

BELINDA McBRIDE

BLACK

LAST CALL: EUROPE

WOLF

Changeling Press

Last Call Europe: Black Wolf

Belinda McBride

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ISBN: 978-1-60521-526-6

Formats Available:

HTML, Adobe PDF, EPub

MobiPocket, Microsoft Reader

Publisher:

Changeling Press LLC

PO Box 1046

Martinsburg, WV 25402-1046

www.ChangelingPress.com

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Cover Artist: Bryan Keller

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Last Call Europe: Black Wolf

Belinda McBride

The chase is on, but who is the hunter, and who is the prey?

Siberians live for the thrill of the chase; wolves exist for the joy of the capture. On a foolish dare, Jasper O' Shea takes a gamble at Last Call, letting fate choose his lover for the night.

Detective Brutus "Brutal" Ballantine came to Last Call looking for something far different than a sly clever Siberian Husky. Yet when the call comes over the sound system, he finds himself unable to resist the lure of laughing blue eyes and a happy tail.

Chapter One

Black Wolf:

1/2 ounce Black Sambuca

1/2 ounce Green Chartreuse

4 drops of Tabasco

Add Sambuca first, follow with Green Chartreuse

Top with Tabasco. Serve in a shot glass.

Last Call Europe. It was the exclusive nightclub catering to the paranormal community on the eastern side of the Atlantic. Brutus “Brutal” Ballantine wound his way through the maze of tables scattered throughout the place, barely glancing at the Specialty Bar as he spotted an empty table in a dimly lit corner. It was his third visit to the bar this week, and he wasn’t particularly fond of the habit he’d developed.

Like any club, it was loud, lively and fairly teeming with sexual potential. He sniffed, relieved not to catch the scent of any werewolf bitches in heat. He preferred men but when the girls came into heat, Brutal was just as likely to fall victim to a breeding frenzy as any other male. Tonight, a distraction like that could prove deadly.

He kicked a chair away from a small round table and didn’t bother slipping out of his leather jacket. He was here to watch, not to display himself. He leaned back, stretched out his legs and nodded when the waitress brought him his beer. Telepathic wait staff could be a very good thing.

He sipped and winced slightly at the bitter drink. Yeah, it was the real deal, but still a bit of an assault to his very American palate. Another sip had him accustomed to the stuff, and after a third, he was enjoying it.

The music battered his ears, but he quickly became accustomed to it and concentrated on watching the dancers over the edge of his glass: werewolves and vampire, elves and Fae, humans with extra gifts, and the odd creature that wasn’t quite

anything he'd ever seen before. What he was looking for wasn't here, even though he wasn't entirely certain what exactly it was he sought.

He sighed in frustration, glaring at a flirtatious young Fae. He honestly couldn't tell what gender the wickedly beautiful creature was. It didn't matter. He wasn't here to play.

His journey had started in Seattle, and he'd hopped from city to city, first down Interstate Five, through Oregon and California, straight down into Mexico. From there, the trail had led erratically through Central America and down to some of the glittering cities of Brazil. He'd island-hopped through the Caribbean, and then had flown to South Africa. Egypt had sent him to Athens and up into Eastern Europe. Taking an insane risk, Brutal had decided to overshoot his quarry, gambling on the chance he'd beat the killer to London, where he'd most certainly visit Last Call. This was his typical hunting ground, and Brutal intended to head him off.

He scrubbed at the bristle of his late-day beard and grimaced. By moving out ahead of the killer, he'd taken a huge chance. There was the distinct possibility the killer would strike in Paris or Berlin. There was also the chance he'd skip those cities and come straight here. That's what Brutal was banking on.

He was jolted from his reverie by a burst of laughter. The door to the bar had slammed open; bodies poured in from the foggy evening. He heard someone groan in dismay and looked at the table next to him.

"Damn huskies. And they're here in a pack." The stranger was speaking to his companion, but rolled his eyes when he caught Brutal's gaze. "Damn clowns, every one of them. Make sure your wallet's put away."

Brutal twisted in his chair, watching as several men and women flooded the room, some heading for the dance floor, others making their way to the bar. They carried with them an air of excitement and electricity, almost bringing a smile to his face.

Almost.

They were party animals. They shouted to one another over the music, and one young woman dragged a couple out of their chairs, pulling them to the dance floor with her. A dark-haired man did a series of flips before vaulting over Brutal's empty table.

He pushed his chair back and growled.

Most of them were striking in appearance, medium height and muscular. They were lithe and agile, with exotic faces and upturned eyes. They were almost as fae looking as the Fae! Most spoke in heavily accented English, sounding as though they were from Russia or Eastern Europe.

The majority had dark hair, black or dark brown. Through the throng, Brutal glimpsed coppery hair that looked like a flame amidst all the bodies. He saw a clownish smile and a mischievous face. The man was gone in a flash, only to reappear at the bar.

"Oy! First round's on the birthday boy!" The redhead reappeared with a tray burdened with pitchers and heavy glasses. He was followed by a laughing waitress who carried another pair of pitchers. Unlike the others, his accent spoke faintly of Irish origins. It certainly suited his appearance. They pushed tables together and a large bakery box dominated the center, surrounded by heavy pub glasses and pitchers.

Brutal's attention was caught by an angry roar. To his left, a female werewolf burst out of her chair, chasing a laughing young woman through the crowd.

"Damn you! Give that back!"

The young woman leapt easily to the top of Brutal's table, a purse dangling from her hand. "You mean this?" She held it up, dangling it by the straps.

In her fury, the wolf had started to shift. Her wild anger spread like fire, and Brutal felt a low growl erupt from his throat. Slowly, the husky on his table turned to look at him, her brilliant blue eyes large and startled.

"Oops."

She grinned and vaulted from the table, landing easily on another table. The race resumed, finally coming to an end when she dashed by the wolf, looping the edges of the purse over her head and planting a kiss on her cheek.

The crowd cheered, and even Brutal gave a reluctant chuckle.

"Lass needs a spankin'." The red-haired Siberian was at his table, leaning down with both hands planted on the surface. He had a brilliant smile that caused his eyes to crinkle at the corners. His bristly, punkish hair grew back from a widow's peak. Oddly, one eye was blue; the other looked as though amber swirled through the cerulean depths.

One of his front teeth was a hair shorter than the other, and his canines were short and sharp.

"I suppose we all do, coming in and wreaking havoc this way!"

Before Brutal absorbed the fact that he was suddenly aroused, the redhead was gone, darting after the woman, picking her up by the waist and carrying her to the dance floor. He caught glimpses of the man through the crowd of dancers, and momentarily wondered if anyone would notice his cock was hard and bulging at the front of his pants.

Briefly, he closed his eyes and scented the air, catching a wisp of the redhead's fragrance. It made him growl with need. He shoved his chair closer to the table, propping his jaw on his fists, and scanning the crowd for the man. Desire hit him nearly as hard as if there'd been a bitch in heat somewhere. Fortunately, he still had control of himself. He could still think and plan, and if necessary, he could still hunt.

He finished his ale and waited for the waitress to bring another. Brutal Ballantine was a hunter, and he'd be damned if some flirtatious *dog* would distract him from the kill.

* * *

Rowr!

Jasper O' Shea laughed and danced and never took his gaze from the enormous black wolf over in the corner. The man was hot and hard and much, much too dangerous for someone like Jasper. Still, he was an amazing creature, sitting there in all his surly magnificence.

Tasha grabbed his hand and dragged him off the floor. In moments, Jasper had a mug in one fist, a knife in the other and he was bent over an enormous cake. He

laughed as the pack sang a rowdy off-key version of "Happy Birthday." Drunk on laughter, he held his belly as the Russians mangled the lyrics. He blew out the single red candle and promptly cut the cake, watching as the confection landed on plates, in bare hands and inevitably, on the laps of innocent bystanders.

He grinned when Boris carried a plate to the angry looking wolf, presenting it with a flourish. He had to admit, the big guy looked good in his badness. His black hair was rough cut and too long, and his tawny eyes were narrowed, tracking the crowd, clearly searching... but distracted. When their gazes met, Jasper winked, knowing exactly what had the wolf distracted. When the wolf lifted his glass to Jasper, he threw back his head and laughed in delight.

Ah, but it was not meant to be. Wolves and dogs just didn't mix all that well. But still, he wouldn't mind a one-nighter with a beast like him.

Jasper finished portioning out the cake and licked a stray bit of frosting from his thumb, looking around the non-Siberian portion of the crowd. The old man had sent him out to scout, and thus far, no demons appeared to have put in an appearance at Last Call. That could be a good thing, but given the circumstances, it could also be a bad thing... very bad indeed.

He quickly fished his phone from his pocket and texted a message to his boss, giving him a head's up on the evening. If the demons weren't at Last Call, he didn't really want to contemplate where they might be. Thankfully, the old man had plenty of protection.

"Birthday kisses, my friend!"

Jasper was suddenly surrounded by heated bodies, both male and female. Kisses landed on his lips, face and neck. Jasper melted into the mass embrace, soaking up the scents of arousal and happiness. Soft breasts pressed into his chest, a hard cock rubbed against his ass. He laughed in happiness. He'd lived solo for a very long time. When the Siberians had begun to drift from Russia into London, his lifelong loneliness had evaporated as the pack had enfolded him, making him their own. Jasper had always

been a happy sort, but in recent years, he'd been on a continual high, fueled by friendship, community and a job he loved.

The old man had pulled him from a low level police position and tripled his wages, putting him to work as his nose and ears in places like Last Call. The arrangement had worked out well. He was always on the job, and he was certainly never bored, which was a big plus in Jasper's book.

So now his nose was telling him that while there were no demons abroad this night, there was a big black wolf with a hard cock and some great big secrets he was holding close.

Jasper worked the bar, chatting with the wait staff, and flirting with the vampire who was their chief of security. He served up a piece of cake to the DJ and generally made a pest of himself. He danced. He talked, and eventually gave himself a damned serious sugar buzz. All the while, the black wolf tracked his every move.

"Oy. You didn't eat your cake." He finally gave up the pretense and straddled a chair across the table from the wolf. He reached out, offering his hand. "Jasper O' Shea at your service."

The wolf shifted in his chair, letting his sensually cruel lip curl up in a slight sneer. Finally, he unfolded his arms to shake hands.

"Ballantine."

His hand was big, engulfing Jasper's in an iron hard grip.

"Ballantine, eh? Not local, by the sound of your voice. Yank?"

"From Seattle." The wolf took his hand away, and immediately, Jasper missed it. Since Ballantine hadn't eaten his cake, Jasper swiped a finger through the chocolate icing, licking it off with relish. He paused as the wolf glared at him.

"That's mine."

He shrugged. "You weren't eatin' it. Besides, there's more." He rose and started back toward the table where the cake rested. "You want more?"

"Fuck off, Rover."

Jasper paused and turned, staring back at the wolf with a raised brow. He grinned at the man. Finally, he threw back his head and laughed. "If you're trying to pick me up, that isn't the best line to use!" He shook his head and wandered off, sucking at the remnants of frosting on his finger. Just for the hell of it, he glanced over his shoulder at where the wolf sat fuming in anger.

If he'd been shifted, he'd have waved his tail at the wolf. Since he was human, all he could do was glance pointedly under the table. He scented the air, catching the rich scent of the wolf's arousal. He winked again and turned away, looking for someone else to bother.

Chapter Two

Brutal gripped the table so tightly the wood groaned and creaked. He looked down at his hands, realizing that his claws had unsheathed, and he was tearing deep grooves into the polished surface. Deliberately, one finger at a time, Ballantine loosened his fingers, watching as smooth nail took the place of dagger-like claws. He took a deep breath, cursing slightly because the damn husky's scent lingered on the air, mingling with chocolate butter cream icing.

"Fuck," he muttered, following the movement of Jasper as he worked the room, flirting equally with males and females, shifter, vamp and Fae. In fact, no one was spared his attention. The man wasn't particularly tall, but well-built and muscular. His ass was round, and his thighs were undoubtedly powerful. His laughter was contagious; wherever he went he left smiles in his wake.

What would it be like to take him, to overpower him and bury himself deep into that body?

Brutal took a deep breath, pulling himself back to reality. There'd be no hot sweaty sex with the shifter. He had a job to do, and then he'd be on his way back to the States, ready for his next mission, whatever that might be. He'd be back to his grim office and his barren apartment on the edge of the city. There'd be the veiled looks of contempt from his peers, and the occasional pick-up when he could no longer bear the isolation.

The waitress visited his table once again, this time with two bottles of water on the tray. Brutal nodded in her direction, feeling the sexual frustration dissipate somewhat. Maybe he'd take the shifter's email address. That way, if ever he was in the UK again...

He cracked the lid of the bottle and downed it in one long swallow. Stupid idea. He'd do his job and go home.

The music hushed a bit and the room went still in expectation. Brutal waited for the announcement.

"Last Call for the woman at the bar, she's ordered a Tequila Sunrise."

He turned in his seat, seeing a tall, slender woman sitting at the Specialty Bar in nervous expectation. As though mesmerized, several patrons rose, making their way to the bar, willing and ready to meet her needs.

He picked up the specialty menu and grinned. *Tequila Sunrise: Looking For Domination*. Well, it looked like she had plenty of dominants to choose from. He glanced around the room and was surprised to see Jasper giving her a speculative glance.

As if. The Siberian might like fun and games, but not the dark sort of games she was looking for. Not the games that Brutal himself was so fond of.

The noise of the club... the bodies and scents and music suddenly pressed close, and after months on the road, Brutal had reached the end of his rope. He crushed the plastic bottle in his hand, wadding it into a small misshapen lump. He wanted out. He wanted to shift and run, to track and hunt. He wanted to bring down his prey.

Aware that his wolf's mercurial temper was rising, he took a deep breath, glancing over at the table where the huskies had once again gathered. Jasper was at the center of the group. His mobile face shifted between laughter and dismay as his friends hauled him bodily up to the Specialty Bar. Brutal grinned and turned to watch. It looked like the husky was being treated for his birthday. Jasper O' Shea was going to get laid tonight.

Sudden savage arousal ripped through Brutal, and he stood, fists gripping the table. He felt wood give way beneath his hands, but didn't look down. For once, he and his wolf were fixated on the same object: their prey. He stood perfectly still, remaining close to the wall, knowing his black clothing enabled him to fade into the shadows.

The cluster of huskies around Jasper shifted and moved like liquid humanity. Laughter carried on the air, and an expression of dismay settled over Jasper O' Shea's

face. The female behind him reached around, covering his eyes with her hands and another grasped his hand, steadying it in the air over the plastic-covered drink menu.

Jasper dropped his hand and then stared down, reading the item he'd blindly chosen. There was a brief pause, and then laughter and cheers and slaps on his wide shoulders. Brutal picked up his second bottle of water and cracked it open, sliding back into his chair. When Jasper looked up, his eyes held an expression that combined dismay with raw excitement. He looked straight over at the corner where Brutal sat waiting.

Brutal grinned.

* * *

"Last Call for the gentleman at the bar. Lucky fellow's ordered himself a Black Wolf."

Holy fucking hell!

Jasper stared down at the menu, praying the description under his index finger would magically change. He closed his eyes hard, and then looked again.

Black Wolf: Looking for dark and dangerous.

"Oh shit."

Laughter surrounded him and he groaned, leaning forward to pound his head lightly on the bar. Even the staff was laughing at his predicament. A wolf? The place was full of them, but he'd seen only one black wolf... that bloke from America. He took a deep breath and pasted a cocky grin on his face. Jasper spun around on the stool, turning to face his fate for the evening. It didn't have to be a black wolf... not literally. It was the act...

Right.

A few wolves were on their feet, approaching with lascivious intent, and more than a bit of revenge in mind. But they fell away as Ballantine shouldered his way through the crowd, clearing a path with hands the size of shovels and a lifted lip displaying a single extended fang.

He was a full head taller than the tallest in the room and broad where it counted. Unable to deny himself a quick peek, Jasper let his eyes drop the length of the man's body, pausing at his groin. He groaned again; the brute had a cock of titanic proportions, and it was making its presence known there behind the black denim of his jeans.

He stopped in front of Jasper, massive arms folded, an unholy grin on his dark face. "You rang?"

Without looking back, Jasper reached out and groped on the bar for his drink, downing it in one shot. He winced at the pungent flavor of anise and pepper sauce as it overwhelmed his senses. His eyes watered, and blindly, he reached out and grabbed the room key the bartender pushed in his direction. His faithless friends had drifted away, drunk on laughter.

"You aren't the only wolf here, Ballantine."

"I'm the only black wolf."

