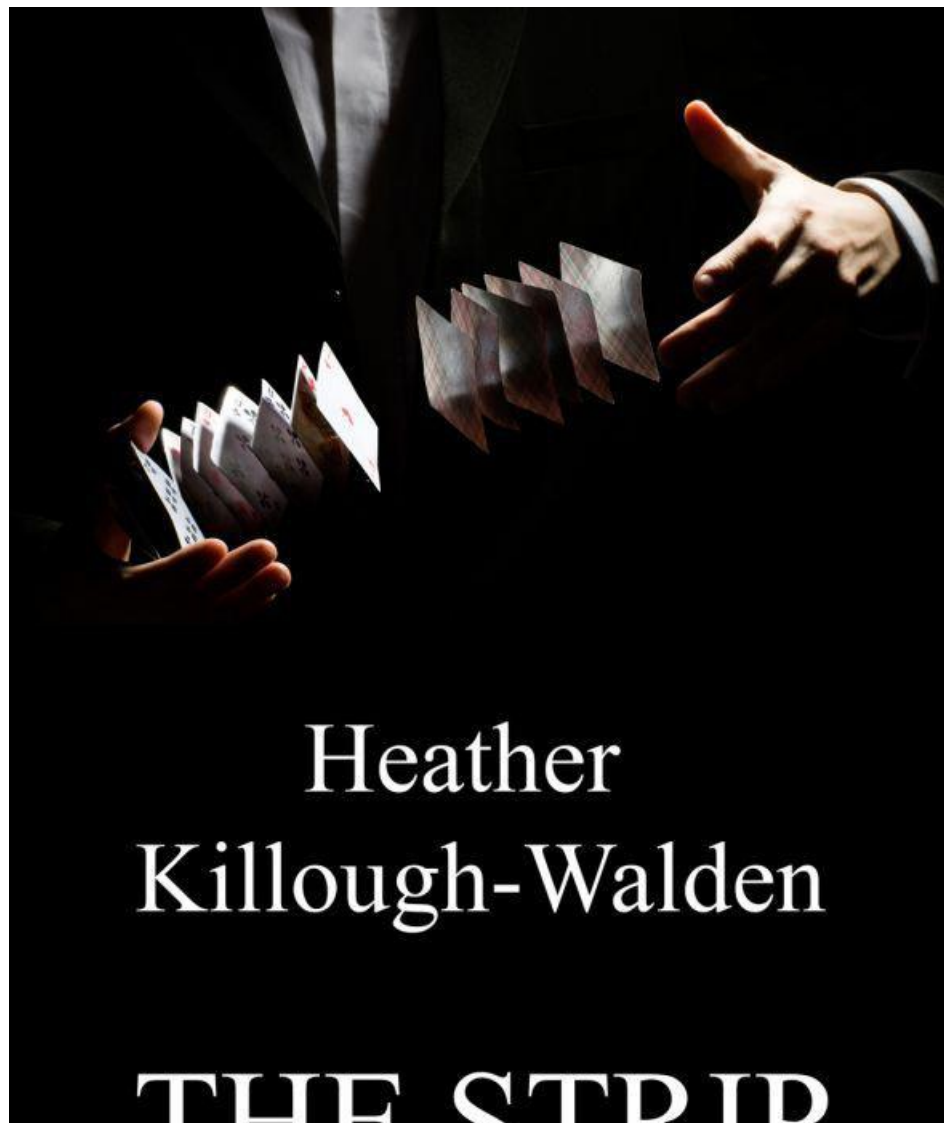




Heather
Killough-Walden

THE STRIP

Big Bad Wolf Series, book two: The Strip
by Heather Killough-Walden



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THE STRIP

THE STIMP

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For Eric and Sarah

"Well, it all looks good. Genuine and binding and all that." Jessie sighed. "Nevada...." He shook his head and shoved the folder closed over the legal documents inside. He looked up at the woman sitting across from him. "Girl you'll never see a brother again in Nevada."

Claire stared at him for a moment, her expression unreadable. And then something flared in her eyes and the smile she shot him was devil-may-care. "That's okay, Jess. You all look the same." She waved her hand dismissively, took a pull of her beer, and continued. "You've seen one brother, you've seen 'em all," she finished, her voice lowering an octave, her stark blue eyes flashing in challenge.

Jessie's heartbeat sped up and warmth flushed to his cock. He knew that look. He'd suspected that she was in a fighting mood. Something had gotten under her skin; he'd sensed it the moment he'd picked her and the rest of the band up at the studio. They'd wanted him to look over some papers – an offer made by someone out of town.

Claire had been too quiet. It was a reliable tell with her. And apparently, he was right. She wanted an out. She needed a release and as always, he was happy to oblige.

He waited a moment, absorbing the dare, and then he arched his brow lazily, accepting the challenge. His thick muscled arms were crossed over the edge of the table and now he leaned forward on them and pinned her with what he knew was a heated gaze.

Claire St.James bravely squared her shoulders, tossing a long, wavy lock of strawberry blonde hair out of her lovely face. She stared right back at him.

Jessie's jeans were starting to feel tight between his legs. She was so gorgeous when she did that. She was so beautiful when she pretended she wasn't about to fall. He fought the urge to smile. "Now girl," he said as he shook his head at her and gazed at her through the tops of his amber eyes. "I know you didn't just say that."

The air between them seemed to grow thicker and fill with electricity.

Her own ice blue gaze narrowed in answer. "I'm pretty sure I did, P. Diddy."

Beside Jessie, a young woman with shoulder-length black hair sighed and shook her head. She sighed, rolling her eyes as she finished off her own beer. Then she pulled a fresh beer from the ice bucket on the table and pushed her chair out.

"That's our cue," she muttered.

Her name was Mary Jane and she'd been down this road with he and Claire before. Jessie didn't have to say anything to her. He kept his gaze squared on his blue-eyed prize.

The other two at the table were the male members of Claire's four-person band. One was a well-built twenty-seven year old, the youngest member of the band. He had blue-gray eyes and buzz-cut blonde hair. The other was a touch taller and wore his long reddish-brown hair in dreads. The dreads were a rather stark contrast to his gold-flecked hazel eyes. Both men stood easily, following M.J.'s example, and

simultaneously snatched up fresh beers for themselves as well. The bit-back smiles on their handsome faces showed that they plainly understood what was about to go down. They were probably sorry they weren't going to get to be a part of it.

M.J. leaned over until her full red lips were a breath from Claire's ear. The picture was decidedly erotic, as was everything about the notorious M.J., and Jessie began to feel impatient. Hungry.

"Try not to kill each other, Charlie," Mary Jane whispered. "Scott's gig is early tomorrow night and we don't have time to find a new drummer."

Jessie watched as Claire smiled but didn't answer. She nodded a goodbye to the others, not taking her eyes off of Jessie.

Mary Jane and both of the men left the room without another word.

Jessie Graves waited until he heard his front door open and close again before he unfolded his arms and placed his hands palm-down on the table. He slowly pushed himself up and watched as Claire's gaze flicked from his face to his broad chest, his powerful arms, and his narrow waist.

He could see the nervous anticipation flash through her beautiful eyes. It was there one moment, and seemingly gone in the next. She was good at hiding it. But he was good at reading her.

"Little white girl comes into a black man's home and shows him disrespect?" His tone was low and deceptively calm as he began to move around the table between them. "You don't really think he can stand for that, do you?"

Claire began to stand as well and Jessie watched as each of her muscles tensed, her lithe, strong body slipping effortlessly into fight mode. "Oh come on, Jessie," she taunted softly, cocking her head to one side. "It's not like you have time for the little things these days." She grinned, flashing her perfect white teeth. "After all, don't you have a country to run, Mr. President?"

Jessie blinked. He truly wanted to laugh at that one, but he managed to chew on the inside of his cheek instead. She was in rare form tonight. He shook his head, half in wonder, half in mock reprimand.

He continued toward her to close the distance between them, and she had the guts to stay where she was instead of stepping back. "Pretty little bitch, you've got a mouth on you," he whispered when he was standing before her. She had to look up to meet his gaze, and he felt something melt inside. He loved it when she looked up at him like that.

It was one of his favorite things in the world.

She took a breath to retort with something new and he moved, like quick silver, his arms snaking around her body, his lips slanting over hers. His left hand fisted in her thick, soft hair; his right hand pressed hard against the delicate curve of her back, shoving her body up against his.

She moaned against his lips and yet tried to push him away with her hands on his chest. It was all part of the game. He was ready for it, of course. He broke the kiss and tightened his grip on her. He glared down at her, his smile rapacious and unforgiving. "Fucking tease me?" he hissed across her lips. He shook his head.

“You’re in for a long night, baby girl.”

With that, he stepped back and grabbed both of her wrists in his hands, using the full mass of his strong body to spin her around and then yank her arms up behind her back.

She gasped at the attack. He knew she hadn’t expected him to do it. He wasn’t playing fair. Claire St.James was not a helpless woman. She knew how to fight, how to defend herself. She worked with a trainer four times a week for two hours each session, and those self defense lessons were ruthlessly drilled into her head.

But Jessie had known Claire for years. They were best friends – with benefits – and at this point, he knew instinctively when she needed something more than their normal, friendly saber-rattling.

Tonight was one of those nights. Claire was hurting inside. He could sense it. She wore her armor well; her tongue was quick and her teeth were sharp. But he could see it in her eyes and feel it in the air around her. He intended to help her work it out.

If it took all night.

This attack position was the one position that Claire had not yet learned how to get out of. He knew that because she’d trusted the information to him a few nights ago while they sat watching the hockey game together. He couldn’t have cared less about the game; he just didn’t *get* hockey. But he listened intently to Claire as she confided in him that it was frustrating her that she couldn’t get the move down. And as always, he locked the information away in his brain for future reference.

Now, he roughly placed both of her wrists into one of his large hands and then snaked his other arm around her body to pull her back up against his chest.

She was breathing hard in surprise and a little pain. The position wouldn’t cause her any real harm – he had to be careful with her arms after all, because she used them to drum and it was her livelihood. But it could sure hurt like hell.

He spread his hand across her taut stomach and then slowly moved it up, grazing her perfect breasts as he continued to her neck. He wrapped his fingers around her slim throat and squeezed just hard enough to ensure obedience. She stopped struggling and closed her eyes. From above her, he could see her long, thick eyelashes flutter against her cheekbones. He used his grip on her throat to force her to rest her head against his shoulder so that he could whisper in her ear.

“You have a choice now, baby girl,” he told her. “You can walk ahead of me to my room and lay down on my bed without a fight.” He grazed his teeth over her ear lobe, his cock jumped where it had hardened in his jeans. “Or I can drag you there and it will hurt, and we’ll get there anyway.” He smiled to himself, squeezing her neck a little more, enjoying the ragged sound of her labored breathing and the moan that he choked from her throat.

“Answer me now,” he commanded, releasing his hold on her neck long enough for her to speak freely. “You gonna come easy?”

She bit her lip and then nodded. “Yes,” she whispered.

He knew it was a lie. It was the only time she ever lied to him. Again, it was all

part of the game. He slowly released her arms and stepped back, waiting for her to turn around. When she did, he caught the defiance in her blue eyes and he tensed a second before she bolted. He was hot on her heels, following close behind her as she escaped into the living room. It was as far as she got before he grabbed her by the back of the neck and shoved her roughly to the carpeted floor of his living room.

He knew his only hope was to immobilize her arms and legs before they could do any damage. This was where his larger size came in as a distinct advantage. No matter how quick you were or how many martial arts classes you had under your belt when you went up against someone who weighed a hundred pounds more than you, chances were, you were going to lose.

Claire quickly rolled over on the carpet and Jessie was immediately on top of her, straddling her. If he'd given her any time what so ever to use her legs, she might have caused him real pain. Tonight, she was a live wire, unpredictable and dangerous, and he very quickly needed to gain the upper hand.

He knew she pulled the punch that she aimed at his jaw, but it connected anyway, and the pain was just enough to bring his determination sharply into focus. His head snapped to the side and back again and he could almost feel his own amber eyes burning like flames.

She blinked up at him as if surprised by what she'd done, and real fear crossed her beautiful features for the first time that night.

He grinned a mirthless grin, all teeth, then roughly grabbed both of her wrists and jumped up, yanking her to her feet. At the same time, he spun her around once more, trapping her arms against her sides as he lifted her into a bear-hug embrace and carried her toward his room.

She thrashed in his arms, her movements now fueled by genuine trepidation. He laughed a pitiless laugh. "You made your choice, baby girl." He said it as if passing a sentence. Final and harsh.

By the time he was shoving through the door to his bedroom and throwing her onto the bed, he'd made up his mind. Claire had never actually hit him before – not for any reason. She'd crossed a line.

She needed to be restrained.

When she hit the mattress, she bounced, and was immediately rolling toward the other side to escape. He let her go, knowing that the only way out of the room was through the door they'd just entered, and she would have to go through him to get to it.

There was a closet door beside him. He shoved the door open and pulled down several leather belts from where they hung on hooks beside his ties. All but one, he hurriedly tossed onto the bed. With practiced speed, he shoved the end of the last belt through the buckle, forming a loop.

In his peripheral vision, he caught Claire trying to run around the bed toward the door. He moved with dogged speed to cut her off and made as if he was going to attempt to capture her wrist in his left hand. When she dodged, he looped the belt over her head and let it slip through the buckle, drawing it tight.

gasped, coming to a sudden stop as he wrapped the other end of the belt taut around his hand and pulled it up short, yanking her against him. Her eyes were shut tight, her fingers clawing at the leather material that dug into her throat.

Her back once more against his chest, he held her there with his makeshift leash and grasped her chin tightly in his other hand. He placed his lips to her ear. "We're moving to the bed now," he told her, his tone resolute. He lessened the grip on the belt slightly, making certain she had adequate air to breathe. At the same time, he used the belt to guide her slowly back toward the bed, and she felt threatened enough to follow him without further resistance.

When her legs bumped against the mattress, Jessie moved his body to stand before her, tilting her head up with his fingers beneath her chin. "Open your eyes, Charlie," he whispered across her lips, using her nickname that only her closest friends used. "Look at me."

His grip increased on the belt, a warning. But his tone was gentle, as were the knuckles he tenderly brushed against her cheek bone. He needed to see her eyes. He needed to look into those ice-blue windows and know that she wasn't actually afraid. Not really. He would never truly hurt her, but he had to be certain that she understood this before he went on.

Claire opened her eyes and gazed up at him. He stared down into those unnaturally beautiful orbs and suppressed a groan of need. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever met.

"I'm going to tie you to my bed Charlie," he told her, brooking no room for argument. There was no fear in her eyes. Instead, there was so much glittering, heavy-lidded lust that his own need had become downright painful. "If you fight me, I'll pull the belt tighter." He demonstrated for her and her hands flew to his chest as she closed her eyes, her oxygen supply suddenly shut off. He released it again and she gasped for air, her fingernails finding purchase in the muscles of his chest. He wondered if she was getting dizzy yet. He strained to keep his calm while his crotch ached.

"If you want to breathe, then lay down in the middle of the bed and raise your arms toward the head board. Do you understand?"

She nodded, this time readily.

"Good." He bent with her as she sat down on the king-sized bed and then scooted slowly to the middle to raise her arms over her head. He considered her clothes for a moment, realizing that he would have to cut them away from her if he tied her first. But there was still a cold fire in her blue eyes. She had some fight left in her. If he gave her the chance, she would make things more difficult for the both of them.

He decided that cutting her clothes off was the way to go. With a speed and efficiency that surprised even him, he had the other belts wrapped securely around her slim wrists and was fastening them to the steel frame of his head board.

Her legs came next. He could tell that she wanted to fight him on this one, but his grip on the belt around her neck changed her mind and she settled down.

"Spread them, Charlie."

Still, she hesitated, obviously not liking the direct order one bit.

He laughed a low, malicious laugh and lowered himself over her until his lips were a breath away from hers. "I'll have them open anyway, baby girl. If you do it yourself, you get to stay conscious when it happens."

She gritted her teeth in frustration and then, as she glared at him in unconditional defiance, she spread her legs open.

"More," he ordered, needing them to line up with the steel posts at the end of the bed. She almost growled at that one, but again obeyed. "Good girl." He knew he was driving her crazy, patronizing her with his words. But he also knew that she needed this. She was a control freak in her every day life and she desperately needed to give up control for a while. Whatever it was that was eating her up inside tonight, she wouldn't be able to let it go until she had a chance to work it out, both physically and mentally.

He was her best friend. He was here for both.

He laughed to himself when he had both of her ankles tightly secured. *Friends with benefits, indeed.*

* * * *

Claire was running. She could hear her ragged breathing, feel her heart hammering in her chest. The brambles and weeds ahead of her seemed to come faster and faster, and she couldn't duck in time, couldn't swipe them away before they clawed at her face and neck and ripped her clothing.

But she could hear him behind her. She could hear *it*. Fear thrummed through her until she tasted metal in her mouth. She couldn't let it catch her. When it did.... *Something bad*, her mind insisted. *Something bad will happen!*

She couldn't run any faster. *God!* Her legs were already growing weak, her lungs felt as if they would explode.

And then it was on her and she was knocked to the ground. Dirt and vines rose up to meet her with dizzying speed. The impact knocked the wind from her body, stunning her into immobilization. She heard a snarl and felt herself being turned over. Strangely, she could have sworn that the hands moving her were human. Not claws.

Still, she closed her eyes and willed herself to fight, to lash out and save her life. She willed herself to keep those sharp, white teeth from sinking into her flesh.

Charlie!

The beast knew her name. He was shaking her now. Why hadn't he ripped out her throat? Eaten her?

Charlie, wake up!

A growl wrapped around her, low and long. It was a warning, a sound of anger and frustration. She felt as if it were a physical thing, tying her to the spot, not letting her up.

She screamed when she felt its breath on her neck, and she opened her eyes. There was a wrenching sensation, hard and horrible.

"Charlie, baby, clam down!"

Jessie was above her and was struggling to keep her pinned to the bed, her wrists in his hands. "Shh... baby girl, it's okay. I've got you"

She could feel that she'd been fighting. Her muscles felt strained from the exertion. Her heart was still a rapid-fire drum beat behind her ribcage. She stared up at Jessie, knowing her own eyes were wide with a fear she couldn't yet shake.

Jessie let go of her wrists and pulled her against him, wrapping his strong arms around her as she tucked her head into his chest. She was shaking. She could feel her body trembling against his.

She said nothing, but held onto him as he gently rocked her back and forth, running his hands through her hair. His low voice whispered that she would be all right. That she was safe. She breathed in his scent, felt the warmth of his skin beneath her fingertips, and grounded herself with him until the cloying vestiges of her dream finally began to slip away.

After several long minutes had passed, Jessie pulled back just enough to look down at her. Charlie knew what was coming. He would want an explanation.

"You wanna tell me about it?" he asked softly.

She shook her head and dove for his chest again. She pressed herself hard against him; she could hear his heartbeat. It brought her comfort. But she knew he wouldn't let it drop. She knew that he could tell something had been bothering her lately, and this dream was a catalyst. There was only so long she could avoid the inevitable.

Eventually, as she knew he would, he pulled her away from him again and gazed down at her. "You need to let me in, Charlie. What's going on up here?" He gently touched his fingertips to her temple.

She took a deep breath and let it out with a whoosh. "I've been having these dreams... every night. They don't let me sleep. Not very much, anyway." She chewed on her lip, a nervous habit. "I'm getting tired, I can tell. Sometimes I miss beats and I never used to do that before." She took a shaky breath and let it out again. "And Reese keeps getting the upper hand. It's like he knows I'm tired and he..." She trailed off. She hadn't meant to bring her trainer into the conversation already – it had just slipped out. And now it was too late.

Jessie pulled back from her and gently held her by her upper arms. His amber eyes burned into hers. "He's the reason for all of these bruises, isn't he?" he asked. She could hear the suppressed rage in his tone. She trusted Jessie with her life, but she knew he wasn't a man to cross. He had connections and she was worried about him interfering somehow, about him trying to do something to David Reese.

"Jessie, it's my own fault. He's only trying to teach me–"

"*Bullshit*, Charlie. The man is a sadist." He yanked the covers out from between them, exposing both of their bodies. His stark gaze raked across her flesh, stopping on the dark marks on her hip bones and upper thighs. He pointed to the splay of small bruises at the bottom of her rib cage. "These were not accidental," he told her, his tone harsh. "He's marking you up while you're too exhausted to fight him off, and

he's *enjoying* it." He almost growled that last bit. "Can't you see that?"

Claire pulled away from him, suddenly angry. Her gaze narrowed. "He's the only one who can teach me what I need to know, Jess. So far, it's saved my life several times over."

Jessie didn't seem to have a reply for that. He opened his mouth as if to say something and then closed it again. She knew that *he* knew that she was right.

There was something about her that attracted a bad element. Men were magnetized to her; always had been. She exerted some sort of pull on members of the opposite sex. The good ones managed to keep their distance, out of respect maybe or at least a sense of what was right and what was wrong. But the others lost out against their more base instincts and she'd had to defend herself against them too many times.

Her parents had warned her about this. Well, sort of.

Before they'd been killed, they had pulled her aside and sat her down. She had been twelve at the time. Her mother had taken her hands and held them in her own. She told her that she was special and that it might cause some problems.

Problems? she remembered thinking. *What sorts of problems? Like... strange periods? Zits? Delayed learning abilities?* She remembered the horror that had crossed her mind as she thought, *Oh God, do I have some sort of deadly disease?*

Charlie had been utterly confused by her mother's statement and had wanted to ask what her mother meant, but her father cut in before she could voice her question. He told her that she would need to learn to defend herself, and that she would always need to play it safe. She would need to learn to keep herself out of harm's reach.

When Charlie had finally asked *why*, her parents had fallen silent.

"It's complicated, Claire," her mother had said. "A little too complicated for you to understand just now. But we'll explain in time. When you're ready."

And they'd left it at that. It was the most bizarre conversation she'd ever had in her life and, as a twelve year old, she'd been quick to file it away in some cabinet in the back of her mind where all of the shadows and spider webs of adolescence lurked. She got on with her life.

Two months later, her parents were killed in a car accident on the Fort Pitt Bridge. Witnesses said that the SUV seemed to appear out of nowhere and then veer horribly out of control. It went straight through the barrier and off of the bridge, into the Monongahela below. When they pulled it out of the river, the vehicle had been ripped into metal shreds. They hadn't said as much, but Charlie knew deep down that the same sort of thing had happened to her parents' bodies.

The closed caskets all but confirmed it.

Charlie spent the remainder of her under-age days with her god-mother, and seeing as how the two of them got along relatively well, the courts hadn't pursued it any further.

High school was touch and go. Claire grew up. And while everyone around her noticed that she'd bloomed into an extraordinarily beautiful young woman, all she

wanted to do was bury herself in her work.

The combination was like catnip to her male peers. They began to take ardent notice in her. So did their girlfriends, though not in the same way. It wasn't long before she found herself seeking out large friends for the relative protection their friendship offered. One such friend was a giant of a boy who loved Metallica. He let her play his drum set one afternoon and was stunned at how well she pulled off a flam paradiddle and buzz roll without ever having touched a drum kit before in her life. She was a quick study.

Claire also learned not to go anywhere alone. She learned to break eye contact with boys right away, so as not to send the wrong messages.

It all helped a little. But nothing was fool proof.

It was a nearly supernatural phenomenon, but she seemed to be a magnet for would-be rapists. After one too many narrow escapes that chilled her to the core, her parents' warning came back to her. She wondered what it was that they'd never had a chance to tell her. At the same time, she resigned herself to never knowing.

Instead, she tried to deal with the problem she inexplicably faced.

She was a natural drummer; her hands seemed to fly on their own, always knowing where to go and when. So it was easy to join a band, surrounding herself once more with people who were not afraid to fight on her behalf. And she sought out trainers who could help her learn to defend herself.

One day, a woman in a Judo class suggested that Charlie try a man by the name of David Reese. She swore that there was no one better. She told Charlie that she could tell he was the kind of trainer she really needed.

David Reese was not listed in the phone book and he didn't advertise anywhere. If the woman hadn't given her his business card, Charlie may never have been able to find his private studio.

The man readily took her under his wing and she had been training with him for three years.

She had to agree that he was good. *Very* good. The best, maybe. But Reese didn't mess around. He attacked full-out and, short of back-handing her into unconsciousness or shoving a needle in her vein, he used the exact techniques that rapists or attackers would use. Charlie had found herself in many a painful position, trapped in his arms and at his mercy as he told her, in vivid detail, what it was that a rapist would most likely do next. He seemed to enjoy whispering the threats into her ears. His hands would often wander. Just as a rapist's would.

Jessie was right, of course.

David Reese was sadistic. He was brutal and severe, even as he was thorough. Charlie's friends had often implored her to stop going to him. But she knew, in the back of her head, that his ruthless methods were what kept her alive. Like it or not.

Right now, Jessie was looking at her with that intent, all-seeing gaze that meant he was noting every expression that crossed her features and placing them into some kind of communications formula for what he would say or do next.

What he did was take a deep, slow breath, in and out through his nose. And then

he let the topic of David Reese drop.

"So, this Las Vegas deal," he ventured, instead. "You're taking it, I guess."

She nodded. Once.

"When will you leave?" he asked.

"The day after tomorrow," Charlie replied, pulling her gaze away from his to stare at the rug. She really didn't want to go. She had never liked the desert. And the idea of Las Vegas seemed so plastic to her, so fake, it tore at some sort of sore spot deep within her. She loved it here in Pittsburgh. She'd grown up here. Her parents were buried in Homewood Cemetery.

Again, Jessie waited a while before speaking. When he did, he'd once more changed the subject and was pulling her back against his chest and wrapping them both in his sheets. "Tell me about these dreams of yours, baby girl."

Charlie chewed on her lip for a moment. And then she took a deep breath and sighed. "Okay. But only if you promise not to laugh."

"On my honor," Jessie swore, placing a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

* * * *

Charlie swung her legs back and forth where they dangled over the wall above the train tracks. Her gaze was locked on the curving tunnel in the distance. In ten minutes, the train would come barreling around the corner, all metal and wind, and she would wave at the conductor. As always, he would wave back and pull the whistle. It was one of her favorite things about Pittsburgh. She was really going to miss her home town.

She sighed. "So, you don't think this business is the least bit strange?"

Jessie glanced at her from where he sat beside her. "You mean Gabriel Phelan and his Casino deal."

She shot him a withering look. "No, Whole Foods," she quipped, nodding toward the store front several hundred yards away.

Jessie shook his head, rolling his eyes.

Charlie went on. "It's just that this guy comes out of nowhere, Jess. He sends someone else to meet us and sign us up..." She shrugged, feeling strange. There was something about the deal that didn't feel right. A man by the name of Gabriel Phelan, who apparently owned a lot of real estate all over the country but especially in Vegas, had just signed Charlie and her band to a very big deal. But she'd never met Phelan personally and the deal had come out of nowhere. It had a strange flavor to it. "Why would he want *us*, specifically?" she asked. "How the hell does he even know Black Squirrel exists?" She blew out a sigh. "And the whole six month thing is just sort of..."

"Creepy?" Jessie offered.

Charlie blushed. And then she shrugged.

Jessie's cell phone beeped. He shut it off without looking at it and smiled at her. "You guys are good, Charlie." He shook his head, something akin to wonder playing across his handsome features. His amber eyes seemed to burn in the waning light of day. "And *you*, Charlie? *You* are *really* good. You're something special." He laughed

softly. "Baby girl, word gets around."

Charlie didn't necessarily agree. She couldn't shake an uneasy sensation that had cloaked over her ever since Gabriel Phelan's contact had approached them at a bar a few days ago. However, she didn't have a chance to discuss it further with Jessie. A dull rumble was filling the air around them. The train was coming.

She turned to watch as the black dragon's dependable roar effectively shut out the rest of the world.

* * * *

The man and woman seated precariously on the outside of the bridge over the roaring train were apparently unaware of anything but themselves and the train they watched roll by. They had no idea that they, in turn, were being observed.

A man in dark sunglasses and a gray sports coat pulled a phone from his pocket and dialed. His gaze remained locked on the woman with long, magnificent waves of strawberry blonde hair.

The call picked up on the first ring. "They've accepted the deal."

"When can I tell him she'll arrive?"

"She'll leave here Monday."

"I will relay the message."

"There's something else," the man's gaze narrowed as he watched the black man beside her wrap an arm around her and pull her close. "She spent the night with the attorney."

There was a pause on the other end. And then, "Graves?"

"Yes."

"I see." It was stone-cold.

"Do you want him out of the picture?" the man in the sunglasses asked.

There was another pause, this one a good deal longer than the first. "No. He represents a weakness for her. Mr. Phelan may have use of him."

"Understood."

"Shadow her until she leaves. Make certain that everything runs smoothly."

The line went dead and the man re-pocketed his phone. A gentle breeze wafted by him and he caught the young woman's scent. He smiled, flashing predatory whites. "Special, indeed," he chuckled to himself. "You have no idea, little Charlie." He lowered his shades for a moment in order to obtain an unobstructed view of her. She laughed and he caught the sound, like wind chimes on the air. His smile broadened and he raised his glasses back into place. "No idea at all."

Chapter Two, *The Tell*

A lot can happen in two years. A lot can change.

He should know. Over the course of the last two years, he had gone from being Malcolm Cole, the mass murderer, the rogue werewolf, the green-eyed monster - to Malcolm Cole, the exonerated. The pardoned.

He'd been forgiven. For things that he had never done.

To the Clan Council, the pardon was enough. His actual curse was a footnote to the more important business of determining his innocence in the grisly murders that Cole had been relentlessly forced to witness first-hand for decades.

The Roma's dying words didn't matter to them. The Clan only wanted to know that one of their own kind had not become that which the human world might actually fear. It was unfortunate that Cole bore the markings of a gypsy blight. But there was nothing they could do about it.

Malcolm took a shaky breath as he moved quickly through the large house and ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. He winced when the red mark on his wrist brushed against his brown wavy locks. He supposed he should be grateful. At least, to one individual.

His case never would have been opened and set before the Council, much less heard and tried and closed again, if it had not been for the persistent and persuasive testimony of Lily St.Claire. After all he had put her through....

The forced confessions of one Allan Jennings, a Hunter, didn't hurt either.

Now, Cole raced around the corner and down the final corridor of the West wing of his home, toward the door at the end. A large blonde werewolf stood before it. Cole managed a nod toward Jake, who always guarded the entrance to Malcolm's new sanctuary. Cole didn't like the idea of the werewolf community knowing his weakness. Weaknesses could be exploited, and his was a doozy.

Jake nodded toward his alpha and opened the door for him. "God speed," Jake told him, with a reverent bow of his head. It was what he always said when Cole was on his way out. Jake knew what it was that Cole would soon find himself surrounded with. He knew where his pack leader went when the wicked, ancient marks on his wrists began to glow red and the blood drained from Malcolm Cole's face, causing his emerald burning eyes to glow eerily bright.

Cole entered the stone room beyond without a word. He was always beyond speech at this point in the curse's cruel cycle. It just hurt too much.

Jake closed the door behind him. The sanctuary was a large stone room with no windows. Rich tapestries hung on the walls. At the room's center was a massive, round, stone stand-alone fireplace. Its blaze burned all day and all night, without fail. A set of large black leather chairs sat before it. Between the chairs was a small black refrigerator. Thick plush rugs covered the chamber's rough-hewn stone floor.

At the moment, the fire in the hearth crackled noisily and shined a stubborn, hopeful light through the darkness that was quickly wrapping itself around Cole's tall form. He struggled to get to the empty space between the chairs and the hearth before it would happen. He'd been too far away this time; it had taken him too long to

get to the hidden room and the privacy it afforded.

Malcolm made it to the center of the vast chamber and bowed his head as the pain in his wrists became too much to bear. He gritted his teeth and suppressed the growl rising from his throat. His fangs pierced through the gums in his mouth, his fingernails threatening to lengthen into claws.

And then he felt himself shimmer. A familiar agony ripped through him, at last tearing a harsh, guttural cry from his throat. The room melted around him, flashed a bright, horrible red, and re-formed. When it was whole again, he was still standing though barely.

He kept his eyes closed, shut tight against the world and its realities. Somewhere far away, traffic horns blared, people yelled at one another, and music poured from discotheque doors that opened and closed again. But here and now, in the silence of the stuffy space he'd found himself in, the only sound was that of his ragged breathing.

Slowly, Malcolm swallowed his fate and opened his eyes.

The sight that greeted him was, as always, inexplicably wrong. This time, something inside of Cole snapped. The strength he'd fought to maintain only moments before at last gave way, and he fell to his knees. His fists clenched until his claws dug into the flesh of his palms and he could feel the blood well there.

Howmany... his mind rebelled. Howmany must I see?

Would there ever be an end? Despair clutched at him as it never had before. In the sterile coldness of truth, this one was no worse than any other. They were all the same. But they were all painted by the red and the darkness and the cloying stench of helpless misery.

Like Dachau.

The Roma's dying curse had struck with the sword of a vengeance harsh and pure. Malcolm was indeed Death's eternal witness.

With a sound that was half cry, half growl, and all anguish, Cole pushed himself up from the blood-stained rug and stumbled to the front door of the small, stifling apartment. It was already part way open, so there was no need for him to touch the blood-drenched handle. He shoved through the door and it banged against the opposite wall as he stumbled out into the night beyond.

Neon lights accosted him. Horns blared. He blinked against the blurry brightness and tried to gain his bearings. Behind him, the reek of murder clung to him, pulling at his senses with elastic, sticky-fingered arms. He gasped for breath beneath the disgusting onslaught, bewildered by both his unusually bad reaction and by the hopelessness of his perpetual doom.

A truck carrying some sort of bakery goods roared by, mere inches from the curb of the sidewalk on which Malcolm stood. The vehicle stirred the air as it passed and a breeze washed over him.

He froze. His ragged breath stilled in his broad chest. His fangs hid, but ached, from behind his closed lips. Without thinking, he straightened and closed his eyes.

And, as pure instinct dictated, he slowly breathed in.

There it was again. He'd never scented anything like it. It was unmistakable. And yet... it was also *impossible*. He opened his eyes and began to search the crowded sidewalks with an uncompromising and piercing gaze. She was here. Somewhere in this mess.

At once, the destruction that waited for the police behind him was forgotten. All that existed in Cole's world was the very unique, very special Dormant nearby and his inexorable need to find her. He tuned his senses into the dizzying world of sights and sounds around him, zeroing his vision onto each individual human face and then moving on to the next.

And then he heard it. It was her voice; he knew it without knowing how he knew it. It was simply the most incomprehensibly beautiful sound he had ever heard. His head snapped to the side and he peered across the street as she stepped out of the warehouse thirty yards away.

Cole's heart skipped one long beat in his chest, picking up its rhythm again at a harder and more rapid pace than before. At the same time, the marks on his wrists began to heat up once more. He ignored them, focusing on the angel.

Her hair was the strawberry blonde color of a San Francisco sunset and fell in long, lush, thick waves to the narrow of her small waist. Her skin looked pore-less, a soft peaches and cream with the tiniest smattering of freckles across her dainty nose. And her eyes.... They were like ice. Like the hidden parts of glaciers, frozen oceans so unfathomably deep, should someone fall in, it was unsure whether he would first freeze or drown.

She was exquisite; impossibly, so.

All he could do was stare at her as she approached a moving van filled with musical equipment, blankets, pads, and dusty tarps. She was accompanied by a woman with shoulder-length dark hair. Behind the girls followed two men. Cole was stunned to find that his immediate and instinctive craving was to rip both of their male throats out.

"Charlie, you worry too much," the angel's black-haired companion was saying. "He's just RFB comping us because the casino is new and he's taking a chance in this economy and he wants us to be comfortable enough to stick around."

The angel seemed to think about that for a moment. She bit her lip and Malcolm found himself growling. Low. *Hungry*. His gums were aching once more, his fangs yearning to grow and pierce and feed.

"Why us, M.J.? He's obviously loaded. He owns several casinos around town. Why doesn't he really draw a crowd in with someone like... I don't know - Three Days Grace or Rihanna or even the Jonas Brothers?"

The dark haired woman threw back her head and laughed heartily. "Sweetie, you really went all over the place with that one, didn't you?"

The men laughed as well, but it was a friendly laugh.

"You underestimate us, Charlie," one of the young men told her. He was tall and well-built and wore long dread locks. His eyes were starkly colored, reminding Cole

of a werewolf's eyes, though he smelled human. "And especially yourself. Don't forget that we were booked up for three months' worth of showings when we signed this contract for Mr. Phelan...."

Malcolm's attention deviated for a moment by the growing pain in his wrists. He tried to focus further on their conversation as he glanced down at his arms to see that the cursed markings were beginning to glow. He didn't have much time.

His head snapped back up and his green eyes once more settled on the Dormant. Charlie. *Charlie*, he thought.

"And the only reason we were at Scott's for so long is because you figured we owed him," the dark haired woman added.

Charlie turned to face her. "You really think we're that good?"

The young man with long reddish-brown dread locks and starkly colored eyes shoved his hands into his pockets and fixed Charlie with a rather exasperated expression. "Girl, you can't be serious."

Charlie shrugged, arms up, expression innocent.

"M.J. how many of Charlie's stalkers have we had to do away with in the last month?" he asked, his eyes still on Charlie.

M.J., the dark haired girl, made a derisive sound. "Three, if you kick it up to a month and a half."

"Okay," the man went on. "Three stalkers in forty days and no fewer than six bands in the Burgh trying to steal our drummer away from us because she's so good." He shook his head. "We're good, Charlie," he reiterated, nodding as he said so. "You know we are, so don't pretend. And don't pretend that you don't know it's mostly because of you."

At that, the other band members fell silent. They were all watching her. Malcolm looked on in rapt fascination as she blushed beneath the scrutiny.

And then the world began to look smudged around him. A sharp pain shot up his spine, arcing like lightning through his tall, strong body. Malcolm doubled over, robbed of breath. *Move now!* his mind screamed.

With speed that blurred, he spun away from the sidewalk and rounded the corner, entering the adjacent dark alley. He had the tiny fragment of time to notice the stench of rotting garbage and the distant wail of sirens as the world finally melted completely, flared once, and then sent him reeling back into his own territory.

He flashed into the stone corridor with a horrid jolt and fell to his knees, a mass of raw, tortured nerves. Almost at once, the pain in his body and wrists began to recede, fading away into nothing within seconds. But Malcolm did not rise. He remained where he was, doubled over on the plush rug over the stone floor, his eyes shut tight, his breathing harsh in the fire-crackled silence. Behind his closed lids, an image of the blue-eyed angel floated enticingly. He didn't want to lose it.

Charlie.

He whispered the name into his mind. She was an impossibility. A Dormant....

And a female born werewolf.

There was no mistaking the scent. Such a thing should not exist. It never had. It

had long been deemed impossible. Werewolves had always had to turn to humans for their mates.

But Charlie was not human. And she was very real. She was nothing short of a miracle. The fact that she had not yet been claimed by an alpha was astounding in and of itself.

Malcolm took a deep breath. And then another. The need uncoiling within him was unyielding. He was an alpha without a mate and had been for far too long. Catching sight of another Dormant at this juncture was like waving a canteen of water before a man in the desert.

But Cole's conscience weighed heavily on his heart. In his race to fill the emptiness that yawned inside of him, he had done things he was not proud of. Two years ago, he had kidnapped another alpha's marked mate and tried to take her for his own. She'd forgiven him when he did not deserve that forgiveness.

It gave him pause. Now that the chance seemed to have arisen again, what exactly was he willing to do?

If he had not been cursed to flash to that murder on the Las Vegas strip at just that time, and if he had not stumbled out into the waiting city at that exact moment, he never would have scented her. He never would have laid eyes on the Dormant who was also a werewolf.

What would he do to claim the woman that fate had thrown so perfectly into his sites? Was he willing to go down that sinister path again?

For Charlie.... Yes. Yes, he was.

With that thought, his resolve hardened into a steely determination. He sat back slowly and opened his eyes. The emerald glow died down into a stark jade green in his handsome face. His expression settled into one of dark purpose as he fluidly rose from the floor and then strode to the door.

Jake opened it for him before he reached it.

"Jake, charter a flight to Las Vegas," Cole ordered, his British accent lacing his low, smooth tone. He moved out into the hall and the blonde werewolf followed beside him. "We leave within the hour."

* * * *

"Guys...." Charlie's voice trailed off as she thought of her friends and all of the trouble she'd caused for them over the years. Roman was right. They were good. But he was also right about her penchant for attracting stalkers. And that wasn't easy on the band. It seemed like they always had to be on guard. "I'm sorry," she told them. And then she shrugged. "I just don't understand. If we're so good, then why are we accepting this strange deal from this man we've never met? Why not wait for something better to come along?"

"This *is* the something better, Charlie." Kevin gestured to the city around them. He wasn't as tall as Roman, but his blue-gray eyes always looked as if they had storm clouds building in them and his strong, stocky build and buzz-cut blonde hair made him appear meaner than he actually was. "And stop apologizing." He smiled at

her, shaking his head admonishingly.

"Really, Charlie. It's already earned you a nick name." Mary Jane shoved at her lightly with her elbow. "Besides, this isn't so strange. So, he wants us to play for him exclusively for six months. So what? It's like asking an author for exclusive rights to review a manuscript. He doesn't want someone else to come in and offer us a record deal before he does."

Charlie, whose real name was Claire St.James, thought about that as she and the others brought their equipment in from the truck and set it up in the warehouse. Gabriel Phelan owned four of the casinos on the strip on Las Vegas. One was a daring, brand new high-rise that split the Nevada sky with its shimmering metal and glass; and that was the one that he wanted Black Squirrel to play in for the next six months. It boasted a tri-level club on the first floor with enough room for three thousand revelers. The band's platform was immense and the backstage was incredibly well stocked.

He'd given them rights to decorate however they chose. He would foot the bill. Not only was he paying for their set up, but he was paying for their room and board within the hotel. He was paying them a sizeable salary, to boot.

It was a dream come true for them all. There was just one problem. Claire couldn't shake the feeling that something about this entire deal was not right. It was simply too good to be true.

There was a strange feeling uncoiling in the pit of her stomach. Lately, her skin had been flushing hot and cold. Her chest had felt unnaturally tight and her heart had been skipping beats.

She knew she was either having panic attacks or mini heart attacks. And since she was in good shape and ate well and was fairly young, she was betting on the former.

Not getting enough sleep undoubtedly played into it to some extent. She'd been having the same recurring dreams for months now. They involved a man with piercing blue eyes that terrified her, another man with stark green eyes that melted her insides, and a horrific, nightmarish mad dash through the woods in an attempt to escape a beast that gained on her a little more with each passing moon. The dreams were draining her strength and stealing her concentration.

Claire sighed as she glanced down at the rack and the toms in front of her. She needed new drum skins. Badly. She'd beat these ones to their last layer.

"You need new skins, girl."

Claire glanced up to see Roman watching her from where he was setting up his own equipment a few yards away. It was as if he'd read her thoughts. She wasn't surprised. She sometimes wore her thoughts on her sleeve.

"And now you can afford them," he added with a single nod and a smile. She knew what he was getting at. He wanted her to be happy about their new gig. And he was right. With the pay that Phelan was giving them now, they could all afford new equipment. They could afford a lot of things.

"Not if she donates her paychecks to some spaying and neutering charity again,"

Mary Jane retorted. "I swear to god, Charlie, if you give all of your money away this time around, I'm telling Jessie on you."

Claire smiled at that. "Please do."

Mary Jane glanced up from where she'd been tuning her bass and pinned Claire to the spot with her mascara'd gaze. "Girl, you are all kinds of wayward, you know that?" Her red lips spread into a knowing smile.

Just then, Claire's back pack began to play Beethoven. She left her kit and went to the bag, which was sitting against the wall. She pulled her phone out of its front pocket and flipped it open, as usual forgetting to check the number first.

"Two-talk," A voice said.

Claire blinked. "What?" she asked, her brow furrowed.

"Two-talk, Charlie. It's two little buttons. You can't push two little buttons to let me know you're alive?"

Claire let out a breath. It was Jessie. She'd forgotten to call him when the plane had landed. She'd been having a minor panic attack at the time and all she'd been able to think about was whether or not she wanted the beer that Roman was offering to buy her at the first bar they came across in the airport.

She'd opted against it, knowing it would wear off just in time for her to have to practice with a hangover. That was three hours ago.

"Jess, I'm so sorry."

"I know, girl. That's why we call you Charlie," Jessie said grudgingly. She could hear the exasperation in his tone, but she could also hear that he'd already forgiven her. "So, how is everything going so far. Kosher?"

"So far, so good," Claire nodded. "We're just unloading in our new practice space right now. Pretty big warehouse, but someone went to the trouble to add a ton of baffling and provided pads to prevent coupling."

"Baby girl, you do know I don't have any idea what you're talking about, right?"

Claire blinked and bit her lip. "Sorry."

At that, Jessie was silent and Mary Jane, Kevin and Roman all looked up at her, their brows raised, their expressions amused.

She looked back at them. "What?"

Jessie laughed. "I can practically hear them shaking their heads at you, Charlie. You need to stop apologizing all the time. You haven't done anything wrong."

"Okay, that's enough," she told him, pointing at each of her band members in turn so that they knew she was talking to them as well. "You guys quit picking on me."

"I'll let you get back to work," Jessie told her, his tone amused but gentle. "Let me know when you meet Gabriel Phelan." He paused and Claire waited. "I want to know more about the man you're dealing with."

"Can't you just track down files on him or something?" she asked, knowing that Jessie was used to having people researched for his cases and that his reach probably extended to people he was not representing, as well.

"Phelan is a very... private individual," Jessie told her slowly. "Believe it or not, there's not much on him anywhere. His financial empire is real estate based. He has

no family - no wife, no children. And that's about all anyone can find on the man."

Claire mulled this over for a moment. "What does he look like?" she finally asked.

"No pictures," he admitted. "I have no idea. It's one of the reasons I want you to call me when you meet him. I'm really curious."

"Great," she said. "He probably has six-inch fingernails and only eats ice cream in an all-white room on the top floor of one of his casino hotels."

Jessie chuckled. And then he said, "That would be the same casino hotel you're staying in, baby girl. His residence is the one thing I *was* able to find on him. He lives in the penthouse suite at the top of *The August*."

"That has to be a relatively new address, then," she said.

"It is. Before that, he was living in some private estate in the suburbs."

There was a silence between them and then Claire shook herself and stifled a yawn.

"I caught that," Roman and Jessie said, at the same time. It was bizarre to hear their voices synchronize on either side of the phone's speaker.

"Get off me; I'm tired," Claire mumbled.

"Get some sleep, baby girl. Call me tomorrow." Jessie hung up.

Claire folded her phone and put it back in her bag. "Guys, what do you say we call it a night and start early tomorrow?" She straightened and turned to find that Kevin was pulling his jacket off of a nearby stand and that Mary Jane was throwing her faux crocodile purse over her shoulder. Roman was already half way to the exit.

"Okay, then." Claire shook her head, a tired smile on her lips. She picked up her back pack and followed them out of the warehouse.

The plane's engines were a constant, low drone, reminding him of days long since past. Of battles fought and won – and lost. He didn't usually fly. It was discomforting to think of himself being zapped to a murder scene and then zapped back to some space a mile off of the ground where a plane used to be, but is no longer.

He normally drove or went by boat. But he had never been forced to visit two homicide settings in one night, and he'd already had his fill of blood and gore since sundown. He figured he was safe, and in this instance, time was most assuredly of the essence.

Cole turned from the window of the luxury jet and glanced back down at the file folder in his lap. Over the course of the past hour, he'd learned quite a lot about the woman he knew as "Charlie," who was actually Claire St.James, the female born werewolf from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Much to his growing sense of foreboding unease, he had also learned quite a lot about the man who had paid for her temporary move to Las Vegas, Nevada.

"When does he return from New York?" Malcolm asked softly. Jakob Samson, or "Jake," one of the two most trusted members of Cole's pack, sat across from him in the opposite plush leather seat.

"Tomorrow night. I can only assume he'll want to meet her immediately at that time," Jake replied.

Without a doubt, Cole thought to himself.

Claire St.James, according to the Clan Council's file on her, was a female born werewolf who had been orphaned at the age of twelve. Council suspected foul play in her parents' deaths, but nothing had ever been proven. The water from the river in which their vehicle had fallen had washed away all traces of scent, leaving behind nothing but their mangled and conveniently decapitated bodies.

Their memorial and funeral services had been closed-casket and the child had been left in the care of her godmother, a human woman who had been her mother's best friend.

Female born werewolves were so human-like in nature that, in essence, they lead lives of an overtly human nature. Their sense of smell was slightly better than the average human's, as was their sense of hearing. Some were stronger than the standard human of the same stature would be. But, other than these few exceptions, a female born was no more werewolf than a Goth was a vampire.

Most werewolf parents share their secret with their female born children, despite the fact that such children will never be able to flash into wolf form and will not possess any of the gifts that are naturally given to the males.

However, Claire's parents did not. For some reason, they chose to keep their nature a secret from their daughter. And so, when the humans in Claire's circle decided to embrace her as one of their own, the Council did not have much to say. They debated the merits of telling her the truth and bringing her fully into the werewolf

folds, versus the merits of leaving her with her human counterparts.

In the end, the Council assigned a few individuals to keep discrete tabs on the girl and make certain that she was capable of coping with her transition from living with her parents to living with her godmother. When it appeared that the young Claire was handling her parents' death in an acceptable manner and that she was content to lead a human life, the Council recalled her watchers and left her alone.

Her file was closed. The werewolf community would let her go.

Apparently, they had had no idea that she was also a Dormant. After all, a female born werewolf-Dormant was supposed to be an impossible combination. It was clear to Cole that none of her watchers had gotten close enough to her to catch her scent, or they would have known, and the Council would have taken a much different stance.

Either that, or her Dormancy did not readily appear until later. Perhaps puberty. She was twelve when her parents died. Clan Council might have just missed it.

Either way, in the end, the Council let slip through their fingers what might have been their most precious treasure to date, and they still didn't know about it. Because Cole wasn't about to tell them.

Apparently, neither was Gabriel Phelan, the man who owned half of the real estate in Las Vegas and would now be living in the penthouse suite of The August, one floor up from Claire St.James. The man was really an alpha werewolf who undoubtedly knew all too well exactly how special Claire truly was.

One of his pack members must have scented her. There were not many werewolves living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. It was possible that this was why Claire's parents, Colette and Brian St.James, had chosen to live there in the first place. Perhaps they truly wished to keep their daughter from anything having to do with the werewolf way of life. Maybe they just wanted her to be normal. It was a desire that Malcolm could readily identify with.

But, for whatever reason, Charlie had managed to remain anonymous for quite some time in Pittsburgh. It must have been only recently that either Phelan or one of his men happened through the city and by sheer luck scented a hint of the female born Dormant.

Cole turned to stare out the window once more. The night beyond stretched infinitely. Thirty-five thousand feet below, one small city after another appeared in sporadic blooms of multi-colored lights, and then disappeared beneath the plane.

Now that he thought about it, it would have had to be one of Phelan's men who had scented St.James. Because if it had been Gabriel, himself, he would have simply taken her then and there. It was what Malcolm had wanted to do. The need to claim her had been sudden, harsh, and undeniable. According to his file, Gabriel Phelan was around the same age as Malcolm. Ninety years without a mate is a long time.

Now Cole had less than a day before Phelan would return to Las Vegas from whatever business he'd been attending to in New York. That meant that Cole had less than a day to get to Charlie before Phelan did. It wouldn't be easy. He could imagine that Phelan's men were watching her every minute. They most likely trailed

her everywhere she went and knew everything she did. In fact, he was impressed that she hadn't been locked up for safe keeping. Phelan obviously wasn't counting on any other alphas interfering. Most likely, the werewolves in Las Vegas were all members of his pack and hence, under his firm control.

Cole's lips turned up into a small smile. *That* was about to change.

He turned to glance across the aisle at two of the other members of his pack. One was a fairly young wolf, but incredibly strong. He had blonde hair and the common, stark amber eyes that werewolves often had. He was a vicious fighter. His name was Adam Trenayne.

The other wolf was a black-haired man with haunting eyes of pitch and an earring in his left ear. Lucas Caige had a purely ominous look about him, always had. He reminded Malcolm a lot of Daniel Kane, with his black leather and his penchant for motorcycles.

He had served Cole for many years. Caige was an alpha, himself, and had once had his own pack. His power was great and his magnetism was undeniable. But he'd left his pack in Australia long ago and traveled to the states and he'd been with Cole ever since. He was loyal to the end when it came to his leader and seemed to be content not to strike out on his own again.

Cole studied him now as Caige gazed out the window, his thoughts unknown.

And then, as if he could sense that Cole's eyes were on him, Lucas Caige turned and their gazes locked. "Do you still dabble in ink these days, Caige?" Cole's accented voice reached out across his pack members, wrapping around them with unmistakable authority.

Caige raised an eyebrow and shrugged, an interested look crossing his handsome features. "A little. A friend of mine owns a tattoo parlor in town. I do a few requests." His voice was a deep timbre, lightly accented. Caige cocked his head to one side. "Why do you ask?"

Cole grinned, flashing perfect white teeth. He turned to stare back out the window once more. A plan was formulating in his head. "I have an idea," he said. With any luck, it would work.

* * * *

"No!"

