

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

JEZ
MORROW

Shadow
OF A Wolf

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication

www.ellorascave.com

Shadow of a Wolf

ISBN 9781419914652

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Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication February 2008

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SHADOW OF A WOLF

Jez Morrow

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BMW: Bayerische Motoren Werke Aktiengesellschaft

Volvo: Volvo Personvagnar AB Corporation

X-Files: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

Chapter One

It had been almost two years, and still Jack missed Martin.

Saw him still.

In shadows.

In dreams.

When the night wind moved the branches outside Jack's cabin window and the moonlight threw shadows among the trees, black on the blackness, Jack saw him.

Shadows of a wolf.

But they were only shadows. Martin was gone. The only other of Jack's kind. Not until Jack lost him did Jack know that he loved him. More than his own life. There was so much of the wolf in Martin, even when he was in the form of a man. Haunted, hungry, Martin used to snarl at Jack for being too cheerful.

Martin had been lean, all muscle and bone. Sometimes he looked younger than his twenty-five years. But his eyes had seen too much. Martin's large, wide topaz eyes took in everything, seemed to look right through you.

Martin Winter had worked for the FBI, and would defend his country to the death.

He may have done just that.

The FBI was pretty sure Martin was dead. They had followed every lead to its dead end. But no one had taken that last step to declare it.

Martin had been so damned suspicious that Jack had not believed him when Martin called him on his cell phone that night to say he was being tailed. Over the phone, Martin told Jack that he was going to ditch his car in Rock Creek Park, run through the woods as a wolf and meet Jack on the opposite parkway. The last thing Martin had ever said to him was, *Please be there, Jack.*

It had been sleeting that night and Jack had not wanted to go out at all. But he always humored Martin's moods. Jack drove his black BMW to the park, muttering at the prospect of having a soaking-wet, muddy-pawed wolf jump onto his tan leather seats.

Jack had pulled over and parked where Martin said to meet him.

Jack waited, watching the wipers smear ice on the windscreen on a night not fit for man or beast.

Nor for those of us who are both.

Then he saw lights bouncing deep in the woods.

Flashlights?

As a wolf, Martin for sure never carried a flashlight.

Then Jack realized, for the love of God, someone really was chasing Martin.

Jack threw open the car door in time to hear the double crack.

Gunshots.

A human cry.

Jack plunged into the darkness. Brambles caught at his clothes, so he shed them, becoming a wolf. He tore through the trees on all fours, thorns snagging at his thick black fur.

He had lost sight of the flashlights.

Then he heard, at a distance, a van door slide open, slide shut. Car doors slammed.

Tires peeled out, skidding on the icy parkway.

Jack ran with all his strength. When he galloped clear of the woods, he found the skid marks on the parkway.

There had been two vehicles here. Now there were none.

In the brittle cold air, Jack could hardly smell anything. Still, a faint tang reached his nostrils. With the heightened senses of a wolf, he recognized the scent of blood.

Jack, the black wolf, ran after the tire tracks until the ice turned to snow and covered the tracks completely.

He stopped, panting raggedly, defeated.

He threw his head back and howled into the bitter wind with raging grief as if he might howl his soul out.

He retraced his steps, his paws stinging, lungs raw. He stumbled back into the forest, back through the broken underbrush following his own tracks.

He collected up his scattered clothes as a naked man in the snow. His clothes were wet and icy by now. He'd lost a sock.

He started to shake, not from the cold. He coughed. And he was overcome by racking sobs.

Jack Reed hadn't cried since his parents died. He knelt in the icy leaves and forest litter to cry as if his world were ending.

It had taken a long time for Jack to smile again, for his life to return to some imitation of normal. He still felt a hole in his heart, an empty place Martin ought to be.

Jack was twenty-eight years old and drop-dead handsome. He knew it, because he'd been told so too many times to ignore, but he didn't place much store by it. He was friendly, funny and athletic, so there were always women. People immediately liked him and trusted him.

Lieutenant Commander Jack Reed was a Navy officer with a clean record. He had been told he had a stellar future before him. There was only one thing missing—he needed a proper wife.

Well, that and the fact that I turn into a wolf. But no one knew that latter part about Jack Reed.

Except for Martin.

And Jack now knew, too late, why he had never married. He had dated a string of very pretty, smart and charming women who were fun to be with. Sex was fun and felt really good but there had never been the earth-shaking soul-searing experience he thought it could be and he never met a woman he desperately needed to spend all the rest of his tomorrows with.

He assumed it was just a matter of time before he met the right woman. He had never felt there was anything missing from his life—until the center of his life went missing on an icy December night nearly two years ago.

And now Jack was seeing shadows again.

He cursed, wondering if he would never be whole again.

He had spied the shadow for the last five nights in a row, the silhouette of a wolf out of the corner of his eye.

He saw it now.

He slammed his fist into the wall.

No! That's ENOUGH!

He was *not* going to turn and look. He was not going to open the window and chase a memory.

Rain pattered at the log cabin's cedar-shingled roof. Falling leaves stuck to the windowpane.

He was not going to fall into that well of grief again.

Without meaning to, he glanced out the window.

At the slender silhouette of a man.

Jack tore open the door and ran out into the rain.

The shadow did not vanish this time.

Martin Winter stood between the trees, real as life, naked as a wolf but he was in human form. Rain-drenched hair lay plastered to his head. His fine eyes blinked away droplets. Water traced his full lips that were slightly blue. Raindrops welled in the deep hollows of his collarbone, ran down his lean body, traced the contours of his hard muscles and got caught in the springy thatch of hair above his long cock.

Jack stared, mouth open, too much to say and not a thought left in his head.

Martin spoke, "I've been watching to see who you're keeping company with these days."

Jack broke from his daze. "*Martin!*" He closed the space between them in two long bounds, threw his arms around Martin's slender body, laughing. Jack's warm hands pressed Martin's chilled, slick, bare skin. Jack leaned his face against Martin's cold ear. He stroked his wet hair. Martin was real, all real. Jack pulled back to look at Martin's face, then crushed him back against him tight. He could feel both their hearts pounding.

Jack's lips accidentally—or maybe *not* accidentally—brushed Martin's neck. Maybe Martin didn't notice it for the rest of the smothering embrace.

Terse, surly, as familiar as if they had never been apart, Martin said, "Get off me."

Jack let go of him, beamed at him. Laughed at him, "Come out of the rain, you idiot!"

Martin turned away. Yellow light from the cabin windows bathed Martin's wide shoulders, his sculpted back, his tight narrow buttocks, his long athletic legs. Martin bent down to pick up something from the underbrush.

A gym bag.

Jack laughed.

"What?" Martin snapped.

"I'm just picturing a wolf trotting through the woods carrying a gym bag between its teeth."

And there *were* indentations of sharp teeth in the gym bag's handles.

God knew where Martin had left his car this time.

"What else was I going to do?" Martin said sourly. "You don't have any clothes that fit."

Martin followed Jack up the wide wooden steps to the covered porch where Jack opened the door for him. Martin hesitated at the threshold.

Jack couldn't stop grinning. He said, "Get your ass inside."

Martin entered warily. Had he been in wolf form, his ears would have been flat back.

Jack stared at him, marveling at how beautiful he was, bubbling with happiness. Then he saw it. The warm light inside the cabin illuminated a little puckered scar in Martin's back, just below his rib cage, the kind of mark a bullet leaves behind.

"You have another exit wound," Jack spoke aloud as he recognized it.

"I already noticed that, thank you, Jack," Martin said, flatly.

Martin's beautiful topaz eyes took in the kitchen, the great room, the loft. Jack knew he was taking note of all the possible exits, the doors, the windows. Martin had a thing about feeling trapped.

Seeming satisfied, Martin padded barefoot to the nearest bathroom with his gym bag to get dressed.

Jack had a cup of hot coffee ready for Martin when he came out.

Black coffee. Martin never let anyone put anything into his drink.

Martin's dark blond hair was still damp. His clothes were loose on him but they draped well—a crewneck sweater of rough knit, and gray corduroy jeans. He wore no belt and he was still barefoot. Martin never liked socks. He tended to trip over them if he needed suddenly to turn into a wolf.

He moved with raw, wild elegance. He had lost weight, which only emphasized the width of his shoulders and his chest, the slenderness of his waist and narrowness of his hips.

Jack blurted, "Where have you been!" And immediately he put up a hand as if he could stop the words in the air and take them back. "I wasn't going to ask you that."

"Don't," said Martin.

Jack pressed his mouth shut, nodded. He took it as a measure of faith that Martin accepted his coffee and actually drank it.

Warming up, Martin pushed the sleeves of his sweater up to his elbows.

Claw scars, rather recent ones, showed on Martin's sinewed forearms.

"Now what was that?" said Jack, nodding at the scars.

Martin answered wryly, "Dinner disagreed with me."

Jack never ate anything when he was in the form of a wolf. He had a repugnance of raw meat, and it made no difference which form he was in, man or beast. Apparently, Martin had no such loathing. Either that or he had been desperate and starving.

Jack and Martin sat across from each other at the cozy breakfast table in a nook under a kitchen window, a sweet stillness between them.

Jack's gray cat lay on the window ledge, folded into a neat furry loaf with green eyes.

Martin tilted his head sideways at the cat and asked Jack, "You gonna eat that?"

Martin always had a dry sense of humor.

Jack broke into a huge smile. "Can I make you some breakfast, Martin?"

Jack got up, and set himself happily to cooking eggs—just as he had the very first time they had met.

Martin got up from his chair and prowled the great room warily.

There had been nothing but ladders and sawhorses in the great room last time Martin had been here. Jack had still been building the log cabin back then.

It was all finished now.

Martin looked 'round, called into the kitchen, "You've been busy."

Back then, the great room had been unsanded, unfurnished and had smelled of new wood and sawdust.

A polished glow from the stout log beams filled it now. The oversized fieldstone hearth that made up one wall rose up through the loft area above. The light fixtures were black iron mission style. Martin thought he really ought to be able to relax here. It was a rustic romantic space.

And it was filled with things now. Martin looked at Jack's belongings as if he could read Jack in them.

There was a red Navajo rug—authentic. A leather sofa—how manly. A wrought iron fire screen with the figures of two wolves worked into it—how very Jack.

Martin came to a framed photograph on the wall. There had been nothing on the walls the last time he was here, so Martin had never seen this. In the photo, fireworks lit up the night sky over a packed stadium. Crisscrossing spotlights lit three soaring flag poles—the U.S. flag top and center. The photographer had taken this shot from behind the Olympic podium, so you could not see faces. Three teams stood on the tiered platforms. The team on the topmost step wore red, white and blue.

Martin would have assumed this was a tourist memento, except that also in the deep frame, mounted underneath the photo, was a real gold medal from the Summer Olympics seven years ago.

Martin turned from the photo to Jack in the kitchen, "Are you somebody, Jack?" Jack gestured with a spatula. "We were somebody. Track-and-field team. Men's four-by-one-hundred relay."

"Of course," said Martin. "You always were a pack animal."

Just as Martin had always been a lone wolf.

He looked again at the image of young Jack with his teammates, their arms around each other, on top of the world, so happy Martin could almost see their grins through the backs of their heads.

Jack had never bragged about this past glory. Martin must have dismissed this as a different Jack Reed when he had dug into his background. Or it had just been irrelevant at the time.

"I'm second from the left there," Jack wagged the spatula toward the photograph.

"Yeah, I see your ass," said Martin.

Martin moved away from the photograph to the hearth. He picked up a scented candle off the mantel and held it under his nose. It was bayberry, with flowers molded into it. The floral candle was a distinctly feminine touch in the masculine room. "Am I going to get in the way of anything?" Martin asked suddenly, a little alarmed, ready to run away.

"What do you mean?" Jack asked.

"I mean a woman," Martin snapped, replacing the candle on the hearth. "What do you think I mean?"

"Oh. No," said Jack. "I pissed off another one."

Jack went back to the kitchen. "I'm on my own again."

Martin followed him into the kitchen. "Why are you here?"

Jack didn't know how to answer that one. "Uh, because it's my house?" he suggested. "I built it?"

"It's a weeknight," Martin said, sounding like an accusation. "You never come out here during the week. You come here on weekends. But you've been here all week. Why?"

Jack lifted the frying pan off the gas flame and looked straight at him. "You've been spying on me, Martin?"

Martin pressed, "Why are you here?"

"You've never been to my townhouse," said Jack.

"No," said Martin. "Why?"

That was the answer to your question, you beautiful moron, Jack thought loudly.

Jack came to this log house in the woods because memories of Martin were strong here. Jack was here because Martin had been here and because Jack wanted to be near his memories of Martin in this season when the cold rains came and the autumn winds blew. This place was haunted. And Jack wanted to be haunted.

Martin did not seem to have an earthly clue what Jack was telling him.

Well, if the feeling was not returned, then the best Jack could do was not scare him off.

Jack wanted him. Wanted him with a passionate hurt. Wanted so badly to kiss him. On the mouth. But Jack was afraid he would scare him if he said anything even remotely fond. Martin already looked ready to run at the brush of a tree branch against the window.

If Jack could not have his body, then he might at least salvage what he could have. Just let him *be* here so Jack could breathe in his beauty and glory in the exotic warmth of his presence. Here. Really here, in his kitchen, alive. Where Jack could watch Martin's pouting lips move, watch the prominent Adam's apple in his long throat rise and fall when he swallowed. Relish the warm ache of wanting. *God, Martin, just be here.*

Jack answered at last, ironically, "Would you rather I leave?"

"Were you expecting me?" Martin asked, suspicious now.

"Now how in the hell could I have done that? You do know you're dead, don't you?"

Martin turned his face aside, eyes downcast, conferring with inner demons. Sharp cheekbones and a deep jawline gave him an androgynous beauty. He spoke softly, "Jack, you don't know what I've seen."

"That's God's truth," said Jack, sensing the darkness within him. He wanted to put his arms around him, or at least a hand on his shoulder, but Martin's posture was screaming *stay away*.

"I don't trust anyone," Martin said.

Jack had nothing to answer that.

After a very long pause, Martin asked, "You're not going to tell me I can trust you?"

Jack shook his head. "You can. But you've got to figure that out for yourself."

Martin was a harder, sadder, soberer man than Jack had known before. More reticent, more nervous—as if Martin could become more of any of those things. Jack saw that Martin had been hurt, hurt more deeply than just another bullet wound could hurt him.

"Can I rip out someone's throat for you?" Jack offered.

Martin ducked his head, startled. "What?"

"Somebody did something to you," said Jack.

Martin started to object. Then he looked far away, staying silent. He lifted one finger from his coffee cup to signal the end of that conversation. But some remote, safely guarded part of him seemed to appreciate the offer.

Jack served the plate of eggs on the kitchen table and sat across from Martin as he ate. Martin's every little motion captivated him. The shadows of Martin's eyelashes moving on his sharp-boned cheeks made his presence intensely real. Jack saw both strength and delicacy in Martin's hands as his long fingers closed 'round his coffee mug. Jack memorized the shape of his prominent knuckles, the hollows between the tendons in the back of his hand. Jack imagined those strong delicate hands on his body. His body responded with a heated shiver that ran straight down from his hungry eyes to his groin. He hoped Martin would just assume he was cold.

Martin put down his fork, and said at last, "I read your police report."

Of course Jack had gone to the police when Martin disappeared. Jack had omitted the turning-into-a-wolf part from the story and any details about how he happened to be on the scene. But he hadn't told any outright lies in the police report.

"Who else did you talk to?" Martin demanded, suspicious.

"The FBI," said Jack. That much should have been obvious.

Martin had worked for the FBI before he disappeared.

"No one else?"

"No."

Martin's lips formed a brooding pout, unconsciously seductive. His build was big-boned, spare, elegant. He had a beauty that was both masculine and feminine. Jack sensed vulnerability and savagery in him, an animal strength with a delicate touch.

Martin's wide topaz eyes glanced furtively everywhere but at Jack. He met Jack's gaze fleetingly and glanced away.

Guiltily, Jack wondered if Martin had seen the hunger in his eyes. Jack had been imagining slipping his hands under Martin's bulky sweater onto that hot, taut body.

The gray cat yawned on the window ledge.

Martin nodded aside. "Is she giving me a hint?"

It was very late.

"Stay," said Jack. "Please stay."

Martin shook his head. "They'll look for me here."

"Who will?" said Jack. "Martin, who even knows you've ever been here?"

Martin's topaz eyes blinked at him, startled.

"No one," Martin had to admit. "I would look for me here."

Jack tossed his napkin on the table between them. "Penalty flag. Fifteen yards for paranoia."

Martin had crossed beyond caution and was jumping at shadows now.

"Aw, shit." Martin pressed his fingertips to the bridge of his nose. He looked like he was trying to keep the thoughts from running out of his head.

Jack asked, "When is the last time you had a good night's sleep?"

Martin shook his head, trying to think. "Probably December. Before last."

"Stay," Jack insisted. "Stay the night. The guest bedroom is all done now."

Martin seemed on the edge of knee-jerk argument, then relaxed in his chair, even slouched a little. "Kay."

Jack threw Martin's gym bag in the second bedroom, and laid out towels for him in the guest bathroom, which lay at the end of the loft hall that overlooked the great room.

He bade Martin good night as Martin headed for the guest bathroom to take a shower.

* * * * *

Jack had always been able to see in the dark and his eyes were accustomed to it by now.

Martin, just coming out of the lighted bath, had not adjusted to the darkness. He was quite blind for the moment. He could not see Jack in the bed through the open doorway at the end of the hall, wide awake and watching him, admiring the soft sheen of his bare skin. Martin was naked and beautiful.

And he was lost.

Jack could see Martin feeling for the wall to find his way.

To the wrong bedroom door.

Chapter Two

Martin missed the turn into the guestroom and felt his way instead through Jack's open bedroom door.

Jack held his breath. Was Martin truly lost?

Time stood still in wonder and hope.

Martin made an extraordinary, raw, beautiful silhouette in Jack's doorway. Jack was about to ask Martin if he knew where he was going.

Then Jack decided not to tell him.

Martin moved slowly into the room, blind, with tentative steps, until his knee met the edge of the bed. He felt about for the covers and crawled in.

His warm leg brushed Jack's leg.

And Martin jumped as if lit on fire. He could not have moved faster had he actually *been* on fire. He broke into a sudden panicked flailing of limbs, trying to scramble out of the bed. He fell off the side of the mattress in a twist of sheets onto the floor.

Jack's warm chuckle followed him over the edge.

Martin thrashed on the floor, trying too hard to get unwrapped from the sheet. He sounded embarrassed to death, "I'm in the wrong room."

Jack's voice, already deep, dropped in desire. "I don't think so." He reached down. His strong hand closed on Martin's arm. "Come back to bed."

Martin's head waved side to side. "Let me go. I didn't mean—"

"You *never* lose your way, Martin," said Jack. "Please don't run. I won't hurt you." Then he backtracked a little, "Okay, I could hurt you but not on purpose. I swear. Come back to bed."

Martin's eyes, bright in the darkness, were wide, glassy in fear.

"I—let me go," Martin protested but he had stopped trying to pull away. He was only talking now. "I didn't mean to come this way."

"You didn't really lose your way in the dark," said Jack.

"But I'm not—" Martin started. He could not even bring himself to say the next word. He restarted, "I'm not that way."

"I didn't think I was either," said Jack. "But here we are and you can't tell me you don't want to be here, because I don't know why you don't pass out with a cock that big getting that hard."

He could see Martin blush darker in the darkness. Protest all he want, Martin's body betrayed his long, hot, hard desire. Martin's eyes were terrified. His lips had the swollen look of passion.

Tears spilled from his beautiful eyes.

Jack leaned down and kissed the tears from his cheeks. He tugged, gently urging, on Martin's arm. "Come to me."

"I don't know what I'm doing," Martin whispered, but Jack felt him yield to his pull. Martin crawled back onto the bed and Jack drew the sheet around them both.

The first brush of bare skin on bare skin took Jack's breath away. The warm touch was magical. Martin's leg slid against his. Jack drew Martin into his arms.

Martin laid a hesitant hand on Jack's hard-muscled chest, a tremor in his long fingers amid the handsome scatter of dark hair, and Jack never felt more a man. Their swollen cocks touched. Martin flinched as if touched by flame, and Jack inhaled a sharp gasp with the blazing jolt of desire. Jack pulled Martin's body against his own, full-length, drawing a sound from the depths of Martin's soul, a groan of passion, a gasp of astonishment. Martin's breaths came quick against Jack's chest, hot, frightened, impassioned. Jack felt Martin's hands exploring his body, his touch painfully tentative, filled with fear and wanting. Jack could tell Martin was terrified but he could not pull away.

Jack lifted Martin's chin to make him face him, breath to breath. Martin's nostrils flared like a frightened animal. He was so incredibly beautiful that Jack could not hold all the emotions that swelled and overflowed inside him. Jack leaned in and grazed his lips tenderly across Martin's soft lips. Just that simple touch sent spears of heat straight to his hard-on. Jack slid his tongue across Martin's trembling lower lip. Martin's lips were soft and yielding. Jack kissed him fully, as if he might gladly drown in his kiss. He plunged his tongue into his mouth to ravage every moist hidden place. Martin's tongue slid against his, joining and shying away.

