire family of murder victims. Only I'm always there too late." He took a step forward and she was forced to step back. His gaze darkened menacingly. "They're dead. And there is nothing I can do but take it all in. Every. Bloody. Detail."

Lily's breaths were coming quick now, shaky and uneven. Horror flooded her veins. Horror, for so very many reasons. "You mean... you don't..."

Malcolm smiled a nasty smile, his fangs out once more. His green eyes began to glow. "I don't kill them myself?" he asked, his tone hardening. "No," he shook his head. "Not them." He laughed a mirthless laugh, taking another step toward her. Again, she stepped back, and found herself against the door.

"At first, I tracked down the killers. It was simple. Their stench filled my lungs and they became easy prey." His smile disappeared and his pupils expanded ever so slightly. "But then.... I got used to it."

"The werewolves think that *you* killed those people, Cole," Lily managed to whisper. She had no idea where her courage was coming from. But it certainly impressed her.

Cole's smile was back and, this time, it was the hungry, sensually promising grin that she was so uncomfortably familiar with. Her belly warmed and her legs grew weak as his pupils claimed more of the green in his eyes. He leaned forward and placed his hands against the door on either side of her head, once more caging her in.

"Oh, I know," he said. "And, it's Malcolm."

Chapter Twelve: Two Men 'Em Out

Daniel swiveled in the plush leather chair. His uncle came over the intercom and gave them the notice that they would be landing. Across from him, Detective Aiden Knight was talking on the phone. Knight looked at Daniel as he spoke, "You sure about that?"

Daniel could hear the voice on the other end. "Yes, sir. No match."

"Okay, thanks Sandler." Knight hung up. He clicked his phone to his belt beside his badge and sighed. "That was forensics, in case you didn't hear the whole thing."

Daniel nodded, waiting.

"The bullets in the Mayor's body and the bodies of his family members don't match up with the weapon left at the scene, despite the fact that its chamber had been recently emptied. It had GPR all over it."

Daniel considered this for a moment in silence. The gun had been hot, recently fired. Daniel and Aiden and Lieutenant Angel had all been on the scene; they'd all smelled the gunpowder.

Aiden leaned forward, as if to speak with him in confidence. "To be honest, I'm a little confused as to why Cole would bother shooting them in the first place."

The landing gear came down as the plane centered up with the ribbon of black below them.

"You're not the only one," Daniel admitted. "And we didn't smell him there either."

Aiden shook his head. "Nope."

The gun had been a police issue fire arm. Normally, Cole's victims were sensationally murdered. His murders were the kind of thing the press was always all over. Mutilation and torture and half-eaten corpses.

This? This was strangely straight-forward. Unlike Malcolm Cole.

And if he couldn't be scented at the scene, Daniel had to admit that there as a very real possibility that the other werewolf had had nothing to do with it. Which meant that the murder had been an impossibly grand coincidence that Cole had been quick to take advantage of.

"We may have a killer lose in Baton Rouge," Knight finished, leaning back as the wheels touched down and they decelerated to a stop.

To that, Daniel had no reply.

* * * *

Malcolm Cole strode with determined speed toward the stone stairwell that would lead him down into the wine cellar. As he did, he pulled the cell phone out of his front pocket and speed dialed.

"Jake, I'm on my way out again. Keep an eye on her for me."

"No problem, boss. God speed."

Cole hung up just as the burning in his wrists was becoming unbearable. He strode to the center of the vast underground chamber and let his hands fall at his sides. He closed his eyes and tried to prepare himself. As always, he knew that no matter what he did, he wouldn't be ready. It was pointless.

He knew that when he opened his eyes again, he would be standing amidst a

lurid nightmare composed of far too much red and darkness and a smell like copper and fear.

He thought of the Roma woman and how he'd gone to Romania to try to have the curse removed – only to find himself nearly cursed again. They hadn't believed that he wasn't a soldier of death. What proof did he have?

He was condemned to this for the remainder of his life. Only the peace and contentment that came with claiming a mate would be capable of muting and dulling the ache that was there no matter how many times he wrote about it – no matter how many violent words he bled onto a page.

It was always there.

The marks flashed stop-light red, ripping a harsh cry of pain from his throat. Then he began to shimmer. He gritted his teeth against the agony.

And he was gone.

* * * *

Okay. So, she had a plan.

It was insane as hell and probably wouldn't work anyway and, frankly, she was beginning to resent Daniel Kane for ever riding back into her life and putting his damned mark on her arm and forcing her to make such a ridiculously crazy decision in the first place. But, at least she had a plan.

Of course, she was probably going to die –

Lily saw stars swimming and leaned against the wall, running a hand over her feverishly hot face. *That* was a sobering thought. *I might die.*

She straightened and blew out a shaky breath. It wasn't the desired outcome, of course, but the reality of the situation was that Lily didn't want to spend the rest of her life with Malcolm Cole. He was an incredibly sexy man. He was a tortured man. But he was also a jaded and dangerous man and no matter how green his eyes were and how seductive his voice might be, she couldn't see herself loving him. Not now. Maybe not ever. Because her heart longed for Daniel instead.

If a human female was going to defeat a male alpha werewolf, there were only so many things she could do to accomplish that feat. All of them were bat shit.

She was only fortunate enough that, over the last few days she'd reached a frame of mind that barely skirted the edges of a reality that was scarcely recognizable, and her respect for her own mortality was blunted and blurred. Otherwise, there was no way in hell she'd attempt to do what she was planning on doing.

Plus, she was getting pretty pissed off. She was pissed at Tabitha for lying to her all these years. She was pissed at herself for not having the guts to just go up to Daniel Kane in high school and ask him why he had hit on all of her friends but not her. And she was pissed at Daniel – for pulling a 180 and finally hitting on her in a completely selfish, utterly manipulative and frankly insane manner.

So, there it was. She was surrounded with madness and she wanted out.

After their truth-or-dare episode earlier in the dining room, Cole had shoved himself away from her and the door that he'd pinned her against, only to push the

door open behind her and then catch her as she fell backwards.

The brief contact had caused her arm to flash in pain, but he'd quickly set her aside and let her go. Then, with one last very strange look, he had moved through the door and down the hall, not glancing back. He'd rounded a corner, moving with swift purpose, and then he was gone. Just like that.

She had stood there, wondering at his sudden change and dumbfounded by all that he'd told her. She was utterly and completely confused about where she fit within the world of crazy-ass werewolves and their screwed up mojo.

She wasn't at all sure what to think of Malcolm Cole, the author whom she now knew got all of his ideas for his books by being unwillingly thrust into bloody murder scene after bloody murder: Malcolm Cole, the green-eyed werewolf who was cursed by a Roma gypsy in World War Two while serving as a British spy – a good guy; Cole, the man who kidnapped her best friend and tied her to a chair and held Lily down while a witch poured an agony of a spell through her burning veins; Malcolm Cole....

He had whisked her away to a cabin-castle in the middle of the New Mexico wilderness, so that he could flay her mind and body with his magic over and over again while he fully planned on killing Daniel Kane. And yet he suffered horribly himself.

He presented her with an image of him that was half dark and half light. Half villain, half victim. But the two were so tightly intertwined that they were impossible to pull apart. He'd been cursed for far too long. Lily had no intention of allowing the man to take his consequential anger out on her.

So she'd taken the opportunity that his sudden departure afforded her and she'd quickly explored his ginormous "cabin" in order to get her bearings. Make a plan.

In doing so, she realized that calling it a cabin was a tad absurd.

The mansion of wood had, at her last count, three enormous great rooms with stone and brick fire places, twelve meticulously decorated bedrooms, fourteen bathrooms with whirlpool tubs, two dining rooms, a gourmet chef's kitchen, a massive library, a plush appointed study, an in-home theater, a solarium set up with a fully stocked bar, two giant wall-mounted TV screens and a hot tub, a home gym complete with circuit trainers, and an indoor natatorium with a lap pool and a bigger hot tub with enough room for twenty.

Cole had gone to great lengths to create a home that was a virtual city within itself, and Lily had a feeling she knew why. If every other werewolf out there was certain that Cole was responsible for countless murders, there was a good chance that one day he would be holed up in his own home – his own territory – and under siege.

It was clan law and its loophole stipulations that currently kept him safe. She assumed he was quite grateful for that. But laws could be changed. And if they ever were, Cole would be prepared. Not just in terms of his home. But, in terms of his pack.

Maybe it was Daniel's mark. Or, maybe it was the fact that she'd been around

werewolves enough in the past forty-eight hours that she could now recognize one when she saw one. But, whatever it was, she could tell that the men on Cole's property were not human. She had counted eleven, all with those unnaturally stark eyes and tall, strong builds. Every one of them watched her with a wary, careful interest.

Keeping tabs.

She knew they would report back to Cole about everything she did and every place she went within the property. She could only have expected as much. But it sure as hell made things difficult for her. She'd been forced to well and truly consider the logistics of the place before she'd finally chosen the library and the solarium.

It was horribly perfect, actually. All of those books.... Thousands of them. Some of them quite old. It broke her heart, but the logical, analytical part of her brain insisted that the more there were and the older they were, the more flammable they would be.

The library was adjacent to the solarium. The large, glass-encased room was set up as a bar and entertainment area, probably for all of those werewolf-men that had been wandering the property. The liquor was all very, very strong. Everclear. Absinthe. Vodka.

She assumed she had an answer now as to what it took to get a werewolf drunk. Or even buzzed. There were copious amounts of the liquid. Perfect for what she had in mind.

It had been exceedingly difficult, as the werewolves seemed to double their guard on her the moment Malcolm Cole disappeared, but Lily managed to keep careful track of where the cameras in the halls and rooms were pointed at what times. She'd noted what the rotation schedule of Cole's men was.

With this knowledge, rough though it was, Lily spent the afternoon sneaking several large bottles of high-proof liquor through the hallway between the solarium and the library. Once they were there, she set them on the hidden side of one of the reading sofas, next to the hearth lighter she'd swiped earlier.

Now, as she stood before one of the taller, more packed bookcases, she realized that her time had just about come. She'd already "carelessly" left some of the books open atop other shelved books. *Kindling*. She had everything she needed.

Cole had disappeared and she didn't sense him anywhere near. It was strange how she just knew. But he was an incredibly powerful werewolf and his presence managed to make itself known. She was positive he wasn't on the grounds.

All she needed to do was wait for that big blonde werewolf to come in and check on her again, like clockwork....

There he is, she thought, as she pretended to be reading the book in her hands. A tall man with light blonde hair and blue eyes entered the study and leaned against the door jam with his arms crossed over his chest. *I wonder if he can smell my fear, she thought frantically. Maybe he'll just think it's more of my general fear about this entire messed-up situation.* She sighed and ran a hand through her hair as she

gazed out the window. She then pretended to hug herself as if in despair. The blonde man's expression became unreadable but for something solitary that flashed in the depths of his eyes. Then he turned in the doorway. *He's buying it*, she told herself. *And there he goes.*

He was gone. It was now or never. *Even with the cameras, it'll take them a few minutes to get in here.* There was only so fast that someone could come running around a corner without slipping and falling.

Lily dropped the book, picked up the first of the full bottles of liquor, and splashed its contents all over the book shelf, making certain to douse the books that were open and the ones laying on the table. Then she emptied another bottle. And then she poured the liquor from the last bottle, making certain to save just enough for her exit.

At once, she could hear the camera up above whirring to life as it went from left to right and zoomed in, zeroing in on her actions. They would be coming any second.

Lily pulled the trigger on the lighter and held it to the pages that stuck out along the shelves and across the table. The books went up like magic, the new, hot flames hungrily devouring its fuel as if they hadn't eaten books in far too many years.

Lily bolted from the room, taking the lighter and the half-empty bottle with her. As she fled, she poured the alcohol onto the rug in the hallway and set the lighter to it.

Then, as she began to hear shouting, she straightened and ran toward the solarium. Behind her, she could hear one of the shelves in the library go up like a roman candle. The atmosphere around her seemed to shift with the heat, both sucking in air and expanding at once.

Her adrenaline kicked up a notch as she sprinted into the solarium and slammed the wooden door shut behind her. Then she ran to one of the wooden stools, carried it to the door, and jammed it up against the door knob. It was probably pointless, as the werewolves would be loathe to cross through a hallway filled with fire anyway. But should any of them get through, the added, simple barrier would confuse them for an extra few seconds.

Already, heat and flame were licking at the door, sending their threatening tendril-like fingers of yellow and red underneath until it, too, was catching on fire.

Lily wasted no time. She ran to the stools again, chose the sturdiest looking one, and then moved around the hot tub to the glass windows of the solarium.

She slammed the stool up against the window for all she was worth.

The wooden stool splintered a little and then bounced off, uselessly landing with a splash in the nearby hot tub. Lily stared at it for a second as the slow, heavy poison of realization washed through her. The windows were bullet-proof. *Unbreakable.*

And she was trapped.

Chapter Thirteen: Cease Fire

Each of the werewolves were out of their chairs and heading for the exit before the plane even came to a complete stop. Beyond the expanse of wing outside the windows, Daniel could see that there were several waiting motorcycles lined up, along with a single black sedan with dark tinted windows.

The transportation had been James Valentine's doing. The Guardian made the call before they left the landing strip outside of Baton Rouge. Apparently, the man was a powerful werewolf to have on your side. He'd made good investments in his time and had amassed his own none-too-small fortune. Plus, lest Daniel forget this extra important fact, James Valentine was an alpha. He had his own pack and they were as eager to do his bidding as Kane's was for him.

Why Valentine was working for Malcolm Cole was beyond Daniel, but he was sure he'd come to find out in due time.

For now, Daniel was almost grateful that he'd made the man Lily's Guardian. As such, he was possibly an even more powerful alpha male than Daniel. And he would have nothing but Lily's best interest in mind. Which meant he would do anything and everything to keep her safe. At the moment, he and Daniel were on the same page, and that was saying something.

William Kane unlatched the exit door and kicked down the stairs. The werewolves exited the plane and strode toward the waiting motorcycles. They had all agreed that this was the best mode of transportation for getting somewhere remote as quickly as possible.

There were eight of them. "Tabitha, you remember how to ride?" Daniel asked his little sister as he chose one of the bikes for himself and gave it a quick once-over. Obviously, Valentine had planned on allowing Tabitha to ride on her own. The older alpha had more faith in her than Daniel did.

"Shame on you, Danny," Tabitha admonished softly as she moved toward one of the bikes and mounted up. "You scum-sucking chauvinist," she added lightly, throwing him a nasty smile as she turned the key in the ignition and the bike roared to life.

He bit his cheek and then sighed through his nose as he swung his leg over his motorcycle and put the key in the ignition. He didn't fail to see the rather proud and amused look James Valentine gave to Tabitha before the Guardian too mounted his own matte black bike and started it up.

Valentine twisted the throttle to hear it roar just before Daniel gave the order to the rest of his pack. "Mount up, men!"

A few seconds later, the smell of jet engine fuel and motorcycle exhaust permeated the air.

But there was also something else....

Daniel stilled atop his bike and straightened, cocking his head to one side and closing his eyes. He drew in a slow, deep breath. His eyes flew open and he turned in the saddle to see Valentine's mercury gaze glowing eerily in the twilight darkness.

"Not again," the Guardian whispered. Daniel could hear him even over the roars of the engines.

"Prepare for a fire, men!" Daniel yelled over his shoulder and over the din of the bikes. He then kicked his bike into gear, twisted the throttle, let off the break, and tore out of the lot. Major Jordan Stark was right behind him. Next went Detective Aiden Knight. Lieutenant Michael Angel and Tabitha roared easily after them, nearly side by side. Valentine pulled his bike out after Tabitha's and Jonathan and William Kane brought up the rear.

Each and every werewolf on the New Mexico blacktop could smell the ash on the wind now. And everyone of them was filled with a sinking foreboding. Their speed was reckless and desperate. They ruthlessly carved the streets, scraping foot pegs so hard and fast that sparks shot out beside them, lighting up the coming night like fireworks.

The smell of fire drew nearer and a red glow began to light up the horizon. Daniel gave the engine more gas, his bike shooting forward with renewed desperation. The others followed suit.

The air grew positively hot. A roar nearly as loud as that of their engines filled the night sky. Finally, smoke cascaded so thick across the paved road that the gang had no choice but to pull over. Daniel and Valentine were the first to be off of their bikes and flashing into wolf form.

Daniel let the other wolf lead. Valentine knew the lay of the land; he knew where Cole's territory began, and he knew where Lily was being held. The fact that he led Daniel headlong into the most intense heat of the fire made Daniel's heart sink.

She's in this, he thought to himself. She's somewhere in this hellish inferno.

Lily....

As his paws pounded out the earth beneath him, smoke shoved its sticky fists down his throat and tried to throttle his lungs, but he was a werewolf, and such things didn't work on their kind. Lily would not be so lucky.

James picked up speed ahead of him, as if driven by a demon. Daniel was hot on his heels, but he had to trust the other alpha to clear the path, as the smoke and the blur of their movement turned their head-long dash through the woods into a smudged distortion of color, smells, and sound.

The roar was louder now, becoming deafening. Daniel's left front paw began to ache. He wondered whether he'd stepped on something – a thorn or a shattered piece of glass. The ache grew steadily until its sharp, hard pain distracted him enough that he pulled back, flashing into his human form so that he could peer down at it.

The thin blue line across his palm was glowing angrily in the darkness. Daniel's heart beat hard in his chest. He called out to Valentine, but the other wolf was already out of the range of both sight and sound.

Daniel could go no further. He knew that now. He'd drawn up flush with the edges of Cole's territory. And Lily was inside of it. From the way his hand was hurting, from the way his knees gave out beneath him and his guts twisted and wrenched inside of him, he was positive that she was dying.

He was only vaguely aware of his men passing him by as they crashed through

the underbrush on their rush into Cole's territory. They were hot on Valentine's trail. It wasn't until Jonathan Kane stopped to stand beside him and place a hand on his shoulder that Daniel was able to rip his gaze away from the glowing blue mark on his hand.

"It means she's alive, grandson." Jonathan gave Daniel's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "The boys will get her out."

A red flame burned as freely at the center of Daniel's eyes now as it did through Malcolm Cole's territory. Daniel prayed that his grandfather was right. Because if he wasn't, he was going to have to kill himself.

* * * *

Lily could feel the water heating up around her. The door to the solarium had gone up in flames an eternity ago. Along the wall, bottle after bottle of liquor exploded with a pop and a shattering sound that she could barely hear over the roar of the fire that licked its way along the walls and searched for flammable material to help its hellish subjugation.

She wasn't sure how much more smoke she could inhale. Her lungs burned and felt as if they were being slowly painted with tar from the inside. Her eyes hurt too much to open. Her heart was beating a rapid-fire hopelessness against a rib cage that felt as if it had been wrapped in plaster of Paris.

On the one hand, she had the fleeting realization that she had at least been successful on one account. No werewolf had attempted to brave the fire in order to come through the door into the solarium. She wondered if they'd made it out of the house. Or if they were dead.

She wondered where Malcolm Cole was. She had a feeling that he was not in the house. She couldn't sense his presence at all.

She coughed violently and sank lower in the water. *Maybe he got zapped out of here....* The thought went flitting through her brain like a tiny, mad butterfly. *That Roma curse thing.... That's why I can't feel him.*

She coughed again and then inhaled – and then coughed again, as if she had dry heaves in her lungs. There was no oxygen left to inhale. She slid further down. In her mind's eye, she saw herself sitting at her desk in history class in her sophomore year. The coach was the history teacher. He was telling them about Vietnam in that authoritative manner that he used to pretend he'd been there himself. Then he was making them watch Platoon. She couldn't watch. She wanted to cry but didn't want her peers to see. She excused herself as he smirked knowingly, and watched her leave. She paced quickly to the girl's bathroom with its metal mirror, cigarette butts, and missing stall doors. There, she turned on the tap and splashed cold water over her face. She accidentally inhaled some.

She sprang up, coughing violently yet again, realizing that she'd fallen asleep in the hot tub. *No... not sleeping...*

She once more slid down into its watery depths.

Dying...

Malcolm Cole flashed back onto his property and into the exact location from which he'd disappeared an hour earlier. At once, he was accosted with the scents and sounds of infernal chaos.

Fire.

Its stench was heavy in the thickening, ash-filled air of the wine cellar. Though there were no flames in this below-ground cavern as of yet, Cole could tell that it had all but claimed the rest of his mansion above.

Glass shattered, exploding like melted sand bombs. The floor boards creaked and groaned. Support beams crashed to the ground, slicing through ashen walls as they fell. Any human or animal sound that might have been made above would be drowned out in the crackling, howling bellow of the fire.

The roar was deafening, droning in Cole's ears as he took the steps out of the cellar two at a time, only to come to a stop at the heavy, banded door that led to the storeroom and then the kitchen beyond. It was hot. Havoc played just beyond it.

There would be no escape this way.

Lily...

With that thought, he spun on his heel and blurred in the opposite direction toward the wall. There, he shoved an entire shelf filled with wine away from the wall so that it slid violently forward and then toppled, crashing to the ground in a grand display of merlot and amber. Malcolm gazed into the dusty passageway that had been revealed beyond it. He'd had it dug out long ago. Just in case. It led to an old mine shaft on his land; one that had been barred up against intruders years ago.

He wasted no time, already in stride as he flashed into his wolf form and plunged head-long into the much cooler darkness of the tunnel, using his senses to guide his way.

Through the echo-like muffling effect of the water in her ears, Lily could hear the faint sound of breaking glass. Again.

Another bottle of Everclear, she thought. It was a weak thought, like a wisp of smoke when someone snuffed a candle.

And then, as two strong arms pulled her from the depths of the hot tub and carried her swiftly through the broken window and into the clean air beyond, she found herself back in the girl's bathroom of her high school. A man stood in the doorway, leaning against the door jam, his arms crossed over his broad chest. He was tall and handsome and had jade green eyes.

"It's easy for people to die, Lily," he said. His British accent wrapped around her like a warm blanket. And then it ~~was~~ a blanket, thick and black. She shivered violently into it, suddenly feeling the need to cough. He continued to stand there, watching her as she coughed and coughed until she was bent over from the effort. Pain shot through her chest. It rose to her head, where it throbbed from the base of her neck to some point behind her eyes. Nausea roiled in her belly.

She dropped to her knees, almost letting go of the blanket. But, for some reason, she felt the need to hang on. So, she did. She clung to it like a vice and pulled it tighter around herself as her body wracked with seizures of pain.

The man came forward and knelt before her so that they were on eye level. *"That a girl."* His green eyes glittered. He smiled a poignant and proud smile. *"Maybe it's not so easy after all, eh luv? Not for everyone."*

He reached out and brushed a lock of her gold hair from her face. She blinked, wondering distractedly why her arm didn't hurt when he touched her.

"You're a fighter, Lily. I'll give you that."

He leaned forward then and she closed her eyes as he gently pressed his lips to her forehead. The tender deed seemed so unsuited for this man, with his green eyes and beautiful voice. Yet, she felt that it was more suited to him than perhaps anything he had done in a very long time.

When she opened her eyes again, it was to watch as he stood once more and moved away from her. When he reached the doorway of the bathroom, he turned and their gazes met.

"Good bye, luv," he told her in his perfect British accent. *"Give him hell for me."*

Lily watched him round the corner and disappear. She leaned forward then, placing her arms on the floor in front of her. Her forehead dropped to the backs of her hands.

When the tears came this time, she didn't choke on them.