Claire jerked violently in her bed and came awake with a nearly painful ripping sensation. Her heart skipped several beats in her chest and she curled in on herself, nausea roiling up through her belly. She moaned and squeezed her eyes shut tight. The world tilted around her as her skin flushed horribly hot and, at the same time, she began to tremble as if chilled to her core.

It took her a few miserable seconds to understand what was happening. She'd had the nightmare again – and awoken straight into a panic attack.

She wasn't going to die. *I'm not going to die*, she told herself. *I'm not dead. It didn't kill me. And I'm not going to die now.*

She forced these thoughts through her fevered brain over and over again.

Another wave of nausea rolled through her and she tried to take a deep breath. Her lungs didn't seem to want to expand, at least not all the way. She could only get half a breath. One half here, one half there.

When her heart skipped again and another terrible chill racked her body, she shoved off her soaked covers and stood. Dizziness washed over her. She sat back down and put her head between her knees.

"Breathe," she told herself. "Just breathe. Think of thunderstorms...." She tried to imagine an anvil cloud above her, the wind of a racing tempest on the way, the rumble of thunder as the storm gained ground on all who fled before it.

To anyone else, such a vision would probably have been less than settling. But she'd always loved storms. She loved the way there was no controlling them. No stopping them. They were in charge. They were awesome. There was nothing anyone could do but stay inside and wait them out. She loved that.

Her lungs opened up a little more and the nausea passed. She imagined the sound of the rain hitting a tin rooftop. She closed her eyes and could smell the damp soil. It was her favorite scent in the world.

After a few minutes, she was able to sit back up again. In her mind, lightning cracked the night sky and thunder rolled. She was in a cabin beside a warm fire. It crackled invitingly as the gale raged outside.

Slowly, as the world's claws retracted around her, Claire opened her eyes. When she did, she continued to breathe calmly and looked around.

The hotel suite she was in was enormous and opulent. It had been decorated with lavish tastes. It was a no-holds-barred luxuriousness that made Claire more than slightly uncomfortable. She almost felt as if it wasn't just her music that was being purchased.

In truth, and to put it bluntly, it made her feel cheap, despite the obvious high-end price tag of everything around her. The room was on floor beneath the penthouse level of The August and overlooked the entire Las Vegas strip below. The floor to ceiling windows were covered at the moment; she'd pulled the curtains before heading to bed.

Now Claire stood and went to the windows, slowly drawing them open. As ever, the city was wide awake so many feet below. She raised her gaze to the line where the lights seemed to stop and the desert reclaimed the night. It looked peaceful out there beyond the synthetic, neon-lipped fracture that humans had carved into the region's face.

At that moment, she desperately wished that she were out there somewhere, sleeping beneath the stars, with nothing for companions but the coyotes. She took another deep, cleansing breath, hugged herself against the chill that would not leave her slender form, and let her breath out in a long, weary sigh.

She wasn't going to get any rest this night. She knew that now. Every time she closed her eyes, they were there.

The first dream to come was always about the man with the blue eyes that seemed to delve into her very soul, paralyzing her as they ripped away the layers of

her secrets and exposed her to her core. It laid her bare and vulnerable, shivering in her sleep until the second dream rolled along.

Without fail, it was of the man with the piercing green eyes whose perfect, white smile she could only just make out in her mind's eye. She remembered that he was painfully handsome... the kind of man you couldn't make eye contact with because it lit up too many fires within you.

Claire was disarmed by *his* dream. He seemed to catch her unawares. He took her pleasantly by surprise. And yet, when she awoke, she could barely remember his face. All she could recall clearly was the green of his eyes. As sleep faded away, the dream image hid from her like a flounder in the sand. She would always roll over, frustrated and despondent.

Until the third dream invaded her mind. The beast. The teeth and claws and the terror-induced flight through a landscape that fought her at every step. The force that knocked her to the ground... and the human hands that turned her over.

Claire wondered how many times she would dream of the beast before it killed her. Each night, she felt its breath hotter upon her neck and its presence stronger above her. Would it rip her throat out tomorrow night? The night after?

She wondered whether the whole Freddy Krueger myth might actually be the verity in her case. If it killed her in her sleep, would she really die? The panic attacks she was having of late certainly led her to believe so.

Claire ran a hand through her long, sweat-dampened hair and turned away from the window. She felt utterly miserable in that moment. She missed her parents. She missed her home. And she was so tired. Suddenly, she came to a decision. She left the window and strode to the bathroom, where marble covered every surface and plush, ultra-soft towels hung on several gold-gilded racks. She turned on the shower and waited the two seconds it took for the water to run extra hot.

Then she stripped off her nightgown, which clung to her damp skin for a moment before slipping free. She left it on the floor and stepped beneath the hard spray.

Thirty minutes later, she was pulling an ACDC t-shirt over her head and heading for her front door. She left her hair wet, not wanting to bother with the blow dryer. As a result, it began to curl into long waves as it quickly dried in the natural desert night air.

Charlie grabbed her denim jacket and the small canvas cross-body purse by the door, slipping it over her shoulder. Her phone was inside. She pulled it out and dialed Mary Jane as she opened her door, stepped out into the private lobby, and let the door close behind her.

Almost instantly, she felt the eyes of the cameras on her from above. She glanced up as the phone in her hand rang once, twice, a third time. Finally, Mary Jane answered, her voice muffled.

"What?"

"M.J., I need to get out. Come with me, please?"

There was silence on the other end. Charlie stared at the cameras. She blinked and pushed the down button for the elevator.

"M.J.?"

"Girl, what the fuck are you talking about?" Still muffled, and now annoyed.

"I'm talking about you and me going out and getting liquored up." The elevator began to climb. Claire watched the numbers light up one at a time.

"Charlie, it's like 1 a.m. or something."

"It's one a.m. our time, but here in Vegas, it's only ten. If we're lucky, we can catch the tail end of a playoff game."

"Oh hell no am I getting out of this mega-fine bed to go and watch hockey with you, Charlie." Mary Jane was sounding more awake now.

Charlie chewed on her cheek. The elevator was almost there. She would have taken the stairs, but then she'd have been at M.J.'s door by now and the girl still needed some convincing.

"Okay, then we'll go wherever you want, I promise. Just get me out of here and get me drunk, M.J. I'm desperate."

Mary Jane was silent for several heartbeats. The elevator doors dinged open. Charlie stepped inside. She knew Mary Jane was seriously considering this opportunity.

M.J.'s going-out preferences tended a little toward the *un*-safe. Like mega-flirting with guys that she knew hated each other. And hitching rides with bikers with too many tattoos. And, dancing on bars when she'd neglected to put on any underwear. That kind of thing. So, usually, Charlie would dictate where they went out, if for no other reason than to keep from getting into any fights.

"I thought you were exhausted, Charlie." Now Mary Jane sounded concerned. It was no secret amongst the band members that Claire hadn't been sleeping well. And that kind of irked her. She didn't want pity. She wanted oblivion.

"I am, M.J." Charlie sighed. "Trust me. Now, are you gonna help me out or not?"

Mary Jane seemed to come to a decision. Her voice was much more solid when she finally said, "Okay, but we should wake the boys."

"No. No way. No boys tonight. I'm sorry, M.J., but I seriously need to spend a few hours without being surrounded by overprotective testosterone. It's girl's night. Deal?" The elevators dinged open once more and Claire stepped out onto M.J.'s floor. She glanced at each door number as she went down the aisle, noticing that this floor had a lot more rooms on it than hers did.

"All right." Mary Jane took a deep breath on the other end of the line. "It's a deal. But if you want to let loose and have fun for once, then you have to do everything I tell you to do. No ifs, ands, or buts. Deal?"

"Yes, it's a deal." Charlie found the right door and stood before it, waiting.

"Okay, how long before you're ready?" M.J. asked.

Claire smiled a beautiful smile and knocked on the door.

"She's headed out."

A man with amber eyes watched as Claire and Mary Jane moved through the multiple security screens before him. As the women made their way past the casino tables and slot machines and headed toward the exit, he turned to look over his

shoulder at the men standing behind him. There were four other men in the room, their unnaturally stark eyes riveted to the screens. The tallest of them, a silver-haired gentleman dressed in a very expensive suit, pressed some sort of communication device beside his ear. When it cleared for sound, he spoke.

"I need Mitch and his team to shadow Miss St.James and her female companion."

"Understood," came the static reply.

The man lowered his arm and drew a deep, slow breath. "Vince, you follow them too. Stick to Claire no matter what the others do. See that she's back in her room before day break."

A man with long, straight black hair and a goatee nodded beside the older gentleman. His gold eyes flashed as he took one last look at Charlie before she disappeared from the casino's inside cameras and reappeared on outdoor cameras that led down the sidewalks in front of The August hotel. Then he turned and left the room.

* * * *

There were five of them, total. Three of Phelan's men seemed to move around a heavily built werewolf with buzz-cut brown hair. If Cole had heard them right, his name was Mitch. The fifth werewolf moved alone, separate from the others.

All werewolves were tall, to a certain extent. Cole had never met one under six feet. However, amongst werewolves, just as some were stronger and faster or possessed powers that others did not, some were definitely taller than others.

This fifth of Phelan's men was very tall. He wore solid black and the material blended with the inky color of his hair. Cole could smell the strangeness coming off of him. It was the same scent that Eva Black had possessed, though not as tinged with darkness. It was magic. And whether the werewolf was a witch or a warlock, Cole would have no way of knowing for certain until the man began to cast one of his spells.

Since their arrival a few hours earlier, Cole's men had fanned out across the city; he'd brought them all. He wasn't taking chances. More than a dozen werewolves under his command had begun to close in on the Strip like red radar blips, their circle shrinking around the epicenter created by Claire St.James. At the moment, they outnumbered Phelan's men three to one.

Cole suspected that Gabriel Phelan's absence had much to do with that faux pas on their part. It was nearly impossible for a pack to organize itself efficiently while its leader was away. There was something about an alpha's proximity that had an effect on his pack. It drew it together, made it more cohesive and stronger.

Phelan wouldn't be back from New York until the following night. The billionaire real-estate mogul was counting on two things at that moment. He was counting on his pack's ability to keep Charlie safe in what he undoubtedly considered his territory: Las Vegas. He was also counting on no other alpha being aware that Claire St.James existed.

And he was wrong on both counts.

Cole knew the exact moment in time that Phelan's men realized they were surrounded. Mitch and his crew began to scent the air, their heads upturned, their eyes searching the shadows of the streets and alleys around them.

At the same time, the black-haired magic-using werewolf straightened, his head cocking slightly to one side. Malcolm's lips curled into a smile when the man slowly turned in place, realizing that he was not alone in the darkness of the alley.

The mage's amber eyes began to glow as they searched the shadows. "I can smell you, alpha," he whispered. And then those eyes settled on the silhouette of Cole's tall, strong form. The werewolf mage smiled. "Not to mention, see you."

Malcolm calmly stepped out of the shadows of the alleyway and watched as the man's eyes widened, almost imperceptibly.

"Malcolm Cole," he greeted. "The serial killer who wasn't."

"I suppose that depends on your definition of the term," Cole answered, easily. After all, he had indeed killed many a man. His smooth accented voice filled the space in the alleyway and he could see that his power was registered in the eyes of the other man.

The black-haired werewolf wasted no time. "You're here for the Dormant."

Malcolm didn't answer. It wasn't a question, anyway. Instead, he looked down and casually adjusted one of the leather bands on his wrists.

The magic user seemed to mull something over. Cole knew that he was aware he was going to lose tonight's battle. He would have to fall back and regroup. And Phelan might kill him for his failure.

Malcolm was impressed when the mage tried another tactic. "If you take her tonight, Cole, before she has even had a chance to get to know you, she will hate you. You understand that, don't you?"

Malcolm's eyes flashed emerald in the darkness. He pinned the other werewolf with that terribly intense gaze and smiled, flashing fangs. *Oh I know*, he thought. *Better than you can imagine*. But, since when had that stopped him?

The other werewolf said nothing more. His amber eyes were shuttered, closed off. They were at a stale-mate of words. The only discourse left to them would have been combat, and no intelligent werewolf would go up against Cole in that capacity at that juncture. He was too strong, too hungry, and his men were everywhere.

"I will bid you goodnight, Malcolm Cole," the man finally said. His tone was tight. Cole watched him warily. Witches and wizards were dangerous. Warlocks, more so. But their spells took time. While the other man might decide to begin casting a spell against him in that alleyway, Cole would never give him the luxury of finishing it.

Malcolm watched as the werewolf turned and, with one last glance over his broad shoulder, headed out of the small, dark alley. The dark-haired man stepped out onto the well-lit sidewalk beyond and then strolled casually toward The August, where its looming glass and steel unforgivingly fractured the Nevada sky.

When he was out of sight, Cole turned to gaze across the street, where Jake leaned against the wall of a club, his strong arms crossed over his chest. The club was the same one that Claire St.James and her dark-haired companion had entered

twenty minutes before.

Jake's gaze met Malcolm's and the blonde werewolf smiled, nodding once. Phelan's men were temporarily taken care of. Malcolm nodded back and Jake slipped into the club.

It was time to move in for the kill.

* * * *

Mary Jane ordered a beer for Charlie and a shot of Goldschlager for herself and then turned to speak to Charlie in hushed tones. "Okay, here's what I want you to do."

Charlie began to down her beer, chugging it in record time as if it would help her prepare for whatever devious plan M.J. had for the both of them. "I want you to dance with the first person who asks you tonight, no matter how creepy or untrustworthy you might think he is."

Charlie spit out a bit of her beer and wiped her mouth on the back of her jacket sleeve. "What?" she coughed.

"You heard me. No holds barred tonight, chicky-poo." Mary Jane pointed a red-nailed index finger at her friend's chest. "You, my dear, are too harsh. You are too quick to judge guys. You think they all want to rip your clothes off and do you on the floor."

Charlie slowly put down her beer and chewed on the inside of her cheek, her delicate brow arched just a touch.

Mary Jane blinked. And then she sighed and downed her entire shot of Goldschlager. She slammed the glass back down on the table and shrugged. "Okay, so maybe they *do* all want to rip your clothes off and screw you on the floor. But you can handle them. You may as well have fun until it starts getting nasty."

"You mean, I should tease them."

At that, Mary Jane smiled brightly and nodded. "Exactly! Now you're catching on. This might actually prove to be a fun night after all."

This time, it was Charlie's turn to blink. She had meant it rhetorically and hadn't intended Mary Jane to take her seriously at all. But she didn't have a chance to rebuke her friend before one of the waitresses at the club was sidling in at their table.

"Hi," she greeted, as she took two shot glasses filled with amber liquid from her black tray and set them in front of the girls. "These are from that gentleman over there," she nodded toward a man who was sitting at the end of the bar at the center of the club. "And he was wondering if he could have a dance with the dark haired young lady when you've finished them." The waitress smiled at them and then spun away, off to deal with another table of customers.

Charlie and Mary Jane both stared at the man at the bar. He looked like a blonde supermodel. No, better than a supermodel because he didn't look pubescent. He was quite tall and he appeared to have been sculpted from granite and then given a tan. His six-pack actually rippled beneath the tight material of his gray t-shirt. His eyes were a stark amber color, and looked like they might begin to glow at any moment. Unearthly and intense. They sort of reminded Charlie of Jessie.

"Holy fuck," Mary Jane whispered. She glanced from the man to Charlie and then

back again. "He wants to dance with *me*?"

Charlie smiled. "Yep," she drawled. "That's what the lady said."

"She must have heard him wrong. He must have meant you."

"Nope," Charlie continued, her smile growing. For the first time in weeks, she was feeling kind of satisfied. For once, M.J. was getting the male attention instead of her. And from a Greek god, nonetheless.

"I..." Mary Jane seemed to be at a loss for words.

Charlie helped her out. "I suggest you not hurt the boy's feelings," she instructed calmly. "Drink the shot and then go and give him his dance." She nudged one of the shot glasses closer to her friend. "But be careful, M.J.," she added, her smile becoming a perfect white grin. "He honestly looks as if he might bite." She spared another glance at the man at the bar, and added, "Or eat you whole."

Mary Jane made a low moaning sound, meant for only Charlie to hear. "I like it when they bite," she muttered under her breath.

Charlie could see that a blush had risen across her friend's neck and face. And that was impressive – because, almost nothing could make M.J. blush.

"Don't we all," Charlie agreed quietly before she took another swig of her beer. She wasn't about to touch the shot glass – Tequila. She could smell it from here. But, she had a feeling that Mary Jane wouldn't let the precious liquid go to waste.

"Christ, I know I'm gonna to wake up any minute now and boy am I gonna be pissed to find this was all a dream." With that, Mary Jane downed the shot of liquor in front of her and made a face. "Tequila. Damn... that *hurts... so good....*" She gritted her teeth as the alcohol began to work its magic and then she shook her head quickly, as if to clear it. She pursed her lips, sucked her cheeks in, and then laughed. "I'm outta here, sweetie." She stood, throwing Charlie a devil-may-care smile as she pushed in her chair. "Don't wait up."

Charlie laughed too, shaking her head as her friend sauntered from the table and approached the blonde stranger.

His eyes sparkled in the multi-colored lights of the club as he stood from the stool on which he'd been seated and gazed at Mary Jane with stark, open desire.

Charlie shivered. *That's a hungry look, if ever there was one*, she thought to herself. She watched with keen interest as the man took M.J.'s hand and led her to the dance floor. And then she put her beer to her lips again, only to find that it was empty. She frowned and raised her hand to call the waitress for another order, when a shadow fell over her.

A deep, British accent sliced effortlessly through her consciousness. "Allow me."

Charlie glanced up. And for just a moment, the world actually stopped turning.

Cole gazed down into Claire's incredible ice-blue eyes and felt his stomach tighten. He recognized a series of emotions floating in their frozen depths and the space between them was instantly charged. Time slowed down. She was surprised. And then she was frightened. The third emotion to cross her features was one that set off his own hard reaction. Lust.

All of this, he took in with expert ease and grace as he smiled innocently down at her and gestured to the empty beer bottle she held in her hand. "May I?" He bent to take it and her fingers slowly slid away. He wanted to catch them and hold them fast.

"Um... yes. I mean sure. I mean —" She closed her eyes, shook her head once, and then re-opened them, focusing them once more upon his face. "Yes please," she said. "Thank you." She stumbled over her speech, her soft voice wrapping around him as swiftly and as surely as his own voice had always done to others in his sway.

It was stunning, and Malcolm realized with a sinking feeling that it was going to take every ounce of his strength tonight to keep cool and not turn her before the sun rose.

Cole turned to gesture to the waitress who was standing several tables away. He easily caught the woman's attention, whose eyes widened in recognition when she realized who he was. She blushed furiously began to approach him. He could tell she was about to call him out as Malcolm Cole the famous author, and he wasn't in the mood to slip into that role tonight. Not now. Right now, he was in the mood to bed Claire St.James, and that was about it.

So, he let a bit of his power loose and it swirled around the waitress, binding itself around her will like a vice. She stopped mid-step and blinked. And then her smile was back, but this time, it was easy and fake. It was the smile she kept hanging on a hook beside her apron and willingly gave to all of her patrons.

"What can I get for you two?" she asked as she approached.

"Another ale for the lady, please." He glanced at Claire, who still seemed stunned, but who was hurriedly collecting herself while she thought he wasn't watching her. "And I'll take one as well."

The waitress nodded and left.

Cole turned his attention back to Claire. He listened carefully as her heart fluttered wildly. Her cheeks had become rosy. He could smell adrenaline coursing through her blood stream. But just beneath it, faint and ever so enticing, was the intoxicating scent of her arousal.

Again, his hunger spiked. He pulled out the chair that Claire's friend had abandoned and gestured to it questioningly. His grip on the back of it was a little tighter than it needed to be. "Do you mind if I sit down?" he asked.

She hesitated. And then she cleared her throat and shook her head. "No, please. Sit."

He could sense that she had wanted to say no. Despite the fact that she was

obviously attracted to him, her defenses were up. He wondered why. She was certainly beautiful enough to have attracted all manner of dangerous scum in her life, and he could understand that such a penchant would cause her to be cautious toward men. But they were sitting in a crowded club with a good ratio of very large bouncers. It wasn't just the fact that he was a man that was scaring her.

It was him, specifically.

He took a seat and studied her carefully. She blushed beneath his scrutiny.

"I'm... I'm sorry," she said, peek in her cheeks darkening a little more. "It's just that you look very familiar to me."

The waitress came with their drinks and Claire immediately grabbed hers and took a long, deep pull. Cole watched the smooth column of her throat as she swallowed the liquid. She didn't put it back down until it was half empty.

Now she smiled.

His breath caught, his gums aching where his fangs wanted to break free. He felt himself begin to harden and he had to reign his wolf in, forcing it to heel when all it wanted to do was hunt down its mate and fuck her like there was no tomorrow.

Her tongue darted out for a fraction of a second to lick the moisture off of her top lip. Malcolm's vision began to swim with tiny stars. He felt a change coming on; he was losing control. He'd never – *ever* – lost control before. What was happening to him? Why did she have this effect on him?

He decided he needed to touch her. Like a moth to a flame.

When she released her bottle, he offered her his hand. "I'm Malcolm." He smiled his best disarming smile and sensed her arousal growing stronger. In his mind, he was swearing vehemently. There was no way in hell he was going to make it through the night without tasting her.

She gently placed her own hand within his and he wrapped his fingers around her, his touch light, but possessive. He couldn't help it. He was a wolf.

"I'm Claire," she said. "But my friends call me Charlie." She blinked then, as if she couldn't understand why she'd just told him that. After all, he wasn't a friend. She'd only just met him.

Hope began to flare within him, a match struck in a night that had been too dark for far too long. "Charlie," he said softly. He could swear he saw her muscles relax as he said her name. And it was having the opposite effect on him. He wanted to jump her bones. Instead, he sat back and took a long pull on his own beer. Beer had no effect on him, but she would run for her life if he began downing entire bottles of Everclear in front of her. At least it was wet and cold. That helped a little.

"So, Malcolm...." She let the name linger on her tongue, as if trying it out.

Malcolm swallowed hard. *Christ.*

"Are you in town for business or pleasure?"

"Honestly?" He put his beer down and lazily turned it between his thumb and forefinger. "Both."

She nodded. That was everyone's answer when it came to Las Vegas. He could

scent the alcohol in her blood now – just beginning to work its magic.

She took another drink and he waited. When she finished, he asked, “And you?”

She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment, a little harder than she perhaps should have. He imagined that her senses were dulling as a result of the beer. *One kiss*, he thought, *and I can bring them roaring back to life.*

“As cheesy as it sounds, I’m a drummer,” she admitted to him, shrugging as she said it. “And my band just got this... deal.” She frowned. “We’re playing at that casino down the street – the really tall one.”

“The August,” he supplied easily.

“That’s the one,” she said.

“So, what kind of music do you play?”

“Everything,” she said. “Whatever the crowd’s in the mood for, really.”

He continued to study her, taking everything in as she finished off her beer and he raised his hand to summon the waitress. Across from him, Claire chewed on her lip again, her expression at once nervous.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” she said. “Honestly, I never drink this much. I mean....” She was embarrassed suddenly, as if admitting as much made her some horrible cross between the drunk blonde bimbo and the teetotaler. “I mean, I may not be able to drink it if you order it.” She smiled sheepishly and put her hands in her lap. “But, thank you.”

Malcolm’s hunger ripped through him with a vengeance. Every time she bit her lip, every time she smiled, he lost a little more control. He was a very strong alpha; from birth, he’d been granted abilities that other werewolves did not have. In the same way that some humans could run a faster mile and others could lift more weight, Malcolm possessed powers which set him apart from his werewolf community. Though these powers came in handy quite often, he honestly hadn’t planned on using any of them on Claire St.James. He’d gone down that dark road in the past and his actions haunted him now, riding him with guilt.

This time, he had truly wanted to get to know Charlie; to have her get to know him. But she was too tempting. And the effect she was having on him was far too strong. It shouldn’t have been like this. He needed to regain ground with her, and fast.

So, with both resignation and determination, he released another tendril of his power and let it coil around his blue-eyed prize. She squirmed in her chair for a moment and he knew it was lighting fires within her. He willed her to let go. To stop caring.

To trust him.

“Actually, I’ll have the beer after all.”

His arm was instantly up again, summoning the waitress back to their table.

“Another beer, sweetie?” The waitress guessed, before Cole could order. Claire nodded, smiling. “Sure thing. Be right back.” She picked up the empty bottle and strode away.

Then Claire looked up as something over Cole’s shoulder caught her attention. He turned to look and smiled when his gaze settled on Jake. He was holding Claire’s

companion, Mary Jane. And he was kissing her.

"Oh my god!" Claire exclaimed softly. "She just met him!" She blinked, obviously stunned at what she was seeing. Though she was clearly shocked, he could also hear the humor in her tone. She shook her head admonishingly. "How dare he?" she asked, trailing off into a chuckle.

Good girl, he thought. Let go.

"It takes two to kiss like that, luv," Malcolm drawled casually, his gaze still locked on the two figures.

When he turned back around, it was to find that Claire was staring at him openly. He felt pinned to his chair beneath her baby blues and the air around them heated with un-spent electricity.

"Say that again," she said.

"What?" he asked, truly not understanding.

"Say 'luv' again."

He blinked. And then, when he realized that her breathing was shallow and quick and her eyes were glittering, he allowed himself a slow, dangerous smile. "Anything else you would like me to do for you, luv?"

Claire's gaze flicked from his eyes to his lips and back up again.

"Here you go, sweetie." The waitress set the beer down on the table and, luckily, was quickly rushing off again, because neither of them were able to pay her any attention.

"Um...." Claire distractedly picked up her beer and placed it to her lips, swallowing a few small sips. Her eyes were still glued to Malcolm's. "Yeah, but...."

"Charlie, I'm gonna head back to the hotel."

Claire blinked and finally managed to rip her gaze away from Cole's in order to look up at her friend, who had just approached the table. Jake Samson was behind her, his arm around her waist. Cole met Jake's eyes and registered the barely perceptible nod his second in command gave him.

Across from him, Claire pushed out her chair and stood. "What? Why? Are you okay?"

Cole stood as well. He frowned as he felt his powers begin to slide and slip from where they'd been wrapped around Charlie. It was as if she was somehow pushing them away. Was that even possible? He redoubled his efforts and could sense her strength relinquish a little under the onslaught.

"I'm fine, I just...." Mary Jane fanned herself and swooned a little. Jake easily steadied her. "I think I've just pushed myself a little too hard."

Though Claire was weakened by Cole's will wrapped so tightly around her, she was also visibly upset by her friend's sudden condition, and Malcolm cursed himself for not thinking to wait until Mary Jane had downed more alcohol before allowing Jake to control her with his kiss. It would have been more believable. He wouldn't have had to resort to this brute force.

"I'm...." Claire swallowed and ran a hand over her face, as if to clear her head. "I'm coming with you," she said as she somehow managed to side-step her chair and

move with fluid grace around the table to take her friend's hands.

Cole was stunned. She was incredibly stubborn. Not to mention, impossibly graceful and strong.

Mary Jane immediately pulled her hands out of Charlie's grip and put them on her hips. "Absolutely not," she said, sternly. She glanced at Malcolm and then back at Claire. She leaned in, wobbling just a touch, and placed her red lips a breath away from Charlie's ear. What passed between them then was meant to be secret. But Malcolm heard it loud and clear.

"There's no way I'm letting you pass up this chance, Charlie. That man is a god. You be good to him." She backed up, gave Charlie a no-nonsense look, and then moved in again. "And besides, I'm not going back to the hotel alone."

At that, Claire blinked. Mary Jane straightened, a lascivious smile on her ruby lips. Charlie's lips parted in sudden comprehension and her eyes widened as she blushed. "Oh," she stammered. "I – I see."

"That's okay, baby girl. Give me a hug." Mary Jane wrapped her arms around Claire and the two embraced. Again, the dark-haired woman whispered something into Claire's ear. "Thanks for forcing me to come out with you tonight."

"You're welcome," Claire whispered back, too bewildered to say anything else.

With that, Mary Jane pulled away and Jake led her out of the club.

Claire watched her go. And then she looked up at Malcolm. He moved around the table toward her and held up his hand. "Walk with me," he commanded. It wasn't even a request. Not any more.

She hesitated anyway. The effect her resistance had on him was to both impress him and to make him even more hungry for her. In truth, he had always liked a good fight. A part of him *wanted* her to run from him. He was a wolf, and wolves were predators. He pursued anything that ran from him. It felt good. And, though the night pressed with a sense of urgency where she was concerned, he couldn't deny that the chase was his favorite part of the game.

He smiled when she finally put her hand in his and, once more his fingers curled over hers. Claire St.James was definitely game. She was fighting him as much as she was capable of fighting him; which is to say, with every fiber of her conscious being.

But, no woman on the planet could lie to Malcolm. He could read their bodies too well. The scent of their arousals, the sound of their racing hearts, the sight of their cheeks flushed and their lips parted, all chronicled the truth, no matter what their minds might be screaming. That included Charlie. What her body was telling him was that she was loving it as much as he was.

For Malcolm, that fact was like pitching gasoline onto an fire.

He tossed a wad of bills onto the table and wasted no time in leading Charlie out of the club. Once they were outside, he repositioned their hands so that their fingers intertwined. When he did, he felt her stiffen beside him, for just a fraction of a second. And then she let out a quiet, shaky breath – and relented.

He hid his smile. "Your friend seems very liberated," he said as he walked them

down the sidewalk toward the tattoo parlor that he had instructed Lucas to purchase.

Claire was silent beside him. He could tell she was trying to figure out what to say to that. Finally, she sighed. "Yeah, she is." Malcolm felt victory rush through him when he heard the jealousy in her tone that he was so hoping would be there.

"I would imagine she's the kind of person who never takes a day for granted," he continued. "Lives for the moment." He released a bit more of his power to let it enfold her beside him, swaddling her in submissive influence.

"Yes," Claire said, "she does."

"And I imagine you're the level-headed one in the band," Malcolm went on, hoping that he was right about what kind of person she was.

Claire frowned, mulling that one over. She didn't say anything, which meant that it was too true to deny, but too unpleasant to admit.

"After all, someone has to keep everyone in line, right? Not everyone has a motherly instinct, Charlie. I can imagine that you do, though."

He waited.

"Why would you imagine that?"

Bingo.

"Oh. Well – I don't know...." He pretended to stumble over his words, as if he were embarrassed by them. "It's just that you're so...."

"Boring?" she asked then. She didn't spit it at him and it wasn't scathing, exactly. But, though her voice was still soft, her tone held something in it that he hadn't heard from her before. "I'm safe. I know," she told him.

I have to be... He almost heard her thinking. She wore her thoughts on her beautiful face.

"Come," he said. "I'll buy you a cup of coffee." They were standing in front of the coffee shop that neighbored the tattoo parlor. As he'd suspected it would, Claire's gaze skirted from the coffee shop to the store front next door.

"Coffee?" Her voice trailed off.

He knew when he had her. Her shoulders rolled back and her chin lifted. Defiant. Strong. He wanted to take her right there on the side walk.

"Screw the coffee," she said, outright. "I want a tattoo."

* * * *

"He isn't happy."

Vincent Cromwell smiled and almost laughed at that. "No, I imagine he isn't. But it isn't our fault that he underestimated her pull." The tall werewolf moved to the nearest seat and took it gracefully, the overhead lights bringing out the blue highlights in his hair. She's attracted the most powerful available alpha in our community, with the exception perhaps of James Valentine. And Valentine isn't in the game."

The older man across from him took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He leaned forward, placing his elbows onto his knees, and pinned Cromwell with a meaningful gaze. "He's moved everything up and is flying in right now." He pulled his cell phone out of the inside breast pocket of his expensive suit and glanced at

something on its screen. "He'll be here in less than two hours."

"Do you have a plan?"

The man with silver hair smirked and sat back again. "I did. Cole ruined it."

"Then, we'd better come up with another one," Cromwell suggested, coolly. He sat back and crossed his hands over his stomach.

"Do you think he'll take her tonight?"

"Cole?"

The silver haired man nodded. Once.

Cromwell thought about that for a moment. His magical feelers had been out in that alleyway earlier. He'd sensed an incredible amount of deadly-strong resolve around Malcolm Cole. But, contrary to what he'd been expecting to find, he felt no evil. Darkness, yes. Evil, no. Cromwell somehow doubted that Cole wanted to harm Claire St.James. And turning her tonight would undoubtedly bring her vast amounts of mental anguish. In the end, Vincent couldn't call this one. He just didn't know.

"That depends," he said, running a forefinger over his goatee. "On a lot of things."

"I see." The man in the expensive suit stood then, his movements filled with fluid grace. "I want you to cast some sort of recovery spell and at least get her back within the confines of this hotel." He turned toward the exit when Cromwell's voice stopped him.

"I could do that," he said. "But Cole is no stranger to magic. He would know what was happening, and he would stop her. As I said, he has his entire pack with him right now. And he's strong enough, even alone."

The gray-haired man considered this for a moment. And then he strode across the room and opened the door. "I'll deal with Mr. Phelan. You watch Charlie. Wait for the opportunity," he threw a significant glance over his shoulder, "and then bring her home."

Behind him, Vincent Cromwell nodded his acquiescence, but said nothing. As the older man left the room, Cromwell steepled his fingers before him, drawing an image of Claire St.James in his mind's eye. And then he smiled and left the room as well.

* * * *

When Cole led Charlie into the parlor, he was immediately impressed with how well and how quickly Lucas had set everything up. There were two customers already inside, but Caige had possessed enough forethought to hire several other trained artists to deal with whoever might come in that night.

Caige, himself, looked up when Cole entered, and their eyes met. Silent communication passed between the two as Caige approached.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

Claire shrank just a little beside Cole, and his grip on her hand tightened. She looked up at him and was captured in his stark green gaze. He willed her not to back down.

"I would like to get a tattoo," Claire repeated, this time to the parlor owner. Cole could see that she was intimidated by Caige, as most people were. The werewolf

looked like a very handsome actor playing a very wicked role. Charlie she was a Dormant and, as such, even more susceptible to other werewolves and their, for lack of a better word, manliness. Lucas Caige was just about as manly as they came, and his pitch black eyes, which were rare for a wolf, were both intoxicating and threatening.

But, as any parlor owner would have done, he nodded and smiled a reassuring smile. White teeth flashed and Claire smiled, a little nervous.

"First one?" Caige asked, his voice low, his tone gently teasing.

She nodded.

"Then the first thing you'll need to do is pick what you want." He walked her over to a series of large poster-sized displays on the wall. Each one contained several dozen artistic renderings. There was a dizzying plethora of choices. Cole was half afraid that, while Claire carefully deliberated over which one she might want, she would sober up and decide not to go through with it.

However, she surprised him once more by immediately striding toward the middle display and pointing at a drawing near the top.

Malcolm's head swam. She was pointing at a black wolf, howling at the full moon. Caige's eyes cut to him, for a fraction of a second, and he knew that the other wolf was just as surprised.

"Can I have that one?" she asked.

Lucas nodded, expertly hiding his emotions, and led her toward a private room; there were four such rooms in the parlor. Cole joined them, closing the door behind them. At the center of the room rested a plush, reclining table, beside which stood a silver tray, covered in saran wrap. Atop it were a large number of various artist's tools.

"Would you like me to show you what each of these instruments are and what they'll do so that you won't be surprised by anything?"

Claire quickly took in the number of alien-looking devices, replete with needles, and visibly paled. Then she shook her head. "No. Please, just do it. I don't even want to watch, or I might change my mind."

Caige nodded and Cole smiled.

"Have a seat." Lucas motioned toward the table. "Where do you want it?"

"My wrist. Then I can cover the bandage with one of my wrist bands when I'm playing and no one will be the wiser." She sat down and looked down at the insides of her arms as Cole and Lucas once more locked gazes.

Malcolm was fast becoming flabbergasted by everything Claire chose. A wolf? The inside of her wrist? It was like they were soul mates. If he had believed in such a thing.

"The right one." She held out her arm and released a shaky breath. It would be the same exact spot where Lily had born Daniel Kane's mark. Suddenly Cole wondered whether all Dormants instinctively and automatically went down the same roads when it came to their mates.

Claire glanced up at him and he caught and held her gaze. Her ice blue eyes

were nearly pleading. Begging for him to make her believe this was the right decision – and to continue to give her strength with which to do it.

My Charlie, Cole thought. So very brave.

“It’ll be stunning, luv,” he told her softly. She smiled and blushed. “And should you change your mind fifty years from now, I’m sure they’ll have created some instant method for removing them.” *Just not these kind*, he added mentally.

With that, Lucas moved behind the table and gently placed his hands on her shoulders. Cole’s jealousy instantly spiked, but he reigned it in and allowed the other wolf to ease Claire back into the table-chair, reclining it so that she was in a more relaxed position. Then Caige’s gaze cut to Cole and more silent communication passed between them.

“Just close your eyes and relax, Charlie,” Cole told her, allowing a fair amount of power to lace his words and influence his tone.

Claire closed her eyes.

Cole moved behind the table as Lucas handed him a pocket knife. Malcolm wasted no time, drawing the knife’s sharp blade down across his palm. As the blood welled up, he squeezed his hand into a fist and held it over one of the empty ink containers on the plastic-wrapped tray. When it was half full, Lucas nodded.

Malcolm drew his hand away as the wound closed. His earlier discussion with Lucas came back to him...

“I’ll have to go a lot deeper than I would normally with an ink job; deep enough to draw blood. So it’ll hurt her a lot more than it would otherwise. Can you cloak her against that pain?”

Malcolm had considered that carefully. The truth was, he held a good deal of influencing ability when it came to his unique talents, but the power to help someone ignore pain wasn’t one of them. The most he could do was hold her in his sway.

Or kiss her. A werewolf’s kiss could do many things. Through a kiss, a werewolf could exact upon his victim drowsiness, weakness, pleasure, and even sleep. He’d heard that was what Daniel Kane had done to his mate when he’d marked her.

For some reason, following in the Baton Rouge police chief’s footsteps didn’t sit right with Malcolm. And the truth was, he wanted to see the look in Charlie’s eyes when she realized what was happening. He knew that somewhere deep down, she would recognize the mark. It was hardwired into her. She was a female-born and a Dormant. She would know he was marking her as his, and he wanted to see that knowledge in those stark baby blues.

More of Lucas’s words came back to him.

“The moment the needle penetrates deep enough for the blood to take effect, she’ll slip into submission. You’ll have to act fast, then, or she’ll freak.” Lucas told him.

An alpha’s mark forced a submissive effect onto the Dormant he marked, and its initial stages were potent. Dormants were normally overwhelmed with instant sexual need, an utter stripping of will power, and a healthy dose of fear that could cause

them to do crazy things. But so far, those Dormants had all been human.

Malcolm wasn't sure what would happen to Claire. It was entirely possible that she would slip into fight mode and it wouldn't be fun. God only knew what she would be capable of once an alpha's blood mingled with her own.

He'd decided that once she'd been marked and Malcolm could see that she'd had a chance to register his claim, he would kiss her then. He would push hard until she was weakened beneath him. If necessary, asleep.

Because Claire had never had a tattoo before, she didn't notice that Caige failed to use a stencil or to clean the area of her arm that he would be marking. Instead, she simply kept her eyes shut tight and tried to trust the strangers in the room with her.

Malcolm took up position on Claire's left side as Lucas dipped the hand-held machine into Malcolm's blood and drew the thick red liquid into the tube of the gun. With one last meaningful glance at Cole, Lucas placed the tip against the inside of Claire's wrist and, after covertly wrapping his free hand around her arm to hold her in place, he turned it on.

He pressed hard, wanting the needles to strike true the first time around.

Claire's eyes flew open as Malcolm's blood found hers and her arm instantly heated up. Caige held her fast, keeping the gun pressed tight against her skin as the powerful blood did its job. Cole was quick to grab her other arm with his right hand. Claire arched her back and opened her mouth to scream, but Cole's left hand came over her mouth as he slid one long, well-muscled leg over both of hers in order to straddle her so that she couldn't even move.

Terror instantly registered in the depths of her blue eyes. She was trapped, alone, with these men and no one knew where she was. She was in pain. She was defenseless. And, worst of all, something about it was turning her on. He could smell it.

Cole leaned in and placed his lips to her ear, the fiend in him fully enjoying the feel of her breasts pressed so hard against his chest as she arched beneath him, attempting futilely to get away.

"Don't fight it, luv. Let it happen and it'll be easier on you," he told her, allowing his accented voice to wrap around her. She shivered as the initial pain of the needles undoubtedly began to wane and gave way to a rising sense of pleasure. Of need.

She gasped behind the silencing grip of his fingers over her mouth as the mark began to take shape. Cole turned to look when Lucas whistled low.

He'd removed the needle and was gazing down at her arm. A fine, shimmering emerald line was twining its way across her cream-colored flesh. It was intricate and impossible. It was stunning.

Seeing it on her had a horribly forceful effect on Malcolm. He grew painfully hard above her. His fangs exploded in his mouth and he knew that his eyes were glowing. He could feel his pupils expanding hungrily as everything in the room came into stark contrast. His skin burned where it touched hers and all he could smell was her arousal, her shampoo, the cinnamon-flavored toothpaste she'd used before leaving the hotel.

His claws began to grow as need wracked mercilessly through him. Every bone in his body was telling him to bite her now. To rip off her clothes and thrust into her wetness as he swallowed her blood and brought her over. Tiny starlets of light began to dance before his vision as his wolf threatened to break free and flash into existence.

It was Lucas, clearing his throat beside him, that brought his mind and body reluctantly back to reason. He glanced over at the black-haired werewolf. Caige's dark eyes glittered with warning. He couldn't take her now. The mage had been right.

Claire knew what was happening to her. He could tell that although she would not understand the logistics of it, it was clear to her that he was laying some sort of claim on her body. As he straightened and gazed down into those beautiful eyes of hers, he knew that she was aware he was marking her as his own.

And if he didn't give her a chance to digest it in stages, she would hate him. She would despise him. She might even try to kill him. He doubted that Charlie was going to turn out to be a weakling of a made wolf.

No. He had needed to mark her. That much, he could defend as his right. He needed to protect her from Phelan. But, claiming her and changing her was another story. He needed the chance to fully explain things to her before he brought her completely over.

Now was not the time.

Charlie moaned behind his hand as more heat and moisture gathered between her legs. Even Lucas visually tensed at the sound, watching with wonder as she closed her eyes against the mounting pleasure. Caige was a wolf and also an alpha, and he was definitely not immune to the blatantly sexual image that Charlie currently presented.

Lucas stood, undoubtedly wanting to remove himself from the situation as quickly as possible. He moved toward the door and, with one last glance at his leader and his leader's chosen mate, he left them alone, closing the door securely behind him.

Malcolm removed his hand from Claire's mouth and gazed at her through the tops of his now all-black eyes. As if she could sense that he was drawing her attention back to him, her eyes fluttered open.

"You are mine, Charlie."

"What have you done to me?" she asked breathlessly.

"I've marked you as my own. It can't be reversed and you can't fight it. So, I suggest you surrender to it, luv. And let it be."

He could feel that she would have instinctively fought against such a claim had she not been under the submissive effects of his mark. She was a tough girl, and he got the sense that she wasn't new to the notion of fighting. But an alpha's mark was inexorable.

Still, she managed to narrow her gaze just a little. "You're not human," she accused. It was impressive that she had come to the conclusion so quickly. It was even more impressive that she accepted it so readily. But that was a female-born for you.

"What the hell are you?" she ground out as another vicious wave of invasive pleasure threatened to make her climax right then and there.

He smiled, flashing fangs. Her eyes widened, her breath catching.

"I'm a werewolf," he told her. "And so are you."

Chapter Five, *The Marked Card*

Charlie stared, wide-eyed, at the man who pinned her to her chair.

Almost everything about him was straight out of a gothic horror movie. He was an erotic nightmare. From his strikingly handsome face and sculpted build to his all-pupil eyes and glistening fangs, to the aura around him that made her feel like a chocolate bar in a locked cage with a starving man, he was danger incarnate.

He could be the devil. It would make perfect sense.

Devil or not, she wanted him to rip off her clothes and take her on the floor, right then and there, in that room. And that realization absolutely, unequivocally *terrified* Charlie.

Chemically speaking, terror is the sudden and rapid influx of adrenaline and cortisol into one's bloodstream. Claire St.James now had so much adrenaline and cortisol running through her veins, there was little room for anything else.

There was no room in her well-honed body for emotion. No room in her instinct-reverted brain for rational thought. Three hard years of intense training slammed into place, ruthlessly knocking away everything else that futilely scrambled for prime real-estate within her brain.

The only thing she could do was what she had been taught to do for three years. In one fluid movement, she reached up, fast as lightning, and grasped both sides of Cole's head. At the same time, she reared back and gained momentum. A split second later, she was slamming the thick of her skull into Malcolm's face and knocking him entirely off the chair in which she sat.

Without waiting to see what the full effect of her action was upon the man and without stopping to see whether he would get up to follow, Charlie vaulted out of the chair and raced to the door. She didn't stop there, grasping the handle and flinging it open as she rushed out into the main lobby and straight for the front door.

* * * *

Lucas Caige watched Charlie leave the parlor, her long strawberry blonde locks flying out behind her as she headed full-steam into the chaos of the city beyond. He considered trying to stop her, but this was not his fight. And Malcolm Cole needed to take that fight out beyond the eyes and ears of other humans, anyway.

A second and a half later, Cole calmly stepped out of the room and drew the long-sleeve of his white thermal shirt across his face. It came away covered in blood, though there appeared to be nothing wrong with his nose or mouth.

His eyes had gone from all black to a piercing jade once more, and a cruel smile pulled at the corners of his lips.

"She clocked you?" Caige asked.

"More or less," Cole answered, casually. "If we didn't heal the way we do, I would be a tad rearranged, at the moment."

Caige's brow shot up. "So, I was right."

Cole cocked his head to one side. He was listening, but his attention drifted toward the front door and the woman who had just gone running through it.

"She's not like a human Dormant," Caige went on. "She should have gone

straight into submission. But, instead, she head-butted you.” Lucas couldn’t help his own smile, which broadened when Cole shot him a scathing look.

Malcolm took a deep breath and again gazed toward the parlor’s exit. If Phelan’s wolves had still been on The Strip and if Cole’s own men hadn’t out-numbered them, Charlie would be fair game to them right now. However, Gabriel’s men were gone and Cole’s wolves were fanned out across the city. Malcolm’s smile returned.

He knew he was a bastard. There was something a little too dark and maybe a little too twisted inside of him. He wasn’t sure when it had happened, or even how. Maybe it was the curse. Maybe it was that he’d been in three wars, all of them bloody. Maybe it was just him. Perhaps he was just broken.

But whatever the reason, Cole had to admit that he enjoyed slowly and methodically breaking someone down. He’d punished countless serial killers in this manner, bringing them to their knees before he had dealt them their final blow. Much to his shame, he’d systematically tortured Lily St. Claire in much the same way. He had shown little to no respect for her needs or desires. The truth was, he simply hadn’t cared.

He’d never outright hurt her, but he’d wanted what he had wanted and he knew how to play the game to get it.

It was the chase he loved. The pursuit. He was a wolf in its truest, predatory form and whatever form the chase took, it brought him immense pleasure. This situation with Charlie had the makings of perfection. He’d been able to sense her building arousal; hell it had been impossible not to. He knew she was as affected by the marking as he had been. The fact that she had chosen to run from him allowed him the time and the distance that he needed to hunt her down the right way. No matter how strong or stubborn she was, in the end, she would submit to him. This way, it was a lot more fun.

“Deal with these people and close the shop down,” he instructed calmly, his gaze skirting to the windows and the hustle and bustle of the Las Vegas night beyond. “Then head back to the Bellagio.”

Lucas nodded once to show that he understood and then he left to tend to his customers.

Cole pulled his cell phone from his front pocket and flicked it open. He pressed a few buttons and waited as Jake picked up.

“She’s out like a light,” Jake told him, without pretense. Cole knew he was speaking of Charlie’s friend, Mary Jane. He’d succeeded in putting her under with his kiss. Most likely, she was crashed out on Jake’s bed, never having made it to The August.

“Good,” Cole said. “Pull the men in. Charlie’s running and I don’t want them interfering unless she tries to head back to her room.”

“Got it,” Jake confirmed.

Cole hung up and re-pocketed his phone. Then he stepped out onto the sidewalk and inhaled slowly. Deeply. He caught her scent easily. It was as if it called to him. He smiled and allowed his power to surround him as he headed off down the street.

People moved aside, giving him a wide berth.

For all they knew, he wasn't even there.

* * * *

Charlie had no idea where she was going. She just ran.

A few of the people on the streets gave her strange looks. The occasional concerned citizen tried to ask her if she was okay or to peek around her to see who or what she was running from. She could tell that the minimum-wage hires on the street corners considered shoving fists-full of small x-rated cards into her face, but her speed either shocked them or deterred them enough for her to escape facial paper cuts.

Charlie's mind was spinning almost as quickly as her legs were moving. What Malcolm Cole – if that was even his real name – had just told her was crazy. There was no way around that. Werewolves, plus the real world, equaled crazy shit.

But, as crazy as it sounded and as insane as she would be to accept any of this as anything other than a bad dream or a straight dive off of the steep slopes of insanity.... She believed him. In fact, not only did she believe him, but a part of her hadn't truly even been surprised. She was unsettled and confused, but not as shocked as she should have been. And that was really what surprised her more than anything else.

Malcolm Cole's power over her was unreal. *Christ*, was she ever attracted to him. Even as he'd forced his hand over her mouth and allowed his companion to mark her with that needle, she had been wet for him. The attraction was so powerful, it was literally painful.

The moment their eyes had first met in that club, she'd felt like she'd known him for years. He was instantly familiar to her. Those green eyes of his were the same green eyes she'd been seeing every night for several months now. He was the green-eyed stranger in her dreams.

But that wasn't all. There was something else about him; something so magnetic, so impossibly alluring, she had very nearly asked him to take her back to her hotel room for a one night stand. Shoving her beer into her mouth had been the only thing saving her from making that horrendously embarrassing mistake.

Charlie was dumbfounded by what was happening to her body and mind. Even though the man was clearly not human, and even though he swore that she wasn't either – even though everything about the last hour of her life had turned her world completely upside down – she still wanted him. *Craved* him. Like nothing she had ever craved before.

She wanted to run her fingers through his thick hair, so dark it was almost black. She wanted to kiss his sensual lips, to taste him as she ran her tongue along those sharp teeth. She wanted to feel the hardness of his muscles beneath his shirt and then she wanted him to hold her down so that she couldn't touch him at all.

There was a part of her, a *big* part, that wanted to give up control to him. The way she sometimes did with Jessie. She'd never felt that way about anyone else before. It

was as if, despite the dark promise in those all-pupil eyes and despite the cruelty in his gorgeous, fang-filled smile, she actually trusted him.

A werewolf.

She shook herself and picked up speed, allowing the blurred world around her and the hard and fast beat of her heart to distract her from the desire that she didn't understand and that threatened to overwhelm her.

She forced her thoughts in another direction. His fangs. The strange glow in his eyes. The piercing claws that she'd felt on the tips of his fingers as he'd held her arm down in the chair.

Wolves.

Charlie had loved wolves since she was a child. They had decorated her room in her parents' home. At first, when she was an infant, they appeared in pastels and cartoon-like figures that hung from mobiles above her crib and acted as drawer pulls of her armoire. Later, they came in actual posters of Timbers and Grays amidst tall forests, that hung from tacks along each of her four walls.

A wolf had graced the back of her leather jacket in high school. Twin wolves had been carved into her first set of drum sticks. She recalled the night she'd thought of the name Black Squirrel for her band. She'd been dreaming of a black wolf. It had been chasing a black squirrel. And when she'd awoken, she'd rolled over, scribbled down the name, and gone back to sleep.

She'd even chosen a wolf for the tattoo she didn't actually have because a strange, emerald green mark covered her inner arm where the tattoo was supposed to have gone.

Claire's gaze flitted to the mark as she ran, and then back up to the sidewalk so that she could see where she was going.

What had he done to her? He'd told her that she was his. That he had *marked* her as his. She chanced another glance down and noticed the shimmer along the intricate knots of the mark. It was mesmerizing.

And then she ran into a brick wall and the impact jolted every bone in her body, sending her sprawling backwards.

"I can see the wheels spinning in your head, luv," he told her. His voice was so powerful. So damnably delicious. Even as she hastily managed to get her feet beneath her again and back away from him, his voice sent an unbidden shiver through her frame and she gritted her teeth against it.

As if he was well aware of the effect he was having upon her, Cole's smile broadened. "Where were you thinking of going, exactly?" he asked as he took a step toward her. "The hotel's in the other direction Charlie," he taunted her.

Again she stepped back. "How did you get here so fast?" she asked. Her voice was rising, taking on a slightly hysterical note. "What did you *do* to me?" She wanted to know why he had this power over her. Why the very thought of him made her sexually hungry.

"I told you, Charlie," he said as he took another step toward her. Automatically,

she stepped back. His nearness was making her dizzy. He was so handsome. Nature just didn't make men like this.

No, it doesn't, she thought frantically. *Because it makes werewolves instead.* Werewolves that can heal broken noses in seconds flat, apparently. Because he looked as though she had not in fact slammed her skull into him with all of her strength just a few minutes ago.

"I've marked you as my mate," he continued, calmly. "It needed to be done." His accent was rich and intoxicating. It brought her nerve-endings to delicious life, and then blanketed them like a salve.