Martin shuddered as if overwhelmed with sensations too intense to bear. Martin came up for air with a gasp.

Jack traced kisses along Martin's jaw. The slight unshaven roughness was sweet and unexpectedly exciting under his lips, and his own cock moved in heated surprise.

He laid Martin back and crouched over him. Hungrily he let his tongue trail down Martin's long, elegant throat, along his collarbone, down to his smooth chest. He grazed his teeth on the small hard nub of one nipple over Martin's pounding heart.

Martin grasped Jack's head between his hands with a sound like a whimper. His deep chest rose and fell with heavy breaths under Jack's kisses. Martin's hands moved in his hair.

Jack slid his arms beneath Martin's body and held him in a tight embrace, trapping Martin's long, hard cock between his own chest and Martin's belly.

"Oh!" escaped Martin's lips. And again, "Oh!"

Martin was shy but his hips were wanton, rocking back and forth, sliding his erection through the coarse hair of Jack's chest. Jack felt the wetness of Martin's readiness on his chest.

Jack loosened his hold and knelt back to see Martin's cock standing upright, rigid and pleading. A droplet like a tear beaded on its tip wanted tasting. Jack tasted it.

Martin cried out, flinched.

Jack caught his narrow boyish hips between his big hands and ran his tongue up the length of Martin's shaft, delighted at the small moans coming from his shocked lover. He circled the helmet of his cock and slid his tongue back down again. He nuzzled his balls and the curly autumn blond hair of his groin. He felt Martin shiver. He took Martin's cock into the velvet sheath of his mouth and

heard him groan deeply. Jack slowly massaged Martin's manhood with lips and tongue until Martin cried out, "No!"

Jack looked up, his lips wet, his hands caging Martin's narrow hips. "Do you mean that?"

"No!" Martin cried more desperately still.

Jack took him back inside his mouth, teasing, taking pleasure in arousing him. Martin writhed, his head tossing side to side. Then he went rigid, his head thrown back. His back arched off the bed. Martin cried out, a wild feral sound, his hands lost in Jack's dark hair. He pulsed and pulsed in passion's throes, Jack's mouth urging him on.

Martin fell back, panting, vibrating like a struck bell, his eyes wide in wonder.

Jack leaned over him, his dark eyes heavy-lidded, smug. Martin's loss of control was endearing. Jack was intensely pleased with himself, and hungry. He moved with a daunting menacing sexuality. He meant to have Martin now.

Martin's eyes shifted down, beheld Jack's rigid cock with an expression of sheer dread. "Don't put that in my mouth," he said. And Jack could tell he meant it this time.

But Martin could be held and caressed and explored. And when a tentative finger made a slow tender assault on Martin's ass, he made no protest. If a lover was going to say no to this, you didn't get any farther. Pleasure there was hardwired and there was no learning to like it. Back-door loving was either a turn-on or a complete turn-off. Martin looked only profoundly astonished. And did not say no.

Jack reached over to the nightstand, fumbling at the drawer. He fished out a bottle of erotic massage oil, and placed the bottle into Martin's hands.

Martin's wide eyes shifted from the bottle to Jack's cock. He was expected to do something here. And Jack had apparently been around the block a few more times than Martin ever had. Martin was lost.

Martin's voice was a nearly soundless whisper, terrified. "I told you I've never done this."

Jack took the bottle from Martin's hands, poured drops of scented oil onto Martin's palms and set the bottle back on the nightstand.

Then Jack lay back, folded his hands behind his head and commanded, "Touch me."

Martin's face visibly burned. But shyness was only so strong. Passion and desire were stronger. Torn between awe and lust, Martin took Jack into his hands.

Jack's head jerked back in an ecstatic gasp. It took everything he had not to come right there and then. He looked down to watch Martin's hands on his cock, enthralled with his instinctive touch. Martin's fingers teased him to flights of unbearable bliss, amazement and joy. Tears beaded at the corners of Jack's eyes. Desire glistened at the tip of his rigid cock. Martin's finger circled, touched it.

"Stop, stop, stop," Jack choked, even though it was nearly the last thing he wanted Martin to do.

Jack sat up, pushed Martin onto his back and lifted Martin's legs. Martin, always limber, moved easily, his knees hooked over Jack's broad shoulders. Jack kissed Martin's knee that was now by his cheek. He moved forward on top of Martin like a prowling leopard, to hover over him, nose to nose with him.

As Jack's shoulders pushed forward, Martin's ass lifted off the bed and Jack's cock slid in the divide between Martin's hard, muscular buttocks.

Martin's eyes were wide and questioning.

Jack was afraid Martin wouldn't allow him to do what he wanted desperately to do.

Martin's expression became a kind of terror. He did not speak. His lips only parted, expectant. Fearful. These were uncharted waters.

But already standing up between their sweaty bodies was Martin's cock, rigid again and lifting to touch the coarse line of hair that ran from navel to cock on Jack's flat belly. Even for the size of it, Martin's cock was perfectly hard, and straining with rekindled fire.

Jack leaned over him until they touched forehead to forehead, sharing impassioned breaths. He kissed Martin's lips tenderly. Martin's hands grasped at Jack's muscular shoulders.

Jack gazed into Martin's eyes, his gaze asking, pleading. *Will you let me?* His swollen cock prodded, seeking, finding, hesitated at the gates. Martin's eyes were wide, reflecting wanting and sheer terror. He could not say yes but would not say no, trusting Jack to lead him on this midnight road which only two may travel.

Jack pushed. His glistening cock slid easily through the tight gate to heights beyond his dreams and soaring upward.

Martin was either in ecstasy or pain. His mouth opened in a silent cry, his eyes nearly shut, lashes fluttering as if in the grip of something too intense to bear.

Jack thrust deep. Martin's body enveloped his manhood, joining flesh and animal soul. Jack never felt so powerful. His body moved in the timeless dance everyone knows without ever learning, withdrawing slowly and penetrating again.

Driven by overpowering desire, Jack lost control. His thrusts came quick. All the stars in their heaven ignited. A shuddering, consuming blaze enveloped him.

Martin, under him, cried out.

Still captive in the grip of ecstasy Jack thought he'd hurt him but even as he thought it, Jack felt the strong jet of Martin's ejaculation against his abdomen. A startling blaze of wondrous ardor leapt still higher inside him and Jack thrust again, harder than he meant to. He gave more than he thought he had, gave and gave in rapturous waves. Martin uttered deep raw groans, coming hard, and Jack gave again in another spasm of blinding pleasure.

Jack panted in a dazed, shimmering shock, letting the lingering pulses subside, his head bowed, sharing Martin's breaths.

He opened his eyes. Hadn't realized he'd shut them. He was a little surprised he wasn't blind or dead after the rapture.

He took Martin's beautiful face reverently between his trembling hands and beheld him like something holy. "Oh, my love. How could I have known? How could I not have known?"

Jack kissed Martin's mouth, and kissed his wide eyes shut.

Martin gulped for air. And he started to sob. Jack held him to his chest. Martin cried in a rending rush of tears, not from sorrow or pain or anything he could define. It was a release of loneliness flowing away, his cries like bad dreams leaving.

At last, Martin's sobs quieted. He laid his cheek on Jack's chest, his breaths slowing, his wet lashes matted together.

Jack turned him 'round so that Martin's back was toward him, fitting into the curve of his body spoon-wise, with Jack's arm over him, protective. They dozed a little 'til Jack's cock, resting peacefully against Martin's buttocks, stirred, grew, became rigid again.

And again.

They lay together in a hot, wet, sticky embrace. Jack nuzzled Martin's sweaty hair. He felt him tremble, softer tremors now. Martin's exquisite body molded to his, fit together as if made for him.

The world was still quaking in aftershock. Martin seemed so very fragile, as if he'd been burned to ash by a thunderbolt. He had been thoroughly kissed, fucked and adored.

They had made a pretty fair mess of the sheets. Jack pulled the bedding off and put on fresh sheets as Martin rinsed off in the shower.

Martin returned in the dark. He slid between dry, crisp linens to join Jack, no flinching away this time. Jack surrounded him with warmth.

They nestled together to sleep just as the first robin's experimental notes sounded in the blackness before first light.

* * * * *

Jack gazed upon Martin sleeping in the morning light. The sensual fullness of his lips captivated him. The delicate skin of his closed eyelids was blue-cast, tired. Martin had been crying. The shadow of his eyelashes drew delicate fringe patterns on his cheeks. The fine golden bristle Jack had kissed last night showed on his chin and along his strong jaw. He needed a shave.

His long limbs lay relaxed, his strong, hard-edged muscles at rest. He looked beautiful and thoroughly ravished. He was too lean. The spareness of flesh did amazing things to his looks, giving him an ethereal beauty. Jack ached for him.

Last night had been nothing but pleasure and pure joy for Jack. For Martin, it had been a kind of shattering. Jack let him sleep.

Feeling light, Jack pulled on a pair of jeans and padded downstairs, put the coffee on and started breakfast. Happy, he knew he was smiling like an idiot. Couldn't help it.

Soon, he heard a stirring upstairs, very light. Martin could move like a shadow. Jack had come to a stopping point in the breakfast preparations. He set the frying pan aside, off the burner, so he wouldn't scorch anything if he didn't come back to the kitchen for a while.

He took the stairs by twos, his cock straining at his jeans. He knew Martin was going to say something sarcastic about his big grin. Jack was just too happy and could not hold it in.

He bounded to his bedroom.

The room was empty. The bed a delighted rumple of sheets.

The master bathroom door was open, no sounds coming from within.

Jack backtracked down the hall to what was supposed to have been Martin's room for last night.

The window was open. Cold air billowed the curtains.

Martin was gone.

For a moment, Jack was seized with terror. Maybe Martin's fears had not been paranoia after all and Jack just hadn't listened. Was someone hunting Martin? Had they tracked him here?

Jack ran to the open window, and leaned out.

Wolf tracks in the soft earth below led away into the forest.

No one had come to capture or kill Martin. Martin had run away.

His clothes were gone. His gym bag was gone.

He was not coming back.

An overwhelming hollowness froze Jack's chest, making it hard to breathe. He left the room in a nightmare trance.

He could not go back down to the happy kitchen, where coffee for two waited.

Pain hit so hard it dizzied him. He sat down at the top of the staircase.

How could something so overwhelming, so soul-shaking, not be shared?

He had been flying so very high. Coming down from that height, that fast, that hard, did not feel like he should survive. A buzzing filled his head.

He had to remember to breathe. It hurt.

He was alone again.

Chapter Three

Jack lost his parents when he was still quite young, before his adolescence when he discovered that he could transform into a wolf—not with the changes of the moon but at will.

The first time had not been his conscious will at all. It had been an accident. In a fit of grief over his parents' deaths, screaming at the merciless heavens, young Jack Reed had morphed into a howling animal.

It was luck that he had been alone at the time.

And it was a huge relief to find out that he could change back again just by wanting to.

He would remember for the rest of his life frantically pulling his clothes back on, yanking on his socks inside-out in panic, before someone could come upon him and ask him what the hell he was doing outside naked as a pervert in the middle of the afternoon.

The second time was on purpose, carefully planned, alone in the forest land he had inherited from his father. He didn't even know what sort of creature he had become until he found a woodland pool, looked down into the still water and saw a black wolf with eyes like his looking back at him.

There was no one he could ask about it. He searched his parents' papers for some clue, some record of how this could be happening to him. The only faint hint that his mom and dad could have known anything about it was a piece of jewelry of his mother's. A wolf head ring among her old high school vintage stuff. Could be nothing. Or had she known? Had she been a wolf too?

His guardians—his father's brother and his wife—seemed entirely oblivious that there could be anything odd about their nephew Jack.

For a long time, Jack wondered if there was anyone else in the world like him.

He grew up to become a Naval Intelligence officer.

Navy because his Dad had been.

Intelligence because he had a drive to know things.

He was very good at uncovering secrets. Except for the secret of what he was and were there any others.

He served two tours on the battleship USS *New Jersey*, then came Stateside and was working now at the Pentagon with the Department of Defense.

His Georgetown townhouse was his official residence these days. The log cabin was a retreat he built on the wooded land where he had first discovered his true nature.

He had all but given up any hope of ever finding how he had become what he was, or of finding anyone else like himself.

Then came the sunny day when he took a romp in the woods behind his log cabin to cool off. He needed to cool off, not because the day was hot. He needed it because he was hot and horny and frustrated.

He never felt desire as a wolf. So whenever he was feeling unbearably randy and had no one to share his bed, he turned into a wolf to clear his senses.

The day was fine and crisp. He ran all out, just to feel his muscles move. Forest air filled his lungs. He scared all the birds and the rabbits. He bounded through the underbrush, collecting burrs on his thick black coat. He leapt over logs, splashed into cold streams. He saw something up on the embankment. And stopped dead. Another wolf. The District of Columbia was not known for wolves. Could it be? Dare he even think it could be? Had to be. Someone like himself. Jack's hopes leapt. The skinny little wolf's lip curled into a snarl and it growled low, threatening, its hackles raised. The wolf looked so raw and wild that Jack's spirits sank again, realizing it was probably just a real wolf after all. Maybe someone's cast-off pet that had become too much for its owner. This animal did not look as if it had ever been tamed. It had a silver coat over a loose rangy build. Its light topaz eyes flared, teeth bared. Jack thought it was a little she-wolf. But those topaz eyes were too knowing. There was someone home behind those eyes. And she was bluffing. Jack's spirits soared again. The eyes told Jack that this creature absolutely had to be one of his own kind. Overjoyed, Jack bounded up the bank. The other wolf crouched, head down, snarling, ears pinned flat back, tail clamped between legs. Jack trotted right up, bowed down dog-style in invitation to play. Then he sprang up and ran circles around the stranger. He batted the silver wolf in the side with his own big paw. *Tag!* His tongue lolling in a big wolfly smile the whole while. The other wolf was not amused. He. Jack saw now that it was a he. The little wolf growled. But the ears were lifting, the tail relaxing and the growling subsided into a mutter. Jack raced back and forth with an exuberant come-with-me barking. The silver wolf grudgingly stirred himself, followed Jack where he led—pausing now and then to sniff the air, circle 'round to look back suspiciously, topaz eyes furtive. Then he would lower his head and continue following Jack. They came to the log cabin. The silver wolf held back, as if smelling a trap. At he last followed Jack through the open door. Inside the cabin, Jack galloped up the stairs, grabbed sweatpants and a shirt in his mouth and thundered down the stairs to drop the clothes at the silver wolf's feet. Then he turned tail and ran back up to his bedroom. He transformed into a man, threw some clothes on, and thudded back down the stairs like Christmas morning.

And yes, there was a young man, dressed in Jack's too-big sweats, looking very surly. And very sultry.

The young man was too spare for his big bones, all hard muscle and bone and satin skin. He had an otherworldly beauty, entirely male but beautiful. He looked hunted, haunted, brooding. His topaz eyes were very large, set in their wide orbits, finely shaped and wary.

Jack's clothes hung loose on the slender young man. "Not a great fit," Jack allowed.

"You're bigger than I am," said the stranger.

"No, I could never say that."

The stranger glared at him sourly.

But there was no hiding the size of *that*. Within the sweatpants, the stranger was well hung. His body was hard and taut, his big bones finely sculpted. His shoulders were wide, his waist hard and narrow.

Jack was the taller, broader, like a stallion next to a gazelle. Jack's dark eyes sparkled, his smile was bright white. Jack Reed was a very handsome man, with dark hair, a strong chin and a strapping, well-proportioned build.

"Dog," the stranger snapped dryly.

Jack only smiled more brightly still, nearly laughing. His brows lifted quizzically. "Dog?"

Martin spoke, wryly, "So this big mutt runs circles 'round me, comes up and smacks me in the side with his big paw and does the 'Do you want to play?' pose, smiles and wags his tail, while all the time I'm telling you I am going to kill you. And then the dumb shit does the 'Come this way, Timmy!' doggie maneuver. Did you think you were Lassie?"

"Oh yeah, smartass?" Jack shot back merrily. "I thought you were a girl."

"And now I'm standing in a stranger's house, in baggy clothes, talking at this big, overly cheerful dick who thinks he's found a new best friend."

"All true, except that *you* found *me*," said Jack, completely unfazed by the abuse. The insults just didn't sound convincing. "How did you find me?"

"Reports of wolf sightings. There is not just a whole lot in the way of wolfage inside the Beltway, so I had to wonder. The sightings were of a black wolf, so I knew the reports were not about me. *I* haven't let myself be sighted."

"I didn't know I had been seen," said Jack. "I never saw any report in the news."

"Not in the news," said the stranger. "At the Bureau."

"The Bureau." That could only be the FBI. Jack barked a laugh, "You're an X-File!"

"There are no X-Files, you idiot." Then the young man's artistically shaped head snapped aside like a hawk's. "Jack. Jack Reed. Lieutenant Commander. U.S. Navy."

"I told you who I was," said Jack.

"I know you," said the stranger, recognition setting in. Then, suspicious, accusing, "You were in the database—searching in the same files I was! You're the Jack Reed who ran a data search on werewolves. *You were looking for me.*"

Jack shook his head, no. "I was looking for *me*. I was afraid I was a weapon."

"So your search word was 'werewolf'? Are you a werewolf?"

"Same as you," said Jack.

"Werewolf?" The stranger drew his chin in, taking insult. "Maybe girl wolves obey the phases of the moon but I don't."

"Girl wolves? Are there girl wolves?" Jack asked. Then, not waiting for an answer, he said, "Are you hungry? I don't have much here but I can do breakfast. Who are you?"

His name was Martin Winter. He worked across the Potomac from Jack, in the J. Edgar Hoover Building. He was a Special Agent in the FBI's Criminal Investigation Branch, in the Office of Law Enforcement Coordination.

"There are no X-Files in the FBI," Martin repeated. Then, in the first of Martin's dry jabs that Jack came to know well, he added, "That's the Air Force's job."

Breakfast was bacon and eggs. And coffee.

Martin had already done a background check on this Jack Reed in the Bureau's database. Reports painted Jack Reed as just the nicest guy. Lacking a certain gravitas and political ambition but Lieutenant Commander Jack Reed was a steady officer with a snow-white reputation.

But the Jack Reed that Martin had read about kept a residence in town—not out here in the middle of the woods.

"What is this place?" Martin looked 'round at the rough unfinished beams, the sawhorses, the tools in what was to be the great room.

"This is my weekend project," said Jack.

Of all the rooms, only the kitchen was nearly finished. The appliances, the tall hickory cabinets, the fixtures were all high-end. The rest of it was a half formed vision.

This mesmerizing creature brought life and light to the space. The floorboards were well sanded and smooth under Martin's bare feet. Transom lights were set over all the large windows. Sawdust floated in the beams of sunlight that streamed through them, dreamlike and luminous. Martin looked like a magical creature in the midst of it.

The land had been in the Reed family since 1803. It bordered on wetlands, so there would be no other houses around him. Jack's neighbors had antlers.

"What were you doing out there?" Martin demanded.

"Running," said Jack. "What brings you to my woods?"

"You, it would seem," said Martin. "I was looking for my own kind. I found one." He raked Jack up and down with his eyes, then revised his statement, "More or less."

The two were alike, yet so *not*. The suspicious and the trusting. The cheerful and the scowling. The friendly and the prickly. Jack and Martin had only one thing in common. A huge thing.

They asked each other at the same time, "How many of us are there?"

Each blinked at the echo of his own question from the other.

Jack was first to answer, "I thought I was the only one."

Martin tilted his head to one side, and said, "Then we have a known total of two."

Each of them thought it odd that both of them ended up in the intelligence community—Jack in Naval Intelligence with the Department of Defense, Martin in the FBI. Both would do anything for their country but neither of them had ever entrusted anyone else with the secret of the wolf. It was too outrageous. No one would ever even believe it, if told. And both of them harbored the real fear that if they were ever to show their ability to transform, they would be locked away and analyzed to death.

"So tell me, DOD," Martin called Jack by his place of work—Department of Defense. "Did your guys over at the Pentagon create us? *Are* we secret weapons?"

"No," Jack shook his head. "No country is even working on anything remotely like this. Can you imagine asking for funding?"

"No," Martin admitted. "But just being like this doesn't make any sense either." They asked each other about their parents, but found no possible kinship between them.

Jack was Maryland-born. His mother was a Daughter of the American Revolution through and through. Father's family was just as old. There had been a Reed in the Navy ever since there had been a Navy on these shores.

Martin was born in Virginia but was not a true Southerner because his family roots went back only as far as Ellis Island. His grandparents had not come over until after the Civil War.

"From Romania? Transylvania?" Jack asked.

"Germany and Moravia," Martin answered, not amused.

Jack's family was close and loving.