James Valentine knew the moment that Daniel Kane was no longer able to follow him into Cole's territory. The other alpha had flashed back into human form and staggered to a halt as Valentine had continued to rush forward into the murky, smoky madness. James had gone another hundred yards before skidding to a halt, a new scent whipping at him in the wind.

Cole. And.... Chlorine?

James pricked his ears, listening for something he knew he would never catch. It was pointless; the fire was too loud.

He sniffed the air again. Yes, chlorine. He turned toward the scent, carefully following it as it wafted in and out, there one second, gone the next. His pace sped up as he locked on. Beside him, Kane's men watched him, running at his side, their wolfen expressions questioning. He ignored them, concentrating hard.

Ten yards. Thirty. Seventy.

The scent grew stronger. Water. Chlorine. *Lily!* The hint of lavender, of cinnamon, and soap and Dormancy.

And with her scent was Cole's, as heavy and powerful as the man, himself.

Kane's pack stopped in their tracks as James Valentine entered the clearing. He stood still for a moment, taking in the scene before him with molten silver wolf eyes.

The green-eyed man turned to face him.

"Ah, Valentine." Malcolm Cole nodded to himself, as if everything made perfect

sense. At his feet lay an unconscious and drenched Lily St.Claire, her small form curled on its side, a damp patch of earth beneath her lips.

James could see and smell Cole's wolf pack, roaming in the shadows of the adjoining forest, watching their leader. They were waiting for the slightest hint from Cole that they should attack.

There was mockery in Cole's tone, to be sure. Valentine could tell that Cole was not at all surprised to find that James had turned on him. But there was something else in his tone as well, something that skirted the edges of capitulation. It was also there in his expression. "I can sense that you've been made her Guardian," Cole said. He smiled then. It was mirthless, as always. "I can't say I blame you, Valentine. What would any of us do for the chance to feel whole again?"

James flashed back into his human form and strode across the clearing until he stood a few feet from the man who had kidnapped and threatened Kane's marked mate.

"Where will you go, Cole?" James asked.

Malcolm blinked. And then he nodded, once. "Nothing escapes you, does it?"

Valentine was old enough to know that Cole was surrendering. Perhaps not the war, but the battle, at least. He knew that Cole would take his pack and disappear. He was very good at that.

Cole looked down at Lily's sleeping form and his gaze softened. "She was willing to die to escape me," he said. He knelt beside her and James knelt with him, ever watchful.

It didn't faze Cole. With a shaking hand, he gently brushed a damp lock from her cheek. "She isn't meant to be mine." Cole bent over her and James allowed him this small token, this scrap of a goodbye, as Cole placed a tender kiss to Lily's forehead.

Then Cole pulled away and stood once more. His gaze flitted to the edge of the clearing, where wolves moved through the trees. Some of them were his, watching and waiting for their alpha to engage in battle so that they could follow suit. Others were Kane's. They, too, were waiting. To see what Valentine did – or maybe Lily.

The fire was spreading. Embers of red danger floated on the wind around them. Soon, it would cross the garden and touch the shed that housed the propane tank. There would be no hope for anyone in this vicinity if they were still here when that happened.

"You need to get Kane and his people out of here," Cole told Valentine.

Valentine gazed up at the man who had been long thought of as responsible for countless grizzly murders – the man who had been a Nazi soldier. He knew that none of those things were true. Malcolm Cole was a very smart, very dangerous and stunningly powerful alpha werewolf. But he wasn't a bad man.

James nodded. He understood. There would be no great battle this night.

Cole stepped back, flashed into wolf form, and dashed into the forest with blurring speed. In a few short seconds, Valentine could no longer hear or smell Cole or his men.

They were gone.

Beside James, Lily stirred. She coughed in her smoke-clogged slumber. He bent and lifted her into his arms then strode quickly to the edge of the clearing and the wolves that waited there.

Chapter Fourteen: The 4-1-1

Lily awoke gradually, the sound coming first. Deep voices conversing, but muted. Traffic at a distance. She felt a little cold, but a warm beam touched her cheek, as if to stay the chill. She could smell the detergent in the blankets that were wrapped around her.

And then she smelled *him*. He was leather, the faintest hint of cologne or body spray, and wind. *Yes, wind has a smell*, she thought, as the corners of her mouth turned up in a slow smile.

She opened her eyes. They burned a little, but the blurriness subsided after a few seconds and she took in her surroundings.

She was in Tabitha's house, in the guest room that she had used when she'd first come back to Baton Rouge and had been looking for a place to live. There were flowers everywhere, artfully arranged, all with get-well notes attached. She could hear Tabitha's voice in the other room. She was talking to someone who spoke in a voice that was somehow familiar to Lily, but she couldn't place it.

Lily's gaze skirted the room to fall on its only other inhabitant. Daniel Kane lay reclined in a large chair several feet from the bed and against the wall. His eyes were closed. His inhumanly perfect features were darkened with a five o'clock shadow. As always, he was dressed in black, his badge attached to the waistband of his jeans. Even in sleep, his presence ate up the space around him without forgiveness. His breathing was deep and slow, his broad chest rising and falling in easy slumber.

Lily had never seen Daniel sleep. It was strange. He was always so dominant, so in control, so in charge. The act of sleeping took all of that and effectively erased it away. What was left was simply the person underneath, and its tender vulnerability.

As she lay there, on her side and watched the slumbering werewolf, the events of the last few days came rushing back to her.

Malcolm Cole, the Nazi who wasn't. The cursed red marks on his arms. The fire.

She remembered being in the hot tub, sinking. Everything else was a blur of sights and sounds and smells and pain. Some where along the way, she'd stopped coughing, stopped throwing up, stopped shivering uncontrollably – and slept. She vaguely recalled people touching her here and there – moving her, giving her medicine, giving her water.

And now, she felt warm under the quilted covers; she felt safe in that languid way that overcame one when the pain finally passed and they no longer had to fight it so hard.

Her gold-flecked gaze traveled across Daniel's form, drinking him in with a boldness that she never would have exercised had he been able to gaze back. She was transfixed by the angles of his face, the tall and lean muscle of his body, the darkness that he seemed to wrap around himself from his black clothing to his blue-

black hair. And there was that hidden wolf in there too, somewhere beneath his impossibly beautiful exterior. She had yet to see it in her waking life. But she'd seen it in her dreams a thousand times.

He looked like a fallen angel at that moment, laid to waste, perhaps, by some archangel's killing blow. It made her want to go him, kiss him awake, take him in her arms and make the hurt go away.

She blushed at that roving, runaway thought and tingling warmth spread across her forearm. She peeked under the covers at the thin blue line that she'd all but forgotten. She chewed on her lip and sighed. The mark. Daniel's brand that stung like hell any time another alpha with designs on her so much as came near her.

The mark that he hadn't asked her permission to give her but had forced upon her like shackles.

Suddenly, instead of wanting to kiss him, she wanted to punch him. Her gaze narrowed of its own accord and she turned her arm over, not wanting to view the shimmering tattoo. When she looked back up, it was to find Daniel leaning forward in his chair, his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped casually in front of him. His eyes were drinking her in.

Lily gasped and stilled in the bed, wondering how he had managed to awaken and move into that position so quickly and without her hearing him.

He studied her in silence for a while, his expression unreadable. But there was a wealth of thinking going on behind those blue eyes. "How're you feelin' cher?" he finally asked.

Lily took her time in answering. She was searching for some clue in his expression as to what he was thinking, what was going on in his head. But he gave nothing away.

"Do you want the honest truth, Daniel, or do you want me to say something that will satisfy your male ego?" Her voice was a tad scratchy, but it worked.

Daniel's lip twitched and his eyes glittered as he replied, "Preferably both."

Lily's gaze narrowed. "I'm feeling mad as hell at you for what you did and if we were in any other city, I'd seriously consider pressing charges." She paused, leaning back against the pillow behind her and crossing her arms over her chest. "Seeing as how you're the law here, I know it wouldn't do any good."

Daniel seemed to consider this, his expression still a somewhat impassive mask. And then, in that slow drawl that drove her crazy, he said, "I meant, cher, how does you're your *body* feel?" As he asked the question, his gaze skirted to her form, where it hid beneath the blankets, and then back up to her face. "You inhaled a lot of smoke. And water. Sort of went for both ends of the spectrum there."

Any other day, any other circumstance, this charming banter of his would have won Lily over. But not today. Not now – not after all that she'd been through. She'd been attacked, branded, kidnapped, and half-drowned. He was real damn good at negotiating, smoothing things over, and flirting his way to complacency. It probably came with the job. But she wasn't falling for it.

"How does my body feel? It feels tired, Daniel." She paused for effect. "And so

do I.”

Daniel Kane continued to watch her for several quiet moments more and then he took a deep, slow breath and sat back in his chair, draping his arms over the rests. He hadn't missed the double meaning behind her words. She was tired of being thrown around, from the arms of one domineering werewolf to another, and treated like some caveman's conquered love slave.

He was impressed that she was able to express as much in her condition. She had to be starving. Probably thirsty. Definitely weary. He was also getting a sense now of just what kind of person Lily St.Claire really was. He'd already known she had a kind heart. He figured he could safely add that she was stubborn. And anyone willing to set fire to someone's multi-million dollar mansion in order to escape them had to have a fair share of guts and determination as well.

He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. "I did what I felt I had to do, Lily," he said. "I can see how you would feel it was a selfish act. But it saved you from Malcolm, and it saved Tabitha too." He leaned forward again, pinning her with what he knew was a very potent gaze. "And I would do it again."

Daniel could sense the change in her almost before she realized it herself. It was a hardening in her brown-gold gaze, a set to her beautiful jaw. She was slipping into fight mode. As if by instinct, the wolf in him readied for the same. His muscles tensed, his senses heightened. He could hear her heart rate speed up. Her breathing became more shallow. He could smell the adrenaline in her blood.

It smelled good.

She straightened in the bed, coming off of the pillows, and he did the same, placing his palms on the chair's arm rests so that he could push himself up if he needed to.

Lily threw off her covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Beneath the discarded covers, she wore a pair of Tabitha's cut-off sweat shorts and a borrowed tank top. She was unaware of the way Daniel's gaze darkened when she revealed herself. She didn't notice his pupils expanding in the oceans of his eyes. She had no idea that his blood was beginning to heat up at the sight of her long, tanned legs and her nipples, erect behind the thin material of her shirt.

He knew that all she was thinking was that she wanted to attack him. It was senseless and, if she'd paused long enough to consider what he was saying, she might have realized that he was sort of right. She just didn't care any longer. He could see that now.

She stood before him, and just as he rose to meet her, she drew back her arm. Her hand balled into a fist, and she drove it forward for all she was worth.

Daniel saw it coming a mile away and, for once in his life, he let it come. It was the least he owed her, he supposed. But as her fist connected with his jaw, it was *her* pain and not his own that he immediately sensed. She'd snapped his head to one side with the force, and yet his own discomfort barely registered. He turned to face her again, at once overwhelmed by what he was seeing.

She was bent over, cradling her wrist in her other hand, tears streaming down her cheeks as she hurled wanna-be obscenities at him in that southern kind of way that only true ladies really had down.

He blinked. Then, as if on auto pilot, he was moving. "Lily, let me see your hand," he told her. He reached for her, but she jerked away from him just as the door flew open and two people barged into the room.

Daniel looked up, as did Lily. Tabitha went for Lily immediately, but James took one look at Lily's bent form and the tears on her cheeks and he was suddenly turning on Daniel, his fangs extended, his gray eyes glowing like quicksilver.

"What did you do to her, Kane?" the Guardian demanded. His tall form radiating massive amounts of power.

The wolf in Daniel roared to life in response and his fangs tore from his gums, extending to their full length. His eyes flashed. "*Nothing*, Valentine. This doesn't concern you." His voice had gone gravelly, and the air in the room was growing thick with their combined supernatural tension.

"Please you two, not now!" Tabitha tried to wedge herself between them, but Lily rushed forward, grabbed her arm, and pulled her away.

"He works for Cole!" Lily exclaimed frantically and aimed them both for the door.

"No, Lily, he *doesn't*! He's your Guardian!" Tabitha tried to reason with her best friend.

Lily wasn't listening, though, and Tabitha had to forcibly grab the other woman by her upper arms. With great effort, and only because Lily was presently weakened, Tabitha managed to jerk her to a halt and even spin her around. "Lily, please! Listen to me! He's not here to hurt you, okay?" She gave Lily a small shake, as if to drive her point home.

Lily's head snapped a little and she blinked, her expression bewildered. "What?" she asked, her voice hoarse and quiet.

The men had gone still. Daniel was torn between a confrontation with Valentine and the scene unfolding between the two best friends.

Lily looked from Tabitha to James. Their gazes locked and James suddenly stepped back from Daniel and turned toward Lily. Daniel blinked. James clearly knew that she was afraid and that it was his fault. Daniel was impressed, despite himself. It seemed that a Guardian's protection could take many forms.

"It's true, Lily," James said. "Just take my hand and you'll understand."

Daniel suppressed a sudden, rising growl. He didn't like the idea of someone else touching his mate, but he managed not to move or say anything. This was for Lily's benefit and he was smart enough to realize that.

"Take his hand, Lily." Tabitha gestured to Valentine's outstretched palm. "I promise, it'll be okay."

Lily was so tired. So, so tired. She was hungry and she was weak and suddenly, she had no more energy with which to fight. She sighed a shaky sigh and placed her

grasping the hand in Valentine's strong grip.

He gently closed his fingers over hers.

Her eyes widened at the surge of warmth and protection that instantly came spread from the contact. It began in her fingertips and raced up her left arm to her shoulder and then across her chest. It quickly infused her entire body with the sensation of being safely wrapped in a fleece blanket and protected by a hundred armed soldiers. Nothing could hurt her. Her right arm didn't sting at all with the contact, as she'd half expected it to. In fact, she felt nothing coming from the mark whatsoever.

This was so unlike how it had been in Cole's car with James, when she'd been overwhelmed by his presence and the wine and she had been aching for something... *more*. No, this was different.

"What happened?" she finally had the nerve to ask.

Valentine's smile was warm when he replied, "I've been made your Guardian. You will always be safe with me, Lily. Whenever you need me, I will be here."

Lily blinked. She was confused as to this turn of events; when it had come about, how it had happened, what it meant, and why. But she did understand that James was telling the truth. She somehow just knew. The answer was there, in her blood.

He would protect her – against anyone – if he had to. That included Daniel.

She pulled away from him and he let her go. "He didn't hurt me, James. I punched him," she told the tall, handsome man, a blush creeping up into her pale cheeks. Her eyes were as tired as her voice when she finished with, "Only, his head is even harder than I thought it was."

Daniel waited as this information sank in and James turned his mercury gaze onto him once more. There was a wealth of thinking going on behind the older wolf's eyes. But to his credit, Valentine said nothing further on the subject. He nodded once at Daniel and then nodded once, more respectfully, at Lily.

The look that Valentine then gave to Daniel's little sister was entirely different. Tabitha locked gazes with him, her hazel eyes darkening ever so slightly, her cheeks reddening just enough to give her away.

Lily's brows arched. She looked up to see that Daniel's eyes were glowing and his fangs had yet to recede. He was watching the two of them with dark promise.

Valentine's expression became appreciative and admiring as he looked down at Tabitha, his pupils expanding hungrily before he turned for the door and gracefully slipped out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Lily watched Daniel seemed to force his fangs back into his gums. He eyed the door with malice. "I'm going to kill him."

Tabitha blew a raspberry and rolled her eyes. "Sure you are, big brother. Good luck with that, by the way." She took Lily's right hand and held it up to the light. "No real damage done, I think. For what it's worth, sweetie, wait to throw the punches until you become a werewolf. You'll actually be able to hurt him then."

At that, Lily's eyes flew to Daniel's once more and their gazes locked. Reality came washing over her again in that moment. She was a Dormant and she was

marked. She was going to have to become a werewolf.

Tabitha pulled back a little and eyed her best friend. "Oh hell," she said. "You look scared again, girl. I think this is a conversation you need to have with the Chief over here, but I'm not so sure I can trust the two of you alone...." She turned to pin her brother with a warning. "You think you can behave like a gentleman and not like a cop long enough to get through this?"

Daniel cocked his head to one side and pointed to the door. He didn't dignify her question with an answer; there was no room for argument in his expression. His blue eyes glittered like sapphires in his face, a stark contrast to the rather pale hue of his skin and the blue in his raven black hair.

Tabitha stood there for a moment and studied her older brother. There was sudden concern in her expression. Lily turned to regard Daniel carefully. Now that she was really looking, she could see the slight violet cast to his eyes and the way he was actually more pale than normal. He appeared starkly hungry. His tall, masculine form seemed a barely adequate cage for the animal within. He looked more inhuman than ever. Lily wondered why.

"You got a lot of fight in you, Daniel, but whatever you do – you'd best make this soon," Tabitha said softly. "You're strong, big brother." She shook her head. "But you're not that strong." She took a deep breath, gave Lily's good hand a gentle squeeze, and then headed once more for the door. "James is just outside, Lil'. He'll be able to hear everything you two say." Tabitha stopped at the door and gave her best friend a meaningful look. It was meant to reassure her. Lily wasn't alone.

She opened the door, stepped through it, and shut it again behind her.

Chapter Fifteen: Internal Affairs

Lily was dumbfounded. She wondered what Tabitha had meant by Daniel needing to do something soon. Was she talking about Lily?

Once more, Lily found herself alone with Daniel Kane, Police Chief of Baton Rouge - the very beautiful but very supernatural-looking alpha werewolf. Lily swallowed hard.

"Have a seat, Lily. We need to talk."

She frowned. "Would it kill you to say 'please', Chief?"

A muscle ticked in Daniel's jaw, and the corners of his mouth seemed to want to turn into a smile. But his eyes were as intense and as serious as ever. "It's Daniel to you, cher. And, *please* - take a seat."

Lily went to the bed and sat down, pulling the covers over her dangling legs. She was a little cold. Plus, the covers helped serve as a barrier between her and the big bad wolf standing a few feet away.

"I couldn't be more sorry about the way I had to mark you, Lily. *That*, I promise. But, like I said, I would do it again. I had to do it. You don't know how tempting a Dormant is to our kind. Sooner or later, you'd have been found out and taken. There's not much a human can do against a werewolf, Lily. Except, maybe, burn his house down," he added, his tone suddenly a bit mystified.

But then he ran a hand through his hair and continued, as he took to pacing back and forth in front of her bed. "If you had to be claimed, I'd rather it be by me than by someone else. I know how selfish that sounds, Lily. But I've been in love with you for more than a decade. I stayed away," he said, as he stopped and pinned her with his blue fire gaze. "For Tabitha's sake. But I can't do it any more, cher."

It was a good long while before Lily was able to swallow past the lump that had formed in her throat while he was speaking. He was in love with her. He'd *been* in love with her. Since high school? *Dear God*.... All that time.... She couldn't believe it. He had to be lying.

Lily took in his expression, frank and stark and hungry. She noticed the way he was breathing, as if he couldn't quite get enough air, as if his body were in pain. She realized that this was what a man looked like when he was being painfully honest and that honesty involved love.

Christ, she thought. *Oh, Christ*.... She was certain that Daniel could hear her heart hammering, rapid-fire, in her chest. Her blood felt like Novocain in her veins and little stars of light were dancing before her eyes.

Daniel came forward then, and Lily watched in paralyzed silence as he sat at the edge of the bed, one hand wrapped around the bed post so tight that his knuckles were white. She absently hoped he wouldn't accidentally break it as Cole had done with his chair. Werewolves were so strong - and this bed was an antique.

Her thoughts were rambling in chaotic nervousness.

Daniel's gaze continued to burn into her. "You have two options at this point, cher. You can join me. Mate with me - and I'll turn you. You'll become a Made wolf, a

werewolf's mate who becomes a werewolf herself. You'll be stronger and faster and you'll heal quickly. Not much in this world will be able to harm you. Not even our female born are given such a chance, by nature. And Made wolves are very rare these days, cher. They are the only kind who can give birth to more werewolves. They are our only means for continued survival. *You* are our only means for survival, Lily."

Lily sat in silence and digested this for a long while. The room grew quiet. He'd just given her a lifetime's worth of news. She wasn't sure which was more shocking. Finally, a question slid onto her tongue. It may not be the one she wanted an answer to most, but it was the first one to come out. "I'll be able to actually turn into a wolf?" she asked softly.

Daniel nodded slowly. "And I can imagine you would be breathtaking, cher. As you are now." His tone had lowered, his eyes darkening a little.

A shiver rode through Lily and the mark on her arm began to warm up. But she wasn't ready to give into her sex-craved side just yet. She was still blown away by Daniel's confession. There was still too much she didn't understand. Too much she needed to know.

She chewed on the inside of her cheek and then asked, "What do you look like in wolf form, Daniel? I've seen you in my dreams, but... I've never seen any of you actually, well, *shift*, I guess."

Daniel's brow knit together. "You mean Cole never –"

She shook her head.

Daniel pushed himself off of the bed and took a step back. "You promise me you won't go rabbit on me now, cher? The wolf is a hell of a lot harder to control than the man, and both are real hungry right now."

There was no doubt in Lily's mind as to what he meant by that. But she steeled her nerves and nodded once, gripping the blanket tightly in her hands.

He nodded in return and then there was a strange flash. The light expanded, engulfing Daniel's frame in a blinding aura, and then it contracted once more, dying out as quickly as it had come to life. When it was gone, Daniel was too. In his place stood a massive wolf with thick blue-black fur and bright blue eyes.

Lily stared at the massive creature for what seemed like an eternity, her breathing all but stilled, her mind reeling at what she'd just seen. It should not have shocked her – shouldn't have surprised her this much after all that she'd been through and knowing all that she now knew. But it did. There was just something about knowing for once and for all that the man who loved her was a real, live *wolf* that blew Lily away.

The wolf, for his part, watched her too. He never took his eyes off of hers, even as he began to come forward, approaching the bed as cautiously as a lion would have approached a gazelle.

Lily was fascinated by the way he moved. He was so graceful and smooth and quiet. She could see the muscles rippling beneath his fur. She could hear his breathing, a low rumble deep in his massive chest.

The mark on Lily's arm was very warm now. And that warmth was spreading.

With great courage, she slowly pushed her covers aside once more and slid off of the bed until she was on her knees on the soft, plush carpet.

Equally as slowly, she extended her hand toward the wolf. He paused as she knelt before him and then, eyes shining bright, he came forward, and very gently nuzzled her out-stretched palm with his muzzle. This brought a smile to Lily's face that she simply couldn't control. As if in response to her smile, the wolf gently licked the tips of her fingers.

It tickled and Lily suppressed a giggle. "How do I taste?" she asked, without thinking.

There was a sudden flash in front of her and she blinked to find Daniel standing over her, gazing down at her through eyes that were mostly pupil. "*Sweet*," he said. His tone was so low it was nearly a growl and his fangs had extended once more. "*Promising*." His smile was predatory in the extreme.

Lily found herself rising quickly, but she was backed against the bed and there was nowhere further for her to go. She wracked her brain as she gazed up at him and fell deeper and deeper into the black abyss that was growing in his eyes. "You said I had two options," she spoke quickly, almost stumbling over her words in her rush to get them out. "What's the other one?" She felt the bed behind her with her fingertips and knew that one small move on his part would see them both falling atop it, his hard body trapping hers for good.

"The other option isn't an option," he told her plainly, taking that final step that closed the distance between them. She jerked slightly in his grasp when his strong hands found her wrists and gently encircled them.