"You're crazy," she told him. "Stay away from me. I don't know what you are, but I never want to see you again." Even as she said it, she knew it was a lie. A blatant lie. But she was desperate. There was too much coming at her all at once.

His only response was to stop in his tracks and cock his head to one side, his piercing green gaze narrowing slightly. "Do you know that I can hear it in your heartbeat and in the subtle change of your tone when you lie, Charlie?" He considered her for a moment and she was nearly paralyzed beneath that emerald scrutiny. "It doesn't become you."

Her fight-or-flight response was to spin around and bolt in the other direction. Once more, it mattered not where she was going. It mattered only that she put distance between herself and the green-eyed man behind her.

* * * *

Something strange flickered in the depths of Cole's eyes.

Quite unexpectedly, he felt conflicted. As he watched Charlie's blue eyes narrow with determination, he realized that no matter what her heart told her, her mind was trying its best to convince her that he meant her harm.

He couldn't exactly blame it. Thus far, he had done nothing to prove otherwise. He had tricked her, held her down, marked her, chased her, and treated her with nothing but menace. The wolf in him was both keyed up and angry. While it enjoyed the chase, it also wanted her to simply accept the inevitable and stop running.

This was obviously hurting her. She was scared. He had heard the erratic, slightly irregular beating of her heart and had seen the way she trembled. He could smell the fear coming off of her.

When she spun around to once more disappear into the crowd, he found himself wondering what had brought her out on this night, in the first place. Why had she been in that club with her friend? It hadn't seemed like her, come to think of it. She'd been... out of place, somehow. Rather like a fallen angel among demons. She'd been nervous. That much, he had scented. And what was it that her friend, Mary Jane had told her?

"Okay, so maybe they do all want to rip your clothes off and screw you on the floor. But you can handle them. You may as well have fun until it starts getting nasty."

He frowned as he recalled her words. An unpleasant heaviness settled

somewhere in the middle of his chest.

There was much more to Claire St.James than met the eye. She was as complex and complicated as she was breathtaking. What did trouble Cole was that, for the first time in his very long life, he found he actually cared.

He let his gaze drop to the ground and pulled out his cell. By the time his call connected, he'd taken a deep, calming breath and come to a decision.

"Jake, get her a ride home."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. And then Jake replied, "Sure thing, boss."

Malcolm hung up and ran a hand through his thick hair. "*Christ.*" This was going to be a lot harder than he'd thought.

* * * *

Lily Kane watched as the young woman with the long strawberry blond hair sped down the street several blocks away. She was inexorably heading in the direction of the taxi in which Lily now sat waiting.

"Told you!" She nudged the tall man beside her. "Here she comes! And she's terrified. I did tell you. Didn't I?" she repeated. She reached for the handle of the car door, but James Valentine stopped her, his fingers wrapped firmly but gently around her wrist.

"Wait." He cocked his head to one side. "Cole's second is out there as well. Jakob Samson. I can smell him."

"So?" Lily turned toward him, her golden gaze narrowed. "I'm not going to let him stop me. She needs our help, James. I'm telling you, this time it's serious."

Valentine gazed down at her for what seemed like a long while, his silver eyes darkening into a charcoal-laden mercury. He knew she was right. He could sense the danger out there. But he was far more prepared to allow Claire St.James to wander helplessly into that danger than to allow Lily Kane to willingly step foot into it.

"Your husband will kill me if I let you do this, Lily."

Lily gave him an *oh-brother* look. "Nothing can kill you, James. Not even Daniel." *Though he could probably come close*, she added mentally. But she needed to get out there, and time was running short. Claire, or "Charlie," as she was in Lily's dreams, needed help.

Two years ago, Lily Kane had been Lily St. Claire. At the time, she'd been a social worker – and a human. But a twist of fate and a run-in with an incredibly sexy crush from high school had changed all of that in the course of a few short days.

Daniel Kane had turned her into a werewolf. With the new physiology came a change in her vocation because, for some reason, Lily now possessed the ability to see into other werewolves' lives. She dreamed about their pasts, the dangers they were facing, and sometimes she even saw how everything would turn out. She'd gone from being a plain old social worker to a social worker for the supernatural.

Neither Daniel's begging nor the pleading of James Valentine, her guardian had been able to change Lily's mind when she'd decided that this new gift of hers needed to be put to good use. Now she tracked down the wolves she dreamed about and

she tried her best to help them.

Daniel was the police chief of Baton Rouge, so his job kept him in Louisiana most of the time. For that reason, Valentine accompanied her when she trekked across country to set things straight for complete strangers.

It had been especially difficult when she was pregnant. At first, Daniel had steadfastly refused to let her go. But her dreams would cause her to feel guilty and, in the end, they were both worried about the effect it would have upon their unborn son. So, he allowed her to follow her heart. She was accompanied by Valentine and more than a few members of his pack everywhere she went.

Somehow, they'd made it through that rather intense nine-month stage and Lily's son was now safe with Daniel and Lily's best friend, Tabitha. The infant had Daniel's entire pack looking out for him. Lily felt very, very fortunate to be a mother with so many strong, loving, and able bodies to turn to for child care. How many moms had even *one*?

The least she could do was repay the world somehow.

Right now, that meant helping Charlie.

"There's a Hunter out there who has it in for that woman, James," Lily told her guardian. Her tone was no-nonsense. "If anyone in the world knows what that feels like, it's me. And this guy is a hell of a lot worse than Allan Jennings was." She shivered as she recalled her dream of the Hunter and how he'd touched Charlie. "Trust me. We need to intervene."

With that, James sighed heavily and let go of her wrist. He nodded and opened his own door, even as she opened hers.

* * * *

Charlie skidded to a halt when the strange scent reached her. It was a dangerous scent. Not like death, but a portent to it. Her breathing was incredibly steady for someone who had just run twenty blocks full steam. She barely felt tired as she hurriedly scanned the crowds on both sides of the street, searching for the source of the oddly different smell.

And then she saw the woman and the man getting out of the taxi two blocks down. They were staring at her. Their eyes were unnaturally stark; the woman's a bright, glowing gold, the man's like molten metal.

Not human, she thought. *Werewolves*.

Her heart skipped a few beats and she almost whimpered. The bizarre but beautiful mark on her arm felt like it was heating up. She glanced down at it even as she *felt* the couple from the taxi begin to make their way toward her.

"This isn't happening," she muttered, desperation flooding her slim form as surely as the adrenaline already coursing through her blood stream. Once more, her training took over and she bolted across the street, weaving between speeding cars and earning herself a few irritated honks and a crudely thrown finger.

She ignored them all and shot down the nearest dark alley. *I need to get back to the hotel*, she thought frantically. But it was so far. Before she'd come to Las Vegas,

she'd had no idea the city was actually so big. She'd thought it was just that one street, more or less, and then a smattering of restaurants.

It wasn't.

I need to find a cab.

And then she was cruising out the other side of the alley and a taxi was pulling up along the curb in front of her. Again, Charlie skidded to a halt. But this time, no one got out of the car. In fact, the back seat was empty. The taxi driver simply leaned over and yelled through the passenger-side window. "Hey, lady! I was told to pick you up an' take you to The August!"

Charlie gave him a quick once-over. He was an older man, probably in his sixties, and his accent had been Jersey. He looked tired, but eager to earn money. He had a wedding ring on his left ring finger and a picture of him with his family on the front dash board. Three kids, all grown up. Four grand kids.

Charlie glanced once over her shoulder, caught the scent of werewolf again, and quickly came to a decision. She opened the back door of the cab and slid inside.

The cab driver eyed her from the front seat. No doubt, he could see the fear in her expression. He expertly acted on it. "Fare's been paid," the man said as he pulled away from the curb. "But if you wanna give me a great big tip, I can go faster."

"Go faster," Charlie told him, from the back seat.

The man chuckled a little, shook his head, and stepped on the gas.

* * * *

"Shit!" Lily slowed and came to a stop, bending over to catch her breath. Running wasn't her thing – never had been. She was only *slightly* better at it now that she was a wolf. "Did you see that burst of speed?" she asked James, between breaths. "That wasn't normal!"

"No," Valentine agreed from beside her. His gray eyes were glowing brightly in the darkness of the alley. He'd watched the young woman get into the cab and drive away. "Not even for a wolf."

"What happened?" Lily asked, straightening again and running a hand through her long golden hair. "How did she suddenly get so fast?"

James thought for a moment. He wasn't out of breath, but he was indeed impressed by the Dormant's sudden speed. She'd taken on a nearly blurred appearance as she'd darted down the alleyway, moving much faster than should be possible. In fact, Valentine had only ever known one wolf who could move that fast.

"What are you two doing here?"

Valentine wasn't surprised. He had smelled the other alpha before his British accent filled the alleyway. But Lily spun around, alarmed.

"Cole!"

Malcolm laughed mirthlessly. "You never learn, do you, luv?" He stepped from the shadows against the wall, his tall form moving into the beam of a street light at the end of the passage. "It's Malcolm."

Lily swallowed audibly. And then she seemed to remember that she no longer had anything to fear from him. She straightened, rolling her shoulders. "You shouldn't

up on people like that."

Malcolm studied her in silence. This was the first time he'd seen her since she'd been transformed. "I must admit you're stunning, Lily. The Change looks good on you." She grew uncomfortable beneath his gaze. "It makes me wonder what Charlie will look like when I turn her."

"You marked her, didn't you?" Lily accused.

Malcolm frowned. "You didn't answer my question. Why are you here?" His gaze skirted from her face to Valentine's. "What business do you have with Claire?"

"She's in danger," Lily told him point-blank.

Malcolm's gaze flitted back to her. His smile was wry. "From me?" he asked softly, his emerald eyes filled with secret meaning.

Lily gritted her teeth. The man could be so infuriating. Two years seemed to have seen no difference in him. "No," she ground out. "From a Hunter who wants her so badly, he followed her from Pennsylvania."

Cole's smile disappeared. His handsome face became expressionless. He looked at James again, as if for confirmation. James nodded.

"Now you answer my question," Lily demanded. "Did you mark her?"

Cole turned his attention on her once more and fought the temptation to let loose a few tendrils of his power so that they could flay at her senses. For some reason, it irritated him that she and James, who used to work for *him*, were interfering in this business. And the news of the Hunter stirred up something volatile within him. He felt the need to lash out. To kill anyone and anything that came within ten feet of Claire St.James.

Charlie was *his*.

"I'll take that as a yes," Lily stated simply. "And that would explain the sudden burst of speed." Lily sighed then, crossing her arms over her chest. "She's a female born," she continued. "When you mixed your blood with hers, something strange happened. Namely, she got a bit of your power."

"It isn't important," James interjected. "What is important is finding the Hunter before he finds her."

Lily frowned and her gaze dropped to the ground. She was remembering something. "We're too late on that front," she said. "He already knows where she is." Images skated before her subconscious and she closed her eyes, trying to see them more clearly.

Cole's voice cut through her thoughts like a hot knife through butter. "What does he look like?"

* * * *

Jessie Graves stood from where he'd been crouched on the building's roof top. He had watched Charlie run down the alley and get into the taxi cab. Now, he pulled his cell phone from the front pocket of his jacket and speed dialed.

"What is it?" came the greeting on the other end of the line.

"Complications have arisen," Jessie spoke calmly and quietly. He didn't want the

man and the woman in the alley down below to hear him. "There are too many players on the field."

The man on the other end paused, obviously considering these words. "I'll patch you through."

Jessie waited as the line clicked a few times and then a second person picked up. The man's voice was deep and gravelly, his tone serious, even though he spoke slowly. "Graves," he greeted. "What seems to be the problem?"

Jessie made his way to the roof's fire exit and then back down the extensive stairwell. As he moved, talked.

Charlie got out of the cab and dug into the front pocket of her jeans to pull out a twenty. She handed it to the cab driver. "Thanks for the quick ride," she said. He took the bill and nodded, a big smile on his lined face.

"No problem, lady. Any time you need a ride, give me a call." He put the twenty in a compartment with his other money and then drove away.

Charlie turned toward the entrance of The August. Already, the door men were opening the double glass doors for her. She took a deep, shaky breath and then went inside.

The night had been long. The last twenty-four hours, an eternity. She felt a little drunk and didn't know whether it was from the beers she'd consumed or from everything that had happened with the man who called himself Malcolm Cole. She was confused and she was scared. But most of all, she was just exhausted.

She made her way to the elevators and asked the voice-activated computer inside to take her to the 42nd floor. A camera confirmed that her voice actually belonged to her, and the elevator doors closed just before it began to rise. Charlie's ears popped twice on the way up. The doors dinged open again and stepped out into the massive foyer that led to the few select apartments beyond.

As she walked down the hall, her cell phone rang. She pulled it out of the front pocket of her denim jacket and flipped it open without checking the LCD to see who it was.

"Hello?"

"You never made it to your last class, Charlie."

Charlie stopped in her tracks, her breath caught in her throat. A cold, strange chill swept over her. The mark on her right arm began to warm up. She registered all of this in the split second after she recognized the voice on the other end of the connection.

"Reese."

"I assume you have a good reason for allowing your training to falter."

Charlie's pulse sped up. She had no idea why she should suddenly feel so afraid, but there it was. She was scared. David Reese had always frightened her to some extent. The man was big. He was tall and built and very, very strong. He was handsome, but in a cold way. He always kept his long blonde hair tied in a leather strap with knots so intricate, they automatically made her think of bondage. As if he knew what she was thinking, his brown eyes would taunt her, his cruel lips would smile in that knowing, secretive way that they always did.

He used her nick name, even though he knew she didn't want him to. He looked at her as if he could see right through her; as if he knew more about her than even *she* did. When they trained together, he always managed to find a way to get her in his arms so that he could torment her even while he taught her to save her own life.

It never failed to leave her feeling incredibly conflicted. Safe in the knowledge of the education he gave to her. *Unsafe* in the way he gave her that education. But he was in Pennsylvania. She was in Nevada. So, why did the sudden sound of his voice scare her so badly?

"I'm sorry, Reese. There was no time –"

"You know I don't accept excuses, Charlie." There was a pause on the other end and all Charlie could hear was the blood rushing through her ear drums. "You owe me a session, sweetheart. I intend to collect."

The line went dead.

Charlie stood still in that hallway for what seemed like forever. She slowly lowered her phone and stared at it. She blinked a few times. And then she closed the phone, re-pocketing it.

When she seemed to have found her breath again, she let out a shaky sigh and closed her eyes, running a hand through her long, strawberry-blond hair.

"Too much," she muttered. "Just... too much."

She opened her eyes and continued down the hall, forcing thoughts of David Reese to a back burner. He was miles away. She could deal with him later.

She found her door, inserted her key card, and went inside. The accommodations beyond were cool and dark and, admittedly inviting. Charlie pulled off her jacket and hung it on the side of the chair that was tucked under a round table beside the front entrance.

Then she made her way straight to the lavishly made bed in the adjoining bedroom of the massive suite. She pulled off her shirt half way there and left it on the carpet. Next came her bra and then, as she stood directly beside the king-sized mattress, she unbuttoned her jeans and slid out of them, leaving them in a pile beside the bed, along with her underwear and shoes.

The cool air in the room made Charlie immediately aware of how wet she still was. The moisture between her legs served as a cruel and unwanted reminder of the man who had brought it there. An image of Cole's green eyes flashed in her mind. She saw his fangs and shivered, hugging herself.

But then her stomach tightened and warmth rushed across her belly as she imagined those fangs scraping gently across the skin on her neck. Her collar bone. The top of her breast.

Charlie looked down to find that she was running her fingers along her skin, as if blazing the trail that she imagined him following with his mouth. With his hands.... At once, she felt vulnerable, but deliciously so. She couldn't help it when she leaned luxuriously, across the bed and took her time crawling across it to un-tuck the covers. As she did so, she stretched like a cat and felt the cool air brush enticingly against every inch of her bare flesh.

Finally, she pulled the covers aside and slid beneath them. The sheets were so incredibly soft, she actually let out a low moan as she settled in between them and pulled them up to her shoulders.

What's wrong with me, she found herself thinking.

None of the night's events made any sense. Everything was insane. It was like she'd stepped through some crack in reality and wound up in Bizarro world. The Twilight Zone.

But, despite it all, the only thing she could really think about right now – all she could truly concentrate on – was the need that was growing within her. The material of the sheet on her skin was too soft, too enticing. It felt like a caress. She felt heated and wanton. She needed....

Beneath the covers, Charlie spread her legs, bending her knees so that she was exposed beneath the sheets. Her fingers trailed down her chest to her stomach and then slowed. She closed her eyes and, instantly, Cole was there, filling the darkness with his presence. Distractedly, she noticed that her right arm felt warm. It tingled in a pleasant way.

The fingers of her right hand were warmer than usual when she parted the downy hair on her mound and continued to glide downward. Another moan escaped her lips. She felt her long eyelashes against her cheeks as she squeezed her eyes shut tight and brushed her fingers against her opening.

A moist warmth coated her fingertips. She bit her lip.

Oh God, she thought. I need....

She needed *something*. Something she couldn't give to herself.

The mark on her arm heated up a little more and her eyes opened. Everything in the room had come into stark contrast. She blinked a few times, wondering at the sudden change. She couldn't normally see this well in the dark.

But another strong wave of desire rolled over her and her eyes shut once more, her body trembling as she shuddered beneath the hunger awakening within her. Before she could attempt to once more take matters into her own hands and lessen the need coursing through her heated body, Charlie began to feel strangely sleepy.

Sluggish.

The heat was still there. It still demanded and she still hopelessly yearned. But her eyelids were so heavy. She let them fall and allowed her arms to rest against the mattress. Within a matter of several short seconds, her head lolled to one side, her body having been shoved ruthlessly into a wholly unnatural sleep.

A few moments later, the door to her suite opened and Vincent Cromwell walked in. His tall, dark frame filled the doorway for a minute as he scanned the room. Then he stepped aside and another man followed him into the foyer.

This man was just as tall as Cromwell, but more massively built. His long, blonde hair fell slightly past his broad shoulders in silken waves. His blue eyes burned like cold-fire sapphires as they scanned the room just as Cromwell's had.

He looked like an angel. But the unforgiving lines of his coldly beautiful face and the cruel set of his sensual mouth marked him as.... *Fallen*.

"She's in the bed," Cromwell spoke softly. His amber eyes glowed in the room's darkness. His voice sounded slightly hoarse. The man beside him nodded and moved through the apartment, allowing the door to swing shut behind them. Cromwell

followed him.

The two men paused in the entrance to her private bedroom. The blonde man's blue eyes began to glow, his pupils expanding slightly as he took in Charlie's unconscious, lithe form sprawled across her bed. The sheets and covers bunched up around her as if she had been writhing beneath them. Her long, silken locks spilled across the pillows like a shimmering rose gold waterfall. One long leg had freed itself from the tangle and it enticed with its lean line and slightly shimmering, golden skin.

"Keep her under." The man spoke, his tone low and commanding. Cromwell nodded once and moved into the room to take up station at one corner beside the tall windows that overlooked the city's ever-bright lights below.

The blonde man moved to the bed until he stood beside it, his tall frame towering over the sleeping goddess.

"She is exquisite, isn't she?"

There was no answer. The question had been rhetorical.

"She always has been," the man finished. He bent slightly, grasping the covers in one strong hand. Slowly, he pulled them down until they fell over the foot of the bed, leaving Charlie fully exposed and vulnerable.

The man's eyes went from blue to black in the space of a nanosecond. Charlie's sleeping form shivered and her brow furrowed in a frown. Slowly, languidly, she moved on the mattress, her skin flushed with goose bumps in the cold night air. One of her hands fisted in the sheet over the mattress, clutching it tight. Her full, pink lips parted as she sighed... and then moaned. Her legs drew up, bending at the knees. And then she straightened again, her hand gliding in sleep across her stomach.

The blonde man sat on the edge of the bed beside her. Across the room, Vincent Cromwell turned toward the windows and closed his eyes, focusing his concentration on the spell he desperately needed to maintain.

"Do you hear me, Charlie?" The fallen angel had lowered his lips to her ear and was speaking softly to her, his strong arms pinned on either side of her slim form. He lowered his voice to a whisper and asked, "Can you recognize my voice?" He chuckled then, an utterly cruel sound, and Charlie gasped in her sleep.

"I know what you want, Charlie," he told her, still whispering. His fingers found her right wrist and wrapped around it, grasping it gently in order to turn it over. His gaze flitted to the mark on the inside of her arm. "I know what you need," he continued, his gaze darkening slightly as the emerald mark shimmered in the moonlight streaming in through the windows.

When he looked back up at Charlie's face, his lips parted, his merciless smile exposing the long, sharp fangs behind them. She would have screamed in her magical slumber if not for the kiss he then forced upon her, silencing her outcry.

By the windows, Cromwell nearly cried out himself as Charlie's mark went from emerald green to a deep, burning, ruby red and the magic he had to force over her to keep her asleep beneath such an attack became nearly impossible to command. His palms were splayed against the glass, his head bowed, his eyes shut tight. He was shaking hard with the effort of keeping her under.

But Gabriel was merciless. He always had been.

Phelan parted her teeth with his tongue and tasted the Dormant beneath him. She was sweet – unbelievably so. She was cinnamon and alcohol and something like strawberries. His cock jumped in his pants, straining for release. He'd wanted it for so long. He'd wanted *her* for so long.

He could not take her this night. It was the one thing Cole's mark absolutely forbade. However, he could have a part of her, nonetheless. And he *would* have a part of her. This part of her. The rest, he swore he would have later.

He broke the kiss slowly and sat back on the bed, allowing his inhuman gaze to burn down her body, taking her in. As he watched Charlie settle down into a deeper, more peaceful slumber, he came to a decision. "I want the mark off of her by tomorrow night, Cromwell."

Across the room, the wizard Vincent Cromwell swallowed slowly. He nodded. He was spent and exhausted. But he would not let it show. Instead he said, "As you wish." His low voice was a mere whisper in the new silence of the room.

Gabriel Phelan stood then, his gaze still boring into Charlie's sleeping form. Then, without another word and without looking at the mage, he left the room.

Vincent heard his master leave the suite, the door shutting softly behind him.

Slowly, the mage ran a shaking hand through his long blue-black hair. And then, with something like regret in his glowing, amber eyes, he made his way to the bed and pulled the blankets up so that Charlie was once more covered.

On the bed, Charlie smiled. It was a grateful smile. Small, and sweet.

Cromwell straightened and wondered what the hell he was going to do next. He did not possess the kind of magic that could remove an alpha's mark from his mate. That was a dark magic, indeed. It would take a warlock, and he was not one.

He would have to find one. And within twenty-four hours.

Or his life would be forfeit.

Malcolm hurriedly began to shove furniture up against the walls. Jake and Lucas helped, and then, when the center of the hotel room was completely cleared, Lucas backed up to take station by the tall windows along one wall. Jake moved to guard the front door, bolting it tight.

Cole stood motionless in the middle of the room. He glanced down at the glowing red marks on his wrists, and then his hands curled into tight fists at his sides.

"God speed," Jake said softly. Malcolm glanced at him and their eyes met. Then he dropped his head and closed his eyes, waiting for the curse to once more disturb his already disturbed existence.

It didn't disappoint.

Within seconds, the pain he'd come to know so well was arcing through his body, riding along his spine to send sparks of agony into his inhuman brain. This time, he refused to give it voice, swallowing the anguished bellow that threatened to rise from his throat and erupt behind his extending fangs.

Another few tortured heartbeats passed and the flash overtook him, ripping him from one reality and sending him reeling into another.

He forced his eyes open and took in the scene around him.

A young woman lay on a dirty hotel mattress. Her corpse was pale, despite the flickering red light emanating from a dying neon sign beyond the hotel room window. She had been drained of blood – gashes marked both of her wrists and were carved into the insides of her naked thighs.

The scent of blood here was overwhelming, even though the mattress beneath the woman was dry. Whoever had done this had painstakingly collected her blood – and then painted the walls with it.

This is my fault, Malcolm thought. She's dead because of me.

It was the second time the killer had struck in as little as twelve hours. Same technique. Same kind of victim.

If Malcolm had gone after the killer the first time, the woman on the bed in front of him would still be alive.

But Cole had been snowed under by Charlie's appearance and utterly preoccupied with the prospect of claiming her. And he had truly thought that there would be more time before the murderer would strike again. A few days, at least.

But the man who had done this was on a rampage. He was not a patient, systematic serial killer. He was angry and frightened and wanted to do as much damage in as little time as possible.

Malcolm bit back the bile that churned in his stomach and allowed himself to change. A quick burst of light filled the room, like the sudden flare of a camera's flash, and a wolf was standing where a man had stood only moments before.

The room's furniture focused into quick, sharp contrast. The smells in the room separated themselves and became like hard, tangible objects, almost with colors

and shapes of their own.

He found the scent he wanted and committed it to memory.

And then the pain was back and he hunkered down in his wolf form, gritting his teeth against the physical torture of being torn from the here and now and sent into the then and there.

When he flashed back to the hotel room, Lucas Caige and Jakob Samson were still standing where he had left them. They took one look at him in his wolf form and prepared to fight. It was natural for their kind. If the alpha was in fighting mode, the others followed suit.

But he switched back into his human form before they could unleash their own wolves, and ran a shaky hand through his thick black hair.

"I'm going hunting," he said, his tone low, his voice hoarse with pent up emotion.

Jake's head raised in understanding. "We're going with you, then."

Cole didn't object. It was as much their right to hunt as it was his. And it would have been stupid to refuse the help. Cole was incredibly capable and strong – perhaps the strongest werewolf in the clan, save James Valentine. But no wolf was an island, and Phelan's men were out there. The night was long and dark. Anything could happen.

So, he nodded once and made his way to the door. Samson and Caige silently fell in behind him.

* * * *

By the time the trio of wolves returned to the Bellagio an hour later, they'd purchased new clothes and washed their faces and hands with a hose borrowed from someone's yard. It had been a long time since they'd gone hunting in this manner; on the spur of the moment and without backup supplies. In a way, it felt good.

At least, Malcolm could tell that his *companions* felt good. Caige was fairly swaggering with satisfaction as they entered the luxurious lobby and made their way to the elevators. And Jake didn't look too disappointed either.

Malcolm, however, felt tired. Unnaturally so.

His thoughts kept returning to Charlie. He wanted to visit The August and find her room. He wanted to make certain that she'd made it back all right. But Jake had assured him that the taxi driver dropped her off at the hotel's entrance and that Charlie had made it safely inside.

And he was so tired.

When the elevator doors closed in front of them, Cole leaned against the far wall and shook his head to clear it. His thoughts were becoming fuzzy. Something was wrong.

"Boss?" Jake's voice sounded suddenly concerned.

"I'm fine," Malcolm said, softly. But his tone lied. His speech sounded slurred and drawled past his lips a little too slowly.

"Did he get hurt?" Caige asked softly, obviously speaking to Jake, beside him.

There was no answer and, from behind Malcolm's closed lids, he could feel the other wolf shrugging his uncertainty.

"I'm not bloody injured," Cole stated. But, again his words were slurred and unconvincing. His legs felt weak. He was too heavy. He felt as if he'd been poisoned. Maybe drugged.

His thoughts flashed to Charlie again. Sudden concern for her flooded his mind.

Magic! This was the work of magic – and he smelled no mages anywhere near him. Which meant they were using it on Charlie. He knew that they were linked now. Whether she wanted it or not, Cole's blood ran through her veins. If someone was using magic on her, there was every possibility that he would be affected by it as well.

Before he could warn his men and send them out after her, his tall, strong form swayed in the elevator and began to fall. Lucas and Jake were instantly on either side of him, holding him up. He sensed them vaguely, as if at a distance. Consciousness was slipping from his grasp.

From afar, he heard the elevator doors ding open. A voice miles away said, "Get him to the couch." And then there was darkness... but it didn't last. Malcolm had not had a dream in decades. It had been so very long, he'd forgotten that he had ever dreamt at all.

He was familiar with the concept of dreams, of course. The mind empties itself during sleep. However, since he had been cursed, he had been denied that luxury. What his mind absorbed, his mind retained. He was never rid of it.

The only reprieve he could find was in the spilling of a pen's ink upon a paper. Or the words that he typed onto a screen. They were a smattering of soul-stuff forced somewhere else – somewhere other than his own brain, his own weary spirit.

There was brief, however slight, liberation in writing. At times, he felt that if he did not write, he would explode. The thick, bulbous, inky-black plague of his memories would spill over, weakening the seams that barely seemed to hold him together. Already, he felt fractured. Each time the marks on his arms heated up, the miniscule cracks in his psyche split a little further and rode a little higher in the weathered pottery of his core.

There was no light at the end of this tunnel. There seemed to be no escape.

But tonight, at last, he dreamed.

It took him a good while to realize what it was he was seeing and that it wasn't real. Something in the way the world around him blurred at the edges and in the way the sound seemed both too clear and muffled, all at once – this is what tipped him off.

He stood, wide-eyed and stunned that he'd found himself in the sleep scape after so many long years of nothing but night time oblivion.

"Claire, let's move down the hill a little. The light is perfect in the valley with the older stones."

The young woman before him was striking and bore a remarkable resemblance to Charlie. But it wasn't her. Not exactly. She had the same color hair, if a bit shorter. Same facial features. But the eyes were different. Where Charlie's were that impossible arctic blue, this woman's were amber, and they had that strange glow to

them that Malcolm recognized so well. She was a werewolf.

She was standing in a massive cemetery, its grounds immaculately tended, its trees magnificently tall and plentiful. She was holding a large camera, its strap over her shoulder, bearing the weight. She was speaking to someone behind her.

Malcolm watched as she glanced over her shoulder and a beautiful smile spread across her face. "What do you think?" she asked, addressing the hidden person once more.

"Fine, I'll race you down, mom" came the reply. The woman stepped to the side and Malcolm got a look at the young girl who had spoken.

Charlie...

It took all of a split second for Malcolm to realize that this was Claire St.James as a child. She was beautiful, even when she should have been right on the verge of an awkward stage. He would place her at eleven or twelve years of age, and her hair was already waist-length. It shimmered gorgeously in the sun. Her skin was still smooth, having yet to be subjected to acne, and there was already a smattering of tiny freckles across her small, up-turned nose.

The woman, who Malcolm realized must have been her mother, laughed once and then whirled around to begin running down the hill.

"Hey, no fair! You're cheating!" Charlie's blue eyes flashed in irritation, but her own smile matched her mother's as she leapt up from where she'd been seated beside a particularly weathered gravestone and began to chase after the young woman.

Malcolm watched them race down the hill. Charlie's mother won, though barely. Charlie was fast. When they reached the bottom, Malcolm's perspective began to change.

The dream scape became more fuzzy and seemed to shift. He blinked. And then he was gazing up from a hole six feet in the ground. Charlie stood beside it, still the twelve-year-old girl he'd seen earlier. She was dressed from head to toe in bright yellow. A tall, nearly skeletal-skinny woman stood next to her. She too was dressed in yellow, though more conservatively. The woman's shoulders shook and her expression was grief-stricken. She raised a gentle hand and placed it on Charlie's shoulder.

Charlie closed her eyes.

Malcolm seemed to rise from the ground until he was able to gaze over a congregation of people who had gathered for what was obviously a funeral.

The rest of the people were dressed in black, as was customary. Charlie and her companion stood out from the others, like candle flames in a dark room. Charlie's hair glinted in the sun. She'd left it down.

There were two rectangular holes in the ground and Malcolm knew all too well who they were for. He wondered how much time had passed between the last part of his dream and this one. How many more days had Charlie had with her mother before the woman had been taken away from her?

Again, time seemed to lapse, though the backdrop remained the same. Once

more, Malcolm stood in the cemetery, but this time dead leaves coated the dying grass on the rolling hills and, above him the trees had been painted red, orange and gold.

He heard a woman crying and turned in place to find that Claire St.James, now a fully blossomed teenager, was kneeling before two twin grave stones. She was hugging herself and rocking back and forth. The sleeves and neck of her thermal shirt were torn, causing the garment to hang over her shoulder, exposing the creamy flesh beneath. Mud and dirt caked the knees of her jeans and a tear in the material over her right leg exposed a long gash that marred the skin beneath. Leaves and small sticks had tangled in the thick mass of her hair.

When she looked up to wipe the tears from her eyes with the backs of her hands, he could see that her lip was bleeding. There was a scrape across her left cheekbone and that eye seemed to be slightly swollen.

Malcolm stood frozen to the spot, unreservedly dazed by what he was seeing. At the same time, a terrible fury, harsh and hot, roared to life within him, painting the entire dream scape a bloody red. Charlie had been attacked.

He tried to look away, to peer around her in order to find her attacker.

But he could not peel his eyes from her form. The dream wouldn't let him. Instead, he could only remain where he was, paralyzed in place, as Charlie stood on long, wobbly legs and whispered something private to the spirits of her parents. She turned and walked away, stumbling once on a stone hidden beneath the leaves.

Again, the scene changed. Now, the cemetery was gone and Charlie was standing in a crowded hallway outside of what appeared to be a studio in a busy gym. She was damp with sweat and her sports bra exposed the taut, tanned muscles of her abdomen. It also exposed a bruise on her upper arm that looked remarkably like a hand-print.

Malcolm gritted his teeth and, even in the dream, he could feel his fangs begin to lengthen.

Charlie's gray sweats were thin from much use and clung tantalizingly to the tight curve of her bottom. A worn pair of sneakers adorned her feet. She was grown now and Malcolm would have placed her in her early twenties.

She was speaking to several other women, all dressed similarly, none looking nearly as perfect as Charlie.

Finally, the women she was conversing with each gave her a hug and hurriedly walked away. When Charlie was alone, another woman approached her. Charlie turned to face her and the woman whispered something and handed her a business card.

Charlie didn't seem to know what to think of whatever it was the woman was telling her, but she took the card and nodded, obviously thanking her politely.

When that woman, too, had gone, Charlie stood alone in the hall and gazed down at the card. She seemed to consider something for a moment. Then, distractedly, she rubbed her hand over the bruise on her arm and took a deep breath, letting it out in a sigh.

When she began to make her way down the hall toward the women's locker room, Malcolm at last found that he could move. He attempted to follow her, wanting to speak with her, wanting to gaze into her blue eyes – desperately wanting to touch her.

But when she walked through the locker room door and he entered on her heels, the scene once more changed.

The dojo beyond was empty, save for Charlie, who stood at the center of the room, and a man who stood at the mirrors, his back to the doors. He was peering at Charlie through the mirror in front of him and Malcolm instantly recognized him as the man that Lily Kane had described as the Hunter. There could be no mistaking him. Not many men in the world looked as this one did.

He was very tall and well built, with the physique that Malcolm would normally reserve for werewolves. His hair was long and blonde and wavy, pulled back in an intricately tied leather band. He wore a tight black t-shirt and black sweats and his biceps were tattooed with Celtic knots. It was only his eyes – his normal, human eyes – that marked him as less than supernatural.

But right now, those brown eyes were peering at Charlie with dark promise.

What is she doing here? Cole thought, his mind spinning. *How can she be so close to a Hunter? To someone who wants our kind dead?*

For her part, Charlie was staring right back at the man, giving as good as she was getting. Her body was tense and ready, crouched low for an attack. Every part of her aura seemed alert and prepared to fight.

The Hunter smiled a nasty smile and then, like lightning, he was spinning around and the two were colliding in a whirlwind of hits and blocks that vaguely reminded Malcolm of something one would see on Roadhouse or Burn Notice – or even Buffy the Vampire Slayer.

He couldn't keep up with what they were doing, and that astounded him. He'd seen a lot of fighting in his days – three wars' worth. But this was unlike anything he had ever witnessed. Both combatants moved faster and were hitting much harder than a human should be capable of. As far as Charlie was concerned, Malcolm could guess where the extra speed and strength were coming from. She was a female born.

But the Hunter? Malcolm had no idea how the man could be so good. Hunters trained hard and they were very capable killers. But not like this. Charlie should have been able to fight him off. If what Cole was seeing was real – if it was a peek into Charlie's world, as he believed it to be – then Charlie was amazing. She was a one-woman army. Buffy had nothing on her.

And the Hunter was simply too strong. Way too damned fast. Something here wasn't right.

A few seconds more and the Hunter suddenly had Charlie in his grip, her arms pinned up behind her back, her body pulled up against his with the strong arm he had wrapped around her chest.

She gritted her teeth against the pain she was obviously feeling and the Hunter

smiled. He whispered something in her ear and she tried to jerk away. She failed.

Malcolm couldn't help what his own body did then. The flash came over him unbidden and he was helpless to fight it. One second, he was a man – the next, he was a wolf, his teeth bared, his hackles raised.

However, even the massive black wolf was trapped in the invisible muck that makes up a dream's atmosphere. He could not help Charlie. He could not move toward her. His menacing growl was drowned out in the thick nothingness that stood between him and his chosen mate. All he could do was watch.

The Hunter whispered something else and his hand slid across her collarbone to gently cup her breast. Charlie went rigid in his grasp and Malcolm watched through glowing emerald eyes and a field of vision that was quickly turning red as the Hunter softly laughed in her ear. Then suddenly, unexpectedly, he shoved her away from him.

She went stumbling forward a few steps and then swung around just in time as the Hunter came in with another full-fledged attack. Malcolm couldn't watch. He simply did not want to see Charlie abused any more.

And, blessedly, the scene changed.

Three-quarters of a century without a single night-time reverie and now Cole was stuck in one that seemed go on forever. *Will this dream never end...* he thought, as he found himself suddenly standing in a small public restroom. The Hunter stood a few feet away, his tall form bent over the only sink in the otherwise empty bathroom. His eyes were shut and it appeared as if he were catching his breath. Or even praying.

Malcolm's gaze narrowed. *If this wasn't a bloody dream, I could just kill him now.*

But all thought flew from Cole's mind as the Hunter then straightened, raising his head to gaze into the mirror above the sink. His eyes were no longer brown.

They were blue.

And they were glowing.

"You look a tad anemic, Vince." The gray-haired man entered the sitting room and went directly to the bar, where he took a bottle of hard liquor from one of the shelves and poured himself a straight glass. "Phelan has you working overtime, I'd wager."

Vincent Cromwell opened his eyes and peered across the room from where he sat, sprawled, on one of the plush love seats. "He had me cast an expansion spell that forced his territory to engulf the entire hotel, not just the penthouse suite," he stated softly.

The gray haired man turned to face him, one brow arched in interest. "Ah." He nodded and downed half of the contents of his glass. "That was clever of him, you have to admit. Cole can't enter the hotel now – he can't get anywhere near Claire St.James."

Vincent gave him an exasperated look. "I'm aware. But it doesn't stop there."

The older man considered the mage for a moment and then took a seat opposite him. "Oh?"

"Do you have any idea how powerful an alpha's mark is on his mate?"

The gray haired man's amber eyes glittered in the soft lamp light. "I've an idea."

Vincent made a derisive sound and ran his hand over his face. "I had to keep her under while he felt her up. That mark was glowing like the fires of Hell."

The other man seemed to consider this for a moment, his expression unreadable. Then he downed the remainder of the liquid in the glass and set the empty vessel on the table in front of him. "Is that all?"

"No." Vincent let his head drop back on the couch and closed his eyes. "I have to find a warlock by midnight."

* * * *

Lucas Caige sighed and dropped the curtain. The hot Nevada sun had just come up over the horizon, eager to scorch the parched land yet again. Day was not his favorite time of... day. He loved the night and its cool air and its endless, vast expanse of space. He loved the stars and the moon and the velvet cloak of darkness. He felt at one with it; always had.

He chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment and made his way to the adjoining kitchen. He opened the refrigerator door and peered inside, feeling restless and unsure of what to do about it. He could sense the strangeness coming off of his leader, who was currently passed out on the couch. He glanced over his shoulder at the tall, strong form of his alpha where he lay sprawled across the leather sofa. There was a definite tinge of magic about him.

Lucas recognized the scent. He knew that Cole had utilized it from time to time and, Lucas himself had dealt with it before. But it hadn't ever been by choice. He didn't like it. Not one bit. Magic was an intangible, un-sure thing that could not be fought with fang and claw. It slid and slithered and its icy tendrils reached in to grasp you where you hurt most, and it couldn't be killed by having its throat ripped out.

Anything that could not be easily killed was not to be easily trusted.

Lucas took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he reached in to grab one of the beers on the top shelf, popping the top off with the thumb of the same hand.

In the next instant, he spun around, startled by the sudden movement behind him. Cole was rising from the couch, his emerald eyes in full glow, his fangs extended and pronounced. Lucas immediately set down his beer and headed toward him, but before Jake Samson had fully made it in from the other room and he and Caige could stop their leader, Cole was striding for the door at full speed.

Jake was on his heels in an instant. "Boss! What the hell—"

"It's Charlie. Someone is using magic on her. I have to get to The August."

So, Lucas had been right. It was magic. "Is that what sent you under?" he asked as he yanked his leather jacket off of the chair by the table and followed Jake and his leader out the front door. His blood was humming to life with the adrenaline he would need to fight, but at the same time, he felt relieved not to be doing *nothing* any more.

"It has to be." Cole led the way to the stairs, not wanting to wait for the elevator. He tried not to blur into motion going down the twenty or so flights to the bottom, as the other two were not quite as fast as he was and wouldn't be able to keep up. But it was hard. "She's in more danger than she knows. The Hunter is one of us," he told his men as he reached the bottom and slammed through the exit door.

When he came out the other side, it was to come face to face with James Valentine. Cole stopped short and straightened, the air around them suddenly charged with the power of two of the clan's strongest alpha werewolves.

James cocked his head to one side, his silver gaze reflecting in the light of dawn. Lily was just behind him, her golden eyes shimmering, her cheeks flushed as if she'd just run to get where she was.

"The Hunter is a werewolf?" James asked softly, obviously having heard Cole from the other side of the door.

Cole wasn't exactly surprised to see them there, and he wasn't surprised at *all* that Valentine had heard him. But he didn't have time to waste explaining things to anyone right now. So, he decided to talk while he walked.

"Yes," he said, as he turned and continued to stride down the street. James fell in beside him. "And for some reason, Charlie knows him personally. I watched them spar with one another in some kind of dojo."

"When did you see this?" asked Lily, who had moved up on Valentine's left side.

Cole shot her a quick glance and wondered how much he should tell her. And then he remembered that *she* had abruptly and unexpectedly known an awful lot about *him* after she'd received Daniel's mark. He wondered, suddenly, whether marking a Dormant automatically released some sort of... magic. A dream magic, perhaps?

Whatever it was, there was little point in keeping it secret. The more she and Valentine knew, in fact, the better chance they all had of coming to the right conclusion in the end.

"I dreamt it," he told her, flatly.

"We came back from hunting when someone started casting sleep spells on Charlie – and wound up taking him down along with her," Caige chimed in, nodding toward his leader.

"You mean because they're linked," Lily interjected. "Because he marked her?"

Caige nodded. Malcolm shot him an irritated glance and Lucas shrugged.

"Fascinating," James said, finally. "By the way Cole, where are we going?"

"To the August. Someone is casting spells on Charlie and I'd wager it's Phelan. No one else has reason to. I need to get to her before she loses the mark."

James stopped abruptly. "He can't remove the mark from her without her permission."

Malcolm too came to a halt. He turned to face James, now several feet away. "Permission isn't necessarily difficult to obtain," he said with a meaningful glance in Lily's direction.

Lily blushed. Two years ago, Malcolm had managed to get Lily's permission to remove Daniel's mark. All it had taken was a bit of his indomitable power and a whole hell of a lot of seductive sway.

"Maybe," James cocked his head to one side. "Maybe not. She's a female born, not a human. And it doesn't matter anyway, Cole. You won't be able to go anywhere near her."

"What the bloody hell are you saying?" Cole's green eyes flashed his impatience.

"I tried to get into The August this morning," James told him. "The entire hotel is his territory now." He paused long enough for the significance of what he was saying to sink in. "No alpha can cross its borders."

* * * *

Charlie didn't rush to get out of bed that morning. She lay on the soft mattress, her wide eyes gazing up at the ceiling, and thought about everything that had happened the night before.

Every once in a while, she raised her right arm and stared at the shimmering emerald mark on the inside of her wrist. It was beautiful.

Nothing made any sense.

"I'm a werewolf," she said softly. That was what Malcolm Cole had told her. She closed her eyes and searched her memories. Her father was there, with his bright white, wolfish grin and his stark, cobalt eyes. Her mother gazed back at her through eyes of amber. They looked like Jesse's eyes. She wondered if it was one of the things that attracted her to Jesse. That likeness.

"I'm a werewolf?" This time it was a question. Again, she looked at the mark on her arm. It seemed to beckon to her. It looked almost familiar; as if she'd always known deep down that she would be wearing it one day.

She sighed now and rubbed her eyes. She wasn't tired, but it seemed like the appropriate thing to do. Then she got up and got dressed, donning worn blue jeans, a Metallica t-shirt, and slip-on Converse sneakers. As she dressed, she noticed the way the material felt against her skin. Her lace bra kept rubbing against her nipples,

which were painfully erect. The seam of the blue jeans brushed the insides of her thighs. She was too sensitive.

She wanted to take the clothes off again and crawl back beneath the soft sheets on the bed and masturbate.

"Jesus," she muttered, running a hand through her hair. She needed to figure out what was going on. What was wrong with her? She knew it had something to do with Cole's mark, and she had a feeling that it also had a lot to do with herself.

She sighed again and looked around the room, trying to remember where she'd left her cell phone. Then she remembered and started toward the chair where her jacket hung, but half way across the room, she stopped in her tracks.

The lock on the front door had turned green, issuing a small beep. The door knob was turning.

For some reason, Charlie froze in place, unable to do anything but watch as the door swung slowly inward, and several large men strode into the room.

All at once, Charlie's eyes widened, her throat constricted, her heartbeat hammering painfully. Her ears began to buzz with the roar of blood rushing through her veins. Four men entered the room, each exceedingly tall and well-built. Two wore dress slacks and tight black t-shirts. The other two wore jeans. Their eyes, every pair a color that stood out in their handsome faces, shone eerily in the dawning light. The men in jeans bore tattoos on their arms, but all of them had short-cropped hair, making them appear even more mean than their physiques and ink jobs suggested.

Charlie's brain felt as if it were burning up, feverish in its fear. She experienced the brief, mad gratefulness that she'd managed to get dressed before her room was overrun with heavy-weight boxer look-alikes. But the fleeting appreciation was gone as quickly as it had come when the fifth man stepped through the doorway and the light from the window behind her illuminated his features.

Her jaw dropped open and tiny stars danced in her vision. "Reese?"

David Reese, her trainer, stood in the foyer of her private hotel apartment. He was dressed in an incredibly expensive, tailored suit and his hair was down instead of tied back as it always had been. But she would recognize him anywhere. From his long, blonde waves to his piercing brown eyes to the cruel smile on his lips.

"Hello again, Charlie," he said. As always, the low rumble of his voice both intrigued her and set her nerves on edge.

The men on either side of him eyed her with something akin to hunger in the depths of their gazes. She felt completely and utterly overwhelmed. The mark on her arm began to prickle. She had no idea what to say and vaguely wondered whether she was actually dreaming all of this.

"How are you enjoying your accommodations?" Reese asked. "I do hope you find my hotel satisfactory."

The men began to come further into the room, separating as they neared her so that she felt trapped. She took a few steps back and felt the familiar stirrings of panic burgeoning to life within her. Her skin was flushing hot and cold. Her chest hurt.

"What are you talking about, David?" she asked, the alarm clearly audible in her

voice. "What are you doing here?" She glanced at the tall men who were moving further and further toward her, boxing her in. "What are *they* doing here?" A few seconds more, and she would scream. Would anyone hear her? God, was she going to die in a hotel room today?

"Please," David's gaze darkened. "I think it's time we do away with the pretense, Charlie. I've grown so weary of it over the years. Call me Gabriel. I've always wanted to hear my name slip past your lips."

Charlie just stared at him. Gabriel? As in Gabriel *Phelan*? The man who owned The August and half of the real estate on the Strip?

"What the hell are you talking about?" She took another hurried step back and felt her body begin to slip into fight mode.

It didn't escape Reese.

"Take her now, men. I don't want that kind of fight from her this morning," David commanded.

At once, the four large men rushed forward, moving faster than Charlie could fathom. She had little to no time to fight and they gave her no leverage to fight with. They were impossibly strong; her efforts at escape were futile. Within a few short seconds, her wrists were bound behind her back with leather-lined cuffs that she hadn't even known they'd had, and she was being held immobile by sturdy grips on both of her arms. Their strong legs were positioned in such a way in front of hers that she could not move, much less use her legs to kick.

She was out of breath and defenseless.

Charlie felt as if she would faint. Her vision was tunneling inward. She concentrated on sending it back out. On breathing. But she was so confused. Why would Reese do this? Was he really Gabriel Phelan?

She managed to lock gazes with the blonde man as he came further into the room and allowed the door to swing shut behind him. His expression was unreadable, but a horrid dread was uncoiling deep within Charlie's gut. His eyes looked strange. As he drew closer, they seemed to lighten – to change. One moment, they were brown....

And the next?

Charlie's ragged breath caught in her throat. The tiniest, shaky whimper escaped her lips as he came to stand a foot away and she found herself staring up into a pair of eyes of the deepest blue. She recognized those eyes. They glowed in the depths of her imagination, ripping through her subconscious and shredding her inner workings to smithereens as they exposed her for everything that she never knew she was.

They were the searing, merciless blue eyes of the man from her dreams. The man who was not Malcolm Cole.

"To answer the question that I know you are asking yourself, sweetheart – yes. I *am* Gabriel Phelan, Charlie." His smile was unforgiving. "I am the man who hired your band to come to Las Vegas for six months. I am the man who signed your retainer check and put you in a room directly below his penthouse suite in his tallest hotel....

Like a princess locked in a castle's tower." He softly laughed then, the heartless sound causing the mark on her arm to tingle threateningly. His voice wrapped around her like the petals of a black rose. Dark and silky soft. But the thorns of the rose came flaying after. She shivered violently, her skin flushed, her stomach roiling with a mixture of queasiness and shocking sexual anticipation.

Gabriel took that one final step toward her, closing the gap between them, and Charlie winced as the emerald mark on her right arm grew uncomfortably warm. "I told you that I would collect on our session, didn't I, Charlie?" he whispered, slowly raising his hand to brush his fingers along her cheek bone.

Sparks of pain shot up her arm and she hissed, trying to pull away from him. The men's grips tightened on her arms. Gabriel's hand shot out like lightning, roughly fisting in the hair at the nape of her neck to hold her still as the fingers of his other hand gently brushed along her lips. More pain assaulted her and she knew that David – that Gabriel – could see it in her eyes. He'd always been able to read her; to tell when she was in pain.

He liked it. His smile said as much. "Does his mark hurt you, Charlie?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't. It took all of her strength not to cry out as his fingers dropped from her lips to her collarbone, brushing it gently and then drifting lower on her chest. He ran his hand over the thin material of her t-shirt to the outline of her bra, his gaze locked on her eyes all the while. Watching. Measuring her reaction with malevolent curiosity.

"I imagine you're very confused, aren't you?" he whispered.

The pain shooting up her arm and across her chest was nearly unbearable now. And her mind was going into shock.

It was all too much. She had no idea what the mark meant or why David Reese was really Gabriel Phelan or why he would bring her here or what Malcolm Cole wanted with her or what he had meant with his talk of werewolves. All she knew, at that moment, was that she was in agony. And that she wanted it to stop.

"I can take the pain away from you, Charlie." Gabriel squeezed her breast through the material of her shirt and lace bra and Charlie couldn't help the harsh cry that finally ripped from her throat. His touch was a dichotomy of sensations. He brushed his thumb across the hard nipple through her garments, and it sent waves of electric pleasure through her body even as the contact had also elicited a new and terrible kind of suffering from the cursed mark that now burned like a brand on the inside of her right arm.

Charlie felt her knees go weak beneath the double assault. But Phelan's men easily held her up and Gabriel retained his grip in her thick, silken hair. He lowered his lips to whisper across hers.

"Nothing else matters right now, Charlie. There's just you and me." He brought his hand back up to wrap his fingers around her throat. He squeezed gently, cutting off just the right amount of oxygen from her already bewildered brain. "Tell me that you want the mark removed, Charlie, and I'll do it. The pain will stop," he promised her softly. "Or we can do this all day." He suddenly released her throat and ran his

free hand over her taut stomach to the waist band of her jeans. Then he roughly shoved it underneath both her pants and her underwear, finding the soft curls between her legs.

She bucked in the men's grips, screaming once more at the further anguish the physical assault released over her. Gabriel's hand threatened, stalling inches from her inner core, and Charlie was positive that she had never known such suffering. But it was nothing compared to what she felt when he violently thrust his fingers inside of her and silenced her resultant scream, covering her mouth in a brutal kiss. It was all force, all hunger, and it bruised her lips on contact.

Charlie's entire world was engulfed in a mixture of red-hot need and misery. Her legs gave out and her swallowed cry dropped off to a low moan as an orgasm racked through her body, the harsh pleasure immediately absorbed by the pain that had become her entire being.

Consciousness began to slip from her grasp.

And then something strange rode through her, piggy backing on the agony, a sort of insipid, slithering influence that coursed through her veins and re-awakened her senses.