Martin's parents divorced when he was young. Martin had been reared more or less, by his father, which really amounted to Martin fending for himself.

Martin's mother had remarried. She lived in a cute gingerbread Victorian house with her second husband, their three children, a minivan, a town car, a rose garden and a toy poodle.

"I confess to murdering the poodle," said Martin. "Can't say I'm not a son of a bitch."

Martin ended up staying the day at Jack's cabin, helping him run electrical cable and hang lights.

They were two creatures of twilight, as different as dawn and dusk—misty morning and gathering darkness—they seemed two halves of a whole.

Martin had spent that night there at Jack's cabin, curled up in wolf form by the big stone hearth. He filled a place in Jack's heart and home he never knew was vacant.

Losing him a second time, Jack felt the pain of his absence more than ever. And wondered where Martin was now.

* * * * *

A silver gray wolf curled up, shivering, in the forest.
Hiding from himself.

Martin the wolf huddled down in a hollow by a rotting log, making himself very small amid the moss and acorns and forest litter. The place exhaled earthy scents of black dirt and the sharp sweetness of last year's oak leaves.

Wind souging through the treetops brought down a rain of bright yellow maple leaves. They pattered down softly around him. Pine boughs nodded over his hiding place.

He was not cold. He could not stop shaking...

He shied from a memory too hot, too searing—the amazing sensation of Jack's hot, wet tongue on his body, of Jack's mouth on his straining cock, of Jack coming inside him. Martin kicked at the memory. He could not believe his own wild abandon, his shattering climax, the sounds that tore from his throat.

He pushed against the images, the sensations.

And visited the memory again.

He quivered, wincing at the piercing keen snapshots of memory. He curled back up, tail over his face, a frightened animal, fearing what he felt.

An animal groan rose in his throat at the memory of Jack's hands—big hands, calloused hands, of a man who worked with wood. He remembered the warm and tender touch of those hands. He relived Jack's hot kisses on his throat, tracing fire on his skin, Jack's tongue in his mouth, filling his soul...

Sensations and emotions flooded back, out of control, terrifying.

He cringed to remember writhing like a cat in heat under the caress of Jack's tongue on his body. The roughness of Jack's cheek on the inside of Martin's thighs, the utter masculinity of it hit hard and enflamed him. This great beast, this animal power, was undeniably, altogether male and Martin had yielded, submitting to another man. And loved it.

What had he done?

He wanted more than anything to go back.

But what he wanted did not matter.

He could not drag Jack Reed into his world. The danger was clear and it was present. Martin was probably going to die for real this time.

Jack. Oh God, Jack.

Martin knew he had probably hurt him. But he could not drag him into this, even when he would give anything to be in that strong embrace again.

He would give anything but Jack's life.

For what Martin needed to do now, he must be alone.

Chapter Four

Jack worked in a hollow haze of disbelief. Lonely. He had heard that people missing a limb felt the itch of their missing part long after it was gone. He felt half his soul missing. It itched, ached, called out to be restored to him. He fought off the impulse that came to him every other minute to track Martin Winter down. To call him. To confront him. To just ask him *why*.

His heart knew better. Martin would not be hunted.

Jack shook himself out of the fog. He got up from his desk and headed out to meet some friends for lunch.

The sunshine was warm, the wind cutting, as he walked out to his car.

The cell phone vibrated in Jack's pocket. He flipped it open, answered, "Reed."

He expected to hear one of his friends. But the unfamiliar voice introduced herself tersely, "DC pound. We have your dog."

Jack was about to tell the woman at the pound that he did not have a dog, but he caught himself in time.

Oh no.

He asked carefully instead, "What is your location?"

* * * * *

Dressed in his winter uniform, Jack Reed walked into the dog pound. The wind gust at his back from the door's closing kicked up his dark hair, pushed his officer's cap forward. He took off the cap, tucked it smartly under his arm.

His entrance caused a small stir, not just among the caged dogs which all started barking. Workers turned and looked and didn't turn back to work.

In service dress blues, Lieutenant Commander Jack Reed cut a daunting figure. Handsome. Official.

In one of the many cages which lined one wall of the facility sat a docile silver gray wolf wearing a dog collar. A pendant, shaped like a dog bone, hung from the wolf's collar. Jack crouched down to see his own cell phone number engraved on the dog bone pendant. Made him feel like they were going steady.

Jack put his hand to the stout wire mesh of the cage. He wanted to talk to him, but he didn't dare. And he didn't know what to say anyway.

The wolf lowered its head sheepishly, its topaz eyes contrite, embarrassed.

"Jack Reed!"

Jack recognized the voice on the phone. He looked up to see a clerk moving from behind a counter.

The clerk was perhaps fifty years old, fit. She looked like a country girl in a city uniform.

"Stay right there," she commanded, as if telling a dog to sit. She bustled to the back, through a door marked "Employees Only".

Jack, still crouched at the cage, glanced aside to the topaz eyes on level with his. He murmured, "Are we in trouble, Martin?"

Jack stood up as the animal control warden stalked forward from the back room. The man regarded Jack coldly. He refused to be intimidated by the uniform, by Jack's height, by Jack's muscular build. He glared straight up at him and said accusingly, "This animal has been shot."

Both Jack and Martin carried their human scars into their wolf forms, so the silver wolf inside the cage bore the distinctive scars that only came from a bullet, even though it had been Martin the man, not Martin the wolf who took both shots.

Jack quickly improvised an answer to explain why his pet dog would have two bullet scars. "Yeah. Some jerk with a gun mistook him for a wolf." He turned to the animal behind the mesh. "I thought for sure I'd lost him."

"You're telling me this is not a wolf," said the warden, his bushy, brambling eyebrows sky high.

Jack shook his head as if he had no idea about that. "He's a mutt I picked up from the roadside. I don't know why he was abandoned. He's a pretty good dog. Though I wouldn't trust him around poodles."

"He's a perfect sweetheart," the woman clerk called, hurrying from the back room with some paperwork. She set the paperwork down on the front counter, then brought Martin out of the cage on a leash.

She crouched nose to nose with Martin and scratched him behind the ears. "He's such a good dog."

Martin wagged his tail, trying to look as sweet and doggie as possible.

The clerk stood up, reluctantly passing the leash to Jack, and confessed, "I was hoping you wouldn't show up."

Jack nodded, "Yeah, how can you resist a schmooze like that?" He tried not to show the depth of the emotions warring within. Mostly he was just achingly grateful to have Martin at his side.

The warden cited Jack for not having a dog license, for not having a rabies vaccination on record, for not having his dog on a leash and for letting his dog roam.

Two hundred dollars poorer, Jack left the pound with his newly licensed dog, Lassie.

"Um, you know this is a male dog," the clerk had said when Jack had given her his pet's name for the record.

"So was the actor who played Lassie," said Jack. And to Martin, "Heel, Lassie."

* * * * *

The animal sitting beside Jack in the car transformed into a beautiful young man, naked except for the dog collar around his neck. Martin rubbed at the rabies vaccination site behind his neck.

The absurdity of the situation caught up with both of them and they both started sniggering through their noses as Jack drove.

"*Lassie?*" said Martin, insulted.

"Hey. I bailed your furry ass out," said Jack. "You had that coming, *Lassie*." And you owe me one here, *Lassie*!

Martin craned his neck 'round to check the backseat. "You wouldn't happen to have any spare clothes in the car?"

"What's wrong with what you have on?" said Jack.

Jack turned his head from the road for a quick glance at Martin—a truly stunning figure, his artistically sculpted muscles finely honed to sharp definition. His flat abdomen looked splendid in daylight, as did those long athletic legs with a fine haze of blond hair on them. Martin's long cock was half hard now and intriguing.

DC traffic was not the place for distractions while driving. Jack faced quickly forward before he could plow his BMW into a street sign.

"I *could* bite you," said Martin scowling.

Jack pulled into the parking lot of a big box department store. He ran inside to buy a sweatshirt, jeans and loafers in Martin's sizes. It had the strange feel of one of those bizarre missions you ran after midnight in college with the guys.

Upon his return, Martin pulled off the tags and got dressed in the car. He slouched way down in the seat, his legs up. Jack glimpsed a flash of short golden hairs on bronzed skin just before Martin's hard, taut calves disappeared into new denim. Martin's angular hips thrust up as he pulled up the jeans. Jack felt his own cock trying to salute him.

Martin zipped up, took off his dog collar and stuffed it into his jeans pocket. He slid his feet into the loafers.

"Thanks, Jack."

"Feel like talking now?" Jack asked.

"No," said Martin.

Jack couldn't say that didn't sting.

"Okay, where to?" Jack asked at the wheel.

Martin nodded forward. "Just drop me on Pennsylvania Avenue."

"No. Where are you going? I'll take you."

"Stay away from me, Jack."

Jack knew he must look like he'd been stabbed. He felt like it.

Martin's face was a determined mask, his posture all business. His voice betrayed some softness, "Jack, it's not safe to know me."

Jack finally let himself get angry. "If that's really why you ran, then screw that, Martin! Let me stand with you. If it's something else—" He broke off. His voice was going shaky and he would not allow it. He refused to show weakness. And he refused to believe Martin had no more interest in him. He damn well knew better. "I don't know if I deserve an explanation, but you're sure as hell going to give me one."

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Jack. I can't—" Martin's thoughts seemed to get stuck together in a jumble. There was too much to say, so he skipped over all of it. "I just can't. I have to go. Stop the car."

Jack pulled over to the curb and parked. A big lump clogged his chest with the kind of anger that fills you up and just sits there. His face was burning. He tried to keep both hands on the wheel.

Martin reached for the door handle.

And dammit anyway, Jack's hand made a motion to take Martin's arm. He stopped himself short. Jack was not going to turn into a stalker and was not going to detain Martin by force. He withdrew his hand and resorted to quiet words. "Please stay."

Martin opened the car door, put a foot out to the curb.

Jack's world stopped. Anger, sorrow, hurt, bewilderment sat on him, crushing him.

After a moment that lasted forever, Martin's leg moved back into the car. Martin sat back in the seat and shut the door again. He stared straight ahead. "Shit." He took a huge breath then admitted without looking at Jack, "I could use help, Jack. It—it could cost you."

"I don't care," said Jack thickly.

"It could cost you your life."

"You already own it," said Jack.

Martin inhaled, a small gasp. Jack's quiet statement hit him hard.

He glanced at Jack, glanced away. The look in Jack's eyes was too hot to endure. Martin stared at his own feet in their stiff new loafers. "I can't pretend that night didn't mean something."

Jack put the car in gear. "Can we go somewhere?"

"I'll let you feed me," said Martin.

Martin hadn't touched his dog food in the pound.

"Yeah, come to think of it, I missed lunch," said Jack. "What are you in the mood for?"

"Anything as long as it's fast and I don't have to go inside."

Jack pulled into the drive-thru of a fast-food place. They sat in Jack's black BMW in the parking lot, eating burgers.

As long as Martin could just stay in this moment with Jack, the car, the food, the passing traffic, life almost felt normal. If Martin had ever known normal.

"How'd you end up in the pound?" Jack asked at last, fishing the last fry out of the bag before stuffing their trash into it.

"I reported to work," said Martin.

Martin worked at FBI headquarters in the J. Edgar Hoover Building on Pennsylvania Avenue. "After over a year, they weren't entirely thrilled to see me."

Agents had left him alone in an office while they conferred. Martin's keen wolf hearing had detected voices beyond the next wall, whispering. They meant to detain him. He tasted their fear in the closed air. Frightened animals were dangerous. Especially those who moved on two legs.

They had left Martin in this room and told him to wait. Martin didn't wait. He slipped out of the room, down the corridor, down the stairs and ran out a fire door, setting off all the alarms.

Accustomed to frequent drills, no building full of office workers ever reacted quickly to a fire alarm, so there was a great deal of confusion in convincing

anyone that there was a real emergency and that it was not a fire, not anthrax, and not a terrorist attack.

Martin's own coworkers were the first agents to spill out of the building. They fanned out in the streets, searching for him.

Martin kept a dog collar in his pocket just for such a contingency. He ducked into an alley, stripped naked, put the dog collar around his neck, gave his clothes to a homeless man camped by a hot air vent with his cardboard blanket and ran.

The vent man pointed the FBI agents in the direction that the naked man had gone. He did not make any mention the wolf that just happened to run into the alley and out the other way immediately after that.

Having eluded the FBI, Martin got cocky and stupid. While trying to get home he apparently trotted through a neighborhood that had just *had* it with dogs running off-leash. Animal Control came after him.

Cornered and looking exactly like a wolf, Martin decided that surrender was the wiser course of action. He started wagging his tail, sat prettily and smiled at the dogcatchers. He heeled when told and jumped into the van on command.

"When you're a wolf, the collar keeps you from getting shot on sight." Martin pulled his collar out of his jeans pocket. "You should consider one of these."

Jack turned over the dog bone pendant on Martin's collar. "You put my phone number on your collar. I'm touched," said Jack. "I mean that."

"You're the only man I trust, Jack."

"You ran away from me, Martin."

"I ran away from *me*," said Martin. Martin's whole world was in upheaval. His composure crumpled. His breaths came hard and deep in anguish. "I'm not handling this, Jack." His eyes blinked fast. He looked at the sun. Squinted. His face crinkled, trying not to cry. A tremor moved his long fingers. He croaked, "When did you know?"

"I think part of me knew from the first time I saw you," said Jack. "You had that really cute little snarl."

Martin darted him a hard glare. "If you ever jump on me as a wolf, so help me, I *will* bite you."

Jack laughed. "I don't think the equipment even works when I'm a wolf."

Martin couldn't laugh. He asked, solemn, "I mean, when did you know...you liked men?"

"The night I lost you."

"Not before then?"

"No. And I don't 'like' *men*," said Jack. "It's you, Martin. Only you. It's like living in the night for a long, long time, and there are all these stars, and they're all pretty. Then the sun comes up and you can't see anything else but the sun. There is no one else in my sky."

Martin was looking out the window. Anywhere but at Jack. His mouth opened to speak, then said nothing. He had too much to express. He could not even contain it, much less speak it.

He retreated into suspicion. "You're telling me you've never been with another man and you just happened to have that oil in your nightstand?"

"Oh, that." Jack had to laugh at him. "Old girlfriend. She was a freak—freak in a good way. I've only been with two women who ever cared for taking their loving that way. I don't see the charm myself—not on that end of it. Jenna tried to get her vibrator up my ass. Blue thing, this long, this big around. No thank you, ma'am. I'm definitely in the not-ever category. I can dish it out but I can't take it."

"Then what made you think I would like it?"

Martin hadn't just liked it. He'd been enraptured.

"I *didn't* know, Martin," said Jack, serious now. "I just hoped like hell. I only knew I had to be inside you."

Heat darkened Martin's face. He let his head fall back. He would have been gazing out the sunroof but the cover was drawn shut. "And I need you, Jack. And I never knew." A tear escaped from the outside corner of his eye. It trickled down his jaw to his neck.

Jack brushed the tear from Martin's neck with his lips. Martin shivered. The smallest gasp of pleasure escaped him on the edge of a deep male groan.

The sudden eruption of a police siren made Martin start. Jack remained steady. He watched the patrol car speed past the parking lot, wailing and flashing, and on down the avenue. The alarm was not for him.

But the FBI would still be looking for Martin.

He had nowhere to hide.

"I can't go anywhere," said Martin. He steeled himself. "I need to go back."

"Now?" Jack asked.

"Right now."

* * * * *

Jack drove to the FBI building, parked illegally. In uniform, moving smartly, he strode through the front door. He took a commanding stance at Martin's side.

A male clerk sat at the front desk, guarding the locked inner doors. He glanced at the lieutenant commander. He did a double take upon seeing Martin.

Martin presented himself dryly, "Martin Winter to see Executive Assistant Director Cobb. Again."

The clerk eyed Martin from head to loafers. He dialed four numbers on the phone. "Executive Assistant Director? Um, Martin Winter is here." He paused for the reply. "Yes, sir." The clerk carefully set the phone receiver back on its cradle. "Wait here."

Martin looked up to Jack. "That's what they told me last time."

The FBI did not breed warm and fuzzy personalities. Agents were suspicious by profession.

The clerk watched Jack and Martin suspiciously.

Jack heard the sound of a gun cover unsnapping under the desk. He maintained his lordly stance. Speaking with the steadiness of an officer who actually had been under fire, Jack advised the clerk, "You can snap it back up, mister. This isn't the Gulf and you're not under enemy fire here."

The clerk, embarrassed, turned red under his freckles.

The locked inner doors snicked open. Three glowering people came out to the front lobby.

One was a tall, squared-off granite slab of a man whose name turned out to be Special Agent Larry Hunter. Hunter's tailor probably cut his suits out of cardboard refrigerator boxes. He had enormous hands that Jack never wanted to meet in a fist.

The severe woman, with her reddish curls cut very short, was Special Agent Ann Jefferson. She was probably in her thirties but all those down-turned frown lines in her face added a decade to her looks. Her skirt suit was dark and dowdy, her shoes way too sensible.

The third person was a burly, compactly built Korean-American man of indefinite age. His flat face was utterly smooth, heavy-jawed, lipless. He was Special Agent Moo Park.

Their eyes flicked over Martin, noticing the change of clothing since this morning.

Martin gave a very hard smile. "Jack, meet Larry, Curly and Moo. The three blind mice."

Ann Jefferson said, "That's not fair, Martin."

"Oh yeah? Nice rescue you arranged for me, team," Martin shot back. "Great to be home. Where were you looking for me? Up your...mail slots?"

"We knew you were in Colombia," Moo Park offered, defensive.

"Oh. Colombia." Martin nodded significantly. His smile turned dangerous.

"You knew that much?"

"Yes," Moo Park insisted. "We *looked* for you."

"That's great, because I was in fucking Guatemala! Which is like, maybe...the *wrong continent?*"

The inner door clicked again. Opened. An older man came out. He was probably not as old as his job made him. His black, woolly hair was heavily salted with white. A quiet figure, he commanded instant respect.

This was Executive Assistant Director Cobb, a grandfatherly, ox-patient, knowing man.

Jack recognized the name Cobb. Martin had mentioned him several times, warmly. Frederick Cobb had become the father figure that Martin's real father never had been.

"Sounds a little lively out here," said Cobb in a low voice like soft wind over sandy rocks. "Shall we move this discussion into my office?"

Cobb's office was a stately, paneled, carpeted place that induced civilized behavior. Cobb made them all sit in armchairs, the harder for them to grab each other by the throat.

Martin accused Ann Jefferson, Larry Hunter and Moo Park of trying to imprison him. Jefferson, Hunter and Park defended the idea of taking Martin into custody because of his sensitive position in the department and his very long, unexplained absence.

Cobb listened without interrupting.

At the end of all the accusations, Cobb addressed none of them. He looked to Jack curiously. "And you are?"

Jack rose. "Jack Reed, sir." He passed the executive assistant director his card across the desk.

Cobb studied the card which identified him as Lieutenant Commander Jack Reed, intelligence analyst at the Department of Defense.

Cobb's tired eyes within wrinkled, papery lids looked up. "I may have heard this name." Then he placed it. "Jason Reed's boy."

"Yes, sir."

Martin said, "Jack has SCI clearance."

Sensitive Compartmentalized Information, "SCI", was security clearance higher even than Top Secret.

"Impressive as that may be, your clearance, Lieutenant Commander, doesn't clear you for *this* department's information," said Cobb in a stern grandfatherly voice.

"And I have no idea what Martin is working on," said Jack.

"None?" Cobb challenged, a reasonable tone to his challenge.

"None," said Jack.

Cobb's brow furrowed in confusion, concern. "What is the DOD's interest in this matter? Are you here in an official capacity, Lieutenant Commander?"

"No, sir."

Ann Jefferson suddenly placed Jack's name. "You're the one who came out to meet Martin the night he disappeared," she said like an accusation. "Why did you do that?"

"Martin told me to come, so I came."

"Without knowing why?" Cobb asked.

"Without knowing why," Jack affirmed. "I trust him."

Cobb nodded. "Trust is a wonderful quality in a friend," he said. "But as an intelligence analyst, you must recognize that when a special agent disappears for over a year, one ought to wonder what he was about and whose side he is on by now."

"I would wonder," Jack allowed. "But you can't detain a U.S. citizen without more than that. Martin is one of your own. He was kidnapped, shot and now you want to *detain* him when he comes back to you of his own free will?"

The grizzled head nodded. The executive assistant director gently scolded the others for their overzealousness.

Moo Park looked fit to burst. Larry Hunter chewed the inside of his cheek.

Ann Jefferson blurted, "If you're still one of ours, Martin, why did you run? And how the hell did you evade security this morning!"

"Hell if I'm telling *you*," Martin shot back. "Do your own job, Jefferson."

"That's enough," said Cobb.

Martin told Cobb, "Annie is throwing a lot of suspicion my way when she is the only person who knew what I had uncovered on the night the goons came to get me."