"Then why..." She shivered and tried to swallow, tried to pull her gaze away from his. She failed. There were those familiar waves of power rolling off of him now. Warmth had spread across her middle and wetness was gathering between her legs. "Why did you mention it?" she asked, her voice trembling. He was overwhelming her and this time she couldn't blame it on his mark. It was just him and his supernatural magnetism – and her ever-reliable, oh-so-hot reaction to him.

"Well, cher," he drawled, moving his hands up her arms with painfully slow deliberation. "I guess I was tryin' to be fair." His grin was diabolical.

"Fair's good," Lily breathed. "Fair's g-great." She tried to summon some strength from somewhere, but it had been a long week. And he was so damned sexy.

His smile never wavered as he pushed, just a little, and she found herself on her back on the bed. He hovered over her, his arms braced against the bed on either side of her body, his muscles straining under the material of his tight black t-shirt.

"Please..." she finished, almost moaning the word. She wanted him so badly now that she wasn't even sure what she was saying "please" for. It nearly didn't matter what the other option was. A part of her insisted that she was mad just for asking about it. But there was still some tiny, sane part of her in some corner of her mind that, though bullied and blinded, was adamant about its freedom – its choices. She wanted to take that part of herself and throttle it and then toss it out the second

story window. Still, she managed to whisper, "I want to hear it, Daniel."

Her hands were against his chest now, her fingers pressing into his shirt, aching to dig their nails into the hard muscle beneath it.

He leaned in until he was nearly kissing her. His eyes were pure inescapable black, his fangs stark against his bottom lip, and his aura one of utter, demanding need. When he spoke, it was with a rumbling growl that was completely inhuman. **"You can run, cher. And I can try my damndest not to hunt you down,"** he told her, his words caressing her lips. **"But when bums on the street die by my hand and another wolf claims you anyway, you'll only have yourself to blame."** As he said this, his right hand found her hip, squeezed, and ran slowly up her body, shoving the tank top up to reveal the flesh of her taut stomach as he did so.

Lily's breath caught in her throat and she shuddered when his hand found her waist and his skin burned into hers. She could feel a low rumble coming off of him, a barely contained growl that licked at her senses like tongues of flame. She could barely comprehend what he was saying. Her body was too wrapped up in desire, her mind too far gone.

When his lips finally touched hers, it was with a painful tenderness that utterly belied the stifling hunger of his pent-up passion. Her eyes closed and she found herself arching against him, unable to stop herself. She wanted him. With every fiber of her being.

Without waiting for him to deepen the kiss, Lily ran the fingers of her right hand through his blue-black locks and moaned into his mouth. His hair was so silky soft. She wantonly grabbed it with both fists and pulled him toward her, swallowing the growl that escaped his throat. She felt his fangs, long, sharp and cruel, and brazenly explored them with her tongue. She was intoxicated with him.

She always had been.

Hell, he'd always been on her mind – in her heart. The only men she'd ever dated had somehow resembled Daniel Kane. From the guy with the ice-blue eyes to the man with the motorcycle in college. She'd always gone for Daniel. They were connected somehow. They had been all along.

Daniel... She arched against him again and he pressed back. She could feel his rock-hard need beneath the confining material of his jeans and she had the sudden urge to tease him – to run her hand over its length. Maybe she would draw back from him and play hard to get.

On that impish impulse, she began to break the kiss, and so suddenly that it made her head spin, *he* was the one fisting *her* hair, holding her captive as he deepened the kiss in a nearly painful manner.

At once, unnatural pleasure coursed through her, taking her to the treacherous precipice of an orgasm and dangling her there, teasingly, mercilessly. It was a punishment of the kind that only a werewolf could deliver.

She was on fire. She was so wet with need that she found her own fingers sliding between her legs; anything for release. But his free hand caught her wrist and quickly

pinned it to the mattress beside her. She moaned, thwarted from her reprieve, and the wolf laughed. Low and wicked, the sound rolled over her, teasing her nipples into taut buds. But she still had one hand free. She used it, plunging her fingers beneath the fabric of her sweat shorts and into her panties.

Moistness greeted her – as did a nearly angry growl that vibrated against her lips. Almost immediately, she felt an invading weakness steal through her and she realized that Daniel was using his kiss to control her body. Painful pleasure one second. Weakness another.

It wasn't fair. He was toying with her, laying waste to her defenses. He wasn't playing by the normal rules. He was playing by *his* rules, and they were simply unfair. Blissful, but unfair.

She protested with a "no" that he effectively silenced with his kiss as he let go of her hair, grabbed her other wrist, and pinned them both above her head on the mattress with one of his strong hands. Then he once more straddled her, as he had done in his own bed all of those ages ago. Finally, *slowly*, he pulled his mouth away, releasing her from his kiss.

Lily opened her eyes and gazed up at him as she tried to catch her breath. *Oh my God*, she thought. *I'm as good as done for*. As if he could read her mind, Daniel smiled.

She gasped.

And then he was ripping through her t-shirt and shorts with claws that moved so fast, she couldn't see them. She had barely enough time to hope that he didn't end up cutting her too before she was being thrown further up onto the bed, stripped and vulnerable.

She cried out for half a second before his mouth was claiming hers again and his hard, still-clothed body was pressing her into the mattress. She brought her hands up, unconsciously trying to push him away; it was preservation. She was going to die beneath his hungered onslaught. She would die slowly and it would feel better than heaven, but she would die all the same. She was sure of it!

Her struggles did no good, of course, and when she felt his hands sliding down her sides to her thighs, she knew there was no turning back. This was it.

His fingers skated over the front of her legs to roughly grasp her inner thighs. He pried them apart without pity and without pause. Her eyes widened, her heart hammering. She could offer no resistance as his fingers parted the soft curls between her legs and moved lower, claiming the same slick part of her that her own fingers had found only moments before. The sensation was too much. Lily made a desperate sound and it was met with his own unforgiving chuckle, muted by his lips on hers.

Lily's hands clawed at his back as he ran his fingers languidly over her lips and sent more unnatural pleasure into her through his kiss. His thumb grazed her clitoris – and then pressed down in just the right spot and Lily cried out. Her legs bent and unbent beneath him, writhing in an ecstasy that was quickly nearing a kind of aching

torture.

When he suddenly and without warning plunged two of his large fingers inside of her, she screamed into his mouth and he drew back, breaking the kiss. With his fingers still embedded deep within her, he brought his other arm up and fisted it once more in her long golden locks, roughly jerking her head back to expose her throat.

Lily arched against his invading fingers, wanting more of him, and he obliged, pushing further as his thumb continued to press expertly into her clitoris. His lips grazed her chin, touched upon her ear, and then sank lower, to the delicate, exposed column of her throat. There, he paused, his breath hot against her taut skin.

Daniel slowly pulled his fingers away, and Lily couldn't stop her cry of protest; she wanted him inside of her!

She got her wish. She felt him then, pulsing hot and huge as he teased at her opening. With his free hand, he captured both of her wrists once more and again pinned them above her head. Her eyes flew open in sudden alarm, but he gave her no time to consider the situation, and certainly no means of escape.

When he plunged into her with one swift motion, she screamed in both sharp, ecstatic pleasure and very real pain. She was small and tight and he was massive inside of her, filling her beyond capacity. But, just as it had with Malcolm Cole, the pain only served to excite her further, stoking her infernal fires, and in that fast and furious moment, she was brought to the brink of some kind of gluttonous, velveteen satisfaction. It was just out of reach – calling her name. She bucked beneath him, eyes closing in surrender as her body completely overshadowed her mind. All that mattered was reaching that plateau. Nothing else.

She was so far gone by the time he leaned down to whisper in her ear that she barely registered what he was saying. "I'm going to take you, Lily," he told her, his tone low and harsh. "I can't wait any more."

And with that, Daniel Kane pulled back slightly, his long, sharp fangs glistening in the waning sunlight, and as he drew partly out of her and then thrust back in, he plunged those fangs into the side of her throat.

Lily's second scream outdid her first. She felt his fangs sink into her throat and the sensation was tremendously shocking. There was a kind of pain, but it was something she'd never experienced before. It wasn't pain so much as a delicious, demanding throb that synchronized with the throb between her legs and awakened her to a whole new level of pleasure. She reached that plateau and kept on climbing. With each pull against her throat, he seemed to deepen the bite, marking her in a way that she was certain would never heal.

Surely, he would kill her.

What a way to die... she thought. It was the last thought she registered. Her body convulsed around him, squeezing him tight over and over again. There was no Earth beneath her any longer. No bed. No room. She was floating on a sea of endorphins that wracked through her, at first with severe and uncompromising razor-sharpness – and then with a slowly rolling pleasure.

For Daniel Kane, there had never *been* pleasure until now. There had been only

water, and now he was drowning in wine. He'd never tasted another partner during sex. He'd never dared to bite. Knowing the consequences, he'd always held back, hidden his true self, and given away whatever it was the women had wanted. He'd been good at making them happy. It was something in his blood, his being. He just knew what to do.

But Daniel, in turn, had always gone away barely sated and deep down, slightly more empty than before.

Now, as his teeth sank slowly into her throat, Lily's blood welled to meet him, fueled by her rapid-fire heart. In ecstasy, he swallowed. Not a drop was wasted. He fed greedily, his body moving along hers, crushing her into the bed, needing to be so much closer than was possible. He wanted more.

He pulled at her blood with an insatiable hunger and thrust himself into her harder and harder, knowing that his large size and her small body were probably bringing her some pain. He could feel her tightness wrapped around him, squeezing him relentlessly and yet he wanted to be deeper. *Deeper*. His gums ached, his head spun, his heart raced, his body plowed relentlessly on, demanding everything that Lily had to give and more.

The world around him was melting, dissolving into a swirl of sound and color that had no meaning. All that was left was him and his strong, inexorable, unyielding desire – and little Lily, his Dormant angel with the gold-flecked eyes and golden hair and the body to kill for. His mate.

My mate. Mine.

With that thought, he pulled his fangs from her neck, jerked her head around, and sank his teeth into the other side of her throat one last time, claiming her in a near cruelty that wouldn't be sated. He'd wanted her for too long. He wanted *all* of her.

And so he took her. Again and again. When he felt her climax one last time, he couldn't hold back his own roaring orgasm; his grip around her became so tight it was suffocating. His claws dug slightly into her wrists where he held them against the bed. He yanked his fangs from her throat and growled into the room. Her tight body was convulsing around him, milking him for everything he was worth. He couldn't stop the monstrous sound that escape his throat, so loud and low that the paintings rattled against the wall and the window shook in its pane.

He rode the tidal wave down, both man and monster sated and soothed for the first time in their lives. He opened his eyes, the pupils dilating once more to their normal size, and lowered his head to gaze down at Lily St.Claire. His mate – soon to be his wife.

Her own eyes were still closed, but gently, as if in sleep. Her bruised red lips were parted, her breathing shallow. Her honeyed hair cascaded around her like waterfalls of liquid gold, shimmering against the pillows in the light of the setting sun.

She was very pale. Large, deep puncture wounds marked both sides of her delicate, slim neck.

Normally, any wound created by another werewolf's teeth or claws would take as

long to heal for a Made werewolf as it would for any human. It was the reason clan law stated that werewolves were not allowed to attack one another unless strictly necessary.

However, if the wounds created by wolves while claiming their mates did not heal more quickly, many mates would have been lost long ago. In this, nature and evolution had allowed them one boon. These bites would heal rapidly, shrinking to pin-prick marks much like fabled vampire bites. In a few days, they would be gone entirely.

They had already stopped bleeding. And Daniel could hear Lily's heartbeat. It was faint, but it was steady. She had survived the changing. He could smell the slight difference in her scent. It was no longer Dormant. It was awakening and the scent was as enticing to him as hot chocolate, caramel and baked cookies were to a child.

His own heart rate quickened at the once-again realization of what he'd done and he felt weak in the knees. She was a werewolf now. He had turned her.

My God, he thought. *I never imagined....* Suddenly, he felt overwhelmed with fondness for this precious woman beneath him, this priceless, rare creature who was everything he had ever wanted, and who was everything his people needed. He slowly pulled out of her, which drew a moan of protest from her parted lips; her brow drew into a delicate "V".

He smiled. In a moment, he had re-buttoned his jeans. It was the only disrobing he'd bothered with before he couldn't wait any longer and had to be inside of her. His smile didn't waver as he gently rolled her onto her side and lay down behind her, pulling her smooth, naked form up against his chest to spoon her.

He noticed the inside of her right arm then, and its lack of a blue mark. He glanced at his own left hand; his mark was gone as well. They were longer needed.

Her hair smelled like lavender and felt like silk against his cheek. He gently kissed the side of her neck, just above the marks he'd left. And then he pulled her covers over them both, not even bothering to remove his boots.

He was too satisfied. Too content.

Nothing mattered now but laying here and holding the woman he loved.

And hoping that she would grow to love him back.

Chapter Sixteen: Cold Case

It was the sound of his cell phone beeping that drew Daniel out of his deep, comfortable slumber. He raised his head and peeked over Lily's still sleeping form. His phone was resting on the side table against the opposite wall. He wanted to ignore it, but he knew who it was from by the ring tone. This would be too important.

With a deep sigh of regret, Daniel placed another gentle kiss on his mate's cheek and snuck out from beneath the covers. He picked up the phone, muted it, and with one last longing glance at Lily, he left the room, closing the door gently behind him.

Once out in the hall, he realized that Tabitha and James were not home; they'd most likely gone out long ago. He popped the cell open, noting the ungodly hour: 4:25 a.m. He pressed "talk" and listened.

"Chief, I'm afraid there's been another one." It was detective Knight's voice. He sounded strange. It took Daniel a moment to recognize that tone, and when he did, the warmth he'd been wrapped so deliciously in began to chill and drop away.

"Who was it, Aiden?"

Knight took a long time to answer. "I'm sorry, Chief. You need to come see for yourself."

With that Daniel's heart sank. There could be only two reasons that the detective would hesitate in filling Daniel in on the murder victim's identity. One – it was family. Or, two – it was a friend.

He thought of Tabitha, and then shook his head. No. She was with James Valentine and he was very strong. He would protect her. But his voice said, "It's not Tabitha –"

Knight cut him off. "No, Chief." The detective quickly gave him the address and hung up. Daniel dialed Tabitha's number. It went to voice mail.

He hung up again and peered over his shoulder at the closed door that led to his sleeping mate beyond. He took a deep breath and sighed, pocketing his phone. Leaving Lily at this point in time was just about the last thing he wanted to do. She needed him now. He'd just turned her; she would wake up a different person and she would feel that difference. She might have questions. It was the most basic thing in the world for him to want to hold her, to comfort her, to help her through this transition.

Quite suddenly, for the first time in fifteen years, Daniel hated his job. He wondered why he'd ever wanted to go into it in the first place.

With great effort, he forced himself to find a piece of paper and a pen and he left Lily a note. He would return as soon as he possibly could. He only hoped that it wouldn't be as long as he feared it might be.

As it was, the Mayor and his family were dead and their killer was loose. The Mayor had been a good friend to Daniel and to the Kane family, and Daniel had yet to mourn his death, much less track down his killer. Now this....

If this new murder was committed by the same person, then they not only had a killer on their hands – they had a *serial* killer on their hands. One was worlds worse than the other. And one involved the Feds. As it was, they already wanted in on the

case since it involved the killing of a man in political office. They were chomping at the bit and Daniel had a feeling that his city was going to be overrun by men in cheap suits and plastic dress shoes before the week was out.

With the stealth befitting of his kind, Daniel left the house, locking the door behind him. He mounted his motorcycle and donned his helmet just to set a good example; he was the Chief of Police. Then he started up the bike and pulled out of the lot.

Well, that'll wake her for sure, he thought, with a bemused shake of his head as he hit the blacktop and twisted the throttle. *At least I left a note.*

He was at the address given to him by his detective within five minutes. Out front, a carnival of blue, white and red lights flashed hari-kari, slicing the early morning darkness into tell-tale, ominous pieces. The world would know that something had gone wrong here.

Yellow tape had already been stretched around the fence in the front yard. Daniel drew the bike alongside another squad car and shut it down. He pulled off his helmet. Instantly, his blue eyes began to glow. He had to force his fangs back into his gums. Nausea roiled in his stomach. *No...* It couldn't be.

He recognized the stench of death at once, and beneath it, as one sensed what was worse than the worst, Daniel caught the scent of family. Had Knight lied?

Daniel was off of his bike and moving through the crowd with determined speed. When he was spotted by the members of his pack, they approached him quickly as if to surround and protect him. And to protect everyone else *from* him.

Detective Knight was the first by his side. "Chief, I'm sorry. But you need to reign yourself in." Aiden Knight gestured smoothly to the glow in Daniel's eyes, and Daniel stopped in his tracks. With a hard, shaky breath, he concentrated on forcing down the terror and bile rising in his throat, attempting for all he was worth to get himself under control. When he finally felt the wolf in him retreat and found the breath to speak, it was through a growl that he barely suppressed. "**Who, Aiden...**"

"Your uncle," Knight told him, plainly.

Major Jordan Stark moved ahead a little and stood in the doorway of the house as if to block his boss's entrance. "I want to warn you, Chief. It's worse than you think," Stark said.

That, Daniel had already figured out. It wasn't just his uncle. As he'd approached the unfamiliar house, the scents around him had grown stronger and separated. There was the blood that he now knew was his uncle's blood. But there was other blood as well. Daniel recognized it as somehow more than human. As far as Daniel knew, there was only one kind of creature that was somehow more than human and yet not a werewolf. A Dormant.

"Christ, Jordan," he said, his voice cracking the slightest bit. "Get out of the way." Daniel looked at his friend beseechingly.

Beside him, Lieutenant Michael Angel nodded at Stark, and the two exchanged ready-or-not looks. Daniel knew that they figured he was going to lose his shit. He

wasn't so sure they were wrong.

Jordan moved to the side. Daniel steeled his nerves, as he ritualistically did every time he entered the scene of a homicide. Then he stepped into the lit entryway beyond.

Already, there was blood. There was blood and there were, as of yet, no bodies. Daniel followed the garish, red trail through the living room, down the hall, and into the bedroom at the end. There was a queen-sized bed in this room and, atop it, two bodies.

William Kane had been shot. This was apparent only because there were at least a dozen bullet-sized holes in the front of his shirt. That wasn't what had killed him, of course. He had also been beheaded.

A single bullet however, had been more than enough to kill his mate, who lay a few feet away from his body, atop the blood-drenched mattress. Even in death, she was beautiful. Her long, chestnut colored hair spilled over the side of the bed and soaked up the werewolf's blood as if it were thirsty for it. Daniel could see, even from where he was standing, that she'd been shot through the heart. One bullet, point-blank.

Just as the Mayor and his family had been killed.

Daniel's gaze flitted from her lovely face, which appeared for all the world to be in the quiet repose of sleep, to the beheaded body of his uncle. And then to his head, which lay on the floor a few feet from the bed.

William Kane had been a fairly young man, by werewolf standards. He'd been ten years younger than his brother, Daniel's father, and due to the way that werewolves aged, though he was forty-five years old, he appeared only a few years older than Daniel.

Daniel was more grateful than he would have admitted that his uncle's face was turned away from him at that moment. His blue-black hair was cut short, unlike Daniel's, and the tell-tale tattoo of a Grumman Goose on the back of his neck marked him for who he was. He'd always loved planes, loved flying. He'd made a living out of it.

Daniel was beyond feeling at that moment. A strange sort of numbness was climbing up his legs and spreading across his belly. At the same time, his heart sank into his stomach and his fingers went numb. And through it all, his blood boiled. It roiled and churned, hot like acid. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

He'd found his mate, Daniel thought, absently. *He was claiming her, changing her when this happened.*

William Kane had been lucky enough to find the woman he loved, the woman who was destined to spend a werewolf forever with him and even bear his children. It was what every werewolf desired more than anything else in the world. And he had found her seconds too late. Someone had taken this rare and precious gift from him at the final hour.

That killer had known full well just what William Kane really was. The beheading was evidence enough or that.

Beside Daniel, detective Knight leaned in close. "Wound in the Dormant matches the wounds in the Mayor's family," he said, softly. "The bullet was carved out of the crown molding; same make. Glock nine millimeter."

A thousand thoughts chased each other through Daniel's fevered brain at that moment. However, two of them were stronger than the others, as if written in bold and all-caps, as they floated willy-nilly before his mind's eye. Someone in Baton Rouge was killing people who were close to Daniel. And that person knew that he was a werewolf.

"Lieutenant, where are Jennings and Mayfield?" he asked.

Michael Angel, who was still standing by his side, pulled his smart phone out of his pocket. As he did, he replied, "It's Jennings' day off, sir. But Mayfield is on traffic." He waited, his phone ready as if knowing his Chief would have him make a call.

"Get Mayfield to Tabitha's house right away. Have him shadow Lily," Daniel said. He didn't have to tell his men that the murders had become personal. They were well aware of it already.

As Angel made the call, Daniel pulled his own cell out of his pocket and dialed a number. Lily didn't answer. He left her a message, wondering all the while where her cell phone even was. He didn't remember it being on her when Valentine had pulled her out of Cole's territory. She'd been through a lot in the last few days and, in all probability, the phone had been lost somewhere along the way. He hung up when he'd finished the message and then dialed Tabitha again. She still didn't answer. He left her a message, mentally cursing women in general, and hung up.

"Mayfield is on his way, Chief," Angel told him, hanging up and pocketing his phone. "I also called Jonathan. He said he'd head over to your sister's place as well, just in case."

Daniel thanked him. Then the lieutenant turned toward the other men in the room and joined the forensics team. It would be his job to make certain nothing untoward wound up in the coroner's office – nothing that would give away who and what they were.

Stark nodded once to Daniel and joined Angel, leaving Daniel standing with Knight.

"You gonna hold up?" Knight asked him, turning to face him completely.

Daniel eyed his friend for a silent moment. There was no correct answer to that question, of course. But Daniel nodded anyway, clapped Knight once on the shoulder, and then turned and left the house, not looking back.

* * * *

Lily rolled over in the bed and instantly felt the emptiness where Daniel had been the last time she'd rolled over. Her eyes flew open and she sat up.

He was gone.

She blinked, her brow furrowing. She looked down at herself and the covers. She was still naked and the sheets were wrinkled. She blinked as memories came rushing back to her.

Then she raised her fingers and brushed the sides of her neck. The wounds were

obvious to the touch and still tender. But, as she felt them, she also felt her lips curl into a smile.

She took a deep, cleansing breath and sank back down onto the bed, wrapping her long legs around the blankets with the languid grace of a sated cat. "Daniel Kane, you'd better have a damned good reason for leaving my bed," she muttered quietly, still smiling.

After a few luxuriously lazy moments in the bed, she stretched again and got up. She needed a shower. She could feel a stickiness between her legs and she wanted to clean the wounds on her neck.

She made her way to the guest closet. Luckily, she'd stashed a few changes of her own clothes in here long ago, so it was no problem to pick out an ensemble and take it with her to the bathroom.

Without reservation, she opened the door and walked, still completely unclothed, into the hallway beyond. For some reason, she simply knew that she was alone in the house. She heard no one else in there. No breathing. No heartbeats.

At that thought, she paused, stopping in her tracks.

No heartbeats? I can tell that there are no heartbeats.

She listened. She could hear the kids playing in the back yard across the street. They were talking with each other. No, they were *whispering*, and yet, she could hear them.

She could hear a man watering his lawn, using his fingers to spray the water from the nozzle of the hose. She recognized that method of watering and knew it was Mr. Broden, five houses down.