The blackness receded, and with the retreating shadows of blessed sleep came more pain. Inescapable. She was dragged ruthlessly back to the world of fully-conscious perception. Slumber had been denied her.

She couldn't even faint to get away from the pain.

Gabriel Phelan slowly released her from his kiss and straightened, a pitiless and knowing smile on his handsome face. He drew back just enough to peer down into her glacial eyes and then shook his head. "No, Charlie. I'm afraid you don't get off that easily. You'll remain here, sweetheart. With me." He drove his fingers deeper inside of her and she sobbed in throbbing, excruciating ecstasy as her inner muscles involuntarily squeezed him back. "Until you give me what I want."

The tears that had been building in Charlie's ice blue eyes now spilled forth to run down her cheeks. She felt like throwing up. It was one thing to be violated in this manner by someone in the first place. It was far worse that it should bring such confounding, horrible agony like the pain brought on by Cole's mark. But it was unimaginably wrong that she could feel pleasure at the same time. Phelan was doing something to her. He'd cast a spell or something. He wasn't human.

She wanted to die. To disappear.

If she had possessed any ability to move whatsoever, she would have thrown herself through the floor-to-ceiling windows across the room. Anything to end this intolerable anguish.

"What do you want?" she gasped. It was surprisingly easy for her to find and form words in her suffocating world of hurt. The question just came out.

"I want *you*, Charlie. *All* of you," he hissed, giving her hair a swift tug to accentuate his words. "Tell me to remove Cole's mark from your arm. *That's* what I want."

Charlie stilled under his grip. A quiet stole over her. In a brief and surprising moment of mental clarity, Charlie realized that if Phelan was asking her for something – it was something that she should not give him.

He was a good fighter. He was a good teacher. But Jessie was right. He was a sadist in every sense, and in the truest form of the word. And it was no secret that he particularly liked dolling out pain to *her*. It brought him pleasure. She could see it in his eyes and in the way he smiled. She could feel it when he touched her and hear it in the low, mesmerizing pitch of his voice.

She didn't understand how Malcolm Cole, the green-eyed man from her dreams, had managed to put that mark on her arm. She didn't comprehend what purpose it served – other than, apparently, to cause her immense amounts of pain. But she knew, suddenly and with stark certainty, that if Gabriel Phelan wanted it gone, then she was better off keeping it.

"No," she hissed, her own gaze narrowing in defiance. She winced as more pain rode through her like a shockwave but she gritted her teeth and continued through it. "I think I'll keep it."

She expected his wrath. She expected him to hit her. Maybe punch her. Anything but what he actually did. He gently pulled his hand out of her jeans and his lips spread into a victorious smile. She stared up into his blue eyes as they started to glow, just as they had in her nightmares. And then her gaze flicked to his mouth and she almost moaned in horror as his canines began to elongate until they were razor-sharp fangs, glinting malevolently in the waxing sunlight.

Charlie stopped breathing entirely. She went utterly still beneath him.

"Ah Charlie," he said, his low voice now laced with a barely perceptible, animalistic growl. "I was so hoping you would say that."

Chapter Nine, *The Rake*

"Boss, you need to calm down." Jake watched his alpha warily, wondering if his life was going to come to an end that day. If Cole slipped into wolf form, everything would go to hell. His pack would follow suit – loyal to the end. And humans would see them. And then there would be a giant battle between timber wolves and gray wolves and black wolves – right in the middle of the street in Las Vegas.

And then, no matter who won, the Council would get involved and someone would have to pay for the mess. And someone would have to clean it.

It would be bad.

It had only been seconds since James Valentine had given his leader the news about the territory spell on The August. Seconds was all it had taken for Cole's entire visage to darken – to change. His power had lashed out wildly, infused with fury and Jake had temporarily been robbed of breath. He could feel the humans around them giving them a wider berth, suddenly crossing the street to avoid them.

Cole's eyes had begun to glow like emerald search lights. Lucas Caige had been quick to take off his own mirrored shades and hand them to his boss. Cole had dodged them without hesitation.

But no one was fooled by the temporary cover. Jake knew that there were fangs behind his boss's lips. And the hands that the alpha had curled into fists at his sides most assuredly bore claws. Jake could smell Cole's blood. It was pooling in his palms, drawn by his own digging nails.

"The spell will fall by midnight," Lily piped in, trying to help. "I've been reading about these kinds of things. Most spells like this can't last more than twelve hours, no matter how good the witch or warlock is."

"Caige," Malcolm turned to the leather-clad wolf. His voice had become a growl behind his barely hidden teeth.

Jake noticed that Lily Kane backed up when Cole spoke. She sensed the mounting danger, and his low, rumbling growl most likely reminded her of the time that he'd kidnapped her and absconded with her to his cabin in New Mexico two years ago. James Valentine quickly stepped in front of her. It was his job as her guardian, but it was probably also natural.

Lucas Caige came toward his leader, waiting.

"Call Scrubs," Cole commanded. "There's no way in hell I'm waiting for that spell to drop."

Jake's eyes widened.

But Lucas smiled a slight smile and nodded. Caige was like that. Crazy sometimes. More than a little wild. He liked things hard and fast and rough and Jakob felt sorry for whatever mate he claimed, because she wouldn't have an easy go of it with him.

The man that Cole referred to as "Scrubs" was a member of a particular motorcycle gang that Caige had been a member of since the sixties. Scrub's real name was Johnny Campbell, but a failed stint in medical school had forever labeled him the gang doctor. It was just a name, and it meant nothing. Especially since the

thing Scrubs was actually known best for was the knowledge he'd picked up in the gulf.

He was a demolitions expert and had even done time due to a penchant for arson. He was the only human alive who knew what Lucas Caige really was. He was as loyal to his gang members as werewolves were to their packs.

If Cole wanted Caige to call Scrubs in on this, then it was because he was planning something big. Something dangerous. Involving explosives and lots of people.

It was a terrifying thought and one that every wolf on that sidewalk was thinking. But not one of them gave voice to their concerns. None of them dared. At the moment, Cole was just that scary.

Caige pulled the cell phone from his leather vest pocket and dialed a number, stepping away from them to speak in private. It was a gesture done more out of respect than practicality, since any werewolf within several thousand feet would have been able to hear the conversation clear as day.

Jake ran a hand through his hair. He glanced at the other wolves. James Valentine was gazing down at Lily, who in turn was watching Cole warily. "You should probably head back to the hotel, Kane. Your husband will flip his lid if he finds out that you had anything to do with this."

Lily turned to look up at Jake. "I'm not leaving," she said, stubbornly. "If and when you big boys manage to rescue Charlie, she's going to be confused and terrified. She's going to need a girlfriend and I intend to be there for her."

"Go home, Lily," Malcolm told her flatly. His low growl was no-nonsense and left little room for argument.

Lily swallowed audibly, her gold eyes flashing in both anger and trepidation. But then her jaw set and she shook her head. "This wouldn't be the first time an abusive spouse asked me to butt out of his business, Cole. And I didn't listen then either."

Cole gazed at her from behind those impenetrable shades and Lily began to fidget. And then he cocked his head to one side and spoke very quietly. "Abusive?" he asked, his hushed tone far more frightening than his outright growl had been. "Do you honestly think that I would hurt Charlie?" he asked. It was nearly rhetorical.

But Lily wasn't going to be dissuaded. Even after James put his hand on her shoulder in an effort to make her back down, she didn't relent. "Yes I do, Cole. You had no problem marking her against her will. You probably laid it on nice and thick, didn't you?" she asked.

Jake bit back a groan. He didn't like where this was going.

"I would imagine that you practically drowned her with your stupid power and then tricked her some how to get that mark on her arm. Did she even stand a chance, Cole? Did you give one tiny thought to how *she* might feel once the deed was done? To the possibility that she might not *want* to be marked by you? That she might want a *choice*?" Lily's voice had become progressively more high pitched as she'd spoken and when she yelled her final question at Cole, it was clear that there was more than

a touch of personal venom attached to her words.

Cole's reply was to smile at her, flashing the tiniest bit of fang. "Why luv, it sounds as if you speak from experience. Might I suggest a marriage counselor to help you work through that anger?"

"You son of a -"

"Lily." Valentine's deep voice was laced with a strong, authoritative note.

Lily stilled, but visibly bristled. Jake couldn't really blame her. There was a lot of fight in her and it was natural for a werewolf to want to air out those feelings. In fact Malcolm Cole was the only werewolf that Jake had ever known who could keep his emotions carefully in check, vigilantly hidden for decades at a time.

He glanced at his leader.

Now was not one of those times. Cole's emotions were getting the better of him. Jake could smell the adrenaline in his boss's veins. The power whipping out wildly around him was out of control. Chaotic. It made Jake feel nervous and agitated and itchy for a fight.

"In this instance, I agree that you'll be in too much danger if you come with us," James told Lily. "If we manage to make it in, there will be wolves and police and humans running madly everywhere. You're too precious to risk."

Lily rolled her eyes, but Valentine held up his hand, as if he could sense that she was coming back with a retort. "If Claire is hurt, we'll bring her immediately to you." He was trying to placate her. Jake knew that as her guardian, James wouldn't lie to her, so if he promised that she would be able to help Claire, then he meant it.

It was that promise that finally managed to convince Lily Kane to stay behind. She nodded and shot Cole a warning glance. "You have no idea how special she is, Cole." She shook her head, her expression serious. "I haven't told you everything."

She turned to leave and, as she disappeared down the street, back toward the Bellagio, Cole seemed to gaze after her. Jake couldn't see his eyes, but he would be willing to bet that they were still glowing heatedly. "It's Malcolm," he hissed softly, still staring in the direction she'd gone. "And what the bloody hell didn't you tell me, Kane?"

* * * *

"Forgive me for asking," Vincent drawled, his amber-gold eyes flashing in the dim light from the sconces along the wall. "But, how old are you, anyway?"

The young man sprawled on the black leather sofa across from him smiled a clandestine smile, his indigo-colored eyes glinting strangely, almost reflecting the light as a cat's would. "I'm older than I look," he replied.

Oh, no doubt, Vincent thought.

The warlock's voice was that of an eighteen-year-old's, nearly adolescent in its crisp sound. But he spoke with the calm of one much older. Vincent eyed him warily. It hadn't taken him nearly as long as he'd thought it would to locate the warlock. In truth, the warlock had found *him*. He'd walked into the casino as if he'd known exactly what it was that Vincent was looking for. Like a devil appearing in a flash of smoke and fire before a dying man - contract in one hand, pen in the other.

The warlock's thick hair was cut just above his shoulders and was the color of midnight, a deep-space black that reflected the same indigo light that flashed in the depths of his piercing eyes. He was tall, but not as tall as a werewolf. Vincent would have placed him at around six feet, with a build that was impressive for a human, but a little too wiry for a wolf. His complexion was fair enough that he bore the look of a vampire. And he dressed like one, as well. Black jeans, white long-sleeved shirt, black leather vest, black boots.

The contrast of his youthful appearance with the knowledge reflected in his eyes and the composed confidence with which he held himself was disconcerting. There was a bubble of nearly palpable menace surrounding the man. Vincent imagined that anyone finding themselves in his presence would become distinctly uncomfortable before long.

He looked untrustworthy and utterly, unapologetically mean.

Vincent Cromwell had been a magic user – a wizard – for a long time. As such, he easily and readily recognized the kind of magic radiating off of the other man. It was stifling. It had a dangerous smell to it. There was the faintest hint of fire to it; the way it smelled when someone up-wind lit a match. At the same time, it smelled like snow. Like winter. Long and cold and unforgiving.

The only name he would give Vincent was “Seth.” And Vincent knew enough to recognize that it wasn't his real name. Most likely, no one knew his real name, and hadn't for a long time.

At the moment, the two of them were waiting on the black leather furniture that “decorated” the basement of The August. The entire underground facility had been made into a dungeon upon the hotel's completion. The walls were lined with a grisly assortment of implements and the massive metal door bore several locks.

Vincent chanced another glance at the large stone room's fixtures and equipment. And then he stifled the need to swallow audibly past the lump that had formed in his throat. He felt sick inside. But Vincent had the very strong feeling that to show such weakness in front of the man sitting across from him would be patently hazardous.

So, he drew his gaze away from the leather restraints, the giant wooden crosses, and the various punishment tools hanging on the walls and settled it once more on Seth: The warlock who was going to remove Cole's mark from the arm of Claire St.James.

Seth was watching him carefully, an unreadable expression on his young, handsome face. His near-black eyes sparkled malevolently with untold secrets. Around his neck, he wore a black leather cord with a single lapis lazuli stone.

Vincent took a slow, deep breath and then sat back in the plush leather, draping his arms over the back of the couch. “A recall stone?” he asked, wondering if his hunch was correct.

“Of course,” Seth answered easily. “One can't be too careful, and contracting with werewolves is dangerous business for my kind. An associate of mine was killed a few years ago in Baton Rouge for agreeing to do the same thing I will be doing

tonight.”

Vincent knew who he was referring to: Eva Black, the witch-warlock who had attempted to remove Daniel Kane’s mark from Lily St. Claire’s arm. She had failed. And Kane’s pack had killed her. It seemed like ages ago. Working for Phelan was no walk in the park. If time flew by when you were having fun, then it positively crawled when you were employed by the devil.

“Just out of curiosity, how many people can it carry?” Vincent asked, still referring to the stone and its magical abilities.

“It’ll take everyone within a thirty-foot radius,” Seth answered calmly. Then he leaned forward and pinned Vincent with a meaningful look. “Everyone that I want it to take, that is.”

The significance of that final statement was not lost on Vincent. But he had no time to contemplate it further, for the sound of footsteps came from beyond the dungeon door.

He stood and faced the door, knowing that Phelan and his men – and Claire St.James – were on the other side of it.

He could hear her heartbeat. It was a frantic hummingbird kind of sound amidst the calm, cool beats of the werewolves surrounding her. And he could hear her breathing. It was clear, by the sound of it, that she had not been gagged. It would have been pointless, and she probably knew it. The stairwell leading from the two upper floors to the basement was completely private and sealed off from the rest of the hotel. It was sound proofed and free of doors or windows.

As was the dungeon. There was only one way in or out of the massive, stone room, and only two people had a key. Gabriel Phelan had one. Vincent Cromwell had the other.

Seth the warlock remained seated as the door unlocked and Phelan and his men came in. However, once the two men leading St.James dragged her into the room, the warlock finally stood.

Vincent noticed the movement and turned to look at the other man.

It was clear, from the fascinated expression on Seth’s attractive face, that he was incredibly impressed with her beauty. Apparently, whatever dark, insidious powers had informed Seth of Cromwell’s need of his magic had failed to mention that the woman he would be casting that magic on was very special, indeed. She was a female-born werewolf – *and* a Dormant.

In addition, Cole’s possessive mark seemed to have released an air around her that screamed of sexual tension. It was as if she was in heat or drenched in pheromones.

“Strip her and string her up,” Phelan ordered as he strode through the room toward one of the leather “viewing” couches near Vincent and the warlock.

Cromwell watched as Phelan’s men unfastened Claire’s cuffs in order to disrobe her and she immediately began fighting. She moved incredibly fast. Her body nearly blurred with speed as she back-handed one werewolf and kicked another solidly in the solar plexus.

Beside Vincent, Gabriel shrugged off his suit coat and laid it on the sofa, watching the proceedings with an interested, but detached air. His blue eyes sparkled with barely-disguised malevolence, even as his easy movements spoke of a cool and collected calm.

Gabriel unhurriedly unfastened his tie, taking it off to lay it next to his suit coat. Across the room, Charlie's wrists were caught by one man and she used the leverage of his weight to lift herself up and kick him in the chin. He let her go.

Gabriel sighed. He unbuttoned the top three buttons on his white shirt.

Charlie was attacked again, and this time her movements were a tad slower. But she managed a few direct blows before she was ducking away from one of the large men and then jerking out of the sudden grasp of another.

Gabriel began to roll up the sleeves of his shirt, barely paying any attention to the struggle now. Instead, he seemed to be focusing inward. Preparing himself.

Vincent knew that his boss had done this before. Many, many times. He was a born dominant and a practiced sadist and he was well versed in the art of breaking a person's spirit. Unlike most dominants, however, he didn't do so with the express permission of a submissive and he didn't do it for her pleasure. Instead he did it simply because he could. He'd been wanting to break Claire St.James for years, and now he had an excuse. He wanted the mark off of her arm; he planned to tear down her will until she gave him the permission he needed to take it off.

A few more tense minutes passed and, finally Claire was once more detained, this time by four men whose fangs were extended and whose eyes were glowing like headlights. They hadn't been allowed to bring her any harm in apprehending her, which had made their jobs much more difficult. The anger and frustration they felt was blatantly obvious. Claire's struggles had only spurred the hunger within them. If Phelan had not been standing in the same room with them, she would have been their dinner by now.

"You know how much I love to watch you fight, Charlie, but I have to admit that I had something a little different in mind for today," Gabriel said calmly. His deep voice echoed off the walls and drowned the sound of Claire's heavy breathing as he moved to one of the stone walls in the room and began to casually peruse the whips that hung from hooks along its surface.

Behind him, three of his men held Charlie tightly while the fourth roughly grabbed the front of her Metallica t-shirt and ripped it clean away from her body. She hissed as the material bit into her skin and then gave way, revealing the lace bra and supple swell of her breasts beneath.

Her narrowed gaze flashed ice-cold fire at the man. From between gritted teeth, she ground out, "That was vintage, you son of a bitch."

He smiled a fang-filled smile and then wrapped his fist around the front band of her jeans. Charlie stilled. A shirt was one thing, but ripping the jeans off of her was going to hurt. Bad.

"Hold still and I won't shred them," he threatened her, as if he could read her mind.

Vincent could tell that she desperately wanted to fight him; she knew what was at stake. But she was a smart girl. She stopped struggling and the werewolf's smile became positively wicked as he snapped each of the buttons and then lowered himself to one knee in front of her.

She gazed down at him, her chest rising and falling with quick breaths as he grasped the jeans in two strong hands and slowly slid them down her long legs. The tattooed biceps of the werewolf's arms bulged with barely suppressed ferocity as all of the muscles in his body tensed, flexing with the need he felt. Vincent was pretty sure that he knew why. He imagined that the werewolf could scent her in that position – kneeling before her long, lithe form. Her body was probably making him crazy. Vincent didn't envy him.

But the werewolf certainly didn't lack self control. You couldn't work for Gabriel Phelan if you did. And so, when he was finished pulling Claire's jeans down, he allowed them to pool at her feet and then instructed her to step out of them. As she did, he grasped her ankles and pulled off her shoes, leaving her in nothing but her panties and the matching bra.

Then he stood and strode to a nearby shelf, which bore on its surface a wide assortment of leather restraints and cuffs. He selected a pair and returned to the center of the room.

Vincent could hear Claire's heart skip a beat and then start up again, harder than before. He wondered if it hurt her. There was so much adrenaline already flooding her blood stream that he wouldn't be able to tell if it had. He could see the mark on the inside of her right arm. It had gone from emerald green to a blood red and he didn't have to guess whether it was causing her pain. He knew it was. She wasn't supposed to be touched by anyone but the wolf who had given her that mark.

She was being touched by all sorts of people.

The werewolf with the cuffs watched Claire through hooded, brightly glowing eyes as he reached up and grasped one of the leather ropes that dangled from the ceiling above him. At its end was a buckling device. He pulled hard on it, as if to test its strength. When it held easily, he let it go and nodded toward the men who held Claire. They moved her forward, lifting her and then setting her down firmly in front of him.

He wasted no time, then. Quickly and efficiently, the fourth werewolf proceeded to wrap the strong, leather restraints tightly around each of her slim wrists. When he had finished, he then raised her arms over her head to connect them to the buckles on the end of the leather ropes.

All four men released her then and stepped back. It was a scene straight out of an S&M film. Countless strong, fully clothed men in a dark dungeon, surrounding a nearly naked, very beautiful woman who was bound and helpless before them.

Vincent couldn't deny the pull the picture had on him. He was a wolf. He loved the hunt as much as the next wolf. And when the entire pack was aroused, it was exceedingly difficult not to follow suit.

Every man in the room was watching Claire. But she had eyes for only one of them.

As Gabriel Phelan selected several important implements and laid them out, side by side, on a bench a few feet from her, she pulled against her bonds. Vincent could sense her desperation. He could feel her mounting fear.

Finally, Gabriel turned toward her and she was trapped in his piercing blue gaze. "I can imagine that you are quite confused about what is going on, Charlie."

"Don't call me Charlie," she hissed at him, belying her terror and giving another strong yank on the leather restraints that held her so tight.

Phelan ignored the outburst and began to unfasten the platinum watch on his left wrist. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, as if contemplating his next words. "So allow me to explain the situation."

He strode calmly toward her, handing the watch to one of his men as he drew near. "You are a werewolf. A female-born, to be more precise." He began to slowly circle her, his gaze searing her flesh. He casually crossed his arms over his chest, thrumming his fingers against his thick bicep as he moved around her. "Your father was a male born werewolf and your mother was a Dormant – a human who possesses the ability to make the change into werewolf and bear our children." As he moved and spoke, he studied her with those stark blue eyes. He was contemplating each curve, each expanse of creamy skin – and everything he would do to it.

"Your father claimed your mother and, twenty-seven years ago, you were born to her. As a female-born, Charlie, you possess none of the outward abilities of a male." He stopped directly behind her and Vincent saw her close her eyes, tensing as if readying herself for some kind of blow. For more pain.

He was a good deal taller than her, even with her body stretched as it was, and it was easy for him to move in behind her so that he could whisper in her ear.

"And then your mother and father were murdered, Charlie. *Hunted*," he said, as he reached around and ran his right hand over her stomach. She hissed in pain, jerking in her bonds, but her eyes were wide – comprehending.

"Yes, Charlie," he whispered. "That's right. They were killed by a Hunter." He chuckled softly, his teeth a mere hair's breadth from her ear lobe. "They were dead long before that car went over the bridge fifteen years ago, sweetheart. Decapitated, actually." His hand splayed out across her trim abdomen and he used it to pull her body against his as she began to shake, to tremble beneath the pain he was inflicting on her, both physically and mentally.

"I had originally planned to take you out as well," he continued, bringing his other hand up to run it through the thick, silky locks of her beautiful hair. "But then I saw you.... You were only twelve. Dressed in yellow. You looked like the sun." He brushed a lock against his lips, breathing in. "And you smelled different," he said, as he dropped her hair and stepped back, slowly releasing her from his agonizing grip.

"*Very different... promising.*" He turned away from her then, and slowly made his way toward the bench where he'd placed the instruments of torture. He stood before the bench, his back to her, as he lifted a large buck knife and twisted it between his thumb and forefinger. The blade glinted threateningly in the firelight.

Charlie closed her eyes. Vincent could see the tears on her cheeks now. She

was trembling violently, and he could hear the soft sound of her silent crying.

"I am what I am, Charlie, and though most of my Hunters simply believe me to be an eccentric reclusive man who gives them orders through phone calls and never meets with them in person, the truth is," he glanced at her over his broad shoulder as she opened her eyes again. He smiled, flashing sharp, white fangs. "Well, you know the truth, don't you, Charlie?" He paused for effect. "And as a wolf – as an alpha - I am bound by the same need as every alpha wolf of my kind."

He strode toward her again and she whimpered, her light blue eyes locked on the wicked blade in his hands.

"I decided to let you live. You were just too beautiful to destroy." Again, he moved around her and she began a renewed struggle with the leather restraints around her wrists. Vincent could smell the adrenaline flooding her system now as if there was more of it in her veins than actual blood. She was being overrun with fear.

Phelan was very good at what he did. Relentless.

"After the murder of your parents, you were assigned several Sentinels – watchers, as it were – by the Council. I backed off and bided my time. By the time they'd finally gone and left you alone, I'd made up my mind."

Claire jerked violently as the cold metal touched the heated skin over her spine. "Shh, Charlie. Don't move, sweetheart," Phelan whispered in her ear again. Claire sobbed, squeezing her eyes shut tight as she felt the knife's blade slice into the strap of her bra. "Good girl," he taunted softly as he slid the blade up higher and cut the strap over her right shoulder. The left strap came next and the bra fell to the stone floor.

Claire lowered her head in a kind of defeat, her eyes still shut tight against the nightmare she'd found herself trapped in.

"When you turned eighteen, your dormancy reached its full potential. And I had a choice," Gabriel continued, almost conversationally, as he stepped back once more and continued to move around her. "I could either take you then and make you my mate, or I could leave you as a Dormant." He came to stand in front of her, the knife in his right hand. His left hand, he raised, curling his forefinger beneath her chin and forcing her head up so that her gaze was once more locked within his. "You were so strong, Charlie. So fast. A perfect pupil." He smiled again. "A perfect toy."

"Turning you would have changed all of that." He closed the gap between them, his left hand slipping down to encircle her throat and hold her still. Again, she gritted her teeth against the pain of his touch, her eyes going wide as she once more felt the sharp blade threaten her skin. It slid across her hip bone and beneath the strap of her panties, slicing through the thin material with incredible ease.

Gabriel lowered himself so that his lips were nearly touching hers. When he spoke, it was in the softest of whispers and he accentuated his words with a tightening of his grip on her throat. "Werewolves never bruise, Charlie. And this body was made to bear my marks."

She moaned as he sliced through the other side and then peeled her underwear from her body. He gripped the thin garment in his hand and brought it before his lips.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply.

Charlie watched him in sickened fascination.

When he opened his eyes again, they were glowing as if bright lights had been turned on behind them. She was trapped in the blue radiance; Vincent could see her go utterly still in her restraints.

"I would have changed you eventually anyway, Charlie," he told her. His voice had changed, become deeper, and was laced with a deep threatening growl. "But fate moved things up a notch." He dropped the underwear and they joined her bra on the cold, hard floor. "Another alpha moved into my territory in Pittsburgh and I had to send my Hunters after him. I couldn't have you accidentally killed in the fray – or taken by the encroaching alpha. That wouldn't do." He shook his head and stepped back, turning away once more so that he could peruse the other items on the bench. "So I brought you here."

He lifted a long black whip from the wooden surface, gathering its coils in his other hand. He sighed then, as if in frustration. "We could have continued our sessions for months, maybe years." He turned to face her, anger flashing in his glowing eyes. His gaze narrowed. "But Malcolm Cole managed to pop in at just the wrong moment." He strode back toward her then, stalking her with slow determination and barely-contained fury. "And he managed to get a whiff of something he liked." He gazed at her, hungrily, through the tops of his sapphire-lit eyes. "But you aren't his to take, Charlie. I found you first. And I'm keeping you."

A terrified, miserable sob tore itself from Claire's throat and she began to beg. "David, please—"

"It's Gabriel, sweetheart. And by the time we're through, you'll have screamed my name so many times, you will never forget it again."

Jessie Graves sat reclined in the metal chair of the café's patio and watched the group of men gathered across the street. His amber eyes took in every move they made. To the humans around him, especially the women, the group of men seemed to be nothing more than handsome, well-built and well-dressed males, gathering to discuss something in private. There was one female among them, but that didn't seem to bother anyone. She was beautiful enough to attract the attention of most of the human males, despite her large and ominous companions. And the men in the group were striking enough that the human women simply ignored her. Both sexes satisfied.

Probably the one who was attracting the most attention from the females around Jessie was the dark-haired man who had just donned a pair of mirrored shades. His entire, tall countenance was more than a little imposing. There was something about the way he was standing, the way everyone else seemed a tad shorter around him, the way his chest and the muscles in his arms and legs filled out his clothing with a nearly artistic perfection that made him stand out. Plus, he looked pissed. And somehow, that intensity only added to his charisma. Malcolm Cole.

Jessie had overheard a woman behind Cole comment on the his "strong chin," and whisper that she liked his shoulders. Her companion had said he looked dangerous.

You have no idea, woman.... Jessie hid his dark smile.

Cole and his men were certainly gaining notice. It was one of the reasons his kind were not supposed to gather in large numbers in overtly public places. One alpha male here or there was one thing. But the two most powerful alpha males and half a pack all huddled close together in the middle of a very crowded sidewalk were another thing altogether. The vibe they gave off was ridiculous. It was otherworldly and dramatic and far too potent. It was strictly forbidden.

People were beginning to feel buzzed and agitated. They were waiting for something to happen and they weren't even sure what it was. Cole, his men, and James Valentine were causing a bit of a stir. To the humans in their vicinity, they looked like gamblers whose game had been figured out and were about to go head to head with casino owners or the police. They looked like mafia drug runners who were close to getting caught by the FBI. Or maybe gorgeous actors who were about to do some sort of impromptu Vegas Strip street performance. Any number of exotic and titillating possibilities ran through the minds of the people around Graves as they sat watching and commenting in hushed tones.

But to Jessie, the men across the street were not any of these things. He knew *exactly* what they were, and because he was one too, he could hear everything they said.

"Call Scrubs. There's no way in hell I'm waiting for that spell to drop...."

Jessie frowned. Something dark flickered in the depths of his stark, amber eyes.

He picked up the beer in front of him and took a slow drink, his piercing gaze still locked on the group of men. He watched as Lucas Caige nodded, smiled a devil's smile, and then pulled a small black cell from his vest pocket and popped it open. He turned his back toward the others in the group as he spoke quietly into the phone. It was a useless gesture, Jessie knew, but one the man was most likely accustomed to making for the benefit of any on-looking humans.

It baffled Jessie that Caige wasn't leading his own pack at this juncture. The man struck nearly as daunting a figure as his leader did. Even in the waxing heat of a Las Vegas late May morning, Caige was dressed in motorcycle boots and black leather. And he wasn't breaking a sweat. In fact, he seemed to be surrounded by an air of palpable cool, from the careless scruff on his chin to the tousled pitch-black locks of his unkempt shoulder-length hair.

Jessie shook his head. Malcolm Cole was bad enough alone. Lucas Caige was trouble with fangs and a biker jacket. And if the conversation that Jessie was eaves dropping on at that moment was any indication, Caige was about to show both the werewolf and the human community just how *much* trouble he could be.

Graves pushed back from his table and slid his own set of mirrored shades back over his eyes. Then he pulled his cell phone from his shirt pocket and dialed a familiar number.

After a few irritating rings – Jessie didn't feel patient at the moment – a man's voice picked up on the other end.

"Yeah?"

"Roman, it's Jessie. Is Charlie with you?"

There was a pause. Jessie knew the guitarist was sorting several things out very quickly.

Then, "No, man. I think she overslept. We tried her door and her phone, but there was no answer. Mary Jane said she met a guy last night and probably overdid it. Have you tried to call her yourself?"

Of course Jessie had, but he'd also known it was pointless. He knew damned well where Charlie was. And, for too many reasons to count, he wasn't about to let Roman in on the intel.

"Where are you now?" Jessie asked instead, changing the subject.

"We're in the practice studio. It's actually a warehouse that they converted."

"Are you all there?" Jessie interrupted.

"Um... yeah, except for Charlie. Why?" Roman's tone had lowered, becoming more serious. He was concerned. "Is she okay? Is something wrong?"

Jessie quickly formulated what he was going to say. He forced his tone to remain calm. "I assume she's fine, but I discovered some iffy things about this Phelan character that you guys contracted with. We may have to go over the terms again and, in the meantime, I wouldn't play for him if I were you. Stay away from the hotel, in fact. I don't want you to get into some sort of confrontation and have to deal with assault charges."

"What the hell did you find out?" Roman asked, clearly baffled.

"Let's put it this way," Jessie ventured, carefully. "The man doesn't play fair." That much was true. But not as true as the next thing he said. "And he doesn't have your best interests in mind."

There was another long pause on Roman's end and then Jessie could hear the musician softly swearing.

"Jessie, we already signed a fucking contract," he hissed into the phone.

"Don't worry about it, Roman. Just make sure that you and Kevin and M.J. don't go near the hotel until I have spoken with both you and Phelan. And if you see Charlie, make sure she does the same. Okay?"

Roman didn't answer right away. And when he did, what he said took Jessie by surprise.

"Jessie, I have a bad feeling about Charlie. She's never late for practice." His voice had lowered considerably and Jessie guessed that he was trying not to be overheard by his two companions. "And I'm not happy about what she and M.J. did last night. I don't trust the guys they met."

Jessie chewed on the inside of his cheek. Roman was right, on so many levels. But, while the man's worry was most certainly warranted, it was misdirected as hell.

"I'm flying in within the hour, Roman. If we don't locate her by this afternoon, we'll contact the police."

That seemed to placate the man. Jessie could almost hear Roman's curt nod on the other end of the line. "Deal. Call me when you get in."

Jessie disconnected and made his way out of the small café. At least now he knew that the rest of the band would be safe on the off chance that he couldn't stop Cole and his men from blowing The August to smithereens.

He didn't put his phone away, though. He had another call to make – this one a lot less pleasant.

The call was answered on the first ring. Jessie didn't wait for the man on the other end to speak. "It's Graves. I need to speak to Mr. Kavanagh immediately."

The pause on the other end was very brief. Then Jessie heard a series of clicks and the line picked up once more.

"Graves," the Overseer greeted. His gravelly tone felt immensely powerful, even through the connection.

Again, Jessie didn't hesitate. "The situation has become irreparable. Cole and Valentine are planning something drastic and I need permission to intervene."

"Granted," the deep voice came back at once, sounding more than a little upset. "Get my granddaughter out of there, Graves. I've had enough of this. Our alphas are obviously inept at caring for their mates."

"Yes sir."

"Bring her straight to Council headquarters and try your best to explain things on the way. I'll send reinforcements and a chopper within the hour."

Charlie tried to brace herself for what was coming, but she knew it was pointless. She wasn't a child. She knew enough about people like Gabriel Phelan to know that

they strove to create within their victims a sense of confusion, horrid anticipation, and fear. If Charlie expected to be struck five times, he would probably do it ten.

So, when Gabriel began to pace around her once more, the cruel black whip in his hands, she closed her eyes and thought of her parents. The parents that Gabriel Phelan had killed.

She wondered how exactly they had died. Were they taken by surprise? Did they put up a fight?

Why.... Why had he done it? And what was a Hunter?

She hadn't wanted to show any weakness in front of Phelan, but the tears that streamed down her cheeks ran unchecked. She was helpless against them. Her insides were mangled and her soul felt mutilated. She was bleeding from within, somewhere so deep and dark, the blood would barely be visible. It was a hiding place for pain. Everyone had one, but Charlie's seemed a tad full at the moment.

The tears were spillage – a leak in the dam, a flooded river bank.

"Tell me to remove the mark, Charlie."

Charlie's eyes flew open. She'd managed to pull herself away from him for a few precious moments – and he'd cruelly jerked her back. The sound of his voice was like a tether around her consciousness, holding her fast and choking the life from her at the same time. Her heartbeat sped up once more and more sweat broke out along the smooth, golden valleys of her body.

That mark, thought Charlie. What did it even mean? Why did he want it removed? Why did he need her permission? Why didn't he just cut it out of her?

And if she gave her permission... Is that what he would do?

She didn't know why, but for some reason, she would have given anything to have the man who gave her that mark in the first place standing there beside her in that room. Instinctively, she sensed that he would have protected her. She knew, as she knew that the sun would rise in the East, that Malcolm Cole would rip her hands free from her bindings and take her into his strong arms.

And then he would kill Gabriel Phelan.

She wanted that last thing right now more than anything else in the world. She had never hated anyone before. Not like this. She really wanted to see Phelan dead.

It was this sudden, visceral fury, this fuming and heated loathing that fueled her next defiance. "Fuck off, David." She hissed the words through gritted teeth and they sounded like literary venom.

She expected him to laugh at her. To tsk her and taunt her and perhaps even to thank her for giving him more of a reason to torture her.

But already, he was surprising her. Already, he was filling her world with unexpected confusion. Because he didn't laugh. Instead, he sighed. "Very well," he said softly, and she could have sworn that his tone was disappointed. Annoyed, even. "We'll do this my way."

She couldn't see what he did next, but he must have given his men some sort of signal. Because one of them stepped forward – the one who had disrobed her. He closed the distance between them and Charlie gazed up into amber eyes that tore at

her heart. They reminded her so much of Jessie's. It was wrong that they were in this other man's face – this man who was most likely about to cause her inordinate amounts of pain.

And not the good kind.

"I'll make you a deal, Charlie." Gabriel's voice again. Charlie's frazzled attention was instantly torn between the man before her and the man at her back.

"If you can refrain from making any sound, the leather of this lash will never touch your flesh." He paused, allowing his cruel words to sink in. "However, breathe so much as a sigh and you'll be punished."

The man in front of her slowly raised his right hand and Charlie stiffened. She held her breath, stifling her gasp and swallowing her miserable moan as he very gently brushed the backs of his fingers against her collarbone. White-hot pain leapt to life on her forearm and raced quickly to her shoulder. Charlie shut her eyes tight against the sudden kiss of fire. She'd been expecting the pain. *I can do this*, she thought. *Please... Let me be strong enough to do this...*

"And remember, Charlie. Werewolves have very good hearing," Gabriel added. His tone had lowered, the auditory companion to the dark look she'd seen in his hungry gaze. "I can hear you praying right now."

The man's hand dropped to the curve of her breast and the pain from her arm and shoulder rushed across her chest, digging deeper, becoming more sharp. The man laughed softly, a low, mocking sound, and Charlie opened her eyes.

Her teeth were clenched so tight, she feared they might crack. More tears gathered in her eyes, but she held them there, allowing her vision to blur. She didn't want to look upon his face as he tortured her.

And then he leaned over and Charlie threw her head back in silent agony as the man's teeth clamped down on her nipple, nearly drawing blood. At the same time, his hand continued to trail down her body until they were parting the curls between her legs.

Charlie pulled so hard against her restraints that they began to dig into her flesh. Stars swam in the darkness behind her eyelids. The pain was stealing her breath; her lungs almost refused to expand. Her legs began to tremble and she bit her lower lip so hard that it began to bleed.

And then his free hand suddenly grasped her other nipple and twisted it viciously. Charlie was utterly helpless to stop the cry that ripped itself from her throat.

The first kiss of Gabriel's whip against her back cracked through her consciousness and drove her entire being into sharp focus. The pain in her body centralized and pooled around her heated, marked skin. The tears were squeezed free of her ice-blue eyes and her entire body rocked forward, arched against the agony. Her scream echoed off of the stone walls. The flames danced in the sconces.

"Ask me to remove Cole's mark, sweetheart." Gabriel's voice slid toward her, iron and steel wrapped in velvet and silk. It caressed the heated flesh that he'd just damaged and played havoc with her senses. He seemed closer to her now. His

voice was louder. It was almost as if he were inside her head.

Charlie let her head fall on her arm and hung loosely in her leather restraints. But when she said nothing, the man in front of her picked up where he'd left off.

She choked down the sob that rose in her throat as his hands settled on her hips and his lips lowered to her throat. His nearness instantly filled her senses. She felt his hot breath on her neck and could smell the heat of him even as her cursed pain was back, once more rushing through the channels it had carved so ruthlessly over the past several hours.

When the werewolf whispered in her ear, she knew he was speaking through fangs.

"I can smell your wetness, whore," he told her. "I think you like it when it hurts."

Charlie bit her lip again and more tears streaked her cheeks. His grip on her body tightened, as if he were trying his best to force the smallest sound from between her lips. He was a ruthless asshole and the worst part about his harsh accusation was that he was partly right.

Charlie had always liked it a little rough. She needed to give up control. It seemed to be the only way she could relax enough to enjoy the sensations that a man created in her.

But she had only ever had one sexual partner and she'd trusted him implicitly. He never truly hurt her. He always seemed to know what she wanted, what she needed.

There was a huge difference between the kind of dominance and sweet sexual torture that Jessie Graves had always given to her when they were both willing – and what Phelan was doing to her now. Phelan's torture was sharp and focused and determined and there was no facet of it at all that was meant for her own satisfaction.

The fact that Gabriel and his goons were somehow able to elicit even the tiniest bit of sexually charged reaction out of her with their vile torture was beyond horrible to Charlie. She didn't understand it. She couldn't comprehend what was happening to her. She was like a dog in heat and it had all started with Malcolm Cole's fucking mark. It was doing something to her that wouldn't normally happen.

The man holding her laughed again and then his teeth grazed her shoulder as his hands slid behind her to trail to the curve of her ass.

It was too much. He was too close. She could feel his enormous erection pressed against her pelvis. Her wrists were now bleeding and the pain the mark was causing was dragging her into some sort of nauseating abyss.

When the werewolf slowly slid one of his hands between her legs from behind, Charlie gasped and automatically bucked away from his touch.

In the next heartbeat, he was stepping away from her.

And Gabriel's whip kissed her flesh once more.

She screamed, again arching away from the pain, her head spinning with too many harsh, unforgiving sensations. Her vision began to tunnel inward and she heard herself crying, as if from a distance.

She didn't care that her legs had given out or that she could feel a rivulet of her own blood make it all the way to her bicep from her wrist. Her body suddenly felt

slightly numb – far away. A blessed gift. There was no greater pleasure than the cessation of pain.

And then she heard him again, this time close enough that she knew he was standing beside her. Were those his fingers beneath her chin? She couldn't tell. Her eyes wouldn't open. The pain in her back and arm was muted, dulled by a gradual slip-slide into unconsciousness.

"Are you still with me, sweetheart?" His voice gently embraced her, coating her frayed nerves like some kind of deceptive salve.

She didn't answer, but she couldn't slip away either. He coaxed her back with his power, held her there, inexorably in his grasp. "Give me what I want, Charlie." He was whispering to her now, his tone soothing and calm. "It isn't so hard. Just say 'yes'."

Charlie frowned. He was right. It didn't have to be this hard. What was the mark to her anyway? All it had given her so far was pain. Would it be so bad if David... if Gabriel took it off of her?

Yes.

Oh, Christ, she thought. Just let me sleep. Just let me die.

And then Gabriel was kissing her and she was rearing against him as he pulled her body up against his, crushing her to him with one strong arm around her waist.

Charlie felt his magic whisper through her, like a bag of snakes emptied into her soul. The numbness slipped away and the pain returned. The blackness in her vision receded as she was brutally dragged back into his endless, nightmarish hell.

After he had succeeded in subjugating her mouth, his tongue forcing itself between her teeth and exploring her sweet taste as he swallowed her moans of pain, he pulled away from her and stepped back.

Instantly, the throbbing ache from the two abrasions on her back had her full attention. She hissed against the pain, gritting her teeth and narrowing her impossibly blue eyes at Gabriel Phelan.

"You are stunning when you're in pain, Charlie." He regarded her, his own dark blue eyes glowing eerily, his fangs fully pronounced.

She didn't reply. But she did manage to look away.

"There is no escape from me, Charlie. Not in sleep. Not in death. And I promise you, I'm only getting started." He moved around her to take up his position at her back once more.

"I'll give you one last chance, Charlie."

"Go to hell, David." Charlie knew it was the single most stupid thing she'd ever said in her life. It might be the last thing she ever said. But she didn't care. Foolishly, naively, *idiotically*, she just didn't care.

"It's Gabriel, sweetheart."

She heard the whip before she felt it. But when she did feel it, she realized at once that he'd been holding back before. The pain she'd felt with the first two lashes had been nothing compared to this.

When she screamed, it was a harsh, guttural cry that burned her throat and trailed off into a hoarse wail. He gave her no time to recover. The fourth lash came

fast and furious and even as the agony was enough to shove her mercifully into oblivion, it was also hard and fast enough to keep her grounded, right where she was, in the middle of Satan's playroom.

She tried, then. She honestly did. She tried to tell him that she wanted the mark gone. She tried to make those words come out. But they couldn't seem to fight their way past her screams.

The whip's leather marked her back once more and Charlie wasn't sure whether it was number five or six. She wanted to retch, but there was nothing in her stomach to throw up.

Her world had gone red. There were no smells, no sounds, no sights but the blood colored haze behind her blurred, meaningless vision. All that really existed was the pain. On her back, in her arms, in her head and in her soul.

* * * *

Johnny Campbell looked as insane as he ever had. His blonde-gray hair flew around his weathered face in wisps that reminded Caige of cotton candy. His sparkling blue eyes glittered with the kind of intelligence that most people considered scary. And, as always, he wore a cheap, fleece sweat suit – this time an olive green set – despite the warm climate.

On his feet were combat boots.

Lucas and the werewolves around him watched in silence as those combat boots touched down and Campbell shut down his bike. When he dismounted, he walked toward Lucas with a very familiar and tell-tale limp and Caige smiled.

"Well, son of a bitch," Campbell greeted, flashing a grin full of surprisingly white teeth.

Caige nodded in return, and held out his hand. "Scrubs, you look like shit, as usual," he said, and then nodded toward Campbell's bike. "Nice ride, though. What happened to Delilah?" Delilah was the name of his other bike and one he had most likely crashed. It was something Scrubs did quite often.

"She took a soil sample, my friend." Scrubs shrugged, smiling still. "You look good, though, Ares." Scrubs looked his old friend over, using the nickname that the gang had given Lucas long ago. It fit. He did look a little like a god of war. "Fucked anyone I know lately?"

Caige chuckled, but then grew serious. "No time for catch-up, Scrubs. We have a situation here."

"Yeah, so you said." Scrubs looked from Lucas to Cole, who had been watching the exchange in stoic silence, his glowing verdant gaze hidden behind the mirrored shields of his sunglasses. "I brought everything I need. Just tell me where," he said, having gone all business as well. "And tell me when. And then stand back."

Caige nodded and was about to fill Scrubs in when every werewolf on the sidewalk suddenly turned toward the sound of someone running. The step was light and very quick. They all knew instantly who it would be, even before she had finished approaching them. Lily Kane ran straight toward Cole, who seemed as if he wanted to back up, strangely daunted by her quickly forthcoming figure.

"Cole!" she called out as she neared him.

James Valentine stepped forward, grasping her by her upper arms and spinning her around. "Lily, what the hell are you?"

"The spell is down!" she told him breathlessly. "The territory spell!" She swallowed and pulled out of his grip, turning to Malcolm again, who had by now come forward and pulled off his shades, revealing a green gaze so intense that the men around him had to stifle the urge to flash into wolf form.

Johnny Campbell's eyes widened and he rocked back on the heels of his combat boots. But, wisely, he said nothing.

Cole's expression was at once intensely focused on Lily. "What did you say?"

"I said the territory spell is down, Cole," Lily told him, as her breathing settled into a more normal pattern. "It's The Council! They're involved now and they have a mage-"

"The Council?" James asked, his silver eyes flashing. "How do you know this?"

"It doesn't matter how she knows," Malcolm replied swiftly. He slipped the shades back on and turned away from them. The sidewalk seemed to magically clear before him as he broke into a swift run toward the distant, gleaming tower of The August hotel.

His pack stared after him in shock. And then, all at once they seemed to come to their senses and take chase.

* * * *

This fuzzy existence that she'd found herself floating in, this other plane between torment and anguish, was so encompassing that it took Charlie a few seconds to realize that the beating had ceased. When she did, she tried to speak once more, but her throat was swollen, and at first no sound would come out.

He was behind her then, his fist in her hair, yanking her head back as he hissed in her ear. "Say it!" he demanded, and she could feel his angry power wash over her like a blood red tide. He wrapped his other arm around her waist, drawing her beaten back against his shirt-covered chest. She could feel the coil of his whip against her abdomen and wondered distractedly if it had her blood on it.

"Say 'yes,' Charlie," he hissed in her ear, jerking her head once to emphasize his words. "Say it *now*."

His last order was a feral growl. Charlie's heart felt as if it would rip out of her chest, it was beating so hard. She felt as if she'd been run over by a semi. Twice.

But she felt proud, too. He'd done his best – so far. And he'd failed to get what he wanted out of her. There was some consolation in that, however miniscule it was. So Charlie continued to deny him. She said nothing.

Gabriel's grip on her tightened and then there was a strange flare in the room, a quick burst of light like the flash of a camera. Then another one. Gabriel cocked his head to one side, his attention suddenly ripped from the woman in his arms and focused elsewhere.

Charlie stilled. She could feel it too. Something different. Not quite a sound. Not even a smell. It was a vibration. There was another flash and Charlie tried to see what

was happening, but Gabriel's hand was still fisted in her hair, holding her head firmly in place.

"The spell has fallen," came a deep voice from somewhere to her right.

Gabriel growled. "*Who?*"

There was a pause, as if the man he was speaking to was trying to figure exactly that out. And then, in a voice that clearly relayed trepidation and surprise, the man said, "The Council. It must be."

Gabriel seemed to consider this for a moment. Then he was swearing vehemently and Charlie grimaced as he shoved away from her, causing her to rock forward in her leather restraints. In the next instant, he was reaching up and slicing his hands across the leather straps that held her in place. They came away easily, ripped completely in half. Charlie fell to her knees.

"Warlock!" Phelan roared as he lifted Charlie by her arm and dragged her toward the other side of the room and the couches. "Get us out of here now!"

Charlie managed to steal a quick look around as Gabriel pulled her across the room. With something nearing hysterical shock, she saw that there were several large wolves in the dungeon with them. At the same time, a few of Phelan's men were missing.

Werewolves... The thought floated through her mind.

Phelan dragged her before two other men, both with dark hair and both radiating a strange kind of aura. The younger of the two, a man with short black hair and indigo colored eyes, nodded to Phelan and came forward. Charlie instantly reeled back, trying to get away from him. Something about him felt very wrong. He looked like he was all of twenty years old and yet he absolutely, unequivocally terrified Charlie. She didn't want him anywhere near her.

As if he could sense her trepidation, the young man smiled. It was not a comforting smile. It was filled with dark secrets and darker promises.

Charlie's abused back screamed at her as she renewed her struggles with Phelan. But he made short work of subduing her, quickly overpowering her with one of the many fighting techniques he and Charlie had practiced for so many years.

In a few short seconds, she was trapped in his grasp, her back once more pressed painfully against his chest, one of his thick arms wrapped threateningly around her neck. He began to squeeze ever so gently, and she stopped struggling.

"Good girl," he hissed. "Now," he turned his attention back to the warlock. "Use the stone."

The young man wrapped his right hand around the lapis stone he wore around his neck and began to whisper words in a language that Charlie didn't understand.

And then the door to the dungeon came crashing inward. It came open with such force that it ripped completely off of its hinges and soared across the room to slam against the opposite wall.

There was instant chaos in the dimly lit dungeon.

More bright flashes lit the room and, this time, Charlie was able to see what

caused them. One moment, she was staring at one of Phelan's men across the dungeon. And the next, she was staring at another massive wolf.

Gabriel shoved Charlie to a nearby couch and she stumbled, landing on her side on the black leather.

A low rumbling sound rolled through the stone floors and reverberated off of the walls, reminding Charlie of thunder. And then the firelight in the sconces went out, casting the dungeon into darkness.

The darkness in the dungeon was absolute, but the sounds and smells came alive for Charlie as her fifth sense was deprived. Gabriel had thrown her roughly to the couch and she could smell the leather beneath her and feel its cool touch against her heated skin. She could smell the smoke from the torches that had gone out in their sconces. And she could smell blood. It had a tangy, metallic smell to it; a little like iron shavings in wet earth. She wasn't sure how she recognized it for it for what it was, but she did.

She couldn't help but wonder how much of it was her own. She didn't want to think about it, but images of what her back must look like floated before her mind's eye and she cringed inside. Scars were bad enough. But learning how to move and sit and sleep while she healed would be horribly painful.

Along with the enhanced smells came the sounds. They stole her breath away.

They were chaotic sounds. Men were bellowing orders. Some were cursing. Some were chanting. Large things around her were scraping against the stone floor. She half expected the couch she was laying on to be lifted and thrown across the room, but it didn't move. It seemed she was at the eye of a storm, immobile in the sudden, raging tempest.

Adding to the storm illusion were the brief flashes of light that punctuated the dark entropy. They would blast through her vision, searing it with red and white streaks, and then disappear again to plunge her into a darkness even more thorough than it had been seconds before. Each time the flash came, Charlie strained to look around, to get an idea of what was happening. But it was impossible. They came too fast and the only thing they gave Charlie was a sharp, burgeoning headache.

She wanted to run. She figured that this was her chance. She had a general idea of what vicinity the door was in. But she could hear and sense that so many people were in between her and it that she was positive she would only run into several on the way.

Still, it was worth it.

Slowly, she straightened, feeling the skin around the marks on her back pull and threaten. She ignored them and, when she felt and heard that it was clear ahead, she jumped off the couch, just catching the next flash.

But that was as far as she got before a familiar, painful grip found her upper arms and she was once more pulled against Phelan's chest.

The next flash that came was different from the others. It was not as bright, but it lasted longer. It blinded her utterly and completely and when Gabriel let her go, this time, she fell to what felt like a thick, plush carpet.

She blinked rapidly, trying to clear her vision. The sounds had gone, as had the darkness. And the only blood she could smell now must have surely been her own.

As she lay on the unfamiliar rug and hugged herself, waiting for her sight to return, she felt people move around her. She had no choice but to sit and listen to

them.

"You left Cromwell, I see."

"I don't trust him. He was soon to betray me; it wouldn't have been long."

That second voice was David's. *Gabriel's*. But the first voice, Charlie didn't recognize. It was a very deep timbre, somewhat gravelly, and sounded older.

Spots were swimming in her vision now and the edges of it were solidifying into identifiable forms. Charlie sat up and looked around. She was in some sort of sitting room. There were a few couches and love seats around her – a coffee table, it seemed. And, beyond, an open plan that led to a kitchen and a dining room. It was someone's house. The colors were muted browns and beige's. Simple and elegant and expensive.