Ann Jefferson's mouth opened to protest then shut without speaking.

Cobb spoke for her, evenly, "And Special Agent Ann Jefferson told *me*. Will you be accusing me next, Special Agent Winter?"

"No, sir," said Martin, resentful.

Cobb assured Martin, "My agents are loyal and incorruptible. I have the same faith in Special Agents Jefferson, Hunter and Park as I have in you, Martin. The enemy must have had sophisticated surveillance on you to know your movements. We underestimated them. You do understand that debriefing is required after an absence this long?"

"But not detention," said Martin. "And I want to choose who does the debriefing. And I want witnesses. Not them." He pointed at Ann Jefferson, Larry Hunter and Moo Park.

The three look murderously insulted.

Cobb nodded, "I will indulge your paranoia, Martin. You have earned it."

The executive assistant director rose and they all rose with him. Cobb reached across the desk to shake Jack's hand. "Pleasure, Lieutenant Commander. Martin can escort you out."

Cobb's tired eyes fell on Martin's jeans. "And Special Agent Winter," Cobb said witheringly, "do not show up here dressed like that again."

Out on the street and free, Martin allowed himself to smile. "I owe you big, Jack."

"That you do," said Jack breezily. He was grateful to see his car had not been towed. He looked for Martin's Volvo. "Where's your car?"

"Hell, Jack, I lost that a year and half ago. I took the Metro here this morning."

"Where can I take you?"

Martin had to think about that. "Home," he said.

* * * * *

Jack followed Martin up the front steps to his condo. Martin had lost his key. But he had thumbprint entry, which still recognized him.

The doorknob turned. Martin glanced over his shoulder. "Brace yourself."

Jack took a step up. He put his hand alongside Martin's hip. It seemed a natural thing to do. He hadn't even thought about it. He felt Martin tense.

"You haven't been home yet?" Jack asked.

Martin inhaled. "No." He pushed in the door.

Stale air met them walking in.

"Not too awful," said Jack.

The space was modern, open, urban, all uncluttered clean lines in stainless steel and simply fashioned wood. Martin's bed was a futon. It was currently folded up to serve as a couch. A haze of dust lay on its wooden frame.

"I guess I haven't been declared dead," said Martin.

"I'm guessing you have automatic bill pay," said Jack.

All Martin's automated payments had continued to happen in his absence. The mortgage was drawn from his account every month. And the electric and the gas and the water. The refrigerator was still running. Some of what was in it was fairly loathsome by now but it was cold.

Martin's houseplants were all dead.

"My bank account's gotta be somewhere near empty right now," said Martin, unplugging the refrigerator. He turned the thermostat way down.

"Where's your mail?" Jack asked. There should have been a giant pileup by now.

"Post office box," said Martin. "Unless they drilled it. Maybe the Bureau's been collecting it. Looks like they got my computer." He walked to a dusty computer table which now held only a printer and a monitor and some disconnected cables. "And my answering machine."

The television was still here, and the stereo, so the theft hadn't been the work of burglars. And it was too neat for drug runners. It had to have been Martin's coworkers.

An odd thought suddenly struck Jack. "You haven't filed your taxes."

"Oh *shit*."

The IRS. Now there was a warm and fuzzy group of people.

"I'm sure they'll understand," said Jack with a graveyard grin.

"Maybe I should just go back to Guatemala," said Martin.

Jack glanced at the clock. "I need to put in an appearance at work," he said, apologetic. He did not want to leave.

"Yeah." Martin opened the blinds. A sprinkle of dust filtered down. "I got some work to do here," he said unenthusiastically. Sneezed.

"I have to see you," said Jack.

Martin surveyed his dusty, stuffy condo in chagrin. He brushed his hands off on his jeans. "I'll come to your place."

Jack took a look in Martin's refrigerator. "Come tonight. I'll feed you." He let the fridge door close. "I'll be at my townhouse. Do you have a way to get there?"

Martin nodded.

Jack strode to him, kissed him on the lips. "Please don't stand me up."

Chapter Five

Jack's townhouse was in an old building that had been completely redone on the inside. The ceilings were still twelve feet high and the windows very tall. The rest was new, from the polished wood floors to the very tall kitchen cabinets.

It was a narrow space, two floors built on top of the street-level garage with a tiny foyer.

Jack was down in the foyer as soon as he saw the cab pull up in front of his townhouse. Martin was climbing the stone steps as Jack opened the front door to greet him with a dazzling smile.

Martin looked up timidly. Terrified, really. His greeting was almost a whisper, "Hey, Jack."

Jack had meant to kiss him hello but instead just held the door for Martin to come in. Jack took Martin's dark green trench coat, hung it in the small front closet and followed him up the narrow stairs, his eyes fixed on the fluidly moving muscles of Martin's buttocks, clearly delineated under the close-fitting fabric of his fawn-colored trousers.

The first floor of the living space was all one open area. The kitchen took up the inside wall. A dark granite-top island separated it from the great room. Soaring windows fronted the street side. A small desk with a laptop computer made a tiny office area in the front corner. The dining area was designated by wherever Jack put the table and chairs today.

Jack sensed Martin was feeling a little bit trapped. Jack stepped into the kitchen, so he wouldn't be blocking Martin from the exit. With an open way to run, Martin seemed to relax a degree and he ventured farther into the great room. He went through the motions of checking out Jack's stereo system, which was softly playing cool jazz.

"Red, white or beer?" Jack offered cheerily from behind the island, holding up a goblet, a fluted glass and a beer stein.

"Um, red," Martin whispered.

Jack's first date when he was fourteen years old had been less frightened of him.

Martin had probably changed clothes as many times as Jack had, so they were both perfect pictures of casual nonchalance. Except in real nonchalance, they would both be in sweats. And they would have five o'clock shadows.

Martin wore a crisp black shirt with the collar open, and casual-cut fawn trousers of very fine wool. Jack wore a long-sleeved polo shirt of designer make, which draped easily on his strong frame.

Martin had come for dinner but he was so nervous he could scarcely even swallow the wine.

Mostly he just held the glass, letting the wine grow warm from his hands. Sometimes he wet his lips, which made him look provocative, but he could not drink. He did not sit.

He drifted to the windows.

Night fell early this time of year. The streetlights were haloed in wet, cold mist. Inside was warm and light. The room seemed to glow in expectancy.

Martin was shy, ready to bolt like a deer from the glade.

Desire held him here.

He stayed like the moth hovering 'round the edge of the flame. He knows it burns. Still he circles the flame because he must. And he knows he must go in. And burn.

Jack really just wanted to throw him onto the couch, tear his clothes off and take him. Yet he waited, stepping through the paces of this slow dance. The music beckoned, smooth and sexual.

There were a few exchanges of really dumb small talk. It didn't matter what they said. They were just touching each other with their voices. Then they stopped talking.

The air was suffused with quiet tension, thick with expectancy, knife-edged with certainty and doubt, desire and fear.

They both knew why they were here. This night was going to climax with Jack plunging his cock into Martin's sweet body. They knew that. Still, they hesitated in an apprehensive twilight. The chasm between them grew vast. Jack was afraid to breathe wrong, afraid to speak first. They had been down this road before, so he could not understand how they had gone back to being so guarded.

But they had not known how much it mattered before. The first time, Jack hadn't really known where the road was leading. He did now. And he wanted to get back there with an inexorable need.

There was no real doubt in his anxious longing so much as a don't dare screw this up.

A street lamp limned the edge of Martin's face in light, a white-gold outline of his exquisite bone structure, his delicate breed of masculinity.

Jack set his wineglass down and walked to Martin in the middle of the floor. He took Martin's wineglass and set it aside. He stood before him, close, face-to-face. Martin gazed up wide-eyed. Jack brushed the back of his fingers against Martin's cheek, which evoked a tremor in Martin's throat.

Jack unfastened a button of Martin's shirt. Martin's breaths deepened. His lips quivered.

Jack unfastened another button. Martin let him, solemn, wonderstruck.

Jack parted the front of Martin's shirt to draw a line of fire down Martin's sternum with his forefinger. Martin caught in a sharp breath, and turned away—a mindless impulse, like a jerked knee. Something he hadn't really wanted to do. But here he was, pulling away.

Jack moved slowly, with the patience of a sure thing. He closed the space between them, savoring the anticipation. He bent his head down and pressed his lips to back of Martin's neck.

Martin took a step backward and leaned back into Jack so that there was no space at all between them. His hands reached back to Jack's hips, drawing him to press his swelling manhood more urgently against Martin's ass.

Jack feathered a kiss on Martin's ear. He slipped his hand inside Martin's shirt and there fondled the smooth skin of his hard chest, teased a nipple. He felt a jolt ripple through Martin's body, felt his moan, torn between the shock of a man's hand touching him that way and the shock of the pleasure of it. Martin's head tossed side to side.

Jack cupped his jaw, trapped his head and gently turned his face to the left. He grazed his lips against Martin's cheek and teased the corner of his mouth with his tongue. Martin's full lips parted, as if begging for those tormenting kisses that were just out of reach.

Jack turned him 'round in his arms, gazed at him, stunned by his beauty. He covered his mouth with his lips, kissed him over and over, deeper and deeper. In a storm surge of pent-up desire, he plunged his tongue into Martin's soft mouth, drinking deeply of his sweetness. He held him in an iron embrace. His breaths came deep and labored. He exhaled in heated jets. Passion mounted, alarming and swift. His strong arms held Martin captive, his hands on his body, hips grinding his swollen desire hard against the desire he felt in Martin's groin. He groaned, the smoldering growl of a great animal, his kisses a devouring, ravaging hunger.

Martin's mouth was yielding but Jack could feel his body tense up in fear, felt his arms pull in as if to resist him. He heard a sound in Martin's throat like a little whimper.

Jack tasted salt.

Jack released his steel grasp. He caught Martin's shoulders, held him at arm's length so he wouldn't run away.

Martin's eyelashes were matted wet. Tear tracks glistened down to his lips that were swollen and tender.

Martin was not a timid man, except here where it mattered. He had been shot twice. He knew danger. But not this kind. Get too close to him—really close, to Martin himself—then Martin could not let himself go. The defensive walls flew up by themselves in elemental fear.

"I didn't mean to do that," Martin whispered.

Martin didn't want walls. But he could not keep them down.

"You didn't do anything," said Jack. He brushed Martin's tears away with a caress. Martin shut his eyes.

Jack drew him back closer. "Easy," he murmured at Martin's trembling.

Jack undid the rest of the buttons of Martin's shirt. He pulled his own shirt over his head. Martin's gaze followed the mesmerizing motion of powerful chest muscles as Jack's thickly sinewed arms stretched upward. Jack's dark hair emerged free of his shirt in rakish disarray over his brow.

Jack tossed his shirt to the floor. He drew Martin into a gentle embrace, bare skin warm on bare skin. Jack's lips pressed to Martin's temple. He murmured, "Dance with me."

Martin melted into him, shy as a virgin bride. He bowed his head, his lips to Jack's bare shoulder. The delicate flutter of Martin's eyelashes against Jack's neck made him feel powerful. Martin stopped shivering and relaxed into the dance.

The music was very soft and it was not much of a dance, more just moving together. Jack stroked Martin tenderly, trying to tame something wild with a whole lot of claws and fangs. Martin's arms settled 'round Jack's bare waist, his thumbs hooked in Jack's belt loops, his fingers trailing on Jack's hard, hard ass. Jack inhaled his fragrance, clean, scents of wood and spice. His face was smooth. Martin had shaved very close. His hair was soft, just washed. And Jack had to chuckle. He could not pretend this was not a date and that Martin was not going to end up in Jack's bed.

Martin's hands strayed lower to glide over Jack's buttocks, feeling the slide of molten steel muscles under the fabric. Then his hand moved forward, between them, to lay his palm on the swollen mound of desire at Jack's crotch. There was way too much fabric between them but the cue was right.

Jack bent down, picked Martin up and carried him like a bride to the stairs.

Martin sputtered, "Jack, you have got to be kidding."

Jack grinned, dark eyes gleaming. "Not hardly."

He bounded up the stairs effortlessly. He laid Martin on his bed and crawled over him, panther-like—wolflike. Desire strained at the confines of their clothes. Jack rubbed against him, feeling the responsive swelling of Martin's erection through the maddening cloth, enflaming him.

Martin said, "Jack, I'm in pain here."

"Then come out," said Jack, sitting back on his heels.

The closure on Martin's trousers turned out to be a button, not a snap, and it flew off with Jack's too-enthusiastic pull. But he was intensely careful with the zipper. He slid his hand down inside Martin's fly to protect Martin from the zipper teeth. The touch of his hand met with a gasp and a groan and a swelling of physical yearning.

The zipper parted and set Martin's long, hard rod free.

Martin lay back, grasping at the sheets as Jack's hands glided up and down his hard shaft.

Martin's eyelids felt heavy. His chest heaved. He saw Jack's face over him, the tender look in his eyes with a faint smile on his lips. It was a look of loving.

His touch was light, tormenting. Martin was already slick and ready. He wanted more, needed more. Unable to bear the enticement, Martin closed his hands 'round Jack's hands and held them tight around his cock. Martin pushed through the hard channel of Jack's hard, splendid hands.

Immersed in pleasure, Martin's body took over. His hips thrust upward, faster and faster. Restraint tore away, vanished. He held tight to those powerful hands holding his cock. Nothing existed in the universe but his need and Jack's hands. He thrust and thrust.

Ecstasy swept over him, through him, an intense blinding bright rapture. His back arched off the bed. Martin came. Came hard, a lightning blaze, releasing hot wetness into his lover's hands.

He shuddered at the last. Shuddered again.

At length he lay back, panting in blissful shock.

Then he was mortified.

He saw Jack's lowered lids, his lips set in a smile of tender mockery. Martin was horribly embarrassed. "Oh *shit*."

Jack laughed gently.

"I—I'm sorry," Martin gasped.

"Don't you dare be," said Jack. His smile was positively wolfish.

"Oh hell, Jack, that's not how that was supposed to go."

Jack lifted an eyebrow. "Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes! But—"

"Then shut up. You know we can keep trying 'til you think we've got it right."

Martin sat up and nestled into Jack's gathering arms. Jack's hair tickled his face. He cried, not even sure why.

He nuzzled Jack's chest, smelled him. "I never wanted to want you but God help me, I do."

Jack kissed the top of his head. "I have absolutely no problems loving you. I'm the happiest son of a bitch on the planet."

Jack laid him down again and stroked his skin.

Jack's hands felt warm and sure on his body. Martin luxuriated under his masterful touch. The pleasure was terrifying. His breaths deepened. Sooner than he could have imagined his cock stirred.

Jack's hands surrounded his head, kissed his eyes, kissed his mouth deeply and long. Jack's body entwined with his. Martin moved with him to touch and be touched, trying to feel every part of this beautiful man.

With passion's return, so came the fear. Martin lost the line between excitement and terror as if desire were a well he could drown in. He started to fight.

Jack wrestled him onto his back. Martin struggled.

Jack let go.

Martin gasped, scrambled up but he retreated only as far as the corner of the bed. He crouched there, naked and miserable. "I didn't mean that. I want—I—" Jack reached out his hand. Martin put his own hand into Jack's. Jack drew him in, took him firmly in arms. "Here is how it will be—"

"I'm sorry, I want you. I do, I just—"

"Shut up." Jack's finger pressed to his lips. "You can cry, you can push me away, you can fight me all you have to—I can take you."

Martin felt his brows go up, dubious. He was strong.

Jack assured him, "I can. And I *will* take you. You can say no. I'll ignore you. But if you ever want me to stop—if you really want me to stop, say 'stop.' I will stop." Then, he added lightly, "And if you *really* want to shut me completely off, just turn into a wolf. Believe me that would do it."

"I wouldn't do that to you, Jack."

"Well, thank you, I would hate it."

Jack laid Martin down and crouched over him. Martin lay fearful and trusting under Jack's hungry gaze.

Jack bathed Martin's body in passionate kisses. Jack's intense masculinity shook Martin, frightened him. Just the feel of him, of Jack's chest hair against his own chest. The male scent of him excited Martin past his ability to control.

Martin's breaths quickened 'til he was hyperventilating.

Then Jack's big hands were caging his face. Jack's dark hair moved with Martin's heaving gasps. His gaze was loving and sure.

Jack's deep voice reached inside him like a caress. "Slow down, sweetheart, we have all night."

Jack bent his head down and Martin felt Jack's tongue trace his eyebrows, his eyelids. Jack traced his jawline with his finger. Jack murmured, sounded amazed, "You're so pretty."

Martin sputtered, "Pretty?"

"You are," said Jack. "Deal with it."

Jack's great strength surrounded him, his powerful hold wonderful and terrifying. Yet Martin struggled. He couldn't stop himself. Martin was very strong for a slender man. Jack was stronger. Jack trapped Martin's wrists over his head and held him down. Martin gazed up with wide, frightened eyes. Martin felt his narrow nostrils flaring. His chest rose and fell with drowning breaths, wanting Jack and fearing the wanting.

Martin whispered fervently, "I didn't say stop."

Jack's fingers grazed his brow, moving a lock of hair off his forehead. Jack's strong features were tender, thoughtful. A pinch formed in Jack's brow "Martin, would you mind if I tied you up?"

Martin came down from panic. He felt his own brow tighten. He asked, "Are you into that?"

"I don't know," said Jack. "I've never done it. Want to?"

Martin hesitated. "I—" His eyes were on Jack's lips. Torn between passion and terror he murmured, "Guess so."

Jack kissed him playfully before he pushed himself off the bed. Jack's voice carried from the closet. "This has got to be why God invented ugly ties." Jack came out holding two ties. "And why the Navy taught me how to tie a knot."

Martin threw his arms out to his sides on the bed in surrender. "Just do it before I change my mind."

The ties were silk. Martin didn't give a rip what they looked like. Jack tied first one wrist, then the other to the bedposts. Martin submitted, wary. He knew his eyes were enormous. He could get away anytime. A wolf's paw was nowhere near as big as a man's hand. Escape would be easy.

The knowing was enough. Martin did not want to get away.

Jack stood back just looking at him, the expression in his dark eyes intense. Martin felt Jack's gaze on his naked body like a physical touch.

Martin's eyelids fluttered as if in pain. He could not meet Jack's eyes. He felt the burn in his own cheeks, felt the fiery hunger smoldering in the core of his being. Martin cried with his eyes shut, "Jack, I didn't think it was possible to feel any more naked but this is it."

He felt the mattress dip as Jack crawled onto the bed.

Jack's hand sliding up his leg made him shiver. Jack lifted Martin's leg, kissed him within the bend of his knee. He positioned his broad shoulders under Martin's knees. He moved forward to hover over Martin like a hungry wolf.

Jack's voice was deep and sexual. "Don't be afraid of me."

Martin opened his eyes. "I'm not afraid of you."

He was afraid of the extremity of feeling, the overpowering, all-consuming sensations that made him lose himself. Martin was accustomed to being in control. Jack stripped that from him. It didn't matter that Jack was there to make certain he landed softly. The fear of falling had no mind.

Martin gave the ties an experimental tug. His soul tumbled into the depths of Jack's eyes. "Take me."

Martin strained at the bonds, grateful that they gave him something to fight against that wasn't Jack—because Jack was glorious. Everywhere Jack's lips touched his body was on fire. Everywhere Jack's hands stroked him was silken splendor.

Jack bent close over him and pressed Martin's swollen cock against his muscular torso.

Martin's hands splayed wide, then closed tight on his bonds. Cries imprisoned in his throat sounded as aching moans.

Jack's hot manhood, made slick from its own wanting, slid against his ass.

"Now!" Martin pleaded. "Now!"

Jack's hardness penetrated him with a shock wave of sensation, his motion slaking his thirst and stoking his fire.

Martin felt transcendent, his soul lifting halfway to heaven while his body stayed grounded in savage, earthly joy. Above him, all he could see was Jack, his body straining, his face enraptured. Martin rocked with him. Their hips moved together in one rhythm.

Jack's thrusts came faster, desperate.

A ragged breath, a cry of ecstasy tore free from Martin's throat. His release was scintillating fire, a throbbing pulsation that went on and on as his lover held him tight. Wave on wave rippled through his body in exquisite spasms of pleasure.

The brilliance, the fire receded slowly, like the lapping of waves from an eternal sea. Martin lay panting, enjoying the weight of Jack on him, Jack's kisses on his neck, glorying in pleasure's echoes.

Jack reached above him to untie Martin's wrists.

Set free, Martin let his arms drape strengthlessly around Jack's strong shoulders. He buried his face against Jack's neck.

In time, Jack rolled off to lie on his back, resting, completely relaxed, spent, enjoying the peace, not sure who had ravished who. Martin had come all over his abdomen and he was sticky. The dark hairs on his flat belly were matted down. It was kind of sweet and funny. It made him smile.