She could hear a humming sound, like the buzz of electricity. It ticked. Ticked again. And then switched and a higher-pitched buzzing starting up where the other had stopped. She knew, without having to check, that it was a traffic light. She'd heard them up close. She knew what they sounded like. But the nearest traffic light was a block away.

"Oh my God," she muttered. She could hear *everything*.

And she could smell things, too. Someone in the neighborhood had put their trash out a day early. Tabitha's neighbor was falling off of her non-smoking wagon. Tabitha's other neighbor was burning scented candles. Some animal nearby had just given birth; she could actually smell the placenta. And the cherry blossoms a few houses down were ripe and in bloom.

She could even smell Daniel. On her own skin.

She flushed hot at the thought and a small part of her didn't want to shower – didn't want to wash him off. She felt somehow sultry. Like an animal in heat.

What was happening to her? Instinctively, she once more brought her fingers up to the marks on her neck. "He changed me," she said, aloud. As if saying it out loud gave the verity of it real substance, she reeled from the shock and found herself against the wall, using it to help her remain upright.

"I'm a werewolf." With that, she blinked a few times, pushed against the wall to

straightened herself, and continued to walk, almost on auto-pilot, down the hall. She felt sort of numb, as if stuck in a kind of dream that she could never wake from. It had only been a few days ago that she'd even learned werewolves actually existed.

And now she *was* one! It would be enough to rattle anyone's nerves.

At the same time, though she was overwhelmed by the unrealistic turn that real life had taken, she couldn't deny she also felt... *good*. Like, *really* good. She felt stronger. She felt as if she could punch a hole through the wall if she wanted to. Or rip a door off of its hinges.

Lily rounded the corner of the hallway and walked into the living room. She would never admit this out loud, but the truth was, she also felt beautiful; the way a super model might feel. Or Wonder Woman. She felt sexy in that special way that usually only came in dreams, where no man could resist your charms and every guy wanted to ask you to dance.

She smiled a slow smile and shook her head. A note on the coffee table caught her attention. It was written in a man's hand, printed in all-caps. It was definitely not the curly cursive that Lily had long associated with Tabitha's writing.

Lily strode to the table and picked up the note, moving all of her clothes into one arm as she did so. She read the words slowly, a frown furrowing her brow by the time she was finished. She read it again.

Instantly, she felt sad. But not for herself. For Daniel.

"That's quite a life you've made for yourself, Chief," she spoke softly. Any kind of job that yanked you heartlessly, out of your lover's bed and threw you directly into a murder scene was one hell of a vocation. She felt very sorry for him.

She was also worried. Was it always going to be like this? Baton Rouge wasn't Chicago or Detroit or New York City, but it wasn't Hanalei, Hawaii, either. It had its fair share of crime and a good amount of that was violent.

With a heart-felt sigh, Lily dropped the note back on the table and headed toward the bathroom and its shower.

Thirty minutes later, she was clean and dressed and she'd combed her long, gold hair out with her fingers. She pulled the toothbrush out of the drawer where she'd left it while she'd been visiting Tabitha and squeezed out a good-sized dollop of paste onto its bristles. Then she used her free hand to wipe the fog off of the mirror.

She dropped the toothbrush in the sink and stared at her reflection.

Her gold-flecked-brown eyes were no longer simply gold-flecked. They were full on gold and they were *glowing*.

Her heart rate sped up at once and her breathing quickened. Not a single flaw marred her skin, which also seemed to glow, as if lit from within. There was an ethereal shimmer to her honeyed hair, even while it was wet. Her teeth seemed even whiter than they had been before.

"*Holy mother...*" she whispered. No wonder she felt beautiful. She really *was*.

* * * *

Tabitha wasn't sure how it had happened, and she almost didn't care why, but

she was more happy that she would care to admit that she was laying next to a man – a werewolf – as incredibly powerful and sexy as James Valentine. One of her arms was draped over his chest, and her head was propped up on his bicep. The fingers of his left hand lazily played with a lock of her blue-black hair.

Tabitha took a deep breath, enjoying the scent of him. And then she asked something that she'd been working up the nerve to ask ever since he'd made that phone call to his pack while they were on the plane to New Mexico.

"James..." She bit her lip. "Why were you workin' for Cole?"

Valentine glanced down at Tabitha as she looked up at him and it looked as if he was considering the question carefully. Eventually, he hugged her closer to him and sighed. "I was born in a little town in Arizona in 1881. But my mate was born in 1933, in Mississippi. She was beautiful; a truly breathtaking Dormant. But she was born into the most unfortunate form possible for that place and time." His expression took on a far-off look.

"She was black," Tabitha guessed.

James nodded once and, as he continued, Tabitha could almost see the images flitting behind his molten silver eyes. She was growing acquainted with the waves of power that rolled off of the alpha werewolf at this point. Right now they were waves of sadness and an anger that would never fully go away.

"We met in 1955 and were in love at once. We mated and I changed her and she became pregnant." He paused, his tone growing more quiet. "She was a very religious woman, despite the fact that I threw more than one curve ball into her philosophy with our supernatural existence." At that, he smiled a small smile and Tabitha could hear the love in his voice. "But she was stubborn. She insisted we be married. There was no arguing with her; especially after her transition."

He sighed. "So, we were married in a very private ceremony in the only church with a pastor that would see a white man and a black woman joined in holy matrimony. I had my reservations. We both did. We knew what people were saying. Hell, I could hear them a mile away."

He shrugged beneath Tabitha's head. "But we kept them to ourselves." He stopped then and drew a deep, calming breath, as if steeling himself to go on. "They set fire to our home while I was away one morning. She was nine months pregnant; werewolves have the same gestation period as humans. She had had a hard night. Our son had been kicking her in the ribs."

Tabitha could see the shadows cross his handsome face. His gray eyes took on a slight glow. "He never let her sleep..." He fell silent for several full minutes. Tabitha knew enough not to break that silence.

Finally, he cleared his throat and went on. "When I got home, the second floor was already caving in. Our neighbors begged me not to go inside. But I had to try." He looked down at Tabitha then and gestured to the scar on his arm. Then the one on his cheek. "I found her on the first floor. She'd fallen through when the wooden beams of our bedroom gave out beneath her. They had--" He closed his eyes.

Tabitha held her breath.

"They had cut my son out of her and she hadn't had a chance to heal completely before she and the baby were trapped in the fire." He opened his eyes again and stared unseeing at the ceiling. "There was no heartbeat. Not from her. And not from him."

Tabitha felt the tears gather in her eyes. Her guts clenched tight as she gently raised her hand to touch his cheek. She could not imagine how hellish it would have been for him – finding his wife's beautiful body, tortured and burnt into an unrecognizable form. And then finding his murdered child. The pain that she could not imagine was still unbearable. She didn't need to tell him that she was sorry. He already knew. But she said it anyway. "James... My God –" She broke off, swallowed hard, and finished, "I'm so sorry."

James took a minute to compose himself and then continued, this part of his story quite obviously a lot less painful than the first part. "A few weeks later, a man with green eyes approached me. I could smell that he was a werewolf. So, when he asked me for a minute of my time, I agreed. I had nothing left to lose."

"Cole?"

James nodded. "He told me that he could find the men who had killed my wife. He wouldn't tell me how he knew, but I didn't care. He tracked them down and I took their lives." He paused again, letting the memories slide through his mind. "I worked for him on and off from that day forward. I figured I owed him."

Tabitha waited a good long while before asking her next question. When she did, she framed it as carefully as she could. "Did he kill all of those people?"

James, in turn, took a while in answering. Finally, he said simply, "No."

Tabitha frowned. "How do you know?"

"For a long time, I didn't. I thought there was a chance he ~~was~~ the murderer. He was always disappearing at odd times – right off the radar. And it always turned out that those times coincided exactly with the times of the most publicized, most vicious murders. Serial killings. Things like that."

"But?"

James smiled a small smile. "But once, just after he did one of his disappearing acts, I went looking for him. I found him, too. He appeared out of thin air, breathing hard and covered in blood. He was sobbing." He paused and seemed to consider something. "In that moment, I knew. I knew he was involved somehow – but that he wasn't guilty. Not for the deaths of the innocent."

Tabitha had nothing to say to that. It was an answer that bred more questions.

"He saved Lily from the fire in New Mexico," James went on. "And then he let her go... It was so unlike the image of him that werewolves have built up in our minds over the decades. It was much more like the Malcolm Cole that helped me track down my wife's killers fifty years ago."

Tabitha thought about this in stoic silence. Then resolutely she pulled the covers back up over them both and closed her eyes as he wrapped his strong arms around her.

Chapter Seventeen: Good Cop, Bad Cop

Lily nervously adjusted the small silk scarf she'd tied around her neck. She felt so much like Sookie Stackhouse in True Blood that it was plain ridiculous. How obvious could a person be?

She had to remind herself that vampires didn't really exist and that practically no one realized werewolves existed either and that anyone noticing the scarf would simply assume she was making a fashion statement. Besides – it *was* kind of cute. Kelly, the Starbucks barista, was always very honest with her and she'd told her as much. And the color matched her hair.

Christ, I'm giddy, Lily thought to herself. *I sound like a teenager.*

She sighed and sat back in the black lounge chair beside one of the several outdoor tables they'd set up around the perimeter of the coffee shop. The sun had only risen on the horizon a few short minutes ago. She was never up this early in the morning. She was a night person, by nature. But there was so much going on inside of her and around her that there had been no way in hell she could have stayed home.

She'd lost her own cell phone somewhere between Tabitha's house and Daniel's, but Tabitha had a landline for her computer, so she'd used that phone to try reaching Tabitha's cell. It had gone straight to voice mail. Lily smiled. *Three guesses as to that one,* she thought. And she didn't want to bother Daniel. He had innocent lives in his hands at the moment.

The next number she'd dialed was for the taxi service. She'd taken a taxi to her own apartment, retrieved some cash and her license and a few other necessities, crammed them into a purse, and then driven her own car to Bluebonnet. She was growing quite familiar with that particular street again.

Now Lily took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She could smell the coffee out here, the exhaust from the street, the rain from last night, the fresh earth from a garden somewhere nearby. She could hear people talking inside. She had to fight not to eaves drop. She could hear their heartbeats.

One of them was getting louder. Drawing nearer.

"Miss St.Claire?"

Lily looked up, almost making the mistake of taking off her sunglasses as she did so. She'd put the shades on when she'd realized that she didn't, as of yet, have the expertise in werewolf powers to make the glow in her eyes subside. And Daniel wasn't there to help her learn. Luckily, the sun was in that uber annoying and bright place on the horizon that practically screamed for sunglasses.

A man stood beside the table, a hard back book in one of his hands, a sleeved paper cup of coffee in the other. He had short brown-black hair and blue gray eyes. Lily recognized him at once.

She'd gone to high school with him eons ago and now he was a cop who worked with Daniel. He was currently out of uniform, but she vaguely recalled that he'd been one of the men seated in the marked car that had been posted in front of Daniel's house a few days ago.

"Yes?" she said, shifting in her seat. "Officer..." She searched her recollection for his name. *Allan* something.

He smiled an understanding smile and flushed slightly. "I'm sorry. I forget when I'm not wearing my name tag. You probably don't remember me from high school either –"

"Yes, actually, I do." She gently insisted. "Allan, right?"

He blinked. And then he, too smiled, appearing for all the world like a young Anthony Michael Hall who'd just learned that the prom queen knew he existed. "Yeah, that's right. Allan Jennings." He put his coffee down on the table beside them and extended his hand in a friendly gesture. She shook his hand and cocked her head to one side.

"Jennings – you know, if I recall correctly," she said, "you were quite the genius in school. Weren't you captain of the debate team and didn't you graduate with all kinds of honors?"

He blushed and held up his hand, as if to spare her from saying anything further. "I did okay."

Lily had to smile at that. He was modest. *But he must be very nervous*, she thought. It was strange to her how hard his heart was beating. "So... I thought you'd be a lawyer or a politician. Or, maybe accountant to the stars," she told him, flashing a perfect white smile. "What's the deal with the law enforcement gig?"

He picked up his coffee and took a sip, flinching when it was too hot. Then he shrugged. "You know how it goes. The geeks really just want to play football."

Lily laughed. He was quite charming. He'd grown since high school; he must have shot up half a foot and he'd filled out nicely. She glanced at his ring finger, which she had a horrible habit of doing when meeting a half-way decent man. No ring.

And, as she also had the horrible habit of doing, she then wondered why.

"I take it this is your day off?" she asked, knowing that it must be or he would be mired in the murder muck that Daniel was currently trapped in.

When he nodded, she gestured to the seat across from her. "I don't mean to be presumptuous, but would you care to join me? I've been snubbed by both my best friend and my boyfriend and I could use the company." She desperately wanted to take off her sunglasses, as she'd always considered it rude to talk to someone while wearing shades. But, she wasn't sure whether she could chance Jennings – or anyone else, for that matter – noticing the odd brightness to her now gold eyes.

Jennings shrugged, nodded, and sat down as he again attempted a sip from his cup of coffee. He put his book on the table and leaned back in the chair. "You know, you weren't a C student in school either, as I recall. You did pretty well. I heard you became a social worker."

Lily nodded. "I guess my own parents weren't messed up enough for me to get my fill of family problems. Had to absorb everyone else's too."

At this, he shook his head. "Actually, it fits you. You were always the one who stood up for the little guy. Even stood up for *me*, once."

Lily blinked. "You're kidding." She didn't remember that. But the truth was, he

was right; she'd defended a lot of people in school, from kindergarten on up. She didn't remember their names, just the anger she felt at seeing them picked on. It had always colored her vision red, and she'd always jumped headlong into the fray.

"Nope," Jennings smiled. "Not kidding. Remember Rosella Barrios and her boyfriend?"

Lily nodded. "Oh yeah. I remember her. *And* him." Did she ever. Rosella and Tabitha had been arch enemies in school. Barrios had done everything from smear Vaseline onto Tabitha's locker combination – to set the entire locker on fire. Her brute of a boy friend was no better. "I heard Martin Gomez was doing time these days," Lily said.

Jennings nodded. "But long before his days of auto theft and breaking and entering, his pastime mostly involved making my life miserable. One Tuesday morning, he ripped my guitar out of my hand and ran across the school with it." He pinned her with a frankly admiring gaze. "You chased him down and took it back."

Lily stared at Allan through her sunglasses. Then she couldn't help herself when she took them off and stared at him some more. "Oh my God, I *do* remember that. Only, I had no idea it was your guitar. I just knew it wasn't *his*." She'd cornered Gomez against the wire fence on the opposite end of the parking lot and he'd laughed at her crazy "gringa chica" tenacity and handed the guitar over while he shook his head. She'd walked back with the instrument, but by that time, the bell had rung and no one was left in the halls. So she'd turned it into the office.

Well, now she knew. Apparently, it had been Allan's. Lily shook her head and laughed softly. "I hope it didn't get hurt in the chase."

"No," Allan assured her. "Not that you'd have been able to tell. I couldn't play worth a damn." He sighed and scooted his chair out, standing slowly. "It's been great catching up, Miss St.Claire –"

"Please, call me Lily."

He smiled and nodded. "Lily, it's truly been a pleasure. I'm afraid I have to be somewhere else right now, but I'm sure I'll see you around. You know, hanging out with underdog runts and riding off on stolen motorcycles."

Lily blushed and covered her face with her hands.

He laughed. "Catch you later."

She nodded and shooed him away. When she looked up, she saw him climb into a silver Dodge Challenger parked at the curb several cars down the street. He started it up and pulled away. Lily watched him go, wondering quietly, why his heart had been beating so hard and so fast. And she was fairly new at this scent thing, so she couldn't be sure, but she could have sworn that, quite suddenly, he had smelled like... *anger*.

She shrugged it off and finished her coffee. Then she popped a breath mint, chewed it up, and threw her cup in the trash.

The air was quite thick with moisture this morning and she could smell a storm on the way. She'd been able to do that while human; now it was almost certain. It may be

clear as a bell at the moment, but by two p.m., there would be thunder and lightning.

She smiled. She left the Starbucks patio and began to stroll up Bluebonnet toward the Mall of Louisiana, where her car was parked.

By the time she got to it, the wind was already picking up. Lily looked up at the sky as she unlocked her door. In the distance, a rolling black storm cloud was riding toward the city. She slid into her seat just as the faintest sound of thunder reached her ears. She wondered whether she was the only one at the Mall of Louisiana who could hear that particular thunder clap.

And then she froze. For, beneath the sound of the thunder rode another sound. Fast and hard, like a drum.

Before she could fully realize that it was the sound of a heart beating, the owner of that heart rose up in the back seat and wrapped one strong arm around her neck, yanking her unsuspecting body hard against her seat. His other hand held a gun, and screwed onto the end of that gun was a silencer.

Without pause, he shoved the barrel of the gun against her ribcage and pulled the trigger. Once, twice – three, four, five times. Again and again, he emptied the rounds into her chest, until the 9mm was empty and seventeen bullet holes fought to close in Lily's unconscious form.

Allan Jennings opened the passenger-side door to Lily's car, got out, and then shut the door again, glancing around quickly as he did so. No one was paying any attention. Then he got back into the car on the driver's side, shoving Lily's body into the passenger seat to make room. Blood oozed from her wounds, drenching her clothes and the cloth material of the seats beneath her.

Jennings wasted no time, moving with efficient speed as he pulled a set of handcuffs from his back pocket and positioned Lily's wrists so that they were gathered at her back. "Didn't anyone ever tell you to check the back seat of your car before getting in, Lily?" He snapped the cuffs on her wrists and then pulled a second pair from the waistband of his jeans beneath his t-shirt. Both sets of these particular handcuffs were made, not for humans, but for werewolves, so they expanded to a larger size than the standard police-issues. And Lily had small ankles. He was able to ensnare her legs easily.

Once he had her firmly secured, he sat back up and gazed down at her. The point-blank gun shots wouldn't kill her, but had knocked her out almost instantly, just as he had known they would. They always did.

Lily now lay with her eyes closed, her head resting against the door. The way she was cuffed caused her shoulders to roll back, and her collarbone and breasts were more pronounced.

Jennings' crotch ached.

Her hair looked like spun-gold in the early morning light, despite the spatters of blood that marred its shining smoothness. Her peach-gold skin was flawless. But then, as far as he was concerned, it always had been.

His blue-gray gaze fell on the scarf around her neck and with slow determination he unknotted the silken material and pulled it off of her, exposing the vampire-like bite

marks beneath.

His gaze darkened, his jaw setting. His expression turned hard. With that, he faced front once more, slipped a new clip into his Glock, and laid the gun across his lap. Then he turned the key in the ignition and pulled the stick shift out of the parking lot.

Chapter Eighteen: Deep Cover

"She must have been on foot, but her scent just disappears." Jonathan Kane turned his face toward the wind, which was really beginning to pick up speed. Miniscule droplets of rain misted the side of his face. Beside him, James Valentine was scenting the air and listening at the same time. They were in front of Tabitha's house and Lily was gone.

"Can you sense her?" Tabitha asked softly.

Valentine gazed steadily down at her. His expression was unreadable. He shook his head and left it at that.

Just then a marked police car rode up, drawing flush with the curb. Tabitha recognized the driver as one of the men who had been stationed out in front of her brother's house a few days ago. She remembered that his name was Mayfield. She nodded at him and he nodded back, getting out of the car. As he approached, his expression turned pained. "Don't tell me she's gone," he said, his tone just about hopeless.

Tabitha nodded. "I think she must have left before sunrise."

Mayfield held up his hand as if to tell her to stop and then pinched the bridge of his nose with his other hand. "I told you not to tell me she was gone," he muttered. "The Chief is going to have me canned."

Tabitha ran a hand through her long blue-black hair and thought hard. *People don't just teleport*, she told herself. *If her scent disappears, then it's because she stopped walking*. She blinked and almost slapped her forehead. *Duh! She got a ride*. "I don't think she would have gone very far on foot, so I'm guessing she got a ride, Officer Mayfield. Can you run a check with the taxi services around here?"

Jonathan Kane turned and looked down at his granddaughter with stark pride. Tabitha found herself blushing a little. Beside her, James was watching and listening carefully as Mayfield pulled a radio off of his belt and began communicating with someone on the other end.

A few minutes later, they had the name of the taxi company that Lily had used – and they had a destination. James immediately headed toward his black sedan, and Tabitha and her grandfather followed closely behind. Mayfield moved to his patrol car as well.

Once everyone was seated, the two cars pulled out into traffic, Mayfield leading the way. Now Tabitha just had to call her brother back. He'd left her a message to call him and she had yet to even tell him that Lily was gone. Probably, it was nothing to be too concerned about, but James said that he couldn't sense her. And she wasn't sure what that meant. She couldn't imagine a Guardian not being able to sense his charge. Was he lying to her? And if he was – then *why*?

Then again, Tabitha had never known a Guardian before; it was a right not given out lightly, since the granting of it came with a good amount of extra power. It was possible that Lily was just out gallivanting about town in her new werewolf body, enjoying the freedom that came with her transformation and that she was simply too

far out of range for James to feel.

Yep. Tabitha was going with that. Because the alternative was just too terrible to think about.

Either way, Daniel deserved to know. So, Tabitha pulled her cell phone out of her purse and prepared to apologize, once more, for ever turning it off. She pushed a speed dial number and waited.

Daniel picked up on the first ring, and must have done so without looking at the caller ID, because all he said was, "Kane."

"Hey, big brother, it's me."

"Tabitha?" He sounded at once starkly concerned. "Oh hell, don't tell me —"

"We're headed toward Bluebonnet and the Mall of Louisiana area." She tried to put as much nonchalance in her voice as possible. "Looks like Lily decided to do some shopping."

There was a brief but heavy pause. And then Daniel said, "I'll meet you there."

* * * *

Daniel hadn't told his sister yet that her uncle was dead. But worse was that he hadn't told his grandfather that his son was dead. Jonathan Kane had already lost one son: He'd lost Daniel's father years ago.

Brandon Kane and his wife, Daniel's mother, Genevieve, had been camping to celebrate their wedding anniversary. They'd been murdered and, since they were both werewolves, Daniel had always assumed that it had been a very grisly murder. There were only a few, harsh methods by which to kill a werewolf. None of them were pretty.

But Jonathan had kept those details from his grandchildren, perhaps wisely.

Now William was dead as well.

A parent should never have to witness their child's death. Nature was not supposed to run that way. Natural death was hard enough. But it was not a Benjamin Button world and death in the wrong order brought with it an unnatural measure of pain. It was too much for any man to bear.

Why did it seem to Daniel that so many people, werewolf and human, had to bear it anyway? He'd seen so much of it over the years. As a cop, he couldn't escape it. The small coffins....

As he climbed onto his bike and started it up, he wondered at his changed and jaded attitude toward his job. It had never bothered him before. He'd wanted to be a cop for as long as he could remember and now he was the Police Chief of Baton Rouge.

Was he going to start going sour now?

He pulled the bike out of the police station lot, forgetting about the helmet for once. The ride to the Mall of Louisiana was fast, despite the now pouring rain. A part of him was regretting his choice of vehicles today. Wet streets made for slick streets and coming out of a motorcycle accident without a single scratch was a difficult thing to explain away.

But another part of him enjoyed the sting of the drenching wind and the way it

cleaned the air. It felt as though it cleaned him, as well. He needed that.

Daniel rode around the large lot until he spotted Mayfield's squad car parked in one of the further, outlying spaces. Tabitha and Jonathan were standing in front of a black sedan parked beside the marked car. They both raised their arms and waved Daniel over from across the distance and Daniel angled into the proper aisle, heading in that direction.