Jasper snorted. "Technicalities. It's just your coloring." Indeed, Ballantine fit the description to a tee. His black hair was wavy and ruffled, growing back from his forehead and dropping to his collar. His beard was coming in, dark against the tawny color of his skin. Tilting his head, Jasper imagined him dressed in the buckskins of a Native American. He was a hell of a lot more wolf than any of the others in the room.

His almond shaped eyes were more golden now that his arousal had heightened. He grinned, displaying an impressive set of fangs. Self-consciously, Jasper ran a tongue over his much smaller canines. His teeth probably weren't the only portion of his anatomy that didn't match up to Ballantine.

"So, Ballantine..."

"Brutus. You can call me Brutal."

Jasper swallowed. "Brutal. Nice. How'd you earn the nickname?" He slid off the barstool and looked up at the man towering over him. "Never mind. Don't want to know." He walked, his back stiff with unaccustomed discomfort. At the same time, arousal began to steal through him, mingling with devilish anticipation. He turned his

head slightly, glancing back as Brutal Ballantine followed him to the back of the bar, heading toward the door leading to the private rooms.

He ignored the catcalls, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other. His mind raced, adopting and rejecting various scenarios. Most ended with Jasper on his knees, servicing the wolf's giant cock with either his mouth or his ass.

Brutal didn't say anything. He didn't touch, nor did he crowd Jasper as they climbed a stairway and turned down a hallway. Jasper matched the number on the key to the number on a room and slid the keycard in. With a grin, he pushed open the door and slipped in, tossing away his jacket, followed by his shirt. He didn't bother with the lights; they both had acute night vision.

By the time he reached the simple four-poster bed in the middle of the floor, Jasper had divested himself of everything but his jeans and his Doc Martins, and those wouldn't be a problem. Not for long.

Jasper vaulted the bed, rebounding off the surface, landing in a crouch at the other side of the room. It was large, sparsely furnished, and held more potential than he could imagine.

"Catch me!" He grinned, shifted and slipped from the remnants of his clothing. He exploded into movement as Brutal launched himself through the air, missing Jasper's white-tipped tail by just inches. Then the wolf was cursing, struggling out of his heavy jacket, fighting to free himself for the shift. Jasper had spent too many years on the streets; he was an expert at shifting on the fly.

"You little shit! Get back here!" Brutal kicked off a boot and tripped, struggling out of his jeans. His cock was erect, and Jasper froze, staring at the enormous piece of equipment. Obviously, that was where the nickname came from, because the man had one brutal looking cock.

Then there was no more time for looking, for Jasper was being pursued by a huge demonic beast. Shaggy black fur bristled from his body, and tawny eyes reflected the light with a red sheen. He crouched and leaped through the air, once again missing Jasper's smaller canine form by inches.

Well, the wolf might be bigger and faster, but Jasper was swift and agile. He jumped over a chair, landed on the side table that ran the length of the room, and then dodged under the bed, emerging from the same side when Brutal blocked his exit. A sharp set of fangs nipped, causing him to tuck tail and drag ass across the carpeted floor. Oddly, the room seemed to have expanded, and he found he had plenty of space to evade the wolf.

Brutal drew up alongside him and Jasper body-slammed him, bouncing off the muscular bulk of the beast. To his gratification, the big wolf veered away, clipping a chair and sending it flying. Jasper dove under a table and then burst out from under a low-hanging tablecloth, panting hard now.

Without warning, Brutal came down on top of him, pinning him to the floor with his bulk, and as hard as he struggled, Jasper was unable to escape. They lay like that for a moment, catching their breath and waiting for their hearts to slow their pace. Wicked teeth dug into Jasper's nape, holding him in position.

Jasper groaned. Not in animal form! God only knew how it would feel if the wolf knotted him! He relaxed and let himself shift back to human, feeling the soft pile of the carpet under his belly. The wolf was pressed full length over his body, holding him in place.

"Okay... I submit!"

Jasper felt a shimmer of power, and then a very large, very aroused man took the place of the wolf. His body responded, his ass clenching even as his prick grew painfully hard. The carpet suddenly didn't feel so good against his skin.

Brutal began to rock against him, pressing his erection into the hard muscle of Jasper's thigh.

"You sure? I was just getting warmed up." His voice was a growling rumble in Jasper's ear. He rose to his knees, jerking Jasper's ass into the air. "You want it dark and dirty, and I'm more than happy to comply, Red."

"Jasper. The name's Jasper." He gasped. "And I'd appreciate lube if you're planning on shoving that monster up me arse!"

Brutal began laughing, and let Jasper loose. He crawled away and turned, plopping down on his bottom. He grinned at the big man. "Gave you a good run, didn't I?" He scooted back as Brutal began moving in his direction, still on hands and knees.

"Shut up."

Hard lips came down on his, a rough tongue forced its way into Jasper's mouth, and he gasped, trapped and unable to retreat any further. He had the wall at his back and a man the size of a wall to his front. He struggled briefly, and then submitted to the rough embrace, letting the wolf take out all his sexual frustration in the kiss.

Their teeth clicked, and Jasper ran his tongue over the wicked canines that hadn't yet receded completely. When he tried to move, Ballantine's hand tangled in his hair, holding his head in place.

Suddenly Ballantine had moved away. He was on his feet, reaching down to drag Jasper upright, hauling him bodily toward the bare, simple bed. Jasper was tossed through the air and landed on his back, his breath gusting out on impact. The beast followed, crawling across the mattress until he covered Jasper, pinning him in place.

"I win." He grinned at Jasper.

"This round, perhaps."

"It's the moment that counts." He continued up Jasper's body until that flushed, rigid pole of his was hovering just over his lips. Jasper cocked a brow, looking up at the man who had him pinned in place.

"Suck."

"Oh, such a romantic."

He saw Brutal's lips twitch in a smile. "You've been asking for it all night. It's time to take what you asked for, Rover. Now suck."

The head bumped against his lips and Jasper tilted his jaw back until it was sliding down under his chin. He turned his head, and it was wrenched back when a big hand anchored itself in his hair.

"Oh, fine. Just fine..." He opened his mouth, letting the tip of his tongue drag up the heavily veined underside of Brutal's shaft. He turned his head slightly.

"This would be a bit easier if you'd get your knees off my arms."

"Shut up."

Jasper rolled his eyes and opened his mouth, swallowing down the engorged flesh as Brutal pushed in ruthlessly. He sucked hard enough to strip the chrome from a trailer hitch, watching as Brutal's face went dark with shock and pleasure. Bastard wanted to get sucked off? Well, Jasper knew a thing or two about blowing a man.

He tilted his head forward just a bit, bobbing and pulling back, concentrating on enthusiasm rather than finesse. It took only minutes before the wolf was up on his knees, his hips swiveling, both hands cradling Jasper's head as he fucked his mouth. His hands clenched painfully, and his body shuddered. He roared, shooting jets of seed over Jasper's lips and mouth.

He dropped forward, his weight on the hands resting on either side of Jasper's head. His chest heaved, sweat beaded and rolled down his chest. On impulse, Jasper caught a droplet on his tongue, teasing the other man's nipple as he did so. The wolf's body quaked at the sensation, and Jasper grinned, knowing that Brutal wasn't looking at his face.

"If you're going to pass out, please do so off to the side. I don't think... *oomph!*" He gasped as the wolf collapsed onto his body. "Rotter. You did that on purpose, I suppose."

"Figured I'd be able to shut you up if you couldn't breathe."

He pushed at the heavy body over his. "Couldn't shut me up even when you shoved that log in my mouth. What makes you think --" He pushed a bit harder. "What makes you think this'll shut me?" He thrust upward with his hips, frowning in exasperation. "You'll not be sleeping, Ballantine. You've got some unfinished business here."

Brutal chuckled, his head still a dead weight on Jasper's shoulder. "Didn't know I needed it so badly. I'm feeling pretty relaxed right now." He lifted his head a bit, his eyes gleaming gold in the dim light. "Don't harsh my mellow, dog."

In frustration, Jasper bucked upward, dislodging the heavy body from his. Brutal moaned a bit, shifting his hips as he burrowed into the mattress. "Not done with you yet, Red --"

"The name's Jasper, you great lunk." He moved to the side of the bed, glaring down at his unsatisfied cock, and then at the truly magnificent body that lay stretched out over the mattress. A smile played over his lips. Jasper rose and prowled the room, aware that Brutal had flipped over onto his back and was watching him warily.

"Get your rest. I'll stay busy."

"Somehow a busy Siberian sounds like a dangerous Siberian." Brutal had thrown an arm over his face, shielding his eyes in the dim light. He was watching Jasper... barely.

Jasper smiled and began opening drawers in the table against the wall. He found the normal accoutrements of sex: condoms and lube, a few different toys and vibrators. He grinned, setting out a few interesting items. The bottom drawer contained a few objects which were of more interest, so he simply closed those drawers. He'd return to those later. He looked up at Ballantine. The wolf was well on his way to sleepy land, so Jasper kept exploring, peeking into the bathroom and whistling at the two-man sized tub in there.

They'd be using that before the night was through.

He returned to the bedroom, which had somehow reduced itself back to its original size. Brutal was sleeping now, lightly snoring. Jasper took a moment to feel for the man; obviously he was under a great deal of pressure. It must be wearisome to stay angry all the time.

He eyed the clothing scattered on the floor and began to gather it up. As he folded Ballantine's jeans, he slipped the wallet from the pocket and flipped it open. One side was the usual: driver's license for the State of Washington, various forms of credit and identification. There was also a wad of cash, denominations from all over the world. His big wolf had been traveling far and wide.

He flipped open the other side of the wallet and silently whistled, finding an ID with an embossed shield. The man worked for the big guns, eh? Detective Ballantine. There was a second ID; this one identified him as a special agent for INTERPOL. Jasper slipped the billfold back into the pocket of the jeans and then searched elsewhere, finding a hotel receipt and a few other items of interest. With a quirky grin, he slipped his own business card down into the wallet, knowing Ballantine would bust a gasket when he found it in there.

He set the clothes to the side and leaned back against the wall, arms folded across his chest. The wolf was truly a sight to behold. He was easily four or five inches over six feet and weighed in much heavier than he appeared. His broad muscular chest was lightly furred; his belly was flat and ridged with muscle. His hips were narrow, and his now-flaccid cock was still intimidating in proportion.

Long legs with graceful ankles drew his gaze downward. Massive biceps led him back up. Son of a bitch didn't need to carry a weapon. He was lethal just the way he was.

With that in mind, Jasper turned to the items he'd left hidden in the drawers, removing them quickly and quietly.

Brutal Ballantine had been a very bad boy, and Jasper was just the man to teach him a lesson.

Chapter Three

Brutal felt good. Damn good. He hadn't felt this loose since... He couldn't remember. He floated upward from a very nice place, pushing back a niggling sense of something...

Oh, that. The Siberian was still in the room, and probably pissed as hell about being used and discarded that way. He got what he asked for. He shouldn't plan on bitching about it. He yawned, stretched, and... came up short.

"What...?" He opened his eyes in confusion, to find himself securely bound, hand and foot. A flare of panic ran through him. Chasing killers for a living tended to make a man a bit paranoid. The fear receded when Jasper's happy grin came into view. The little fucker was naked as a jay bird, and obviously happy to be that way.

Brutal growled and pulled at the shackles around his wrists.

"Tough luck, big boy. Remember, this is Last Call, paranormal solutions for paranormal needs. I'm afraid you won't be breaking through those chains." He moved to Brutal's side, kneeling on the mattress. "Imagine my delight when I found these chains and the nicely anchored bolts in the floor." Brutal pulled harder, groaning at the effort. "And to add to my amusement, look up above you, Detective."

He blinked at the contraption above the bed. With the lights turned up, Brutal was able to see that the Spartan room they were in was a fully equipped dungeon.

Detective? He looked at Jasper in alarm. "You little fuck," he snarled. He jerked at his bonds again. "Look, Jasper, I'm on duty. I've got to head back downstairs..."

The shifter shook his head. "Nope. You're going to be tied up with me for awhile. If anything happens downstairs, we'll hear about it soon enough."

"You don't understand..."

"I do understand. Perfectly. So I suggest you shut the bloody fuck up, and get used to the idea that you're here with me, and I'm in control." Jasper rose to his feet, towering over Brutal. "And you are an impolite, undisciplined sack of shit, Brutus Ballantine. I've decided it's time for you to learn some manners."

He hopped lightly to the floor and then rattled around in some drawers on the side table. He returned, walking on the springy mattress. He knelt between Brutal's outstretched legs. Brutal jumped when the other man began handling his genitals.

"No need to be nervous... just getting you dressed for the rest of the evening." He held up a wide piece of leather. A cock ring. Brutal growled, bucking his hips. When Jasper's outstretched hand came down on his hip, he froze, caught between outrage and amazement.

"I like this one. It's adjustable, for big boys like you." He felt the leather slip over his testicles, and then twisted his entire body as Jasper worked his shaft through the ring.

"Now, let's see how it fits."

A warm mouth covered his balls, and Brutal nearly howled at the sensation. The damn Siberian had a mouth made for sin. He felt the blood rush into his shaft, aching and throbbing with the pressure of the ring.

"Not too tight? Well, then..." Jasper rose to his feet, his ruddy cock just beginning to fill. His skin was creamy white, and the nest of his pubic hair was darker red than the hair on his head. He was surprisingly muscular, but lithe in appearance, broad of shoulder and narrow of hip. He carried much less bulk than Brutal, which explained his speed and agility.

He stood, hands on hips, grinning down at Brutal. "Looks like I bagged myself a Black Wolf." He quirked his brow and winked. Once again, he hopped off the bed and rummaged around on the table. "One more little thing before we continue."

He returned and straddled Brutal's hips, his muscular ass temptingly close to his engorged cock. "Every well-dressed sub should have nipple wear." He dangled a

handful of chains and a pair of nipple clamps. Brutal hissed as Jasper carefully attached a clamp to each nipple, and then attached the chains to his cock ring.

"There. Lovely. Now to get you on your feet."

Brutal exhaled through his nose, biding his time. As soon as the little bastard unfastened the chains...

Jasper knelt at his feet, unlocking the shackles holding his lower body in place. "Up. On your bum." Brutal scooted into a sitting position, wincing as every movement bit into his nipples. "Easy. Let me adjust these..."

Finally, his arms were free, and Brutal readied himself to strike -- but was jerked back into place.

"Didn't notice the collar, did you?" Jasper held a chain lead in his hand. "Let's just finish hooking you up here..." and before Brutal could react, Jasper had fastened new chains to his shackles.

"You son of a --" Brutal was pulled up short; every move he made caused shrieking pain to lance through his nipples. The pain ran straight to his shaft, causing it to throb and ache with need. He reached up to tear the clamps away, but found he'd lost the slack in the chains.

Jasper was holding a remote. Slowly, Brutal's arms were pulled over his head. He looked down and discovered the mattress was gone; he now stood on the level floor.

Fucking enchanted room. He bared his teeth, willing the shift to wolf, but it didn't come.

"Silver. It's in the collar around your neck, luvvie."

Jasper didn't look like some sort of sadistic dom, but clearly, he knew his way around bondage. He dropped his hands behind his back, circling Brutal with a mock serious expression on his face.

"Just in case you think I'm trying to humiliate you, that isn't my objective." He stood in front of Brutal. "Well, not my primary objective." He grinned and reached out, tweaking one of the nipple clamps. "You do make a lovely package, though." He gave an elaborate sigh.

Brutal tried futilely to grip his chains, but couldn't reach. When Jasper drew close, he glared.

"Lean down and give me a kiss then, darlin'."

Brutal jerked his face away, and then yelped as a streak of fire lashed his hip. Jasper had a willow switch in his hand!

"Wrong response, Ballantine. Now you had no problems kissing me earlier, when you had me helpless. Just show me a little love."

Brutal clenched his jaw. Jasper rested a finger on the chain hanging from his nipples, bearing down gently. "Power steering for big rebellious fellows like you." Unable to resist, Brutal followed the direction of the chain, the pain from his nipples streaking through his body. Conversely, the pain went straight to his cock, which seemed to enjoy the bite.

"Very good, Ballantine." They were face to face, and Jasper leaned in, kissing him gently, carefully. His lips ghosted over Brutal's mouth, his tongue flicked over his lips. He slanted their mouths, coaxing Brutal to open up and let him in.

"Don't know who taught you to kiss, but you've got a bit more to learn." Jasper returned to his mouth, nipping gently at Brutal's lips. When he finally settled into a kiss, it was intoxicating as the finest wine. When the shifter moved away, Brutal tried to follow, caught in a near hypnotic state.