Martin sat up lazily, moved to sit astride Jack, just gazing at him. Then he leaned over him, reached up to the bedpost to retrieve one of the ties. He toyed with it. Jack eyed him guardedly. But instead of trying to tie him up, Martin absently placed the tie around Jack's neck and started tying the knot. It was a nonsensical thing to do. The tie was just there and Jack was there. It was as if

Martin were dressing him for work. Like a wife might. Jack liked that image. Except that, other than the tie, he was naked.

Martin adjusted the knot then laid his palm on Jack's chest. He tilted his head appraisingly. "You're right," Martin murmured. "That's a really ugly tie."

Jack chuckled. He covered Martin's hand with his own, picked it up, pressed a kiss into Martin's palm, then pressed his palm to his heart. "I have gotten very fond of this tie in the past hour."

Martin frowned, shook his head. "Doesn't make it any less ugly."

Jack smiled. "Trust me, it looks much better on you." He lifted Martin's palm from his chest and turned his wrist over. It looked so narrow and vulnerable in Jack's big hands. There was no bruising.

Jack sat up suddenly, flipping Martin off him and onto his back. Jack pinned Martin down by his wrists and asked him, nose to nose, "You sleepy?"

Martin looked up at him, sleepily, from below heavy lids. "That really, really depends on what you have in mind, Jack."

"I did promise to feed you."

Jack let him up. He tugged at the knot of the ugly tie 'round his neck, and ducked his head out of the tie's loop. He went into the master bath to take a shower. He would have loved to bring Martin in with him, but then they would never get to dinner.

They finally got around to eating in the middle of the night. Jack watched Martin's shy fleeting smiles across the breakfast table. He reached across, took Martin's hand and kissed it.

Afterward Jack led Martin up to the rooftop.

The night was foggy, murky cold. Street lamps showed as hazy beacons. Wolf-keen sight made everything seem bright.

Jack watched Martin prowl the roof. He crossed his arms, surveyed the high ledge overlooking Jack's urban domain. "This has gotta be a wolf thing," said Martin and turned to him. "Ever come up here as a wolf?"

Jack nodded. "Sometimes I sleep up here."

Martin looked 'round as if trying to envision it, the black wolf curled up here on his mountain ledge. "Ever howl?"

Jack shook his head but admitted, "Really tempting."

"Discipline," said Martin.

"Yeah, discipline." Jack took Martin's hand and guided him into the darker darkness behind the roof access structure. The access to the stairs cast a shadow within the night's shadow that sheltered the two of them from sight of the street. Jack nuzzled Martin behind his ear.

"Oh no, Jack."

He didn't sound like he really meant it.

Jack pulled Martin back against him. Martin's taut lean body pressed against his was an indescribable turn-on.

Jack slid his hands up inside Martin's shirt, feeling Martin's flat, hard chest. He found a nipple and gently pinched it. Martin's body flinched against him. His head fell back against his shoulder.

Jack slid his other hand down into the front of Martin's trousers. Martin's light gasp melted into a groan. Jack found Martin's cock roused into a painful bend. He delighted in easing him up straight into the palm of his hand.

Martin groaned, his breath rising in clouds around both of them. Martin's body molded into his. Martin leaned into him and began to slowly rock, moving his erection against Jack's hand, his ass against Jack's inflamed groin.

Jack tore Martin's shirt open. The buttons went flying.

Humping him through the maddening barrier of their clothes, Jack groped Martin's heaving chest, his other hand kneading his cock, his balls.

"Come inside," Martin begged raggedly.

"Let's stay out here," Jack murmured into his shoulder. He dragged his lips up a strong tendon in the side of Martin's neck, his hot breath puffing against Martin's ear.

"No, I mean come inside." Martin unzipped and pulled his trousers down around his thighs.

Jack moaned. He jerked his own trousers down. His cock gleamed in the darkness. Jack seized Martin's hips and plunged his erection inside him. He felt, heard Martin's pleased moans accepting him into the hot, tight embrace of his body.

Deep inside his lover, Jack reached around to Martin's cock, adoring him with both hands while he thrust. Martin's hard-corded thighs rode atop on his own thighs, moving with him, accepting, begging for the power of his driving need. Martin's motions heightened the delicious thirst, the ecstatic torment.

Time suspended in elation. The embrace of the night held them in their own world of bright darkness high on their wolf lookout in the cold open air.

One heart, one breath, joined into one flesh in a timeless feral rhythm. A blaze rose between them too hot to let burn, a need that must be met *now*.

It was the most desperate, savage joining, an ecstatic climax. Love came like a burning bright fountain. Jack released his all into Martin's body. The wet heat of Martin's passion spilled over his hands.

Jack held him tight, extending the moment, throbbing, his sex inside Martin. Moisture glittered on his eyelashes. Panting, he exhaled fire.

Martin dropped to his knees, steam rolling off his heated sides.

Jack was instantly afraid he had been too rough. He crouched over him. "Did I hurt you?"

"Oh, Jack," Martin laughed, sobbed, "I don't give a rip."

Chapter Six

Martin's sleep was brief but deep and sated, nestled in Jack's arms.

Martin had to catch a cab at 5:00 a.m. because he needed to stop home before going to work. He hadn't brought a change of clothes with him and they had not been able to find all his buttons on the roof.

Jack chided him for lack of planning.

"I couldn't presume," Martin said, sheepishly. "I didn't want to get my hopes up."

"Martin," Jack rebuked him with his name. "I'm a sure thing."

Martin laid his palm on Jack's broad chest. "I know, Jack."

Jack kissed him goodbye on the doorstep. Hands holding Martin's waist, Jack gazed deep into his eyes, his brows knit. He asked, "Can I see you again?"

Martin sniggered, happy, giddy. "You are such a prick."

* * * * *

"What are you doing here, Winter?" the clerk challenged Martin in the lobby of the Hoover Building. Martin had lost his keycard and hadn't received his new one yet, so he could not let himself through the locked inner doors.

Why was he here, the clerk wanted to know. The question puzzled Martin. "I work here?" he suggested.

"No, you don't."

"Oh, like hell!" Martin threw down the pen. Bad enough that he had to sign in like a visitor. "Let me talk to someone who is someone."

The clerk paged someone upstairs.

Special Agent Larry Hunter allowed Martin in as his visitor. The clerk buzzed Martin in.

"Do you know the way?" the clerk asked.

Martin didn't know if the clerk was being snide, so he didn't call him an asshole. He just clipped on his visitor's tag, opened the buzzing door and went in.

Martin took the elevator up to his third-floor office. He found his office locked, with someone else's things inside it.

Larry Hunter seemed to take pleasure in informing Martin that he was on administrative leave.

Still on a euphoric glide from last night, Martin could not get too angry. He was only irritated. "You might have called me and told me about that before I came in to work."

"Not my fault," said Hunter, the edges of a hard smile on his thin lips. "Your phone line is disconnected and the Bureau canceled your cell phone a long time ago."

Martin studied Hunter curiously. He had never realized how much this man looked like Lurch. Except, from what Martin had seen of the old shows, the hulking zombie butler had never been mean. Hunter was enjoying this.

The short, burly figure of Special Agent Moo Park blew past them, throwing on his coat to go outside. "Hey, Martin, they found your car!"

"Good!" Martin made an instinctive reach for his car keys, which, of course, were not in his pocket. "I'm getting real tired of the Metro. Where is it?"

"Bottom of the Chesapeake."

"Oh." Martin guessed he wouldn't be driving home after all, keys or no keys.

"Want to go see it?" said Moo, waiting in the doorway.

"Sure," said Martin, falling in step with Moo. "You're driving."

* * * * *

Moo Park pulled into a parking lot on the riverfront in time for them to see a giant crane fishing the once-white Volvo out of the muddy water.

Martin Winter and Moo Park climbed out of Moo's car into the blustery cold wind that was blowing off the Chesapeake. Martin turned up the collar of his trench coat. The two agents walked out to the river edge to watch the Volvo rise into the air.

"Oh wow. I'm screwed," said Martin.

A brittle voice sounded behind them, "Is that a confession?"

Martin and Moo Park turned. Special Agent Ann Jefferson was there. It looked like she'd been here for a while, her face windburned, her eyes fixed in a squint. She wasn't pretty, wasn't ugly. If she would lose that permanent frown, she would look like a normal human being. That red color she had chosen for her short curls was all wrong for her. So was the blue eye shadow.

She had been supervising the raising of the Volvo. She gestured with her cell phone, which was seldom far from her ear. "So what is that car going to tell us, Martin?"

"It's going to say it doesn't think my insurance payments are current," said Martin. He turned back to watch his car dangling on the giant hook. He uttered a lot of foul language to the cold wind.

"Sorry, man," said Moo Park. His broad paw of a hand patted Martin's shoulder.

"Maybe I can hit the Colombians up for a new car," Martin said.

Moo Park turned to face him, suddenly suspicious. "I thought you said you were in Guatemala."

"I was. Doesn't make me Guatemalan. And I don't think the guys who held me were Guatemalan either. They had Colombian accents."

The car teetered, dripping mud. Moo Park's lipless mouth, turned down at the sides, looked like a cartoon of a frown. His chin jutted forward. "What a mess. What a mess."

Martin got the feeling he wasn't talking about the car.

The car tilted on its hook. A rear door popped open and a cascade of gray-brown sludge spilled out.

Ann Jefferson moved away, yelling into her cell phone.

Martin asked Moo, "Did your divers get all my drugs out of the backseat before you dragged her up?"

Moo wagged his head. "Talk like that is going to get you shot, Marty."

"Again?"

"I am your friend," Moo chided him, stung by his sarcasm.

"Yeah? Want to act like it?" Martin snapped.

"You make it hard," said Moo.

"I've been told."

Moo could not possibly know what Martin was referring to. So it shocked Martin when Moo said, "Tell me about Jack Reed."

The sound of the beloved name left Martin ringing inside. "Leave Jack out of this," said Martin darkly.

"You didn't," said Moo Park.

No, Martin realized. He hadn't. Martin had dragged Jack into this.

Furious with himself, Martin turned 'round and shouted. "Hey, Annie, you running this show?"

Ann Jefferson lowered her cell phone from her ear to answer, "Yes."

"Great. Can you tell someone in HR to issue my back pay? I'm just about broke here and I'm not expecting payment from my drug buddies for a long, long time."

* * * * *

Jack made for a cheery presence in his office at the Pentagon. He brought carnations for all the women in his department, just because he was happy and wanted someone else to smile. He also brought a better brand of coffee for the coffeemaker.

A coworker tasted the new brew. His eyebrows skied. "Are you running for office, Reed?"

* * * * *

"Well, Jack," said Martin, hauling another suitcase up the two flights of stairs of Jack's townhouse. "All the women at the office want your phone number — except Ann Jefferson, who already has it."

Martin had gone to work only sporadically over the past few days. He was admitted as a visitor and grilled with questions.

"Moo Park calls you Captain America. And Larry Hunter? Do you know, I think Hunter's holding a torch for you?"

"Torch?" Jack asked, following him up the stairs with a couple of lamps from Martin's condo. "As in the villagers coming after the wolfman?"

"No, I think he's hot for you." Martin dropped his suitcase in Jack's closet.

"Come on, Jack, where's your gaydar? Aren't we supposed to have that?"

"I think we've already established that I'm thick as a brick on that score," said Jack. And any thought of Larry Hunter made his face look as if he had just sniffed ammonia. He looked about for a place to put the lamps. The place was getting crowded with Martin's stuff.

While Jack was at work Martin spent most of the day moving his belongings out of his condo, getting it ready to put on the market.

Martin tried to remember the discussion. Couldn't, because they'd never had one. Jack had just told Martin, "Let's get you out from under this place," and hired a cleaning service, telling them to do a sell-the-condo job on it.

What did Martin expect from a man who told him he owned his life?

Funny how he could be in such deep trouble and feel so safe.

"Why are they giving you such a hard time at the Bureau, Martin? Aren't these people supposed to be your friends?"

"No one loves a traitor," said Martin. "And if I really were a traitor, they would be right to hate me. I would hate me. The sticking point is that I can't account for all my time away."

"You were in captivity," Jack answered. "Even I know that." Jack was there when Martin had been taken. He had not been able to save him. Martin could tell that bothered the hell out Jack.

"Yeah, they read your police report," said Martin. He tried to show Jack the FBI's view of that. "You were there but you didn't actually see it. You heard shots. You heard a van door slide. You heard vehicles drive away. You saw taillights and tire tracks of two vehicles—the van and the car. You didn't see who was driving my car. That could have been me driving off into the sunset with my cohorts."

"Oh hell!" Jack's anger was intimidating and beautiful. He looked like an enraged archangel. It comforted Martin to have that power and fury on his side.

"And," said Martin, "there are great gaping holes in my story because there are great gaping holes in my memory. Amnesia is a word that makes the FBI suspicious."

Jack's face showed shock. He dropped the lamps on the bed and came over to take Martin's hands between his. "I didn't know you had amnesia, Martin."

Martin was relieved that Jack had heard of traumatic amnesia. Some people—Martin's coworkers in particular—thought it was a convenient fraud.

It was real. Traumatic amnesia was the mind's defense against memories that were just too horrible to hold.

"Of course you didn't," said Martin. "I never told you."

Jack would have assumed that Martin was not telling him anything about his absence because Martin's work was classified. And that was a part of it. But it never occurred to Jack that even Martin did not know all of what he had been through while he was missing.

Something too horrible.

There were blind spots in Martin's memory from when he had been tortured. He was pretty sure he had been tortured, though he could not tell anyone precisely what they had done to him. He did not know. He had blanked it out. But like the missing parts in a jigsaw puzzle, he could tell the shape of what ought to be there from the shape of the edges. He remembered men pounding him with questions. He remembered the questions.

But he did not know for sure that he had not talked.

"There are also things I do remember and I can't tell them at the Bureau. Like how I got across the border. I do remember crossing the border. No one asks a wolf for his passport, that's how. Border patrol thought I was a coyote and I

was lucky no one was in a coyote-shooting mood that day. But everyone is real interested to know how I got across the border and they won't let go of that question. And I sound like I'm lying when I say I walked."

"Is that how you got home?" Jack asked, appalled.

"That's part of what took me so long. The Bureau wants to know how I survived without money and how I did it without ever showing up on the information grid. I really can't tell them I survived on grasshoppers, rats, rabbits. The odd poodle."

Jack looked down to see if he was kidding. Was. Maybe. A little.

"Do not ever serve me prairie dog or rattlesnake. I've had my fill."

"There goes my dinner plans," said Jack. "Cocker spaniel?"

Martin snorted. Like Jack could ever hurt a cocker spaniel.

Martin caught in his breath, suddenly remembered, "I need to send some money to some folks. Anonymously. I had to steal clothes off of some clotheslines. And you know if they're hanging their clothes out on lines, these aren't people who have money to burn. Do you have any idea what it feels like to steal from a migrant?"

"I can get cash to your victims," said Jack.

"Be careful. The FBI is watching you now too."

Chapter Seven

Martin sat across from Ann Jefferson in the interrogation room. He thought the use of this room was a little over the top but he had nothing to say about it.

Ann Jefferson slid photographs of two grim-looking men across the table. They were smarmy, sneering images that could rape you with just their eyes.

Martin picked up each photograph, considered it, put it down.

He folded his hands on the table and waited for Special Agent Jefferson to ask a question. He knew this game. Never volunteer information. A guilty man starts babbling.

None of the vulnerability he showed to Jack was here. He waited in perfect calm. No fidgeting, no glancing around, no throat clearing, no eyebrow lifting to cue the woman across from him to speak.

He sat straight, picturesque, patient and contained as the cat on the windowsill of Jack's cabin.

True love provides a floor to one's world, a place to stand. It does not shift or rock or heave. It is steadfast. Physical threats remained but no one could touch him, the Martin Winter whom only Jack Reed had ever seen, only Jack Reed had ever touched.

This woman did not threaten him.

Ann Jefferson considered herself a hard-ass. She sat there with something to prove.

Martin assessed her during the standoff. He tried to figure out what was driving her. Ann Jefferson was as tenacious as a pit bull. Martin wondered if she kept pressing her case against him just because she could not admit she was wrong. That would be typical Annie. No reverse gear.

Or did she need to convict him of espionage because she needed there to be someone to take the fall for her own crimes? It would be just like a traitor to try to pass off her own actions on the person who came closest to revealing her.

It was a long wait. Ann got tired of it first. She tapped at the two photographs on the table between them, and broke the silence, "Do you recognize either of those men?"

"Yes," said Martin.

"Which one?"

"Both."

"Who are they?" Ann demanded.

"I don't know."

He gave her no more than she asked for, like a stubborn two-year-old.

She made a face of irritation. "Are you going to make me pull teeth here?"

"Yes."

She gave an impatient huff. "Well, Martin, it just so happens that I do know who these men are."

Martin waited. He had not been asked a question.

Ann again had to break the silence. "Fingerprints of two drug cartel strongmen were preserved inside in your car. Prints of wanted men. These men." Her forefinger hammered down on the photos.

Martin still had not been asked a question. He said nothing.

"What are the fingerprints of these men doing in your car?" Ann demanded.

"If their fingerprints are in my car, I would conclude those men were in my car."

"You're claiming you didn't know they were in your car?"

"I didn't actually see them in my car."

"You recognize them. They were in your car. But you say you don't know them."

"Yes."

"You don't know them," she said, skeptical. "So how do they know you?"

"I'm not a mind reader. Why don't you bring them in and ask *them*?"

"They're in Colombia," said Ann.

"Are you *sure* this time?" said Martin. "Because last I saw them they were in Guatemala."

"You don't know them."

"I already said that."

"You saw them in Guatemala."

"Yes."

"Martin, I am going to beat you."

"If it gives you joy."

"So you know them from your dealings in Guatemala?"

"I recognize them from Rock Creek Parkway. They were two of the men who kidnapped me. One of them may have shot me. They were there when I was shot but there were others, so I don't know which one actually pulled the trigger. I know for sure that I took the shot while they were on the scene. Do you want to check the position of my scars?"

"I've already seen your medical file," said Ann.

"There were more than two men that night. I didn't see which men actually drove off in my car and which bundled my bleeding carcass into the back of the van. I don't *know* any of them. And I didn't know who ditched my car in the Chesapeake. Could have been the tooth fairy for all I knew. But if the fingerprints say it was those two men, then it was those two men. Now I know that much."

Ann retrieved the photographs from the table. She regarded the two repulsive images. "So, Martin, you were going to roll over on these friends of yours?"

"If that were the case, then I would still be *in* the car, Annie, now wouldn't I?"

"Well, *Marty*, if you are not their friend, why *didn't* they leave you in the car when they pushed it into the Chesapeake?"

"Because they needed to know what I knew."

"What do you know?"

"I know that they have someone on the inside of Federal law enforcement."

"Well, lord almighty," she declared dryly. She folded her forearms flat on the table and leaned over them to glower at him hard. She turned his words around on him. "Now isn't that just what I've been saying all along?"

* * * * *

Martin took the Metro to the station nearest to Jack's townhouse. He arrived at Jack's place in a bitter mood. He hung up his green trench coat, frowning. "You know you've had a bad day when your coworkers are trying to link you to the same drug dealers you're trying to bring down." He dragged his fingers back through his dark blond hair.

Jack said, "Your department isn't even in drug enforcement."

"Really?" said Martin, oozing sarcasm.

Jack's hands went up as if Martin had opened fire. "Whoa. Friendly."

Martin let his head fall forward, penitent. "Yes, I am an ass."

Jack came to him, kissed his brow. "Go get upstairs and get changed. I'll take you for a romp in the woods."

"I don't romp," said Martin.

"Yes, you do."

Martin changed out of his monkey suit and let Jack drive him out to the cabin. The drive, Jack's buoyant presence made it hard for Martin to hold on to his scowl.

The sun had already set by the time they arrived but the sky was brilliant with cold stars winking through the treetops.

Jack no sooner shut the car door when he vanished into a pile of clothes and big bundle of black fur with a white toothy grin. He ran a circle around Martin.

Romping. He meant romping.

Martin transformed, shook himself out of his clothes and followed Jack into the forest.

Woodland scents of old leaves, acorns, moss and bracken, the innocent chuckle of a stream in its rock bed, the haunting call of a great horned owl, the near presence of the black wolf with his bright cheery dog smile, all conspired to wash away the claustrophobic madness of the day.

A woodpecker scolded them with a rattling cry. Martin named it Ann.

Jack bit his tail, and Martin tore after him, snapping.

They returned to the cabin fairly muddy.

Jack transformed next to the car, collected up his clothes and went inside the cabin. Martin followed him into the warmth. Jack was already in the guest shower, so Martin took over the master bath to rinse off the mud and the last frustrating thoughts of the work day.

Towel around his waist, Martin came out of the shower to find Jack lying back on the bed with his hands folded behind his head. He was tantalizingly half dressed. He wore only his dark trousers, which fit snug against his hips and across his groin. His obvious interest swelled there. His shirt was open, baring his spectacular male torso, his wide chest with its handsome scatter of dark springy hair. A line of dark hair made a trail down that slight furrow where

hard muscles met in his flat abdomen, leading the way to forbidden pleasures below.