The scent of Lily's blood slammed into him like a freight train. He skidded the bike to a halt, putting his left boot down on the tarmac. He was still a hundred yards from his sister and grandfather. He could scent Valentine with them as well and he wondered, distractedly, where the Guardian werewolf was.

But the bulk of his attention was focused on his immediate surroundings. He knew Lily's blood well enough to recognize it when he smelled it. The scent had been sharp and sudden, there one second and gone the next.

Daniel straddled the bike and turned his face up slightly, his stark blue gaze scanning the parking lot. He now cursed the rain that he had been enjoying so much only moments before, as it served to wash away the scent he searched for so desperately.

"She was here," Valentine said from beside him.

Daniel wasn't exactly surprised to find the Guardian werewolf suddenly at his side, but he was at least impressed. He turned to face the older alpha. "She's hurt. I can smell her blood."

Valentine nodded. "She's gone now. And whoever took her knew what she was. There can be no other explanation."

Daniel's own blood drained from his face. For a brief moment, he saw bright white spots. His hands clenched and unclenched around the handlebars of his motorcycle. He thought of the Mayor and of his uncle and his uncle's mate. He felt suddenly, overwhelmingly sick.

He swallowed, fighting to keep the bile down.

The thing that he had feared the most in this unthinkable world was actually happening. It was real. In the space of a few short hours, his life had become a waking nightmare.

Valentine gently placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed, his shining, silver gaze capturing Daniel's and holding it fast. "I couldn't tell Tabitha this, but I can feel her. She's alive, Kane - but we need to act very fast."

And, just like that, fifteen years of law enforcement training kicked in, clicking into place with a nearly audible finality. Daniel found himself straightening, his expression going stony. He pulled his bike into an empty space and shut it down.

As his sister and grandfather made their way toward him, trailed hesitantly by Officer Louis Mayfield, Daniel pulled the phone out of his pocket and flipped it open.

Within a few seconds, he'd put out an APB on both Lily and her black Dodge Neon.

"Chief?" Mayfield greeted, questioningly, as the three of them approached.

"Mayfield, I want everyone who is off duty to come back *on* duty," Daniel ordered.

"That includes your partner." He thought of Jennings and how inherently intelligent the man was. He was good at finding people; he'd brought in his fair share of thugs over the years. And though Jennings and Mayfield had let Lily slip past them earlier in the week, the truth was, Jennings had handled the situation well. He'd followed proper procedure and he'd done it quickly. Besides, Lily hadn't exactly played fair.

Daniel wanted Jennings on this case. There was a reason he had trusted the two of them to watch over his mate in the first place. "Go to his house and drag him out of bed if you have to, Louis. We have a serial killer loose in the city and he or she has taken Lily. I need the two of you on this ASAP."

"Yes sir." Mayfield nodded and spun on his heel, heading back toward his car as he pulled his cell phone out of his uniform shirt pocket.

If he'd thought there was a ghost of a chance that Lily's cell phone was anywhere near her, he would contact the FBI personally and ask them to turn the phone's speaker on and locate it via GPS. However, he'd already tried her phone and he'd also already accepted that she'd lost it long ago.

Everything was now riding on the location of her car.

Daniel turned to his grandfather. It was time to face the music. He needed to tell his grandfather the truth about William.

Lightning split the sky above them and thunder rolled heavy and low across the black top. To the outside world, a cop in black stood beside a motorcycle and spoke to another man in a voice that was drowned out by the storm.

To Jonathan Kane, his grandson's voice was the only sound he could hear.

* * * *

Lily moaned low and rolled over, her wrists catching and pulling in the handcuffs that chained her to a thick, metal pole behind the bed. She coughed violently on the leftover blood that had pooled in her esophagus. As she did this, Jennings stood from where he'd been seated beside the bed and retrieved a wet cloth.

When she was done coughing, he brushed the cloth across her mouth and chin, wiping the blood away.

Lily closed her eyes, not wanting to see him. There was once more no pain in her body, but she felt incredibly weak and drained. She'd lost a lot of blood.

The first time she'd awoken after Allan Jennings had shot her, she was still in her car, but this time in the passenger seat and bound with handcuffs that should not have worked on her. She could instantly feel her superhuman strength, and yet the cuffs did not break. They didn't even bend.

Jennings had told her to settle down and that her struggles were useless. He'd glanced at her and then turned his attention back to the road.

In a sudden fit of rage and panic, Lily had attempted to raise both of her legs and kick him. She'd hoped that she could kick him right out of the car, not caring if the car drove off of the highway as a result. She knew she could live through that. If that didn't work, she would jump out of the car herself.

But just as she'd begun to attempt the act, Jennings had moved with amazing swiftness, grabbing the gun from his lap and training it on her with merciless speed.

The gun went off again and again, and once more, Lily had slipped into unconsciousness.

How many times was that? How many bullets had he emptied into her body? Each one, a capsule of searing pain. Offhand, she wondered how many of them had gone straight through her, and how much lead was actually sealed up right now inside of her healed wounds.

Dizziness washed over her and the world tilted. She closed her eyes and suppressed another moan. She'd lost way too much blood.

She was hungry. *So hungry...*

When she opened her eyes again and focused them on Jennings, he backed up a step.

"What do you want with me?" she asked him. Through her words, she could feel that her teeth had changed. She ran her tongue over the backs of them and felt the fangs. They were smaller than Daniel's, certainly, but just as sharp.

She could hear Allan's heart beating. His lungs breathing. She could smell his blood. It smelled so... *good*. He smelled like food to her in a way that Beignets or cinnamon rolls used to.

Jennings gazed down at her for a long, silent moment. And then he ran a hand through his dark hair and dropped the wet cloth in a water bowl on a shelf against one wall.

"I honestly don't know, Lily," he said softly. He sighed and sat down in a large, plush chair a few feet away. "I'm sorry that I had to hurt you. There was no other way to get you here." His gaze skirted over her face to the marks on her neck. "But it's your own fault. You shouldn't have let him touch you. You shouldn't have let him turn you."

Lily closed her eyes and rolled onto her back again. She could feel that she had been stripped of her clothing. Only a thin white sheet had been draped over her and separated her body from the world and Allan Jennings.

"God, Lily, you just had to fall for the one man I hate most in this world, didn't you." He stood, his tone becoming agitated. "Daniel Kane. *Daniel Kane!*" He turned in place, once more shoving his hand through his hair. "When I heard you were back in town, I thought... I thought there might be a chance." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "But Kane got to you first." Suddenly, he whirled on her and she actually flinched. He stormed to the bed, towering over her. She instinctively pulled against the cuffs.

"Daniel Kane, track star extraordinaire who broke every record to set all of his own! Daniel Kane, prized Bulldog quarterback, Daniel Kane, prom king – Daniel Kane, Chief of the fucking Police of Baton Rouge!" He leaned in to brace himself on the bed, one arm on either side of her. He moved to within inches of her and Lily was forced to turn her face away. "Why should I be surprised?" he asked. "He's always had a thing for you, Lily. Did you know that he actually told me to stay away from you in high school?"

He reached up and roughly grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him once

more. Suddenly, as if the feel of her skin beneath his touch had infused him with tranquility, his grip eased up and his expression softened. "You..." He blinked and very gently caressed her jaw line. "You look hungry, Lily. Your eyes are glowing. Just like his do. But on you... it's beautiful."

If Lily had been a human, she would have been sick with fear. As it was, she was so weakened and so shocked that all she could do was stare up at him. *He's crazy.*

Allan's thumb moved down her cheek and then brushed tenderly across her lips. She shuddered violently, once more turning her head away. And once again, he jerked it back, growing irritated. His thumb was on her bottom lip again. This time, she froze as he pried her lips apart and gazed down at her small white fangs.

"I've hated his kind for nearly twenty years," he said, his tone distant, as if he were stuck in some kind of daydream. "My father knew of their existence. He taught me about them early on." Jennings released her and stepped back. "He was a Hunter. And a good one."

Lily watched as he turned away from her and paced across the room to turn and lean back against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest. It was the first time he'd put as much space between them and she took the opportunity to look around.

They were in a basement somewhere. It was a finished basement, but she could smell the inherent damp that was barely kept at bay. The bed she was on was nothing more than two mattresses on a frame.

There were no windows in the large, square room, and the only other furniture consisted of shelves along one wall, a plush leather chair, a metal stool, and a black traveler's trunk, its lock open and dangling in its latches.

"Until, one day, he took care of a couple of the demons in Kisatchie." Jennings paused, his blue-gray gaze hardening as he stared at her. "But he didn't leave the scene right away like he usually did. This time, he'd taken me along with him. After he'd killed the demons, he wanted to show me how it was done." He smiled, and it was a mirthless smile. "As he was teaching me, another demon appeared out of nowhere, true to the malevolence of their kind. I will never forget his massive form and his glowing green eyes.... as he ripped my father apart."

Lily's heart hammered hard in her chest. *Green eyes? Malcolm!* she thought. *It was Cole! He must have been zapped there by his curse!*

And then the second realization hit her.

Kisatchie... a couple... *Oh my god. It was Daniel's parents.*

Jesus, she thought. All this time, Daniel has hated Malcolm Cole and all this time, it was Cole who avenged his parents' death. Then she frowned. But, if Malcolm had shown up and killed Jennings' father, then there would have been another body there. Tabitha had never mentioned that another man was killed along with her parents. Did she not know? Did they not find the body?

Maybe they had, she thought, but they disposed of it. Maybe the cops who dealt with the crime were werewolves too. That made sense. Daniel was a werewolf and he was the law. There was no reason to believe it hadn't been that way for a while.

"The demon let me live. I don't know why," Jennings continued, watching her carefully. "But I vowed to do away with as many of them as possible in my lifetime." He pushed away from the wall and began pacing the room, looking at the carpet as he walked. "I remembered everything my father taught me – how to recognize them, how to kill them, even how to hide my scent afterward. As young as I was, it wasn't long before I realized that Kane was one of them." He stopped and looked up at her.

Lily's head was spinning. She was so hungry and so weak, she could barely keep from thinking of blood – of meat. But she forced herself to pay attention anyway. If Jennings' father had died at the same time as Tabitha's parents, then Allan would have been eight or nine years old – roughly the same age as Tabitha was. A little boy. Taught to kill.

"It wasn't long after I realized Kane was a demon that I realized he was a born leader among them," Jennings continued. "I decided to shadow him – to get on his good side. I needed a way into his world." He moved to the shelves against the wall and picked up his gun, fingering the trigger. "So that I could rip it apart from the inside."

He laughed then and looked over at her. "I was good, Lily. You'd have been impressed. He eventually forgot all about how I'd had a crush on you in high school. Hell, after you left town, it was like you'd never existed to him. He never brought you up. And neither did I." He shook his head and started slowly toward the bed. "Before long, I was the only human he trusted enough with the tougher cases. Everyone else he surrounded himself with was a demon. Just like him."

He came to stand beside the bed and towered over her, his gun held easily, casually, in his right hand. "When Kane asked me to do a check on Malcolm Cole, I couldn't believe my luck." He laughed harshly. "A serial killer demon in the same town as a demon cop. It doesn't get more perfect than that." He gazed down at her through heated blue-gray eyes. "I had truly hoped that he and Cole would make things easier for me and do each other in. There's nothing a Hunter likes more than to see two demons kill each other off. Two birds with one stone." He shook his head. "But things got messy."

Lily's mind raced. As she stared up at him and his stormy, avid eyes, she figured it was now or never. Using the softest, breathiest voice she could muster, she licked her lips and said, "Allan? Please. I'm hungry. I'm thirsty. Why are you punishing me for something that Kane did?"

Jennings blinked. His brow furrowed slightly. Suddenly, he was shoving the Glock in the waistband of his jeans at his back and sitting beside her on the bed. This caused the sheet to pull taut over her form, and his eyes wandered to the curves so obviously outlined beneath it.

He cleared his throat. "What-" His gaze trailed back to her face. "What do you need?"

"I think," she paused, licking her lips once more before continuing. "I think I need meat." This much was true. While the thought angered her a little because she hadn't eaten an animal for as long as she could remember, she knew that it was only

natural. She was a wolf. They were carnivores. And right now, the image of a rare filet mignon was floating, enticingly, before her mind's eye.

"That must make you angry," he said softly.

Lily blinked, thrown for a moment.

He smiled a gentle, knowing smile. "I know you're a vegetarian, Lily. You have been since high school."

He was right. She'd had her reasons. She just didn't like to think of the animal that was behind the meat – its muscle and bone, like her own muscle and bone. But it had made her stand out in the lunch room. Anything that could possibly make her different from the other students in high school, she masochistically took to like a moth to a flame. That was Lily. The leftover.

"And now he's made you into a monster and you have to kill for your food." Shadows crossed his face and something dark flickered in his eyes. But he shook his head quickly and his shoulders fell. He looked away from her. "I know it isn't your fault. I know you tried your best to escape him. You ran from him. I'm sorry that I didn't stop him in time."

Lily closed her eyes as another wave of dizziness swept over her, this one stronger than the last. It felt like her world was rocking back and she would slide right off of it. She couldn't stop the moan that escaped her throat. Her head fell to the side. Her gums ached around her fangs. Her stomach cramped. Her hands clenched above her where they were fastened so securely to the metal post.

"I'm so sorry, Lily."

She opened her eyes again when she felt the backs of his fingers caress her cheek. She had to fight the urge to pull away from him. It wouldn't help her right now.

The weight on the bed lifted as he stood. "I'll get you something to eat."

Jennings turned and left the large underground room, and Lily could hear him slide several bolts shut in the door. It sounded metallic.

The door must be metal, she thought. She choked out laughter in cold amusement. *As if I could ever get out of these cuffs. What the hell are they made of, anyway?*

More dizziness assaulted her and she tried to curl on her side. It was difficult and her wrists hurt, but she managed it, not caring that it lifted the sheet behind her, exposing the back of her body.

Eventually, she even drifted into an uneasy sleep, welcoming the darkness over the discomfort with open arms.

Chapter Nineteen: Man Hunt

When the call had come in that Lily's car was located north of town on Highway 61, halfway between the city and St. Francisville, Daniel had not hesitated.

He'd stormed out of the precinct and sprinted back to his bike once more. As if they sensed that this was it – that this meant werewolf war – his entire pack had followed suit, each heading to their own vehicles, whether they were off-duty, personal vehicles or marked police cars.

Several members of Daniel's pack rode motorcycles of their own. Others had paired up and were traveling in pick-up trucks and SUV's. As a result, Daniel's Harley Night Train was the point vehicle in what effectively became a convoy of sirens and roaring engines that rocketed through town, bypassing traffic lights and stop signs without slowing.

They were a sight to behold.

Had any of them cared a whit what kind of a show they were putting on, they would have noticed the openmouthed stares of children who stopped to watch them from street corner sidewalks, and the pointing fingers of LSU students who stood in groups and muttered amongst themselves as they wondered what the hell was "going down."

But the only thing any of them was thinking was that Daniel was their leader and his mate was in mortal danger. Without Lily, Daniel would not reproduce. It would be yet another blow to their already greatly suffering population.

Their very future was at stake.

Daniel knew that very few people on the planet actually believed in werewolves – much less knew Lily Kane would be one. Of those very few people, Hunters made up the majority of the population. And if it was a Hunter that had taken Lily, then it was most likely the same Hunter who had killed Daniel's Uncle and his mate – and the Mayor and his family. Though, that one was confusing to Daniel.

Why kill the Mayor? Unless it was something personal, and that bore more consideration.

Just not now. Because all Daniel could concentrate on right now was Lily. Construction barrels lined the road on either side of the single-lane highway, making it difficult for people to pull to the side when the siren-blaring cars hurtled their way through traffic. Daniel steered his motorcycle expertly through a cacophony of pumpkin painted metal and neon arrows that directed traffic to merge or turn around or simply disappear. He found himself wondering at the chaos of it all and empathizing with the poor fuckers who occasionally gave into road rage.

The late afternoon sky was darkening rapidly.

Clouds of white cranes circled like vultures around cattle in the farm land that bordered Highway 61. They gathered in snow-colored flocks in the corn and sugar fields and then ducked down into the moss-covered bayou to pick at dead fish and crawdads. A few of the brave beasts startled at the sound of the racing cars, trucks and motorcycles of Daniel's crew, but for the most part, they ignored the humans that had built a straight, hard line through their world.

And Daniel ignored them.

Finally up ahead, the starkly flashing red and white lights of two police cars summoned Daniel and his werewolf posse, guiding them to their destination like a lighthouse on the misting, gray horizon.

Daniel straightened and loosened his grip on the throttle of his bike until it slowed beneath him. He rode it to a full stop twenty feet from the first flashing vehicle as the rest of his pack parked up and down the street, all along the shoulder.

Daniel switched off the engine, kicked down the stand, and dismounted. His blue gaze fell on Lily's car and his heart skipped a painful beat.

"Chief, nothing's been touched. We only verified the vehicle as belonging to Miss St. Claire and called you right away." One of the officers approached Daniel, nodding respectfully.

It was beginning to sprinkle again. A second storm was rolling in, right along with the night.

Daniel eyed the human officers and took a deep breath, trying desperately to think like a cop and not like an alpha male in danger of losing his mate forever.

These men were human. They were not wolves. They should not be there. If they hung around, they could see something that would need explaining and at that moment, Daniel couldn't afford to expend the time and energy necessary to detain the men while the Clan Council provided the only kind of "explaining" sufficient to keep the werewolf community sufficiently safe. Which is to say, the magical kind.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Daniel put on his business face and nodded curtly. Aiden Knight came up beside him, as did Lieutenant Michael Angel. The two wolves eyed the other officers with the same wary impatience that Daniel felt riding his own body and mind. "We'll handle it from here. I'm reassigning you for the time being," Daniel continued, nodding to Angel, who took the hint and gestured for the other officers to follow him. "Lieutenant Angel will fill you in."

Michael Angel corralled the officers to the side, pulling them from Lily's car and allowing Daniel to give it his full attention. He strode the last ten feet to the black two-door Dodge Neon, reached his hand out toward the door handle, and then froze.

The smell of her blood washed over him so thick and red that it felt as if he'd walked into a wall of it. And he hadn't even opened the door yet. Nausea roiled once more in his belly, forcing bile to climb his esophagus until he swallowed hard against it, fighting with all of his might the furious fear that drained his own blood from his face and shoved his fangs through his gums.

He felt Knight beside him and he turned to face his longtime friend. Knight took one look at him and swore under his breath, pulling a pair of shades from his own front pocket and handing them to his Chief. "Put 'em on," Knight whispered.

Thunder rolled in the distance. A fat droplet of water landed on the sleeve of Daniel's leather jacket.

His fingers shook as he unfolded the sunglasses and slipped them over his glowing eyes. The clouds gathering overhead were heavy with the building storm and dark enough now that, had Daniel not been a werewolf and had excellent vision, the

shades would have rendered him blind.

As it was, however, they would be no protection against what was waiting on the other side of that car door. They would fail to shield him from seeing what he didn't want to see.

Daniel opened the car door and peered inside. He was right.

"*Christ*," Knight whispered beside him. His hand found Daniel's shoulder and gripped tightly. "She's alive, Chief. Just remember that she's alive."

Daniel didn't speak. What breath he had was locked in his lungs and going nowhere. Both of the front seats of Lily's car had been drenched in her blood. The thick, red liquid had pooled two-inches deep in the cup holders and ran in quickly drying rivulets around the base of the gearshift to the saturated carpet below.

Her blood coagulated into a deep burgundy where it had splattered across the dash board and stereo controls, but Lily's abductor must have known enough to wipe down the windows before heading into traffic, because while they should have been covered in a confetti of red as well, they were more or less clear.

Everything else was soaked.

Daniel had rarely seen anything like this. He had witnessed countless killings. But, unlike the gore they poured into movies made for the big screen, in the real world bodies only bled so much. Once they were mortally wounded, they tended to die relatively quickly. Once they were dead, they stopped bleeding altogether.

Lily hadn't stopped bleeding because she hadn't died. She hadn't died because she was a werewolf – and her abductor was able to wound her again and again. And again.

So the blood kept pouring and this ruined, sopping car was the result.

"When we're finished with him, God won't be able to put him back together again," came a voice from behind Daniel.

As if in a dream, he turned slightly and recognized the two additional figures at his back as his grandfather and James Valentine. It was his grandfather who had spoken. Jonathan Kane placed his hand gently on Daniel's back and said something in an old Cajun French dialect that only Daniel could understand.

Daniel swallowed once more to make sure nothing was going to come up and opened his mouth to reply to his grandfather when another, different scent stalled him once again.

Lily's abductor. It had to be. There was no other scent in the vehicle and, even this one was so faint that it was obvious the abductor had attempted to cover it up. He'd almost been successful.

But not quite.

"I don't fucking believe it," Knight hissed. He'd scented it too.

"It can't be," whispered Jordan Stark, as the officer approached from behind Daniel.

Peripherally, Daniel was impressed that they'd been able to catch the scent as he had. He'd trained them well. And he could certainly understand their confusion – their surprise – as to what they were smelling.

Because the scent that so obviously belonged to the abductor was supposed to belong to a friend. A seasoned cop.

Allan Jennings.

Daniel had pulled the man into his fold of friendship. He had trained him personally. He had trusted him. But in return, Allan Jennings had seriously injured and kidnapped the love of Daniel's life.

Daniel's instincts about the man in high school had been right, after all. There had been something about Jennings that he simply hadn't liked. And when he'd found out that Allan wanted Lily – he'd made damn sure that the boy stay away.

Daniel had good instincts. Because, if his deductive reasoning was correct, Jennings was a Hunter. Daniel had believed that nothing more could surprise him that day. He'd been wrong.

"I'm going to strangle him with his own intestines," Lieutenant Angel swore through gritted teeth. He'd sent the human officers away and come back to stand beside Daniel once more. He, too, had scented Jennings in the car.

Something inside of Daniel slid back into place in that instant. The cop in him stepped forward and shoved the wolf in him aside. Sort of. Enough for him to do his job. At least he had something to go on. And he knew Lily was alive.

Now it was a race against time.

* * * *

Daniel allowed the cop in him to take the reins. With expert efficiency, he watched himself move through the motions of tracking down Officer Allan Jennings. His cell phone conversations were hurried, plentiful and blunt. He made demands and the people on the other end of the line always obliged him. He was the Police Chief and this was a life or death situation.

He had people pull up everything from Jennings' utility bills to his bank notes to his credit card records. He had people running a full check on the man's psychological profile and tracking down documentation on where Jennings went while online, what he purchased, what he downloaded. *Everything*.

Approximately half an hour later, a call came through from someone at the station. Apparently, Jennings had purchased a second house about a year ago. No one had ever heard of this transaction. His home address had not changed. He'd never spoken of it to anyone. He had paid for it in full. In cash.

"Hunter money," Stark muttered, the expression on his face reflecting the disgust that everyone on that highway shoulder was feeling at that moment.

Over the phone the address was quickly relayed. Daniel hung up. "All right men, it looks like he may not have gone far. This home address is only three and a half miles up the road."

Daniel figured that Jennings had left Lily's car parked here, so close to his address, with the sole intention of confusing his Chief into thinking he would then take his new vehicle somewhere far, far away. It was a smart move on his part. Luckily it hadn't worked.