"Very good, wolf. You get a reward."

Jasper's hands ran gently down Brutal's torso, lingering on his way down to his belly. Fingers played in his pubic hair, and then his cock was caught up in the shifter's strong hands. He rocked eagerly, chasing the bliss of Jasper's touch. All too soon, it was gone.

"Here's the game, Ballantine. You play nice, I play nice back. You play ugly, and you get punished." He tugged the chain that was attached to the cock ring. "Got it?"

Brutal set his jaw and looked away. He wasn't playing games, not with this little shit. Not ever. A warm, rough hand engulfed his balls, tugging them away from his body. The sensation was erotic and disturbing. The hand trailed back, caressing his ass

crack. Jasper stood up straight, facing Brutal. He grinned and flexed his hips, letting their cocks caress. A quick jerk on the chain and Brutal groaned at the fusion of pain and pleasure.

The shifter leaned in closer, nipping Brutal on the chin. "Don't think I've ever seen a bloke I've wanted to fuck as badly as I want to fuck you, Brutal Ballantine." He stepped around behind Brutal's back, leaning in to his body. "Muscle on muscle, and an ass just begging to be bitten!" He bent and nipped at Brutal's tense buttocks. "I love to watch you dance, wolf." He followed the bite with a lick.

He reached around and stroked down Brutal's belly, grinding his cock into the hard muscle of his ass. Jasper dropped to his knees, and Brutal tried to twist and see what the other man was up to -- and once again was pulled short by his chains. He cursed and growled, and then gasped when a warm, wet tongue snaked along the crack of his ass.

"Dark and dangerous, Brutal Ballantine. Just like I ordered."

He moved away and Brutal could only wait, suspended between outrage and anticipation. Glancing down, he saw that his cock was purple with arousal; drop after drop of pre-cum dribbled down its length. If not for the ring, he'd most likely have come by now.

"I'm going to skin your hide, dog." His voice came out as a harsh rumble. The damn shifter just chuckled. He'd moved away and returned. He reached up, brushing Brutal's hair from his neck.

"In all honesty, I shouldn't bother with a safe word; I doubt you'd use it anyway." He nipped the lobe of Brutal's ear. "But if you need to stop, say 'mercy.' Got it?"

Brutal didn't want to answer, but he nodded.

"Tell me, Ballantine. If I suddenly let you loose this very minute, what would you do?"

Brutal managed to turn his head just slightly. He sneered. "I'd have you on your knees with my dick up your ass."

"That's what I thought." Jasper chuckled. "Won't be yours truly on his knees when we're finished. Not this time."

Jasper stepped away, and Brutal was obstinate enough to turn his head and try to track the Siberian. He was standing several feet back.

"Shall I make you scream, Brutal Ballantine?"

Brutal's balls suddenly went tight, straining against the constriction of the cock ring. His ass clenched and panic fluttered in his belly.

His cock twitched.

"Go fuck yourself, asshole."

Jasper laughed. Brutal heard the switch before the pain registered, and he twisted, immediately causing the Y chain to pull tight on his nipple clamps. He braced himself for the next blow. Bastard was caning him!

The next blows stung a bit. They came at him rapidly, fluttering over his ass and upper thighs, and coming perilously close to his ball sack.

"Breathe through it." Jasper's voice was eerily calm. Brutal stopped holding his breath and did as the shifter said. The blows came to a stop, and Jasper was close to him again.

"Say 'Thank you, Mr. O' Shea'."

"Fuck you, you bastard!"

Jasper gave a loud sigh. There was one more stinging blow to his ass, and then the Siberian stepped back. He was ominously silent. Brutal braced himself for yet another blow. Instead, a hand gently stroked his back, caressing his stinging skin. Jasper stepped around to his front again, dropping to his knees, breathing softly over Brutal's aching cock.

He shuddered at the sensation.

Jasper's pink tongue emerged, and he gave Brutal a delicate lick, just over the head of his cock.

Brutal choked back a groan. He needed to come. Now. His ass clenched, and he thrust his hips toward Jasper's mouth. He panted, straining for the orgasm which

remained elusive. When Jasper leaned back, looking up at him, Brutal roared in frustration.

"Say 'Thank you, Mr. O' Shea.' When you learn some manners, I'll let you come."

Brutal breathed rapidly through his nostrils. Sweat poured down his torso. He remained silent.

Jasper gave him a brilliant smile. He leaned forward, fitting his mouth over the head of Brutal's cock, sliding quickly down half his length. Just as quickly, he pulled back, and Brutal thought that his knees would give way.

"Fuck!" His fists clenched, and he locked his knees in place. "Please!"

"Very good." Jasper stood smoothly, and Brutal nearly lost himself in the Siberian's shattered blue gaze. The shifter reached out, stroking his face. "Please and...?" He rocked forward, their cocks brushing in a heated embrace.

Brutal glared. Jasper pulled away.

"I'm hot for you, Brutal. Aching. I gave you a climax, but you didn't see fit to return the pleasure. And you didn't even say 'thank you'."

Shame rushed through Brutal. Embarrassment. He'd been so desperate for the shape shifter, in such a rush to finish, he'd taken him rudely and selfishly. That was pretty much his mode of operation when it came to sex.

Still, Brutal wasn't one to humble himself.

He mumbled, "Thanks. And sorry." He winced at how sullen he sounded.

"What was that again? I didn't quite hear." Jasper paused in profile, allowing Brutal a moment to study his quirky, handsome features. He gave Brutal a sidelong glance, a slight smile on his lips.

"I said thank you. And I'm sorry."

"Not quite what I instructed you to say, but hell." He shrugged one shoulder. "It couldn't have been easy." Jasper turned to face him again, reaching down to stroke Brutal's captive penis. His touch burned like fire, bringing Brutal back to mindless arousal. He pumped gently. He gestured with the remote, and Brutal's arms were

lowered. He finally had some slack in the bedamned chain running from his throat to his cock. He rubbed at his wrists, and then out of nowhere, a leather padded bench manifested. He backed away, quickly coming to the end of the tethers on his ankles.

"What the..."

With one hand between his shoulder blades, Jasper pushed him forward. He was already off balance, so he went over easily, and the shifter quickly had him secured. His ass was in the air like a bitch in heat.

"...fuck! Jasper! What the hell?"

The shifter was at his back, one hand trailing down his spine. "Are you using your safe word, Brutal?"

He looked back, glaring at Jasper, who had an unholy grin on his face. His hand had moved from Brutal's spine and now lingered between his legs, tickling his balls. Jasper's finger rimmed his ass, and then he was down, dragging his tongue down that spot between balls and anus.

Brutal dropped his head and groaned.

"Do you want me to stop, Brutus?" His wet finger pressed into Brutal's hole, stroking and retreating until he went deep enough to hit the hot spot. Brutal moaned and twisted, desperate to come, desperate to be fucked hard and deep.

"Please!" He couldn't say just exactly what he was begging for, but a litany ran through his mind, desperate and needy. *Takemefuckmetakeme...*

Two fingers and he nearly sobbed in his arousal, and then the pressure increased, and Brutal knew the damn shifter was shoving his cock up his virgin ass. He snarled and a hand came down, stinging and burning, and then another slap, and then another. While he focused on the blows, Jasper was steadily forging deeper, until he felt the tickle of rough hair against his ass cheeks.

They both collapsed over the bench, panting and sweating, holding back in desperate excitement. Brutal clenched hard, grinning like a fiend when Jasper gasped, his hands digging hard into the wolf's hip and shoulder.

"Nearly brought you, you little bastard!"

Jasper retreated, and left Brutal feeling relieved and empty, and when Jasper began to fuck him again, his cock was slick with lube. He pulled out, greased up once again, and then thrust in, finally moving easily.

"It's the big..." *thrust* "...nasty..." *thrust* "...boys like you that make for the hottest... tightest ride..." Jasper clasped Brutal's shoulder with one hand, the other coming around to grasp his cock, pumping in time with his thrusting hips. He let go of Brutal's cock and quickly unfastened the nipple clamps. Relief... and then pain rushed from nipples to his balls, drawing them up to his body, strangling on the fucking ring down there. He shouted, flexing his back, and the new angle had Jasper's cock slamming into his prostate.

"Are you ready?" Jasper's hand came down in a noisy slap, drawing Brutal's lust-fogged brain back from the orgasm that was bearing down on him like a ton of bricks.

"God... please..." Brutal groaned.

Jasper was slamming into him now. Their skin slapped, and sweat dripped into his eyes, adding another layer of pain to the bewildering rush of sensation.

"Brutal, come *now!*"

To his shock, he came, shouting and flexing, thick ribbons of semen shooting from his strangled cock, his balls feeling hot and heavy and endlessly full. The climax twisted on and on; he shuddered and froze with every wave, and somewhere in the tumult of the moment, he heard Jasper's shout, felt Jasper shove his dick deep into his tortured ass, sending white-hot seed deep inside his body. They came together, and together, they came down -- and they came down hard. Brutal heard Jasper gasp out words that were nearly unintelligible, and then he was off the bench and face down on the bed, the shifter a heavy, inert weight on top of him.

It felt good and safe. It felt warm, and when Jasper stroked his back soothingly, Brutal groaned at the sensation. Jasper rolled away from him. Jasper's words of praise were a gentle balm to his ears.

He lay there with his ass stinging, his buttocks and nipples throbbing, and for the first time in his life, someone spoke gentle words to Brutus Ballantine.

Perhaps once upon a time his mother had shown kindness, or a teacher had given him praise, but it was only the barest memory. He kept his face buried in a clean, white pillow, feeling the pace of his heart begin to slow. Next to him, Jasper's breath was becoming deep and steady. He wanted to look at the shifter, but was afraid of what the other man might see in his face.

Submission. Need. Hunger and loneliness so deep, he'd never bothered to test the depth and breadth of the void.

He rolled onto his side, giving his back to the Siberian, and when Jasper rolled close to him, draping an arm around his waist, he didn't move except to drape his own arm over the shifter's, keeping him close.

Chapter Four

Like most closet submissives, Brutal Ballantine was taking the new experience hard.

Jasper lay behind him, his arm trapped under Brutal's. He was pinned just as completely as he'd had the wolf trapped earlier, but Brutal wasn't trying to dominate him now. He was clinging to Jasper in his own odd way. He wasn't sleeping; his back was stiff and his breathing was shallow. No doubt his mind was fuzzy and confused, desperate to sink into his happy place, and yet fighting it. He rubbed his cheek against Brutal's bare shoulder, doing his best to comfort the wolf.

"First time for you, then?"

"Yeah." Brutal let out a gusty sigh, but didn't elaborate.

"You always a rat bastard to your lovers?"

Jasper didn't think he was going to answer. He lay still, letting the other man work his way through the confusion of the moment.

"Don't have lovers, just the occasional fuck. No time or space in my life." He didn't let go of Jasper's arm.

"So you just hit and run then. That must make for a lonely existence." Jasper tucked his chin into the wolf's neck. "Know all about that. Until the pack moved into the UK, it was just me and a few others. Our kind is social. Yours too."

Brutal snorted. "No one else of my kind."

"Really?" Jasper tried to rise, to look at his face, but Brutal's heavy arm kept him in place. If he really wanted to, he could slip free, but for now, he'd let Ballantine call the shots.

"So, you're a detective. You've been traveling quite a bit. Is London the end of the line?"

"Can't talk about it." Finally, Brutal let go of his arm. He rolled to his back, and his eyes were slightly reddened. Jasper chose to ignore that. "But you... you've done this BDSM shit before." He glared at Jasper.

"Didn't expect it, eh?" He grinned and rested his head on his arm. "Did it for a living for awhile."

"You were a hooker?"

Jasper gave a short laugh. "Nah. Dom for hire. I had quite a following. I was butch enough for the men and... sensitive enough for the ladies. I was right on the cusp of working the streets when I ran across a fellow who just wanted to be tied up and caned. Gave me a bit of a charge to oblige him." He shrugged. "I have a knack for it, and I don't mind switching roles now and then. But when I decided to take my police exams, it was time to put that career on ice."

"You? A cop?" Brutal looked both amazed and amused. "And a professional Dom?"

"Well, it didn't last long. I didn't have the temperament for police work. The slap and tickle stuff is fine on occasion, but not as a profession. I've got a better gig now." Jasper rolled from the bed. "If this place works the way it should, there'll be a hot bath running by now." He padded to the bathroom and opened the door, grinning as steam rolled from the room. "I know you're a big, tough hard case, but a little aftercare isn't out of order." He leaned against the door jamb, aware of how he looked, naked and swathed in ribbons of steam. Brutal sat up, wincing slightly. He'd heal up quickly enough, but no doubt was feeling the effects of his first time on the receiving end of a fuck.

Maybe Jasper should feel a bit guilty about the whole thing, but he didn't. He'd given Brutal a safe word and a way out, which the wolf hadn't chosen to use.

Humming, he stepped into the doorway, grinning at the oddly decadent room. The bathroom was almost Spartan in appearance, yet the walls and floor were tiled. The tub was huge and wide. It was filled to the brim with steaming, herbal scented water. He shook his head; the overall look was reminiscent of a bathroom he'd once seen in an

architectural digest. Just as he'd commanded the other room, the bathroom had shaped itself to his desires.

In the bedroom, he heard Brutal moving about, no doubt checking his wallet. With a groan of pleasure, Jasper stepped into the water, sliding down till he was submerged to his nose. From the corner of his vision, he saw the wolf edge into the room, locating the door that led to the watercloset. He vanished for a moment and then returned, standing and staring down at Jasper.

He let out a gust of air, crossing his eyes to watch the bubbles come up from his nose. He glanced up, seeing an almost-smile hovering over the other man's rough face. Jasper sat up a bit, making space.

"Plenty of room, Ballantine." He slid low again.

Brutal sat at the side of the tub and gingerly slid into the water. Hadn't he ever taken a bath before? Probably not. He didn't seem the sort to indulge himself. Under the water, their legs brushed and Jasper let his float, tangling with the wolf's long limbs.

"So you were a Dom. Then a cop. What are you now?"

"Constable. And now, I'm a private investigator."

Brutal snorted and looked away. "Cheating spouses and dirty divorce cases."

Jasper made a noncommittal sound. "And you, Mr. Detective..." He flicked water at Brutal with his foot. "...what are you doing so far from home?"

Brutal looked away, not answering.

"You said you're on duty, but how many Seattle cops are active in the UK?"

Brutal let out a huge sigh. "I'm on a multi-national, interagency task force. That's all you need to know."

"Well, there's a mouthful." He ran a foot up Brutal's leg. "Chasing down a nasty character, eh? Maybe a killer? Maybe I could lend you a hand, give you some guidance around London. Been here most of my life."

Brutal rose, water streaming down his admittedly magnificent body. Jasper lay back, admiring the hills and valleys of his musculature. His chest was lightly furred; his

cock was thick and heavy in a nest of black curls. He stepped out of the tub, grabbed a towel and dried off. Jasper lay back in the tub, watching him through narrowed eyes.

"This is a dangerous situation. Don't need civilians getting in the way."

"Civilians. I'm a former police constable; I'm now an investigator for an attorney who works some of the most dangerous cases in the world. I know this city like the back of my hand, and have a pretty damn good grasp on what's happening in the rest of the paranormal world. Not just here, but internationally." He grinned, letting the tips of his fangs peek out. "You don't need to protect me, wolf. But you do need my help." He rose from the water and reached out, not even glancing to the side as a thick towel manifested in his hand.

"You're just running out because I frightened you. You frightened yourself, discovered something about yourself tonight."

Ballantine gave him a look from those golden eyes. "This isn't about me. I'm here on a case. We fucked. It was hot. Next time I'm in London, I'll drop by Last Call; maybe we'll hook up again." He glanced around the bathroom. "At a regular hotel." He tossed the towel on the floor, where it immediately vanished. He didn't even spare it a glance. Jasper followed him into the bedroom and watched the detective quickly dress himself. Too bad, he'd been having fun with the room.

"He... won't be out there tonight." Jasper hung his towel on a hook on the back of the bathroom door. Brutal turned slowly, giving him a look through sharply intelligent eyes. "No one was here trolling for victims tonight. Moon's wrong and there's too much innate power coming up out of the streets. It'll interfere with the ritual. He needs tightly focused power."

He followed his trail of clothing back to the door, dressing in reverse order. He sat on the floor, pulling on his socks and tying up his Doc's. Brutal was already fully dressed.

"Ritual? Maybe you and I need to talk after all, dog." He crossed his arms over his chest and stared angrily at Jasper.