Romping, thought Martin.

Lying there on the four-poster bed of the log cabin, dressed only in a timeless cut of trousers, Jack might have been a dashing sea captain of old. Sea captain, because Jack Reed was too gallant, too heroic ever to be a pirate. But he was just as daring and lusty and playfully arrogant. Martin felt his dazzling white smile call to him. His dark hair, tossed across his brow, made him look like a rogue.

"Lose the towel, Martin," Jack ordered in a lordly voice.

Martin hesitated.

"Or let me do it," said Jack. He waved Martin closer.

Martin approached diffidently. As soon as he was within reach, Jack whisked off the towel. A tremor stirred in Martin's throat. He could not believe he was still shy.

He felt Jack's eyes travel appreciatively up and down his naked body. Then Jack lay back again and ordered, "Set me free."

Martin climbed onto the bed. He knelt astride Jack's powerful thighs. His own long erection stood straight up between them and Jack murmured something like a prayer.

Martin discovered the closure was a button-down fly. Even in the grip of nervous fear and clumsy passion, Martin managed a startled laugh. Exposed and flustered, he cried, "Jack, you prick."

"I don't trust you with a zipper," said Jack with a touch of evil.

Cheeks aflame, Martin fumbled at the buttons, taking an agonizingly long time in getting them undone—not on purpose but it was good to let Jack burn awhile.

He slid his hand into Jack's trousers, took hold of his manhood and eased it free. Jack moaned. Martin let his hands float over Jack's pleading cock with a feathery touch. He licked his fingertip and drew a circle around his swollen helmet.

Jack rose swiftly and pushed Martin onto his back with a growl. Jack reached for the massage oil in the bedside table.

Martin opened his palms, but Jack poured the oil into his own palms instead.

"Stay still," Jack told him.

Satiny strokes of liquid fire traveled over Martin's body, massaging, relaxing and exciting. Martin's body simmered. Jack turned him over and kneaded the muscles in his shoulders, his back, his legs. The experience was lulling, luxurious and wonderful. Martin's skin was singing.

Jack got up from the bed. Martin could hear him taking his trousers off.

Jack turned him over again. Martin moved languidly, smiling up at him. Jack's touch grew hot. His hands were on his chest, teasing his nipples, making him feel things he had never imagined. Martin writhed and moaned under his touch. Jack's hands strayed lower, cupped his balls and swept up his engorged cock. Martin had to push away from the unbearable pleasure.

Jack asked softly, "Martin, do you want me to tie you up?"

"I think you're going to have to," Martin bleated. He'd thought he was relaxed. He was wrong. "I can't help it."

He let Jack tie his wrists to the bedposts. Then Jack descended on him like a famished beast. Martin thrashed underneath him, putting up a useless struggle he never wanted to win. Trapped like this he savored the raw lust and forbidden desires he could not submit to unbound. He strained at his bonds, resisting and needing Jack's gentle domination.

Martin tried to keep his eyes open while being kissed. He lost that struggle and surrendered. He opened his mouth to Jack's deep kisses, his invading tongue, like being lovingly fucked.

Jack's great warm hand slid down between them. Martin felt it caress his tightening balls and stroke his erection.

In the grip of pleasure so strong that he must either come or cry out loud Martin let go a wild savage cry, fighting not to climax.

Jack pushed himself up. He sat back on his heels, gazing down on Martin, his face rapt.

Martin's body vibrated. He had been worshipped and teased and thoroughly felt up, so that his skin now glistened. His cock stood up rigid, begging.

Jack prowled lower and Martin felt the wondrous shock of Jack's hot, moist tongue roving over his groin. Jack's mouth closed over top of his long shaft and Martin thought he must shatter.

Jack's lips, set in a firm ring came down on him, and back up, his tongue massaging his length. The light grazing male stubble at the rim of Jack's lips made Martin fight his bonds even as his back arched up and his hips thrust of their own will.

"No!" he cried. He meant yes. No just came out. None of this could be happening—Jack's mouth on his manhood, his tongue stroking him, surrounding him with fire and paradise. "No!" He could not be feeling this way. "Jack!"

Jack lifted his head. He dragged his forearm across his glistening mouth. He lifted Martin's legs up over his broad shoulders. Martin felt Jack's hands on his ass, caressing.

Jack moved forward to crouch over him, forehead to forehead, eyes locked in an intimate gaze. "Are you all right?"

"Take me," Martin pleaded. "Please take me."

Jack kissed his lips with great tenderness and answered, "With pleasure."

Jack sat back. He took a drop of massage oil in his hand and smoothed it over his own cock. Martin felt his eyes go wide. Martin doubted Jack ever had to do that in his life. The sight of him touching himself was erotic.

Jack moved over him again, lifted his buttocks. Slowly, sensuously, in a transcendent moment Jack's slick cock entered his body. The promise of relief from sweet agony lay just over this next summit. Jack braced his hands on the bed on either side of Martin's body. Martin gazed up at the muscles in Jack's powerful chest, working, driving, a sweat sheen appearing under the dark springy hairs that curled there. Jack strained to be careful, gentle, as he thrust

rhythmically, carrying Martin up to the highest point of desire. A deep throaty growl rose up from within his chest.

Martin hovered on exquisite edge. The breath caught in his lungs. The splash of heat inside him pushed him over the brink. Fire spread to his groin. Heaven itself tore open. Martin opened his mouth, his teeth bared in a voiceless scream of shattering splendor. Sensations without words to contain them exploded in a wild conflagration. A joyous bursting star pulsed liquid fire in a searing blaze. And he cried his lover's name over and over.

Chapter Eight

At last Martin was cleared to return to work. He was issued a new keycard, a new cell phone and his back pay. His office had been assigned to someone else while he was gone, so he got a workstation out in the cube farm.

Martin was connecting his computer cables when a shadow fell across him. "Who let you in here?"

Martin looked up toward the voice.

Larry Hunter loomed over him like an eyesore of a tall building that someone ought to tear down.

"Don't look so happy for me, Hunter," Martin said. He adjusted the position of his monitor.

Larry Hunter put his hand atop the partition of Martin's cubicle and hung there as if riding a bus. "What is Lieutenant Commander Jack Reed to you?"

"Put your ears on, Hunter. Jack is my friend."

"Your friend lives all kinds of real fine for a government employee," said Hunter. "Is he on the take?"

Martin fought down rage. Martin did not know why he had not seen that insinuation coming. He had assumed that Jack's innocence ought to be obvious. Making assumptions like that was a mistake in this crowd.

Hunter, in so very many ways, did not know Jack.

Martin answered, "If you had any *intelligence*, you would know that Jack inherited several extremely lucrative patents from his mother."

"His mother. Right."

Martin forced his attention toward arranging things on his microscopic desk. He tried to ignore Hunter but Hunter was very large and would not go away. Finally, Martin had to tell him out right, "Hunter, don't you have an office to go to? One of us is trying to work here."

A little later, Moo Park sidled over to Martin and told him confidentially, "I personally think you're innocent, Martin. But I think your friend Captain America might be using you as a patsy."

And I think you're an idiot, Martin thought loudly. He just stared back at Moo Park.

When Martin said nothing, Moo Park continued, "I just think you should be careful who your friends are. That's all."

Martin nodded. *So do I.*

* * * * *

Jack had fallen asleep with his arms around Martin, their legs entwined. Jack woke to a dream of desire. His cock was hard.

He opened his eyes. Martin's face was right there on the pillow before him. Martin's eyes were open and watching him. A beautiful blush colored Martin's translucent skin.

"I had the same dream," said Martin.

Jack could feel Martin tremble. He moved over top of him, lay over him, kissing his face, his lips, his throat, his shoulders. He returned to drink in the sweetness of his mouth.

He sat up to gaze upon his otherworldly beauty. There was a soft sheen to his petal-textured skin. The muscles underneath were hard as lustrous marble. There was a captivating gentleness in his wide frightened eyes.

Earlier that night, Jack's loving had been more enthusiastic than wise. He was feeling voracious and did not want to hurt him.

Jack took Martin's head in his hands, and guided him down toward his own stiff, pleading cock.

Martin's face filled with trepidation. His nostrils flared, his lips trembled. Jack urged him nearer.

Martin braced the heels of his palms against Jack's hips, trying to push away, resisting the amorous pull. "No."

Gently, firmly, Jack drew Martin's mouth closer to his need.

Martin's eyes were wide, his lips aching provocation. Jack needed those lips, so unimaginably soft and tempting, on his cock.

Martin pushed, insistent, desperate, "Jack, I mean it!"

He was so close Jack could feel the hot caress of Martin's breath on his shaft that strained to reach that velvet promise.

"Stop!"

Upon that word, Jack instantly let go.

Martin reared back. He did not go far. He did not leave the bed.

Jack tried to collect in his scattered emotions and passions. Martin crouched at the edge of the bed, shaking. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. We don't have to do that." Jack sat up. "Come here."

Martin ventured closer. Jack gathered him back in his arms. Felt Martin's eyelashes flutter against his shoulder.

"If you don't want to do it, then I don't want to. You have the most erotic mouth I could ever imagine and I'd love for you to take me inside. But I'm not going to force you and I won't have you upset because you don't want to. You're allowed not to want to do it."

"I don't want to disappoint you," said Martin.

"You don't disappoint me. You can't disappoint me. You are a miraculous creature. I love your body. I love that squirrel's cage of a mind behind those mysterious eyes. Believe me, if it doesn't give you pleasure, then it's no good for me, either."

"You don't get it, Jack. I *want* to want to! And I don't know why I can't even —"

His hesitation grew long, as if his thoughts had got lost somewhere.

Jack asked, concerned, "What is it?"

"I thought I was remembering something." Martin's eyes focused into the dark distance, as if trying to chase down a dream. Or a nightmare. At last, he shook his head. "It's gone now."

* * * * *

Martin had an early meeting in the morning, so while Martin got ready for work, Jack was still sprawled on the bed, naked, raw, male, trying to distract him. Martin stood at the bedside, dressing, fastening a button at his starched cuff. Jack watched him intently, noting his crisp white shirt, the sleek hard body beneath it, the open collar waiting for a tie.

Not yet smoothed-down, knotted-up, buttoned and belted, Martin was a half dressed beauty, vulnerable and accessible. The contour of his thigh just there on the other side of the fabric called to Jack like a secret promise. Arousal overcame Jack. He took Martin by the arm, pulled him off his feet and onto the bed. Martin rolled into Jack coming to a stop nose to nose.

Jack tasted Martin's breath on his lips as Martin spoke, "I really do need to go. Jack, don't make me say it."

It.

The dreaded word stop.

Jack immediately let go. But he brushed his thumb over Martin's soft lips to let him know what he was missing. He felt Martin's arousal against his hip. Jack chuckled. He'd turned him on.

"Bastard," Martin breathed, tearing himself away.

* * * * *

In the evening, Jack learned that something had happened during Martin's investigations that day to make Martin realize that he had not talked under torture in captivity.

"They still don't know who El Gusano is," said Martin.

"Who is El Gusano?" Jack heard the stupidity of the question even as he said it. He backtracked quickly, "You can't tell me."

"You're right, I can't tell you. But I can tell you what El Gusano is. It's a code name for a traitor within the U.S. intelligence community."

"Do you know who El Gusano is?"

Odd looks moved across Martin's face. He began to shake. He took a step back away from Jack, topaz eyes round and terrified. He was suddenly horrified of Jack. Martin looked about to be sick. He backed toward the window as if he were about to transform into a wolf and jump to freedom.

Jack suddenly realized that he had just asked the question Martin's torturers asked him.

Jack said quickly, "I didn't say that. I don't want to know." Jack took several steps back, giving Martin space. He held his hands up, empty, meaning no harm. "I'm sorry. That just came out." He forced himself to sit down, so he didn't look so anxious to run at him and catch him. "I ask questions for a living. It's what I do. *Shit!*" He clenched his fists. Wanted to go to him and didn't dare. He shut his eyes tight, pressed fists to his brow.

With a tread so soft that even Jack with his wolf senses hadn't heard him, Martin crossed the room. Jack didn't know it until he felt Martin's breath disturb his hair. Martin whispered. "I know that, Jack." Martin sank to the floor and rested his head against Jack's thigh. "You're the only thing I'm sure of."

* * * * *

Come Friday, Jack came home from work in high spirits. He changed clothes and suggested, "Let's find a nightclub and go dancing."

Martin scowled. "Are you insane?"

"Are you ashamed of me?" Jack asked.

Martin choked on that suggestion. "No," he said. "Absolutely not. I just really don't have a problem with the closet. It's nice in the closet."

Jack coaxed, "I want to go out. With you. I have nothing to hide."

"Except being a wolfman?"

"Now that little detail would be much harder to get someone to believe it than it is to keep it secret. Can you imagine trying to *tell* someone?"

"Point taken."

Martin could not even say he was keeping that secret. The secret kept itself.

Jack said, "If anyone ever asks me if I can turn into a wolf, I'll tell the truth."

"And if they ask you to show them this ability?"

"Then I'll show them." Jack demonstrated, closing his eyes and screwing up his face as if trying very hard to bend a spoon with psychic powers. He opened his eyes, regarded his own hands as if surprised to see them still there. "I just can't seem to do it right now."

Then, not to be led off track, Jack returned to his pursuit, "Dancing, Martin. We were talking about dancing. Do you know how to dance?"

"I can lead."

"You'll get over that."

"I don't know any nightclubs," said Martin.

"Neither do I," said Jack breezily. "But how many intelligence analysts can it take to find one?"

Martin inhaled for courage. "All right. But I'm starting drinking before we get to the club."

He marched to Jack's liquor cabinet. Stopped short. Glared at the assembled bottles on top of the cabinet. He asked flatly, "What the hell is that?"

Jack did not need to ask what Martin was talking about. "It's a bottle of tequila."

"It's a dildo," Martin said flatly.

It was a bottle of tequila, shaped rather rounded on either side, with a very long neck as thick as Martin's cock, terminating in a bulbous cap.

"I was buying scotch," said Jack. "I saw that and laughed so hard I had to have it."

"As long as you were laughing," said Martin. "Keep that away from me."

"Oh hell, Martin, you've got to know I am not sharing you with a bottle of tequila."

Martin edged toward the liquor cabinet as if something fanged dwelled there. He gingerly took up the bottle. A devious look came over his face.

He locked gazes with Jack and very slowly ran his tongue around the bulbous cap.

Jack groaned. "You're teasing me now."

"Yes, I am." Martin set the bottle down. *That* was not happening. "You should have seen your face."

"I can imagine. Stop changing the subject. Let's go out. Pick a nightclub. I want to dance with you."

"Oh, come on! Out? *Out?* In public? To be *seen?*"

"I don't give a damn who sees us. This is who I am. I have a right to be here. And I am not apologizing for loving you."

Martin fought down nerves. He demanded, "Where's the scotch?"

"You are ashamed of me."

The words startled Martin. His attitude abruptly shifted, like a sudden light going on. "No," he said, decisive. He strode away from the liquor cabinet and grabbed his trench coat. "Let's go."

It was easy enough to find the right place. The club had an artistic, upscale façade. Well-groomed, truly well-dressed men arrived in pairs or alone but not in the company of women.

Martin walked in with Jack's arm around him in ownership. Jack made it clear to the world that Martin was this wolf's territory. Martin borrowed strength from Jack's pride and ease and joy.

Jack was fearless. He could talk to anyone. He was the alpha male in any pack.

Martin was an inaccessible beauty. His walk said drop dead.

His keen ears picked up scattered comments.

Look at that guy! Look at that GUY!

That guy was unmistakably Jack.

What's he got with him, though?

That would be Martin.

It's kind of a tight little bitch, isn't it?

Kind of hot. If you like doing it to a pine board. Man could have anyone and he picked that?

Jack was gorgeous, cheerful, outgoing and butch as hell. Jack could indeed have anyone.

The voices meant nothing. The possessiveness in Jack's touch made Martin know that Jack wanted only one man and Martin was that one. Everyone else was just an entertaining flock of colorful birds.

They found a table for two. Jack twined his fingers with Martin's across the table. "Are you going to make it?"

Martin nodded. "It's not so bad."

"I'm going to get us drinks," said Jack, rising. "Don't dance with anyone else while I'm gone."

As Jack waited for their drinks at the bar, a young man slithered up against his side. The stranger caressed him with his body like a cat.

"Hey, tall, hot and hard. What's that bitch have that I don't have?" The stranger jerked his head back toward the table where the most beautiful creature on the planet waited for Jack.

"All of my attention," said Jack. He put a tip in the jar, collected drinks for two and returned to Martin.

Martin was a sexual drunk. A few drinks and his eyelids became heavy and sleepily seductive. His eyes peered at Jack from under a fringe of lowered lashes. A beckoning almost-smile evanesced on his swollen, pouting lips.

"Dance with me," said Jack.

Martin slowly blinked an okay.

Jack led him out to the dance floor.

The dance was a grind, like getting a lap dance standing up. Martin, so taut, so contained, so disciplined was a surprising natural at this. His dance was feral and sultry, his body elegant, sensual, hot. Martin's ass moved against Jack's groin to the primal rhythm of the music, Martin's palms sliding along the sides of his hips. Martin's back swayed with animal grace.

On fire, Jack had to back away. He took Martin's hand and led him off the dance floor, back to their table.

"Did I do something you didn't like?" Martin asked.

Jack had trouble even talking. "Oh no. Opposite problem."

The room was getting hot and crowded.

"I need something to cool off," said Jack getting up again. "Get you anything?"

Martin signaled no with a languid motion of his hand. "I'm pretty well marinated here. Just come back to me."

Martin waited, pleasantly buzzed, toying with his glass of melting ice cubes.

A tall smoky man strolled to Martin's table, stopped there, his thigh pressed against the table's edge. The man pointed a long manicured finger to Martin. Something in the man's crotch was pointing as well. "You. You are the hottest thing in the room. What you doin' with that white man?"

Martin considered this, carefully studying his cocktail glass, his eyes on the ice cubes, a little confused.

He checked the color of his hands just to make sure. Because he could transform into a wolf, he took nothing for granted.

Still white.

He asked the man, "What's wrong with white?"

"You move that body with color. I got what you need." What the man thought Martin needed presented right there at eye level, bulging at the man's fly. Martin wasn't looking there. He looked up, meeting the man's eyes.

"I love him," he said.

"Oh. Well. Damn. I got nothin' to answer that," the man conceded and surrendered the ground to Jack.

* * * * *

Jack took Martin back to his townhouse.

Martin's walk up the two flights of stairs was straight as a sober man's but loose, raw and seductive. When he had climbed to the bedroom and turned around to face Jack, his eyes were bright, his lips licentious.

Jack flipped the loose end of a tie around one bedpost. "Do you need these?" Martin shook his head, not so terrified now. He was tipsy, relaxed and pliant. Jack let the tie drop. He threw Martin onto the bed in joyous abandon. Martin showed no fear. Jack wished he didn't need liquor but hell it was working. Alcohol made Martin a seething-hot lover. Martin writhed dreamily as he was being stripped.

Martin slowly unfastened a button of Jack's shirt. The artistic motion of his long fingers was sweetly seductive. Jack was mesmerized watching Martin undress him. Then those long-fingered hands slid inside his shirt and laced through his coarse chest hair. His heart thundered under Martin's hands.

Jack took him in his arms and rolled back, wrapping his legs around this naked magical creature. Martin dragged Jack's shirt off his shoulders. Jack felt Martin's lips, tongue and teeth draw wet heat across his shoulders and up his neck.

He captured Martin's head, covered his mouth with his lips. He kissed him, stroked his tongue with his own, drinking in his heated breaths.

Jack had to let go. He rolled Martin off him, desperate to unzip and kick out of his trousers.

When Jack was naked, Martin prowled back in on all fours, more cat than wolf, head low, topaz eyes gleaming with an alcohol shine. And Jack felt Martin's tongue slide up the inside of his thigh, a touch like an electric current. Jack became very still, shocked and astonished. He dare not move, struggled not to come.

Martin licked the inside of Jack's thigh, tracing the intertwined muscles up to his groin. The slight golden roughness of Martin's cheek, the tension between masculine and feminine was excruciatingly beautiful. Martin's hair brushed against Jack's balls in a silken moment and made Jack gasp. Martin's kisses drew so close to his sex that the keen agony of anticipation was near to pain. Jack's cock was wet and so ready.

Jack wanted to seize Martin's head, make him take him inside his mouth. He though Martin just might let him.

Might.

But Martin was half in the bag and Jack could not take advantage of his sweet, drunken lover.

Jack could wait.

Maybe.

He was in flames.

He rolled up with a roaring groan, threw Martin onto his back. He reached down to Martin's narrow hips, wondering absurdly, just where were love handles when you needed them? He lifted Martin's tight little ass.

He met with no struggles. Limber and languid, Martin's legs settled over Jack's broad shoulders. Martin's fingers toyed with Jack's chest hair.