"The Council intervened." That was Gabriel again. Charlie looked up at him as she curled her knees to her chest and hugged herself. She couldn't run now. She had no idea where she was, and she was naked.

Gabriel was pulling a cell phone from his front shirt pocket. She could see that the white suit shirt was stained with blood. She wondered whose it was. Hers? Some of it, at least. Or, had he pushed her onto the couch in the dungeon so that he could fight with someone else? The sounds had been so chaotic and angry. It was definitely possible.

She wondered just what had happened in that dungeon. And how the hell she happened to not be in it anymore.

"You were right to expect them." This time, it was the younger man who had spoken. He stood about a foot way from Gabriel – the one that Phelan had referred to as the "warlock." He was watching her. Their eyes met and their gazes held.

She *really* didn't like him. It was one of those instantaneous, hard dislikes that made your top lip want to curl. There was nearly a vibration of wrongness coming off of the man; it was no different now than it had been in the dungeon.

"Yes, unfortunately, it seems I was." Gabriel sighed.

Charlie realized that if she were to believe that what she'd seen in that stone room were people transforming into wolves, then she had to accept that werewolves were real.

And then she had to accept that Gabriel Phelan was one. As was Malcolm Cole.

And so was she.

And if she accepted that much, then she might as well believe in magic, in general. With that final leap in faith came the recognition that it was the warlock's magic that had brought Charlie and her captors to this living room in this unfamiliar home.

If he could do that, what else could he do?

Charlie stared up into his deep, deep blue eyes and felt stone-cold.

Suddenly, a very soft blanket was being draped over her shoulders. She turned to face the man who had covered her; the third and last man in the room. He was an older gentleman, dressed in an impeccable suit. His eyes shone a bright amber-

gold.

Another werewolf.

"The Council's interference was bound to happen eventually," Gabriel continued. "I've been expecting it for years." He flipped open his phone and pressed several buttons. "This is a loss I will feel more deeply than others." He pressed the talk button.

An explosion sounded from somewhere in the not-too-far distance and Charlie's eyes widened in shock as the rumble reverberated off of the walls and the floor beneath her. "What - what was that?" She somehow found the will and the breath to speak. There was a sinking feeling in her gut. She was certainly still in pain and she was definitely exhausted and she was more than a little dizzy and even a touch nauseated with the toll that the last several hours had taken on her body. But she wasn't unconscious, and she wasn't stupid. She knew that something pretty damned big had just gone *boom*. And she feared that she knew what it was.

"That was The August," Gabriel answered, calmly. "A nice addition to my family of real estate, but one that had to go, I'm afraid."

Charlie's head swam. She stared up at him as he turned his attention from his phone to her and trapped her in his sapphire gaze. She started to see spots again.

Roman. Mary Jane. Kevin...

"Sweetheart, you're white as a ghost," he said slowly, calmly. He was watching her with ardent interest, his head cocked a little to one side, his gaze narrowed slightly in keen observation.

Charlie couldn't breathe. Immediately, she curled in on herself, dropping forward on the carpet to tuck her head between her hands and knees and close her eyes. The world was spinning away and expanding lungs were no longer a part of it.

So many people.... There had been so many people in that hotel. Children?

No... oh, God, no...

The sound of Gabriel swearing softly reached her ears. But it was muted, as if traveling through cotton tunnels, and she no longer cared. Oblivion was finally – *finally* – hurrying toward her. She welcomed it with silent, dark, open arms.

And then Gabriel was jerking her up by her arms; the blanket slid to the floor. He quickly spun her around and then laid her back down, pressing her against the leather of another nondescript couch. She blinked languidly as more pain sliced through her body. Some from his touch. Some from the whip marks on her back, now shoved so ruthlessly into the cold, hard material of the sofa.

She could smell his cologne and feel him move above her. But shock was riding her hard, spreading throughout her body like a cold, numbing fire. She knew she was shaking, trembling violently, but only because she could hear her teeth chattering against each other – again, from far away.

"We can't continue our session if you aren't going to be awake for it, sweetheart."

She closed her eyes as the smell of fresh blood wafted to her nose, reaching her senses in that subdued and muffled state. Something hard and wet was placed to her lips, covering them completely.

“Drink.”

The command and the touch came with more pain, this time worse than before. It was more urgent and insistent and, somehow, she got the vague impression that the mark on her arm didn't want her to drink whatever it was he had pressed to her mouth.

But she was drowning and it didn't matter, anyway. She would probably just choke on it and die. And death would be okay.

She parted her lips and warm, salty liquor burned over her tongue. The power of the alcohol – was it alcohol? – was so strong, it caused her to buck against the couch. The darkness in her vision began to recede and her senses of smell and sound came into sharp focus once more.

Charlie swallowed and the fire raced down her throat and burned her esophagus... her stomach.... She moaned low and long and tried to shove the offending liquid away, but a strong arm stayed it at her lips.

“One more, sweetheart.” It was Gabriel urging her to drink. His voice sounded more guttural now. Deeper. There was a touch of raw animal instinct lacing his tone.

Gabriel wanted her to drink. Gabriel the killer, her parents' murderer, the man who had mercilessly tortured her and blown up an entire hotel filled with people, including his own men. He was the epitome of ruthlessness. The embodiment of evil.

Hatred fueled her fury, bringing strength to replace the withdrawing numbness in her limbs. She brought her right arm up and roughly shoved at him, managing to dislodge whatever it was he'd held to her lips. She tried to sit up then, opening her eyes.

And he was on her, growling in her ear, his fingers wrapped tightly around her throat, pinning her to the couch by her neck.

She tried to gasp, but the air got caught beneath his squeezing grip. Instead, she stared up at the most evil man in the world and, with all of her spirit and all of her soul, she wished him dead.

Whatever she had swallowed was working some kind of magic on her.

The liquid was healing her; she could feel the marks on her back closing. She could feel the ache in her muscles and joints begin to ebb away. Along with this no-doubt ill-gotten reprieve came an influx of strength. It was an unexpected boon accompanying the already unexpected healing and the new, memento-like throb that his touch and the angry mark on her arm sent through her form.

Charlie's gaze narrowed as this new-found strength coursed through her straining muscles and she found the will to glare up at her captor. It was a challenge. A promise. In the space between his mind and hers, she threw a mental pledge at him and she knew that he could read it in her eyes.

One day, she was going to kill him.

His snarl turned to a nasty smile, flashing sharp white fangs that glistened threateningly above her. “I see you're feeling better, Charlie.” His smile broadened. “That's good. But *never* pull away from me, pet. You're mine. You will learn to obey me. Surrender always comes – sooner or later.”

He punctuated his words with an appropriate tightening of his grip on her throat and she found her hands on his chest, trying to push him off of her. He was so heavy. Un-budge-able. She tried to think fast, but her thoughts were becoming fuzzy. Strained.

He was cutting off too much air.

And what could she really hope to accomplish by defying him anyway? Where would she go? Even if she beat him, what would the warlock do? And the other man?

He must have felt her body yield a little beneath him, because he let up on her throat. Her mind immediately began to clear. "That's better, sweetheart."

And that did it. She would not submit to him. She would not lay there beneath him and let him win. He'd taken everything from her. If there was anything she had left in the world, it was her own mind. Her own will. What there was of it, she was going to use.

"Get off of me, you asshole." With that, she raised her left leg, bringing her knee up with such force that she surprised herself. His body was positioned so that she could not get him where she wanted to hurt him most. But if she went fast enough, she could get him in the kidney. Kidney shots were always a good second.

Her speed was lightning-fast and her aim was impeccable. It should be. He'd taught her how to do it himself. He noticed the move a fraction of a second too late and could not maneuver a block in time. Her knee connected and he momentarily doubled over, his grip going instantly slack.

She used the advantage to drive her hands forward once more, shoving him roughly off of her. He went flying back, but landed on his feet, and as she came up off of the couch, Gabriel straightened, seemingly affected much less than she had hoped.

She'd hurt him, but he was tougher than most men. Pain didn't have as much of an effect on him as it did others. It was part of what made him who he was.

They stood that way, facing one another, the air between them crackling with hateful energy, and his cobalt gaze smoldered, swimming with unearthly, unspoken promises.

Charlie glared right back. Her body was healed; she could sense that now. She felt strong. Furious. Crazy. She wanted to kill him right then and there or die trying. She had nothing to lose.

As if he could sense her defiance, his head raised ever so slightly and his gaze narrowed. He studied her carefully for several silent moments and then took a deep breath, in and out through his nose. "Get her cleaned up and dressed," he ordered, calmly. "Have her ready to go in twenty minutes."

The handsome gentleman with the gray hair came forward then, and Charlie whirled on him. "Stay the fuck away from me!" she yelled at him, her body shaking with the rage she felt. If she had to kill him too, so be it. Blanket or not.

"Be nice to Ulrich, Charlie. Or I swear I will have Jessie Graves taken out into the desert and buried to his neck for the scorpions to find."

Gabriel's threat was softly spoken, calmly delivered, and caught Charlie utterly by

surprise. Her ice-blue gaze flashed to him once more. He didn't even smile. He just continued to watch her – daring her to not believe him.

Charlie didn't really have to wonder how he knew about Jessie. Phelan was a very powerful man. He probably knew everything. He had killed her parents. He'd been watching her for fifteen years.

In the end, Charlie realized she'd been wrong. She had something left to lose after all. And she couldn't risk it. She took a deep breath, just as Gabriel had done, and her gaze skirted to the floor.

It was enough to signal her surrender. At least for now.

"That's better," Gabriel said. "Ulrich."

The man in the suit came forward and Charlie's hands clenched into fists at her sides as she forced herself not to fight him.

* * * *

Malcolm stopped in the shadows of a neighboring alley and watched as two vans stopped by the back entrance to The August and a dozen giant werewolves climbed out of the vehicles.

The Council.

They were accompanied by a woman. Malcolm could smell the magic on her. A witch. Lily had been right. They were involved now. The witch must be very powerful; she must have taken the territory spell down from a distance.

Malcolm ran a hand through his hair.

"Cole!"

Malcolm turned around to see James Valentine striding down the alley toward him. His expression was very, very grim. His silver eyes were glowing. He looked a tad frightening, and the waves of power rolling off of him were tinged with the sharp electric vibration of fear.

"Lily just called. The August is going down. We have to get everyone out."

Malcolm blinked. "What?" He hadn't given Caige or Scrubs the go-ahead on blowing anything up. What the hell was Valentine talking about?

"You heard me, Cole. Everyone out. **Now.**" Valentine brushed past him and headed toward the hotel, running straight for the female that Malcolm had pegged for a witch.

Malcolm watched him go, his head spinning. Valentine had sent Lily back as soon as she'd told Malcolm about the territory spell being down. This time, she hadn't argued.

If she'd called Valentine with this news, then it must have been another vision. She was taking them in rather rapidly today.

Cole shook himself and forced his mind to think fast. Jake was beside him, and the rest of his pack, except for Lucas Caige, were further down the alley – waiting.

He turned to Jake. "I have to go in and find Charlie. You take six men and help Valentine clear the hotel. Check the pools." Children always went swimming with sitters while their parents were out enjoying a break. "Get the kids out. Keep in touch and let me know when you're in the clear."

Jake nodded and waved a few men over. They were gone within seconds. The rest of Malcolm's pack gathered just behind him, awaiting his next command.

"Cole!" Again, Valentine was calling him, this time from where he stood beside the witch. Malcolm joined him without prelude.

"Dannai says that Claire is in the basement. The Council's enforcers have already gone in ahead of us. They should be making it in right about now."

Malcolm glanced from Valentine to the woman beside him. She was a starkly attractive young woman, possibly in her late twenties to early thirties. Her hair reminded Cole of a raven's wings and fell in thick waves to the middle of her back. Her complexion was smooth and clear and just dark enough that it was a good bet one of her parents had been black, and she had the unexpected eye color to prove it. It seemed to be a speckled amalgamation of blue, green, gray, and brown.

They were pretty, but odd enough to be somewhat disquieting.

Malcolm assumed that this was Dannai. "You can sense her?" he asked.

The woman nodded. Once.

"Then can you tell me how many people are in the hotel, in general?"

"Not many," she said. She had a beautiful voice; deep and rich, but a touch shy. "There's a show going on down the street. Big opening thing; most people are there this morning." She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "Maybe about fifty... mostly on the first few floors. Majority are in the casino."

Malcolm nodded and turned to his men. "Clear out the bottom floors and then get out."

Adam Trenayne, a younger but very hard-hitting member of Cole's pack, stepped forward. "I want to go with you. You can handle Phelan, but not his entire pack."

Cole eyed him. Trenayne knew that Malcolm was going down to the basement to retrieve Charlie and that Gabriel Phelan would probably be there as well – along with most, if not all of his wolves. Adam was never one to shy away from a fight; the slimmer the odds, the better.

Malcolm nodded, accepting the offer. "Valentine," he then turned to the guardian werewolf, shooting him a meaningful glance.

James Valentine nodded; he would join him as well.

"You can control human minds, Cole," Dannai suddenly said, pulling his attention back to the witch. She gazed at him steadily. "At least to some extent. I can help you expand your reach – you can make the humans in the building want to leave immediately. No werewolf interference required."

Cole blinked. *Shit*. "You can do that?"

She nodded again, all confidence.

She was good. And she knew too much about him. For a human, she was very, very much within the werewolf community's circle. She was important enough to be working directly for The Council. It made Cole wonder.

"Fine. Do it," he told her. He waited as she came forward and placed her hand, palm-down, on his chest. Electricity seemed to buzz through her hand and onto his

skin, spreading and sinking until his entire mid-section was encompassed in a cocoon of rather brawny legerdemain.

"Go," she ordered, closing her eyes.

Malcolm closed his eyes as well and reached out with his power, spreading it around himself like invisible feelers, until he sensed that it had gone much further than it normally would have gone. The witch was assisting his coils of influence, making them thicker, longer and stronger.

He found a human mind and dove in deep, causing the human to throw down his cards and fold, pushing away from the table at which he sat. Others followed suit. Within a few minutes, slot machines found themselves abandoned and Craps tables were empty. Bouncers began to head toward the exits, wondering what was happening.

None of the burly guards were werewolves. They were unsuspecting humans, hired to protect an enterprise that was about to be blown to smithereens. Cole attacked their minds, scrambling their thoughts until all they knew was that they wanted to go outside and take a walk... just like everyone else.

How much time do we have? Cole asked, knowing instinctively that the witch who was now touching him would be able to hear his thoughts.

Minutes... I don't know. St. Claire is the seer, not me.

He opened his eyes and she removed her hand, stepping back. "I'm going in," he announced as he turned to Adam and James. They nodded, in unison, falling in behind him as he raced through the entrance to the back stairwell of The August.

Cole's werewolf hearing immediately caught the sounds of struggle somewhere below, deep underground.

He could smell blood and would be willing to bet that the other two men with him could as well. They sped down the steel and concrete stairwell until they came to a set of double doors that had already been torn off of their hinges.

Malcolm followed the sounds ahead, sprinting down a long dark tunnel to another set of doors. These too had been ripped open. Beyond was a final hallway, this one lined with sconces that held torches now extinguished and smoking in their brackets.

The stench of more blood assaulted his senses. But, this time there was a delicate ribbon of scent attached to it that Malcolm instantly recognized. It was *Charlie's* blood.

With a roar of rage, Cole flashed into wolf form and drove into the fray beyond the last, arched doorway.

Immediately, another wolf met him in combat, going for his throat. He easily knocked the silver wolf aside, slamming the other animal's body against the stone wall. Then he looked around, his vision having shifted into perfect night sight so that the forms in the chaos of the large room were easily discernable.

Charlie was not among them.

And, though he still had no idea what the other alpha werewolf looked like, Cole was certain that Gabriel Phelan was not in the area, either. The entire room had been

outfitted as a dungeon, complete with racks and restraints and a large variety of torture implements lining the walls. The vast, dark space reeked of black magic. There was either a warlock currently in the room – or there had been recently.

As Malcolm pondered this, he caught the slender waft of Charlie's blood once more and whipped around to follow it.

He bounded forward and was caught, mid-flight, by another body crashing side-long into his. The two fur-covered forms went sailing at a right angle and hit the ground rolling, their blurred bodies an entangled flurry of black and gray.

Malcolm wasted no time in gaining the upper hand; his strength was greater, and his need more desperate. His claws found purchase in the other wolf's belly and his fangs found the other wolf's neck.

He bit deep and pulled back, ripping his attacker's throat out. He didn't wait to watch the man flash back into human form. Instead, he bounded away and sniffed the air, locking once more onto the scent of Charlie's suffering.

And then he located the source of the offending aroma. A long black bull whip lay coiled on the ground beside two leather restraints that had been sliced from their straps in the ceiling. Both the restraints and the whip were painted with Charlie's blood.

Malcolm Cole had never felt a kind of rage like the one that overtook him then. Never. He'd seen a thousand murders, killed a thousand people, and never – not once – in his near century-long life, had he ever felt the kind of hatred or mind-numbing malice that he felt in that instant.

It was like breathing bile.

All around him, the world turned red.

He looked through that red world and allowed his instinct to take over. He had no choice. It was too strong; the wolf was in charge now.

Across the room was a man that Malcolm recognized. It was the black-haired wizard he'd spoken to in an alley on The Strip. He worked for Phelan.

Cole went for him, transforming back into a man as he moved through the fight with blinding speed.

* * * *

Vincent Cromwell shoved at the Council enforcer in front of him, managing to catch the giant red-haired man off guard long enough that he could focus some of his energy into his palm. When the enforcer came at him again, Vincent rammed his hand into the man's chest and let loose with his magic. The brief, painful electric shock that charged the larger werewolf took him by surprise and he staggered back, shaking his head as if to clear it.

Vincent took the opportunity to begin casting a spell that would get him out of the dungeon, altogether. But he had only begun to chant when his world was suddenly blurring around him in horrid, quick-silver motion, and an iron band was tightening painfully around his neck.

Malcolm Cole had him by the throat and was rushing him backwards as he simultaneously cut the flow of oxygen from his body. Vincent grimaced, swallowing a

cry of pain as his tall form was slammed into the stone wall behind him. Stars swam in his vision and he tried to flash into wolf form, but his body wouldn't respond. He was too stunned.

"Where. Is. She."

Vincent blinked a few times and when his vision came spiraling back into focus, he stared at the man in front of him. In that instant, he knew what it meant to look death in the eye. He was face to face with his own imminent demise. It was snarling at him.

A flurry of thoughts raced through his head. He knew that if he didn't give Cole what he wanted, the alpha would kill him. He also knew that if he did give Cole what he wanted, then Gabriel Phelan would kill him.

He thought of Claire St.James, the female-born Dormant who had been unwittingly trapped in a game of cat and mouse with a man who thoroughly enjoyed batting around his mice until they no longer moved and he grew bored enough to finally eat them. She didn't deserve this. She wasn't a bad person and, frankly, she could be a cold-hearted killer and not deserve what Phelan had done to her over the last fifteen years.

He thought of the wolves in this room – half of them were Council enforcers, which meant that The Council was involved. And that meant that if Cole didn't kill him and if Phelan didn't kill him – he would be brought before the Overseer and his life would be as good as forfeit.

In the end, and in the space of a few short heartbeats, Vincent Cromwell came to a decision. If he was going to die anyway, he was going to go out as a good man.

He opened his mouth to answer Cole, but no sound made it past his lips. No air was moving through his body. Cole had him too hard.

With his eyes, he implored the stronger werewolf to let up on him. To let him breathe. But Cole's entire form was radiating wrath, like a hurricane condensed into the space of six feet, four inches and draped in the façade of a man. It wasn't going to hold. And there was no reasoning with it.

As Vincent's vision began to fade, he felt Cole drag him away from the wall and lift him, still by his throat. Vincent's arms came up, his fingers curling around Cole's forearm, his claws digging into the other wolf's muscle and drawing blood. *"Recall... stone,"* Vincent managed to gasp out through clenched teeth. It was all he could say.

Cole's fury was lashing out around him like whips of flame, searing Vincent's skin as if he was actually being held to some kind of magical fire. He knew that the alpha had smelled Claire's blood. There could be no other reason for fury this strong. His anger was understandable, but he wouldn't find Claire like this. Not in time, anyway. Not before Phelan worked on her enough that she finally broke and gave him the permission he needed to remove Cole's mark.

Vincent's head was pounding now, his lungs burning, his heart beating hard and fast and erratic. He was going to lose consciousness. He wondered how long he'd be out.

"Let him go, Cole. He can't help us if he's out cold!"

Vincent closed his eyes as a deep voice of reason cut through the sound of blood rushing through his ears. Cole's grip slackened, and the sudden influx of oxygen and blood made Vincent's head pound even harder. His lungs expanded greedily and he wanted nothing more than to slump forward and gulp in air, but he knew he didn't have the luxury. He used what strength he had to speak. "Phelan's... house..." he croaked. "North of town."

"We have to get out, Cole." The voice of reason again.

Malcolm did not answer. Instead, he grabbed Vincent by the shoulder and spun him around, shoving him roughly toward the exit. Vincent took the hint and made his legs move, falling into a brisk run toward the hallway beyond the dungeon. As he moved, his lungs drew in more and more air and his pulse evened out. His strength was returning.

Others were joining them now; a mass werewolf exodus from the dungeon. Someone must have sounded an alarm.

For what? Vincent wondered. But he had neither the time nor the inclination to stop and ask. Instead, he half-followed and half-lead the congregation of werewolves from the underground cavern, noticing that none of Phelan's men were among the survivors now pouring from the underground passage and climbing the stairs. The men around him were all either Cole's wolves or Council enforcers.

Phelan's pack must have been defeated.

Vincent was the only one left.

They chalked it up to a gas leak.

All of the proper authorities from all of the right departments were all over it within minutes of the explosion. The Strip's main access was cut off from both ends and the sound of choppers whirling overhead was accompanied by the songs of sirens from below.

The second-most amazing thing, the news anchor said, was that The August had been built with such sturdy forethought, the explosion only managed to set the first three levels on fire – and did no damage, whatsoever, to the steel foundation and frame of the sky-rise hotel.

The *first*-most amazing thing was that the first three floors of The August had been utterly and completely empty at the time.

The mayor had something to say about that...

"I personally think that the opening of Magic Mirrors had a lot to do with it and the timing was perfect, but I'm not a fool. This is nothing short of a miracle."

The lives of the werewolves who had gone into The August that afternoon were probably indebted to James Valentine, who had smelled the gas and had taken control, issuing everyone out of the basement.

But the lives of the humans had been saved by Lily Kane and her ability to divine future events. *That* was the miracle that happened on The Strip.

Malcolm, too, could smell the gas before the explosion rocked the foundation of The August hotel. He had perceived it; a very faint scent that wafted in and out of existence, a thin thread of danger that took a back seat to a wolf's instinct to protect his mate. He'd noticed it. But, in his anger, he'd ignored it.

The anger that ruled his every functioning fiber in the dungeon was the same anger riding him hard at that very moment, as they sat Vincent Cromwell down in a motel room on the outskirts of town and told him to talk.

"Gabriel Phelan is a Hunter," Cromwell said right away. "And not only is he a Hunter, but he's the leader of the Hunters and has been for more than fifty years."

At this, Malcolm's gaze shot to James Valentine, who seemed as surprised as he was.

"Does he go by any other name?" Valentine asked, putting two and two together.

"David Reese," Cromwell replied, nodding. "And because I know you're about to ask – yes – St.James has known him for years. He was her trainer in Pittsburgh. He killed her parents and then... sort of... *stalked* her, for lack of a better word. He's always planned on making her his mate. He just likes to toy with people and because she was a female born, she was perfect for-" At that, he cut himself off, as if he knew that saying anything further on the subject would cause the already boiling wrath within Cole to finally blow its lid.

The Council had recalled most of its enforcers directly after the explosion, along

with the witch, Dannai. However, a few of the burly werewolves remained, and Lucas Caige and Johnny Campbell, aka Scrubs, had joined Malcolm and Valentine at the motel. Lily was there too. People were in danger, and she wouldn't back down; she insisted on being in on the action.

Vincent Cromwell was now the subject of their collective gazes and he shifted uncomfortably beneath so much heat.

"Where did he take her?" Cole asked then. His fangs were out; he hadn't been able to reign in his wolf entirely, and his voice was as animalistic as his glowing-eyed appearance.

"He owns a house North of town. He's with a warlock who used a Recall Stone."

"I need the address," Cole stated, simply.

"Fine, but be warned, Cole," Vincent straightened and shot him a steady gaze.

"There's something not right about the warlock."

"You mean besides the fact that he uses black magic?" Lily asked. She wasn't quite being sarcastic.

Vincent glanced at her and nodded. "Yes. He calls himself 'Seth,'" he said. "And he smells different from other warlocks."

"Exactly how many have you had occasion to scent?" Valentine asked, his tone heavy with disapproval.

"A few," Vincent replied, undaunted and unashamed. "And Seth is worse than all of them combined."

At that, the room fell silent. They seemed to be contemplating his words when, finally, Cole shifted where he stood beside the wall and came forward. "The address," he repeated. This time, his tone left no room for argument or delay.

"Seventy-two-oh-one Grand Palms Circle. It's inside the Silverstone Golf Club."

Malcolm turned to Scrubs, who had taken up temporary residence on the rickety lamp table beside the window. The biker must have been used to being on the run – or at to least having to keep an eye out for trouble. Every now and then, he pulled the curtains slightly to the side and glanced out warily. Now, however, he stared at Malcolm and cringed. It was like he knew what was coming.

Malcolm took one look at the man, saw the worry etched into his features, and came to a decision. "Let me borrow your bike and I swear that if I wreck it, I'll buy you three new ones."

Scrubs handed him the key and Malcolm was out the door.

"Follow that motorcycle." Jessie signaled the helicopter pilot and spoke into his head set. The pilot glanced down, nodded once, and aimed the chopper so that it mirrored the movement of the bike that sped along the ground several hundred feet below.

The sky was filled with metal dragon flies; some belonged to news stations, some to the police. The one that Jessie was in belonged to the Council, or more specifically, to the Overseer. But the side of the Bell 412 read, "Mercy Air," and anyone glancing up at it would mistake it for an emergency medical services

helicopter.

Right now, the Mercy Air chopper was racing North over North Rainbow Boulevard. Down below, Malcolm Cole sped through the traffic, carving around other cars and orange barrels.

Out of curiosity, Jessie asked the pilot, "How fast is he going?"

The pilot glanced down, then at his controls, and then ahead. "Ninety. Maybe a hundred."

It was a good thing it was so hard to kill a werewolf.

Jessie had Phelan's address. The enforcers that had been in the motel room with Cole and the wizard had phoned it in to him right away. However, now he had a decision to make. Did he let Cole rescue Charlie and defeat Phelan? Or did he intervene and take Charlie to her grandfather at Council headquarters?

Jessie had his orders, but as always, they were flexibly contingent. It was part of what being a Sentinel was all about. Above all, it was his job to make certain that his charge was safe. But second only to that was the need to make sure she was happy. And that meant allowing her to fight her own battles, find her own mate, and learn her own lessons, no matter how painful those lessons may be.

So long as they didn't kill her.

In truth, a Sentinel was never supposed to interfere at all. But Charlie was different. She was special.

And he loved her.

That hadn't originally been part of the plan, of course. Fifteen years ago, when Charlie's initial group of Sentinels had been recalled, her grandfather had called Jessie into his office and spoken with him in private. The Overseer knew that his granddaughter was also a Dormant. She was the first of her kind. His son and his daughter-in-law had shared this information with him shortly before they'd died.

When they both died and watchers were sent in to look after Charlie until everything could be squared away, each Sentinel had caught her very special scent. It had been barely discernable; faint and only just beginning to bloom.

Mr. Kavanagh wasn't sure what to do, at that point. It seemed that Charlie was content living a human life. She had no idea that she was a werewolf, to say nothing of the fact that her grandfather was alive, was also a werewolf, and that he was the Overseer of the Clan Council – the most powerful and influential werewolf organization in the world.

He knew that it was too much information for a twelve year old to absorb, much less believe. So, in the end, he let her go.

But, just in case, he told Jessie to continue to watch over her. So, Jessie did. And as he did, he noticed her grow. He watched her transform, from a lovely and spirited young girl to a painfully exquisite young woman.

How could he not notice? She was stunning. From her sunshine and strawberry hair to her tall, slim, strong figure, to her clear, glacier-blue eyes, she was unbearably beautiful.

But a few days after her eighteenth birthday, Jessie left Pittsburgh on another

temporary assignment. In his absence, Charlie was viciously attacked. It was luck and a 911 call from someone who overheard her scream that saved her from being raped. As it was, she sustained bruises and abrasions and was so mentally distraught that she actually ran when the sirens scared her attackers away. She didn't seek medical attention.

The werewolf community never would have known about the attack if Jessie hadn't returned the next day and noticed the bruises. When he found out what happened – when he saw the marks on her body and read the fear and shame in her eyes and overheard enough conversation between her and her friends that he was able to piece the incident together – he contacted the Overseer. He asked for permission to remain in Pittsburgh on full-time assignment. He asked for permission to get closer to Claire so that he could more effectively protect her.

And he asked for what he wanted, most of all, at that moment in time: The go-ahead to kill the men who had hurt Charlie.

They died the next night in a fire on Murray Avenue in Squirrel Hill. The authorities eventually came to the conclusion that the three young men had broken into the funeral home with the intention of debasing the bodies. It was good old fashioned juvenile delinquency at its finest.

Unfortunately for the boys, one or more of them managed to bump into a number of combustible chemical containers, and they were trapped in the resulting fire.

Charlie began taking self defense lessons at community centers. She made more friends – big ones. And she stopped going anywhere alone.

Not long after the attack and the subsequent fire, Charlie's godmother died, leaving her alone in the world. That was when Charlie met Jessie.

The rules were simple. He was allowed to take care of her. To see to her happiness and needs. He was even allowed to befriend her – and he did. But he was not allowed to mark her. He could not claim her. He was a Sentinel – a werewolf with the unique ability to mask his scent and pass for human, but possessing of the massive strength and exceptional power of a guardian. His kind were rare and in great demand. They were granted a great many boons by the Council for their services, and had been for hundreds of years.

However, in return, they were beholden by their oaths to remain uncommitted. It was the only way to ensure their continued utility. They were to remain on active duty, so to speak, and claiming a mate would change all of that. The Council wasn't willing to risk losing any of their few, precious Sentinels these days, and Jessie was the best.

On that first day, fifteen years ago, when the Overseer had called Jessie into his office, Mr. Kavanagh had made the situation very clear. His granddaughter's mate would one day make his appearance. She would see him in a dream. If it happened to be Jessie, then so be it. He would let Graves go, releasing him from his duties as a Sentinel, and give the couple his blessing. However, if it didn't, then Jessie had to accept that. And he had to help Charlie find her way to her mate, no matter how difficult the task might be, physically – or emotionally.

The Overseer had wanted to make certain, before allowing Jessie to take Charlie's assignment, that Graves understood the somber importance of these instructions and could accept them, whatever the consequences. Jessie had agreed.

He hated to admit it, but as he now followed Cole's bike path across Las Vegas and peered down at the British werewolf who ~~was~~ supposed to be Charlie's mate, he realized that he'd had no idea what he had truly been promising the Overseer. Boy, did he know now.

Charlie had a way of getting to that place inside of you – that place that lays empty for most or all of your life, and remains stubbornly empty, no matter how you try to fill it. You start directionless but resolute, and search year after year for whatever it will be that will finally slide snugly into place within the darkness at your core to fill it right up.

But nothing ever does.

And then you meet Claire St.James and she looks at you with her baby blue eyes and you feel something strange happening inside. It's like having someone sand-blast the inkiness right out of your murky, depressing spirit and fill it up with down feathers, violin music, and candle light.

That he would never be – *could* never be – anything other than her watcher, would forever remain Jessie's greatest regret. But he was an old man. And, in the years that he had seen come and go, he'd learned that however deep the wound, even the worst of scars faded over time.

* * * *

Charlie wasn't sure what it meant. She just knew, instinctively perhaps, that she could not let on about the way the mark on her right arm was warming up. It was tingling again, but this time, in a *good* way. It was a comforting feeling, like cold water on a burn, or a heating pad on sore muscles. It felt like the brush of silk against her skin and when she surreptitiously glanced down at it, she found that it was shimmering like crushed emeralds that had been super-glued into some fantastic, Celtic knot design. The mark almost glowed in the sunlight slicing through the livingroom curtains.

Her mind could make no sense of it. Her mind was exhausted, traumatized, and in mourning. But, as crazy as it seemed, her *body* was telling her that Malcolm Cole was near. It was insisting that he was drawing nearer with every passing second. It was like a humming in her blood; a lick of electricity that hardened her nipples and tightened her stomach.

Charlie felt the heat rush to her chest and up her neck in an honest-to-god blush and she ducked her head, praying with all of her might that Gabriel Phelan would not notice.

Right now, he stood across the room, near the bar that connected the family room to the kitchen, and he was on the phone. He spoke softly, but she could hear him anyway. She'd always had good hearing.

He was talking to someone about a jet and a private air strip. Making flight plans.

The thought gave her a hard chill and, despite the sudden and unexpected comfort afforded her by the mark on her arm, she also experienced a brief wave of queasiness. There was no way in Hell she was going to get on a plane with that man. She would find a way to kill herself first.

As if he could sense the stark, stubborn resolution of her thoughts, Gabriel turned then, and pinned her with a hard-as-diamonds sapphire glare. She felt like glaring right back, but she was a little worried that he would detect something was amiss – that he would notice the mark's effects on her – if he looked at her too long.

So, she glanced away and slowly turned around in her chair to face the other direction. When she did, she found herself gazing up at the warlock. Who had clearly been watching her all along. From the gleam of knowledge in his glittering indigo eyes, it was obvious that *he* had noticed her blush, even if Gabriel had not.

She wondered if he was going to say anything about it.

But he just smiled. It was entirely unnerving. She gazed up at him and found herself reminded of insane, deadly youth, like the vampires in *The Lost Boys* and *After Dark*. But there was something not-so-young about him, as well. Like someone had taken a boy's skin and laid it out over a mummy's body.

She realized in that moment that the warlock was not working for Gabriel Phelan because Gabriel Phelan wanted him to. He was working for the werewolf because he had his own agenda. Everything about him screamed *secret*, *trouble*, and *don't let down your guard down*. He may have appeared to be no more than a quarter of a century in age, but the depth to the darkness in his eyes and the cruel curl of his lips spoke volumes of that appearance's deceit.

Whatever his plans were, helping Gabriel Phelan at that moment somehow fit into the scheme. Otherwise he wouldn't be there.

Charlie managed to pull her gaze away from his and look over at the werewolf, Ulrich. He was resting in a love seat a few feet away. His expression seemed to indicate that his thoughts were turned inward. He was staring out the windows, as if waiting to catch sight of something.

He had been a perfect gentleman while Charlie got cleaned up and dressed. He'd somehow procured a summer dress for her, which was not Charlie's style at all. But once she'd showered – with him waiting patiently *outside* the bathroom door – and gotten dressed, she had to admit that it was refreshingly cool to be wearing white linen and not blue jeans in the Las Vegas heat.

Watching him now, with his regal air and ramrod-straight back, Charlie found herself wondering what his story was. What was he to Phelan? Why was he working for him? She had the urge to ask him, flat-out. He seemed a gentle enough man. Why would he allow himself to be employed by such a ruthless, sadistic bastard?

But, then again, appearances could be deceiving. David Reese was really Gabriel Phelan, after all. And the warlock appeared to be a young human male. In actuality, Charlie would bet her drum sticks that he was anything but young – and probably anything but human.

She was pondering these things when the mark on her arm heated itself to a degree that it became distracting. It was still not a painful kind of heat, but it was certain and it was imminent and accompanying it was the sudden, irresistible urge to move.

She suddenly wanted to get up and leave the space she was currently occupying. To get back...

Without giving it further thought, Charlie allowed her instinct to take over. She sprang up from the chair and whirled around, heading for the hallway just off to her left. In her peripheral vision, she noticed Ulrich rising from his own chair in order to take chase. She also noticed Phelan glancing up from where he'd been writing something down on the counter. The warlock cocked his head to one side and turned, not toward her, but toward the windows.

Something shimmered and flashed just beyond her sight – a blaze of black and chrome in the stark Nevada sunshine, slicing through the washed-out landscape in a quick gleam and burst of reflected light.

And then there was a crashing sound and the chiming of a million shards of glass hitting tables and walls, and Charlie intuitively dove, hitting the hard-wood floors and covering her head.

* * * *

There were a hundred things about protecting Charlie that had irritated the hell out of Jessie. When she'd begun to train with David Reese, Jessie had known right away that the other man was a werewolf, and not only a werewolf, but an alpha. He knew that David was most likely not his real name and that brown was most certainly not his real eye color.

Still, he wasn't allowed to interfere. So, when the man had begun beating on Charlie in the guise of training her to defend herself, the only thing Jessie had been able to do was gently suggest that she stop seeing him. Week after week, month after month, year after year – he told her that Reese was bad news. And she kept going back.

It was her prerogative. She was stubborn.

And she was scared. Jessie could understand that. Charlie had been treated badly by a plethora of ill-intentioned men and Reese was the only self-defense trainer who had been capable of teaching her what she needed to know in order to survive.

She didn't want to lose that, and bruises would heal.

When Charlie had begun having her dreams and panic attacks, he had watched her strength ebb and recede and wondered what she was seeing behind her closed lids at night. Finally, a few nights ago, she had opened up to him. She'd been dreaming of two men. One with blue eyes. Another with green.

Jessie was smart enough to put two and two together and come up with *mate*. Over the last few years and with increasing frequency, Dormants had begun to dream of two separate possible mates. The Council had its theories as to why this was the case.

Dormants were very rare. All political correctness aside, they needed to be used

to their ultimate potential. In other words, they needed to mate with the werewolf most worthy of reproducing offspring. It was possible that the double dream presented the Dormant with a choice that she had never had before. And, let the best alpha win.

But when Jessie realized that one of the men in Charlie's dreams had blue eyes, he grew increasingly nervous that the blue-eyed alpha may in fact be David Reese. He so badly did not want Charlie to wind up with Reese for a mate, that he very nearly broke his oath to the Council and told Charlie everything.

And then Malcolm Cole appeared on the scene.

It had given Jessie pause. There was a lot of history to Malcolm Cole, the British bad boy who had long been thought a serial killer among wolves. He'd recently been exonerated of all of his purported crimes – and even commended by the Council for bringing justice upon the men who had actually *done* all of the killing. He'd worked as a spy for the British in World War II and served in both the Korean War and Vietnam.

He donated frequently and anonymously – to human perception, anyway – to countless charitable organizations and had even traveled to several countries around the world in order to provide whatever help he could, wherever it was needed.

As a werewolf, he could do this without fear of being harmed by soldiers or of being contaminated with human disease. And, unlike most other werewolves, he used this advantage widely. Not that he would tout this, of course. Malcolm Cole seemed to prefer that people think of him as an asshole. The picture on the back of his books, which sold millions of copies, had captured him in a devil-may-care moment, his green eyes flashing challenge.

But, in truth, he was not the devil, and he actually *did* care.

He was a veteran and a philanthropist and, if a bit rough around the edges, he seemed to truly have the general welfare of the world at heart in almost every act he committed.

Malcolm Cole was a genuinely good man.

It was so much more than Jessie could say for David Reese that, when he appeared in Vegas and Jessie remembered that Charlie had also dreamt of a man with green eyes, the Sentinel made the immediate decision to make certain he did everything he could to help Charlie end up with Cole.

It hurt. A little, anyway. Jessie wanted her to be happy, but there would always be that selfish part of him that wished he were not as powerful as he was. So that he would not be a Sentinel.

But, he ~~was~~ a Sentinel.

And the important thing now was to do his job.

Down below, Malcolm Cole took a sharp left off of North Rainbow and onto Grand Teton drive without even slowing for the red light. Jessie couldn't hear them, of course, but he could imagine that the drivers of the cars he now watched spin out of control and come to a stop on the median and shoulders were honking their brains out.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered to himself as Cole then took another sharp turn,

going from Grand Teton to Bird Rock street at a devil's pace. Bird Rock was the entrance to the Silverstone Golf Club.

Before Jessie could really wonder how Cole was going to locate the address he had without knowing the street lay out, Cole had wound his way to the right, cut another left at Passadera street... and then sliced through someone's yard to head full-speed across the very expensive, very well-tended golf course beyond.

"Oh, *hell* no," Jessie muttered, his amber eyes wide with disbelief. This wasn't going to go over well with the Overseer. And, for some inexplicable reason, that made Jessie smile.

He shook his head as Cole's motorcycle managed to wind around a sand pit, avoid a small pond, and narrowly miss running over several elderly, over-dressed men. The Harley Davidson finished expertly wedging out pieces of the green on the golf course and then veered right, carving through another manicured lawn.

"Crazy son of a bitch," Jessie grinned.

Then his smile disappeared because Malcolm Cole hit asphalt once more and turned the bike directly toward a large adobe-style house on the corner of two perpendicular streets. He wasn't slowing.

"Oh, tell me he isn't going to--"

He didn't finish his sentence. The breath was stolen from his lungs as he watched Cole's bike hit the curb, take to the air, and crash head-long through the house's front floor-to-ceiling windows.

Malcolm knew he wouldn't be able to cross the boundary himself. It was Phelan's house and therefore Phelan's territory, and no other alpha would be able to cross into it. But the bike could. And the explosives in the bike's saddle bags would make it in as well.

He jumped the lawn and punched the throttle, leaning heavily to the right as the bike slid out from beneath him, continuing in its forward momentum. As he hit the lawn and rolled, he heard the sound of glass shattering and the sudden, loud crash of heavy machinery sliding to a violent halt across an empty living room.

It took a minute for the stunned fuzziness to fade from Malcolm's consciousness, but as it ebbed, he listened carefully, wondering how long it would take for the house's inhabitants to realize that the Harley had been strapped with C4.

Not long, apparently, because, just as Malcolm was making it back to his feet again, the garage door splintered open behind the roaring sound of a V8 engine and a lot of gasoline.

Cole instinctively turned and covered his face as the wooden planks splintered and shredded and went flying in a million stake-like shards of shrapnel. None of them hit him, miraculously, and he lowered his arm to peer across the yard at the black Shelby Cobra that had squealed into the street and come to a full stop.

The monster engine idled loudly. From over the top of the driver's wheel, Gabriel Phelan glared at Malcolm. Green eyes met blue, electrifying the distance between them. Time slowed down.

Charlie was in the back seat, held fast by a young man with black hair. The passenger seat was empty.

Malcolm's gaze skirted from Phelan to Charlie and held. His heart hammered hard in his chest. She peered at him steadily. There was fear there, in those ice-blue pools, but there was also relief. Rebelliousness. Rage.

She gazed out at him and fairly dared him to do everything and anything he could to kill Gabriel Phelan – even if it meant that she be taken out as well.

Gabriel shifted, taking the beast of a car into first gear, and Cole growled. He rushed forward, at once all instinct and hatred. But before he'd taken two strides toward the shining black vehicle, a silver-white wolf slammed into him from the side, taking him once more to the ground.

As he hit and rolled, he flashed into wolf form, extending his claws to find purchase in something solid around him.

Tires squealed and the Cobra roared by just before the two wolves went rolling out into the street.

* * * * *

"Keeping up the low profile." Jessie shook his head as he gazed down at the spectacle of the two giant wolves locked in combat in the mansion's front lawn, and the black Mustang that had just crashed through its own garage and was tearing

away down the street.

Cole and Phelan were creating one hell of a spectacle in Las Vegas, Nevada. *Fuck it*, he thought. "Follow the car!" he ordered into his headset. Then he turned around in the chopper's small cabin. Along one wall, several firearms of different caliber had been racked. They were always loaded, as they were rather useless otherwise. Among the weapons was a .270 Winchester rifle. He yanked it off of its hooks and spun back around.

Below, the Cobra was turning a sharp right, its wheels hugging the asphalt with incredible ease. The car seemed completely at home beneath the demand of its handling and speed and gripped the street with effortless efficiency.

But Jessie could take care of that.

He brought the weapon up, cradled it against his right shoulder, and peered down the scope's sights. The weapon's discharge cracked loudly, even over the sound of the helicopter's blades, but the recoil was nothing against Jessie's shoulder. And the bullet hit its mark.

Below, the Shelby Cobra veered slightly off course, its front left tire blown to shreds and hanging by thin straps of rubber to its metal rim.

* * * * *

"Son of a bitch!" Gabriel hissed as he felt the front tire go and adjusted his steering to keep them on course. "Take the chopper out!" He barked the order at the warlock, who was holding Charlie by her upper arms, his grip tighter than it strictly needed to be.

The warlock grinned at that and released her, focusing his attention on the helicopter that hovered above them. He began to chant.

Charlie rubbed her bruised arms for a moment, watching him with wide eyes. Then her gaze narrowed. In the next instant, she was leaning forward and bringing her left elbow back with sharp, hard focus, driving in with as much strength as she could maneuver in this position. Her elbow struck the warlock directly on the nose, shoving his head back into the black leather of the seat behind him.

Seth instantly covered his face with his hands. His chanting ceased immediately and whatever spell he had been attempting was broken. From behind his palms, he glared at her, the indigo in his eyes shifting and lightening to become more purple, as if the blue was leaking out of them to be replaced by red.

"Don't even think about it, warlock." Gabriel peered at him through the rearview mirror and then quickly returned his attention to the road as the helicopter above them seemed to switch positions, hanging back slightly.

Gabriel cast a dark glance at Charlie over his shoulder. "You just cost Graves his life, sweetheart," he told her, his tone a dark promise.

Charlie stared at him and felt no fear. What could he do to her? Whatever he could dish out, she could take. Her gaze narrowed and she cocked her head to one side. "Oh," she said, "Okay. Then, I guess since he's dead already, I have nothing to lose by doing *this*." With blurring speed, she brought her elbow forward and back

once more, again hitting Seth in the nose, just as she had before.

The warlock made a harsh sound of pain; a roar of anger and barely-checked wrath that bespoke plainly of the serious damage he wanted to inflict upon Charlie.

She only smiled at him, a saccharine sweetness, and then leaned back in the leather seat to cross her arms over her chest.

A muscle ticked in Gabriel's jaw, but he had no time to deal with the situation as the sound of a gun's report again split the sky and the car beneath them suddenly jerked to the right, nearly ripping the steering wheel out of his grip.

Gabriel swore vehemently and grabbed the wheel once more, downshifting as he hit the breaks and took the car over the curb, into a mail box, and across half of a green lawn. They must have hit the sprinkler system as they crossed the grass because the water came on, shooting up and then pouring over the black vehicle like an earth-bound rain storm.

Gabriel turned in his seat and pinned the warlock with a warning glare. His blue eyes were glowing with sapphire menace.

"Get the chopper down here, because it's our ride now."

Seth glared back at Phelan and then lowered his hands. Blood smeared half of his handsome face.

He sat back slowly in his seat and the dichotomy of his calm exterior and the fury she could feel boiling just beneath its surface sent chills through Charlie. She watched as his visage seemed to ripple like the surface of a lake. It was as if someone had taken a Polaroid photograph of him and was holding it behind a waterfall.

When the rippling stopped, he was whole again and the blood was gone.

He turned in the seat to pin her with his terrifying black-magic gaze. He was once more as handsome as ever. And his eyes were glowing red.

* * * *

Malcolm hissed behind his wolf fangs as the older wolf managed to sink his teeth into a space behind Cole's shoulder. His bite was strong and deep and sent a shock of pain through Malcolm's body.

In answer, he snarled and whipped around, ripping the wolf's teeth free. He ignored the sound of his own tearing flesh and focused instead on gaining the upper hand.

The other wolf was older, but he was very strong. There was something familiar about the kind of power that rolled off of him. It was like Malcolm had sensed it before, and just recently. It was recognizable enough that it was nearly distracting and Malcolm had to force himself to concentrate on the logistics of fighting.

He managed to pull completely out of the other wolf's grip, though the effort cost both animals deep grooves in their sides, left there by the claws of their opponents.

They stood facing each other, their muzzles a mere foot apart, their fangs bared, their glowing-eyed visages the very images that children saw in their nightmares.

So, you think you're good enough for my niece?

Cole froze, his hackles up, when the deep voice resonated within his mind. It

wasn't his own voice. He had never heard it before. But it was somehow familiar none the less, and Malcolm knew without a doubt that it was coming from the silver-haired timber wolf in front of him.

Because I don't think you are, the voice continued. The older wolf's amber eyes narrowed above his snarl, as if to punctuate his mental communication. *You've done a hell of a job so far, Malcolm Cole.* The voice seemed to spit out his name, as if it tasted mentally bad.

Cole growled low in his throat and paced forward, his right paw gaining ground as he hunkered down, his emerald glowing eyes flashing challenge.

You're weak, Cole, no matter what my brother says. Only the strongest should mate, the voice continued. *You had no business marking my niece. You can't even protect her.*

Cole's growl rose in volume and he took another step forward. The wolf across from him backed up a pace. The air was filled with the sound of helicopter blades. Somewhere to their left came the sound of a gun going off. Squealing tires came next, followed by the loud thunk of a collision and then an idling engine.

Cole never took his eyes off of his opponent. And the silver wolf returned the favor.

We're a dying breed, Cole. The voice's tone held a note of weariness then. *We won't survive unless the best of us reproduce.*

Cole waited, knowing what was coming next.

And I've yet to see any evidence that you're the best.

With that, Cole snarled one last time and then, in a move that most likely thoroughly confused the other wolf, Malcolm turned around and darted off in the other direction toward the waiting, sprinkler-drenched Cobra at the other end of the block.

He didn't look over his shoulder to see if the older wolf was following. At the moment, he didn't care. Something the wolf had said had really gotten under Cole's skin.

He hadn't been able to protect Charlie.

The silver wolf was right. Nothing was more important than Charlie. Nothing else mattered.

* * * *

"Um... boss, I gotta take her down."

Jessie glanced up at the pilot. He was looking nervously at his gauges and, now that he mentioned it, Jessie could feel a slight difference in the way the blades were spinning.

They seemed sluggish. The helicopter was losing altitude.

Jessie stood in the doorway of the chopper and re-hooked the .270. He nodded at the pilot. "Fine. On the green," he said. He ripped off his headset and threw it to the side, readying himself for what he knew would be coming.

The pilot managed to maneuver the helicopter past a few houses beneath him and land it on a smooth roll of grass just beyond the long, extended lawn attached to

Gabriel Phelan's house. As the helicopter touched down, bouncing once and then settling, Jessie leapt from the open doorway and flashed into wolf form.

He managed twenty or thirty feet in the direction of the street on the other side of the houses, when Gabriel Phelan's luxury home exploded.

The sensation and sound were nothing like they were in the movies. On the big screen, a bomb went off with a *bang* and a flash of gorgeous, destructive orange and red flame and a mini-mushroom cloud of ash and debris.

But in the real world, a bomb went off with a *boom*. It was deep and rumbling and shook the earth as if the solid ground were nothing more than water in a pond. The force rippled out in a super-sonic shock wave that knocked the breath from your lungs and all awareness from your mind, temporarily turning everything into a muffled, painful *thump* of mega-proportions.

The blow ran over Jessie as if he were a squirrel in the street and a Mac truck had just decided to make road kill out of him. He was directly behind Phelan's house when the blast ignited, and his body now took the brunt of the bearing. By the time he'd stopped rolling across the ground, his furry form was limp and he couldn't feel his limbs.

Absently, he wondered if they were still there.

Not a lick of flame or rubble had come anywhere near him; it was only the force of the explosion itself that had driven him to the ground. His ears were ringing and he tasted blood in his mouth. He'd bitten his tongue.

In the distance sirens wailed, but Jessie barely heard them. His world had become a fuzzy, humming unreality and he felt just numb enough that he could only lay there and accept it, almost grateful for the unknowing that came with it.

Eventually, veracity seeped in around the edges of his consciousness and he remembered who he was. He remembered *what* he was. He remembered that he had to save Charlie.

Slowly, almost languidly, he blinked a few times, attempting to clear the white, fractionated fog from his vision. Sensation returned to his feet and he moved them. They were human feet, at the ends of human legs. He had flashed back into human form when the bomb went off.

He moved his hands and managed to push up off of the grass, raising his head. He breathed in, his lungs expanding painfully against the bruises his ribs had carved along his sides.

One rib was broken. He could hear it clicking as he breathed.

It shifted and re-attached, even as he lifted himself up off of the ground. By the time he was standing, the bone was healed and his vision was clear.

His amber, glowing eyes scanned the landscape. There were no bodies strewn across the rolling green. He scented no blood. No one had been hurt in the explosion. The sound of sirens reached his ears. They were still far off, but he could tell that they were coming nearer.

For the second time in the last five minutes, Jessie rushed forward and flashed

into wolf form.

* * * *

Gabriel roughly pulled Charlie down beside him when the C4 in the saddlebags of Cole's bike detonated and Phelan's house belched thunder, its windows shattering and sliding to the ground in cascades of razor-sharp crystal.

The force of the explosion sent everything within an impressive circumference a few inches backward, including the Shelby Cobra, which skated a little across the wet lawn, forcing everyone who was hiding behind it to scramble along beside it despite the fact that they were also somewhat stunned.