"Just remember, Detective Ballantine, London is old." Brutal started to speak, but he lifted a hand, cutting him off. "Not old like the Americas are old. There were people living here long before your country was even a dream in the minds of the explorers. The building next door to us is older than America. And just down the street is a Roman wall. And before the Romans, there was a city here."

He looked up at the other man, who was glaring at him with skepticism. "Ah, never mind. Forget the metaphysical shit. According to my sources, your killer has a final target. London is the end of the journey, everything else was just preparation."

Brutal strode over, grasping the Siberian by the collar and hauling him to his feet. "What do you know about this, you little shit?"

Jasper went limp, sliding right out of his jacket, and then standing to face the wolf. Clearly, he'd grown up on the streets.

"What I know isn't for the likes of you, wolf. You did good jumping ahead of him like that. And you were right guessing he'd end up here in London. But when he finally arrives, you won't see or hear him." He looked him up and down. "Unless you happen to be his flavor of the month. Then it won't matter." He plucked the coat from the wolf's hand. "Too bad. I could have used your help."

He walked to the door, turning to glance back at the tousled, empty room. "I could have used a bit more time with you as well. We were good together, once you learned a few manners."

Ballantine growled ominously. "*I could have helped you?*"

"You're out of your league on this one, Brutus." He tilted his head, giving the big shifter a reckless grin. "But then I am too. I'm just lucky enough to have backup." He watched as Brutus Ballantine charged across the room in his direction. He'd really chaffed the fellow this time! He waited until the wolf was bare inches away, and then he gave the mental nod.

The world turned sideways and upside down, and Jasper landed on his knees, sprawling forward. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing down the nausea. Lord but he hated when Jedidiah pulled him out that way. He struggled back to his knees and then

rose unsteadily, grateful for the heat of the fire burning merrily in the hearth. He blindly reached out, his fingers falling on the giant snifter of brandy awaiting him. When Jasper opened his eyes, he was back in the familiar study that was his boss's refuge from the world outside.

"Well, that was quite interesting." The demon seated in the velvet wing chair sat at his ease, gazing into the red and gold of the leaping flames. "An American werewolf... in London?" He lifted an arched brow, playing up his demonic appearance in the flickering firelight.

Jasper sipped the fiery fluid and grinned, sinking down into an empty chair. "Were you able to read him through me?"

The boss sipped the golden fluid in his snifter. "Some. Enough to confirm my suspicions." He gazed steadily at Jasper. "I do enjoy when you flex your dominant skills, Jasper. It makes me wish I were available to play."

Jasper laughed and looked away from the demon. If he and Jedidiah were ever to play, he knew damned well who'd be on the bottom. He gazed into the fire, watching the dance of flames. There was no obvious fuel source for the fire; it burned at the demon's will.

"Keep him out of the way, Jasper."

He nodded and looked over at the demon. "Will do. He's pursuing this as a typical murder investigation. He won't be looking in our direction. But..." He looked away from the demon, suddenly uncomfortable.

"But?" The demon coaxed gently.

Jasper recalled the expression of intensity in the detective's eyes. Cunning intelligence had flashed through his very being. "I think we don't want to underestimate Brutus Ballantine. He's a hunter. If he'd gotten an earlier start, he'd have caught up with the killer by now."

"Then he'd be dead by now." The demon rolled the crystal goblet along his full lower lip, staring meditatively at Jasper. "You've grown attached. That was quick." He

smiled and set down his glass, dropping his hand to his side, stroking the head of a massive black tiger. "But then, that's how shifters work, isn't it?"

* * *

Brutal walked into the darkness, his hands gripping into fists, closing on nothing but empty air. What the fuck had happened earlier in Last Call? He walked, ignoring his surroundings, ignoring the late-night partiers still filling the streets. He found himself near the Museum of London where late-night traffic was minimal. Slowly, he came to awareness of where he was, and rather than taking a cab back to his hotel, he walked, remembering Jasper's parting words.

London was old. He came to a stop, letting himself simply feel the place. Old power seeped up through the concrete sidewalks. He looked up and saw a huge section of ancient wall in front of him. It was the London Wall. He walked down the road, tracing the line of the ancient Roman fortification until he came to Wormwood Street. He was far from his hotel, but somehow, this felt like the place he needed to be.

Brutal looked around. If he traced the route of the Wall, he'd eventually end up at the Thames, at the Tower. He walked, tracing the old wall's route by the power that still lingered after so many centuries. His target was definitely paranormal. Initially, he'd believed the killer was a shifter of some sort; vampires were more precise in their killing, their carnage was more contained. The victims had been brutalized, eviscerated, often little more than puddles of blood and gore.

Yet Jasper's words had him thinking. Every location where the killer had struck had been a center of power: Mt. Shasta, Chichen Itza, a tiny Taoist temple in Southern China, and a grand cathedral in Prague. What brought his prey to London? He killed and moved on to the next site.

What in hell did the Siberian know about all this anyway? He'd been there, and then he'd been gone. As far as Brutal knew, teleporting wasn't a shifter skill. He growled; nonexistent hackles rose on his neck. His memory slid sideways, bringing his cock back to erection. He rubbed his hands where the shackles had rested, and his ass

clenched. He wasn't stupid. He knew it would have happened someday, but with some ginger-haired dog shifter?

Granted, Jasper wasn't little by any means. Not his stature, not his equipment. Certainly not his skill. He'd been given a new insight into what a climax was all about, there at the mercy of Jasper O' Shea. Afterwards, he'd felt dangerously... content. He'd fought the sensation, and then had embraced it for a few moments. Letting someone else take control of his body had been a craving for so long. Didn't mean he was some weak-ass sub crawling around on his knees. He'd never allowed it because no one had ever been strong enough to take control over him. But Jasper O' Shea had, and he'd rocked Brutal's world.

Hours of blind walking led Brutus back to his little hotel, which wasn't so much a hotel as a family run bed and breakfast. He slipped through the unlocked front gate, and then in the front door, frowning at the casual security of the place. Three flights of narrow stairs led him to his bedroom, and Brutal slipped his wallet from his pocket, fishing out his keycard. At least they'd installed heavy doors with up-to-date electronic locks on the private rooms.

A heavy white card fluttered to the floor; he picked it up, shoving the door open as he did so.

The room was chilly and dark, but he scented no intruders inside. He'd paid extra for his own toilet and shower, and was grateful for that small privacy. After kicking off his boots, Brutal fished the card from his pocket, glancing at it curiously.

Jasper O' Shea

Private Investigator

J.W. Worth and Associates

London, Paris, San Francisco

The little bastard had been in his wallet! Anger started and then rapidly fled as laughter took its place. The little son of a bitch had gotten the drop on him right from the start, and knew he'd find the card as soon as he got home. Brutus dug out his phone

and did a quick web search, finding that Jasper was indeed the real deal, and connected to a very prominent, very dangerous man, if the gossip was to be believed.

He shrugged out of his clothing and threw it over a chair. He slipped naked into the bed, appreciating the heavy down duvet. He ran a hand down his belly, clasping his heated, hardened cock.

Next time he'd be on top... if there was a next time. He closed his eyes, imagining the succulent white body of Jasper O' Shea. He'd have him on his back, legs splayed. His tight ass would grip Brutal's cock like a heated glove. The shifter would look up at him through those odd eyes of his, and he'd grin...

Brutal stroked hard and fast, coming to a gasping climax within moments. He lay, his heart pounding, his chest heaving rapidly. His semen slipped like silk between his fingers. Brutal lifted a finger to his lips and licked it, closing his eyes, imagining that it was Jasper's mouth on his skin, cleaning him of his seed. He shivered; his cock ached in reaction to his thoughts.

There'd be a next time.

He grinned, rolled over and went to sleep just as the sun rose over the horizon.

Chapter Five

The sun struggled to break through London's morning fog. Jasper trailed the big detective, impressed that Ballantine was canny enough to hunt in the daylight rather than in the darkness. Most would associate things that go bump in the night with darkness. But Brutal Ballantine knew evil was just as likely to walk in the daytime as in the night.

Leaning against a wall on a busy sidewalk, he watched as Brutal shouldered his way through the crowds that surrounded the section of Roman wall that jutted up into the air. Another point for the werewolf; he was seeking out power centers. Jasper propped a foot against the wall and pulled his hat down over his ears. His fiery hair would draw attention to him, and he wasn't ready to step forward just yet.

There was a shudder of power in the air, and he looked around, trying to spot the disturbance. Unfortunately, most demons were fully capable of masking their appearance. He chewed on his lip, keeping a wary eye on the detective. If he wasn't mistaken, Brutal Ballantine had inadvertently set himself out as demon bait. If he was stupid enough to have done it on purpose, well... survival of the fittest and all. Still, he couldn't just stand and watch.

Jasper pushed away from the wall and trotted down the sidewalk, crossing the busy street to get a bit closer to the wolf. He quickly texted a message to his boss, hoping support would come if he needed it. Unfortunately, the Worth offices were several blocks away.

He paused in the doorway of a little tourist shop, sniffing the air, trying to get an idea of where the demon had manifested. He caught the slightest hint of burnt sulphur just as Brutal's head shot upright. He'd caught the scent as well.

Ballantine was still as a statue, his dark eyes skimming the flowing crowd. He slowly turned away from the wall, walking casually to a dark, dirty little alley.

Shit! What was he thinking? Fortunately for Jasper, Brutal's strategy was a good one, and within moments, an attractive red-haired woman broke away from the crowd. She hovered at the opening of the alley, gazing out at the street. To his shock, she caught Jasper's gaze and smiled at him before backing into the alley. He grinned... it seemed that Brutal wasn't her target after all.

She was dressed in expensive woolen trousers and one of those twin-set things on top, with a clay-colored trench coat over everything. She was dressed to blend in, save for her bright flag of red hair. Smart little cookie.

Jasper masked his caution as he stepped out onto the sidewalk, scenting for other demons, other dangers. He slid a hand into his pocket, fumbling for his cell phone. He couldn't bring it out and call...

Weaving in and out of the crowd, Jasper kept an eye on that flag of hair. In just moments he was at her side, sizing her up.

"Hello, darlin'."

As he'd drawn closer, she'd shifted her appearance slightly, undoubtedly anticipating what would work best to lure a red-haired shape shifter. Her eyes were the green of emeralds, and like his, turned up slightly at the corners. Her full lips were wide and smiling. Smart. She'd very subtly echoed Jasper's appearance. He estimated that she came just to his chin.

"Hi there. I'm afraid... Well... I'm a bit lost." Her accent was North American, but soft-edged. Maybe Canadian? She clutched a map in her gloved hands. She stepped back into the mouth of the alley, as though she was escaping the chaos of the street. Somewhere in the inky dark alley, Brutal Ballantine waited. Jasper took a step closer, following her off the sidewalk.

"Well, perhaps I can be of assistance." He gave her his best smile, letting the Irish overtake the Cockney in his voice. He reached out for the map, which she was holding sideways. "Ah, American?"

She shook her head. "I'm from British Columbia, here on business, but I thought I'd take a day to play." The look she gave him was seductive and magical. In spite of himself, Jasper shivered. She played a good game.

"What sort of play are you looking for?" He moved a bit closer, calling up his old street persona. He'd had more than one pretty tourist up against the wall in London's dark alleys. He gazed deep into those crystalline eyes of hers, catching the alluring fragrance of expensive perfume over aroused woman. The effect was spoiled by the faint scent of rotten eggs. His stomach clenched as the reality of the situation hit him. She was dangerous. More powerful than any demon he'd stumbled across in the past, and other than the American detective, he had no backup.

She stepped closer, her hand coming up to run down the front of Jasper's leather jacket.

"I'd like to play with a bad boy, I think." Her lips curled up into a smile, and she pulled at his jacket, luring him further back into the alley.

His heart raced, and though he did his best to mask it, the adrenaline pumping through his system wasn't all from arousal. Jasper was smart enough to be afraid.

Her hand dropped. She cupped his balls, dragging her hand slowly up to rub his hardening cock.

He swallowed and forced a wicked smile to his face. "I might be your man then, darlin'."

She pulled his face down for a kiss, and to his horror, Jasper found her tongue in his mouth and his back to the alley wall. Her hands ran over his body, sliding his shirt up over his belly, unfastening the front of his jeans.

Succubus?

His strength began to flow outward, his legs began to tremble. With every fiber of his being, Jasper fought for control, because with this one, climax would truly bring death. She'd drain him of his essence and tear him up into little tiny shreds.

Jasper's hand dropped into his pocket, fingering the plastic ties he kept there for emergency. Police issue riot cuffs. His foot tangled with hers and he twisted, pinning her to the wall, one hand behind her.

"Like to play rough, eh?" He pressed his swollen groin into hers, slipping the cuff around one wrist. Distracting her with a deep kiss, he pulled her arms over her head, managing to slip the other loose cuff over her hand. As quickly as possible, he had her bound with her wrists hooked on a protruding stone on the wall.

He gasped, breaking away and watching as fury morphed her face. Jasper braced himself for whatever horror her true form revealed. He'd seen pus demons and tentacle demons and others whose images could break him out into a cold sweat. He waited, watching as her teeth lengthened and her skin became leather-like. Her overall appearance didn't change very much, causing him to swallow hard. Usually the nastier the appearance, the weaker the demon. If she kept that mouth of hers shut, she could pass for human on a dark street.

A fiery pain lashed down his leg, and Jasper felt the fabric of his jeans give way.

"Aw, got a little surprise down there for me?" He gritted his teeth against the pain and glanced down, seeing a barbed tail lashing about. That could be bad, but he was a Siberian shifter and had the gift of speed. The tail lashed, and he stomped on it, crushing the appendage with his heavy, rubber-soled boot. Her furious scream echoed through the alley.

He had only moments before she broke the cuffs. Hell, she might melt through them with acidic sweat for all he knew! Jasper wrapped one hand around her throat and stared down into her eyes. "So, pretty, what are you doin' here in London?"

She spat and he jerked his head. Good save, he heard the stuff sizzling on the pavement behind him. And she'd had her damn tongue in his mouth! He grinned to cover his horror. "You here with friends, or all on your lonesome?"

She snapped her elongated teeth in his direction.

"Now, luv, you know who I work for, and you know he'll be here in just moments. Any last words you want to share with me? It might get you sent to Hell rather than oblivion."

Her rage vanished and she smiled. Glancing up, he saw that she was working at the bindings, but they still had a bit of give.

Where the hell was the boss? Even one of the tigers would be welcome right about now! If they didn't come quickly, he'd have to cut and run, and somehow Jasper doubted that the damn wolf would be smart enough to follow his example.

As if on cue, he heard the muffled sound of a growl in the darkness of the alley, and he looked in Brutal's direction. Bad move.

The pain lanced through him before the warning came. Fire melted from his gut, radiating out to his chest... his groin. Dimly, Jasper realized something was very wrong. He kept his hold on the demon's throat, squeezing tightly even as he felt consciousness fading.

"Jasper!" The voice had morphed from human to animal, and as he slid backwards, falling slowly to the ground, a huge black form vaulted over him, latching onto the demon's exposed throat. Then Jasper realized what she'd done to him.

"Bitch." His voice was faint; a bare hint of humor laced it. He fumbled in his jacket pocket for his phone, but his fingers were too numb to feel the hard plastic. It slipped to the pavement with a clatter, leaving Jasper to watch helplessly as the wolf... man... grappled with the demon.

He wanted to tell Brutal to be careful, to get the hell out of the alley. Once she was free...

She broke from the bindings. Her hands dropped to her sides; huge talon-like claws emerged from the tips of her fingers. She was a fuckin' morph, a venomous, slippery, shape shifting monster. A single slap threw Brutal across the alley, but he scrambled quickly to his feet, wiping blood from his face.

With his hands.

Damn wolf had been telling the truth. Jasper had never seen anything like him.

Brutus Ballantine stood on his hind legs; shaggy black fur covered his massive body. He towered over the demon; his mass dwarfed her. He was a God damn fucking wolfman... just like in the movies.

The skin of his face was jet black under the sparse beard growing there. Golden eyes burned with fury, and his fangs were like ivory colored daggers. He struck back with talons nearly as long and fierce as the demon's claws.

Still, he was no match for the supernatural fury that was an enraged demon.

Groping for the phone, Jasper swallowed, wincing at the coppery flavor of blood in his mouth. He glanced down at his abdomen and promptly looked away. Thankfully, the venom seemed to be blocking the pain.

Or maybe he was in shock. Either way, Jasper O' Shea was in the deepest shit he'd ever stumbled into in his life.