Jack pushed forward and felt Martin's cock wet on his belly. Jack bent down to graze his tongue across Martin's fluttering eyelids. "Martin, please say you're ready."

Martin murmured, "Where the hell have you been?"

Jack penetrated into purest splendor.

Martin's hands glided along the muscles of Jack's sides as he pushed and withdrew.

Jack rode him long and slow. Time suspended at the edge of heaven.

The delicious heat grew stronger, intensified to a piercing blaze. The need goaded, extreme, urgent. Jack's hips thrust.

Wet heat splashed down his front with Martin's cries.

Jack came hard, long, releasing his all into his beloved's body.

Pulsating orgasms went on nearly forever.

At last, at long last, the quakes slowly subsided into a glittering bliss.

Jack with his lover floated on a sea of air and light.

Martin was only a little sad afterward, his head resting on Jack's chest, nestled under his arm. "I don't want to need to get wasted to make love. I want to love you freely."

Jack snuggled him closer, damp skin clinging to damp skin. He planted a kiss on his head and laid his cheek on the kiss.

"We'll get there," Jack promised.

Chapter Nine

"Martin, have you seen my laptop?"

Martin made a slow, sultry walk across the room to where Jack was sitting. He lifted one leg as if mounting a horse to sit straddling Jack's lap.

Jack supposed he had that coming. He held Martin's hips. "That's a truly splendid answer—and a much better one than I was looking for—but I meant my computer."

Apparently noticing Jack's serious expression, Martin said, "Jack, don't tell me you bring Department of Defense files home with you?"

"No. Not unless you count my tax records. My laptop has my e-mail addresses, my nieces' birthdates, letters from friends. Did I leave it at the cabin?"

Martin looked alarmed. He got up, posed like a deer in the crosshairs. "Someone has been here."

He abruptly transformed. Where Martin had stood, there was now a wolf shaking out of a man's clothing. His silver hackles lifted. His nose was up, snuffling the air, then down to the hardwood floor, inhaling scents.

The wolf padded up the stairs to the bedroom.

The wolf came back down with a thudding of paws and kept going down to the foyer, where it waited at the door. The wolf did not scratch dog-style for Jack to open the door for him. Instead the wolf glared at Jack, who followed at a slower pace. The wolf jerked its head toward the door in the human gesture, *Get the door, dumbass*.

So as not to alarm anyone outside on the street, Jack grabbed Martin's dog collar and leash before he opened the door.

Martin, the wolf, sat politely in the doorway as pedestrians passed on the sidewalk below. When they were clear, the wolf galloped down the stone steps to the street level. The wolf snuffled at the bushes, at the window ledges, 'round the back and at the front curb.

Inspection done, the wolf bounded back up the front steps and into the small foyer of the townhouse. Jack shut the door behind him.

When Jack climbed the stairs to the main floor, Martin, naked young man, was pulling on his clothes. Martin spoke, his voice shaking with something like rage, "Ann Jefferson was inside. Larry Hunter was out front."

Jack laid his hand behind Martin's neck, felt Martin stiff as a statue and vibrating.

Martin met his eyes. "They were *here*. Jack, I led them to your *home*."

"And they took my laptop," said Jack, simply. "If they're looking for a security leak, all they'll find is that they don't have a security leak."

"What else did they find? Have we been bugged?"

Jack did not speak. He raised his eyebrows high. *They may have*.

Jack and Martin both worked for intelligence agencies, so they knew all the places to look for bugs.

Jack found one in his phone. He took it out and crushed it under his heel.

Martin uncovered nothing else, and Martin had been thorough.

"Other than finding out what I take on my pizza, I don't think they got anything important," said Jack.

* * * * *

Jack arrived at work the next morning to find his personal laptop on his desk in the Pentagon.

Jack's office was far from the e-ring—those elite offices with the windows. Jack's office was in the basement.

Jack stepped out of his office, laptop under his arm, and asked one of the admins, "Where'd this come from?"

"An agent from the FBI dropped it off," said the admin.

Jack made a noncommittal hmm. "Gotta love Inter-agency cooperation."

Jack's boss, the admiral, summoned him into his office. He slammed the door once Jack was inside.

Too agitated to sit, the admiral announced that he was hugely disappointed in Jack.

"Sir?" Jack said, quizzical.

Jack, the admiral reported, had been seen engaging in flagrantly homosexual behavior last Friday night at a dance club.

"I was dancing. It was a nightclub, not on the street," said Jack reasonably. "Not at work and not in uniform, so how do you know about it anyway, Sir?"

"Inter-agency cooperation," said the admiral. "That is the kind of activity that makes you a target for blackmail."

"I was dancing with a man in a crowded nightclub. Doesn't blackmail require that I have a *secret* to keep?"

The admiral hemmed and hawed, stumbling around for an argument. He came out with, "What would Jason think?"

He had invoked the name of Jack's father.

Jack was not going to answer that. He said, "That is beneath you, Sir."

The admiral backed off, realizing that he had crossed a line. He appeared to reconsider, calming down in Jack's steady presence.

Jack Reed was the same man he had known for two years now. Jack had not changed. The admiral simply knew something about him that he had not known before. Something he never wanted to know.

He admitted, "You're a good man, Jack. You've always been straight up—so to say. You're a fine intelligence officer and a lot of people would miss you around here."

Jack's head tilted. How could he be missed? "Where am I going, Sir?"

"For a blood test. If you test negative, then this conversation never happened."

Then the admiral's finger poked at the air between them, perhaps afraid to land on Jack's chest. "But if you test HIV-positive, Lieutenant Commander, then you are out of the Pentagon, out of Intelligence and out of the Navy!"

* * * * *

Jack had some misgivings about the test, only because he did not know what kind of torture Martin had endured and if it had involved dirty needles or rape. But Jack tested clean.

The admiral was more than happy to put Jack's personal life completely out of mind.

* * * * *

Martin discovered that his team was watching him even more closely than he'd thought.

Ann Jefferson had pictures. She presented them to Martin in the conference room with an attitude that said she had the goods on him now.

Martin felt his face go hot and cold. He was really out now.

He kept his expression slightly bored, mildly curious. The angle was through the window of the townhouse.

Martin tried to sound nonchalant. "Who you going to show these to, Annie? Dicks dot com?"

He forced himself to appear as calm as he possibly could upon seeing himself tied to the bed, with Jack unmistakably deep inside him. Part of him was utterly mortified and embarrassed to death. While another part marveled, *That is a magnificent man*. In one photo his own cock was right up there between them.

"This is what we call 'private'." Martin said.

"You have no private life," said Special Agent Ann Jefferson.

"Well, not *now*." The pictures revealed everything. "Here, give 'em to Hunter, in case he gets cold and lonely."

Martin tossed a couple pictures to Larry Hunter, who was just walking in. It was a brisk toss, so no one could see Martin's hands shaking.

It took a moment for Hunter to focus on what he had. When he did, he dropped the pictures as if they were coated with anthrax. "Shit!" He couldn't get away from them fast enough. As if something in them would come off on his hands.

Moo Park came in. His curious look turned to utter horror. "Oh my God, Martin, they tortured you!"

"That's not torture, Moo. That's what wild blindingly good sex looks like," said Martin, wishing his face were not radiating like a furnace. The blazing red color he felt was ruining his I-don't-give-a-shit act.

Ann Jefferson asked, "What if your *friend* asked you to do something against your country, Martin?"

"That's one of the things I love about him. I know he would not do that. Annie, what are you going to do with these?"

She looked like she was not sure now. She had not expected Martin's reaction. She answered brusquely, "Turn them over to Internal Affairs, of course."

"I'm sure these aren't the kind of affairs they're looking for."

Executive Assistant Director Cobb came into the room. He regarded his four agents as if they were a bunch of squabbling children. "What are you all at now?"

He glanced at the photos spread on the table. He pulled back in disgust. "Get those out of here! I am running an intelligence department, not a smut tabloid! And I don't want to see these in anyone's file either!" He stormed out.

Indignant, Ann Jefferson gathered the photos up from the table. From a distance, Hunter turned his head sideways curiously for a last look.

Martin reached. "Wait, I want that one."

The photo clearly showed Jack's face caught in the moment of rapturous climax.

* * * * *

Martin rode the Metro home, his thoughts all circling around Jack.

Want him. Want him. Want him. Yet Martin could not help the irrational panic that welled up and took over every time he got too close, spurring him to run from everything he wanted.

He loved Jack. Loved everything about him. That smile. The proud and easy set of his shoulders. The sparkle in his eyes. His joy of being. His complete certainty in just being Jack. Martin ought to be able to go down on that man.

He loved feeling him inside. The man filled him with astonished wonder. Gave him those moments in which time stopped, ceased to exist, and his body became incandescent.

He relived Jack's sliding into him with passion and need. *Oh, my love!*

And out. *Oh, come back! Come back!*

And in, with a long luxurious stroke. *Come in, in!*

And out. *Please don't go!*

In, with a blossom of wet fire. *Oh my God.*

He relived the fire spreading through his body to the tips of his eyelashes, the tip of his cock, his whole body consumed in a divine lightning strike.

The hell of it was he had to get tied up or drunk to get there.

He could not so much as kiss the part of his lover's body that gave such pleasure.

Jack's cock was beautiful and daunting. Drawing near to it, Martin's nostrils quivered at his intoxicating male smell—dark, musky, and dangerous. It was intensely exciting, erotic and forbidden.

But get too close to taking it inside his mouth and something reared up inside him.

Martin had thought he was handling it.

His mind was handling it. His body had other plans. His body was scared to death. Come too close and his heartbeat quickened, beating so hard he felt his pulse hammer in his fingertips. A weird vibration filled him like poison. His body mutinied. A wave of nausea swept over him. He would have been sick but Jack never pushed a heartbeat beyond the word "Stop".

Martin should never, ever need to say that word.

What the hell is wrong with me?

* * * * *

Larry Hunter came in to work smug and swaggering. He gathered his department together and announced before Ann Jefferson, Moo Park and Martin Winter, "Checked your story, Winter. You weren't in any prison in Guatemala. I checked *all* of them. There is no record of you." Triumphant, Hunter let fall a stack of supporting documents onto the conference room table.

Even Ann Jefferson looked a little embarrassed by this pronouncement.

Martin said, "Do you want to explain it to him, Annie, or should I?"

Ann Jefferson touched her hand to her head as if it suddenly ached. She spoke, pained, "Go ahead, Martin."

Martin went ahead, "Hunter, how can you be so intentionally dumb?"

"Excuse me?"

"I was not arrested by the Guatemalan authorities," Martin told Hunter. "I was kidnapped by Colombian drug runners. Now, to the best of my knowledge, the Guatemalan government does not lease out prison space to foreign drug lords. I was confined in a private, sub-legal, drug-built, drug-run hellhole in the jungle that exists outside of Guatemalan law and keeps no records whatsoever. Questions?"

After a long embarrassed silence, Moo Park asked, "Did anyone order donuts for this meeting?"

* * * * *

Martin confided in Jack the nature of the case under investigation without giving him any details or specific data.

"Those men kidnapped me because they thought I knew the name of the traitor who is extorting money from them—the man or woman they call El Gusano. As long as they thought I knew his identity, they kept me alive, because they want to know who El Gusano is so they can kill him. And El Gusano needs to know how much I know so he or she can kill all my contacts. I told you I was dangerous to know, Jack."

"The Gulf was dangerous," Jack countered, unfazed.

Martin continued, "The traitor calls himself the Snake. But the Colombians call him El Gusano."

"Is *gusano* Spanish for snake?"

"No, it's Spanish for worm. I don't know if El Gusano knows that or if he knows how much his paymasters despise him. I heard them talking about him from my cell. It wasn't really a cell. It was a dirt hole with bars.

"The cartel pays millions of dollars to El Gusano. They don't know who he is, because the payments go to a numbered account in the Caymans. My captors talked like they're making him bend down to pick pennies out of the dirt. They laugh at him. To them, the payout is just an annoying little business expense to keep the vermin from biting their ankles."

"A million dollars is pennies?" Jack said.

"Millions, Jack. You have to pronounce the s. Millions."

"Hell, Hanssen sold out for pennies on the dollar."

Hanssen was the Bureau's most infamous traitor to date.

"Hanssen is a sorry little dick," said Martin. "And that just makes El Gusano a higher-priced whore. Actually I should say that El Gusano is the pimp. The real whore is in Congress. There is a congressman who is getting a *billion* dollars to clear the path for drugs coming into this country. You just can't imagine the size of these operations."

"I guess I can't," said Jack, aghast. He asked carefully, not wanting to seek more than Martin could give him, "Can I ask which congressman?"

"Don't know. We only even know about the congressman from the drug lords complaining about the 'import tax' they have to pay to Uncle."

"You gotta know I uncovered this whole can of worms backward. I found evidence that someone in U.S. law enforcement was on the track of a congressman's dirty dealings but instead of placing the congressman under arrest, this law enforcement officer started skimming a piece of the action."

"El Gusano," said Jack.

Martin nodded. "That's what they call him."

"Millions of dollars?" Jack pronounced the *s* this time. "That's a hell of a number to call *skim*."

"There are a hell of a lot of drugs moving across our border. And a lot of people who want El Gusano dead. Including me. In fact, when I find out who it is, I will be tempted to let my 'friends' in Guatemala know so they can do something cruel and unusual to him rather than just have our guys arrest him. Jack, you look like you want to ask me something sensitive. I may not answer but you can ask."

"I was wondering who put you on the case." That person would be Jack's first suspect.

"I was the one who found the evidence of the existence of El Gusano, so I brought it to the executive assistant director. Cobb put me on it but it was already my case. It would only be questionable if he gave it to someone else." So much for that lead.

Martin hesitated, as if considering how much to reveal.

He decided to continue, "At first, I thought our law enforcement breach had to be in the DEA. Now I think someone just wanted me to look in that direction. The real traitor is much, much closer to home."

Jack felt a dread chill lift the hairs behind his neck. "How close?"

"I've known for some time that it's someone in the FBI. And now I know—" He stopped as if afraid to say it aloud. He started over. "And now I know it's someone in my own department."

"Martin! My God."

"That is what makes my return so volatile. El Gusano needs to discredit me before I identify him."

Jack was horrified. "Martin, I'm going to repeat an offer I made to you a while ago—can I rip someone's throat out for you?"

Martin gave a sad smile. "I appreciate the offer."

"Well, if it's someone in your department, who do you think?"

"None of them!" Martin threw up his hands. "They all piss me off but I just don't see any of them doing this. If you just weigh the evidence, I would suspect *me* before anyone else. Then you in second place."

"I'm not in your department."

"Oh, but I'm your patsy, according to Moo Park."

"Try a different tack," Jack suggested. "Who looks *least* suspicious?"

Martin shook his head. "Moo Park pretends to be my buddy. But he hasn't done anything for me to back that up."

"Larry Hunter is a bumbling dick. Maybe his mistakes are all an act but I just don't see him having the attention to detail to pull off a scheme this perfectly put together."

"Ann Jefferson is on the offensive. I guess that's how I would play it if I were a traitorous sack of shit. But this is all speculation based on vapor, and I'm not like them. I don't make conclusions without something like a fact to prop it up."

"I'm here for you, Martin. If there's anything you want me to do."

"I need to pretend I'm getting close," said Martin. "I need to force El Gusano to make a move."

"Watch your ass, Martin."

"You too, Jack."

Jack assured him, "You don't have to tell me to watch your ass."

* * * * *

The blank spots in Martin's memory began to fill in.

"The bad news is it's nothing useful," Martin told Jack in the evening over coffee. "I thought I was going to have this big revelation that was going to crack the case and solve everything. What I remember are things I can't tell anyone."

"Anything you can tell me?" Jack asked.

"Yeah. Let's walk."

They got their coats and ventured out into the cold.

Christmas lights were already going up here and there along the street.

Martin held Jack's arm as they walked.

"Ann Jefferson keeps badgering me to explain how I got away." Martin glanced up at the moon. "I remember my escape."

There were two kinds of shooters in the world – those who practiced on a firing range and those who hunted.

In eluding men with guns, you had better luck against the range shooter. Range shooters were not accustomed to dealing with moving targets. Angling off was an art that did not come naturally to most people. A moving target required the shooter to aim ahead of it.

Duck or pheasant hunters had practice angling off but they were also accustomed to their prey being airborne and moving in a straight line, not zigging and dodging.

When you've got a backwoods rabbit hunter gunning for you, you're pretty well screwed.

"From my dirt hole, I could hear some of these clowns shooting skeet to pass the time," Martin said. "They had a lot of time on their hands. They got pretty good at it. I could hear the skeet breaking apart."

Then the day came when Martin's captors were mortally tired of him, tired of the jungle, tired of shooting skeet.

They dragged him out of his underground den, shoved him into an open field and told him to run, Bambi, run.

All his nerves sparked and quavered. Martin presented his back to the shooters. He held his arms out to his sides and walked slowly into the field.

He was not a fun target. They jeered. He was boring them.

He tried to keep his hands from shaking. His back tingled. His knees threatened to buckle under him. Any moment he would feel the shot.

He heard the gun crack. His body went rigid. A bullet ripped the air over his head. He heard the passing bullet zing.

His tormentors shouted, "Move!"

He had walked into the thigh-high grass by now. He heard a gun cock, a muttered curse. The next shot would be for the kill.

Martin dropped into the grass.

He became a wolf, shimmied out of his clothes like a snake leaving its old skin and slinked low to the ground through the tall grass.

Behind him, bullets ripped into his abandoned clothing.

The men came running toward his clothes to collect their kill.

Martin changed direction and broke into an all-out run toward the jungle.

The men found Martin's clothes, empty. They stomped on them, as if making sure no one was really in them, which made no sense but Martin never could make sense of the actions of men who peddled poison. The men cast about on the ground.

They found the direction of the disturbed grasses. One spied a movement, pointed and yelled, "Coyote!"

Martin's head ducked on reflex at the gun crack. The bullet stabbed the ground near him, spraying up dirt, spattering Martin's silver fur. Sounds of cursing reached him from a quickly increasing distance as Martin ran.

"Forget the damned coyote!" someone snarled. "Get the FBI man!"

The "coyote" melted into the jungle.

Martin heard their singsong voices behind him diminishing in the distance, urging him to come out and play.

They claimed they were only just playing. They told him he would die in the jungle.

Had he been just a man, he probably would have died out there, which was why the FBI had trouble believing that Martin escaped without help.

Martin could not tell the full truth to the FBI. He didn't even try to tell them that his captors had mistaken him for a coyote.

"And I remember what they did to me while I was in captivity," Martin said, his voice a faint rasp. "Lots of things. Nothing I really want to tell anyone."

He leaned his head against Jack's arm as they walked, the navy wool of Jack's coat rough against his cheek. He knew there was a strange look on his face. His eyes were wide and glassy, his gaze inward.

Tasted metal. Gagging. Could not breathe. Choking. The light fading. Thought he was dead.

Martin abruptly pulled out of the memory like a fighter jet out of a fatal dive. He gasped. He could breathe.

His fists were clenched on Jack's coat sleeve.

Even to his own ears, his voice sounded distant and hollow. "They jammed a loaded gun in my mouth..."

Chapter Ten

Jack picked up Martin after work to take him shopping for a new car. Martin found a couple possibilities but walked away to see what kind of offers the dealers would call him with later.

On the way home, a news item on the radio caught Martin's attention.

There had been a shooting at a Metro stop. Martin only caught part of the story, so he turned on the television at eleven o'clock to get some details on the local news.

A quick camera shot showed a slender figure in a dark green trench coat sprawled in a pool of blood on the eastbound platform of the Metro. The face was young, early twenties, male, clean-shaven. His hair was dark blond.

Martin stared, shaking. It was like looking at his own dead body.

The time of the shooting was 5:50 p.m.

The place was Martin's Metro stop.

That had been Martin's train.

If Jack had not picked him up after work, Martin would have got off that train at the same time as this young man.

The reporter said there was no apparent motive. She gave the victim's name and his age, which was two years younger than Martin. The victim had been an office worker with no criminal record. The killing seemed utterly senseless and random.

A photo of the victim's face, taken while still living, showed only the most superficial resemblance to Martin. But taken together with the green trench coat – which was identical – his height, his slenderness, the place and the time, it was enough for a stranger taking aim through a telescopic sight to make a mistake.

Martin turned off the TV. He sat very still, staring at the blank screen. "Jack, am I being paranoid?"

Jack looked grim. "No."

Martin flipped open his cell phone.

Cobb's voice, very low, sounded surprised and not happy to hear from him.

"Martin! What is this? Are you still at work?"

"No, sir."

"Just what time zone do you think you're in?" Cobb scolded in a low rasp.

Martin told Executive Assistant Director Cobb what he had seen on the news.

"And the police were there?" Cobb nearly whispered. "So what makes a local shooting a Federal case?"

"The vic was built like me, his hair is like mine, he was wearing my coat, he was on my train and he got shot at my stop!"

"You were there?"