Charlie's ears were ringing and her muscles felt slack. Her heart felt strange and heavy in her chest, as if it had been fibrillated by the blast and was now as befuddled as her mind. But Phelan had a hard grip on her upper arm, his fingers cutting into the bruises already left there by the warlock, Seth.

Seconds became minutes, and the rivulets of power radiating outward from the explosion began to die down.

"Clear the way to the chopper," Gabriel instructed.

The warlock didn't reply, but he again began to chant and anger coursed through Charlie. She hated the sound of his voice; of those horrible, ancient words he was muttering. She hated the fire-red glow in his eyes.

"Shut up, you vile, obnoxious freak!" she hissed at him, straightening so that she could attack him full-on. She just wanted to punch him, to send her fist flying straight through his rib cage and out the other side.

But Gabriel sensed her intentions and took action. In the space of a few short heartbeats, he had her in his arms and locked up against his chest. He didn't bother saying anything to her, as any threat he could have offered at that point would have sounded empty. Instead, he focused on the task at hand.

"Get to it, warlock," he commanded, his tone menacingly low.

Seth gazed steadily at Charlie. She'd managed to foul his spells twice in the space of less than ten minutes. There was little doubt in Charlie's mind that if it weren't for Phelan being with them there at that moment, the warlock would kill her. Slowly.

But Phelan *was* there and, instead of attempting to harm her in any way, the warlock once more began to chant. His gaze skirted from her defiantly flashing ice-blue eyes to the street and row of houses beyond.

Charlie tried to follow his gaze, to see what he was concentrating on – were there other people there? Who had flown the chopper? Who had shot out the tires? But Gabriel had her too tight. When she tried to turn her head, one of his hands came up to encircle her neck. It was a warning that required no words.

She went still in his grasp and tried to think. She knew one thing for certain. She knew that Malcolm Cole was nearby. Even if Gabriel had not credited the motorcycle to Cole as he'd hauled her into the adjoining garage and forced her into his car, she would have known.

The blood in her body confirmed it. It was humming to life with something like

hope. She could sense him as surely as some peoples' bodies could tell them that it was going to rain. The promising sensation managed to dull most of the unpleasant fear that had invaded her body and mind. Even the pain that Gabriel now caused because he was touching her was muted compared to the certainty she felt that her mate would not allow her to come to any more harm.

My mate? she thought, bewildered. Where had that come from?

She didn't have the time to consider her own thoughts for much longer however, because Gabriel was suddenly swearing again and the warlock was spinning around in place as a giant black wolf bounded toward them at a speed so unbelievably, impossibly fast that it seemed to actually blur the edges of his fur around him.

Charlie was thrust to the ground and hit the grass just as another one of those strange flashes went off around her. She rolled over to find herself staring at two massive wolves – one black, one white – locked in mortal, terrifying combat.

The sounds they were making were inexplicable.

Charlie had heard cats fight before. She'd seen them rip into each other in the alley behind their apartment in Pittsburgh. She'd always gone out into the alley to try to break them up because the sound was so awful. It was like children being tortured to death. This was worse. These weren't cats. They weren't even dogs. They were full-grown, larger-than-life wolves, all fang and claw and deep, reverberating growl that seemed, at once, louder than a Harley's engine and meaner than the Hell's Angel atop it.

Charlie found herself backing away from the scene, her eyes as wide as saucers in her face.

"How does it feel to know you've been marked as bait for one of those animals?"

Charlie froze in place. The voice sounded from directly behind her. If she'd taken another step back, she'd have run into him.

The warlock laughed low and she knew that he was shaking his head.

"One of them will die and you'll be stuck with the other," he continued, his tone still soft and low and laced with a menace palpable enough that she could almost taste it. "Set to be collared and leashed and rutted on until you get pregnant with his puppies," he told her.

She whirled on him, her heart hammering.

His red eyes glowed hellishly. He smiled – flashing fangs.

My God...what the hell are you? she thought, frantically. Her breathing quickened and her pulse began to race. She knew he wasn't a werewolf. She knew it in her blood.

But he clearly wasn't human. She'd been right about that.

He came forward then and, as if he were some gentleman out of a historical romance novel, he offered her his hand. She glanced down at it and hastily took a step back.

He cocked his head to one side, his red eyes flashing. "I can take you away from all of this, Claire."

He's going to kill me, she thought.

"I will *not* kill you," he promised, speaking expertly around his razor sharp fangs. "I give you my word."

"Get the fuck away from her warlock," a deep voice growled.

Seth glanced to the right and just before Jessie Graves would have slammed head-long into him, he spoke a simple archaic word.

And disappeared.

* * * *

The fire trucks and ambulances were too close, his resources said. The authorities would be upon the scene in minutes. Apparently, humans along the street had already ventured out of their homes – and slipped back inside, terrified and confused at what they had seen.

No fewer than twenty 911 calls had been put in, and Kavanagh felt he could safely say this incident would go down as one of the worst exposures in werewolf history. But, as bad as it was, it was not one that couldn't be dealt with. He had the world's best magic users working for him. And he had connections in every government agency known – and unknown – to man.

It wasn't the possible exposure that had Kavanagh on a private plane, headed for Las Vegas at that moment. It wasn't the damage to the golf course or the media mess or the pay-offs he would have to make that were truly bothering him.

It was the fact that his granddaughter was right smack in the middle of it all.

When Jessie had informed him that Gabriel Phelan, also known as David Reese, was the rogue leader of the Hunters, Kavanagh's heart had fallen into his stomach, cold and heavy as a lump of coal. For a human to be a Hunter was bad enough. They were skilled fighters, hell bent on the utter destruction of the werewolf race.

But their zealotry was misdirected and mistaken and could often be written off as a form of insanity; they likened werewolves to demons and honestly believed them to be such. In the end, a human could sometimes be forgiven for their ignorance.

But a werewolf? A Hunter? And not only a Hunter – the *leader* of the Hunters? What kind of sick son of a bitch was Phelan? And what would he do with Claire... with his little Charlie?

Kavanagh felt another nauseating wave of apprehension roll through him. He was surrounded by an aura of disquiet, anxiety and concern. Most of all, he was wrapped in anger. He had loved his son very much.

And Gabriel Phelan had killed him.

Kavanagh's gaze narrowed now as he turned to stare out the airplane window at the blue horizon beyond.

* * * *

Cole knew that Gabriel Phelan was a good fighter in human form. But in wolf form, he was subject to the same laws of nature that every other werewolf was held to. All that mattered was size and strength and determination.

And right now, despite the fact that Cole had already been injured by another werewolf, the two wolves were matched on all but one of those qualities.

Phelan wanted Charlie. That much was patently clear. But Cole wanted her more. And there was enough hatred and needed revenge running through Malcolm's bloodstream at that moment to fuel an entire German army. So, when a slip in Phelan's defenses finally presented itself and afforded Cole an opportunity that anyone else would have missed, Malcolm took it.

He brought his claws up toward Phelan's underside and attempted to dig in, but Phelan sensed his intention and twisted, allowing Cole's teeth to rip completely through his flesh in exchange for the freedom it afforded the white wolf. Phelan pulled away and backed up, the snowy fur of his left shoulder covered in rivulets of dark red blood.

Cole growled, exposing his blood-soaked fangs.

Phelan flashed back into human form.

When he did this, Cole was temporarily blinded. He skittered back on his paws, shaking his head to clear it. By the time he focused on Phelan again, it was to find that the man was holding a gun on Charlie.

Where he'd gotten the gun, Cole had no clue. He must have had it on him before he'd flashed into wolf form. Perhaps tucked into the back of his pants. It didn't matter.

Cole flashed back into human form himself and glanced at Charlie. She was looking from Phelan to Cole to a black man who was standing a few feet away from her. The stranger's scent was human. But his amber eyes were glowing, and he was sporting fangs.

Cole was overwhelmed with a plethora of different emotions at that moment. Confusion was high on the list, but higher still was anger. Highest was fear. Of everyone in this fray, Charlie was the only one who could be killed with whatever bullets Phelan had in that gun.

And the Hunter knew it. In the hand that gripped the gun, Gabriel Phelan held all of the cards.

"I'll take the chopper, gentleman," he said, calmly. "Turn around and get down on the ground." Blood welled in the wound on his shoulder, and Cole could smell it. It matched the wound that Cole bore in his own shoulder. But Phelan paid it no heed and his expression did not reveal that he was in any kind of pain. He simply looked angry, calculative, and determined.

Cole and the stranger hesitated in following Phelan's orders. Gabriel cocked his gun. Charlie closed her eyes, holding her breath.

As one, Malcolm and the stranger turned around, lowering themselves to their knees in the grass. Immediately, Cole could hear Phelan run by them, heading in the direction of the helicopter that had touched down on the green beyond the nearest row of houses.

He hadn't taken Charlie. He must have thought she would put up too much of a fight to chance keeping her in the chopper. Maybe he had other reasons. Whatever they were, Cole had never felt so relieved in his life.

And then Charlie was releasing the breath she held and sinking to the ground along with them.

* * * *

Jessie crawled to Charlie and attempted to pull her into his arms. But she yanked away and stared up at him, her eyes wide, her jaw slack.

He knew that his eyes were glowing. He knew his fangs had been visible since he'd appeared. With a concentrated effort, he made them recede and tampered the fire behind his eyes. This was the moment of truth. There was nothing else to hide behind.

"Jessie, my *God*," she whispered, her words trailing off under the weight of the shock she was undoubtedly feeling. "Jessie... are... *are you*...."

Jessie stared at her and shook his head. He felt such deep regret in that moment, it chewed at his insides like a rabid dog mauling a bone. "Oh, baby girl," he spoke softly, raising his right hand to gently brush his fingers along her cheek bone.

To her great credit and his tremendous relief, she didn't pull away. She stayed where she was, gazing up at him in wonder. As an alpha werewolf, his touch would bring Charlie pain, but as a Sentinel, it would not bring her nearly as much as the touch of another alpha. She undoubtedly registered these shocking facts along with all of the others. But despite the plethora of surprises slamming her, there was also something blessedly familiar behind the blue of her eyes. It was trust. It was still there.

That he couldn't turn back time and explain everything to her sooner was yet another regret he could chalk up to this horrendous week and its pitiable luck. She deserved better. "I'm so sorry, Charlie."

"You sound like me," she said, softly.

He blinked, taken aback by her sudden lick of humor. She smiled a gentle, tired smile, and it echoed the weariness in her shadowed, blue eyes.

"Come here." He pulled her into his arms then and, this time she let him. As he did, he looked over her shoulder to find Malcolm Cole watching him steadily. He'd witnessed the entire exchange and by the expression on Cole's face, it was clear that the alpha was torn between wanting Charlie to have whatever comfort she could glean at that moment even if it came from Jessie – and wanting to rip Jessie's throat out.

Jessie nodded once at the man and then slowly pulled away. A helicopter buzzed loudly overhead and then drifted away, the sound of its blades overshadowed by the wailing of the sirens attached to the emergency vehicles that were now coming around the corner several blocks down the street. "I think it's time we go somewhere more private. And safe."

"Agreed," Cole said, simply.

Charlie looked up at him and then at Jessie. She took the hand Jessie offered and stood.

"We have to run, Charlie."

"Fine," she said.

Jessie nodded and Cole led the way into the alley between two nearby houses. They came out on the green on the other side and then sprinted across the golf course, toward the taxi-laden streets beyond.

"How is she?"

Lily softly closed the door behind her and looked up at Malcolm. She took a deep breath and looked away, clearly contemplating her answer before replying. Malcolm's jaw tensed. His gaze hardened as he waited.

"She's actually doing quite well," she finally said. "She isn't a werewolf... yet." A sharp glance at Cole. "So, she can't hear us if we talk softly. Besides, she's taking a shower right now." She gestured for the others to follow her into the adjoining room and then took a seat at one of the plush leather sofas.

Malcolm entered behind her, and James Valentine, Lucas Caige, and Jakob Samson joined them. They all took seats, Caige looking somewhat uncomfortable with the relaxed setting.

"St. James is a very tough girl. As I'm sure you've already figured out," Lily began again. "She's been to Hell and back and seems to have come out relatively unscathed. At least, physically. Mentally, she's tired. She's exhausted actually, and perhaps a bit numb. It's nothing I haven't seen before. I've even experienced it myself." She slowly shrugged. "If my feelings about her are right, it's something she'll get over." Lily paused and frowned. "I explained as much as I could, with the exception of a few special things that I think you should explain to her yourself, Cole."

At this, she landed Cole with a piercing, meaningful gaze and he knew she was speaking of the mating ritual and everything that would happen directly afterward.

"She was also very happy to learn that her band mates were alive. You can't imagine the relief she showed when I told her that no one at all had died in the hotel. She was especially relieved for the children."

Malcolm thought about that. He wasn't at all surprised. He could imagine that when the hotel had exploded, Charlie had been terrified on too many levels to count. And anyone with a heart would have been concerned about any kids caught in the blast.

He nodded, and then he changed the subject. "What did she say about this guy – Jessie?" It was something he'd wanted to ask ever since the man had shown up out of the blue on the golf course next to Phelan's house and taken Charlie into his arms. He had smelled human, but was so obviously not. So, what was he? And more importantly, what did he mean to Charlie?

"His name is Jessie Graves. He's the band's attorney and Charlie's best friend; has been for a while. She told me that hugging him had hurt, but not nearly as much as touching Phelan or his men. She ignored the small amount of pain because she needed to hold him anyway," Lily told them.

Cole considered that. It meant the man was a werewolf. But.... "He smelled human."

"Yes, I know." Lily nodded. "But he also had glowing eyes and fangs, apparently." She raised her eyebrows, and Cole sighed. "And she told me that he managed to

basically vanish when Caige showed up with the ride after you three escaped the police outside of the Silverstone golf course. She said he told her that he had to go and that he would explain everything later. Next, he was apparently disappearing back down an alley." She shifted on the couch and glanced at each of them in turn. "Am I right?"

"Yep," Caige said with a nod. "I saw him help Claire into the car and then run down the nearest gap between two rows of houses. He smelled human to me too. But I gotta admit," he half-smiled and reclined into the deep cushions, "he was moving pretty fast."

Again, Lily nodded. "I think he was a Sentinel."

Now James nodded as well. "I agree. It would explain everything. It makes perfect sense."

"How so?" Jake asked.

"Claire St.James is a female-born. She's also a Dormant. And her parents were killed by Hunters. She's probably dead-center in the Council's sites. I can imagine that they would have vested interest in protecting her," James explained.

"Hell of a job they've done so far," Caige muttered, lacing his fingers in front of him and resting them across his hard stomach. "Like you said, Kane. She's been to Hell and back. Was that part of their plan?"

Lily shot him a weary look. "Of course not, but she's alive. And you have to admit that the Council was more successful at reaching her in The August than you were. One of their witches was responsible for taking down the territory spell."

To that, Caige had nothing to say. He appeared vaguely uncomfortable for a moment and then looked away. Malcolm knew the man wasn't fond of magic users. A warlock had killed Lucas's brother many years ago in Australia.

Caige hadn't been at The August in time to meet Dannai the witch, but all the same, it probably irritated him to no end that the werewolf community had had to resort to such means to defeat Gabriel Phelan.

Malcolm also had nothing to say. Mostly, because it also irritated the hell out of *him*. He didn't care about the witch one way or another, but Charlie wore his mark. She was his to protect. And he'd failed her.

"Don't let it bother you too much Cole," Lily continued, as if able to read his mind. "I think they pulled out the big guns because she means more to the Council than what she's worth as a walking puppy mill."

James rolled his eyes and ran a hand through his hair as if to say, "*Here we go again.*" Lily ignored him and continued. "I think she's got family or friends in high places."

"Why would you think that?" Jake asked.

She looked at the blond werewolf and cocked her head to one side. "Because the Overseer is on his way here right now."

Malcolm blinked, as did everyone else in the room. At first, he wondered how she knew this, but then he remembered. "You had a vision." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," she admitted, meeting his gaze. "While Claire and I were talking, I saw Mr. Kavanagh standing right here in this room. Speaking with your intended mate."

They all took a moment to digest that information, and the atmosphere in the room became more tense by several degrees.

"Charlie's quite a catch, I'll admit, but there might be another reason for the Council intervening like this," Caige suggested. He chewed on his cheek as the others turned to look at him. Malcolm's green eyes glittered. Caige shrugged. "Well, the *warlock* was one nasty guy. I mean, think about it. We could smell the bastard even after he'd gone. That's some powerful mojo there." His smile turned spiteful. "And very, very tainted."

"You think the Council wants to question Claire about the warlock working for Phelan?" James asked.

Again, Caige shrugged. "Maybe. Plus, Phelan got away. That can't be sitting well with them."

"It isn't sitting well with anyone," Cole said softly. He wasn't thinking of himself. He was thinking of Charlie. Her parents' murderer was still out there somewhere and had yet to atone for the heinous acts he'd committed. "But, whatever the reason, we're about to find out," he added as he cocked his head to one side and listened. Beyond the door to the suite and down the hall, he heard the elevator doors ping open. "Kavanagh is here."

* * * *

Charlie turned off the hot water and gently squeezed the excess moisture out of her hair. Fat droplets showered to the floor and ran down the drain. She then threw her long, dripping locks over her shoulder and opened the stall door, grasping the towel that hung on the hook beside it.

She ran through these motions on auto-pilot, not really present in the moment or fully aware of what it was she was doing. Instead, she thought of Malcolm Cole.

For weeks before meeting the werewolf, she'd seen him in her dreams. In those night time reveries, his impossible green eyes scorched her insides and melted her on the spot. She always awoke from those dreams with a sense of longing, frustration, and un-spent sexual energy.

And now she knew why.

According to Lily Kane, Malcolm Cole was meant to be her mate. He was an alpha werewolf with a boat load of power, a British accent that brought nerve endings to delicious life, and a face and body to die for. And he wanted *her*. Out of every woman on the planet, Malcolm Cole wanted Claire St.James.

Charlie.

He had made a ton of money on his books, which meant that he was a talented artist. And that probably meant that he would understand and empathize with that same kind of creative streak within her. It was something she had always longed for in a man... should she ever decide to actually hook up for good with anyone.

Apparently, Malcolm Cole would go anywhere and do absolutely anything in

order to obtain her. His pursuit would be relentless. It was all part of the chemistry, Lily said. It was a kind of fate. It was just the way things worked.

Surprisingly, Charlie was okay with that. There was a part of her that had always been able to appreciate the more animalistic aspects of human nature. Though she'd always been forced to play it safe around guys, there was a side to her that longed to flirt. To tempt a man into giving chase. She read romance novels ripe with powerful, intelligent men who knew how to get what they wanted and went to great lengths to make it so.

She liked it rough. She knew that such a thing labeled her as a freak in many people's eyes, but there it was. She couldn't help it. And, as long as he didn't really hurt her, she liked a man who knew how to be a man. Dominant. Strong. Persuasive.

Well, she was lucky. Because apparently dominant, strong, and persuasive was an alpha werewolf to a T. It was why Cole had marked her against her will two days ago in the tattoo parlor on the Strip. In an act that at the time had seemed chaotic and surreal and crazy, Malcolm Cole had placed a protective brand upon her that would prevent any other werewolf from mating with her and claiming her as their own.

Charlie wrapped her hair in the towel and glanced down at the shimmering green mark on her arm. It was quite stunning. No tattoo artist in the world would have been able to pull off something so intricate or beautiful. It almost looked fake. Too good to be true. Like the man who had put it there.

Charlie sighed and lowered her arm. Malcolm Cole. She closed her eyes and called up his image in her mind. He was tall and hard and had the kind of face that model agencies would kill to sign; chiseled, strong, and manly. Then there were those eyes. Those *damned* eyes! They ate her up inside. Every time she was near him, he ignited something within her. In the club, when they'd first met, on the sidewalk when she'd run from him, in the car after escaping Phelan and his warlock, and even out in the main room of the hotel's suite, his gaze had done her in. While surrounded by Lily Kane and men who were apparently members of Cole's pack, the British werewolf's very presence had caused Charlie's stomach to tighten, her chest to feel strangely heavy, and her pulse to race. She'd actually experienced a bit of dizziness.

Lord, he made her hot. And wet....

And she knew that he knew it, too.

It wasn't fair. It was senseless. How could she be thinking about him at a time like this? The world was spinning out of control! Far too much was happening!

Gabriel Phelan had murdered her parents. The gods only knew what he wanted to do with her as well. He was still out there somewhere, along with that warlock, Seth and his red, glowing eyes and sharp, white fangs.

And Jessie was a *werewolf*!

That one, she had a hard time wrapping her head around. She knew in her heart that Jessie hadn't meant to hurt her. He would never willingly or knowingly hurt her. Not really. But when he'd drawn her into his arms on the green at the Silverstone golf course, her immediate, knee-jerk reaction had been to pull away – to escape the sudden pain that his touch had caused.

It wasn't as bad as Gabriel's had been – nowhere near as bad. But it was icing on her pain cake and she'd known what it meant. She'd been so stunned, so caught off guard. How many years had she known him? How close were they?

She'd even slept with him. He'd touched her in ways that she had never let any other man touch her. And all that time, he had been something more than human.

Had he been able to smell her when she was turned on? Could he smell her fear? Had he been able to hear her heart beat? What else did he know about her that she hadn't told him? And *why*? *Why* was he a werewolf? *Why* was a werewolf her best friend? What did he want?

In the end, she had needed her best friend's touch. She'd needed the solidness of him, to know that he was there, and to feel the familiar safeness that always wrapped around her when he held her secure in his arms. So, she'd ducked her head into his chest and forced herself to ignore the pain.

She was getting used to it, anyway.

She shook her head now, as if to clear it. She sighed and opened the door of the bathroom. Beyond, a lush private room awaited and new clothes were draped over the end of the king-sized bed. They had been purchased for her at the forum shops beneath Caesar's palace. Lily had picked them out. Lily had excellent taste, as far as Charlie was concerned. There were Lucky jeans, and an Ed Hardy T-shirt; Ed Hardy was big in Vegas. A Victoria's Secret lace bra and panties joined the outfit, along with a new pair of slip-on Converse sneakers. Charlie smiled and picked up the shoes, always happy to receive a new pair. She turned them over to find what she knew she would find there. A Christian Audigier signature.

Definitely big in Vegas.

She put the shoes back down and began to dress. As she did, her thoughts once more wandered.

Her friends were alive and she was out of Phelan's grasp for now, but there was a wealth of Big Bad waiting outside her proverbial door. All she had to do was mistakenly unlock it, and she would be trampled under Evil's foot in its race to subjugate her world.

Any sane person in her situation would believe they'd gone mad at this point. Sanity was a fickle thing sometimes, here today and quietly ushered away tomorrow. But Charlie had lost that gentle, complacent sanity long ago. The majority of the submissive logic that was so easily waylaid by a changing world and things "not dreamt of in our philosophy" had slipped away from Charlie when she was twelve years old. It had drifted off on a silent wind as Charlie stood with her godmother in a vast cemetery wearing a yellow dress because it had been her mother's favorite color. The rest had gone missing over the last forty-eight hours, and she knew that she would never see it again.

What was left in its place was a toughness that most people only dreamed about. It was a kind of hard-rock, diamond-edged acceptance that realized the world was not as two-dimensional as we are lead to believe, and that just because you'd never

seen something didn't mean it wasn't real.

Charlie took the towel out of her hair, pulled on her new jeans, and slipped on her shoes. Then she made her way to the window and looked out through new, wiser eyes at the world beyond.

The sun was going down in the distance, its last defiant rays glinting off of the Bellagio fountains down below. Across the street, the Paris Hotel's Eiffel Tower turned blue beneath the fading light, and the darkening horizon brought the neon lights of the Strip to stark, gorgeous life. From up here, just now, it seemed that Vegas was the only city in the world.

"It's rather lovely, isn't it?"

Charlie turned at the sound of the British voice, deep and low and practically laced with sex. She tried to hide the shiver it sent through her spine, but she knew it was pointless. He was a werewolf, right? He could probably hear her heart hammering behind her rib cage.

Would it always do that when he was around?

He smiled at her, flashing perfect white teeth, and she hugged herself. She smiled back, a little nervously.

He was dressed in light beige linen pants and a long-sleeved white linen shirt, the sleeves rolled up to expose two leather bands around his wrists. When Charlie's gaze fell on the bands, her smile wavered.

Lily had told her about those. Cole's curse.

"I've always loved the twilight view from the Bellagio towers," he said softly as he shoved his hands in his pockets and came forward. His green-eyed gaze skirted from her to the view beyond.

She watched him move through the room to stand beside her at the windows, a tall, powerful figure of grace.

"When you're up here, at this time, it seems you're looking down on the only city in the world." He spoke so softly, it was nearly a whisper.

Charlie blinked. That was exactly what she had been thinking about Vegas. *Oh, no! Don't tell me he can read my mind, on top of everything else!*

He glanced down at her and frowned. "Charlie? Did I say something?" His beautiful features were suddenly etched with concern. His jade green eyes appeared so soulful that she knew at once he was being genuine. He hadn't read her mind. They just had something else in common.

"No," she told him, shaking her head and turning to look out at the lights below. "I was just thinking the same exact thing." She glanced back up at him again, and managed another smile, this one not quite as nervous. "That's all."

He looked relieved and his own smile was back. It was killer. "Have you ever seen the fountains, luv?"

Charlie frowned. "I'm seeing them right now," she said, not understanding.

His smile broadened. "Ah. Well, then. It's settled. I'll take you down myself."

Charlie blinked. "What do you mean?" She could see the fountains very well from where she was standing. The room had the most incredible view. *It must cost a*

fortune.

"I wouldn't spoil the surprise," he told her confidently. His voice continued to send shivers through Charlie's body, and the mark on her arm was warming up, sending rivulets of pleasure up her arm and across her chest. It felt very good. "However first," he continued, turning fully toward her and compelling her to look up at him once more, "there is someone in the next room who very much wishes to speak with you."

Charlie's heart sank. She didn't want to speak with anyone else. Lily Kane had been very kind and it was clear to Charlie that the woman knew what she was doing when it came to people who had been through traumatic events. However, Charlie was all talked-out. She was sort of numb and more than a little tired. Could there really be anything else in the world that anyone could tell her right now that hadn't already been bomb-shelled on her over the course of the last two days?

"Who?" she asked. It was all she could really muster. She kind of didn't want to know.

As if sensing her hesitation and weariness, Cole's smile became reassuring. He leaned toward her and offered her his hand. "Trust me."

It was a strange request; a little disconcerting. And yet, Charlie found herself flushing beneath it. He wanted her trust. She'd never before given anyone but Jessie her complete trust. It was as if Cole knew that by asking this of her, he was asking for everything she could really give. He was asking for all of her. That was what he wanted. *All* of her.

It made Charlie feel very special. Coveted.

She couldn't help the rush of heat that climbed her neck and painted her cheeks pink. Her nipples were hard against her lace bra and t-shirt when she hesitantly ducked her head and accepted the hand he offered.

His fingers were cool and strong and wrapped possessively around hers. The heat that had stolen across her chest suddenly raced up her arm and down her stomach to coil between her legs. Her breath caught in her throat, and she jerked her head up, her eyes searching for his.

Cole's smile was gone. His eyes had darkened, the pupils at their centers expanding to encompass most of the green. It seemed that shadows had angled across his face, forcing his handsome features into stark lines. He looked hungry. He looked very much the wolf.

Charlie swallowed, audibly forcing the lump in her throat back down from where it had climbed. There was no hiding the tremor in her body now. There was no denying the moisture that was pooling between her legs. She could barely breathe.

Fortunately, Malcolm Cole seemed to possess faculties that Charlie had somehow lost when he touched her. He straightened and pulled his keen gaze from her own, though his grip on her hand did not ease. She knew instinctively that if she'd tried to pull away from him in that moment, he would not have let go.

He turned away from her and lead her across the room toward the door. She followed, if somewhat reluctantly, but a touch relieved to have an out from the

situation. His heat was stifling.

Malcolm piloted her through the door and down the short hallway beyond, to the living and dining room area of the two bedroom, four bathroom suite. As they entered, Charlie's gaze locked on the tall man who was standing at the windows.

She could sense Malcolm Cole's power, like a massive mountain casting his shadow over the flat topography of the rest of the planet. She'd sensed the same kind of power in James Valentine. However, *this* man overshadowed both of them. Perhaps put together.

Charlie found her legs locking in place, refusing to allow her to go any further. As if sensing that she was there and that she had noticed him, the man at the windows turned to face her.

When his ice-blue eyes met hers, Charlie's world fell out from under her. He was the spitting image of her father.

"Charlie, allow me to introduce Mr. Alexander Kavanagh," Cole said. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, drawing her gaze to his. "Your grandfather," he finished, softly.

Charlie could feel her eyes grow wide and her jaw drop, but she was still frozen in place. Malcolm's reassuring smile was back and he nodded toward Kavanagh, releasing Charlie's hand.

It took her a moment to regain her ability to move. When she did, she turned to look at the man across the room. He offered her a smile of his own. It was also her father's smile.

And then the world cracked open and the levies broke and, quite suddenly, Charlie's eyes were filled with tears. She could feel Cole move away from her and out of the room, leaving her alone with the man that she had long thought was dead. It was what her parents had always told her.

"Hello, Charlie," Kavanagh said. His voice rolled over her like a thousand hugs, soothing and warm and comforting. It felt the way hot chocolate tastes. The way Beethoven sounds. Like the New York skyline to world-weary eyes.

His smile was gentle, his light blue eyes filled with moisture of their own. "We have a lot to talk about."

* * * *

Malcolm left the hotel room and strode down the hall toward the elevators. He needed some fresh air. Of course, in order to get to the fresh air downstairs, he would have to walk through the casino, which sported anything but fresh air. But it would have to do. The walk would do him some good as well. It was either that, or a cold shower.

He pushed the button for the elevator and ran a hand through his hair, forcing himself to breathe deeply. In. Out.

Christ.

All he'd done was hold her hand. One little touch and he was lit up like a firecracker. Every muscle in his body was tensed to the point of pain. His gums ached where his fangs threatened to lengthen, and it took nearly every ounce of self

control he possessed to keep his dick from sucking up all of the blood in his body.

Need was riding him hard. No Dormant had ever, ever, smelled as good as Claire St.James did, and the woman bore his mark. There was absolutely no part of Cole that didn't feel like claiming her now, here – in this hotel room, before the clock struck its next hour.

He had to calm down. He had to find a way to give Charlie the time she needed.

The elevator doors pinged open and Cole frowned. As he stepped into the lift, he thought of the way she'd reacted to his touch. She'd been just as turned on as he was. He'd been able to scent her arousal. He could hear her pulse quicken, her breath catch. He'd seen the desire in the fathomless blue of her eyes. She wanted him. He would bet every last dollar he possessed at any table downstairs on those stakes.

But Lily was right. Charlie didn't know what she was getting herself into. If he took her to bed, he would not be able to stop himself from turning her. She would become a werewolf, and there was a slight possibility that she did not fully realize those consequences, or had not come to fully accept them.

He gritted his teeth as the elevator doors opened again and he stepped into the foyer beyond.

Lily Kane was waiting for him. Cole stopped in his tracks and automatically looked around, searching for Valentine. As he'd expected, he found the guardian werewolf several meters away, speaking softly on his cell phone. Cole eavesdropped for only a moment – long enough to confirm his suspicions that it was Daniel Kane's sister, Tabitha, to whom James was speaking.

Then he turned his attention back to Lily, who had been watching him with interest.

"We need to talk, Cole," she said.

"It's Malcolm, luv. And what horribly bad news are you going to give me now? Is the Bellagio about to go up in flames? Has Gabriel Phelan killed me in one of your visions?" He raised his brows and waited, once more shoving his hands into his pockets.

Lily pursed her lips and put her hands on her hips. "Look, I miss my son, Cole. I want to go home and I want to have sex with my husband. I'm only here right now because I'm trying to help you." She shifted on her feet and shrugged. "And because I like Charlie and I want her to be happy."

Malcolm stared at her. He had to admit that she'd gotten between the joints in his armor with that one. He was quite impressed that she'd been as bone-deep honest with him as she just had. She genuinely seemed to want to help him. Maybe they were making progress.

"Okay," he ventured, slowly. "What do we need to talk about?"

"Walk with me. I can't stand the smoke here." Lily turned and started to head toward the exits across the casino. Cole followed. He had nowhere else to go anyway.

As he moved, he noticed that the members of his pack were spread throughout

the casino. Some were at the tables. Others were at the slot machines. All of them were aware of him and met his gaze as he found them. They were ever the loyal wolves, ready to help their leader at a moment's notice. It did bring him a bit of comfort.

"Cole, I know that your basic instinct right now is to just take Charlie and make her your mate before waiting for some other calamity to strike –"

"But you think it would be best for me to wait. That she's fragile and needs time to heal," Cole interrupted her, guessing what she was about to say.

"Actually," Lily said flatly, "no."

Cole stopped in his tracks and pinned her with a confused expression. "What?"

"I think you should go with your gut on this one."

"You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"No. Listen." She moved in a little, took his elbow, and began to steer him once more toward the exit. Clearly, she wanted out of the casino. "If Charlie were a human, I would tell you to leave her the hell alone. I would tell *every* man to leave her alone. She's been through too much and all of it was at the hand of one very sadistic man. She would need time to heal, and lots of it."

She paused and Cole waited. "But?"

"*But*," Lily continued, "She's not human. She's a female-born. And you guys work differently. Werewolves are wired differently. At the most basic level, you are animals and you need to know that the natural world continues, no matter what else happens. It's a constant in a man-made chaos. A werewolf shows love and support in different ways than a man or a woman, Cole. And I think that deep down, she understands that. Almost more than she understands human ways." She paused again, as if searching for the right words. "I think it's the reason she is the way she is. She's special. She doesn't even know how special she is."

"You're telling me that I should turn her tonight."

"No time like the present," Lily said, softly. "And she's not immune to your charms, Cole. She really likes you. She has for a long time. She dreamed about you."

Cole blinked. His jaw dropped open. "She saw me? In...." He stumbled to silence, swallowed hard, and started again. "She saw me in her... her –"

"Yes." Lily smiled at his sudden, shocked expression. "She did. And I think I can safely say that she enjoyed those dreams."

Cole still couldn't speak. He was too flabbergasted. That Charlie had dreamt of him was like having fate put the stamp of approval on their union. A Dormant dreams of the man she's meant to be with. And all this time, Cole had been dealing with a deep-down, barely squelched guilt that he had been stealing her from someone else.

Again, Lily laughed. "Looks like I'm off the hook now." She moved away from him and walked toward Valentine, who had followed them at a discreet distance and was waiting for her at the end of the aisle.

Malcolm watched her go. She took Valentine's hand and glanced back at him over her shoulder. "I wish you the best of luck, Malcolm. You deserve it."

And then Valentine led her out of the casino and into the Las Vegas night.

Chapter Fifteen, *The Pair*

It took a moment for Malcolm to realize that, after nearly three years, Lily Kane, formerly, Lily St. Claire, had finally used his first name. She was giving him her blessing; letting him move on.

Outside, the fountains gave off their sonic booms as they sprayed high into the night, thrilling audiences that had lined up along Las Vegas Boulevard. Some store front was playing "New York, New York," despite it being the wrong city. It was the spirit of the thing, he guessed.

Inside, several people's pulses sped up and Cole could hear the distant static buzz of radio communication. Someone had just won big at a craps table.

Upstairs, Claire St.James was meeting her grandfather for the first time, and her grandfather just happened to be the Overseer. He was the single most powerful and influential werewolf in existence.

Cole took it all in and ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. A group of women began to make their way toward him and he sent them away with nothing more than flick of his supernatural command. He wasn't in the mood tonight.

"Join me for a beer?" Jake was beside him, and as always, the man knew what Cole needed.

"Right." Cole led the way out of the Casino and down the street, to an open patio bar with music loud enough that he could hide from his thoughts for a while.

Once they'd seated themselves and ordered, Jake leaned forward and folded his hands on the table. "So, the Overseer is Charlie's grandfather."

It wasn't a question, but it was certainly an invitation for elaboration. Cole smiled a slightly lopsided smile and leaned forward, himself. Anyone watching them from out on the street would have taken them for performers in one of Vegas's many shows. Perhaps a Cirque routine. Off for the night and probably gay.

"That he is," Cole replied. "And I would give a year's royalties to be a fly on the wall in that room right now."

"You think he's going to tell her to go back with him to Council headquarters?"

Malcolm thought about that. "I bloody well hope not." Because if he did, then the Council was going to have one really angry alpha werewolf on their hands. "But I doubt it." After all, Charlie had dreamed of him. If any one werewolf in the world had the authority to mess with a fate like that, it would be the Overseer. But, somehow, Malcolm didn't think Kavanagh would do that. He would want what was best for his granddaughter, and she wore Cole's mark. That wasn't a comfortable position for her to be stalled in. It was best if they moved on and took the next step.

Charlie was a formidable female-born as it was. She'd broken his nose in a head-butt the likes of which he'd only ever seen in movies. She ran nearly as fast as he did. As a werewolf, there was no telling how strong or how powerful she would be. At the very least, she would be far more capable of defending herself against Phelan or any other Hunter that might cross her path.

The waitress brought their beers and then paused, turning to Malcolm as if she recognized him. She was about to ask him something when she suddenly stilled,

closed her mouth, and then smiled a vague, friendly smile and walked away.

Jake watched her go. He shook his head. "You're one cruel British bastard, you know that?"

Malcolm shrugged and took a swig of his beer.

"You may have a date lined up for tonight, but / don't. Lay off the chicks. You're probably jumbling things up inside their brains."

Malcolm smiled at this and pinned his second-in-command with a glittering gaze. "What happened to Mary Jane? Charlie's friend?"

Jake chewed on his cheek and averted his gaze. He was instantly nervous. Embarrassed, even. "She... Sort of... Doesn't want to see me again."

Malcolm's brow rose. He was all interest now. "Oh?"

Jake sighed heavily and took a long, deep pull of his own beer. When he'd finished, he set it down a little hard. His tone was edgy when he spoke. "She woke up next to me and freaked out and wanted to know where Charlie was."

"Go on," Malcolm smiled.

Jake shot him a withering look. "I told her not to worry about her friend and that she could take care of herself." He looked at Malcolm wide-eyed, his hands splayed up. "What was I supposed to do? You wanted her out of the way, right?" He shook his head, then. "That's when she went ballistic. She wanted to know who you were and if we were together and, when she couldn't reach Charlie on the phone, she threatened to call the police."

"Bugger," Malcolm said, smiling behind the beer he once more brought to his lips. "She's a live wire." He took a drink and then asked, "She call the cops?"

Jake's gaze darkened. "Yes."

Malcolm laughed out-right, throwing his head back as his deep laughter rumbled around them, drawing covetous looks from many of the women – and men – in the cantina. When he'd finished, he cocked his head to one side and pushed his empty beer to the edge of the table, where it could be picked up and replaced with a full one.

"What did you do?"

"Why do you think it took me so long to get back to you? I kissed her again, much to her surprise, and when I had the control over her I needed, I made her tell the cops she'd made a mistake. She was convincing, too."

"And you say I'm a bastard."

Jake had no answer to that. He hid his flush behind his beer and finished it off, setting it at the edge of the table alongside Malcolm's. Then his gaze flicked to the other side of the cantina and the color drained from his face. "Oh shit. Speak of the she-devil."

Malcolm turned in his chair to find that Mary Jane and her two male band mates were climbing the stairs to the main area of the cantina. She looked fetching in a tight black t-shirt, tight black jeans, and knee-high boots with what had to be more than four inches of heel. Her straight black hair shimmered enticingly beneath the strung lights in the bar, and her lips were as red as rubies.

"She's on the prowl my good man," Malcolm muttered under his breath, and then shot Jake a warning look.

Jake sat back in his chair and he and Cole thanked the waitress as she dropped off two fresh beers. Jake grabbed the one nearest him and brought it to his lips, eyeing Mary Jane over the top of it.

Cole listened carefully and caught the sound of Jake's pulse quickening. There was a new tension rolling off of the blonde werewolf now. Malcolm studied his second-in-command as he watched the woman he'd slept with talk to several other humans, two of which were men who immediately offered to buy her drinks.

Her band mates shooed them away. More or less. They were just sort of scary looking. Especially the tall one with the dreads. But Malcolm had the distinct impression, based on the hard, unforgiving angles of his friend's face and the way his jaw was set with such determination, that if the men hadn't left, Jake would have *made* them leave.

"You gonna make a move on her, Jake, or sit here all day, pining for her?" Cole suddenly asked, his cool British accent slicing through Jake's obviously heated thoughts. Jake pulled the beer from his lips and shot Malcolm an irritated look.

"Oh come on," Cole continued, sitting back and taking his own beer from the table to hold it in his lap. "You want her. So, go get her. She's probably forgotten all about the cop thing."

Just then, Mary Jane caught sight of the two of them at the other end of the outdoor seating area, and her dark brown eyes narrowed. She turned toward them and her blood-red lips curled into a smile.

"Oh fuck," Jake muttered.

"*Truly*," Malcolm's smile broadened as he took another long pull of his beer and watched Mary Jane make her way through the tables toward them. He heard Jake fidget in his chair and saw him, in his peripheral vision, running a hand through his thick blonde locks.

"Boys?" Mary Jane greeted softly as she sidled up to their table and put her hands on her hips. Her two male companions eyed Malcolm and Jake with outright suspicion and distrust.

"MJ," Jake nodded at her, his tone cool, but his amber eyes flashing with promise.

Malcolm put his beer back down and leaned back, draping his hands over his rock-hard abs. He wasn't at all surprised when Mary Jane turned her dark gaze on him.

"What did you do to Charlie, asshole?" she asked softly, making certain that her tone remained conversational, even if her words had bite.

Malcolm flashed teeth. "Nothing she didn't want me to, *luv*. She's back at the Bellagio right now... *resting*." His tone intimated much.

"No she's not, you lying fuck. I just got off the phone with her. She's having a heart to heart with a grandfather that she didn't know existed. So, wipe the smug smirk off

of your pretty face.” Again, her tone was very light, and again, her words were acidic, dripping venom.

Jake’s brow lifted a notch. A smile pulled at the corners of his sensuous lips.

Malcolm could now see what Jake liked in Mary Jane. She had fire, and lots of it. She also wasn’t stupid. He sighed and stood. “Very well, then,” he said as he dropped a wad of bills on the table and began to turn away. “I give you two my blessing.”

Across the table, Jake’s amber eyes bored holes into him. Malcolm couldn’t deny the thrill he got by leaving his second-in-command to such an uncertain fate. The poor devil. He was definitely outmatched.

Malcolm left the table, brushing past the two men with Mary Jane. Each of them locked gazes with him as he went by, and he could read the dark promises there. Charlie’s friends were loyal, and they didn’t want anyone messing with her.

He nodded at them, sent out a few tendrils of his power, and hoped that the reassurance he’d attached to them would find its way into their minds.

When the men blinked and seemed to relax, he knew it had worked.

As he walked back across the cantina, he could feel Jake’s gaze burning into his back, but he knew it was better this way. The werewolf needed to deal with his own girl issues without any unsolicited help.

And Malcolm needed to see Charlie.

* * * *

Charlie hung up the phone, turned it off, and flung it on the couch. Then she turned an apologetic expression to the man sitting across from her.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just that when I saw it was her, I knew she needed to hear my voice, and I was right. She’d been worried sick about me.”

Alexander Kavanagh smiled an understanding smile and shook his head. “Think nothing of it, Charlie. I don’t blame you one bit. I had to call my wife from the elevator. She has to hear from me every hour or she vows that she’ll send the Council’s enforcers out after me.” Alexander shook his head, his blue eyes laughing. “I swear, the power has gone to her head.”

“You have a wife?” Charlie asked. Her grandmother – her father’s mother – had been dead since before Charlie was born. At least, that was what she’d been told. Then again, she’d been told that her grandfather was dead, too.

“Yes,” he said softly. “She’s my second wife, Charlie. We’ve been together for almost thirty years. We married seventeen years after your grandmother died.” He paused as she took this in. And then, gently, he added, “You would have liked your grandmother, Charlie. She was just like you; full of spirit and tough as nails. You’re the spitting image of her, in fact. I’m sorry that you never got to meet.”

Charlie stared at the floor for a moment. She tried to conjure up the image of a woman who had been alive fifty years ago, but it was hard. She was tired, and her mind kept sliding back to Malcolm and his light green eyes.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were alive?” she suddenly asked, surprising even herself. She hadn’t known the question was there, on the tip of her tongue, until her

mind spit it out and her mouth had to obey.

The silence in the room stretched and Charlie looked up. Her grandfather was watching her carefully, his blue eyes filled with secrets and wisdom and probably things that nobody would believe, even if they knew about them. But his smile was gentle and more than a touch remorseful.

"I thought about it," he said, softly. His deep gravelly voice felt like the entire desert and all of its harsh heat and deadly beauty and hidden treasures, wrapped up and shoved into the small space occupied by a single tall, well-built man. "But your father had wanted you raised as a human. It was why I'd never introduced myself to you before. I knew that you would be able to sense my...." He trailed off, as if searching for the right word. He was too humble.

She helped him out. "Power?" she offered.

He chuckled and had the decency to blush. "I suppose so," he said, nodding. "He'd told me that you were a Dormant. It was unheard of until you came along. You're the first, Charlie. The first female-born to also be able to make the Change." He sighed and stretched out his legs in front of him. His expensive, tailored suit slid along his well-muscled body like silk over a statue. "Well, your father was outright scared of what the combination might do to you. He didn't want any alpha anywhere near you." Again, he chuckled, and it was such a deep, resonating and contagious sound that Charlie almost joined him.

"I can't blame him, really. If I'd had a daughter instead of a son, I would have felt the same way." Here, he paused, and his expression took on a meaningful cast. His blue eyes darkened, just a touch. "So, he wanted to hide you away. And he was successful, for the most part." He looked down at the floor now, and seemed to be seeing something in another place and time. "At least, until he and your mother were killed."

Charlie swallowed. A lump had formed in her throat, and it hurt a little. "By Phelan."

Kavanagh's gaze snapped back up, and the light blue of his eyes was now glowing as if someone had lit a fire inside of an iceberg. "Yes," he said.

Charlie's breath caught in her throat. His gaze was so utterly stark in the handsome setting of his face that it fairly stunned her. She could see why he was the Overseer. The power rolling off of him now was stifling. She felt hot and cold, at once. She felt dizzy and short of breath.

Like she was having a panic attack.

As if suddenly aware of the effect that his anger was having on her, Kavanagh stood and reigned in his influence. She could feel it sliding off of her, uncoiling from her body and everything around her. How he did it, she would never know, but she was grateful.

Now she could breathe.

"I'm so sorry, Charlie. I didn't mean to lose control." Kavanagh sighed and moved once more to the floor-to-ceiling windows across the room. The Las Vegas skyline seduced from below, inviting revelers with a siren song of lights and movement,

music and magic.

"I loved my son very much," he told her, softly.

"And I loved my father."

At this, Alexander turned and pinned her with a somewhat startled expression. He gazed at her in wonder, as if seeing her – truly seeing her – for the first time. And then he smiled again and nodded. Once. "You're a strong young woman, Charlie. I'll give you that."

Charlie stood too, and ran a hand through her hair. Then she hugged herself and asked the question she'd really been dying to ask since she'd learned he was the Overseer and the only one who would for certain know the answer. "Who is Jessie Graves?"

Alexander blinked, and then his shoulders sank a touch. He sighed heavily and shoved his hands into the pockets of his suit pants. "He's a Sentinel. Your Sentinel, right now. And he's been watching over you for many years."

"How many?"

He waited a good long while before replying. He obviously didn't want to answer this question. But in the end, he capitulated. "Since you were twelve," he admitted, softly. "The day your parents died."

Charlie's heart stopped beating – and then started up again, *hard*. She felt dizzy, light-headed. She sat down on the couch, not even realizing she was doing so. Her fingers dug into the leather and she closed her eyes. "You mean to tell me that he's known me since I was... since I was a *child*?"

"Yes." Again, he sighed and moved away from the windows. "Charlie, there is much about the werewolf community that you have yet to learn. Sentinels are complicated beings, even by our terms. Graves is the oldest and most powerful among the watchers. That was why I chose him for your job."

"Hold on." She held up her hands and kept her eyes closed. "I need a minute here." And she did; that much was true. She had trusted Jessie. With *everything*. And he'd been lying to her, in so many ways, all along. It was too much.

"If it helps at all, Charlie, he didn't have a choice. I wouldn't have allowed him to bend down where you were concerned. I needed my best man for this, and he was it. If there is anyone who needs your forgiveness, it is I. Not Graves."

At that, Charlie looked up, and she knew that the pain she felt in her heart was reflected in her eyes. She knew, because her grandfather looked as if he'd been hit with a physical blow. His expression was pained with regret.

"You don't know," she said, softly, so that her voice wouldn't crack, "you have no idea what we... how I..."

"I have an idea, little one," Kavanagh whispered. And then he was coming across the room and she could feel his presence drawing nearer. His physical form was preceded by a wave of comfort, warm and reassuring, just as it had felt when she'd first laid eyes upon him.

Charlie gave in to it, welcomed it, and did not move away when he sat beside her and slowly, tenderly, drew her into his arms.

It didn't hurt. Not that she'd expected his touch to hurt. It was just that she was wearing Cole's mark and she knew her grandfather was a werewolf – a powerful one. Undoubtedly an alpha.

But she guessed that family didn't count when it came to a mate's mark. And as she rested her head against his chest, she was eternally grateful for that. It would have really pissed her off if, on top of everything else, she hadn't been able to hug the only family she had left in the world. She would have had to kill Cole.

And she didn't want to kill him.

She wanted to other things to him. With him. She wanted to – well, she wanted to....

"Cole is a good man," her grandfather suddenly said. His voice rumbled in the chest beneath her cheek, the vibration reminding her of a Harley's engine. She pulled away and looked up at him.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, wondering once more if a werewolf could read her mind.

"Actually Charlie," he looked sheepish for a moment. "I can."

Charlie blinked. *He can what?*

"I can read your thoughts," he repeated, stating the fact as if he were admitting that he'd once been a boy scout or had graduated Magna Cum Laude from Harvard Law.

He didn't give her time to dwell on it, though. Instead, he expanded upon what he'd said earlier. "Malcolm Cole has been through a lot, as I'm sure Mrs. Kane has told you."

Numbly, Charlie nodded. But her eyes were golf-balls in her lovely face.

"He's earned the high regard and respect of every member of Council, including myself. And that's not easy, Charlie. I'll admit that his ways are unorthodox at times, and that he often lacks subtlety. But I also know that when a wolf is powerful within a man, he is bound to be ruled by it once in a while. And Cole's wolf is powerful, indeed."

"You can read my thoughts?"

Alexander laughed softly once more. He nodded. "Yes, little one. Each werewolf is born with different powers. Some are more useful than others." He shrugged, as if it were no big deal. "The ability to read a person's mind is one of mine. Please don't let it bother you, child. I've grown quite used to filtering out things I don't need."

"You can read minds.... Holy hallelujah." She suddenly felt as if she needed to hide everything from him. She tried to think of sunflowers. Bees. Summer. The color yellow.... But then she was thinking of her mother. And the funeral.

And David Reese. Gabriel Phelan.

When her grandfather's visage darkened in response to her thoughts, she knew she'd lost the battle.

"He will be found, Charlie. And he will be brought to justice. This, I promise."

There was a knock on the door then. Kavanagh straightened, obviously not

surprised. He took a deep breath and managed a small smile for his granddaughter. "Come in, Cole." He gave the order and Malcolm Cole slid a key card into the door on the other side. He opened it and stepped into the foyer.

Charlie's heart rate immediately sped up. Their eyes met and she was trapped; a doe in emerald headlights. For the thousandth time, she was struck with how handsome he was. It took her breath away. No man had ever looked like him. His face was something out of her very own wet dreams. And those eyes of his... *Christ*, did she ever love his eyes. And he smelled good. Every time she was near him, she was overwhelmed with the sense of him. He smelled like fog and the beach and sailing ships and leather and some wonderful, expensive hint of cologne, and after shave and –

Beside her, her grandfather shifted and stood up.

Instantly, Charlie ripped her gaze from Malcolm's and looked up at the Overseer. A horrid heat crept across her cheeks and neck. She was furiously blushing, his presence suddenly reminding her that he could read her thoughts. He'd most likely read every one of the less-than-demure thoughts she'd just entertained.

Charlie stifled a moan and looked down to stare steadfastly at the floor as Kavanagh crossed the room to speak with Cole. She overheard them say something softly to one another, and then her grandfather was leaving. Cole shut the door behind him.

They were alone.

Charlie's head snapped up when she heard Malcolm bolt the door and set the latch. She knew he could hear her breathing from across the room. She couldn't control her pulse or the air moving swiftly in and out of her lungs. She couldn't stop the thin sheen of sweat that suddenly broke out along her brow and made her t-shirt feel too hot. She wanted to take it off. And her bra.

Across the room, Cole turned to face her fully, his light green eyes expertly taking in every single move she made. No woman in the world would be able to keep from melting beneath that gaze. For Charlie, who wore his mark, it was worlds worse.

He started toward her, his stride slow and easy. One hand was in his pocket. With the other, he set the card key on a table against one wall and then dimmed the lights.

Charlie's lips parted and moisture gathered between her legs when she realized that there was only one reason in the world that Malcolm Cole would have both dimmed the lights and locked the door.

There was no escape for her now.