* * *

Brutal flew backward, slamming into a brick wall, shaking mortar dust from his eyes even as he attacked again. She was fast and what she lacked in finesse, the demon made up for in wiles.

Fury nearly blinded him. He'd followed this monstrosity all across the world, and while there was no doubting that she was bad, she wasn't quite what he'd imagined. Except for the occasional appendage that sprouted from her body, she was far more human in appearance than Brutal himself.

He remembered the sick feeling of dread that had come over him when he'd first scented her. The old Roman wall had resonated with ancient power, heightening his already acute senses. When Jasper had accompanied her into the alley, he'd been torn between fear for the shifter and jealous fury when they began writhing against the wall.

He refused to look down at where Jasper lay bleeding. No one could survive that sort of injury, not for long. Not even a shifter. Her barbed tail had vanished from under Jasper's foot, reappearing at the front of her body even as she'd impaled the Siberian on its poisoned length. He'd shouted his warning too late, launching his attack as the tail had writhed and wiggled from the back of his torso like an obscene snake.

Brutal went for the injury one more time, rending with his hind feet, clawing at the gaping wound in her throat with his claws. They grappled, and as her noxious blood flowed over his hands and down his arms, her strength ebbed. One strong twist broke her neck. It wasn't a fatal injury, but put her down for the time being.

Soon enough, the break would heal; the nerves would knit back together. Now though, she stared at him helplessly, rage burning in her weirdly beautiful eyes. He wiped the caustic blood from his hands, leaving dark red streaks down the front of her coat. With difficulty, he fought down the temptation to spit in her face. Brutal stood upright, scenting the air and looking for possible witnesses to the fight. Only blind, dumb luck had prevented an innocent bystander from wandering into the carnage.

Jasper lay on his back, his eyes open and slightly glazed. Brutal lowered his great bulk to his knees, using every ounce of gentleness he possessed, fighting to keep his face blank as he examined the injury.

"There're a few things out of place down there..." Jasper's voice was breathless and wheezy. "...maybe you could give a hand with them?" Brutal planted a hand over the wound in an effort to stanch the flow of blood. He also did his best to shove a pink rope of intestine back into place.

No real point; the sharp smell of bile told him that Jasper's insides were perforated. Even if the Siberian could shape shift, he'd be incapable of healing such massive injuries. "Shut up. Where's your phone?"

Jasper's hand trembled violently as he gestured. He licked his lips, smearing blood onto them. "Push 'send.' Someone will come."

The phone slipped from Brutal's slippery grasp, but he caught it, following Jasper's instructions. There was no ring on the other end, no one picked up the call. His heart plummeted. "How the hell do you dial 911 around here?" he grumbled.

"Don't bother. We've got it covered."

Actually, Brutal found himself covered. A pitch black tiger melted from the shadows, hovering over the fallen body of the demon. A marmalade-colored tiger followed, taking position beside him. Brutal dropped into attack readiness, one hand

braced on the bloody pavement, protecting Jasper. He snarled, and the black tiger lifted a lip, displaying a massive white fang.

"David, Mya. Is that polite?" The voice was cultured and refined. Smooth and so very upper crust. The man was tall, excruciatingly handsome, and garbed in what had to be top tier designer clothing. He smiled, and Brutal growled a warning.

Two tiny horns emerged from the man's forehead.

"There's really no need to be alarmed. We're here for our friend." He approached; the camel-colored overcoat he wore flowed gently around his ankles. When Brutal tensed to attack, he found himself unable to move.

"You must be the wolf." The man examined Brutal's semi-human form. "Interesting. I don't recall seeing one like you in a very long time. You are a rather special man, Detective Ballantine." He carried a cane and used it to steady himself as he knelt fastidiously next to Jasper. Brutal struggled to free himself, but could only fight against the invisible bonds holding him.

"Stop fighting and I'll let you loose."

"Right!" He struggled some more.

"The name is Worth. Jedidiah Wormwood Worth, at your service." He looked across Jasper's body as he spoke. "Young Mr. O' Shea is in my employ. It seems we've got some work to do if we're to save him."

A low growl caught his attention. Jedidiah placed an elegant hand over Jasper's bleeding midsection, and then looked over at the tigers.

"Mya, dispose of her in the usual method. Otherwise we'll be seeing her again far too soon." He looked away, ignoring the wet sounds of violence as the tigers dismembered the demon. "She won't die, not completely. I'm rather fond of Princess; and she's only obeying her true nature."

Brutal stared steadily at the demon facing him. "Princess?"

"Don't you think it appropriate?" He smiled; a wicked, sensual expression. "Jasper love, are you still with us?"

The Siberian's eyelids fluttered, causing Brutal's heart to speed up. He was suddenly aware of the most intense feeling of relief he'd ever experienced. Warmth flooded his body, and unable to resist, he reached out, stroking Jasper's face as gently as he could with his giant paw. "Thought he was dead for sure."

"Only nearly." Before he could react, the demon gathered Jasper into his arms and stood. Brutal rose as well, and with a deep breath, felt himself shift back to his human form. He shivered, feeling the aftermath of the battle over every inch of his body.

"Gather your clothing, Detective." Jasper's blood was soaking into his exquisite clothing, but Worth didn't seem to notice.

He did so, bundling them into his arms, watching the demon every step of the way. The tigers had finished their work with Princess and lay on their bellies, watching their master with soulful, loving eyes.

There were no traces of the demon -- or her blood -- anywhere. She'd evaporated.

"Hold my arm, Detective."

He didn't want to, but when Jasper's eyes opened slightly, Brutal reached out, resting a bloodstained hand on Worth's arm. It was muscular under the fine cloth, and hot. So hot. And then he was falling, sideways and up, in a nauseous whirl of smoke and ozone. Brutal landed on his side and rolled over, bracing himself on hands and knees, coughing and shaking his head.

The tigers lay exactly as they'd been in the alley, down on their bellies. He had the distinct impression they were laughing at him.

Worth stood in the center of the room, Jasper in his arms. "David, please fetch towels and water for our friend." The black tiger rose and stalked from the room.

Brutal looked over the space. They were in a spacious parlor, exquisitely furnished and warmed by a fire. Books lined wooden shelves and the sofa and chairs were upholstered in expensive tapestries and leather. It was the classic gentleman's study, complete with a large desk and crystal bottles filled with fine spirits.

"Help yourself to a drink, Detective Ballantine. Once we've seen to Jasper's injuries, we'll get yours taken care of as well. No doubt you've taken a great deal of venom."

Uncertain what else to do, Brutal set his bundle of clothing on a chair, noticing that his hands were trembling. It could be the let down from the shift or from the fight itself. Or it could be fear. He could barely handle the decanter as he splashed expensive whisky into a glass and downed it quickly.

A naked man strode into the room, carrying towels and several bottles of water. His black hair and exotic features told Brutal that this was David the tiger. He spread towels over the sofa, and Worth laid Jasper down, then sat on the edge of the sofa facing him. With a flick of his hand, the demon cut away his tattered clothing.

Though he'd already seen the damage, Brutal's stomach twisted. The bleeding had slowed and the edges of the wound were knitting, but it was puffy and inflamed, foul with the stench of poison.

"He should be in a hospital." How could he recover here in a wealthy man's living room? He needed a doctor... who would need an explanation. There was no way of explaining those injuries and the venom oozing from Jasper's wound.

Worth smiled gently. "I've sealed the perforations in his organs. Unfortunately, his body will still need to expel the poison."

Worth held a steady hand over Jasper's belly, and even from several yards away, Brutal felt the heat radiating from the demon. A hand clasped his wrist, and for the first time that evening, anger showed on Worth's face.

A lovely woman stood next to him, pulling his hand away from Jasper. Their gazes met, clashed, and she looked away, over to David.

"Jedidiah, you've expended a great deal of energy today. After the attacks this morning... Mya is simply worried about your well-being. We both are." The male shifter appeared East Indian in heritage and spoke with a cultured British accent. At his words, Worth's expression softened slightly.

"We're under attack, Jedidiah. I'm afraid for you." She ran her hand from his wrist up his arm, and then gently stroked his face. She was tall and willowy, colored in shades of cream, gold and amber, just like her tiger. Her accent was American, but she was as foreign to Brutal as the other tiger.

Worth turned his face into her palm, kissing her gently. "I have energy to spare. I cannot allow our friend to remain sick and wounded, Mya."

She studied his face for a moment, and then nodded. "We'll stay on alert then. One of us will stay with you at all times."

"For now, I'd rather you patrol the house and property. I'm sure Jasper's wolf will be glad to remain with me as I tend to his wound."

She stared at Brutal, obviously unhappy with that arrangement. David stepped up, slipped his hand into hers and tugged at her gently.

"Let's move Jasper to a room upstairs. It will be more defensible than the ground level." Worth rose and glanced at Brutal. For the first time, he realized that save for Jedidiah Worth, every person in the room was naked. He didn't recall ever feeling so... normal.

"I'll take him to his room. Mya, please show the detective upstairs; he'll want to shower before he dresses again." In a puff of smoke, he and Jasper were gone, though Brutal was certain he could still scent them.

His hackles rose and he growled, provoking the female to snarl back at him. David chuckled. "All right then. Follow us; we'll get you settled in. Looks like you're part of the play group now." He led the small procession from the room and up a sweeping staircase. In moments, Brutal was under a stream of blistering hot water, watching as blood swirled down the drain and dozens of small cuts closed up and healed.

Chapter Six

Brutal paced the room, impatience gnawing at his gut. Not really impatience, but some amorphous emotion he really didn't want to confront. He'd emerged from his shower to find Jasper lying naked on the bed, the fully dressed demon on the bed next to him, his bloody hand still resting over the gaping wound in Jasper's gut. He still smelled blood, but the disturbing scent of gastric fluid was gone, and the sweet stench of venom was fading as well.

Brutal had discovered that once the venom was washed from his own wounds, they healed up easily. She'd intended to kill Jasper. They'd both been lucky. He still had not clue why Jasper had intervened in his case. He kept to the edge of the room, eyeing the bed warily.

"I want to know what the fuck is going on. He said you're his boss. How are you involved in this investigation?"

Worth simply lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. He spared a glance for Brutal and then went back into his semi-trance state.

"Is... Was she the killer I've been tracking? I don't remember the smell of her at any of the crime scenes."

Jedidiah Worth sighed and sat up, never letting his hand leave Jasper's injury. The Siberian shifter was pale as wax and deeply unconscious. Looking at him did something frightening to Brutal, so he didn't look, shifting his focus to the demon.

A demon. His... Jasper worked for a demon, a damn powerful one, at that. He didn't look like much, but Worth had frozen Brutal in his tracks back in the alley. It took a lot of juice to incapacitate Brutal Ballantine, and Worth had done it without any apparent effort.

He wanted to get close, to touch the shifter on the bed. He didn't know where the compulsion came from, just as he didn't understand this damn possessive jealousy. He gritted his teeth, took a deep breath and began pacing the room.

"I'm sure it took you by surprise," Worth noted, "Bonding so deeply and quickly to another shifter, one of another species. But I don't imagine there are many like you, unless you have siblings."

Brutal gave a quick jerk of his head and paused. Bonded? "Matings are for reproduction, like your tigers downstairs. Can't mate with another male."

Worth chuckled. "Not all paranormals are capable of reproduction. I imagine you've tried, but never succeeded, as you're a hybrid. Bonding is a far different thing." He rolled to his side, watching Brutal's restless journey back and forth across the room. "I couldn't possibly mate with a tiger shifter, but they certainly bonded to me. I had little choice in the matter."

"You... and them?" Brutal stopped and shook his head, choosing to ignore the implications of what Worth was saying. He knew that he wasn't the average shifter; there was something else lurking in his genetic code. It was something wilder than his mother had been. That's why she'd taken him far away from her pack. That's why she'd spent his earliest years training him to hide his otherness from everyone. When she left him to the mercy of the county, he was prepared to be alone and hide his true nature.

"We aren't talking about me," Worth said gently. "Do you know what your father was?"

Brutal glared and resumed pacing. He had a suspicion, but had always pushed it from his mind.

"Well?"

He turned, folding his arms defensively across his chest. He looked at Jasper's still form instead of at the demon. "Figure my mother was with a demon or hellhound or something equally nasty."

Worth chuckled. "Pardon me!"

That's right, he was a demon. He didn't look like much of a demon.

"Brutus, you are nothing so mundane. Your father was a full wolf. Your mother must have been running in her animal form when she came into heat. I'm not surprised she conceived, but I am surprised you survived. Her basic instinct would have been to kill you at birth. Your pack would have been dangerous as well. I'm amazed that she had the strength of will to keep you safe."

Brutal swallowed back the anger that welled up. "She gave me away."

"Of course she did. If she hadn't she might have killed you. She must have amazing strength of will. I'd love to meet her someday. Now you're an adult and well able to take care of yourself. And your partner."

He's not mine! He wanted to say it, but the words wouldn't form. Brutal stared at Jasper lying there so sick and weak. Every instinct he possessed urged him to touch, to hold the shifter, but he kept a distance between them.

"I've almost finished purging the toxin from his wound. Afterward, he'll need rest and care. I'll need rest as well; if you need anything, make yourself at home. Mya and David keep the kitchen well stocked."

Jedidiah Worth wasn't looking so well himself. Brutal moved closer and saw the hand resting on Jasper's belly was bright red and mottled. The heat from his body was beginning to falter. There was a pallor to his face that hadn't been there before. "You aren't purging the poison, you're absorbing it!"

"Hush!" He glanced at the door. "Last thing I need is Mya coming in to lecture me!" He grinned, transforming his face into the image of wicked sexuality. Brutal had always heard the devil's greatest weapon was his beauty. Now he understood what it meant. Jedidiah Wormwood Worth was the most dangerous being that Brutal had ever encountered, and he was also the most seductively handsome man he'd ever seen.

The better to steal your soul.

As he lifted his hand from Jasper's belly, it trembled. Worth appeared weak as he rose from the bed. Brutal remained by the wall as the demon walked slowly to the door.

"Why did you do it?"

Worth looked back at Brutal in question.

"Why did you hurt yourself to help him? You're a demon. You take your energy from the pain and suffering of others."

Worth straightened slightly. "Different demons power themselves differently. Princess feeds off a cocktail of sex and fear. I am energized by..." He broke off, looking slightly confused. "I used to draw my power from the struggles of the damned as I dragged them to Hell. I frequently needed to be in the presence of my Maker. I don't know what fuels me now." He turned away and Brutal thought perhaps Jedidiah wasn't accustomed to not having the answer to every question.

"Maybe you draw your energy from helping others." The voice came from the bed. Jasper lay awake, still weak and drawn, but alive. Brutal's heart gave a kick in his chest.

Worth threw back his head and laughed in delight. "Now there's a disturbing concept! I helped because Jasper is a damned fine investigator. And he makes me laugh. I am very happy to see you awake again, my friend." He left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. In moments, Brutal caught the soft voices of the tigers as he spoke with them.

"I have a hard time wrapping my head around the whole threesome thing." Brutal gazed at the door, unwilling to look at Jasper. There was no answer, so he finally turned. The Siberian was gazing at him through sleepy eyes. He dug deep and found his anger, wrapping it around himself like a protective cloak. "What the fuck were you doing following me? And how could you be stupid enough to follow that -- that bitch into a dark alley? Didn't you smell what she was?"

Jasper sighed and then winced, placing a hand gently over his belly. "I had to try and get information from her, Brutus. This thing is bad. You know that." He swallowed and took a deep breath. Talking was still difficult for him, and Brutal wanted to lay a hand over his mouth to make him stop. He couldn't bring himself to cross the room. "Besides, you were down there. I trusted you'd have my back."

"Trust? Damn it, Jasper, you were a one-night stand. A fuck. What the hell makes you think I'd have your back in a dark alley?"

Jasper raised a brow. "You were there, weren't you? Of course, I'd rather have had you at my back in a different context." He gave a weary, yet lascivious grin.

And just like that, Brutal was hard and aroused. He turned away and cursed, pacing the floor again. What was happening to him? Hell, it had already happened. So how the hell did he fix it and get away from this insanity?

"Brutal. Just stop the drama. Come lie down next to me. It's been a long day."

Brutal stopped and looked over where the shifter rested. The bed was large and looked welcoming. He glanced out the window; night had long since fallen. How many hours had passed since the fight in the alley? He was hungry, but had no desire to eat. Instead, he moved closer to the bed, picking up one of several bottles of water on the bedside table. He opened it and quickly drained it.

Jasper. He'd lost so much blood.