Receiving the intel was like flicking a switch. The pack mobilized instantly;

Knight, Stark, Angel and the others returned to their cars, motorcycles, and trucks and started their engines. Daniel once more retained the lead on his Harley, but this time, the pack kept their sirens quiet as they raced after their quarry. Just as they hadn't wanted to warn Cole, the wolves didn't want to alert Jennings to their approach.

At least, not until it was too late.

Bougainvillea Lane was one of those ancient plantation driveways that was historic and scenic enough that city government had deemed it worthy of its own street name. It turned off of Highway 61 without warning and now that the rain was coming down steadily, it took some serious riding expertise for the cops on motorcycles to keep from laying their bikes down as they turned onto the gravel drive.

The home was vintage antebellum; white pillars supported a wrap-around porch that framed a two-story mansion most likely built in the late eighteenth century and then revived. Potted plants sported bright pink and white blooms and the air was thick with the scent of honeysuckle. The two-hundred-year-old oak trees that lined the drive were dripping with Spanish moss so long and thick, it nearly hid the Greek-styled statues that decorated the well-manicured lawn.

How a police officer could have afforded a place like this, Daniel had no idea. Maybe Stark was right. Maybe it was Hunter money. But why? Why would a Hunter even be interested in purchasing such a residence? It had to have cost millions. Wasn't it a well known plantation of some sort? And it was large enough for several families.

As far as Daniel knew, Jennings was just Jennings – no wife, no children, no family to speak of. What would all of the other rooms be for?

It made no sense.

But that didn't stop him from kicking down his stand, leaping from the saddle of his bike, and charging toward the front porch, his fire arm drawn as he moved with blinding speed.

The others rushed to keep up with him. Daniel didn't bother to knock on the door. Instead, he cocked his head to one side, listening. He turned his nose up slightly to sniff the air as he simultaneously waved several of his men around the building.

The sound of a television could be heard coming from some room deep within the home. A late afternoon sitcom. Track laughter filled the space between the television and the werewolves waiting outside.

Daniel's gaze cut to his grandfather, whose slightly bewildered expression mirrored the Chief's. Jonathan Kane shrugged and shook his head. There were shadows on the man's face. He'd lost a lot today. Everything he had left was riding on this, here and now.

Something about this didn't feel right.

His gaze fell to the floor boards of the porch as he continued to listen to the sounds of scripted banter and forced laughter from beyond. Then he lifted his head again and nodded. Once.

Instantly, the door to the old home was open and police officers were filing

inside, Daniel at their lead. As he turned the corner into what was once most likely a drawing room, he found an elderly African American sitting on the couch. Daniel ordered them to the floor and they instantly complied, their shaking hands in the air.

He and the cops around him aimed their weapons down and away from the couple, but their eyes were alert and watchful.

"What the *hell* is going on here?" asked the old man.

Daniel didn't answer. His eyes searched the shadows, his expression grim. "This is wrong," he muttered. "This is the address, but this is wrong." Frustration was riding him hard. Time was of the essence and they were wasting it. This was not the place. Jennings wasn't here.

"We're looking for a Caucasian man, just over six feet tall," one of the officers began to address the couple kneeling on the floor. While Daniel would normally handle the situation himself, at the moment he just didn't have it in him.

He turned away from the scene and left the room, his gun still gripped tightly in his hand, his eyes still relentless in their search. He felt like a man who stood on the threshold of Hell and was ready to start knocking on the door.

Knight, Stark, Angel and Jonathan Kane all followed closely on his heels, leaving the others to apologize and straighten out the mess behind them.

"Just in case, search the stairs and check to see whether there's a basement," Daniel ordered softly as he opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch.

Knight nodded. "I'll take the stairs. Angel, take the kitchen and basement. Stark, check the grounds."

The others nodded their assent and left.

Daniel waited beside his bike, trying to get his body and mind under control. A few minutes later, his pack returned. There had been no basement. There was an attic, but there was no blood anywhere. And no Jennings.

Daniel took his phone and dialed. "Nichols, give me the address again," He ordered. He waited as a woman on the other side of the line repeated the address she'd given to him earlier. "You do realize that's a plantation home?" he asked, his patience wearing as thin as carbon paper.

There was a pause on the other end as the officer ran a check through her data base. Daniel could hear the woman's fingers flying across her keyboard. A mouse click. Another. More finger-flying. "I'm sorry, sir. You're right. That address is listed under the Ambrosia Plantation off of Highway 61... I don't know what happened."

"I do." Daniel muttered. He hung up.

The Hunters were a powerful organization. At their head, they were lead by an obscure figure with a seemingly endless source of finances and sway and their members numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Somewhere along the way, a kind of base had been purchased for Allan Jennings and its address had been switched – hidden – in every file that contained it.

Daniel pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. Jennings had been a cop and as such, he'd had access to all sorts of otherwise secure information. As a *Hunter* and a cop, that circle of access would only be greatly broadened.

Off-hand, Daniel wondered how many others in the police department were set to betray the werewolf community. Which made him wonder something else. How many officials in political positions around the world, in general, were somehow tied to the Hunters?

If Allan Jennings could infiltrate a pack as tightly knit as Daniel's.... Where was their safe ground? *Was* there any?

"*Think*, God damn it, *think*!" Daniel hissed at himself, ran a hand through his blue-black hair and pinched the bridge of his nose again. He felt as if electricity were buzzing through his system. He was going to explode. He began pacing, furiously running through the information in his brain.

He now knew what Hell felt like. Because somewhere, at that very moment, Allan Jennings had Lily St. Claire, and God only knew what he was doing with her.

Chapter Twenty: Really Good Cop, Really Bad Cop

"Lily."

Lily's eyes fluttered open and almost instantly, her stomach cramped. Her wrists throbbed where they pulled with bruising force against the strange, strong metal of the cuffs that contained them. *So, it wasn't a dream....* Her heart sank and tears built in her eyes. She forced them back and rolled over to look up at Allan Jennings, who was standing beside the bed holding a plastic tray.

She smelled the food that was on it. There was meat.

Hope burgeoned to life within her. Her plan was simple. Get him to take off the cuffs. Eat something. Get her strength back. Trick him. Overtake him. Kill him.

She waited. If she didn't say anything, maybe he would think of taking the handcuffs off himself.

Jennings stared down at her for several long, silent moments. His expression was unreadable. But she knew that the sheet over her had been pulled to the side, exposing half of her naked body. She could hear his blood rushing and could smell his arousal. It was pre-cum. She could see the bulge in his jeans.

It was strange how she didn't care. Brazen. Insane. *I'm as nuts as he is....*

The damned dizziness was back and she closed her eyes. "Are you going to stand there and tease me with the food, Allan, or are you actually going to let me eat it?" she found herself asking. Her voice sounded different. Lower. Sultry. More sexy.

With that, he seemed to compose himself and pulled the stool closer to the bed. He set the tray down on the bed and Lily turned to face it, managing to raise herself onto her elbow in order to get a look at it.

He must have ordered out, she thought. It was a steak and it was actually rare. Just as she'd imagined it. It smelled better than anything she'd ever smelled in her life.

There was nothing else with it. No bread, no potato, no vegetable, as if he knew she wouldn't have touched anything but the meat. *Of course he knows*, she thought. *He knows everything about werewolves. He's been tracking them and killing them for years.*

Her gaze flitted from the steak to Jennings again. He was pulling a small set of keys from his front pocket with one hand. And then he pulled the gun out of his waist band with the other.

Lily stiffened.

Jennings saw this and held the gun up with his fingers splayed placatingly as if to show her that he wasn't planning on using it. Not yet, anyway. "I don't want to hurt you again, Lily," he told her. "So just make sure you don't do anything stupid, and I won't." At that moment, he reminded her of John Cusack in Grosse Pointe Blank. He acted like he was making a reasonable request. As if there was justification for shooting someone thirty times.

She stared at him for a long, silently seething while. And then, forcing a defeated expression onto her features, she nodded. Once.

In turn, Jennings placed the barrel of the gun – *gently* – against her chest and, with his other hand, he reached over her and unlocked the cuffs.

Lily didn't even dare to move once he'd unlocked her. She really didn't want to get shot again.

When he finally stepped back, taking the gun and the cuffs with him, she slowly pushed herself into a seated position. The steak was already cut into little pieces, and there was no fork.

Lily kept her eyes trained on Jennings and his gun as she reached out, picked one of the pieces up with her thumb and forefinger, and brought it to her lips. She opened her mouth and set the piece on her tongue. It was so good that she had to force herself not to moan or close her eyes. She simply chewed and swallowed. Then she took another piece. And another.

All the while, Jennings watched her as carefully as she watched him.

In a few moments, Lily could feel her strength returning. The dizziness subsided. The cramps in her stomach lessened and then went away.

"Your color is returning," he told her. There was no discernable emotion in his tone.

She didn't answer him. She finished the meat and then licked her fingers. She couldn't help it. There was a glass of water beside the plate on the tray. She lifted the glass and brought it to her lips. Before drinking, she slowly breathed in. Scenting.

It was just water. She gulped the water down, emptying the glass, and then returned it to the tray. Then she waited, watching her captor carefully, weighing her options.

"Lay down," Jennings told her.

She stared at him, her gaze narrowing ever so slightly.

He raised his arm, training the gun on her once more and expertly notched the cuffs open with his one free hand. "I said lay back down, Lily."

Lily's fingers tightly grasped the side of the bed. "You can't keep me here like this forever, Allan. What are you going to do? Do you have a plan yet?" she asked softly. Again, she was surprised at the change in her voice - and in her courage. She felt more angry than afraid. Which was just nuts. He could have her unconscious in seconds. And then he could take off her head. Or burn her body. Or whatever other grisly methods there might be of killing werewolves that she didn't know about.

"Tomorrow I will go back to work and, when Daniel Kane is at his weakest – brought to that state through the death of his uncle and the abduction of his true love – I will kill him," he smiled a nasty smile.

Lily's eyes went wide. "His uncle?"

Jennings nodded slowly. "It had to be done. And just in the nick of time, too." He shook his head at that, as if he was amazed at how close a call it had been, and then he shrugged, all nonchalance. He sighed and went on. "After that, I will find someone who can reverse this process within you."

Lily straightened. Her heart skipped a beat. "That isn't possible."

"Oh no?" He raised an eyebrow. "There is quite probably a lot about Kane's

world that you aren't aware of." He studied her for a moment, as if trying to decide on something. "Do you think that he or any of his demons would ever let on to you that you didn't have to remain a monster once they had turned you?"

"I..." She didn't want to think about his words. Didn't want to consider them. But they were important. She pursed her lips and then shook her head, once. "I don't believe you."

He cocked his head to one side, his expression softening just a touch. "Of course you don't," he said, calmly. Under different circumstances, his confidence and the slight smile he now wore would have been very attractive. As it was, however, she felt that he was mocking her.

And it was beginning to piss her off.

"As I said Lily, Kane wouldn't have shared this information. But think about it for a minute. You already know that witches exist and you know what they're capable of doing. How far of a stretch is it that they take it a step further?"

Lily blinked at that. She glanced down at her right arm and, for the first time since she'd been with Daniel, she noticed that the mark he'd placed there a few days ago was now gone. No thin blue line. Nothing. *It's gone now. It must have disappeared when he turned me, because I don't need it any more.*

Because I'm his.

She also noticed that there was no blood on her body. She was sure that she had been covered with it after being shot. *He cleaned me*, she thought. The realization was disgusting; she didn't want to consider Jennings with his hands all over her body.

She looked back up at Jennings, who was watching her with deft interest. She shivered. He looked like he actually knew what was going through her head. That was unnerving.

She swallowed and cleared her throat, finally pulling the sheet protectively to her chest. "I don't understand," she shook her head. "Why me? Why not just kill me too?" She really couldn't wrap her head around his actions. He had killed Daniel's uncle. His hatred for werewolves was clearly extreme.

Allan made a small bewildered sound and shook his head. "You really don't know?"

She waited.

"Lily, everything about you screams goodness. Light. Salvation. I know you better than you think I do. I've – " He brought himself up short, as if he had been about to give something away that he didn't necessarily want her to know. Then he swallowed hard and continued. "I know what is in your heart and I can't let Kane and his monsters take that from you. I can't let them change you. I won't let them win. I'll do whatever I have to do to make sure that they don't."

Lily sat there on the edge of the bed, her fist clenching the mattress so tightly that the springs groaned beneath her grip. She was utterly thrown by what Allan Jennings had just told her.

She wasn't stupid. She was familiar enough with men like him; had dealt with them in her line of work. The signs of obsession were clear to her. He was crazy all right, but it was worse than that. He was crazy about *her*. And he was smart and he'd been in a position of authority for a decade. She wondered exactly how much he really did know about her.

I've gone from Malcolm Cole to Allan Jennings, she thought. From the frying pan and into the fire.

Lily figured that she had two options at this point. She could fight him, which she desperately wanted to do, and she would probably lose. She might even make him angry enough to kill her.

Her second option was to pretend to be on his side. Go the Stockholm Syndrome route. Or the route of the helpless female who neither wants nor deserves the curse that the evil, horrible, no-good werewolf has placed upon her.

The second option sort of made her feel like biting off her own tongue and chewing it up and swallowing it. But it was also probably the smarter choice.

"Allan, I'm cold." She made a show of wrapping as much of the sheet around her body as she could. "And those cuffs hurt," she nodded toward the impossibly strong handcuffs in his left hand. "Please just let me sit here. Give me back my clothes – or a blanket." She spoke softly and pleaded with a smooth, yielding tone. She wanted him to think that the fight in her was gone. She even glanced at the gun a few times, nervously, as if all she could think about was the fear of getting shot again. As if she would do anything to prevent that from happening.

Jennings peered down at her, his gray-blue eyes looking like stormy skies.

"You honestly think I'd fall for this, Lily? We're both smart, remember? You're a social worker who knows how to negotiate with people." He gave his head a small shake. "And I'm a cop." He smiled a wry, admonishing smile. "I'm also a Hunter, Lily. I know how the demon works inside your head."

Lily bit her cheek. "And how exactly is that?" she asked, desperately trying to keep the conversation going. Anything to forestall the handcuffs.

"How does it work?" He laughed at that, a dark chuckle. "Like poison." He shrugged. "But I'm a little surprised by how fast it's working on you, Lily. I thought you were stronger than this."

You want to see how strong I am? she thought. *Come on over here – without the gun.*

"Still, you're not as far gone as some of the Made wolves I've hunted. I could tell you some stories."

Lily squelched the nauseating disgust she felt at his murderous admission and took the opportunity he presented. "So tell me then, Allan. What has Kane done to me? What exactly am I in for?" Her tone was even. She'd successfully kept the icy chill of hatred she felt from entering her voice. "Tell me," she repeated.

Jennings seemed to consider this a moment. His smile was still cruel and his stormy eyes glittered in the fluorescent lights.

Lily tried to calm her racing heart. *Surrender*, she told herself. *Play stupid. Play nice.*

Then he seemed to come to a decision. The storms in his eyes darkened into thunderheads and his jaw set. "I'd be happy to. But not before you lay back down and raise your arms over your head like a good girl." His tone had lowered. It was probably the tone he used when telling drunk drivers to get out of their cars for sobriety tests.

Lily's own golden gaze narrowed dangerously. She felt her fangs lengthen once more in her mouth and strange lights danced before her eyes. She wondered if she was about to flash into wolf form. No one had told her how to do that. She had no idea what to expect. And she knew that if she went – he would shoot. And she wasn't sure she would ever wake up again.

"Now, Lily." He cocked the gun with his thumb. "I won't tell you again."

She gritted her teeth and, with one last furtive glance at the 9mm, she acquiesced, laying flat on the mattress and once more and pulling the sheet up over her body. She truly was starting to feel cold. On the inside as well as out. She really wanted a blanket. She really wanted her clothes.

She really, really wanted an Uzi.

"Arms above your head and wrap your hands around the pole."

A muscle in Lily's jaw ticked with suppressed resentment as she did what he instructed. And then, once more, the barrel of the god-forsaken weapon was against her rib cage and Jennings was leaning over her with the superhuman cuffs to chain her wrists into place.

Suddenly, an idea occurred to Lily. It flashed, half-image, half memory, before her panicked mind's eye.

Now, Lily. You have your strength. You can't let him win. It was now or never. She had to get out. She had to warn Daniel - or die trying.

Lily's head swam and her chest tightened as she prepared to do what she was going to do. It had been a fleeting thought, a quick-floating memory through her fevered brain, that had given her the idea.

It was a thought of Daniel - and his kiss.

A werewolf's kiss had the power to make someone feel pleasure. But she also knew firsthand that it could weaken someone, and even put them to sleep. It all depended on what the wolf wanted. Lily suspected there was even more to that equation, but the sleeping thing was what got her attention at that moment.

Just one kiss, she thought. *Just one little kiss.*

Just as Jennings touched the cold metal of the cuff to the side of her right wrist, Lily raised her head and trapped his lips with hers.

* * * *

"I don't know what the fuck to do now." Daniel let loose the words as his soul was claimed by a despondency and despair unlike any other. He had lost much in his life, and half of it in the last twenty-four hours. But this?

He looked up at James Valentine through eyes both glowing and red-rimmed, no longer seeing the man as a threat or competition, but as a chance. A hope.

Daniel would cling to anything – *anything at all* – right now if it presented to him the least amount of hope that he would find Lily and bring her back home.

"Tell me what you feel," Daniel demanded of the Guardian werewolf. He knew that Valentine would be able to sense whether Lily was still alive. And he wanted to know the truth. Precious minutes had passed since they'd discovered her missing from the parking lot at the Mall of Louisiana. Precious minutes that had transformed into more than a precious hour – and that was a long time. A long, long time when it came to abduction.

"I sense that she's alive," Valentine told him, simply. "And I would not spare you, Kane," he continued, speaking softly and in a tone of such deep seriousness, everyone stilled around him. "No matter what you believe."

That was good enough for Daniel. He nodded. And then turned away from the Guardian to gaze up and down the street. Everyone sped on Highway 61. Few of his officers bothered ticketing people any longer, unless they showed signs of being under the influence.

Across the street was a small brick church, its worn sign announcing 8:00 service on Sunday night. The sign was decrepit with rust and hung in its frame by a single screw. The parking lot was riddled with weeds. In the middle of the week, as it was now, the lot would be empty. A single service vehicle was parked near the back of the gravel drive and, currently abandoned. It was an older truck. As cars and trucks tended to do in the South, it was rusted along the tire rims, door and hood seams. An emblem on the side depicted an oak tree and rolling hills. A lawn and garden service.

Just in time, it would seem. The church badly needed some work.

A few hundred yards up the road from the church was another drive leading to a barbeque "pit." Currently, there were four vehicles parked in the drive and smoke billowed from its kitchen chimney. Daniel could easily detect the scent of seasoned, cooked meat in the air.

About a third of a mile in the other direction was a gift shop-casino-truck stop. At the moment, two semi's were pulled up alongside the back and an SUV was pumping gas at what looked like pump number two. Even at this distance, Daniel was able to narrow his supernatural gaze on the back seat of the vehicle and make out the struggling forms of two bickering toddlers.

There was nothing else. Other than the construction, that was all there was to see along that particular stretch of road.

Daniel turned away from it all and once again began pacing back and forth across the porch of the plantation home.

"Why here? Why did he choose this address?" he asked to no one in particular.

"I don't know," Tabitha stated. "It's ridiculous. I mean, the place is practically famous. Frankly, I'm amazed that none of us knew it for what it was right away." There was a dangerous edge to the tone of her voice. Daniel recognized it for what it was. It was that note that bordered on hysterics.

Valentine had his arm around her and was holding her tightly against his side. Daniel suspected it may be the only thing keeping his sister from going off the deep end at that moment.

Daniel nodded and then shook his head, agreeing with her. "But there's something else. Something we're missing." He looked up at Detective Knight and pinned him to the spot with eyes that he knew damned well were both red and glowing because they burned in his sockets. "Come on, detective. *Think*. What do we know about Allan Jennings? He's worked with us for a fucking *decade*, for chrissake! There has to be a clue in there somewhere!"

Aiden Knight blinked and then ran a hand through his brown hair. "He's an excellent marksman," he offered. "Always groups his shots really close together."

"He always parked perfectly between the lines at the station," another cop added.

"He likes to analyze things – charts, graphs, maps. He's good at tracking people down," Knight continued.

There was a sound in Daniel's head. A lone jigsaw piece clicked into its place in the puzzle. "Keep going."

"He reads a lot. But they're all the same kinds of books. Murder mysteries, mostly," Mayfield suggested. He was a werewolf, but he was also Allan's partner and knew Jennings better than anyone there.

Mayfield paused and stared fixedly at the floor boards. Wheels were spinning in the man's head; Daniel could almost smell them burning. "He never likes to stray too far from our designated location. If we're assigned to Perkins, he wants to get lunch on Perkins. It's the same way with everything, actually," Mayfield continued, now obviously just thinking aloud. Brainstorming. "He keeps everything real orderly. Grouped together – just like his shots at the range."

Another sound and another piece clicked into place. "Keep talking," Daniel ordered.

"The change on his desk was in stacks," Mayfield continued.

"*Everything* was in stacks," Knight added. "Papers, books - everything."

"So, he was neat?" Tabitha asked, not understanding where this was leading and visibly worried that they were wasting precious time.

"Not just neat," Knight shook his head and reached into his jacket pocket to extract his iPod. He fiddled with it for a moment, until a personalized list popped up on the screen. He read from it. "His ID's and pass codes for the sites he visited were always within the same letter and number range. It never varied by more than five degrees in either direction."

"So, he likes to keep things close together?" Tabitha asked again, her face contorting into an even more thoroughly confused expression than the one she'd been wearing a moment before. "He just sounds orderly!" she shouted. "Keepin' your passwords like that just makes them easier to remember quickly." She shrugged in aggravated frustration. "I do the same thing."

Daniel blinked.

Close together.... Everything Jennings did was grouped close together. From the change on his desk to the bullets he fired at the range. It was almost an OCD thing. Close. Neat. Easy.

Daniel looked up at the service vehicle parked across the street. His gaze skirted from the truck to the brick church. Empty. Old, broken sign. *Out of use.*

Was it empty because it was a week day? Or, was it empty because it was no longer a church?

He swallowed hard and the others followed his gaze. Lightning split the sky and thunder cracked overhead.

"Oh holy shit," Knight whispered.

Chapter Twenty-one: Breaking and Entering

It was the last thing Allan Jennings had been expecting. A kick, a punch, a sudden jerking away – all of that, he had readied for, his index finger smoothly wrapped around the trigger of his gun, waiting for the signal from his brain.

But her kiss?

He'd dreamt of it. A *lot*. He'd imagined, time and again, how it would feel to capture her smooth, full lips beneath his own: To crush them, press them open, to taste her...

He could smell some faint traces of shampoo in her hair... *Lavender*, he thought. He could feel her long eye lashes brushing against his cheek bone. The rush of pleasure that snaked through him forced a groan from his throat.

Oh, how he had wanted her. He'd been watching her for so long, snapping photos from a terrible distance, always wondering whether he would have anything more in his hands than a picture. His favorite photograph had captured her perfect pink lips in a demure smile. He wanted those soft lips wrapped around his cock. He wanted to bury himself into every one of her holes. He wanted to cum inside of her, again and again. He'd wanted it for fifteen fucked-up years.

Now she was beneath him on a bed, naked. Kissing him.

His need roared to life and he found himself kissing her back, pushing her into the mattress beneath her, his gun-hand trembling where it pressed against her ribs. He found his other hand slipping to the bed to hold him up as his knees grew weak with the hunger she was awakening within him.