"Tell me to leave, Charlie," he told her, his low tone a gentle warning and a hard seduction wrapped into one. "Tell me now, because you won't have the chance again."

Oh Jesus... oh holy shit...

Charlie couldn't think straight. Her thoughts were a jumbled, frantic mess. But, even as her mind was spinning wildly out of control, her body knew what to do. Her body, at least, knew what it wanted. So, she drew a shaky breath and forced the

words out of her mouth.

"I don't want you to leave, Malcolm. I... I want," she swallowed, not sure whether she could even finish saying what it was she really wanted to say. "I want you to make me forget everything else. Everyone else." She tried again to look at the floor, but this time he held her fast and would not allow her to look away.

Malcolm had stopped in his tracks and his expression was now unreadable. However, his gaze continued to burn, and the pupils at the centers of his stark eyes were expanding. It made him look hungry. Almost mean.

Charlie shifted under the intense, nearly painful scrutiny of those darkening green eyes. And when the silence stretched, she began to wish that she'd never spoken, or that she'd asked him to leave after all.

But when she brought her arms up to hug herself in her discomfort, his voice cut through the space between them and once more froze her in place.

"Stop." He had spoken very softly, and yet she jerked a little with the force of the command. "Don't hide yourself from me, Charlie," he told her, his low tone a touch beseeching. "Not from me."

Charlie swallowed hard. She was beginning to ever so slightly tremble, but he continued to run her through with his piercing gaze, offering no respite. And then he spoke again, and his next soft command snaked around her like a vice, a coil of steel wrapped in plush velvet. "Take off your clothes."

Charlie couldn't move. A very big part of her wanted to do what he said. But another part of her was afraid of the exposure, on so many levels. He had yet to see her without her clothes. What if he didn't like what he saw? She was very fair; what if pale skin wasn't his thing?

"I believe they are new, Charlie, and I doubt that you wish to see them destroyed," he told her, his tone decidedly, expertly calm, even as the air around them nearly crackled with his presence. "So, take them off." The order was crisp and simple and it made Charlie's panties stick to her body with warm, wet anticipation. This was what she had always dreamed of. Malcolm Cole and his eyes had invaded her sleep for so long. He was the one she was meant to be with. He was also a perfectly dominant male who cared for her, would protect her, and who knew what she needed and could give it to her. He was her intended, and she had been born to do this.

It was surreal. It was too perfect. And it was turning her insides to molten magma.

Charlie closed her eyes and drew in a shaky breath. As she let it out, she curled her fingers under the hem of her t-shirt and pulled it up over her stomach, her breasts, and then her head. With her eyes still shut, she took it in one hand and let it drop to the floor.

She could hear herself swallow past the lump that had formed in her throat and she wasn't surprised to open her eyes and look down and find that sweat had pooled between her breasts and dampened the lace of her new bra.

Without glancing back up at him, she began to unbutton the front of her jeans. She tried not to think about what she was doing. She tried not to think about the way her skin felt chilled in the air conditioned room and the way her nipples were so dark

and visible against the fabric of her bra. If she stopped to consider her actions, if she dared to look up and once more get caught in the heat of his gaze, she would falter.

So, she finished unbuttoning the jeans and then curled her thumbs over the waist band on either side of her hips. Slowly, she pushed the jeans down over her hips, over the swell of her bottom, and then let them pool at her Ed Hardy Conversees.

As she stepped out of them, she slipped her feet out of her shoes, and touched her bare toes to the thick, plush carpet behind them.

She desperately wanted to hug herself then. She wanted to hide, and she felt both unbelievably hot and cold at the same time. Tremors of anticipation and apprehension racked through her tall, lithe body, and the tension coiling in her stomach forced her muscles to contract.

She would never know the effect that the sight of her standing there, all lean muscle and soft, damp, glowing skin had on the alpha werewolf before her. She would never be quite fully aware. But she could sense a change in the air. It made her dizzy. She thought she might faint, so in an effort to obey his order not to cover herself, she backed up toward the window and pressed her palms against it for support.

A low, barely audible growl reverberated from across the room and Charlie's eyes flew open. The planes of Malcolm's face were sharp and shadowed, his visage the very essence of animalistic need. Still, his tone was soft when he spoke to her. "Come here," he quietly commanded.

Charlie's eyes widened. Her breathing sped up, and her natural defiance rose to the occasion, forever wanting to play the game. She shook her head, a small movement, and that dark emerald gaze narrowed.

"Charlie," he repeated, his rich accented tone the essence of calm authority and control. "Come. Here."

The air in the room seemed to heat up, becoming electric and muggy. Cole's domination coursed through the space between them, an unbearable heaviness that achieved so much more with mere words than most men could ever hope to accomplish with ropes or chains. It brooked no further resistance.

Charlie closed her eyes and forced her body to move. One step. Another. She opened her eyes again and her stomach clenched, her nipples hardening into painful nubs against the now-scratchy lace of her bra. Her skin felt flushed, her nerve endings raw against what little scraps of clothing were left on her body.

Cole's eyes continued to claim her, never wavering, never letting up, and heat routed its way through her body, carving a path of ruthless need across her chest, her abdomen, and between her legs. Moisture continued to gather there, soaking her new lace panties.

She stopped a few feet from him, utterly unable to go any further.

The world was suddenly blurring around her as one of his hands fisted in her hair and the other firmly wrapped around her neck and her body was shoved up against the nearest wall, his tall, hard form pressing her into the paint and plaster behind her.

She gasped in painful surprise and then failed in suppressing a moan of

unadverted need and pleasure as his grip around her neck tightened and his knee forced her legs apart until her wetness was resting on the long, hard muscle of his thigh.

He lowered his lips to her ear and the words he whispered sent shivers shock-waving through her trapped body. "Get ready, luv," he told her as his thumb let up on its pressure so that he could gently rub it along the line of her chin. "Because before the night is through, I'm going to have you in every way imaginable, in every room in this suite, and then Charlie," he hissed as he tugged her head back, forcing her neck to arch, "when you can't take any more, I'm going to sink my teeth into you and drink you in."

Malcolm's hand slid up her neck and over her chin. His thumb forced itself between her lips, prying her mouth open. He ran it along the tops of her teeth and she shuddered under the new violation. He lowered his lips to within an inch of her own and whispered across them, all the while gazing deeply into her ice-blue eyes, trapping her in too many ways to count. "Do you have *any* idea how breathtaking you are, Charlie?" he asked her softly, his tone laced with urgency and desperation. His hand dropped from her mouth to once more gently encircle her throat and she suppressed a moan at the contact. "I suspect not," he went on, his own breath shaking now as he seemed to fight with something inside of him; something he was barely able to control.

When his fingers released her throat to graze across her nipple and slide slowly toward her waiting, dripping heat, Charlie felt as if she were lost within some wonderful erotic dream. But there was something he'd said... something he'd just whispered... about teeth? A warning bell was trying to ring within her mind, but she couldn't hear it. She couldn't acknowledge it. Cole was too big, too strong, and he was filling her world.

At once, he released her and pulled away just enough for her to move. "Turn around and put your hands on the wall," he commanded.

She stared at him for a moment, stunned at the sudden absence of his body pressed against hers. But the heat of his gaze still seared and her body was screaming for his.

His command waited to be obeyed.

She was game. And she could give as good as she could get.

With a raw, avid look that she knew spoke volumes of how much she wanted him, Charlie slowly turned around, keeping eye contact with him over her shoulder as she did so. Then she tossed her hair over her shoulder, looked away, and leaned over. She pressed her palms to the wall, arching her back to allow the long, curved line of her body to present itself to him at its best.

The silence stretched. A heartbeat. Two.

And then she was shoved roughly into the wall, her breasts pressed flat against its cool surface, her wrists caught in his steel-hard grips. "I'm not human, Charlie," he told her, his lips brushing softly against her ear as his body pressed so roughly against hers. "I'm a wolf and you're my mate." He let the warning sink in. That was

what it was – a warning. He would not be gentle. He *couldn't* be gentle. Not now. "This is your last chance. If you tell me to leave now, I will."

"If you leave now," she told him, gasping the words through bared teeth as she pressed back against him to urge him on, "*I will hunt you down.*"

Malcolm laughed, low and long, and the sound snaked through her consciousness. He lowered his head until his lips brushed the taut skin of her neck. And then he smiled, and Charlie felt his elongated fangs graze her flesh.

She hissed at the contact, a quick intake of breath, and fresh fear uncoiled within her. Somewhere deep inside, a red warning light began to flash. She ignored it, hazy and incomprehensible as it was, and instead listened as he spoke once more.

"I can't always control the wolf, Charlie," he said. "Move your hands from that wall and I won't even try." Cole kicked her feet apart with his shoes and eased his grip on her wrists to run his hands down her arms.

She was still wearing her bra, but it was no armor against his touch, the lace only scratching and rubbing enticingly as his warm palms grazed over the curve of her breasts and cupped them gently. When his thumbs flicked the hardened nipples underneath, Charlie once more jerked in his arms, and then she bucked again as he repeated the movement, sending rivulets of electricity through her body.

She kept her hands where they were. She'd felt his fangs. Adrenaline piggy-backed the craven desire coursing through her veins. Fear was ever the handmaiden to real pleasure.

Cole's fingers deftly curved over the lace edge of the material that was pressed so tight against her creamy flesh. And then, in one vicious move that elicited a cry of both surprise and pain from Charlie, he ripped the lace downward, rending the garment in two.

Charlie came away from the wall and whirled around to face him, but Cole's hand found her neck once more and squeezed, this time hard enough to still the breath in her lungs. Her fingers wrapped around the wrist of the hand that held her and her eyes closed of their own volition.

Cole bent to whisper across her lips. "You moved your hands."

With that, he was spinning around and tossing her roughly toward the nearby couch. A brief flash of panicked terror ripped through Charlie's consciousness as her body went flying through the air, and then she was landing on the leather of the sofa and relief flooded her system. But it was temporary.

Because once she got her bearings, she looked up at Malcolm to find that his green eyes had gone completely pitch, his pupils having swallowed his irises in their inhuman darkness. Long, sharp white fangs punctuated his cruel, promising grin, and his chest rose and fell with the deep, fast breaths of a man on the edge.

He looked like a monster. A beautiful, dangerous, oversexed monster who was going to literally eat her up, bit by bit, and make her enjoy it.

The defiant, sexually charged part of Charlie's brain was sparking with electric overload. It was in control now. There was no conscious predetermination when she suddenly jumped up and vaulted herself over the back of the couch to take off at a

fast sprint toward the nearest doorway. She knew he would give chase. That was the point.

She was very fast – but Malcolm Cole was a lot faster. And the doorway she'd escaped through led to his bedroom.

His body slammed into hers without warning, and she was once more sent flying through the air, this time to land roughly on the bed. Cole gave her no chance to catch her bearings this time, instead flipping her over with little to no effort, and then securing her wrists to the mattress above her. His strong body straddled her waist, preventing her long, lean legs from doing any damage.

She stared up at him with wide eyes as he continued to grin down at her, all hunger and basic instinct. What little there was left of the man who was Malcolm Cole had stepped away and allowed the wolf within him to take over.

Charlie tensed her muscles against his strength, but she was no match for him. A fact that he more than adequately demonstrated as he released one of her wrists in order to grab the metal railing of the head board above her.

With one hand, he tore the end of the metal loose from its soldering and lifted her right wrist to literally wrap the metal pipe around it in a make-shift vice. Charlie cried out in shock and instinctively jerked against the steel binding. A little bondage was one thing, but this was mind-blowing.

Her resistance was an utterly useless gesture. It was solid metal. She was flesh and bone. And Cole had wrapped it around her wrist just tight enough that it didn't hurt, but secured her effectively, rendering that arm useless.

Charlie's breathing was now coming very short and fast. She could only lay beneath Cole, in staggered amazement, as he took hold of her other wrist and proceeded to do the same thing once more. The metal headboard made horrible sounds as he ripped an end of it loose and then wrapped it around her slim left wrist as if it were rope or cloth.

She was restrained. There was no way in hell she was getting out of this one.

Game over.

Cole wasted no time. He slid down her body and, with not a shred of gentleness, he curled his fingers around the thin lace material of her panties and ripped them from her body. Charlie was too stunned to cry out at the brief pain, but her body reacted and she rose off of the mattress, arching her back and forcing a growl to escape Cole's throat.

She stilled at the sound, resting back against the bed. But her aroused scent and racing pulse belied the fear in her eyes, and she knew it. She knew he could feel, smell, and hear her desire. She was burning up beneath him, and his fierceness was only making her want him more.

She didn't bother fighting him when he roughly pressed his hands on the insides of her thighs and pushed them far apart, opening her to him in a way that she had never been opened before. When he lowered his head to her taut stomach, gently kissed her, and then sank his fangs part way into the slim curve of skin over her hip

bone, she cried out in painful ecstasy and rose once more off of the mattress.

Cole gazed at her through the tops of his green eyes, spearing her with promise. And then his fingers were shoving inside of her and she was screaming once more. The feel of him, diving deep into her most sensitive parts was almost too much for Charlie. On top of everything else, it nearly drove her over some sort of precipice. Her core clutched at him, milking his fingers, urging him on. She closed her eyes and moaned, unable to stop the sounds escaping from her throat.

She wanted more. She *needed* more. She was on fire with it. She almost felt that she might die – and was too lost in her own spinning, red world of sensation to notice when Malcolm ripped his other hand across his pants, freeing the engorged erection underneath.

And then he was pulling his fingers away and his body was looming above hers. Waves of his power rolled over her and she nearly came right then and there. How could he do that to her? How could one man have so much power? Surely it would kill her?

Yet her body opened for him and her legs remained where they were, spread and willing, as she waited for him to take her.

“Tell me that you’re mine, Charlie,” he told her, the black pools of his eyes drowning her beneath their midnight, velvet weight.

She opened her mouth, her lips parting as if she would speak, but no sound came out. She would fight him yet, in this one tiny way. It was all she had left, and she was defiant to the end.

Undaunted, and as if he had been expecting her rebelliousness, Cole shook his head in admonishment. But his smile, cruel and cold, was still there as the tip of his hard member threatened the entrance of Charlie’s wet slit.

Charlie arched against the contact, suddenly and desperately wanting him inside of her. She almost lost the fight then. She almost cried out and begged.

But he gave her what she wanted, if only a little, and as the tip of his thick shaft pierced her, he cupped her slim throat with one hand and her breast with the other. A swift, hard pinch of her nipple was followed by his hand squeezing the air from her windpipe and Charlie was sent reeling end over end into erotic bliss.

It was too much. She was being tortured. She wanted all of him and she wanted it fast and hard and *now*.

“Tell me you’re mine, Charlie. Tell me you belong to me,” he commanded once more, his fingers deftly torturing her hard nipples and the heat of him searing her, teasing her from the inside. Charlie was lost in bliss. She fought every instinct she had to give him what he asked for. In the effort to keep her tongue from speaking the words he wanted to hear, she sank her teeth into her bottom lip, and drew blood.

Above her, there was a sharp intake of breath and, a nanosecond later, Cole’s mouth was slanting over hers in harsh possession, his tongue prying her teeth apart and tasting her freely. She moaned against his lips, once more arching her lean body off of the bed, and Cole sank a little deeper into her.

She could feel him drinking her in; could taste her blood across his tongue, and

knew that he was sucking the red liquid from her wound. Something heavy was building inside of her, ebbing further and further in, circling down to some secret spot within her that would cause it to crash outward and explode like an expanding star.

Cole's kiss deepened, and Charlie moaned again. This time it was accompanied with Malcolm's low growl-like groan of need as his grip around her throat tightened to the point of danger and her blood rushed in her ears.

Just as she thought she might pass out, her body convulsed in intense, tight ecstasy, the walls of her passage contracting over and over again as she orgasmed like she never had before.

She rode the waves of slowly receding pleasure and let the world blur around her. It was several seconds before it began to solidify again. Cole had relinquished the hold he had on her throat, but his kiss remained, and unfeasibly – *unbelievably* – Charlie felt herself begin to heat up once more. It was as if she'd never climaxed. Need built up again within her with impossible speed. As she came close to her second orgasm, Cole broke the kiss.

Charlie growled in frustration, stalled there beneath him, her breathing ragged, her body shaking, her mind utterly and completely out of control. It was his kiss. The werewolf had brought her to orgasm with nothing more than a kiss. And now he'd brought her to the edge again – and left her teetering, craving, *yearning*.

"Tell me, Charlie. Tell me that you belong to me."

Oh God, just take me! a voice within her screamed. He still wouldn't slide completely into her and all she wanted in the world at that moment was for Malcolm Cole to plunge into her and fuck her like there was no tomorrow.

Out of desperation and rage, she began to pull against the thick metal restraints he'd wrapped around her wrists. She arched against him in the hopes of taking in more of him. But he was good, and he was fast and he could read her like a book.

Another pinch and pull and twist of her nipple and she was screaming into the back of his hand as he covered her mouth and shook his head.

"I love your screams, Charlie, but that isn't what I most want to hear."

He moved his hand and she shuddered. His fingers grazed over the now sore breast once more, eliciting a low, hopeless moan. As he lowered his fanged mouth to her throat, Charlie felt the tips of his fingernails – his claws – dig into the sides of her nipple. It hurt. Deliciously so. It was a sweet, merciless pain that expertly tore down the last of her resistance.

"I'm yours," she whispered, her words ragged with need. "I belong to you."

Cole shoved into her with everything he had and Charlie again screamed, this time to be silenced by his soul-searing kiss. He filled her up completely, to the point of pain, and she wondered if she were splitting inside. She wondered – but she didn't care. It felt too good.

When he drew out of her, just a little, and rammed himself back into her, she couldn't help the next shriek of agonizing bliss. And the next. And the next.

Without mercy and without tenderness, Malcolm drove into Charlie, thrusting

harder and deeper and faster, until there was nothing in the world but the sensation of his body claiming hers.

She ~~was~~ his.

She truly *did* belong to him.

When he pulled his lips away from hers and fisted his hand in her hair to yank her head back, there was a part of her that knew what was coming. It was natural. It needed to be done. *She wanted it.*

"That's right, Charlie. You're mine," he whispered in her ear, not slowing in his assault on her trembling, quaking form. He rammed into her again and his grip tightened in her hair. "*Always.*"

And then his teeth were sinking into the taut skin of her neck and her body exploded beneath him. He clamped his mouth tightly over the wound, sucking hard against her flesh until the mingling pain and pleasure became literally unbearable for Charlie and she climaxed once more, screaming as it ripped through her, and jerking violently against her bonds. This time, there was nothing to stop the cry torn from her throat and it echoed throughout the room, a testament and tribute to the natural Change that Cole was forcing upon her.

He continued to take all of her, forcing her to cum beneath him again and again as he drew her blood from her veins and her body slowly began to grow weak. Languid.

At last, Cole thrust into her one final time, more deeply than it seemed possible, and his entire, hard body went rigid above her. As his seed spilled forth inside her, Cole ripped his teeth free of her neck and threw his head back in a harsh cry of violent, perfect satisfaction, his blood-soaked fangs glistening in the moonlight that shafted through the curtains above them.

Charlie saw and heard the image through a blurry haze. Her body felt well and truly used. Her toes tingled; her arms were heavy where they hung in the thick metal vices over her head. She floated, in a calm sea of sated joy, as her blood cells morphed within her, painlessly, beautifully, ushering her into the next chapter of her life.

As she closed her eyes, at last surrendering to everything that Malcolm Cole had done to her, she felt him bend the metal around her wrists and draw her into his arms. The last thing she heard before the deep, healing slumber of her Change claimed her was Cole's whispered promise. "I've got you, luv. Trust me."

Chapter Sixteen, *The Kicker*

It was sound that first made it through the blanket over Charlie's awareness. Sonic booms that sounded like fire crackers on the fourth of July. Sirens wailing in the not-too-far distance. The gentle hum of an air conditioner. The sound of a man breathing. And then....

A heartbeat. At first, it was a soft, steady rhythm. But as she continued to listen, it became stronger. It was Malcolm's heart beating. She knew it without knowing how she knew.

Charlie opened her eyes and blinked at the stark contrasts around her. She saw the window as a stream of yellow moonlight slicing at a horizontal angle through the room and carving its way into the carpet. The edge of the bed was a cliff's precipice, delving off into darkness far below. The mirror in the bathroom across the room reflected a backwards world, but one that was outlined as clearly now as it was at high noon.

There was a woman in that reflection. It took a precious moment for the realization to solidify within her brain, but when it did, Charlie stilled where she sat on the bed.

And stared at the woman with glowing ice blue eyes.

Her scream was strangled at first, but then it set itself free from her throat to pierce the night air and fill the gaps of silence in the large suite.

Half a second later, Cole's arm flexed where it was wrapped around her waist like an iron band. In one swift move, he was rising over her and shoving her down into the mattress, his green eyes glowing like flame-lit emeralds, his fangs fully extended, every muscled ounce of him in fight mode.

He seemed to search the shadows of the room around them and then, when he realized there was no danger, he gazed down at Charlie. She gasped and panted beneath him, her expression one of stark confusion and fear.

"My eyes!" she finally told him. "They're – they're *glowing*!"

Above her, Malcolm stared down for a moment more – and then, much to Charlie's befuddled surprise, he broke out laughing. The sound was intoxicating; a deep, rumbling belly laugh, laced with a touch of that resonating British tone that instantly managed to quell the worst of Charlie's anxieties and bring her nerve endings to anticipatory life. As he laughed, his fangs retracted and the glow in his eyes died down to its normal light green.

"What the hell?" She gazed up at him, wondering why on earth he would think this was funny. Obviously, he did something to her – it was the only logical explanation. Because normal sex with normal men didn't leave you with glowing eyes.

Cole's laughter died to a soft chuckle and he rolled off of her to lay beside her, propped up on one elbow. He was still fully dressed and that realization reminded Charlie that she, in fact, wore not a single scrap of clothing.

Self-consciously, she pulled the pillow from the top of the bed and held it in front of herself. "Why are my eyes glowing?" she demanded, narrowing that glowing gaze so that he knew she meant business.

His smile was truly beautiful. It was disarming. She wanted to be alarmed and a part of her ought to have been terrified, but laying there beside him, beneath the comforting weight of that perfect, white smile and those glittering, mischievous green eyes filled her with a sense of comfort that could not be denied or fought off. It was like an opiate. It just felt really good.

"Explain," she demanded through clenched teeth.

"When we... when I..." he rubbed his jaw for a moment, his gaze skirting from her face to the flesh that was bare above the pillow she held. And then he lifted his index finger. "One moment." He rolled out of bed and went into the other room. When he returned, he was carrying her jeans and t-shirt.

"Put these on, luv. I can't have a serious conversation with you as long as only a pillow separates me from your naked body."

Charlie's breath caught in her throat at his heated gaze and a prickly warmth flushed through her long, lean form. She felt wetness build between her legs – but she also felt a little sticky.

"I'm going to take a shower," she told him flatly, grabbing the clothes out of his hand with a flourish. "And when I'm done, you're going to tell me why the hell my eyes are glowing!"

With that, she rolled off of the bed and stomped into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

* * * *

Alexander Kavanagh knew the moment he was no longer alone. Any werewolf would notice the brief shift in the flow of air around him as animal magic quickly ebbed and then receded in the space of the massive hotel suite.

Not only could he smell the other werewolf where he suddenly stood in the shadows of the hallway beyond, he could also hear his thoughts.

And so, gently he put down the delicate cup filled with tea in front of him and reclined in his hard, leather-backed chair.

"It's been a long time, Ulrich."

"Indeed, it has, little brother."

Alexander waited while the other werewolf came away from the shadows of his suite and approached the table where he sat. He didn't move as the other man pulled a chair from the table and gracefully took a seat.

"Malcolm Cole informed me of your involvement in this situation. I can't say that I'm exactly surprised," Alexander spoke softly. "But I am disappointed."

"Of course you are," Ulrich stated simply. "Because once more, you fail to see the big picture." Ulrich shrugged and Alexander noticed that his left shoulder did not rise as high as his right.

"Cole injured you."

"And I, him."

Alexander sighed. "What do you want, Ulrich?"

It was a moment before his older brother replied. But when he did, his tone had

lowered. "Your granddaughter is a rare creature, Alex. Are you certain that Cole is the right mate for her? She dreamed of him, yes." Ulrich paused, adding to the weight of his next words. "But she also dreamed of Phelan."

Instantly, Alexander's ice-blue eyes began to glow and the air became oppressively hot around them both. In the kitchen, the microwave turned on. The lights overhead flickered, and the curtains in every room rammed shut on their electric rods. The televisions turned on and then off again.

Sweat began to bead on Ulrich's brow; the heat in the room was becoming stifling. He straightened under the weight of his brother's sudden display of power, and his chest felt tight. He swallowed hard past the lump that was forming in his throat.

Across from him, Alexander Kavanagh was the very image of cool, collected calm, but his gaze narrowed, and his starkly glowing eyes were positively terrifying in the handsome frame of his face. "Do not speak to me of my son's murderer, Ulrich. That you aided him in any way is enough cause for me to kill you here and now."

A muscle in Ulrich's jaw ticked.

Kavanagh continued. "I permit you to live only because it was our mother's wish." Now it was his turn to pause, allowing the silence to stretch until he finished with, "But, if you want the honest truth, then all diplomacy aside, I would just as soon see you join her in her grave."

"You have no vision," Ulrich told him, his words hissed past clenched teeth. "You never have been able to consider the future with any real foresight. Already, Dormants are dreaming of not one, but two alphas. They're being given powers as they Change. They're more rare every year and you continue to sit there, in your throne, allowing the humanity within us to override the *wolf*." He stood up then, a barely suppressed rage causing his tall, strong form to go rigid as he gazed down at his younger brother.

"We are not human, Alex. We never have been and we never *will* be human, no matter how hard you try to form us to the contrary. And in our world, Alex – in the wolf's world – the strongest win. It's survival of the fittest. *Damn it!*" He slammed his fist into the nearby television, sending the electronic box flying in the opposite direction, a big black comet trailed by a shower of sparks.

The wounds on his wrist and across his knuckles instantly began to heal and he ignored them. "As long as you fail to accept that, we will continue to die out!"

"Get out of my sight, Ulrich." Alexander's tone was very low. Very quiet. He remained sitting where he was, gazing up at his brother with those unearthly eyes. "You worked for the man who murdered my son and his wife. You allowed another man to beat your own niece until she bled. And now you stand in my presence, in my territory, and ask me to validate your actions."

Alexander pulled his gaze away and stared at something in the far distance – something unseen. "And all I have to say to you," he continued, his powerful, calm voice never shifting, "is that if you come anywhere near my family again, I will kill you. Promise or not."

Silence followed on the heels of his words and neither wolf moved for several long moments.

Then, slowly, Ulrich took a deep breath, letting it out through his nose. "I promise you, Alex, you're going to regret heading in the direction you're headed. It's a one way street. And I won't help you back out of it."

Alexander said nothing.

"Very well, then," Ulrich whispered. Magic rushed out of him, like the force-field of an unseen, unheard explosion. When it receded again, he was gone.

* * * *

As the warm water ran over her hair and face, Charlie closed her eyes and tried not to think about the fact that they were glowing behind her lids. She pushed her long locks away from her cheeks and forehead and stood there for a while, just letting the heat and massaging action of the showerhead melt the tension from her shoulders.

Eventually, mind still spinning, she shoved the rivulets of extra moisture out of her face once more and finally opened her eyes so that she could locate the shampoo and conditioner. Her hair didn't need to be washed again, but she'd already wet it down. Now it was a done deal. If she didn't wash it and condition it, it would just dry frizzy.

As she turned in the shower and found the small hotel bottles filled with shampoo and conditioner that would most likely dry her hair out like a nineteen-eighties curling iron in a steamy New Orleans hair salon, she sighed. When she reached up to grab the bottle filled with gold liquid, she noticed the inside of her right arm.

The intricate green mark that Malcolm had left there a few nights ago was gone.

In its place, her skin looked slightly puckered. Raw, maybe.

She frowned and ran her hand over the strange redness, noticing that it seemed to have a pattern to it. The steel head board? No. It wouldn't look like this. Her frown deepened. It didn't hurt, but it did feel warmer than the water running over her. Warmer than the rest of her arm.

She blinked and pulled her hand away from it, holding it up in the light. Then she blinked again. "WTF?" she whispered to herself.

But no answers presented themselves. The truth of the matter was, she simply didn't know enough about the werewolf community to understand what was going on with her body at that moment. Lily Kane had told her much, but she'd also left a lot out. Deliberately, it seemed.

Maybe she'd been hoping that Cole would explain it. Or maybe she hadn't wanted Charlie to know... because it was really bad.

With a heavy sigh, she dropped her arm and reached up with the other arm to pull the shampoo from the shelf above her. She blinked and went still when she noticed the same raw redness on the inside of her left wrist. Both wrists bore the same developing mark.

Christ! What the hell was going on?

"Charlie?"

Charlie's head snapped up and she looked toward the door to the bathroom, which she could see through the steamy glass that surrounded the large shower. Cole was on the other side.

She could hear him breathing. His heart rate was elevated. She could actually *hear* it. And she could smell... *something*.

Oh my god, she thought. It's fear. I can smell his fear. He's afraid right now. For me?

"Are you okay in there?" he asked, and somehow she knew that his hand was on the door. Ready to open it. It was the tone of his voice; he needed to hear her now or he would come in and check for himself that she was all right.

"I'm... I'm fine," she said softly. "I'm just... it's just... female stuff, is all!"

He was quiet on the other side of the door. But she could almost hear the wheels turning in his head. He wasn't buying it. And, well he shouldn't. Because she was lying her ass off and she sucked at lying and her heart was probably beating way too fast for someone who was just dealing with "female stuff." And he could hear it.

Just like she could hear him.

"Charlie—"

"Just *back* off, Malcolm!" she yelled, hoping that the harsh irritation in her tone would convey with efficient clarity that she wanted him to go away and give her space and time to think. She needed room to deal with this.

As her gaze drifted down to the strange redness on her arms, she heard Cole shift beyond the door. She could smell the anger in him now. It was almost like being able to read his mind. Even beyond the steam and the soap and the sex that she could still detect clinging to her body, she could scent the werewolf in the other room.

And he smelled good. *Really* good.

But he also smelled like an animal that was growing frustrated, edgy, and mean.

What the fuck is happening to me, she wondered. I can see in the dark. I can hear a man's heartbeat. My eyes are glowing. And my wrists have some kind of rash on them... and it's getting darker, she thought. It's forming into...

Into some kind of design. Her breath caught once more, and her heart slammed hard against her rib cage. *Holy crap.*

With that, Cole popped the lock on the door and it swung open, its security catch now broken and useless. On impulse, Charlie put her arms behind her back to hide the burgeoning red marks. Her breathing was too quick, her pulse too fast. He knew something was going on.

"Charlie, tell me what's wrong." His tone was a low and calm command and his tall, strong form filled the doorway like a brick barrier. It was almost symbolic. She wasn't going to get out of this without going through him.

She spun away from him and put her face in her hands as if she were about to cry. Anything to hide the marks. She didn't even know why she didn't want him to see them; but it seemed essential. "I'm just overwhelmed, okay? I can hear your *heart* beat, for Chrissake! I can smell you, Malcolm. I can see...." She shook her head

desperately. “*Everything*. In the *dark!*” She was surprised to find that, once the words had begun spilling from her mouth, real tears started to build in her eyes, and they grew heavier there as she went on. “And my damned eyes are glowing! I mean.... What the *hell?* What did you *do* to me?” There was no need to pretend now. She really was overwhelmed and she really did need answers. Her tears drops mingled with the water from the shower and a sob racked through her body.

The door to the stall flew open and Charlie looked up to watch Malcolm step into the shower, still fully dressed.

She stared at him, wide-eyed, as he moved forward and took her into his strong arms, heedless of the warm jets of water that were raining down on them both.

“*Malcolm –*”

“Shh. Hush, Charlie. It’s okay, luv. *You’re okay.*” His werewolf power poured over her again, familiar to her now, and with it came a heavy, relaxing sense of calm. His voice wrapped around her as surely as did his arms, swathing her in his nearness, his strength and protection. “I’ll explain everything, I promise,” he told her. “But you need to know that there’s nothing wrong with you. This is all good and natural. You need to accept it. Do you understand me, Charlie?”

After a few long seconds, Charlie nodded against his drenched shirt. Cole retained his grip on her with one arm and used the fingers of his other hand to gently push a dripping lock of her hair from her face. At the touch, her eyes fluttered closed and she leaned more heavily into him, relaxing against his tall, hard form.

“Good girl,” he said, softly. “That’s it.”

Beneath her cheek, his heart beat steady as a pulsing drum. The sound was intoxicating. She could keep time to it. It was rhythm more perfect, more soothing, and more mesmerizing than any she’d ever created on her own.

She ignored the wasted water for once. She forgot about the marks on her arms. At that moment, all that existed was the man holding her and his unbroken heartbeat. She was content to stand there and listen – forever, if need be. And it would seem that he was just as content to let her.

* * * *

When Malcolm finally left Charlie alone and unmolested in the shower, it was fifteen minutes later, and he was grateful that the hotel had so much hot water. The last thing Charlie needed right now was to finish rinsing her hair under an ice-cold stream. She was already shivering enough.

He gently closed the now-broken door behind him and briefly considered all of the damage he’d done to the suite since he’d arrived. It was fortunate for him and his pack that they had a very good standing with the hotel. And that Steve Wynn thoroughly enjoyed every one of Cole’s books.

Malcolm made his way across the room to where the dresser rested against the wall and began to unbutton his long-sleeved linen shirt. His clothes were soaked through, as were his socks and shoes.

When he’d finished undressing, he bent and sifted through the garments he’d

folded and placed there a few days ago. He selected a pair of blue jeans and pulled them on, not bothering with underwear. He finished with a gray t-shirt that stretched taut over the muscles of his arms and chest.

His thoughts were on the wet leather bands that he had yet to take off. They were uncomfortable against the skin of his wrists, but he really didn't want to see those marks right now. They were the bane of his existence.

And Charlie was his angel.

He'd just stepped foot into heaven and, by *God*, he wasn't going to slip back into Hell right now by gazing down at the Roma curse that a woman had etched into his arms and soul more than fifty years ago. So, he left the bands on and decided that they would dry soon enough in the desert night air.

In the bathroom, the water shut off and the Cole listened as the shower door opened. Charlie was getting out and drying off. He imagined her body surrounded by curling tendrils of steam that clung to her fair skin in droplets. His body reacted quickly and painfully and he groaned in frustration and forced himself to think of baseball.

Of manuscript deadlines. Global warming. *Anything* to ease the sudden stiffness back out of his dick.

In a few moments, he was comfortable again, but he was learning that now that he'd tasted Charlie and felt her beneath him, he had to be eternally vigilant with his thoughts. Until he could either learn to control the urges she awakened in him or tie Charlie to his bed for a month straight, he would need to ban certain things from his mind. Or the wolf within him would take over.

After he'd finished pulling on a pair of engineer boots and running a towel over his head, he took a long-sleeved sweater from the bottom drawer of the dresser and headed for the bathroom.

He knocked on the door.

"Yeah?" came the soft reply.

"I've got a sweater for you, if you're cold," he said. He inched the door open just a tad and slid the garment through the crack, allowing her the privacy she most likely wanted. There was a brief hesitation, and then Charlie took the sweater from his hand.

"Thank you," she told him, with genuine gratitude.

He smiled to himself. They were making progress. "You're welcome, Charlie." He closed the door again and left the room to make a phone call.

* * * *

I should take her first, he thought to himself, *before the wounds are too much. Before the blood began to ruin everything.* She was nice enough looking. She had nice tits. Lean. Attractive body.

But not as nice as Charlie's.

No one was as good as Charlie. Charlie was perfect. No one would ever fight him like she did. No one was strong enough to last....

Gabriel gazed down at the woman tied to a chair before him. Her hair had come loose from her braid hours ago and hung in dark, sweat-soaked locks on either side of her face. One threatened her left eye, which was steadily blackening where he'd had to strike her during her initial struggles.

It was a shame, really. She had pretty eyes, deep brown, almost black. Like coffee. They were big and soulful and she had that certain look about her that only young mothers had: youth force-fed wisdom, portrayed through the finest of lines that were testament to a broader, more intelligent view of the world.

Such a shame.... But it had to be done, because in the end, she wasn't Charlie. No one was.

"It'll all be over soon, sweetheart."

The woman whimpered behind the gag he'd forced into her mouth. It was nothing more than a cloth, covered with a piece of duct tape. It was certainly not his favorite way to gag a woman, but it worked. It would suffice. For her, anyway. Not for Charlie. No. Charlie deserved the best. He had plenty of very nice gags he would love to see pressed between Charlie's plump, pink lips.

"Since you won't live out the night, I thought you might be curious as to why I'm doing this." Gabriel turned and paced slowly toward an old, chipped wooden chest of drawers along one wall. Atop it was a round mirror, and tucked into the rim of the mirror were pictures of a little boy and a little girl, both the same age, and both with the same hair color and eyes of their mother.

He glanced at these pictures, carelessly, and then turned around, leaned on the dresser, and crossed his broad arms over his chest.

"You see," he began, softly, "the man I want to bring here tonight is cursed. He bears marks placed upon him by a gypsy long ago. And any time there is a murder, without heart, without purpose or reason – grisly enough to make the front page news," he flashed the woman a straight, white smile, "he has no choice but to pop out of existence wherever and whenever he may be and pop back into existence at the scene of the crime."

He laughed softly then as the woman stared at him with eyes that were wide with shock and fear, despite the puffy nature of one of them.

"I know. It's a horrible curse, isn't it?" He shook his head. "I don't envy the man." Gabriel paused and frowned. "Well, that's not strictly true. I do, actually. He claimed Charlie first, and I can't deny that I'm jealous over that. Still, it doesn't matter. He'll soon be dead and when he is, Charlie will be unclaimed once more."

The woman in the chair began to struggle in her bonds. She wasn't stupid. She knew what was coming.

Gabriel gave her a cursory glance, but paid her labors no further heed. She was bound tight. He'd had years of practice tying knots that held.

Charlie lifted the giant sweater before her and marveled at its size. Cole was a big man. She would be swimming in it. But she was grateful for it. When the world overwhelmed you, it helped to be able to hide in something warm.

She placed the sweater on the counter, pulled on her jeans and t-shirt, lamented the fact that she had no underwear or bra, and then pulled the sweater on over everything else. Her hair was already beginning to dry in the arid Nevada night. So, she flipped her head over, ran her fingers through it, and then straightened again, calling it good.

She had yet to look at herself in the mirror, however. She was certain that she looked like a ragamuffin draped in the fleece that Malcolm had given her and that her legs probably resembled stilts, sticking out the bottom in their fitted denim – but she didn't really care to see it, because if she did glance in the mirror in order to adjust her wardrobe, she might see her eyes again. She wasn't quite ready for that.

She sighed heavily. *Gotta get used to it, sweetheart*, she told herself. While he'd held her in the shower, Cole had tried his best to explain things to her. Things about the werewolf world and the fact that she was even more a part of it now than she had been a few hours ago.

He'd told her that when he'd bitten her, her body had accepted that it was time to make the Change. The Dormant wolf within her climbed to the surface, forever altering her physiology and the way she would feel and behave.

Her knee-jerk reaction to this news had been anger. Had she been adequately warned? Was this even fair? But as she stood there and listened, she realized that this final turning point had been her destiny all along. And that, yes, she had been warned. Gabriel Phelan had intimated that as much would happen. Lily Kane had hinted at it. And the very fact that she'd been "marked" in the first place was a reminder that she was special – and that she represented a hope for the werewolf community that they could not find in any other woman. That hope was for procreation and survival.

She could only do that if she was one of them.

Cole explained to her that the glowing eyes she seemed to be so upset over were actually very beautiful, and quite natural for a werewolf. He assured her that she would very soon learn to control the light of emotion behind her "baby blues." Though he claimed he wouldn't mind if they looked like that forever. He said she was stunning and gorgeous and that she would never know what she meant to him.

And when she'd finally stopped crying and was able to return his gentle smile, he'd left her alone to finish bathing.

All along, she'd managed to keep the red marks on her wrists hidden from him. She still wasn't certain why she had bothered. She just felt that it was important somehow and that this new and delicate treaty of understanding between them would be ruptured should he catch sight of the red tattoos that had by now fully formed on the insides of her arms.

Charlie shoved the sleeves of the large sweater up to her elbows and gazed down at the strange new brands. They were nearly as intricate as Cole's emerald green mark had been, but there was a wicked, unkind appearance to them. They were the color of blood and the angles were sharp and unforgiving.

He hadn't mentioned anything about new marks when he had been explaining her Change and the symptoms of it a few minutes ago. It was possible that he forgot. But it was far more probable that he didn't know about them. And Charlie was willing to place money on that.

She sighed and dropped the sleeves, effectively hiding the marks. Then she opened the door to the bathroom, allowing a thick cloud of steam to swirl upwards and out as she stepped into the hallway beyond.

The air that hit her face was air conditioned and much cooler than it had been on the other side of the door, and she was instantly grateful for the big, soft sweater draped so comfortably over her. She wrapped her arms around her waist and tiptoed into the hallway, craning her neck and listening carefully to catch any sign of Cole in the rooms beyond.

But they were empty.

She stilled when a delicious, deeply enticing scent wafted toward her and caressed her senses. She entered the dining room to find that candles had been lit on the table and several porcelain plates had been filled and left for her.

There was wine; a deep blood red that she could tell would burn wonderfully across the tongue and down the throat. There was a plate filled with chocolate covered strawberries – six of them. And most enticing of all, though she never really ate red meat, was the rare steak that waited on a plate closest to her. Its surface steamed in the chilled air, its scent carrying across the room toward her, pulling her closer.

Her mouth began to water. Her stomach growled. She hadn't even realized how famished she was until now. With a rush, she closed the distance to the table in long, quick strides and sat down in front of the steak. She picked up the fork and knife and began to eat.

As the first piece hit her tongue and fairly melted across it, she closed her eyes, lost in some sort of primal ecstasy. Her teeth ached in her gums. She wanted to rend, to chew, to swallow *more* of it. She finished the steak in five minutes and then reached for the glass of wine that had already been poured for her and left beside the plate.

She downed the wine and it did burn. But as she drained the glass and replaced it, she realized that there was no immediate buzzing sensation leaping to life in her body. There was no dullness seeping to her extremities.

Non alcoholic wine? *No matter*, she thought. It was probably better that way, because she was really thirsty and wanted to drink more of it.

She poured herself another glass and then started in on the strawberries. She ate with abandon, not caring about morality or fat content or cholesterol or calories. She chewed slowly, but continuously, her mouth ever filled with the next bite, the next taste, of this amazingly delicious fare.

The front door beeped and its lock clicked in its hinge. Charlie set down the last bit of strawberry she was holding and stood, turning around to face the entrance. She swallowed just as Malcolm came through the small foyer and into the hallway.

When he exited the shadows and entered the light of the dining room, he stopped and gazed steadily at her. "Christ, you're beautiful Charlie." He stared as if in wonder, his light green eyes drinking her in, despite the over-sized sweater hiding most of her body from him. "You have no clue." He shook his head. "None," he whispered.

Charlie blushed beneath his scrutiny and the unexpected praise. She hugged herself, wrapping her arms around her middle. He tsked her gently and came forward, crossing the room in long, slow strides. "I told you not to hide yourself from me, did I not?" he asked her, his tone one of gentle but stern reprimand.

She didn't move her arms. She remembered his words well enough – she would never forget them. But she felt strong, just at that moment. She stayed where she was and lifted her chin in defiance. As she did, her heart rate sped up.

He stopped a few feet away and smiled, the dark pupils at the centers of his eyes expanding quickly. "I would love to remind you of what happens when you disobey my commands, Charlie, but as it is, we're late."

Charlie blinked. She ignored the first half of his statement and focused on the last bit. "Late for what?"

"Come with me," he told her, offering her his hand.

She hesitated just for a second and then slid her hand into his. As they always did, his fingers curled around hers possessively. He led her from the room and down the hall to the elevators.

"Where are we going?" she asked again, as the elevator doors pinged closed once they'd boarded.

"You'll see."

She turned and pinned him with a hard gaze. "I've had enough surprises for one night, Cole. Where are we going?"

Instantly, Cole was hitting the stop button in the elevator, his green gaze cutting a fast line to her and pinning her to the spot. The elevator lurched to a halt and Charlie gripped the brass bar beside her. She could feel his sudden surge of anger. She could hear his heartbeat speed up and smell the adrenaline in his veins.

It was both intoxicating and terrifying.

"My name is Malcolm, Charlie," he told her, his jaw tight and his tone low. "A lot of people call me Cole. Friends. Editors. Werewolves. The Overseer." He stepped toward her, closing the distance between them. "But the woman I just slept with will call me by my first name." His tall form towered above her, filling the space of the elevator with werewolf power and heated frustration. "My *mate* will call me Malcolm. Do you understand?"

It didn't take a genius to see that this had become a sore point with him. And so, though she felt defiant and strong, she decided this probably wasn't the best time or place to display it. She nodded. Once. She could always give him a hard time about something else later.

Malcolm turned and hit the same button again and the elevator began moving once more. An amp somewhere near the top of the elevator came to static life.

"Mr. Cole, is everything all right?" asked an unseen speaker.

Cole gazed steadily at Charlie and then slowly, he looked away to glance up at the tiny black camera lens that rested, half-hidden, in the top corner of the lift. "We're fine," he said calmly. "Thank you."

"Very good," came the static reply.

The elevator reached the casino level and the doors pinged open. Cole gestured for Charlie to exit first, and she did. She was a tad more nervous now than she had been a few minutes ago. "You really aren't going to tell me where we're going?"

"Almost there," he replied, this time reaching down and grasping her hand firmly in his. The touch instantly warmed Charlie. It was a gesture of reassurance and was almost electric. She wondered if her touch had anywhere near that kind of effect on him.

Cole led her through the Casino and out into the Las Vegas night. People were gathering along the stone wall in-between Las Vegas Boulevard and the lake in front of the Bellagio. They spoke with one another and laughed out loud and many of them were drinking. But every now and again, they glanced back at the lake and seemed to be waiting for something.

Charlie wondered what it was.

"Here, luv." Cole pulled her attention back to him and she looked up to see that he was gesturing toward a break in the copse of bushes to their left. No one else seemed to notice it and she speculated as to where it led. "After you," he said, softly.

She searched his face for some hint of the secret he was keeping from her, but his expression gave nothing away. He simply smiled an easy, sexy smile and waited for her to duck into the small pathway.

Charlie sighed and stepped through. On the other side was a ledge and a drop of about six feet. Lucas Caige and a few other members of Cole's pack were waiting for her down below.

Caige turned as she came through the bushes and he raised his arms. "Come here, Charlie. I'll help you down."

Charlie blinked at him and then turned back toward Cole. He was right behind her. He nodded, urging her forward. Then he turned to Caige. "Make it quick, Caige. They're due to start any minute."

Now Charlie was as confused as ever, but she decided to resign herself to it and allowed Caige to lift her off of the wall and help her down. It wasn't necessary. In her training over the past several years, Charlie had learned how to jump distances that were much further down and quite a bit more painful than this one would have been. But she knew that Cole's pack wouldn't know that. And they were trying to be nice.

"To the boat, Charlie," Caige instructed, nodding toward a small row boat that had been pulled up at the edge of the lake. She walked toward it as two other werewolves held it still.

"Get in, luv," Cole instructed, a gentle hand at her back, urging her forward. She carefully stepped into the boat, admiring its polished wooden edges and carved

designs as she took a seat and waited.

Cole stepped in after her and then sat down. He nodded toward Caige, who gave the boat a gentle shove with his motorcycle boot. The boat drifted from the white ledge of the hidden walkway and Charlie watched as the shadows of the looming hotel above her receded and the boat coasted out into open water.

All around her, revelers gazed in their direction, but none of them pointed. Their behavior didn't change. They continued to talk and drink and glance at the lake expectantly. It was as if the boat was not even there.

"Can they see us?" Charlie asked.

"Yes and no," Malcolm replied. He pulled two oars from the bottom of the boat, shoved them through the loops at the sides of the craft, and began to row them further out into the lake.

"What do you mean?"

"They possess the capability of noticing us," Cole clarified, his smile broadening mischievously. "However, I'm not allowing them to."

Charlie blinked. "You're – you're what?"

"Charlie, many werewolves are born with gifts that set them apart from others of our kind –"

"Oh, *crap*, don't tell me you can read my mind!" Charlie immediately exclaimed, thinking, instantly, of her grandfather and those exact same words that he had uttered.

Now it was Malcolm's turn to blink. "What? No! No, I can't read your mind. Why on earth would you ask such a thing?" And then comprehension dawned on his handsome features and he nodded. "Ah. The Overseer." He nodded again and rowed them a little further in. "No, as far as I'm aware, Kavanagh is the only one who possesses that particular ability. Along with several other very useful talents," he added, softly.

"Then..." Charlie ventured. "What are you doing?"

"I have the power to control human minds, or their actions, that is. To a certain extent."

"And you can make them blind to us?"

His grin broadened. "That's a lovely way to put it, Charlie. I'll have to recall that for one of my books."

Charlie had no response for that, so she focused on the lake and their boat. "The lake is very pretty, and the night is gorgeous," she admitted softly. "But is this what you brought me out to show me?" She recalled his words to Lucas Caige. Something about being late. "What were you talking about when you told Caige that... they're due to start any minute?"

Cole didn't have a chance to answer her because, at that moment, the speakers embedded in the walls around the lake began to vibrate with music. Celine Dion's "My Heart Will Go On" rode across the water's smooth, reflective plane and the lake's surface started to bubble. Charlie looked around the boat, her eyes wide, and realized that the bubbling was surrounding them on all sides. The small vessel was

right smack in the middle of some kind of churning water work.

The music grew louder and Dion's voice caressed the audience. Water began to break the surface of the lake, spraying in what seemed like a hundred fine streams of fountained beauty. The lines of water swayed back and forth in time with the music.

Charlie's breath caught in her throat and her face broke into a smile that she simply could not suppress as the song crescendoed and canons of water shot straight into the sky, drum beats of majestic, liquid beauty that pierced the darkness hundreds of feet in the air.

All around them, the crowd gasped in wonder and Charlie found herself laughing, unable to hide her joy. Werewolf or not, she couldn't hear the sound of her own exclamations over the roar of the music and the crowd and the sonic boom of the Bellagio's fountains.

The water began to fall back down to Earth and Malcolm produced an umbrella, seemingly out of nowhere, opening it with perfectly timed precision in order to place it over them both as the fountain's droplets slammed into the lake.

Charlie smiled broadly at her mate, too amazed to say anything. But she didn't need to. As the song continued and the fountains erupted around them, her glittering eyes told him everything he needed to know. And his smile was a reflection of her own.

There was nothing else in that moment. There was nothing but the music and a kind of magic that seemed to swell within and around them. Charlie would never forget this moment. This precious space in time seemed to freeze, like the water suspended in space above them, drifting on sound waves of bliss and hovering, poised before the love-struck gazes of a thousand gasping children. *Children*, because they laughed and cried and abandoned themselves to the beauty that was before them.

For the space of a song, they were no longer forty or fifty or twenty-one. They were four and a half and in lust with life.

A single tear escaped the corner of Charlie's once-more glowing eyes and, as she smiled at the beautiful man across from her, it trickled down her cheek, the only drop of water that managed to fall into the boat that night.

In that moment, Malcolm gazed at her with a kind of expression that he'd never shown her before. It was a breed of wonder, a kind of gentleness and of astonishment. Beneath the ballistic sound of rockets at the climax of the display around them, Malcolm took the umbrella in one hand and cupped her face with the other.

She closed her eyes as he leaned in and, when his lips softly brushed hers in the first, tender moments of a kiss, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. It was a kiss that reflected the happiness he'd awakened within her, in the middle of this tiny lake, beneath a rain storm of man-made magic.

He groaned against her lips and took possession of her mouth, his hand sliding to her nape to hold her in place. She melted beneath his touch and let him take control. He was better at it.

But then he was breaking the kiss, drawing back just enough to gaze down into her eyes and whisper across her lips. "You'll make me lose control of them, Charlie," he told her, his grip tightening in her hair. She realized he was talking about the humans; the humans whose minds he was willing not to see them. His once-green eyes had again gone completely black with hunger. "Not here," he told her. A single shake of his head.

She shuddered as he released her and set down the umbrella. The fountains had died down to a low, soft sway. Cole picked up the oars and began to row them back to the private walk where his men waited for them.

Charlie tried to calm the erratic beating of her heart. Moisture had gathered between her legs and, because she wasn't wearing underwear, she was more sensitive to the sensation. Distractedly, she rubbed at the inside of her right wrist. She lifted her legs and hugged them to her chest as she gazed across at Cole and watched the taut muscles of his broad chest flex and relax beneath the tight material of his t-shirt. She thought of how those muscles would hold her down; how warm his body would be against hers. She rubbed distractedly at her other wrist, this time, harder.

She hissed in pain, but barely realized what it was that was hurting. She was too wrapped up in everything that was Malcolm Cole. She wanted him to say something, anything, just so that she could hear his amazing voice and that sexy accent of his.

She wondered if she were falling in love with him....

Again, she drew in a sharp breath, and Cole's gaze narrowed. He followed her movements as she wrapped one hand around her other wrist and squeezed.