Brutal set the empty bottle down and opened another, moving cautiously to where Jasper lay propped against snow white pillows. Awkwardly, he held the water to his parched lips, reaching out to catch a stray drop of water as it rolled down the shifter's chin. "Do you have to... you know... use the bathroom?"

"Toilet. And no. I'm dehydrated still. Don't think I want to try moving yet."

Brutal reached down and moved Jasper's hand from his bare belly, doing his best not to react to the red, angry wounds. She'd gouged him horribly. It was healing, but Jasper would probably be down for days. "What the hell's going on here, Jasper? You work for a demon who's mated to a pair of tigers. According to what I read, Worth used to represent some pretty bad characters. Now he only takes charity and civil rights cases."

"You have no idea. He truly represented the underworld." Jasper looked up at him. His face was drawn with fatigue. "He's not mated with them. They're mated to each other. They both bonded with him. As far as they're concerned, he belongs to them. He takes only charity cases because it makes David and Mya happy. Making them happy seems to entertain him."

"You're kidding me." He sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to jostle the injured man. "They have that much power over him?"

"Yeah, but make no mistake who the dominant is in their little threesome."

Brutal grinned. "I'd say the chick."

Jasper smiled and shook his head. "He'd do anything for them. Anything. Even walk through Hell." His face sobered. "He'd even leave Hell for them if that's what they needed. But at the same time, he calls the shots."

"He's in exile. Because of them." Brutal was amazed as realization dawned. The damned demon had given up all he was for those two. That had to be love, yet how could a creature like him love so... selflessly? Slowly, he crawled onto the bed, lying between Jasper and the door. He toed off his boots. "So what's going on now? You guys are on alert."

Jasper didn't answer right away. For a moment, Brutal thought he was asleep, but when he turned his head to look at the Siberian, he found blue eyes focused on him. Well, one blue eye, one parti-colored eye.

"We think your killer is coming after Jedidiah."

"What? Why do you think that?" Brutal sat up. He slipped out of his leather jacket and let it slip on the floor. He lay back down, feeling marginally more comfortable.

"There's a ritual involved in the killings, right?" Jasper shifted to the side a bit, freeing more space for Brutal. "Would you just get undressed and into the bed? I'm not going to molest you."

Brutal started to swear and then just gave in, slipping out of the rest of his clothing. He slipped off his shorts and slid under the covers. It felt odd. He'd never shared a bed before, except for sex. Those hook ups had always been anonymous and short-lived. No one ever stayed the night. He wasn't certain he could cope with sleeping with another person in the bed.

"No ritual. No pentagrams or anything of the sort." He folded his arms behind his head, letting grisly images run through his mind. Normally, he sectioned those images away, hiding them behind mental walls.

"What I mean is he followed a personal ritual. He picked his victim, a paranormal, often a shifter, right? Someone with a lot of personal power. He stalked them, cornered them and killed them."

"Most, if not all serial killers follow a pattern."

"True. That is true." Jasper rolled slightly toward Brutal, and then gave a gasp of pain. "But did your killer bathe in the shower of their blood? Did he consume them body and soul? Didn't he always seek out places of natural concentrated power to perform his heinous acts?"

Without thinking, Brutal reached out, resting a hand over Jasper's maimed belly. He spread his hand wide, covering the injury. The shifter sighed and rolled onto his back. The touch seemed to comfort him, which made Brutal feel good. It was nice to give comfort for once. "He was gathering souls?" With an effort, he returned to the topic.

"He's feeding himself. He's making himself stronger so he can defeat the most powerful demon on Earth."

"Jedidiah? He's the most powerful?" The idea that the urbane, handsome lawyer was the boogie man was laughable. "He's too damn pretty to be that big a badass."

Jasper glanced at him. "You don't know demons well, do you?"

Brutal shrugged.

"As a general rule, the nastier looking ones are lower on the totem pole. They use their appearance as an offense. It's the pretty ones like Jedidiah that you have to watch out for. He once tore a vampire to shreds inside Last Call."

"But Last Call is warded against violence!"

It was Jasper's turn to shrug. He did so and then grimaced in discomfort. "No human or paranormal is powerful enough to shut him down. Even now, when he's exiled, he's still formidable. If a demon was seeking to make a name for himself..."

"He'd go after the most notorious gunman in town. And you're in the line of fire."

"Not unwillingly. He may be a demon, but he's a good man. One of the best I've met."

"So your boss is on the side of the angels now, eh?"

Jasper gave a soft chuckle. "Wouldn't go that far. Not with his past. Nor with his sex life. He is what he was created to be. A demon."

They were quiet then, lying there in the rapidly darkening room. Outside, Brutal could hear the sounds of pedestrians on the streets and cars whizzing by. He missed the Pacific Northwest. He missed the miles and miles of forest and mountains where he could run for days before meeting a human. He hated cities. Always had.

But there was something about London. It housed a power that was rare and sacred. He understood why Jedidiah chose to live in this city. He was also beginning to see the pattern the killer was taking in his route to the finish line. If that demon came here, it would be a blood bath. If he came while both Jedidiah and Jasper were out of commission, it would be a disaster. But between him and the tigers, they might be able to compensate.

Surely they could protect the others. For the first time in his life, Brutal was grateful for the wildness that was his heritage. For so long, he'd hated the brutish half-form he slipped into when desperation hit. He'd never been able to call it deliberately, and he'd never been able to shut it down when he no longer needed it. The beast left him when it chose to.

He wasn't human; he wasn't werewolf. He was something completely unique. Jasper had seen the monstrosity, but hadn't reacted with fear or disgust. Of course, he'd been bleeding his guts out at the time.

"Jasper?" he whispered. When there was no answer, he turned his head, gazing at the shifter's still face in the weak light of the streetlamps. He slept, his breathing steady and deep. "How can I feel for you when I don't even know you? Why do you understand me so well?"

The sleeping shifter didn't hear him, which was the only reason Brutal had been able to summon the courage to speak. He closed his eyes, willing himself to sleep, leaving his hand resting over the slowly healing wound.

Chapter Seven

Jasper slowly surfaced from a dream, a good dream. In it, he wasn't alone. He wasn't cold and envious as the moans and cries of three lovers floated to his ears from a room far away.

He was wrapped in the warmth of a body much larger than his. He was curled on his side; a large body spooned around him, a rough yet gentle hand resting over the healing injury on his stomach. A hard heated body part was pressed up against his ass. He grinned and tilted his head, listening as Brutal began to rise up from what was obviously a pleasant dream. The wolf moaned, thrust halfheartedly against Jasper, and then woke in a flash. He was on immediate alert, his body going still and his erection fading quickly.

"Brutus?"

He raised up on his elbow, scenting the air, sharp eyes scanning the dark room.

"It's all clear. You're just waking in a strange place."

He let out a breath and lowered himself to the mattress, returning his warmth to Jasper's rapidly cooling backside. His hand came around again, cradling Jasper's belly. This time, a part of Jasper rose up to meet him. When the edge of Brutal's rough hand brushed his cockhead, it felt like electricity shooting through his body.

Brutal snorted in amusement. "Yesterday you had your guts spilling out on the pavement. Today you're back to being a horny dog."

Jasper reached back, draping his arm over Brutal's. It was the same way the wolf had held him in place after that night at Last Call. He pressed his hand over Brutal's, guiding it away from his belly and up to his chest. After a moment's urging, he continued on his own, awkwardly exploring Jasper's body.

"Don't want to hurt you." Brutal's whisper was gruff. He wasn't a man who was accustomed to gentleness. His calloused fingertips played over Jasper's nipples, visiting one, and then the other. He pinched lightly, causing Jasper to gasp in delight.

"You won't hurt me. We'll just go slow and easy." He looked back to meet the other man's dark gaze. He parted his legs slightly, letting Brutal's erect length slip between his thighs. "You get to drive this time. Just remember..."

"Slow and easy. Yeah, I get it."

Didn't much sound like he liked that idea, but his cock was gliding like silk between Jasper's legs, stroking next to his balls, putting a delicious pull on the tender skin of his groin. Brutal clasped Jasper's cock in a warm grip, stroking in time to their movement. When Jasper started to rock back to meet the other man, Brutal pinned his hips in place.

"All you've gotta do is lie there. Let me do the work."

He was catching on.

Brutal was busy back there behind him. His free hand wandered Jasper's body, learning every sharp angle and lithe muscle. Firm lips traveled the length of his neck, nipping the tender skin of Jasper's throat. He explored Jasper's ears and jaw, and then turned his head, kissing him deeply and with surprising passion.

Jasper arched and flexed, anxious to increase the friction, to hurry things along, but the wolf had control and wasn't going to let it go this time. His concern for Jasper's injuries kept him reined in.

He moved away, prompting Jasper to groan in frustration until his legs were splayed around Brutal's massive shoulders.

His first lick was tentative, but Jasper's hips jerked in reaction. Powerful hands clamped down, holding him in place. Brutal looked up at him, a slightly wicked gleam in his eye.

"A little payback here, eh Brutus?"

He saw the white gleam of a smile and heard the wolf's deep chuckle. He didn't hear anything after that, except for his own harsh gasps and the pounding of his heart.

He heard the wet lapping of Brutal's tongue as he laved his balls, and the small noises that came when the wolf swallowed his cock, deep-throating him with consummate skill.

Jasper shut his eyes, one hand buried in Brutal's hair, the other clutching the sheets, hearing them tear as his short claws emerged and receded. He caught the musky scent of Brutal's sweat, the sharp, sweet aroma of his arousal. All the while, Brutal never set a steady pace, never gave him quite enough to tip him over the edge. His ass clenched with need, his balls were heavy and aching for more attention.

He whimpered, and didn't even feel silly as he did so. "There's lube in the drawer..."

Brutal stopped, letting Jasper's rigid cock slide from his mouth. He licked his flushed lips and shook his head. "You aren't ready. Don't want you getting hurt." He bent back down, his tongue flickering over Jasper's perineum.

"I'll be fine. Just fuck me, Brutus!" He twisted in Brutal's powerful grip, reaching for the edge of the drawer. He was jerked back into position.

"You want something up your ass?" The wolf came slowly to his knees; his massive cock swayed hypnotically above Jasper's groin.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea, not yet, anyway.

Brutal looked down at him and grinned wickedly. "You should see how big and round your eyes are right now, Red Riding Hood. Aren't you ready for the big bad wolf?"

Jasper looked from Brutal's massive organ, up to his face, and then back. "I don't remember it being so... huge."

"Wasn't any different the other night. You were just in better shape."

He clasped himself, trailing the tip of his cock through Jasper's wiry pubic hair. He trailed slick pre-come over the skin of his belly and up onto his silky foreskin.

"That's how you got your nickname, right? After that monster."

Brutal slowly lowered himself, dragging his cock over Jasper's reddened shaft. His eyes dropped shut and he reached down, clasping them both tightly together.

"Yeah. I fucked a local reporter. He went around telling people that my name should be changed from Brutus to Brutal because sex with me was rough. Didn't keep him from trying to get it every chance he got. When I told him he could go fuck himself, he ran a story about one of my cases and called me Detective Brutal Ballantine. Sort of a little typo, he said. The name stuck."

"And you hate it." Jasper arched, running his hand down their combined lengths, squeezing as he came to the tips. Both men shivered.

"Wouldn't you?" Brutal spit on a finger and reached down, playing at Jasper's hole. He pressed in, toying with the tight muscles there. He pumped lightly, and Jasper wrapped his other hand around their cocks. He was pinned in place as Brutal began to slide the length of his shaft over Jasper's.

"How'd you like to be a cop with a nickname like mine?" He drove in deeper, causing Jasper to groan. "Plus I never hid the fact that I was gay. Hiding the werewolf thing was enough of a challenge."

Another finger glided in, giving Jasper a bit of a burn.

"You having a little trouble following the conversation, Jasper?" Brutal's fingers were brushing over his prostate, teasing and nearly driving Jasper insane. He didn't bother to answer; he began to pump their cocks, tilting his ass to urge Brutal deeper and faster. He opened his eyes, looking up at the wolf between his legs. Brutal was up on his knees, his already dark skin was flushed. The muscles in his belly flexed as he rocked, working Jasper up toward his climax. He was completely at the wolf's mercy. Or was he?

The pull in his groin told Jasper that he was close, so close to tipping over the edge. His breathing grew raspy but Brutal held him in place. Sweat began to bloom over his chest and belly.

"Brutal." He spoke gently, but firmly. The wolf tore his gaze away from Jasper's body and looked up at him. "Brutal, I want you to come. Now."

Brutal snarled; his entire body shuddered uncontrollably. His back arched and he cried out, matching the frantic pace that Jasper was setting with his sweaty hands on their cocks. His fingers drove deep into Jasper's ass, pressing... holding...

And they were there together in a blinding rush. Semen spilled in twin ribbons onto Jasper's sweaty belly, and Brutal froze above his body, a statue of living ecstasy. He started on a choked whine and finished on a roar. Jasper lay panting, his hands still clasped over their joined cocks, feeling them soften as the blood left their shafts. He licked his lips, smiling when he caught a salty fleck of Brutal's semen at the corner of his mouth. He felt a final shudder wrack his body and he went limp, his hands sliding down to rest on the fine cotton of the sheets.

Brutal knelt there between his legs, head hanging down, looking drained, exhausted and oddly enough, serene. Jasper had been sure the big wolf would be furious with his hijacking their pleasure. Brutal crawled to the side, lying down next to Jasper. He slung an arm over Jasper's chest, once again holding him in place.

"I hate that you can yank me into my climax."

"There's different ways of taking and giving, Brutus. Brute force is just one of them. Trust and submission is another. I couldn't have done that if you hadn't let me."

"Fuck." Brutal rolled to his back, leaving Jasper feeling cold and untouched. "I feel like an animal in a trap."

Jasper closed his eyes tightly. From the moment he'd awakened to find Brutal and Jedidiah discussing him, he'd been luring the wolf to his side like the wild animal he was. He was trying to gentle the beast, not tame him. Now Brutal felt trapped and manipulated.

"I'm sorry, Brutus. I don't want you to feel trapped." He gingerly sat up, pleased that his muscles were sore, but not painful. He stood unsteadily.

"Where are you going?"

He looked over his shoulder and summoned up a smile. He glanced down at the sheen of semen on his skin. "Bathroom. Need to wash up." He walked unsteadily to the room, closing the door behind him. Jasper turned on the water in the shower and

stepped in. Like all the rooms in Jedidiah's house, this was luxurious and sensual. The shower was more than big enough for two, but Brutal didn't join him. He leaned against the tiled wall and felt the water pelt against his skin, stinging the fresh scars on his abdomen.

He was tired, hungry and suddenly dispirited. Maybe that was why he felt like a child needing to be held.

Jasper was fairly certain the wolf wouldn't be in his bed when he came out of the bathroom. This time, he wouldn't go chasing him down. This time, he'd let him go.

* * *

The water in the bathroom was still running when Brutal left the room in search of the kitchen. Jasper was healing quickly, and the process needed fuel. The least he could do was to make sure the shifter was fed before he left.

He wasn't running away. True, he'd had a flash of panic for a moment there; a feeling of need held him at Jasper's side as surely as a leash around his neck. But it had waned once the Siberian had left the room. He had a demon to hunt and a case to close. Brutal Ballantine was a hunter; he wasn't going to sit in this house waiting for the enemy. He'd trap the bastard, take him out before the demon even knew he'd been cornered. That was the point of getting ahead of him.

It was early morning, and still dark outside. On his way to the kitchen, he'd passed a room he assumed was Jedidiah's. Mya had been prowling the hall in her tiger form, sending him a baleful gaze as he passed. Once he got into the darkened lower story, a black on black form paced along next to him, smoothly shifting into a tall dark man.

"Leaving so soon?" David walked along beside him, looking at him curiously. All he wore was a golden wedding band.

"Kitchen. Jasper needs food. Then I'm heading out."

David sighed, leading him into the room. When the lights came up, Brutal saw that the kitchen was warm and vintage in appearance, but was filled with high tech

appliances. He headed for the refrigerator, pulling it open and scanning the contents. "What's he like to eat?"

"Jasper? Oh, he'll eat most anything. There's some leftover take-away in boxes."

Brutal pulled the white containers out and began spooning the contents onto a sturdy white plate. David leaned against a counter, watching him. "You can't take it out yourself. Neither Mya nor I could do it, and we're accustomed to fighting demon sorts."

"You aren't me."

David laughed. "And you aren't us. I've seen your half-form, Brutus. It's intimidating, but when our big bad shows up with a small army at his back, you'll be outnumbered."

"He never had accomplices before. I'd have known." He frowned and faced the tiger.