"No. I saw it on the news. I was supposed to be there. I didn't take the train today. I just walked over my own grave. That was supposed to be me."

"What do you want, Martin?" Cobb said, low.

A chill whispered up Martin's neck. "Sir, you don't sound like you can talk freely."

Cobb hissed, "I am on babysitting duty! I'm trying not to wake up my granddaughter. Hold on. I'm going to another room."

Martin shut his eyes. He hoped he was not crying wolf. It was closing on midnight, and Martin was calling the man at his home while he was watching a grandbaby.

"Okay," said Cobb, returning to the phone.

"Sir, I want us to take jurisdiction of the case. I know it looks like a police matter but I think it was supposed to have been an attack on a Federal agent. Me."

"Yes," said Cobb, not arguing.

Martin blinked, taken up short. "You believe me?"

"I told you, you have earned your paranoia, Martin."

Martin felt his body relax. Everything was going to be okay. The matter was in competent hands now. He told Cobb, "And I don't want Ann Jefferson, Larry Hunter or Moo Park on it."

"Very well. But Martin, since you think you were the intended victim, you aren't getting this case either," Cobb warned. "As soon as we get off the phone, I will call the police and inform them that the FBI is taking jurisdiction. Did you get the precinct or the name of the detective in charge?"

"No, sir. It wasn't on the news."

"I'll find it."

"Don't tell the others—"

"Martin, I am not a rookie."

"Yes, sir."

"And, Martin, don't come in to work tomorrow. I would like to see what kind of reactions your absence might cause."

"Yes, sir. And maybe you could show the picture of the victim to the three blind mice and see who squeaks," Martin suggested.

"Where will you be tomorrow?"

"I don't know," said Martin. He hadn't thought that far ahead. "Somewhere different. Call my cell phone. I can tell you I definitely won't be at the Metro and I won't be at Jack's place."

Martin could hear the thin voice of a little baby crying in the background.

Cobb's crumbly voice mumbled, "I am too old for this."

* * * * *

Jack and Martin left the townhouse and went to Jack's cabin—the last place Martin ever wanted to lead his enemies. The place was their sanctuary.

"You're safe here," said Jack.

"How can you be sure?" Martin asked.

This was Jack's ground.

"If they come for you here," said Jack, "I will kill them."

* * * * *

A text message appeared on Martin's cell phone. It was from Ann Jefferson, summoning Martin to headquarters at 9:00 p.m., well after normal work hours. Jack's head lifted suddenly, his face guarded. A lock of dark hair fell across his serious brow but he did not move it away from his eyes. He did not move at all, like a wild creature at the sound of a snapping twig. "That's a blatant trap," said Jack. His open collar allowed a glimpse of his pulse leaping at the base of his throat. "You won't be able to take your gun inside the building." After hours, Martin would need to sign in, walk through a metal detector and get buzzed through the inner doors. Keycards did not work after hours. "Don't go," said Jack. The words came out like an order. But Martin was already un-tucking his gun from his belt at his back. He set the heavy metal piece on Jack's breakfast table, a dangerous calm about him. "It's a blatant trap," said Martin, determined, a steel resolve fixed underneath his fragility. "I have to go." He was nobody's prey. A wolf was a predator.

* * * * *

Martin took the set of stairs at the farthest corner of the building up to the third floor, so he could approach Ann Jefferson's office in the opposite direction from which she would expect him.

On the landing, he pressed his ear to the door of the stairwell.

Hearing no one, he silently let himself into the hallway.

At the end of the hall, fluorescent lights threw a shadow onto the floor—of someone just around the corner.

Someone was waiting by the elevators.

Martin moved up the corridor with silent tread. At the corner, he flattened his back to the wall, listening.

He heard slow steps on the carpet, back and forth, pacing in front of the bank of elevators.

There came the soft tone of an elevator arriving. The sliding open of doors.

The sliding closed.

No one had got on. The watcher was still there. Pacing.

Martin waited for the pacing steps to make their turn in the direction away from him. Then he quickly peered 'round the corner to see the watcher's back.

"Executive Assistant Director Cobb!" Martin whispered, startled.

Cobb turned. He tilted his grizzled head in mild surprise. "Martin. What are you doing here?"

"Why are *you* here?" Martin shot back.

The executive assistant director was not accustomed to such disrespect but Cobb answered without rebuke. "I received a very peculiar message this evening. Text." He shook his head wearily. "I should not have to do text at my age. It told me not to come here. So of course," he shrugged, "I came. Was that message from you, Martin? What are you doing?"

Martin's thoughts whirled. Ann Jefferson had told Cobb to stay away. But she had to know that would only make Cobb come. She was bringing the executive assistant director into this trap. As witness to what? This was a much more

elaborate snare than he was ready for. Fear crept into his inner stillness. He had no idea what she intended.

"Sir, I know who the traitor is. It's Ann Jefferson. She's the one who arranged the hit on me. She's the one taking money from the drug cartel."

Cobb's thick brows drew together. All the lines in his face became deep fissures with his frown. "That is a very grave charge, Martin. Very grave. And frankly unbelievable."

"Ann knows what time I leave work. She knows what train I take. She knows what coat I wear. She knows I get off at the stop nearest to Jack's townhouse." Martin had always loved the steady older man because you could trust Frederick Cobb to trust his own but that trust was not serving him here. Ann Jefferson was going to take out both of them with one snare.

"There are other people who could know that," said Cobb.

Martin begged, "Sir! Listen! Why would Jefferson summon me here? Now?"

"I—I have no idea. She doesn't trust you, of course. I don't know why this couldn't be handled during work hours."

"And why did she tell you to stay away?"

"Well, that—that cannot be Special Agent Jefferson's doing. This is all ridiculous. I can't have my agents backbiting each other like this. This has got to stop. If she's here, let's go see her together and talk to her. This way."

Those simple words suddenly rang hollow.

This way.

Unnecessary words. Martin knew the way to Ann Jefferson's office. Cobb was more rattled than he let on.

The lights were on within Ann's office but Ann was not visible at her desk.

"I don't see her," said Cobb, looking through the long narrow window which flanked one side of the door.

Cobb tried the knob. It was unlocked. He pulled the door open for Martin to go in first.

And Martin became keenly aware of something he had been trying to ignore.

Martin's wolf-heightened senses caught the scent of danger. What danger smells like. It smells wrong. Hyper-aware now, he picked up the same things a lie detector reads. Cobb's heightened blood pressure made his heartbeat loud to Martin's wolf keen ears. His heart was beating loud and too fast. His body heat was elevated. There was an acrid scent of sweat under his mild façade. His breathing sounded unnatural—too shallow, too careful. And there was an indefinable brittleness in the air.

To Martin's heightened senses, the buzzing of fluorescent lights sounded thunderous, the hard glare nearly blinding.

Oh shit.

Martin tried to mask any outward signs of his own leap into fear. He knew the color had left his face.

How could Cobb be doing this? Of all people.

Martin heard the door shut behind him. It sounded like the shutting of a coffin from the inside.

Martin moved toward the row of file cabinets which stood opposite Ann's desk. He was trying to angle himself a path toward the door.

When he turned 'round, Cobb had a gun drawn and leveled at him.

Martin immediately turned his back again to give Cobb no excusable target.

A shot in the front could easily be called self-defense, but if Cobb shot him in the back there would be too many questions.

Cobb was keeping his distance, aware that he did not have the reflexes of the much-younger man. He spoke evenly but Martin detected false reassurance underneath the words, "Martin, I am not going to kill you unless you force me. I can have you on a boat to Colombia tonight."

Martin would not turn around. He tried to figure out where Cobb wanted to maneuver him. There had to be some damning position Cobb needed him to be in before he could take his shot.

"Ah!" Cobb made a warning sound as Martin edged toward the door. Martin peered over his shoulder to see Cobb motioning with the barrel for him to stay away from there.

Martin moved toward the corner where the metal file cabinets ended. There was a space between the end cabinet and the wall into which a very slender man might fit.

Cobb strode forward several paces to keep Martin in his sights.

Martin peered back over his shoulder again, meeting Cobb's eyes.

Martin glanced to something beyond Cobb, then returned his gaze instantly to Cobb's face.

Cobb noticed the glance. He would not fall for it. He sounded tired. "Is that supposed to make me turn around? I know for a fact that Ann is not here this evening. And she is certainly not hiding behind the desk. I'm not going to look."

Martin's eyes widened briefly. He damn near laughed. "Good!"

Cobb heard the low growl, very close behind him.

He glanced backward despite himself.

White teeth gaped brightly ferocious in a black wolfen face. Wolf lips snarled. The eyes blazed a ravenous gleam. A guttural roaring grew out of the animal's throat.

Eyes on the animal, Cobb still sensed motion from Martin's direction and he fired his gun toward him, then immediately swung the gun 'round toward the black wolf.

The black wolf dodged sideways of Cobb's second shot, which buried itself in the floor.

The two gun cracks blunted the ears. Still, Cobb could hear the strange animal sounds behind him, even though the wolf was right in front of him. The sounds were like animal claws on linoleum. Cobb sprinted toward a wall to get both targets on one side of him and he tried to get a bead on the black wolf, which danced and weaved like a boxer as it snapped at his hand.

Cobb heard a shriek of pain. His.

Teeth buried into Cobb's gun wrist.

Not the black wolf's teeth.

Cobb curled around the stabbing pain in his gun hand. The eyes of a silver wolf glared up at him from the vortex of pain. A silver wolf with topaz eyes like Martin's.

The silver wolf clamped its jaws down harder.

Pain lancing up Cobb's arm froze the air in his lungs, shot up to his brain, filled it as if his head would explode.

He lost strength in his legs and crumpled heavily. He felt a duller pain in his skull where his head struck the floor. He rolled onto his back, gulping for air.

The air felt squeezed from his lungs. The face of a black wolf filled his vision. The black wolf was standing on his chest. It was heavy. Its hot breath blasted his face. Its teeth were huge and close.

Dropping in a heap like a dog, the black wolf lay down on him, pushing the air from Cobb's lungs. It lay there, nose to nose with him.

The pain in his hand had subsided from a stabbing pierce to an agonizing ache.

The silver wolf had let go. The gun slid out of Cobb's hand.

Cobb turned his swimming head aside to get the wolf breath out of his nostrils.

Cobb's blurry vision tried to focus, tried to find the silver wolf, tried to find Martin.

Martin's clothes lay in a pile as if Martin had melted in place. A bullet hole pocked the wall behind where Martin had been standing.

Cobb heard Martin from somewhere, moving about. It wasn't the clicking of animal claws. This sounded like a barefoot tread.

And there was Martin, naked, crouched at the pile of clothes. He had kicked the gun away somewhere and was putting his clothes back on.

Cobb tried to move. The black wolf's mouth closed on his chin with a low purring growl as if it might tear his chin off his face.

Martin stood up, dressed. He walked to the gun and put his foot on it.

"Kay," said Martin.

Apparently he was speaking to the black wolf, because the beast let go of Cobb's face and jumped off his chest with the pushing of heavy paws.

Cobb tried to sit up. A lance of pain jetted up his arm from his bitten, broken wrist.

The black wolf trotted behind the desk.

Gunshots fired within FBI headquarters never went long without security arriving at a run to investigate. Cobb could hear them in the corridor, slowing their approach to take positions flanking the door.

Martin held his arms up and out to his sides, his hands open as the guards first peered then burst in. The guards fanned out, guns on Martin, guns on Cobb.

Martin gave the pistol a push with his foot across the floor toward one of the guards. "You're going to want to check the fingerprints on that."

"Thank God you're here! They attacked me!" Cobb cried. "I had to defend myself." He held out his bloody hand. "Wolf! There's a wolf behind the desk!"

Unsure who was who, the guards kept their guns leveled at everyone in sight – at Martin, at Cobb and now toward whoever was rustling behind the desk.

"You!" one called. "Come out of there! Hands where I can see them!"

"Watch out! It's a wolf!" Cobb cried.

What stood up from behind the desk, hands up, was a tall handsome man in the uniform of a lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy.

Jack. Jack Reed.

The guards quickly figured out who was the dangerous party here. They let Jack and Martin lower their hands. They were confident that the only prints they would find on the gun would be Cobb's.

Executive Assistant Director Cobb gabbled like a lunatic as he was taken away in handcuffs.

"They're wolfmen! They turned into wolves," Cobb told anyone who would listen. "Both of them. That one silver, that one black."

The eyes of the arresting officers involuntarily turned back toward the accused, as if Jack and Martin could possibly have something to say in answer to an allegation that weird. "A silver wolf and a black wolf?"

Jack said, deadpan, "I want to be the silver one."

Martin shot Jack a sour glance. He crossed his arms and said blandly, "I'm the silver one. The executive assistant director said so. Pay attention, Jack."

* * * * *

Ann Jefferson arrived on the scene, dismayed to find bullet holes in her office. She turned to Martin Winter.

"I was told—" She stopped. This was going to sound stupid. "I was told that Executive Assistant Director Cobb says you're a werewolf. Anything to say about that?"

Martin glowered at her. "It's true, of course. You'll see at the next full moon."

Ann Jefferson nodded out the window at moon, a bright round wafer with an icy ring around it. "The moon *is* full, Special Agent Winter."

"Well then, my mistake."

Jack Reed offered unconvincingly, "Grr?"

Ann held her arms tightly crossed, her fingers drumming on her upper arm. She was accustomed to suspecting everyone until she knew the truth. Here she was fast becoming aware that she had been hunting the wrong man. She said at last, "I think our drug dealers' helper has been dipping into the product."

And even though it choked her to say so, she tried to force out the words, "Well, Martin." She could not go through with an outright apology. Could only say, "Damn."

"It's okay, Annie," said Martin. "I thought it was *you*."

"That's fair," said Ann.

"Are we cool?"

She spoke, tight-lipped, as close to mushy as Ann Jefferson ever got. "Yeah. We're okay."

"Well, if this doesn't beat all." Moo Park arrived. He rubbed his scalp and wagged his head. "Cobb. Cobb."

Someone said, "It appears Frederick Cobb was having himself a little midlife crisis."

"Midlife?" said Ann. "How many one-hundred-and-fifteen-year-old men do you know?"

"Point is, Cobb reached an age where maybe he looked back, added up the accomplishments of his life, then looked over at the accomplishments of the bad guys—the men who live in palaces, drive fast cars, fast jets, fast boats. They throw around billions of dollars on whatever they want and they don't need to beg any budget committee for approval of every dime. And maybe our Cobb finally asked that age-old question 'What's in it for *me*? And what kind of pension do I get out of public service and laying my life on the line all these years?'"

Martin gave a reluctant sideways nod. He murmured, "What's your gold watch look like?" He remembered the tiny voice of a baby granddaughter crying. Could that explain the level of greed? The depth of betrayal?

Ann Jefferson put her hand over the American flag pin she wore in her lapel, as if pledging allegiance. She answered absolutely, a low tremor in her voice, "There is no price."

Chapter Eleven

Steam billowed wet heat around Jack and Martin in the shower. The misty clouds diffused the light and created a world apart where only the two of them existed. Their hands were on each other, feeling the muscular contours of each other, savoring steel hardness under slick skin.

Martin crouched down before Jack, his hands caging Jack's hips.

Jack shivered. Warm water spilled down his body as Martin's hot tongue ran up the length of his shaft. Jack's hands held Martin's head. His fingers laced in Martin's wet hair.

Jack looked down at Martin's full lips kissing his aching need. He held his breath in wonder, anticipation and fervent desire.

Then miraculous heat surrounded him—Martin's lips, Martin's tongue, Martin's sweet soft mouth enfolded and caressed his stiff cock. The hazy mist around them became incandescent.

Martin rose suddenly, sputtering. "I can't do this."

Startled from a scintillating dream, Jack put a hand under Martin's elbow to help him stand up. "You don't have to, sweetheart—" Jack started gently. He was touched that Martin would even try.

"I mean I *can't* do this!" Martin blinked water from his eyes. "I can't breathe like that!"

Jack laughed out loud. Martin was snarling, "How does anyone ever do that? How is this supposed to be sexy getting water up your nose! And if you're not under the shower, what's the point of doing it in the shower? Stop laughing at me, Dog."

Jack drew Martin back to him under the water spray, and pressed Martin's body to his own, laughing, kissing his hair. "Seemed like a good idea at the time."

They towed off, moved to the bedroom and rolled onto the bed, their limbs entwined.

Martin writhed in delicious torment, feeling another man's body touch his—*this* man's body—to touch and touch again, everywhere. Jack's kisses on his neck made him tingle with mounting fire. Jack's strong hands on his cock thrilled him past bearing.

Jack crouched over him, pushed Martin's legs apart with his knees. His hands cupped Martin's hard tight buttocks, lifting. There was no more vulnerable position than this, to have a strong man between your thighs, his cock poised to penetrate.

Jack hesitated, as if expecting Martin to cry no. He didn't.

"Please!" Martin cried.

With slow care, Jack pushed. Martin clutched at his Jack's thighs, guiding him onward.

A searing moment grasped his very existence, burning and ecstatic. He gasped and blinked in profound wonder to feel Jack inside him.

Jack's deep dark gaze reflected warring sensations as he searched Martin's eyes and kept his hips agonizingly still. Jack breathed, "Am I hurting you?"

Martin moaned no. He tilted his hips forward to take him farther within.

Jack's eyes shut, rapture washing over his strong features.

He withdrew and thrust again.

Martin rocked under him, welcoming the smooth invasion of hard, hard flesh, glorying in their oneness. Deep moans of inexpressible joy rose from the depth of his being. He moved with Jack, to feel every inch his hard shaft of desire again and again. There were no words for what he felt. He could only groan and beg for more.

His hands roamed the breadth of Jack's powerful shoulders, adoring his magnificent body. His legs embraced Jack's sides sliding between his thighs. Martin reached down behind Jack's iron thighs and pulled him on.

Jack's head bowed against Martin's shoulder as if praying. A growl resonated deep within his broad chest rising to an animal roar.

A splash of hot wetness blossomed inside.

And that sudden heat pushed Martin over the brink of ecstasy. A lightning blaze rent his heaven, blinding bright, shimmering, unbearably beautiful.

Jack's hand closed on Martin's pulsing cock and sent him higher still in a perfect joining of bodies and souls. Martin felt radiant, his flesh ablaze. The heated glow filled him, spread to his very eyelashes in soul-crashing climax. "Jack!"

His hips convulsed with a needful thrust.

He released a cry that was both surrender and conquest.

The throbbing release was both seething fire and quenching rain. It went on and on.

Passion's fires gentled into hypnotic serenity like the ebb of an ocean tide from the beach into a lovely sunset. He had never felt so spent and so filled, so complete, the blood in his veins singing.

Martin floated upon a cloud of elation, holding Jack, enjoying the weight of him, running his hands over the damp skin of his back, tracing the hard muscles that rose and fell with Jack's deep, slowing breaths.

Jack's shoulders shifted. Jack propped himself on his elbows to hover over Martin, searching his face. There was such a quality of gentleness in Jack's dark eyes that Martin had never seen. Jack's hands cradled Martin's head as if he were precious, his shoulders hunched protectively.

His thumbs brushed wetness from Martin's face. Martin hadn't realized he'd been crying. Jack kissed his tears.

They lay together in a tangle of damp limbs in a shaft of moonlight that fell through the parted curtains. Their heartbeats slowed to a deep gentle tattoo.

As the fervor subsided into adoration, Jack drew the sheet around Martin and surrounded him with his warmth and strength, as if he could gather the moonlight around them.

Jack's muscular arm made a hard cushion under Martin's head. Martin nestled closer to find a more comfortable resting place for his cheek on Jack's chest. He toyed with the stiff curls that tickled his nose, and listened to the strong beating

of Jack's heart. He heard Jack's deep voice reverberate within his chest as Jack asked, "How do you feel?"

How did he feel? Shining, whole, safe, blissful—there had to be some word higher, more alive. There was no word to express everything he felt.

Or was there?

"I feel...in love," said Martin. "And I want to feel this way forever."

"I swear I will do everything in my power to keep you in love with me for as long as I breathe," said Jack. "Don't leave me again."

"Never," said Martin.

A cold winter wind moaned through the treetops outside. The night never felt so warm and light. Martin mumbled sleepily against Jack's chest, "Do you think there are any others? Wolves? Like us?"

Jack shook his head on the pillow. "Don't know. Don't need to know anymore. I don't need others. You are all I need in this or any world."

He put both arms around Martin to hold him closer. He kissed his hair.

They were home and whole now, two wild hearts beating in an ancient rhythm, together, for all the rest of their tomorrows.

The End

About the Author

Jez Morrow is a Scorpio with Scorpio rising. The eyes are gray. The hair is blonde at the moment. Rather than the traditional cat, her writing familiar is a large black dog. She is published internationally under several names.

Jez is married to her true love, a combat veteran. (She has a thing for a military man.) Jez and her husband (and the dog) currently live in Ohio, but their hearts are in the Smoky Mountains.

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