"Ow..." she hissed, now fully aware of the dawning pain. "It hurts," she whispered. She'd said the words before she could stop herself, and he heard them loud and clear.

They bumped against the walk and Cole was immediately up and stepping out of the boat. Just as quickly, he was reaching in, lifting her into his arms, and hauling her out as well. He set her down in front of him and gave her no time to steady herself before he was grasping her right arm in his left hand and shoving the sleeve of her sweater up with the other.

He froze. Charlie could hear his heart skip. And then it slammed against the inside of his chest with a fierce thud. "No." His eyes were wide in his handsome face, and they were no longer black. They were a vivid, emerald green that glowed eerily in the darkness.

Roughly, Cole took hold of her other arm and shoved its sleeve up as well, exposing the matching red mark on her left wrist.

"God, no," he choked, "No, no, no...." He released her and then, in what seemed like one clean, swift movement, he ripped the leather bands off of his own arms and gazed down at the insides of his wrists.

His marks were gone.

"Take him," Lily turned to her husband and waited as the tall, black-haired, blue-eyed man gently took the infant boy out of her arms. "My phone is vibrating."

"I know. I can hear it," Daniel said.

"Of course you can, Superman." Lily strode to the purse that was sitting on a divan across the room and unzipped it. She pulled out the phone, glanced at the number on the screen, and frowned.

She hated it when it said "private." Unfortunately, she knew a good number of people who might have numbers that were "private," so she couldn't afford to let it go. She sighed and popped it open. "This is Lily."

"God *damn* it, Kane, why didn't you tell me?"

Lily blinked and went stone cold. It was Cole's voice on the other end of the line and she had never heard him so livid before.

"You knew! You *knew* and you didn't tell me! *Why?*"

A flash of a vision and suddenly Lily was remembering. *Shit*, she thought. "Calm down and tell me what's going on, Cole."

"What the fuck do you think is going on, Kane? The marks transferred to my mate. That's what is going on. And now they're heating up and *hurting* her." There was a brief shuffling pause and Lily imagined that Cole had removed the phone from his mouth and was squeezing it in his hand, trying with all of his might *not* to break the instrument in his rage.

She waited for him to put it to his ear again, and as she waited, she glanced at her husband. Daniel's blue eyes were glowing. He could hear Cole loud and clear and the man's anger was forcing Daniel into fight mode.

She tried to give him a look of reassurance. His own expression didn't change. He held their son in one arm, gently moving him back and forth, but his handsome features were hard and unforgiving and his gaze was locked on hers.

Eventually, she heard Cole's breathing once more. She interrupted him before he could speak. "Cole! Listen to me carefully. There isn't much time, okay?"

Silence. Rage and Wrath and Redness. But silence.

"You didn't transfer the curse to her, Cole. Not exactly. It lifted from you, yes. And she has a bit of it now, yes. But it's different –"

"I swear to God, Kane, if you don't tell me how to fix this right now, I'll–"

Lily gasped as the phone was suddenly torn from her hand and Daniel placed it to his own ear. "Speak like that to my mate again, Cole, and I don't care how fucking powerful you are, I will die trying to kill you."

"Put your wife back on the phone, chief," Cole hissed into his ear.

Daniel closed the phone, disconnecting the line.

Lily stared at him with wide eyes. "Daniel, no! How could you do that? Charlie needs me right now!"

"She has Cole – more power to her – and the only people who need you are standing in front of you, Lily." He pinned her with a stark sapphire gaze. The baby in

the crook of his arm made a low mewling sound.

Lily glanced down at him. "Give him to me," she said softly. Daniel handed her their child and the infant immediately wrapped his fingers in Lily's long golden hair, pulling gently.

"This is too important for you to go all machismo on me, Daniel." She turned toward the hall that led to the nursery. "I'm going to call him back, unless you call him back yourself." It wasn't so much a threat as a promise. At least she was giving him a choice.

She put her son in his crib, swaddled him, and then returned to the living room. Daniel was strapping on his shoulder holster. She watched her husband as his ample muscles stretched and flexed, taut beneath the black t-shirt he wore.

"Daniel, did you hear me?" she asked as she looked around for her phone. "What's happening is very serious."

Daniel shook his head. "Out of my jurisdiction," he replied coolly. Then he turned around, pulled on his wrist watch, and shoved his loaded guns into the shoulder holster. "And I also don't care."

"Daniel, where's my phone?"

"Good night, cher," Daniel strode across the room, his long legs eating up the distance easily. He ran a hand through his wife's soft, silken locks and pulled her in for a deep, possessive kiss. When he broke it, almost a full minute later, he gazed down into her golden eyes and whispered, "I'll be home soon."

* * * *

Cole re-pocketed the phone without giving it another thought and focused his attention once more on Charlie. Now was not the time to lose control.

Charlie, herself, was trying to be calm, and he was impressed with her bravery. She had no idea what was happening to her or what was *about* to happen, and yet she faced it with her shoulders rolled back and her chin raised and her teeth bared.

Right now, she had her hands wrapped around her wrists and clenched to her stomach. "You're good at a lot of things, Malcolm, but I gotta say that diplomacy isn't one of them," she said softly through clenched teeth.

He moved forward and gently took her arms to gaze down at them. "I would have to agree with you on that one, luv," he said. "Now, listen. I'm going to explain this to you, because I don't know how much time we have."

She waited.

"These marks were placed on my wrists several decades ago by a Roman gypsy."

"Your curse?" Charlie asked.

"Yes." He frowned. And then he realized that Lily must have let Charlie in on his little secret. "Kane told you?"

She nodded. "I'm sorry you have to go through all of that." She winced as the pain from the marks must have intensified.

"Ah Christ luv, you're about to be a hell of a lot more sorry. Because that curse may have been transferred to you." He gazed deeply into her eyes. "And there's

nothing I can do to stop it.”

Charlie gazed up at him steadily as she seemed to digest this. And then she looked down at her arms. “You mean I’m going to pop into some gory, bloody place where a murder has just happened and get to see mutilated bodies of innocent women and children?” She barely whispered the question. It was as if she were simply thinking her worst, nightmarish thoughts aloud.

It tore at Cole’s heart in a familiar, horrible way. It was reminiscent of walking into the camp at Dachau for the first time or witnessing his first serial murder and not being able to get the stench of innocent shed blood out of his nostrils for what felt like months afterwards.... And now that sickening pain was back because he knew that Charlie would be feeling it *for* him.

His gut clenched tight and he felt nauseated. Desperate. His head began to pound with the frustrated helplessness that was riding him. He would do anything to prevent her from having to witness what he’d witnessed. But this was one thing he was powerless against.

“Charlie, we have to get you to safe ground,” he said quickly. He noticed that his voice was shaking. He had to get her to some stable place where no one would be walking and no cameras would be monitoring her and no one else could be standing when she popped back into place the second time. And he needed to do it fast. He looked up to find that his men were all watching him, their stricken looks reflecting his own. They couldn’t believe this was happening any more than he could.

In the next moment, Jake was beside him as if he’d sensed that something was wrong and had pulled himself away from whatever he’d been doing with Mary Jane. Jake gently took him by the elbow and drew his attention.

“The men’s restroom. We can rope it off – out of order,” the blonde werewolf suggested.

Cole nodded. It was the only place in the hotel that wouldn’t have cameras, and they didn’t have the time to make it all the way to the suites at the top. “That’ll do.” He took Charlie’s hand and began to lead her down the walk toward the six-foot wall that Caige had helped her down. He climbed up first and then waited for Jake to boost her up. His men climbed the wall around him and, as a large group, they headed back into the casino.

They passed a man in gray overalls with a mop and a bucket, and Caige stopped to speak with him. Cole left him to his bribery and continued through the casino, the rest of his pack in tow. When they arrived at the men’s restroom, he reached in with his mental feelers and forced everyone out.

Three human men left the lavatory, seemingly at once. When the last shuffled quickly past and out of the way, Cole hurriedly took Charlie inside. Jake turned his back to the door from the outside, guarding it until Caige and the janitor could arrive with their sign.

The door shut and Cole turned to his mate. “Charlie, listen to me,” he began. “The pain is going to get worse. And then you’ll experience a sort of...” He searched frantically for the right term. “A ripping sensation.” Even as he said it, he broke out

into a cold sweat. Why did she have to hear this? Why did she have to go through this now?

He hated the world in that moment.

"When that happens," he continued, though Charlie had visibly paled, "you'll flash out of here and wind up somewhere else. I need you to do this one thing for me, Charlie. Promise me that you will keep your eyes closed. Don't open them, little one. Not for anything, understand?" He gently cupped her face in his hands and implored her with his stark, verdant gaze. "Promise me, Charlie. Promise me you'll shut your eyes tight."

Charlie's mouth opened as if she were about to speak, but no sound came out. And then her eyes widened and her body went rigid. Cole could hear her heart hammering hard and smell the adrenaline running through her veins. They both looked down at her wrists, as one, and watched as the marks etched there began to glow.

"No, *no...* *Charlie...*" Cole pulled Charlie into his arms and shut his eyes. He couldn't let her go. He couldn't let this happen. It wasn't right. There had to be some justice in the world. At some point, the pain – the wrongness – had to end, didn't it?

Charlie made a harsh sound, one of pain and fear, and Cole's grip tightened. "Shut your eyes, Charlie!" he commanded, one more time.

And then things were changing around him. He felt drunk, suddenly. Topsy-turvy. The world slanted around him and fell away, flashing into a redness that was all-too-familiar. Confusion hit him hard, fuzzing up his consciousness, but his grip on his mate never lessened. It never let up.

She screamed beneath him as pain undoubtedly ripped through her body, riding up her spine – as it always had his. It was the most miserable moment of Cole's life.

But it was short-lived. The world settled in around him once more, the bright reddish light melting into individual colors and the ground beneath them once more leveling itself out.

"What the –"

It was a man's deep voice. Familiar and hated.

Cole opened his eyes and looked down. Charlie was still in his arms and, bless her, she held her eyes shut tight, just as he'd asked.

"Well, I must say that this is unexpected. You're early, Cole. And you've brought company."

Cole whipped around to face Phelan, his fangs and claws instantly extending, his eyes at once glowing like flame-lit emeralds. Across the room stood Gabriel, his demeanor and dress one of a man who had never been injured and was not about to do what he had obviously been planning to do.

Cole's stomach twisted nauseatingly as his eyes fell upon the young woman strapped to a chair beside the werewolf. Her left eye was swollen and bruising. Her face was sticky with streams of dried tears. Cole could smell faint traces of blood and his eyes skirted down the woman's form to find that her wrists had been rubbed raw where she'd attempted to wiggle free of the ropes binding her.

"David..." Charlie had stepped back from Cole and was glaring at Phelan, her body still giving off residual shock-waves of receding pain, her blood now more cortisol and adrenaline than white and red cells. She was livid and hurt and shocked and her lithe form stood rigid and trembling with pent-up emotion. The small, sharp extended fangs in her mouth and the glowing ice-blue eyes were testament to that much.

Cole's gaze cut from her back to Phelan.

Gabriel was staring at Charlie. He was apparently as surprised as she was. But there was something darker in that gaze. Cole recognized it easily for what it was. He'd felt that kind of desire, himself.

Phelan's gaze skirted to the red marks on Charlie's wrists – and then to Cole's wrists, which were bare. "My, my," he half-whispered. "Isn't this an interesting development."

Cole's growl was low in his throat, but it was so deep and powerful that it shook the windows, which rattled in their panes. Necklaces and Mardi Gras beads that hung from the mirror on the dresser began to tremble against the glass. One of the pictures of the little boy and girl slid from its casing and drifted to the carpet.

The woman tied to the chair whimpered. But there was hope in her eyes where there had been none moments before.

"You sick, ruthless bastard," Charlie hissed, moving to take a step toward the man at the other end. Gabriel's sapphire eyes flashed in challenge and the corners of his mouth turned up in anticipation.

Cole's hand shot out to press against Charlie's chest, staying her in her advance. He turned a warning glance on her. She pulled her gaze off of Phelan to stare up at Malcolm and he hoped that she would understand.

He saw it in her eyes. She understood.

She just didn't care.

He could sense the string of reason snap within her a sheer, split second before she bolted into action. He should have been expecting it. She'd been through too much at Phelan's hands. There was only so much a person could take, werewolf or not.

Charlie's form blurred beside him as she yanked off the sweater he'd given her and then raced toward Phelan, all fangs and claws and deadly intent.

Gabriel crouched low and met her, his arms up in defense, his own sharp fangs extending as she took them both to the ground in a flurry of indistinct and hazy forms. They moved far too fast for the human eye to follow and Cole could tell, with a single glance in her direction, that the human woman tied to the chair was bewildered. Perhaps she thought she'd gone mad and had snapped beneath the traumatic pressure of this nightmarish series of events.

Everything was happening too fast, even for him. Nothing made sense. Charlie moved with a speed that, until now, only Malcolm had ever displayed. Her moves were sharp and impossibly quick and incredibly strong. In the space of a few short seconds, she and Phelan seemed to become one super-human fighting machine.

Cole pulled his gaze off of them long enough to focus on the woman in the chair. He moved forward to untie her when someone spoke behind him.

"You always let your women fight your fights for you, werewolf?" Cole spun to face the source of the foreign voice.

Half a dozen human males were standing in the doorway just inside the bedroom. In their hands were automatic weapons. Cole could smell the gun oil, the gun powder, and the faintest hint of weapons discharge. He registered all of this as all six men opened fire on him, emptying everything they had into his tall, strong form.

Cole's body jerked violently beneath the impacts, but he managed to turn once more and dive toward the woman in the chair, knocking her surprised form to the floor behind the bed as he went down in front of her.

Bullets ricocheted within the room, bouncing off of door handles and the metal frame of the bed. Cole heard the pinging and the thunder of the weapons as if through a tunnel. It was distant and rumbling and reminiscent of wind chimes. He had been hit far too many times. He knew that. He was losing too much blood and with it, he would lose consciousness.

He had no doubt that when that happened, the Hunters would kill him.

* * * *

There was no forethought to Charlie's actions. It was as if that part of her brain – the part capable of weighing things carefully before she acted – was simply turned off. Blocked off. Burned out.

She saw the woman in the chair and the pictures on the dresser and felt the receding pain that had burned through her body and she remembered the whip across her back and the years of David Reese, aka Gabriel Phelan, touching her as she was trapped in his arms. She thought of her father. Of her mother. Of the funeral on that sunny Sunday that had seen the last rays of light before a storm had come that night and washed away every flower left at their graves.

In that moment, something inside of her changed. Something went away.

Before she realized what she was doing, she was racing across the room toward the man who had trained her, built her up, and made her into the vessel of rage that she had become. She didn't know where the strength and speed had come from. They should not have been her own. But it was inhumanity at its finest, faster than she could control, stronger than she could have dreamed.

She and Gabriel went down like weights. They hit the floor with a fierceness that splintered the hard wood beneath them. Sound went away and the world painted itself red. Charlie's hands flew on their own. An upper cut. A shot to the solar plexus. Her palms boxed his ears.

Phelan rolled beneath her, shoving her hard and sending her flying into the opposite wall. A distant reverberation like a motorcycle engine shook the air around them, shock-waves of something repetitive and quick. But the sound was muted and all that existed was the slow-motion alacrity of their furied struggle.

Something hard and sharp sliced through Charlie's left arm. Another went through her right leg. She ignored them; all pain was dulled or nonexistent. She

shoved away from the wall and lunged once more. Phelan met her dead-on this time, his own hands flying with a swiftness that defied logic. A back-hand, an elbow to the back of her head, a crunch somewhere in her left thigh and Charlie fell, rolled, and came up once more.

Again, they rushed each other, the smell of blood now thick in the shrinking space of the bedroom. He blocked her first kick but missed her second, and it found his chest, breaking a rib and stealing his breath. He recovered, the space of a fraction of a second passing before he was returning the favor.

Glass shattered around them, detectable only as a muffled tinkling and the occasional crunch. Something was floating in the air – feathers. Dust. Splintered debris.

Time had come to a near stop, the world frozen in this snap shot of conflict. A woman tied to a chair now lay on the ground, bleeding. Her eyes were closed, her face slack. A man lay beside her, slipping away as balls of lead seared through his body and embedded themselves in the floor beneath him.

Flashes of light pierced the dust motes and chunks of fabric that floated in the thick air. Lightning. Thunder. Blood.

Charlie's head snapped to the side beneath another blow, and she caught sight of the man beside the bed, his green eyes closed, his clothing soaked in thick, red liquid.

They say you can't stop time, that it is a constant and waits for no one. They're wrong. Time slows when you want it to speed up. It goes too fast when you're having fun. And it stops. It stops, dead in its tracks, when the unthinkable occurs. Time is not neutral, it makes no sense, and it bears no logic. It has nothing to do with nature or fairness or physics.

Time is cruel.

And it's as simple as that.

Charlie knew; she'd been trapped in it before. At least this time, the ceasing point in seconds and minutes played to her advantage. It took no time at all whatsoever for her to spin in place, slicing a round house kick through the air that connected with Phelan's jaw and knocked him into the adjoining wall.

A nothing second later, Charlie was punching him in the neck. If it hadn't been for the breaking wall behind him, the werewolf would have lost his head. As it was, he curved into the plaster at his back, and it absorbed the impact, shaking the rafters and sending more gypsum and mortar crumbling to the ground around them.

A bullet sliced through Charlie's kidney. Another entered her left shoulder, followed by a third in her right thigh. She jerked at each contact, not hearing them and not recognizing the pain for what it was. There was only the distant, distinct knowledge that she'd been shot several times, and that was it. Her body kept moving of its own volition.

Phelan took a blow that broke his nose, another that knocked out a back tooth. Then he pressed his palms to the wall on either side of him and raised his legs to shove against Charlie in a double kick that sent her literally flying across the room.

On the way, she picked up several more balls of lead, each kissing her skin and searing a burnt-up tunnel through her body on its way back out again.

Somewhere in the background of her consciousness, Charlie heard a man yelling. The thunder slowed and then stopped, trailing away, and she hit the opposite wall and crumpled.

She forced herself to stand. And herself didn't listen.

Her body remained on the ground, healing beneath and around her, the holes closing up, the bones mending. Again, she told it to stand, determined, merciless – and this time, it obeyed.

But as it did, she found herself surrounded by forms in black. She paid them little heed, blurred as they were, but they seemed to notice her with much more force.

There was a hard, sharp jab of a needle at the back of her neck and her legs once more gave out. Liquid fire spread across her skin, eating her up, burning her down. She fell forward, barely able to catch herself.

Blood roared in her ears, effectively cutting out the fuzzy, mixed-up reality around her. She hit the ground and her head shifted, her right cheek slicing against slivers of glass on the wooden planks beneath her. Malcolm's arm stretched, slack and unmoving, beneath the bed across the room. She could see the side of his face, peaceful in his slumber.

She would have given anything, in that moment, for him to open those light green eyes and look at her one last time.

She felt arms lift her, pulling her off of the ground and against a hard chest. She looked up into Phelan's sapphire eyes and saw triumph in his completely healed and once more handsome visage. She tried to rip it away from him, to peel it off of his face, but her arms wouldn't obey. They hung useless at her sides.

His lips moved as he said something to her. But she couldn't hear him. It was useless. Everything was useless. Hopeless. And this was the end.

No little one. We're here. We're coming. The voice rumbled through her mind, the desert wind on a summer's night. It dried her internal tears and warmed her from the inside out. It was her grandfather – the Overseer. She would know his voice anywhere.

We're here, Charlie. Answer, me, angel. Guide us to you.

I'm here, she thought. *Malcolm's hurt.*

Above her, Gabriel's triumphant smile faded. His sapphire eyes glowed more intensely. She felt the growl that rumbled through his chest and into her body.

I can't move...

Dannai will help you, Charlie.

Gabriel spun with her in his arms as the empty window frames across the room began to curve inward and Charlie imagined that they must sound horrible. The walls around them bucked and crumbled. Something was coming through.

He dropped her and Charlie hit the ground to lay motionless, unable to move or call out or stir in any fashion. She closed her eyes, the division between sight and

sound causing a wealth of vertigo to steal through her system.

"Can you hear me, Charlie?" It was a soft voice, tender, feminine and deep. It sounded a little like Demi Moore. Maybe she was dreaming. Maybe she'd finally passed out and Indecent Proposal was playing in her mind.

But the roar in her ears was receding and the woman's voice came through once more. "You're all right, Charlie. Open your eyes."

Charlie opened her eyes in time to see a woman above her standing and turning away in a flurry of long, jet-black hair and dark gold skin and multi-colored eyes. The woman was racing away from her, off to some other destination, before Charlie could get her bearings and sit up.

She was healed. There was no pain or even stiffness in her body any longer. She sat up and the world cleared around her, coming into sharp focus. Time moved at its normal rate once again, which was very fast. She smelled blood, sharp and metallic. She smelled sweat and gun powder and dust. There were several werewolves in the room now.

With a gentle, but comforting kind of shock, Charlie recognized Jessie among them.

Across the room, the woman who had been kneeling beside her a second ago was now kneeling beside someone else. It was Malcolm.

At once, Charlie on her feet. Her gaze searched the wrestling bodies for a man with blonde hair and blue eyes, but Phelan was gone, and her grandfather was also nowhere in sight.

Charlie blurred into movement, ducked beneath the flying body of a male human, and leapt forward, flipping in the air over the sudden rolling ball of fur and black fatigues as a second werewolf took down yet another Hunter. She landed, found her feet beneath her, and continued until she was kneeling beside her mate.

The woman next to him glanced up. Charlie was caught in a powerful gaze of gold, green, purple and blue, and her breath was instantly trapped in her chest. *He is healed, Charlie, but tell no one*, came a voice in her head. It was gentle, but insistent.

The woman smelled human. But the power rolling off of her was unnatural. *Tell no one what you've seen me do*, the voice commanded gently. *Please*, she added softly.

Charlie gazed into the woman's eyes for what seemed a short eternity. And then she was ripping her gaze away and looking down as Cole groaned low and turned his head. Without thinking, she caught his face in her hands and willed his eyes to open. To look up at her.

They did. Light green sliced through the waning light, trapping her in their stark beauty. Charlie stared at him, once more in awe of his exquisite perfection.

"Duck," the woman beside her suddenly ordered.

Without thinking, Charlie ducked down. A body went flying over the three of them. When it passed, they sat back up, Cole included. Then the two werewolves were on

their feet, both moving as if they'd never been injured. The woman with the long, dark hair and extraordinary multi-colored eyes remained on the floor, turning her attention to the unconscious woman strapped to the chair.

Charlie was now certain that the young mother was going to live. There was no absolute logic behind it; it was just an instinctive knowledge combined with the fact that Charlie could hear her heart beating. She also knew that the woman tending to her was some kind of witch. She'd healed Charlie and would do the same for the young mother who had been trapped in this Hell. Maybe she would even help her forget.

Charlie scanned the room, once more searching for just one man. But, even as she searched, she felt her mate beside her, whole, alive, and strong. She thought of this moment in time – a gift she would have given anything for only minutes earlier.

Jessie dispatched a Hunter, ripping his heart completely out of his body, and then turned toward another as the man came through what was left of the doorway.

Charlie had never seen this side of her best friend. She'd never seen the wolf in Jessie. His amber eyes glowed like yellow fire. His fangs were stark white, long and sharp and wicked. His claws were fiendish and dreadful and his entire countenance seemed to have grown a foot taller and gained the breadth of the same. He was massive and monstrous and awesome.

He was beautiful.

Two other werewolves wrestled with one another in a corner. One must have worked for the Overseer. An enforcer, perhaps. The other must have been with Phelan. They were both in wolf form.

The same scene was repeated near the center of the room and Charlie watched as one furry body was thrown into the bed, forcing the mattress and box springs it to go skidding across the room and smash against the opposite wall.

The witch with kaleidoscope eyes managed to gather up the woman she'd untied and roll with her as the bed slid by, saving them both from its crushing momentum.

Charlie watched as another enforcer flashed into wolf form and charged the two Hunters who were now racing through the door after their comrade. All three bodies went rolling back out into the hall.

Machine guns littered the floor, along with the bodies of the fallen Hunters.

And, still, Phelan was no where to be seen.

* * * *

Alexander waited with stark, calm patience as the man who had killed his son slowly stood from where Alex had thrown him against a hollow, dead tree trunk. Gabriel Phelan gained his ground, rose, and seemed to collect himself with incredible ease. Alexander watched as his wounds healed and his blue gaze focused on the Overseer.

"Here to finish your son's fight for him, old man?" Gabriel finally whispered. The words filled the silence of the desert around them. How they'd gotten there, Alexander was certain that Phelan did not know.

Alex had taken them there. He could move through short spaces like that. In the

blink of an eye – in a flash. And sometimes, if he willed it enough, he could take someone with him. His older brother possessed the same gift, but was able to travel vast distances with it. Kavanagh was confined to smaller areas. It was a lapse in power that his other abilities more than made up for.

This was the desert that spanned out toward the airport behind the young mother's dilapidated house. Phelan wouldn't know that. But he also didn't care. They were there now, and they were alone. This moment had been a long time coming.

The moon shone brightly in the midnight tapestry above them. Power lines hummed softly several yards away. The rocks and dirt and bushes and lightning-struck tree husks were starkly outlined in the yellow-white light it shed.

"You should have given her to me, Kavanagh. I would have spared you, then. Out of respect for her," Phelan told him as he slowly pace away from the dead tree. The Overseer's eyes carefully followed his movements. "But now I'll have my men Hunt you down. And when they fail to find you, they'll find your granddaughter."

"You'll never touch her again, Phelan," Alexander said. "*Never.*"

Gabriel threw back his head and laughed, the sound coming from deep inside. It was truly hilarious to him, the idea of him leaving Charlie alone. "You're a powerful old man, Kavanagh. I'll give you that," Gabriel finally said. He shook his head, once. "But you can't stop me."

"I already have," Alex replied. *You're here with me, Gabriel, and the woman you want is somewhere else, with her healed and chosen mate.* He shot the words into Phelan's mind. "In essence, I've won."

Gabriel's expression froze. His gaze hardened.

Alexander didn't let up. The air around them began to grow hotter. Desert nights are mild in nature. The heat of the day leaks away to leave a gentle breeze that carries seventy degrees of comfort to everyone it touches. But now, that seventy degrees was rising. Seventy-five. Eighty. Ninety.

At one hundred and five degrees, Gabriel glanced around. He sensed the power and smelled the magic and knew, in that instant, what he was up against.

I will boil you alive from the inside out, Phelan, Alex told him. And then I will freeze you. And burn you – over and over again.

The power lines overhead began to buzz. Louder and louder, they hummed in their casings until one snapped and snaked for a moment as it fell to the Earth. Sparks scattered and hissed as it hit the ground and skittered madly with the electricity running through it.

Gabriel's blue gaze cut to the line and then back to Alexander. Alex could smell the fear in him now. It was faint, but it was there.

One hundred and fifteen degrees and climbing.

Sweat broke out along Phelan's brow, but his gaze narrowed. *If I die, my Hunters will scatter, Kavanagh. They will go into hiding until you least expect it. And then they will come after those you love most.*

Alexander listened as the werewolf spat mental words back into his mind.

"Your granddaughter will die, but not before her precious husband," Gabriel said aloud. *And her precious child*, he added mentally. *She will live to see every member of her family murdered. And then, by the time my men have finished with her, she'll beg them to kill her.*

Fear was often a good determinant in a battle's outcome, but anger was another. Both were a bane for any man wishing to gain the upper hand in a fight. And as Alexander rushed the other werewolf and Phelan met him, head-on in hand-to-hand combat, that point made itself decidedly clear.

Phelan had been training to fight for years. His reflexes were quick and strong and Alexander failed to get a grip on the man. Their bodies flashed from human to wolf and back again. All the while, the air continued to grow hotter. Another power line broke free, snapping in half, the rubber tube casing scorched and smoking. Sparks showered down on the two struggling forms below.

Alex shoved free of Phelan for a moment and lashed out with his power. The electric lines whipped down toward the other werewolf, hot and sizzling, and slammed into Gabriel's back, singing the material of his shirt and carving a deep red gash into his flesh.

Gabriel's eyes flashed at the contact and he rolled forward, only to be buffeted back by another lashing line, a make-shift whip that carved across his chest, drawing more blood.

How does it feel, Phelan? How does it feel to be in my granddaughter's place?

A third power line snaked down, faster than the others, and slammed into Gabriel with enough force to knock him off of his feet. His back was now sliced open in two places, his chest a third, and blood welled around the burnt injuries as the wounds fought to heal. They would never heal entirely. If he survived, he would scar. Fire was one of the few things that could truly harm a werewolf. Electricity was nothing more than a kind of fire; one that burned hotter than the sun.

One hundred thirty-five degrees and the air was becoming difficult to breathe. Waves of heat rose from the ground, blurring the bushes and cacti and rocks into a strange sort of yellow and purple haze beneath the color-stealing cast of the moon.

Phelan didn't reply to Alexander's taunt. Instead, he rushed the other werewolf, this time angered by pain and the knowledge that he'd been marked.

But Alexander was expecting it. He spun as they contacted, using Phelan's weight against him and taking them both to the ground. As he did, Alex sank his fangs into the other man's neck and pulled hard and deep against the artery he had opened.

Phelan barked a harsh sound of pain and surprise and tried to pull away, but Kavanagh had him. The air continued to heat up. One hundred forty degrees. Kavanagh imagined that Gabriel was beginning to feel sick. Heat will do that to an animal. As will loss of blood.

He pulled and drank and swallowed and felt Phelan's grip lessen, ever so slightly, on his own body. Then he sensed that familiar flutter in his thoughts – that

touch of another mind against his as someone else used his own power to communicate with him wordlessly. Soundlessly.

But this communication was different. While Alexander expected to hear Gabriel's voice in his head, perhaps for the last time, he instead began to see things. Images. He began to feel things. His enemy, his eyes closed and he was standing in a dungeon. A beautiful woman hung naked from leather straps in the ceiling. In his hands, he held a bullwhip. His heart beat sped up. Lust coiled deep within him, awakening his hunger. His pupils expanded and he raised his arm.

Alexander's arm swung expertly through the air and the whip cut across the space between him and his granddaughter. The leather braid made the most beautiful sound as it hit her back and marked it with a red line. She cried out in agony and Alex grew hard. Painfully so.

His heart skipped in his chest and bile rose in his throat. He pulled away from Phelan, trying not to vomit, hatred and revulsion and agonizing guilt rushing his mind and body until the world was painted as red as the blood that now dripped from his fangs.

Gabriel was standing back up. He was weak, but he was standing none the less. "You haven't won anything, old man," Phelan whispered as the air around him began to cool once more. "This has only just begun."

Alexander turned where he knelt in the dirt, and gazed up at Phelan through tear-stained ice-blue eyes. Gabriel had known how to get under his skin. He'd known to show him those images and make him feel those horrid feelings. He'd known the effect it would have on him. He'd found a chink in the Overseer's armor.

Alex watched in stunned, repulsed silence as Phelan's eyes turned from blue to brown to gold. His body began to morph, to melt, and to change. There was a flash of light.

When it had faded, Gabriel's tall, blonde form was gone. A golden eagle sat on the tree stump a few feet away. It stretched its wings and flapped them hard once, twice, and then rose into the night.

Nearby, a power line sparked. It sputtered and hissed along the ground. And then its electric fire went out.

"Does your husband know you're here?" Cole asked Lily. The acidic note that normally accompanied his tone when he spoke to her was gone. He honestly seemed just curious.

Lily shrugged. "Frankly, I don't care. He really pisses me of sometimes." She blew out a sigh and sat back in the leather couch. "James knows I'm here, as does Tabitha. Good enough."

Charlie cocked her head to one side and studied the female made werewolf who was fast becoming a friend. "What happened?" she asked, knowing instinctively that Lily probably wanted to get it off of her chest.

"Oh, he's just a big bully." Lily looked up at Charlie and smiled a meaningful smile. "You know how alphas are."

Charlie returned the smile and Cole had the decency to look chagrined.

"I can't thank you enough for what you did," Charlie said next. "You probably saved my life, and you definitely saved Cole's." Her gaze cut to her mate, who's glittering eyes reflected her own relief. "And Maria's." Charlie finished, turning back to Lily. Maria was the name of the young woman who had been trapped in all of this and nearly killed as nothing more than bait.

Lily smiled a warm smile and blushed a little. "It's my job." She picked up her paper coffee cup and took a deep sip.

Charlie wasn't so sure about that. Lily's determination was only slightly less great than her resolve to do the right thing. When Daniel Kane had hidden Lily's phone from her, she'd simply gotten into her car and driven the short distance to her best friend's house, where she used Tabitha's phone to call the Overseer. She told him about Charlie's marks – and about the vision of Phelan that she'd had on the way over.

Alexander Kavanagh had then called in the troops.

Dannai was the first one on the scene, as usual, and it was her magic that provided the Council with Charlie's location. If they hadn't arrived when they had....

Charlie chanced a glance around the large hotel room. It was Cole's suite in the Bellagio and it seemed as if the entire werewolf community was inside of it at that moment. The Overseer stood by the windows in his expensive suit, his strong arms crossed over his broad chest. His ice blue eyes were the most keen and intelligent eyes that Charlie had ever seen.

Jessie Graves sat in a sideways chair at the dining table, one arm draped over its surface, the other in his lap. He met Charlie's gaze and smiled tenderly.

She smiled back.

Jakob Samson, Lucas Caige, and the rest of Cole's pack were also in the room. They were scattered around it, most of them standing, and the air was thick with the energy they gave off. They were worried. None of them had quite slid out of fight mode just yet. Phelan was still out there. It seemed the man was impossible to kill.

Enforcers were spread throughout the room as well. It was easy to tell an enforcer. They looked like the body builders of the werewolf community. All werewolves were large and well-built. But these guys were ridiculous.

The witch Dannai was the only one that Charlie could think of at that moment who was not with them in the room. She'd left as soon as the fighting at Maria's house had died down and the Council enforcers had begun to clean up the mess.

As Charlie thought of the woman now, she recalled the witch's unspoken words. *Tell no one... please.*

"I think it's time to discuss Phelan and what the man is capable of." The Overseer came away from the window and paced slowly, his hands now behind his back. "He's a problem that isn't going to go away."

Everyone in the room watched him as he turned toward Charlie. "He can change shapes Charlie, which means that we must accept the distinct possibility that he can become anything he wishes. Any *one* he wishes."

"You mean he could be one of us right now," Lucas Caige ventured from where he sat reclined in a large black love seat.

"That's the general idea, though we would most likely recognize his scent," Alexander replied calmly.

"Unless he can change that too," Cole said.

They fell silent at that, and Charlie noticed that they were all looking at one another, as if unsure of whose presence they were in.

She sighed. "I don't know why I didn't mention his eye color earlier. We may have been able to prepare for something like this. When he trained me as David Reese, his eyes were brown."

"That's true," Lily agreed. "His eyes were brown in my vision."

Charlie nodded. "But he changed them right in front of me. If he could do that, there's no reason why he couldn't do more. I mean," she turned to her grandfather. "You told me that some werewolves are born with gifts. I guess that could be his."

"Indeed," Kavanagh replied. He took a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "All right, people. Be on your guard and keep in touch," the Overseer ordered. As if dismissed, the werewolves began to stand from where they'd been sitting and those who had already been on their feet were making their way to the door.

Charlie watched them leave. Jessie stayed behind, as did Lily.

Within a few moments, the only people left in the room were the Overseer, Jessie, Charlie, Lily, and Cole.

The door to Cole's suite swung shut and the latch caught and Alexander Kavanagh took a seat beside Charlie. "Phelan is bad enough," Alexander said as if speaking with her alone. "But we also have to consider the warlock, Seth."

Charlie paled a little at the thought of the black haired man who looked so young and felt so much older. The warlock was a wild card. She thought of the way his deep, indigo eyes had raked over her, and the way he'd looked at her in the back of Phelan's Cobra after she'd hit him... and she shivered. "He had fangs and his eyes

were glowing red.”

“Yes,” Kavanagh nodded. “I believe he is related to an Akyri. Most likely, the offspring of one.”

“The same thought occurred to me,” Jessie said.

“What’s an Akyri?” Lily asked.

“A supernatural being that has existed alongside the werewolves since time began,” Alexander replied. “They tend to form a symbiotic relationship with warlocks. Something in the darkness of the magic feeds their existence. In exchange, they perform duties for warlocks they feed from.”

“So they’re real,” Cole said softly. “I had suspicions.”

Charlie’s head was spinning, but it definitely wasn’t the first time that week. She now believed in werewolves and witches. What was one more supernatural creature?

“Many of the more powerful alphas have come across them at one time or another and not known what it was they encountered,” Kavanagh continued. “Now you know.”

“Are they dangerous?” Lily asked.

“I would have to vote ‘yes’ on that,” Charlie said, recalling Seth’s aura of power. “But Seth was a warlock himself,” she told her grandfather. “You said the Akyri just feed off of warlocks.”

“I believe Seth may be the offspring of a warlock and an Akyri. These creatures are incredibly rare. In fact, we have virtually no information about them, which is why I can’t be certain that Seth is one. However, it would make sense. And if this is the case, then to answer your question, Lily – yes. The Akyri are dangerous. But Seth is perhaps far worse.”

“Great,” Lily said as she blew out a sigh. “Now what?”

“The Akyri don’t think we know about them,” Kavanagh said. He smiled. “We prefer to keep it that way. If you have a vision concerning Seth, of course you are to tell us. Otherwise, keep away from him. We have no idea what his intentions are. We have no clue as to what it is that he wants. He is holding all of the cards.”

Nobody had anything to add to that. The words seemed to drape a blanket of solemnity over the small group of werewolves. They had much to think about. The leader of the Hunters was out there somewhere with a seemingly endless army of killer humans and werewolves at his disposal. And he could most likely become anything he wished.

To make things worse, there was an inhuman warlock on the loose with a hidden agenda and unbelievable power. It was safe to say that Charlie and her companions were not yet at home base.

“Charlie, we need to talk about those marks on your arms,” Kavanagh interrupted her thoughts.

Cole sat across from them and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and lacing his fingers together. “Lily, you said the curse was different now.” He paused and cleared his throat, as if embarrassed. “You didn’t have a chance to elaborate.”

Lily blushed and nodded. "You showed up at Maria's house before she was killed. And in my visions, it's the same way every time the marks work. You show up *before* anyone is hurt." She waited as this information sank in. "Also, in the visions, Charlie's never alone."

Now, she looked to Cole.

And then she looked away from Cole and turned in her seat to look at Jessie.

Jessie's stark amber gaze narrowed slightly and he straightened in his chair.

"I don't know if you've ever even tried to take anyone with you when you've traveled through the curse before, Cole," Lily continued, softly, as she turned back around to pin Malcolm with her golden gaze. "But it's obvious that Charlie can do it now. She can take people with her. All that seems to be required is a touch."

"You mean, I can travel to these places, before anyone gets hurt, and I can kick some major serial killer ass and save lots of innocent people?" Charlie asked suddenly, an edge of excitement to her tone.

Everybody in the room blinked and all eyes were on her. "What?" she asked. "Why are you looking at me like that? It's true, isn't it? That's what Lily's saying. With this gift, I can save people."

"It isn't a gift, Charlie. It's a curse," Cole said softly.

"No, it was a curse for *you*. But for me, maybe it's something different. Something better."

"She's right," Lily agreed. "The potential to do good here is immense. You have to admit that."

Cole's grip on his own hands tightened and he seemed to be struggling with something. Finally, he spoke through somewhat gritted teeth, "Why do our mates keep acquiring powers that put them in danger like this?"

"An excellent question, Cole." The Overseer sighed and faced the alpha. "I don't have an answer to it, either. No one does. Except, perhaps, my brother."

Charlie froze where she was on the sofa. Had she heard him right?

"He seems to believe that Dormants are given these powers as they are made wolves to further aid our survival. Charlie and Lily are not the only two."

Charlie whirled on her grandfather, her ice blue eyes flashing. "Your *brother*?"

Alexander didn't even flinch. He'd obviously been expecting this reaction. And he could read her mind. "Yes, Charlie. He's your great uncle. Unfortunately, there has been some love lost between us. We're a tad... estranged."

"I have a great uncle?" she asked.

Kavanagh sighed. "Technically, yes. But I'm afraid I must forbid you from having anything to do with him, Charlie. The man is dangerous. His views are twisted. He can't be trusted."

Charlie sat, staring at her grandfather, as this information sank in. And then she straightened, her chin up. "You *forbid* me?"

Kavanagh blinked. He must not have read that thought coming.

Cole cleared his throat. "Charlie, your grandfather is the council Overseer – "

"No one forbids me from doing anything," Charlie said, her tone low, her voice tight. She had just about had enough of the macho nature of alpha werewolves. "But you can reason with me, if you like. And I might agree with you." Her jaw was set and she could almost feel her light blue eyes flashing in warning. "I suggest you give it a try first."

The inhabitants of the room had grown quiet. Charlie's gaze skirted from Cole to her grandfather; both were looking at her with the strangest expressions on their faces. But Lily was smiling.

And from where he sat at the table a few feet away, Jessie Graves began to chuckle. Charlie turned to look up at him. His amber eyes were sparkling and his smile was a proud smile. He shook his head in wonder and, when the other two men in the room turned to pin him with hard gazes, his chuckle broke out into a full-blown belly laugh, deep and rumbling and beautiful.

"Be careful, gentlemen," Lily stated, a mischievous air to her tone. "Revolutions happen for a reason."

And right now I can royally kick ass, thought Charlie, as she recalled the speed with which she'd been capable of moving at Maria's house; the pain she'd been able to doll out to Phelan. She felt incredibly strong. Capable.

She felt... an *absence* of fear.

It was what she'd always strived for. With each trainer she'd tried, with every class she'd attended and every large friend she'd made, it had been her goal. Now it was finally hers. She could walk the street alone if she chose, and, aside from Gabriel Phelan and that inhuman warlock, no man would be able to hurt her.

Not any more.

"Very well." Alexander was suddenly trying to hide a smile of his own. "Charlie, please do me the favor of staying away from your great uncle. He doesn't have your best interests in mind."

Charlie nodded. Once. "I'll do my best."

At that, Lily stood. "I have to go. James and Tabbie are waiting for me outside."

"Wait." Cole stood as well. "What about the pain?" he asked, gesturing to Charlie's arms. "Is there anything we can do to lessen it?"

Charlie's stomach clenched. She looked up at her mate. As tall and strong as he was, he seemed burdened by a weight that he very much wanted to get rid of and didn't know how to. He seemed desperate in this. It made him appear almost human.

Lily's mouth opened as if she were going to say something, and then she paused and closed her mouth again. She looked from Cole to Charlie – and then to Jessie once more.

"I can't do anything about it, Cole. And neither can you." Then she nodded toward Jessie. "But he can."

Cole and Charlie both turned to gaze at Graves.

Jessie stood. He didn't seem too surprised, which served to further shock both Charlie and Cole. "All right," he said, softly. "Now's as good a time as any."

The others just watched in silent surprise, as Jessie moved away from the table

to a briefcase that was sitting on a counter against one wall. He opened it and pulled out a manila folder. Then he walked over to Cole and held out the folder for the other alpha to take.

Cole hesitated, just a moment, and then took the folder and opened it. Charlie stood to peer down at it as well.

On the very top was a photograph of a young, handsome man with deep brown eyes that were nearly black. His skin was fair and his dark hair fell to his shoulders in careless waves. There was something secret in the man's intense gaze.

"His name is Rendor. He is the prince of the Boyash gypsy tribe in Romania," Jessie said.

"And that would be why he seems familiar to me," Cole said. Charlie gazed down at him and then glanced up at Malcolm's face. She thought of what she'd been told about the gypsy who had originally placed the red marks on his arms. And it hit her. The man in the picture was probably related to that gypsy. Maybe he was the grandson? Or great grandson?

"Why are you showing me this?" Cole asked, his tone reflecting a sudden and stark irritation.

Jessie took the final step necessary to close the distance between Cole and himself. He stood head to head with the man and easily held his gaze. "The Boyash tribe happens to owe me a favor Cole," he said. He paused, then added, "and I will happily cash it in." He cocked his head to one side, waiting.

Charlie felt the tension spark between them and stepped back. Cole wasn't stupid. He was obviously well aware that Jessie wasn't going to do him any favors for free. "And what do you want in return?" Malcolm asked through clenched teeth.

"I want guardian rights."

* * * *

It was a long time before both Jessie and Lily were gone and Cole and Charlie were alone with the Overseer. All three of them were growing tired. They were inhuman, but they were still animals, and animals needed their sleep.

"Now that I have you two alone, I need to talk to you about something very important," Alexander began. He paused, searching for the right words. Then, with a deep breath, he ventured, "The witch Dannai is a very special individual."

Charlie's heart skipped a beat. She realized, in that tense moment, that her grandfather could read her mind – and she couldn't make herself stop seeing what it was that Dannai had done in that room of Maria's house. She couldn't stop seeing her heal Malcolm. Heal the woman. Heal herself. Her grandfather would know, even though Dannai had pleaded with her not to tell anyone.

"It's all right, child," Alexander shook his head, a faint smile on his lips. "You don't need to hide her talents from me. I'm well aware of them. And she's aware that I'm aware." He chuckled softly at that. "She also knows that there's no way around it. The two of you, Lily Kane, her guardian, and most of the alphas in our community have been made aware of her gift. She is a generous spirit, Dannai. She shares this healing power with us whenever we need it and never complains. However, should

the rest of the world become aware of her abilities, she would be jeopardized. We must strive to keep it to ourselves.”

Relief flooded through Charlie. But she was still confused. “Why? Why does she want to hide this? She could do so much good with it.”

“And she does, Charlie, believe me. However, the ability to heal one’s wounds is a spectacular power. It’s unheard of amidst humans. Can you imagine what many fundamental religions would think of her? Can you see the tabloids? The government agencies? If word got out... there would be no place on earth that Dannai could hide.”

Cole and Charlie were silent as they digested this. And then Alexander continued.

“She agrees to work for the Council because the covens and the Council have worked together for hundreds, if not thousands of years. And she does so because she’s a genuinely good person. She can’t help herself. When she knows that someone is hurting, she has to be there to help them.”

Charlie nodded. She could understand that. And she had sensed Dannai’s goodness.

“Charlie, she has spoken with Lily and she wanted me to speak with you about it,” Alexander went on. “She wants to...” he trailed off as if searching for the right term. “She wants to *join forces*, if you will, with the two of you. If you three can work together, you can save many, many lives.”

Charlie blinked. “What do you mean?”

Cole stiffened beside her. She could tell he didn’t like the direction this conversation was taking. But the Overseer continued, none the less.

“Lily is able to see the future. You can transport people to the scene of a crime that will soon take place, and your fighting abilities are phenomenal. Dannai can heal wounds – along with a rather vast array of other impressive feats of magic.” He paused long enough for the information to soak in. “As a trio, you would be...”

“Pretty awesome,” Charlie finished for him. She knew that her eyes were bright when Cole swore softly beside her and ran a hand through his thick, dark hair.

“This night is just getting better and better,” he muttered.

At that, Kavanagh chuckled. “I suppose everything is relative,” he said, softly. “And remember, Cole, you can accompany them. As I’m sure Charlie’s new guardian will want to occasionally do.”

Malcolm’s eyes shut tight and he swore again. “*Christ.*”

Epilogue

Lucas Caige tried not to think about what he was doing. It was painful, in a way. Like ripping off a Band-Aid over a wound that had healed long ago. Needed to be done, even though it hurt.

And it was time.

With one quick pull, he yanked the cover off of his bike and exposed the chrome and black-silver paint to the overhead lights of his garage. It had been too long.

With a slow, appreciative gaze, he looked the bike over, running a check, as he always did, before getting on and starting the engine. He'd grown used to it over the last forty years or so. Ever since Scrubs had helped him build his first chopper in San Francisco.

Since then, Caige had owned many bikes. But this one had always been his favorite. A 1978 Harley Davidson FXS 1200 Low Rider in contrasting black and silver. Pristine condition. He made sure of that.

He had no idea where he was going. He had no plan.

There were people out there who meant the werewolf community loads of harm. And he would have to watch his own back. He would always be looking over his shoulder.

But he could handle that. He'd been there before.

The open road called. That some other place that waited at the end of an empty gas tank – it was there. It always had been. His visit was long past due.

"Had a feeling you'd be heading out," Jake said, from where he stood in the doorway that led to the interior of Caige's house.

Lucas had known he was there. He'd sensed him approach. He didn't look up as he lifted a red gas tank from the ground a few feet away and then topped off the bike. "Give Cole my best," he said. There was no emotion in his tone. He wouldn't let any out.

He couldn't afford to.

Finally, as he put down the gas tank, pulled on his gloves, and settled into the saddle on the motorcycle, he dared to meet Jake's blue gaze. "Keep an eye on him, mate," he said, faint traces of his Australian accent lacing his words. It happened sometimes. When he wasn't paying attention. "The pommie bastard attracts trouble."

Jake smiled, flashing white teeth, and nodded. "I will, Caige. Be safe." He hit the garage door button beside him and Caige started the engine.

A few seconds and the bellow of an engine later, Caige and his bike had roared out of sight.

* * * *

She wasn't supposed to be here. This kind of thing was strictly forbidden by the Council, not to mention her coven. But damn it, she was pissed. She was tired and sore and angry at the world for too many reasons to count.

She'd seen something she wanted. And the bad guy had no right to it.

It may as well be hers.

So with quick, determined steps, Dannai made her way through the holding lot

where the Las Vegas police department kept their impounded vehicles. The cloaking spell she wore protected her image from the prying eyes and speakers of the cameras that whirled all around her.

It didn't take long for her to find the one she wanted. It seemed to be waiting for her. When she came around the corner and its large black frame slid into sight, her breath caught in her throat. It seemed to stare back at her as her gaze skirted over its shining length of hood, its charcoal on black paint, its tinted windows. She took in the Cobra emblem on the radiator and the GT500 mark on the side.

It sat there, with two flat tires, and told her a story. It had been abused. It wanted something better. And that the something better it wanted was her.

She smiled, her beautiful face flashing into a perfect, white grin. "Well, hello bad boy," she whispered. "Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?"

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Her heart skipped a beat and her stomach clenched. A nervous anticipation rushed through her, like a rolling wave. She squelched her fear and closed her eyes, taking a deep, calming breath.

Okay, let's do this thing, Danny, she told herself. Now or never.

With that, she opened her eyes once more and searched around her for another car of the same general size as this one. When she found the one she wanted, she positioned herself until she was roughly at the center of the distance between it and the Shelby and she closed her eyes once more.

She began to chant. A breeze picked up in the parking lot. Dust took to the skies and litter swirled in small eddies in between the vehicles. Lightning flashed somewhere near by and thunder split the sky. The harsh lights in the poles overhead flickered and went out.

And then they came back on.

When they did, there were two Shelby Cobras sitting in the lot and the white car that had been in the place of the second one only moments before was now gone.

Dannai smiled a triumphant smile. "That'll do," she said softly. She strode to the Shelby with the flat tires and placed her hands on the car. A few more muttered magic words and, in a few seconds, the tires were whole again and filled with air.

Then she opened the door and slid in behind the wheel. It smelled good. Leather and new car smell. "Beautiful," she muttered to herself. "Okay, baby. Let's get you out of here."

She touched the key hole and pressed in the clutch, shifting the vehicle into first as she did so. She whispered a single-word incantation. The engine roared to life and Dannai's smile widened. She pulled the car out of its space and drove it to the front gates, all the while being careful to make certain that her cloak enveloped the car as well. It was draining and she was already pretty tired.

But it was worth it.

Another few words and a bit more expended energy and the chain around the front gate slipped away, dropping to the ground outside. The gate began to slide open. When the gap was wide enough, Danny revved the engine and shot through.

First gear. Second gear. Third. The highway exit was up ahead. She had no idea

where she was going. She had no plan.

There were people out there who meant her coven harm. The Council was up against an army of Hunters and a megalomaniac sadist with too much power and far too much control.

She would have to watch her back, and always be looking over her shoulder. But she needed a break. A vacation, so to speak.

And the open road called. That some other place that waited at the end of an empty gas tank – it was there. It always had been.

Her visit was long past due.

The End.

Look for the third book in the Big Bad Wolf series, The Spell, now available on Amazon...

Dannai, who is also known as the Healer, has begun dreaming of werewolves. She'd always been able to hide the fact that she was a dormant, using her magic to shield the sweet, promising scent from the alphas she's been forced to work around. But now that they've invaded her dreams, her world has really been turned upside down. For, though every dormant dreams of her intended mate - Dannai is dreaming of two wolves, not one. And neither one of them is good news. One is a notorious killer. The other is Lucas Caige.

Lucas Caige is a man with a haunting past. A warlock took his brother from him fifty years ago and he's spent his life outrunning that dark magic. But fate has a way of throwing sand in your gears - and just when Caige thought he could forever leave behind the magic that brought pain to his life, his path crosses that of the Healer. Dannai unwittingly casts her spell over him the moment he lays eyes on her. She's stunning, she's kind, and everything about her wreaks havoc on his senses.

She's also magic incarnate.

But if Dannai thinks that's going to stop him from doing everything in his power to make her his mate, the little witch has another thing coming.

Also check out Heather's new young adult paranormal suspense, Sam I Am, the first in The October Trilogy....

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.

Go to www.killough-walden.com for teasers and tidbits of upcoming releases.