"Oh, he's got minions; make no mistake about that. Princess was one of his lesser followers. Mya sent back a fire demon while you were sleeping. We were almost too late to Jasper's call yesterday because a half-dozen had manifested in Jedidiah's office."

"He's trying to weaken you."

"Or gauge our strength. And right now, we're at a crisis level. Jasper won't be back in form for a few days, and Jedidiah is still weakened from yesterday's fight. It was foolish for him to heal the Siberian."

Brutal felt the hair raise on his neck. Anger boiled in his gut. "He was hurt doing his job."

"And in normal circumstances, I'd have no issue with Jedidiah doing such a challenging piece of magic. But now..." He shook his head. "It endangers us all."

"It endangers your mate."

David's gaze dropped, sliding to the side. "She is all to me, Detective."

"More than Jedidiah?" he asked quietly.

Tears came to David's eyes, and then he blinked, regaining control. "Jedidiah means more to me than life. But she is with child, Brutus. We are almost extinct. Nothing comes before Mya and her baby."

David's priorities were clear. So were Brutal's. His job wasn't to play nursemaid to an ailing shifter, even if there was a connection between them. Nor was it to bodyguard a frighteningly powerful demon. His job was to catch a killer. "What's this demon's objective in coming after Worth?"

David pushed away from the counter and prowled the room, peering out windows and scenting the air. "Isn't it obvious? When Jedidiah left the underworld, he left a huge power vacuum. But the only way for another to truly step into that vacuum is to eliminate him."

Brutal began to search for utensils. He fished out a fork and knife and wrapped them in a towel. "I don't particularly care what happens in Hell. What's it mean out here?"

"When he was cast out, we all thought that Jedidiah's power would slowly wane. Instead, he's retained it, and picked up a few new tricks as well. He doesn't talk about it, but Mya and I think..." He glanced at the door, and then looked back at Brutal. "We think there are other powers at work. Powers that want something from Jedidiah."

Other powers... If the demon formerly worked for Hell, maybe he really *was* on the side of the angels now. The idea nearly made Brutal laugh. No wonder Worth didn't want to talk about it!

He grabbed the loaded plate and headed for the door, flicking off the lights. He paused, not turning around to look back at the tiger. "So what's it take to kill a demon?"

"You can't." David was a dark shadow in the room. The tiger growled behind his urbane accent. "You can send them back. That's all."

"So Princess?"

David nodded. "She'll be back eventually. The only person who can kill -- really kill -- a demon is another demon."

"And our demon upstairs is knocked off his ass."

"So to speak."

"Great. Just great." Brutal left David in the darkness. When he looked back, he thought he saw a huge black tiger slinking from the room. Maybe it was just a shadow.

Chapter Eight

He hunted in the darkness of London's streets.

Brutal kept to the shadows, watching as the mundane blended into the magical. He caught glimpses of moonsprites dancing at the edges of his vision. He passed a church, where an elaborately carved Green Man leered at him as he walked by. A vampire gazed at him through mournful eyes and then stalked him for several blocks like a desperate panhandler.

Immune to its glamour, he turned and snarled, watching it slip away into the fog. As the sun rose, the fog gained an ethereal glow before it finally burned away. Feeling heavy with fatigue and frustration, Brutal headed toward his hotel, ready for a shower and a nap. Once he'd rested and eaten, he spent the following day and night on the hunt.

He kept expecting to see Jasper at the corner of his vision, tagging along at a discreet distance, but when he turned to look, Brutal saw only early morning commuters hurrying to resume their daily routine.

His killer followed a routine, but if he was here in London, he'd strayed from the norm. He wasn't hunting near any of the powerful sites Brutal had marked on his mental map of the city. He hadn't been at Last Call where the paranormals gathered. Brutal hadn't seen any evidence of demons running amok. In fact, he hadn't seen any evidence of demons at all.

A fact which left him with a nagging sensation of dread in the pit of his stomach.

Jasper hadn't left his thoughts, not for a single minute. Guilt at leaving him behind without saying goodbye gnawed at his subconscious. He'd hoped to prevent needless deaths by diverting the demon before it arrived in London. If he headed it off before it reached Worth and the others, then true disaster could be averted. Mya's

unborn baby would be safe, as well as Jasper and David. If the bad things were trying to kill Jedidiah, then it was probably in the best interest of humanity to make sure Jedidiah remained healthy and happy.

Brutal's plan was sound; the demon wasn't expecting him. Now if the damned creature would just cooperate!

He bought lunch at a small outdoor stand and ate his take-away in a small park, watching... always watching and thinking. Generally, his thoughts strayed from the killer to Jasper.

Brutal had come to accept Jedidiah's opinion that he'd bonded with the shifter. The demon had been right about something else. Though Brutal viewed himself as gay, when a female was in heat, the need to reproduce overwhelmed him. Yet he'd never produced any offspring. His drive to be with Jasper was something else completely. He craved Jasper's presence; he ached to hear his Cockney-laced Irish accent. The scent of the man was like a punch in the gut. When he was with him, he wanted -- needed -- to touch him. When he'd awakened with the Siberian wrapped in his arms, for the first time in his life, Brutal had felt like he had family.

He rolled the paper from his lunch into a ball and tossed it into a nearby trashcan. From seemingly nowhere, pigeons flocked to the can, hustling about, scurrying after the fallen crumbs. Brutal looked around the little park. It was one of many in London, decorated with rigidly trimmed bushes and perfectly tended flowerbeds. A statue dominated the square, and as soon as the pigeons gave up on leftovers, they flew as one to the statue, perching on the head and shoulders of the unfortunate creation until it was lost from view.

A feeling of foreboding settled over him. They weren't in the trees or out in the hidden places in the park; they were right there at the head of the most prominent feature in the park.

The demon wouldn't bother with hunting or finding a victim at Last Call. When he arrived at his destination, he'd be ready. He'd been devouring souls. He wouldn't come alone.

Brutal fished out his phone and did a quick web search.

The last crime scene he'd investigated in person had been in Poland, and then he'd flown to England, thinking the killer would continue to the west. There were no suspicious killings in Germany or France. With a sinking feeling, Brutal visited the secure board set up for the tiny task force. Since the group consisted only of Brutal, his captain, and an Interpol agent, he rarely used it.

When he logged in and checked, he groaned. Stockholm, Sweden. Oslo, Norway. The Goddamned Orkney Islands! It hadn't stopped; the son of a bitch was coming from the north. It was already here.

Brutal snapped the phone closed and began to run. He could take the Tube to Chelsea, but somehow, he was sure he'd get there faster on foot. Brutal had the sick feeling that every minute counted.

* * *

Jasper ran a hand over his stomach, marveling at the fact that he'd been so very close to death. The puckered scars had lingered until he'd found the energy to summon the change. Shifting had knit and smoothed away the final remnants of the wound.

The same couldn't be said of his heart. That felt like crap. When he returned to his room to find a tray of food on the bed, he'd known Brutal was gone. He hadn't needed David to tell him the detective had gone hunting on his own. Jasper could only pray that he'd be unsuccessful.

Jedidiah was up and around as well, but like Jasper, he wasn't up to full strength yet. Not that it mattered. Jedidiah at half-power was a fearsome prospect. He fully intended to return to routine, visiting his offices and projecting an image of blithe ignorance of the threat. Mya was deeply unhappy with the situation, preferring to retreat to the mansion where they could choose their battleground. David was everywhere at once it seemed, prowling the mansion and the grounds.

Jasper opted to stay high, stalking the roof of the great mansion. He alternated between his Siberian and human forms, often lying for hours on end, watching the streets below. On occasion, he caught the distant, tantalizing scent of wolf on the air, too

faint to really lock onto. A myriad of scents came up from the Thames, which ran just yards away from the semi-secluded property. It was a miracle that this old house existed in a city as crowded as London, but he supposed Jedidiah had pulled some otherworldly strings to keep his property through the centuries.

He occasionally pulled out his phone, dialing the number, but never sending the call. He ached inside, but Brutal wasn't ready for domestication of any sort.

Besides, something bad was just on the horizon; he was content to keep the overconfident wolf out of the picture. Brutal truly had no idea what a powerful demon could do, and this one would be hopped up on stolen energy like a junkie on meth. He'd be dangerous and unpredictable.

While Jedidiah readied himself for a day at the office, Jasper lay at the very edge of the steep roof like a furry gargoyle, watching David pace the grounds below. Just on the other side of a green, lush garden, traffic passed by in an unrushed flow. Even the most invasive aspects of the outside world couldn't intrude on this magical spot.

Jasper felt a slight pressure in the atmosphere, a bare hint of a warning, before the world turned wavy and red. Pressure built in his skull and he fought for consciousness. He scrambled, scooting out of the reach of whatever the hell was there, giving a distressed yelp as he rolled down the slight pitch of the roof, scrabbling at the slate tiles of the roof.

He wasn't under attack; the demon was just that powerful.

Down below, David was running toward the house, shouting soundlessly, and Jasper panted, draped around a convenient chimney. When he'd recovered enough to move, he rose and bounded up the roof to the small patio that was nestled up there, racing to the door, shifting on the fly.

He was naked, without anything he could call a weapon beyond his brain and his body. Running down the stairs, he came to a landing, pausing to listen. There were no voices, but the definite sounds of a struggle carried on the air.

He shifted again, moving as swiftly as possible, finally pausing at the door to Jedidiah's private suite. It had been torn from the hinges. Not too ominous; there wasn't

a single resident in the house who couldn't tear a door from its hinges. He glanced inside the empty room and inwardly winced. It looked as though a bomb had detonated. Jedidiah was a lover of the finer things in life, and the damage was incalculable.

Following his nose, Jasper worked his way through the wreckage, sneezing at the pungent scent of spilled brandy. He exited at the far end of the room, rushing down a back stair leading to yet another corridor.

In the year he'd lived here, he'd never been in this part of the house. It was unrestored, dark with age and heavy with time. He ran through corridors, past shut off rooms and found himself at the servant's entrance to the grand ballroom. The door was ajar, so he pushed his way in, appalled at the carnage that already filled the room.

Jasper paused briefly, chose his target and ran into the mess, never once questioning his loyalty.

* * *

Brutal found the great gate at the front of the mansion locked, so he nimbly climbed it, already catching the stench of blood on the air. Hitting the other side at a run, he took a moment to look around the manicured grounds, searching for shadows of watchers, of other dangers which might be lurking.

The front doors of the mansion stood open in invitation and he rushed in, heading immediately up the grand curving staircase. In moments, he began to see signs of battle; broken vases, shattered windows and holes punched through the walls. The marble floors were pocked and covered with scorch marks. Blood was spattered and streaked along walls.

He heard an unearthly shriek and assumed it was one of the tigers, so he ran in the direction of the sound, quickly shedding the most constrictive of his clothing. He climbed several stories, finally locating the center of the battle.

Inside, it was difficult to tell friend from foe. A dim reddish haze filled the air, as though blood had taken a gaseous form. The shifters were in their animal forms, their

glossy fur matted with blood, plowing through the most hideous creatures that Brutal had ever seen in his life.

They worked as a team, ruthlessly and efficiently. One tiger engaged a demon, and while it was distracted, Jasper darted in from the rear, ripping hamstrings, tendons, bringing them to the ground.

At the far end of the room, Jedidiah stood squared off against another man. He wasn't overly large or impressive to look at, beyond the tail lashing around his naked hips and the cloven hooves that served as his feet.

Oh, and the monstrous, deformed phallus jutting from his groin. That was lovely.

The men stood in apparent conversation, yet the atmosphere in the room steadily mounted, until Brutal's ears felt like they were going to bleed. The floor began to vibrate, cracks running across the floor and up into the walls.

When he could no longer cope, the windows burst outward and a huge crystal chandelier swayed dangerously.

The demon laughed in delight while Jedidiah took a step backward. There was a loud popping noise, and another pair of hideous demons manifested, blocking Brutal's path. With a snarl, he reached out, simply wrenching the head from one and planting a foot into the belly of the other. It was a moment's work to finish the second one.

He looked at himself and realized that the mist in the air truly was blood. He swallowed when he began to recognize some of the scents. He caught the blood trace of several of the victims from earlier murders. Horror rose up to his throat. The demon had indeed showered in the blood of those he'd killed. Now the room was filled with a rainstorm of their gore.

He swallowed down his nausea and shifted, deciding to follow Jasper's strategy. As Jedidiah engaged the main demon, he darted in, heading for the back of his legs, hoping to distract him enough to give Jedidiah an edge. Before he reached the battling demons, a huge brute stepped into his path, leering and grinning through bloody jaws.

This one wasn't so easy, particularly when he was on four paws. Brutal leapt at the throat of the minion, tearing it open and then yelping as the caustic stuff filled his mouth.

He shifted, spitting and choking, but all the while he was on the demon, harrying it until it bled out on the floor. Noxious smoke rose from the melting marble, and Brutal shifted again, gliding along the edge of the room, intent on his prey.

He dashed in, slashed at the main demon's bare thighs, and found himself hurtling toward the far wall. He slammed into the wall where he lay for a moment, gathering his scattered wits.

Had Jedidiah done that? He rolled to his feet, glaring at the demon. To his satisfaction, the invader was staggering, blood streaming from the wounds Brutal had inflicted.

Obviously, Worth didn't want his help. Tough shit.

He checked Jasper, found him engaged with some sort of creature that fought with tentacles. He'd tear at one while several others lashed at his body. One wrapped around his abdomen, lifting him into the air and waving him about.

Brutal launched at the demon, gutting it and then getting out of the way. It slid to the floor, its grip loosening on the body of the shifter. Jasper landed on his feet, shook a spray of blood and other fluids into the air and dashed up to Brutal, licking his face joyfully.

In a heartbeat he was gone, leaping onto the back of yet another demon.

He was focusing his energy on Mya's opponents. David was also distracted by his pregnant wife, so when an attack came at him from the side, he missed it, taking a blow to the ribcage. He crouched, snarled and ripped into this newest enemy.

Where were they all coming from? Every time one fell, another took its place. All around, Brutal smelled the familiar scents of the dead. That's when understanding hit.

He shifted. "Jasper... how many? How many have there been?" A demon rushed him... a small one with huge dangling breasts running down the length of its abdomen. Underneath hung an erect penis.

He aimed a single punch at its throat, crushing the windpipe. In a second, Jasper was at his side, naked and bloody. "Gotta say, none of these bastards can fight worth shit. But they're crushing us." He glanced worriedly at the end of the room. "He's just trying to keep us away from the boss."

Brutal shook his head. "Boss doesn't seem to want help."

"Yeah, I saw that. He tossed you like a stick." Jasper ducked then, and barely missed a shard of glass flying through the air.

"How many?" Brutal growled.

"I'd say a dozen, maybe more. Why?" He was looking anxiously at the tigers; they were separated again. Two demons harassed David, leaving Mya with a creature that seemed to be oozing some sort of nasty fluid. She stayed well out of its range.

"These are the victims. He's using the souls of the victims to fight with."

"Shit." Jasper suddenly leaped, scooping up a long piece of metal from the floor and dashing in Mya's direction. The demon had her against a wall with no possible retreat. Brutal watched in frozen horror as Jasper threw himself at the beast. He shoved the metal into its body, skewering it in place against the wall. Everywhere the viscous fluid touched him, huge blisters rose on his skin.

The orange tiger roared her anger and bolted back toward her mate. Brutal was at Jasper's side, examining the burns.

"Don't touch! It'll heal over when I shift." Jasper stepped away from Brutal's hands.

"Why the hell did you do that?"

Jasper just looked at him in confusion. "She's my teammate, Brutal. I've got her back. And there's the baby..." He suddenly pushed Brutal and a small demon shot past them, slamming into the plaster of the wall.

"I'd say that's number thirteen. How many more to go?"

"Fifteen murder victims that I know of." They turned back to the room to see that only two minions remained fighting with the tigers. Jasper smoothly shifted into his Siberian form, darting in to hamstring first one, and then the other.

The tigers finished quickly, and then shifted. The four of them converged, and then turned toward where the main event was taking place. The pressure in the room was mounting again, and without warning, Brutal shifted, rising up nearly seven feet, his form dwarfing every other person in the room. He reached down, gently stroking Jasper's cheek. "This ends."

"Brutal! No!"

He coiled, launching himself in the direction of the two demons. He slammed into the attacker with the force of a tank, rolling and scrambling, feeling the lash of its tail laying open his flesh. The demon looked amazingly harmless, and he remembered what Jasper had told him about the appearance of a demon even as its body began to heat, burning his hands and everywhere he touched its skin.