Weak.... A thought flittered through his brain like a warning butterfly. *She's making me weak.* It was chaotic, blurry.

His strength was slipping. He wanted to curl up beside her on the bed. Pull her against him. The gun barrel slid to the mattress as her tongue grazed the backs of his teeth. *I'm growing weak.*

And then it hit him.

Anger flashed through him. ***Fuck!*** His eyes flew open. He reared back and, in one smooth motion, he drew his gun-arm up, using it to backhand her with all of his strength.

Her head snapped to the side with a loud crack. Jennings stumbled back, trying to regain his bearings. Fatigue swept through him like rivulets of a tide, coming and going. Ebbing, receding.

On the bed, Lily moaned in pain and spat out blood. Then she turned her head to look at him. Her eyes were glowing bright. Droplets of red smeared her lips and the side of her chin. A bruise formed on her cheek bone. He watched, in some sort of sick fascination, as it appeared – and then slowly faded away.

"You bitch," he hissed. "You're further gone than I thought."

She tried to sit up, but he didn't give her any further opportunity for defiance. He raised his gun and pulled the trigger. It took four shots this time before she was slumped back on the bed, her head once more lolled to the side in semi-

consciousness. He decided not to take her completely under.

Not this time.

Anger fueling his determination, Jennings rushed forward and roughly grabbed her wrists, yanking them over her head to cuff them securely to the post behind the bed. Then he ripped the sheet away from her body and stared down at the wounds in her abdomen. He knew they had hurt her. That knowledge somehow both sated and fed his fury. Her blood stopped pouring from the holes and Allan watched as they closed, one after another, leaving her skin once more smooth and un-marred but for the blood that coated her.

The bullets would be under the bed, lodged in the cement beneath the rug of the basement. Jennings balled the sheet in his fist and ran it roughly over her body, wiping away the majority of the blood.

And then he dropped the sheet and reached down to grab her chin, forcing her to face him. Her eyelids slowly fluttered open.

"I hate you," she whispered, and then coughed on more blood.

Allan laughed a heartless laugh. His smile was hard and unforgiving. "Then I have nothing to lose by doing this," he told her.

With that, he roughly released her. He stepped back and placed the gun on the stool beside the bed. Then he pulled his t-shirt over his head, revealing the hard, broad chest beneath.

Lily's stomach clenched. Her heart lurched in her chest. Her reality had become a waking nightmare. It wasn't enough for Jennings to shoot and kidnap her. He was going to rape her, too.

"You want to play games, Lily?" he asked as he began to unbutton his jeans. "Fine. We'll play games." He shook his head, laughing once more. "Do you realize that I can do whatever I want to you and you'll just heal back up?" He dropped his jeans, revealing that he wore nothing underneath. His member was thick and hard and stood erect, red and throbbing.

Lily turned her head away. She was nauseated. Had she eaten enough meat to throw it back up again? *God, please no.*

"Imagine the possibilities, Lily." He was suddenly there beside her, his hand roughly jerking her head back around so that she was forced to gaze up at him once again. With his free hand, he cupped her breast and she bucked at the touch, trying to writhe away from him.

For that, she earned more of his violent wrath. He drew back a little and sent his knuckles flying across her cheek once more. She cried out at the pain and tasted fresh blood. Her teeth had cut the inside of her cheek.

And then the wound was healing, and his fingers were pinching her nipple. Tears gathered in Lily's eyes. Bile rose in her throat. She tried to breathe and found that her lungs would not expand.

In desperation, she yanked violently on the cuffs, feeling them rip into her flesh again and again. When she tried to raise her legs to kick at him, he balled up his fist

and rammed it into her stomach.

The pain was overwhelming. Lily's vision began to tunnel inward. It was several, long seconds before her lungs finally, painfully, expanded. Her heart skipped several rapid beats with the sudden influx of oxygen, and she retched. Jennings roughly turned her head to the side as she coughed again, and this time a small amount of bile accompanied the blood.

Jennings lowered his lips to her ear. "Keep fighting me, Lily. Let's see what else we can do to you, shall we?"

And then he was straddling her, one strong hand wrapped threateningly around her neck, the other roughly mauling her breast. Lily could feel his erection against her stomach and she found herself gagging again.

During the course of her job, she'd been trained to teach women that a man's invading penis was not something to fight against to the point of coming to real harm. It was not worth dying for. It was taught that the important thing was to *live* through a rape – and deal with the rest later.

Lily had always accepted the simple logic of that teaching, because in a way it made sense. But something in her had also felt slightly queasy about it. As if it wasn't *quite* true. As if it was not *wholly* correct.

And now she knew why.

She had been through so much. Yet somehow the thought of Allan Jennings forcing himself inside of her was too painful. It was too much to bear. It was one final violating injustice that was simply too great. *Only Daniel*, she thought. *Only Daniel*.

She wanted Daniel – and *only* Daniel – to touch her. She needed *him* – his hands, his body, his stark blue eyes. She needed her alpha werewolf. Her mate.

Lily began to see stars as, above her, Jennings tightened his grip around her throat, choking the air from her lungs. He was really squeezing. He was trying to kill her. And he was doing it just so that she would wake up a minute later and he could kill her again.

Daniel! Her mind screamed for her love even as her body shuddered beneath the hateful ministrations of another man. Jennings was moving now, prying her legs apart with bruising force. She couldn't fight him. There was no air left in her body. She felt a trickle of blood begin to flow from her right nostril. Her lungs screamed and the blood roared through her ear drums. It was all she could hear, like thunder.... She was drowning.... There was no pain.

Daniel....

And then, suddenly, she was coughing violently, bucking on the bed as her body greedily grabbed lungs-full of air. Jennings had released her throat seconds before she would have passed out. It hurt horribly, this returning breath, but beyond the pain and the subsiding roar of the rushing blood in her ear drums, she sensed that something else had changed.

There were strange sounds, hard and deep. They banged and banged and vibrated through her bones. She wheezed in more air to the sound of something

painful and cracking. Gunshots. Then there was a tearing. A ripping, like metal being rendered in two. A growl? Multiple growls?

Could she be hearing right? She tried to open her eyes, but all she saw were stars, flashing, swirling. The growling grew louder, sending tremors through her naked form.

And then there were voices. Some were yelling. Some were speaking words that she couldn't make out, couldn't comprehend. She heard them through a tunnel or a bubble or both. She continued to gasp, greedily sucking in more air and trying not to gag again.

Then warm hands were on her wrists. She heard metal jingling as her vision cleared a little. There was a blurry black form above her, tall and strong.

At once, the familiar wave of his inexorable power washed over her so intense, so physically present – so comfortingly *there* – that she gave a hoarse cry of joy and of relief, this time allowing the tears to cascade down her cheeks.

Daniel.

She felt his hands gently encircle her sore wrists and then lift her and pull her against him. She closed her eyes and breathed him in, pressing her palm against the solid muscle beneath his shirt. She heard his heartbeat, strong and fast.

His hand was on her head, tenderly running over her hair. He held her so tight.

And then he was speaking to her, his slow drawl breaking through the blanket of fuzzy chaos she'd enveloped herself in. "I'm here, Lily," he spoke to her softly, kissing the top of her head. "I'm here, cher. It's okay."

She could hear things happening around them. Violent things. She recognized some of the sounds. She didn't care. Daniel was holding her and he was solid and real and hard-wearing in a world that seemed to demand no less of him. She tried to squeeze him as hard as he squeezed her, but dizziness swept through her. So, she relaxed in his arms and let him rock her.

She knew that she must look awful. She knew that she was covered in her blood. It must be matted in her hair. But she couldn't care. She'd been through hell.

Slowly, gently, Daniel pulled back from her and began to stand. She whimpered. She couldn't help it. She was cold and he was her sole source of warmth. She looked up and found herself locked in his stark blue gaze. "Easy, cher. I just want to get a look at you." He trapped her there, forcing wave after wave of his power over her. Each one draped over the other, wrapping around her like warm, dark fleece and holding her motionless before him.

"She's lost too much blood."

Lily recognized Valentine's voice. But she couldn't take her eyes off of Daniel long enough to check. He held her fast in his thrall. She watched, with a sort of dazed absorption, as he parted his lips, exposing his long, sharp fangs. He lifted his wrist to his mouth and bit deep. The blood welled instantly.

He dropped to his knee before the bed and, with one hand at the back of her head, he guided her lips toward the wound. "Drink, Lily."

She didn't hesitate. She couldn't. It smelled too good. She closed her mouth over

the wound and swallowed.

Before her, Daniel closed his eyes. For a werewolf, sharing blood was an incredibly powerful experience. It caused the dormant lust within a wolf to spike so hard and fast that it was breathtaking. Most of the time, a werewolf allowed only one or two swallows. It was all he could give before his own hunger in turn overtook him.

It was especially difficult for Daniel because Lily was his mate, and a new mate. at that. He was already filled with so much need for her, so much desire for her, that it hurt him in ways a mortal man would never understand. Giving her his blood was like giving him a gallon of aphrodisiacs after not letting him cum for a month.

It hurt. He wanted her. He was coming fresh from a fight and the waning adrenaline in his blood didn't help. However, right now, Lily needed more than a few swallows of his blood. Allan Jennings had hurt her too many times, in too many ways.

So with tremendous effort, he reigned in his wolf, forced it to heel, and even as he began to tremble slightly and break out in a sweat with the effort of denying himself anything in return, he held her fast against his wrist.

When a full minute had passed, she began to pull away. He almost stopped her. But she opened her eyes and looked up at him and he was stunned.

"Christ, you're beautiful," he muttered. Her eyes shone like gold. Her hair was nearly the exact same color. A soft glow had infused her skin and her cheeks were once more flushing with the warmth his blood afforded her.

He lowered his wrist. As his self-inflicted wound began to heal, he continued to stare at her. He could gaze at her forever. She was perfect.

Then, as if she could read his thoughts, she did the most amazing thing. She smiled a shy smile. Her perfect white fangs were small and sharp. His breath caught in his throat. His heart actually ached. He gently cupped her face with both of his hands. "So, so beautiful," he whispered.

Lily shivered.

Daniel blinked. Instantly, he was up and pulling off his t-shirt. Behind him, several other people moved as well and Lily peered around Daniel's tall form to see who it was.

"These are the men in my pack, Lily," Daniel told her as he knelt before her and began to drape the tremendously large shirt over her slim form.

Daniel's men were pulling off jackets and shirts and handing them to Daniel. One after another, he placed them on her until she was swimming in them – but she was at least warm again.

While he worked, he caught Lily staring at his broad chest and the muscles that rippled across it and his thick arms. He noticed her cheeks burning just before she forced herself to look at the floor.

And then she blanched. Daniel followed her gaze. Allan Jennings was laying on the floor, his body flopped at an unnatural angle, his eyes swelling shut, his nose and lips utterly disfigured. But he was also handcuffed. Daniel could hear the man's heart beating and he knew that Lily would be able to as well.

"He'll be turned into the Clan council and questioned," said James, who had clearly been paying attention to Lily as well.

Lily looked up at Valentine, who was standing over the unconscious prisoner. "What he can tell us about other Hunters is too valuable," he told her, his tone one of consolation, as if he was trying to tell her that he was very sorry.

"Everyone of us wants to rip his throat out, Lily," said detective Knight.

"But Valentine is right," said Stark, who stood a few feet from Daniel.

Daniel watched as she took in the appearances of his pack members as if memorizing them. Lily's gaze flicked to Stark's gray-gold eyes. "The Hunters have become too powerful," he continued, his tone gentle. "We need all the intel we can get."

Lily hugged her gifted clothes more tightly around herself and then looked back at Daniel. "His father killed your parents," she told him softly.

Daniel froze. An invisible wall slammed itself into him and the wind was knocked from his lungs. Memories assaulted him – pain immeasurable. He instantly saw red and wanted to stand, to destroy Jennings, to mutilate his body until it was unrecognizable as animal.

But Lily gazed at him steadily, her breathing soft and ragged, and though the air around them all had become stifling with his unrolling power, he did not move. He did not take his eyes from his mate.

After a long moment, he closed his eyes and his hands dropped to the bed on either side of her. There, they fisted in the mattress, his claws breaking through the material until it was balled uselessly in his grip. And then Lily was running her hands through his hair and pulling his head against her chest. She cradled him there, without saying a word.

The werewolves in the basement grew silent. Respect for the lost.

Thunder rolled in the distance.

Somewhere outside, a storm was moving on.

Epilogue

"I don't think you should do this."

Lily rolled her eyes and sighed. "Not you too."

Tabitha held up her hands in a just-hear-me-out kind of way and went on. "It's just that the Council is.... Well, they're really, really powerful, Lil'. You don't wanna go and draw attention to yourself with them. Once you're in their sights, you're always in their sights and who knows what kind of trouble they could make for you if you do this?" Tabitha followed Lily as she moved from room to room, looking everything over and double-checking to be sure she'd packed what she needed.

"Look Tabby, the Council doesn't scare me. I've been kidnapped by three different men, hand-cuffed to two different beds, shot more than thirty times, drowned in a hot tub in the middle of a raging fire, and turned into a werewolf." She stopped in her tracks and fixed her best friend with raised brows and wolfen eyes. "What the hell else could the Council do to me? Hmm?"

Tabitha's jaw dropped open and she inhaled sharply. "Oh! Girl, you have no idea! Most werewolves spend their lives tryin' to *avoid* being noticed by the Council! Don't get me started on what they could do to you –"

But Lily was turning and moving away once more and Tabitha was forced to follow her around the house again as she argued her point. "Listen Lily, don't ignore me on this. I'm serious. The Council is a force of good, yes. I'll admit that much. And if what you say is true, then I feel sorry for Malcolm Cole too. But in the end, it's your word against theirs and if they think that you're in league with a serial killer, it could cause all kinds of big, bad horribleness to rain down upon you!"

Lily grabbed her sweater off of the wooden bed post in the guest room and then whirled on her friend. "Oh my *God*, Tabby! Would you listen to yourself? You just now all but admitted that Cole was innocent and that you believed me! How can you possibly be okay with every werewolf in the world thinking he's guilty of committing countless gruesome murders?" She brushed past Tabitha in a huff and stormed her way down the hall and back into the living room, where her suitcase sat open on the coffee table. She threw the sweater into the suitcase and spun to face Tabitha once more.

"And, furthermore, do you *really* think there's even the slightest chance that the Council would *honestly* think I was in cahoots with a *killer*? I'm a *social worker*, for Christ's sake! I can't kill a stupid *spider*, Tabby – I have to pick it up in a jar with a piece of paper over the top and take it outside!"

Tabitha shifted from one foot to the other, opened her mouth as if to say something, and then shut it again, running her hand through her hair in a frustrated gesture.

Finally she located something in her head worth saying and took a quick breath and asked, "Do you even know where Cole is?"

"No, of course not. No one does and you know that. He went into hiding again after I..." Lily's voice trailed off.

"Burned down his mansion?"

Lily shot her a hard look. "Yes," she said, through a jaw that was tightly clenched. "That."

"Uh-huh," Tabitha put her hands on her hips. "So, if he's in hidin', then what the hell does it matter whether people think he's innocent or not?"

Lily sighed in frustration. "I swear, sometimes you're just as bad as your brother."

At that, Tabitha's eyes widened and her expression became genuinely offended.

"What? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"He told me not to go too."

Tabitha blinked. "He did?"

Lily's look was dead pan. "What do *you* think? He not only told me not to go, he pretended he actually had the clout to make me *care* that he was telling me not to go." She shook her head. "As if." Daniel was a good man, but he'd lost too much in his life and he'd been forced to take on too many responsibilities too quickly. As a result, he was frankly an asshole sometimes. She loved him because she could see the good in him; she'd been able to see the good in him since high school. But he had another thing coming if he thought he could play the big bad cop routine with her.

"Well, of *course* he did!" Tabitha reiterated, changing tactics. "He's worried about you, too!"

"Honestly Tabby, I don't see what the big deal is. I'm just going to go to headquarters and ask to speak with the Overseer so that I can tell him what I know about Cole's past and try to get the man exonerated for crimes he didn't commit. Why is this such a bad thing?"

"Well, for one thing Lil, you'll be the first woman to ever go before the Council," Tabitha shot back.

Lily straightened from where she had been folding and stuffing socks into the sides of her suitcase. "Seriously?"

Tabitha nodded once, and crossed her arms over her chest.

"The first *ever*?"

"Yes, ma'am." Tabitha looked proud of herself.

Lily's gaze narrowed then. She cocked her head slightly to one side and put her hands on her hips. "Wow, Tabitha. Don't you think that's a little, um, how shall we say it?" She pretended to search for the right word. And then her full pink lips turned up slightly in a bitter, dry smile. "*Puritan*?" The word dripped acid.

Tabitha blinked. And then she blushed and her arms dropped to her sides. "Well, in all fairness, you're not exactly like other Dormants, you know."

"Really? Do tell."

"No other Dormant has gifts like you do. None of the other turned or Made wolves can glimpse visions into the future or the past the way you can, Lily. You're different."

Tabitha had a point there. Since the moment Daniel had left his mark on her arm, Lily had been having dreams and visions, for lack of better terms, about people. It had started with her dreams about Malcolm and his time at Dachau. They hadn't

been just dreams. They'd been glimpses into the past – *his* past – and they'd been extremely revealing.

Now Lily was seeing glimpses into lots of pasts. In the two weeks since Daniel and his men had rescued her from Jennings, Lily had caught glimpses into three different lives. Some of them werewolf lives. She'd managed to warn a female born teenager not to take her father's truck four-wheeling because, if she did, she would turn the vehicle over and get crushed beneath it.

That night, it had stormed, and Daniel's police force had responded to several calls of overturned vehicles in the same area that Lily had seen in her vision. The female born was not among the injured – because she'd heeded Lily's warning and stayed home.

Lily had also managed to save a werewolf boy from what most likely would have resulted in scarring injuries when she'd had a vision of him attempting to light the barbeque pit by himself while his parents were away from home.

The visions came in the forms of dreams most of the time. However, every once in a while, they would simply flash before her mind's eye and Lily had to be careful not to drive off the road or crash her bicycle when that happened.

"You're right, Tabitha," Lily agreed coolly, as she turned back to the task of packing. "And while I forgive my predecessors for 'minding their places' and keeping quiet and dutifully popping out puppies for the betterment of wolf-kind, I may be the beginning of something new, Tabby. Perhaps it's time that Dormants became more than *dormant*. Times are changing." She shot her friend a hard, meaningful look. "You said so yourself."

To that, Tabitha had no reply. She realized somewhat belatedly that she'd talked herself into a corner.

Lily realized it, too. Though she was grown up enough not to rub it in. "It's time one of us 'Made wolves' stood up and spoke out," Lily continued. "And what better reason could we have than to defend someone who is *good* from people who think he is *bad*?"

"Malcolm Cole can take care of himself, Lily."

"Maybe he can. And maybe he won't. Either way, I'm going to do the right thing. If I don't, I won't be able to live with myself." Lily closed her suitcase and zipped it up. "Well, that's it. Am I missing anything?"

"Just James," Tabitha answered, softly.

Lily's gaze cut to her. She recognized the slight blush that had suddenly come to her friend's cheeks, and the vague look of something akin to yearning in Tabitha's hazel eyes. "Wow. You got it bad for that man, don't you?"

Tabitha looked up. Her blush deepened. Finally she sighed. "Let's just say that, though I'm glad he'll be takin' care of you and keepin' you safe – I sort of wish he wasn't going."

Lily smiled. "If you're gonna miss him that much, why don't you come with me?"

"I have to work, Lily. I don't think I can get anyone to cover my hours long enough

to follow you around while you play Joan of Arc against an army of ancient werewolves."

That gave Lily pause. She pulled the suitcase down from the coffee table and frowned. "Exactly how ancient *are* these werewolves? Everyone always talks about how old the Council members are. But, I thought that wolves only aged a little less quickly than humans, not that they were... *immortal*, or anything like that."

"They're not immortal," Tabitha shook her head. Then she pursed her lips. "Well, not that I know of, anyway. But some do age very slowly. Cole, for instance, seems to age at about one-third or one-fourth the rate of a normal human. James is about the same. And I've heard that a few of the Council elders have truly earned the name 'elder'."

Lily considered that for a moment and then sighed. She edged around the coffee table, her suitcase in one hand, and reached for the car keys beside the lamp in the hall. "Well, let's hope those old fogies don't faint dead away when a female, twenty-something Made wolf who has visions comes to argue on behalf of Malcolm Cole, the serial killer."

Tabitha blinked after her and squinted as Lily opened the front door, letting in vast amounts of noonday light. "Yes," she muttered, shaking her head as she followed in her friend's footsteps. "Let's."

Two years later...

"Your spawn wants you," Lily said as she weakly shoved at the sleeping man beside her. He mumbled something into his pillow and then turned to face her.

"No, cher. My spawn wants *you*," he told her, his southern drawl working its magic on her, even now.

She opened her golden eyes to find that he was staring back at her. The blue of his gaze was being swallowed by the black of his pupils. She knew that look. He was as insatiable as his child was.

"You're obviously *up*," she told him, "so go feed him."

"William's my son," Daniel smiled, flashing fangs. "He won't be happy with anything less than a breast."

Lily's gaze narrowed and she raised herself up on her elbow. "Oh?"

And then she was flat on her back and Daniel was on top of her, his strong hands pinning her wrists to the bed on either side of her head.

Lily stared up at him as he smiled his rapacious smile and pressed the hard evidence of his hunger into the thin fabric of her night gown. "You can't be serious," she told him, trying not to let on that she was getting wet under his hungry gaze. The last thing he needed was confirmation that he was getting to her.

He'd always been a little too much on the cocky side of confident. Over the last year, they'd worked a lot on their relationship and he'd managed to smooth out a few of his rougher edges for her. Still, he could be such an arrogant prick sometimes.

"Why in the world not, cher?" he asked.

"He's crying. You can't hear that?"

"I can hear it just fine, sweet heart. I've got great hearing, remember?"

"So you're just going to ignore it?" she asked.

"I'm jealous," he told her flatly, his eyes darkening a little more. They glittered with predatory intent. "He gets to have you whenever he wants you."

Lily rolled her eyes. He was an *immature*, arrogant prick. If she hadn't come to know and love the real man with the kind heart underneath his uber alpha wolf, she would have flushed her gorgeous wedding ring down the toilet months ago. "Get off, Daniel. There's milk in the freezer. You know what to do."

"What's it worth to you, cher?"

An inkling of an idea uncoiled in her mind. With it, a rush of excitement flooded her blood. "A lot," she said softly.

His brow rose. "Oh? Do tell."

"Get off and I'll show you." She smiled a coy smile and made a show of running her tongue over the tips of her teeth. "I promise."

Daniel was off of her like a light. He stood and waited by the bed as she crawled over to his side and raised herself up on her knees before him. As always, despite his unrepentant rapaciousness, she was amazed at how gorgeous he was. In the middle of the night, after three months of practically no sleep, he was still as starkly handsome as a fallen angel.

She leaned in and captured his lips in a kiss. His hand instantly fisted in her hair and held her fast as he deepened the kiss himself. She could feel him begin to send his deadly pleasure into her through the power of the kiss and she knew exactly when to pull away.

She jerked back and shook her finger at him admonishingly.

His look was pure, animalistic need.

And then Lily smiled.

In one smooth move, she pulled her arm back and drove her fist forward, slamming it into the side of his beautiful face. His head snapped to the side and he stumbled backward and into the wall.

Lily put her hands on her hips and nodded approvingly. "Wow. Tabby was right. Punching you as a werewolf is *way* more satisfying." She couldn't believe it had only occurred to her to do it now. Having a kid will take the *think* right out of you.

Daniel slowly straightened against the wall, his left hand gingerly rubbing the tenderness out of his jaw. His eyes were completely black now and his smile had only wavered for a second before it was back and as wicked as ever.

"Okay, cher," he acknowledged, his tone low and laced with dark promise. "I s'pose you owed me that one."

"Damn right I did. Now go feed your son."

Daniel dropped his hand and sighed, shaking his head.

"Oh, and I want Starbucks in the morning," Lily told him as she plopped back down onto the bed and pulled the covers up over her. "But not before ten." She rolled

over then, giving him her back.

Behind her, she could hear Daniel chuckle and finally leave the room.

Slowly, Lily Kane once more succumbed to the embrace of sleep. She recognized the dream state at once and, with a contented calm she allowed herself to float through the fuzzy edges of the tunnel that connected her real self to that other place and time.

As her surroundings solidified into a more discernible shape, Lily surveyed the dreamscape. It was relatively dark.... A club of some kind.

On the stage a band played. Lily waited as sound entered her dream state, and when it did, she felt the rhythm of the drums beat in time with her heart. Long strawberry-blond hair shook and glided past creamy white shoulders as the drummer, in a tank top, beat on the skins of her toms and the lead singer began to croon to a packed audience.

Lily's dream eyes scanned the crowd. In the corner, hidden by shadow, loomed a tall figure, his stark green eyes focused on the drummer.

Lily recognized those jade green eyes. Cole.

Confusion furrowed her brow; why would she be dreaming about him again? After all of this time? But something else tugged at her unconsciousness and she spun to see a second shadowy figure enter the club.

He was tall and built and Lily wondered if he was a werewolf, too. His shoulder-length blond hair was pulled back in a leather knot. His brown eyes scanned the interior of the club.

And then settled on the drummer.

Lily watched him gazing hungrily at the woman on stage and fear began to uncoil in the pit of her stomach. The lead singer's words echoed through the chambers of her mind.... *"He's a Hunter, bound to claim his prize. Lily, save the hero from his mistrusted eyes..."*

It was a vision. The woman in the dream needed Lily's help.

THE END

Look for The Strip, the second book in this series by Heather Killough-Walden.

Also check out Heather's new young adult paranormal release, Sam I Am, the first novel in The October Trilogy, now available on Amazon....

SAM I AM By Heather Killough-Walden
The October Trilogy, Book One

Prologue

61 A.D. Island of Anglesey, Britain....

Keenan stumbled over something he couldn't see and pretended not to notice that it was soft enough to give beneath his leather boot. "Faolan, lift her more on your end, son!" He hissed the command to his son, who was carrying Ciara's legs. Keenan had her shoulders and head and though she was a wee lass, she was nearly a dead weight, and the night was without moon or stars.

The terrain was deadly; it had always been, and the druid elders had long warned against going out on the crags at night without torchlight. But for the angry red glow that emanated from the burning village behind them, there was nothing to guide their desperate escape across the rocks and heather of what had become their final home.

"Hurry, Keenan! We haven't much time!" Ianna spurred them along from where she raced behind them, her small body wrapped in a cloak of sable, to hide her form from the eagle eyes of the Roman army. They all wore the cloaks, for what good it did them. Keenan was well aware that, before the sun rose on the horizon, the cloaks would become their death shrouds.

"I'm movin' as fast as ay can!" Keenan hissed back, knowing that it didn't matter. The night would soon be complete and the door that Ciara had opened several nights ago would remain open. All would be lost if it did. The dead traveled through the door to their new destination, the land that had been ruled by Samhain since time began. But this door worked both ways. If it was not closed and locked by the end of the Harvest, the dead could return through it into the world of the living, and with them, their King.

Ciara was the last of their druid leaders; all others had died on the coast with their soldiers and most of their women. The Roman general Suetonius Paulinus had attacked early in the evening and, though the village had managed to take many of their men down, it had lost in the end.

The women, with their torches and long red hair had fallen beside their mates – and even their children. The druids' spells had immobilized Paulinus's army for long enough to maintain a steady line of defense for most of the early evening. But the Romans had adapted quickly – changing their tactics to take down the elders first, before the others, until there were no bards left. And no spells.

And no hope.

It was Aidan, the strongest of the druids, who called out to Keenan, even as he lay dying with his own mortal wounds. He had warned Keenan that the spell had not

been completed, and charged him and his son with Ciara's safety.

She was the one who had started it. Only she could complete it.

Alas, we failed yae, Keenan thought now, as he tried to block out the sounds of another woman being defiled in the night. They had failed in Aidan's task. Ciara was struck down with a spear even as they ran; the Romans did not mind killing women and children, and not even from behind. There was no honor in their attack, no honor in these deaths. It was slaughter.

But it was still was up to Ciara to complete the spell. Too much was hanging in the balance.

Keenan glanced down to see Ciara's closed eyelids flutter. The blood still ran from the wound in her side. It meant her heart still beat. If it weren't for those signs, he would think her already dead.

Paulinus must be Samhain in disguise to attack on this night, in the midst of Samonois, Keenan thought as he gritted his teeth and took up the slack when his son tripped and momentarily lost his grip on Ciara's booted feet. She groaned as her body twisted and a new well of blood appeared beneath her leather tunic.

"Careful, boy!" he hissed.

An arrow split the air somewhere nearby. The sound was unmistakable. Was it an errant shot by a ballista? Or had the Romans discovered their hasty retreat across the unlit crags in the darkness?

Keenan hoped for the former rather than the latter. They had so little time as it was. He and his family were already doomed. His entire village was doomed. There was no hope for them – not now; that was clear.

But if they hurried, if nature was on their side, they might yet save everyone else. Humanity. The future – every child yet unborn would still stand a chance.

"There!" Ianna rushed past them, her long arm pointing toward the entrance to the oak grove where the first part of the rite had been interrupted that morning. "In there! She'll know what to do then!"

There was no response for that; it was too hopeless to speak on what they were all thinking – that Ciara was too far gone. So none of them said anything. They only moved faster, spurred on by sheer terror and desperation.

Another arrow split the night and following its slicing whiz through the air was the unmistakable thunk of its tip embedding itself into a nearby trunk or chunk of earth.

The spirits take him, thought Keenan. *Take the bastard Paulinus*. The general and his men meant to wipe the Kelts from existence. And they would no doubt succeed; Anglesey was their final refuge.

Ironically, if Ciara could not close the door that had been opened, it would not only be the druids and their people who suffered an end this night. Before long, the Romans would fall as well, victorious or not.

Precious moments passed before Keenan and his son were finally able to lay Ciara down beside the stones that marked the site for this devastatingly important annual ritual.

"Ciara!" Ianna knelt beside the young woman, shaking her gently – but not too gently. Ciara's eyelids fluttered and opened. Stark gold irises reflected the distant firelight. "You must finish the spell, Ciara!" Ianna pled. Her voice was sheer panic now, sharing in the desperation they each felt.

Ciara closed her eyes and then opened them again, blinking slowly. Her lips were the same pallor as her cheeks, pale and dry. She had once been a very beautiful maiden; sought-after as any lass, with hair the color of polished bronze and a smile that beckoned suitors. But now, she was a shadow of what she had been only that morning.

She would soon be joining Samhain in his realm.

Be that he covets her, Keenan thought. Treat her well, Lord of the Dead, for she dies before her time.

And then Ciara began to whisper. It was nearly inaudible, barely a scratching sound, reminiscent of the leaves that fell beneath the Harvest moon and coated the island ground.

But her companions heard her well enough, and they fell silent and willed her to go on.

The distant night crackled and blazed and screamed and sobbed. Another spear or arrow found purchase somewhere nearby. The air felt thick with fog and smoke, and cold with the chilled spirits of the bansidhe, awakened and angered by their sisters' cries.

Ciara grimaced and gurgled, blood making its way into her throat, hiccupping her progress in the spell.

And mist began to rise from a grave nearby.

"Och no..." Ianna muttered. She and the others watched with wide eyes, as the dead began to realize that their return path home might no longer be barred. The witch who kept them – the one who could close the door – was dying.

"Ciara!" Faolan dropped to his knees beside Ciara and gently cupped her cheek with his palm. "Finish the spell." Faolan was only a few years older than Ciara. He had been one of the many men who'd hoped to win her heart one day.

Though they had happened but yesterday, those thoughts and desires seemed years gone now. All that remained was this one thing. This one spell.

It was their final duty to the world and all of life within it. Their people had been charged when time began; entrusted with the guardianship of this portal. It was up to them to keep it closed every year – every Samhain.

They could not fail now.

"We cannot fail, Ciara," Faolan whispered, his lips now mere inches from her own. She slowly opened her eyes once more and gold irises met green. "Sweet Ciara... please," he pleaded. It was all he could really say.

Ciara winced again as what must have been horrid pain lanced through her slender form. But she gritted her teeth and, as the others watched, their expressions lost, she continued to utter the words of the incantation.

Faolan stood and turned to watch as the mists that had begun rising from the

graves started to dissipate. She was doing it. Keenan glanced at the rest of the hallowed resting places within their sacred grove – all were settling down once more.

Another spear split the sky. This time, when it landed, accompanying the thunk of purchase was a grunt of pain.

Keenan stopped breathing, his eyes wide, his world tilted on its side as he took in the image of his son with a spear through his young chest.

Faolan looked down at the long piece of wood embedded in his midsection. He could not even fall; the spear's tip was braced solidly in the earth, holding the young man upright. It was obscene. It was wrong, somehow.

A man ought to at least be able to fall.

Faolan smiled a bemused smile and did not hear the sound of his father bellowing in anguish. Instead, he heard the final words that Ciara whispered as she finished her spell.

Before he closed his own green eyes, he met her honey colored gaze.

And the two of them closed their eyes together.

Chapter One

Modern Day....

Logan hurriedly shut her door and pressed her forehead against it. She tried to breathe. *Just breathe...* but the sound of something crashing from the first floor made her breath hitch in her throat. Then a door slammed.

Maybe it's over for now...

A man bellowed with rage and there was another thumping-smashing sound.

That was Taylor's fist, she thought. *He's putting another hole in the wall.* It was a wonder the place didn't fall down around them all. It was riddled with the fist and shoe-sized holes that her brother had created over the years. *Swiss cheese*, her mind offered, distractedly.

Her stomach churned as Taylor began swearing downstairs. Logan thought of it as stream-swearing. It was always loud and continuous and vicious.

It sometimes burned her ears. The words came down around her like a storm cloud, portending some kind of doom. She could hear his footsteps now. Her brother was moving quickly through the house, from room to room, like the Minotaur huffing through the Labyrinth.

Logan shuddered. Acid burned her esophagus. A sharp white pain shot from the right side of the back of her head to just behind her right eye.

She pinched the bridge of her nose with her free hand and tried, once again, to breathe. Doors opened and were slammed shut again as Taylor made his way through the house, looking for a victim. The reverberations of each door slam went like shock-waves through her body, disturbing her stomach and making her nauseated.

Logan's heart hammered. It felt relentless in its beating, like drums. *I have to stop him*, she thought. *Before he finds James again. I'm the only one he listens to.*

With something akin to hopeless but hasty resignation, Logan reached for the handle of the door and yanked it open.

* * * *

Meagan Stone gazed, almost unseeing, at the calendar that sprang up on the LCD screen of her cell phone. The first of October marked a full moon. The thirty-first was to be a blue moon, and rare in its own right. However, it was especially important during October. This was Samonois, the month of the Seed Fall. Everything changed now.

With a shakiness that she had been trying to squelch all morning long, Meagan took a deep breath and let it out in a trembling sigh. Then she sneezed and her skin broke out in goose bumps. *Allergies*, she thought distractedly. She felt a strange chill and shivered, for the most part ignoring it. When it passed, she looked back at her phone and pinched the bridge of her nose. She was getting a headache.

Tonight was the big night. October first. It was her night to prove that she had

earned her rightful place in the grove.

An October with a blue moon was especially symbolic. Meagan wasn't certain what the implications were, exactly. In fact, so much of the druidic Celtic tradition had been destroyed by Roman historians long ago, that no one in her Grove could say for sure what the blue moon at this time signified.

So, erring on the side of caution, they'd forced Meagan to practice her wording more than they would normally do. And a few of them suggested that she didn't do it at all. Some of the elders had heartily requested that they perform the ritual instead. They were more experienced and this was too important.

However, it was Meagan's right to do the spell this night. She was of age. And a deal was a deal, even if it was with the forces of nature themselves. She was the one the Seer in their group had foretold to do the spell this night, so she was the one who would do it.

And it was as simple as that.

She had been practicing for months – *years* even. She was lucky; she had a good support group, and very good friends who, if they found out about what she was, would most likely think it was something to be proud of rather than afraid or ashamed of.

Still, she never talked about it. Just in case.

There had been countless times that she had been tempted to at least tell Logan. Logan was a writer. In Meagan's belief system, that made her a bard. And she was a good one. Bards had long been considered brethren, special and sacred, druids in their own rights, with magical powers of their own kind.

And Logan didn't even know it.

If Meagan was going to confide in anyone, it would have been her. But rather than chance the repercussions of her secret getting out too far, she remained quiet about it and figured – if it is meant to be discovered, then it will be.

She sneezed again and pulled a tissue from her pocket.

Tonight, Katelyn wanted Meagan and Logan to go to her house for a study session. Of course, it wasn't going to happen. Not for Meagan anyway. And she needed to come up with a viable excuse before the bell rang or Katelyn would assume that she was either coming – or didn't *want* to come, and that would just hurt her feelings.

"I'm having a family night," she muttered to herself as she wiped her nose and then stuffed her books into her locker. She pulled out what she would need for fourth period. She had French with Katelyn fourth period. "That sounds good. Mom and dad want us to play board games or something," she nodded to herself. That would work. Blame it on the parents.

"Hey!"

Meagan turned to see the very blond head of Katelyn Shanks, one of her two best friends, bobbing toward her as quickly as it could through the crowded halls. "Megs, help me! I didn't do the homework for today! I totally spaced it!" Kate breathed as she managed to push up to Meagan's locker. Her hazel eyes were wide

and glittered with that mild form of terror a student experiences in the midst of unfinished assignments or pop quizzes.

"Here, take this," Meagan pulled a sheet out of her three ring binder and handed it to Katelyn. "I took an extra one when she was handing them out." She always did this, as Katelyn was in the habit of losing them or leaving them at home and Meagan knew that if their situations were reversed, Katelyn would do the same for her.

Besides, Katelyn was pretty good at French. She just wasn't good at homework.

"So, are you coming over tonight?" Katelyn asked as she plastered the yellow hand out to the face of the locker next to Meagan's and pulled the pen from behind her ear.

Meagan shut her locker and scrambled the combination. "I can't," she said. "It's family night. My mom and dad want us to play board games. You know – Clue, Monopoly, that kind of thing."

Katelyn looked disappointed, and, once more, Meagan was tempted to tell one of her friends the truth. But the second bell soon rang and the two girls slid into their seats and before long the teacher was talking and Meagan was saved from saying anything further at all.

Logan had already missed the first two classes of the day. She'd had to threaten to call the cops again to get Taylor to put down the gun and back away from her mom. The cops had been out to their house so many times at this point, it was a regular stop for them.

And Logan's dad had long since put most of his weapons in a safe. But he left one out, loaded, and hidden, its location known only to Logan and her mother in case someone broke in while he was gone and threatened them.

Logan could understand that. She really could.

But Taylor was not a stupid young man. Disturbed, definitely. Troubled, absolutely. But not stupid. When he set about trying to find something, he usually found it. And he'd found the gun behind the fluorescent light cover in the garage that morning.

Fortunately, he hadn't been so far gone that he couldn't listen to reason.

Logan was used to talking her brother down. She was the only one he ever listened to – when he listened to anyone at all. Sometimes even *she* couldn't get through to him, and those were very bad days indeed.

Now, however, the morning was more or less over, Taylor was passed out on three Ativan, and all Logan could really think about was how she'd missed the first two classes of the day.

Not that she minded missing the *first* one all that much, but the second was one of her favorites. It was an elective, for one thing, and that alone made it worth going to most of the time. But, more importantly – Dominic Maldovan was in that class.

Well, not exactly *in* that class.

Her class was choir and his was advanced guitar, but they were held in the same

drama department at the same time and there was nothing between them to keep her from surreptitiously glancing at him except the thick glass window of the sound room.

Logan had lived in her small town for a long time – too long, by her book. But in all of the years she'd spent there, she had only ever had a crush on one boy. And that crush, she had suffered since the fourth grade.

She remembered her first meeting with Dom as if it was yesterday. She'd been running on the torn asphalt and gravel playground, trying to escape some kid who liked tagging the girls because they were slower.

Logan had never been one to give up easily, so she had run with all of her might, and when she'd run out of space to go straight, she'd made a hard right. The kid leapt, tagging her hard in the back and knocking her off balance. She lunged forward and hit the ground at a roll, scraping up everything from her shoulders on down.

The first person in the world to be at her side on that playground was Dominic Maldovan. She had looked up, through a tilted world of blurred shock and pain, and Dominic had been there, dressed in a leather jacket, even at his age. Even in the fourth grade.

He had reached down and offered her his hand.

She'd taken it. He walked her to the nurse's office, right up to the door, and didn't leave until the nurse closed it between them.

It was strange, but in the years following that day, he never spoke to Logan. Not really. He would occasionally say "hi," or nod in that rocker-like way he always did. He would smile at her, sort of lopsided and gorgeous, over his broad, leather-encased shoulder.

And she would duck her head and hide her eyes and dream at night about the young man in the black leather jacket with eyes like flinted jade and hair the color of raven's wings.

He was the only boy she had ever crushed on; the only one she thought even remotely appealing or attractive. Maybe her standards were too high. Or maybe she had no interest in dating someone she didn't feel was worth it, just for the sake of dating. It wasn't her thing. She could take boys or leave them. It didn't really matter. Life was complicated enough for her as it was.

But Dominic gave her hope. He was, to her, a glimpse of what might be if the world looked the way it would have looked if *she* had painted it.

If *she* had written its story.

It would be so beautiful – and its men would wear black leather jackets.

Of course, she wasn't alone in her opinion of Dominic Maldovan. Practically every girl in the school had a thing for him. It was hard not to. He was so tall, he stood at least a head above most of the other boys in the school. He played guitar as if he'd been born with a pick between his thumb and forefinger. He even had a band – and they were good. But most of all, when Dominic looked at you, with those piercing green eyes of his, he really *looked* at you – as if he were truly *seeing* you there.

That was rare for boys.

And it drove Logan slightly mad. It was the stuff of dreams; it was definitely the stuff of *her* dreams. And she'd missed him this morning because her brother had gone ballistic. Literally.

With a heavy sigh and a heart that felt equally heavy, Logan shut her locker door and turned to peer down the empty hallway. Her mother had made excuses for her, as usual. It was nothing new, and embarrassing as it was, Logan was used to the principal simply nodding at her as she walked through the school's front door two hours late.

The one good thing that came of it was that she could take her time sorting herself out before she went to third period. She was already late. She was already behind. She may as well stand there and breathe and *think* before she was shoved head-long into what was left of another stressful high school day.

The silence in the halls was so very rare. To Logan, when she stood still and alone in the hallway between classes or after school, she felt as if she'd entered some kind of movie or book or even a dream. It was surreal to hear the echoes of the twelve hundred students who had traversed the hall only moments ago – but stare down its length and see nothing but rows and rows of lockers and a few pieces of careless trash.

It was like living in a ghost story. She expected to catch a glimpse of some student body president from the past, outlined in white transparency, with holes where his eyes had once been.

But that was just Logan. That was the way her mind worked.

It kept her sane when Taylor sent someone to the emergency room or her mother began to slur her speech or her father had one of his bad days.

Now, the silence in the hall stretched and she began to feel the guilty prodding of time at her back. She needed to get to class. But she hated third period. It was a newly required part of their curriculum – a health class – taught by the gym teacher, who was a meat head in the worst kind of way. And none of her friends were in that class with her.

"Hey Logan."

Logan jumped and spun around at the sound of the deep voice behind her. She barely managed to keep down the yelp of surprise that threatened her lips, but the wide eyes and quickened pulse, she was helpless to stop.

Dominic Maldovan smiled guiltily down at her. "Sorry," he chuckled. "Didn't mean to scare you."

Logan swallowed hard, trying to get past the lump in her throat, but it was difficult; her mouth had gone dry.

"No, you – you didn't –" Logan croaked on her words and blushed furiously. She put her hand to her chest and turned her face away, trying to clear her voice. *Dominic Maldovan is talking to me*, she thought. *He's alone with me, here in the hall, and he's talking to me!*

She could feel Dominic smiling beside her. It was wholly unnerving.

"You didn't scare me," she finally finished. She was completely unconvincing.

"Okay," Dominic grinned. "I noticed you weren't in class today."

You noticed? Logan thought feverishly. *He's talking to me and he noticed I wasn't in class?* "I... I was late getting here this morning. Family issues," she explained softly. She had no idea why she was explaining this to him. Most of her couldn't really believe that she was alone, in the hall, talking to Maldovan in the first place.

I must be dreaming, she decided. *I've had dreams like this before, after all.*

"Oh? Is everything okay?" he asked, his brow furrowed.

"Everything's fine," she lied.

Dominic gazed steadily down at her. *He's seeing me,* Logan thought. *He's really seeing me.*

"I gotta get back to class," he finally said, pulling the hall pass out of his back pocket and giving it a little wave in the air before shoving it back in. "Take it easy, Logan." He nodded at her once, in that respectful, rocker-like way he always did, and then he stepped around her and headed down the long length of the hall.

Logan watched him round the corner. And then she groaned defeatedly and slumped against her shut locker. *Way to blowit, Logan,* she thought.

Dominic rounded the corner and ducked into the men's restroom. Once inside, he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. *Smooth, Dom. Very, very smooth.*

Moron.

He mentally kicked himself with steel-toed boots, standing there, cursing softly, until several minutes had passed and he felt a bit better.

How many years had passed? How many chances had he lost? What, exactly, was he afraid of?

She'll turn you down, man. She's a fucking genius. She's creative, she's gorgeous, she's quiet.... You're out of her league.

It would seem Dominic wasn't quite done kicking himself yet after all. A plethora of unpleasant thoughts chased each other through his head. Another opportunity had come, serendipitous and perfect, and he'd let it slip through his fingers.

All because he was afraid of rejection. Just like every other sorry-ass high school kid in existence.

It hurt all the more because this was their final year together. They were seniors, with less than half a term left, and he wasn't stupid. He knew that once Logan Wright graduated and rid herself of this sorry excuse for a town, she would be hit on by every college kid she crossed paths with. And maybe one of them would be in her league, and probably he would show her how special she was and she would smile at him.

Dominic's hands fisted at his sides and his teeth ground together. Now all he could imagine was Logan Wright with another guy; he couldn't get the image out of his head.

Cool it, Dom. Get control of yourself. He opened his eyes and strode to the sinks against one wall. All of the mirrors had been shattered long ago, and most of the faucets were broken. But one of the four still worked. He turned it on and caught the cold water in his hands, splashing it over his face.

A few minutes later, he dried off and left the bathroom to head back to class. He felt a little better.

He'd come to a decision.

Time was not on his side. And where Logan was concerned, he wasn't going to waste any more of it.

(Sam I Am is now available.)