He fought to maintain his hold as his skin sizzled, burning down into flesh. He heard his name being called, felt hands on his body, and then he was clear of the demon, rolling and crumbling in a pile of singed flesh and flowing blood.

In his place stood Jedidiah, who had the other demon in a tight hold. His clothing was smoldering and smoke rose around the two of them. They swayed in a macabre dance, and complete silence dominated the room. The pressure began to build once again.

"Mya! All of you! Out! NOW!" Jedidiah's eyes burned red. His horns had emerged through the wavy tangle of his hair.

They scrambled to obey without question, running through the slick, gore-splattered room, tripping and stumbling over the wreckage of furniture. The room began to vibrate again, the floor began to sway, and Mya went down, falling hard.

She scrambled to her feet only to fall again, and to Brutal's horror, the giant chandelier finally gave way, falling in what seemed to be slow motion from the high ceiling. It crashed to the room in a glittering explosion, shards of crystal filling the air like a lethal ice storm.

From the doorway, David turned, screamed and started back in the direction of his mate. An explosion rocked the room and Brutal leapt with every last ounce of

strength that he had, tackling the pregnant shifter and covering her with his massive body.

Through the chaos of what was surely the end of times, Brutal could hear only his own screams as every inch of his skin was pierced and slashed by millions of tiny knives.

And then all went to merciful oblivion.

Chapter Nine

Jasper lifted his head and blinked as dust and debris rolled down into his face. He shook his head and tried to rise, and then cursed as he fell back down onto a disturbingly soft surface.

"Mya..." The voice was full of agony. David? Under him? Jasper scrambled off the tiger's body, scanning quickly. Thankfully, they both seemed to have avoided any major injury. He vaguely remembered tackling the other man as he tried to dash back into the room.

"Mya's in there still!"

As was Brutal. Jasper's stomach gave a sickening wrench. His last sight of them had been the two of them tumbling out of the path of the giant chandelier. He helped David to his feet, and they gingerly entered the room, stunned at the complete and total ruin.

"Mya!" Heedless of his own safety, David dashed into the room, leaving a trail of blood as he was cut by broken crystal and splinters of wood. Gritting his teeth, Jasper followed. There wasn't time to worry about footwear; he had to get to Brutal...

They were in a heap. Bright red blood seeped through a thick layer of plaster dust. Brutal was in his half form. His massive body had sheltered Mya from the twin perils of the chandelier and the explosion. She was conscious, struggling under his dead weight.

She calmed down as soon as her mate was at her side. David was on his knees, trying his best to move her out from under the body of the wolf. When Jasper joined him, they checked Brutal's pulse.

Still alive.

His back was a sheet of raw flesh, his front was singed and burned, but he was alive.

"Can you get me out without moving him?" Of the three, Mya seemed to be the least in shock. "He's hurt damn bad. I don't want him injured worse getting me loose."

They moved him gently, doing their best to dislodge his massive bulk, and inch by inch, Mya wiggled loose, sitting up and dusting herself off. They all turned to the fallen werewolf.

"Why hasn't he gone back to human?" David was busy examining his back. He was a psychiatrist, so he had medical training.

"I don't know. Maybe he hasn't registered that the danger has passed." Jasper stroked his cheek, willing Brutal to stir, to open his eyes. "The only way all that shit's coming out of him is if he does a full shift, either to human or wolf."

They sat huddled, part of their attention on Brutal, part on the room. A fresh breeze whispered through the broken window; tattered curtains danced on the air. The walls were torn away in places, baring the skeletal remains of the house's structure.

"God, what a mess." Mya sat huddled like a child. Her blue eyes were huge in her face. "Did you guys see...? Do you think Jedidiah's okay?"

David moved from Brutal's side and wrapped her in his arms. To Jasper's surprise, she began crying, her tears making muddy tracks down David's shoulder. "David, I think... I think he died. I think he was trying to save us all."

"Shhhh, he's fine." He rocked her gently, and Jasper looked away. Theirs was a private moment of shared fear. For perhaps the first time, he realized how complete their little ménage was. Without Jedidiah, they'd survive, but their lives would be less brilliant.

He understood. Brutal lay there, grievously wounded, yet there was little he could do. At the moment, they couldn't even move him.

"Oy, Brutus. It's all over now; they've all gone. We can't be movin' you while you're a great beast like this." He ran his fingers through Brutal's hair, wishing he could say those words that played nonstop at the edge of his consciousness. There were things

he would have said to the wolf, if he hadn't been so frightened of seeing the man shy away and run.

At his side, David and Mya rose. He said something about moving Brutal and Jasper nodded, grateful for a moment alone with his partner.

"I never believed in love at first sight, Brutus Ballantine. So maybe it was lust at first sight for us. Definitely love at first fuck, though." He smiled and let his eyes drop closed. "I'd hoped... so very much for us. Then I realized that you aren't like me. You always call me a dog, and it's God's own truth, isn't it? I'm domesticated. Loyal. I love my home and master. I love my odd little pack -- both my packs, because Jedidiah and the tigers are as much my pack as the other Siberians. But you? Well, you're a wild one, Brutus. That's just what you are and there's no changing the fact."

He shifted, reaching down to clasp Brutal's hand. "You might not want a pack, but you need one. You've earned your place with us, you know. You fought beside us when you didn't have to. You saved Mya's life. Her baby too. So no matter what, you've got a place with us."

Brutal didn't answer of course, and the tigers returned, carrying stacks of sheets and a heavy bedspread. To everyone's relief, Brutal's form abruptly shifted into his human shape. Jasper could have groaned in despair. The damage was still grave, though some of the shards of crystal slipped from his skin as he changed.

The tigers put their great strength toward lifting him onto the heavy bedspread and Jasper moved to the foot of the makeshift litter.

"This would be easier if we had a board or something." He grunted as they carried Brutal over the rubble to the edge of the room. Once they were free, they sat him on the floor, and Jasper sat down, picking glass from the soles of his feet.

"Maybe I can help."

He looked up to see Jedidiah there, looking rather worse for wear. Mya leapt up, throwing herself into his arms. David followed a bit more slowly, but no less emotionally. He held the demon in a fierce grip, his face buried in Jedidiah's shoulder.

The demon's usually pristine hair was scorched and ragged. His face was wan and drawn, dark bruises spread over one side.

There was a definite patina of smoke damage to the fine fabric of his now ruined suit. Overburdened, he went down to the floor in a tumble of tigers. Jasper sat back, letting out a sigh of relief. He leaned forward and rested his head against Brutal's still form.

"He's badly injured?"

Jasper looked up, meeting the demon's gaze. He simply nodded. Jedidiah gave each tiger a kiss and then crawled the short distance to sit beside the wolf. He looked gravely down at the detective's bloody back.

"This happened as he was protecting Mya," David said.

"Is this true?" Jedidiah asked Jasper, but never looked away from Brutal.

"When the room exploded, the chandelier came down and shattered. He threw himself over her body." Jasper reached down, clasping the wolf's limp hand.

Jedidiah reached out and waved a hand over Brutal's bare back. As he did so, the remaining crystal worked its way from his skin, shimmering in the air like glitter. In a puff of smoke, it vanished.

"Where'd it go?" Mya crawled over, watching her demon work. "Rather, where'd you send it?"

"Hopefully into the bare bum of Mr. Stanley Edgerton. I made certain he was missing his head when I left him in Purgatory."

David gave a short laugh. "And where'd you leave the head?"

"I dumped it outside Heaven's pearly gates. One little kick sent it right in!"

"Did you really?" Mya's eyes were wide in amazement.

"You should have seen the expression on his face! It'll be eternity before he can get his ratty head back to his body!"

Jedidiah laughed, and suddenly, everything seemed just amazingly funny. Jasper began with a chuckle. It worked up to a belly laugh, and soon he was rolling on the floor next to Brutal. Tears flowed from his eyes.

"There's nothing as disgusting as a man having hysterics." Brutal's voice was harsh, yet barely there. Jasper stopped laughing, looking down at the detective in amazement.

"You're alive?"

"Duh. Just trying to cope with the sheer, mind-numbing pain of being dragged around in a bedspread. You guys really need to take EMT training or something."

"Particularly if we keep blowing up the mansion." Jedidiah's smile was fierce and sudden. "You and I will be discussing your fight strategy later on, Detective Ballantine. If you're joining my team, there are certain things you'll need to understand about how we work. Namely, you mustn't distract me!"

Brutal lifted his head. "He was kicking your metaphysical ass till I came along, Worth. You wouldn't have been able to poof him out if I hadn't bit him in the ass for you."

Jasper watched the interchange like a tennis match, looking from one man to the other. When he looked up, Mya and David looked just as stunned.

"And if you want me to work for you, we're going to have a conversation about hazard pay. And benefits. I want a retirement account. And dental." His head dropped back to the cool marble floor. "We need a bigger room. I've never shared before, so I need space. Lots of space." His eyes dropped closed.

"He does tend to pace a lot." Jedidiah rose unsteadily to his feet, reaching out to help Mya rise.

"He's never still, always in motion. Maybe Jasper can teach him a little about taking it easy." David stood, looping an arm around the demon's waist. Jasper sat and watched wordlessly.

"David, has he ever been without something to say for this long before?" Mya glanced at her husband, and then at Jedidiah.

"You know, you're right. I've never seen Jasper struck speechless. It's a nice change!" The three of them started down the hall together, leaving Brutal and Jasper on the landing. Brutal was stirring, flexing his arms, moving his legs experimentally.

"I believe I have one more trick up my sleeve." Jedidiah smiled and Jasper fell into a sickening freefall, landing on his side on a soft bed. Brutal came more softly, settling gently on the mattress next to him.

"Hey, how come every time he poofs me, he just dumps me like a sack of laundry?" Jasper sat up unsteadily, looking around the room as though expecting to see Jedidiah somewhere. Brutal grinned and buried his face in the pillow, groaning in what sounded like both pleasure and pain.

"You should shift, Brutal. You'll heal faster." Jasper examined his back; all the crystal was gone and the bleeding had slowed nearly to a stop. Some of the deeper wounds still bled sluggishly. His body was clean, not a speck of plaster remained on his skin. In contrast, Jasper was coated with plaster dust, sweat and demon goo. He started to leave the bed, when Brutus reached out, holding him in place.

"You said it."

"What?" Jasper frowned, looking around the room, trying to remember what he might have said to draw a reaction from the wolf.

"Upstairs. In the ballroom. You were talking to me. You said... you know..."

Jasper cocked a brow. "The 'L' word?" He fought to hold back a smile.

"Yeah. That. You mean it?"

He sighed wearily. "Yes, Brutus, I meant it. Sorry if I frightened you."

For a long moment, Brutal lay quietly, as though absorbing Jasper's words. He then moved his head slightly, looking up at Jasper. "No one's ever loved me. Never. At least, that's what I thought till I came here." He brought up an arm and gingerly rested his chin on it. "Jedidiah told me my mom was bred by a true wolf. You think he could know that for sure?"

"Yes, Brutus. If he says so, it's true." Jasper's heart broke for his wolf. Reaching out, he cupped Brutal's cheek in the palm of his hand.

"He said she must have truly loved me. If she hadn't, she'd have given in to the compulsion to kill me. Instead, she trained me and gave me to Child Services. You think that's love?"

Jasper smiled, remembering all the little sacrifices that his mother had made through the years. All Brutal's mother could give him was life, and to her, the sacrifice must have cost a great deal.

"Giving you away was the greatest love of all." He swallowed when Brutal rubbed the palm of his hand with his cheek.

"I always hear people talk about love. They say that they'd die for their country or their church or their family. But you know, sometimes it's harder to give your life instead of your death. I think that's what I want to give you, Jasper. My life. Not my death."

Jasper blinked, trying to work his way through that statement.

"That's the only way I can tell you how I feel, Red. If I had to, I'd die for you. I'd much rather live for you. My life's yours for however long you want it." He'd moved his head away, staring at the fine weave of the pillow.

"Did you just tell me that you love me, Brutus Ballantine?"

"Whatever. Yeah, I suppose."

Jasper didn't know whether to laugh or cry. If he'd felt good enough, he'd have run in a butt-dragging rush around the room. Instead he sat next to Brutal and gazed at the walls in his luxurious apartment. "Well, damn. That's romantic."

Brutal grinned. "That said, you smell like shit. And demon sludge."

Jasper snorted in disgust. "Fine. I'm taking a shower. You should shift."

"Yes, Mom."

Jasper rolled his eyes and staggered into the bathroom. He stepped into the shower without waiting for the water to fully heat and braced himself as cold spray cut through the sludge of grime on his face.

Last time he'd showered, Brutal had left. This time...

He stepped out of the stall and grabbed a towel, running it over his hair and body. He hung it on the rack and opened the door to his room, looking at the dark form sleeping in his bed.

This time the wolf hadn't run. Of course, there was always tomorrow. But somehow, Jasper thought there'd be an awful lot of tomorrows for the two of them. Wolves were pack animals, and Brutal had gone all his life deprived of the comfort a pack could provide.

Jasper understood the feeling perfectly.

He pulled back the covers and slipped into bed, next to the warm, furry body of the black wolf sleeping in his bed. He sighed, threw an arm over Brutal's neck and drifted off to tomorrow.

Epilogue

One of many tomorrows...

"Just one more to go..." Jasper pressed a tiny candle holder into a swirl of icing and then lit a tiny candle, pressing it into the little cup. "And... I'd say this is the loveliest birthday cake I've ever seen." He squirted a bit of fudge icing onto a finger and licked it off. "What do you think, Brutus?"

Brutal arched his head, pulling just a bit against the bindings that secured him to the flat surface of the table that Jasper had dragged into their bedroom. Not one to wait for a birthday surprise, Jasper never failed to concoct his own unique celebration.

Brutal squinted, surveying the blaze of birthday candles that ran from his chest to his lower belly. His skin flinched as a tiny stream of wax dribbled down his nipple. "Ah... you finished?" He winced, anticipating more hot wax with every breath he took.

"Nearly. Not quite, not really." Jasper rose on his knees, giving Brutal a clear view of his flushed, engorged cock. His own cock was ringed and throbbing. Leaning to the side of the heavy table, Jasper fetched a huge blue bow. Carefully, he tied the bow around Brutal's cock. "Now I'm finished. You are both my present and my cake. Are you going to sing to me?"

"No, Jasper, but I'll skin your ass as soon as I get loose!" He put up a slight struggle, hissing in pain as hot wax slid down to sting his skin.

Jasper sighed heavily. "Fine. You don't appreciate my art. We'll move on." He stood and walked across the room; Brutal watched suspiciously. What could he possibly be up to next? When he held up a container of heavy lube, Brutal's cock went postal.

His shifter had flourished during their time together. Jasper was still happy and giddy as ever, but had recently developed a serenity he'd lacked in the early days of

their relationship. Back then, he had probably awakened every morning expecting Brutal to be gone. When they were separated while working on cases, his voice always carried breathless relief when Brutal called at the end of the day.

There had been nothing that Brutal could say to alleviate Jasper's fear of abandonment, but there were a million ways he could show he'd never leave his shifter. Brutal wasn't a romantic man by any stretch, nor was he inclined to change for someone else, but he remembered to make the phone calls and spent time with Jasper's pack, learning to tolerate their sometimes wild antics. He worked with Jedidiah and the tigers, quickly developing a healthy respect for the entire team.

When Jasper went to visit his mother in Ireland, Brutal agreed to go, though his heart lived in his throat for a full week prior to the actual event. When Jasper suggested that Brutal write to his own mother, he rebelled for nearly a month, finally sitting down and penning a stiff, uncomfortable letter letting her know that he was alive and happy.

She'd called him just days later, and she'd flown to London for a short, emotional reunion.

However, he'd discovered that the best thing he was able to do for Jasper was to occasionally offer his submission in the bedroom. Giving control to Jasper lifted a burden he hadn't realized he carried, and gave the Siberian the sense of control he craved. Besides, with the shifter's imagination, sometimes the outcome was hilarious; sometimes it was just hot. This time was shaping up to go either way.

Jasper straddled Brutal's hips, but rather than slicking up his own cock, he spread a heavy layer on Brutal's shaft. Brutal shivered, and then growled. "Let's make this interesting. You fuck me, and do your very best to last longer than the candles."

"If I lose?"

"Oh, I punish you." Jasper grinned wickedly, stroking Brutal's heavy balls. "And if you win, I'll punish you as well." He plucked a single hair from Brutal's heavy sac.

Brutal groaned and grew a bit more excited. Automatically, he pulled against the bindings that held him in place on the table. Win or lose, it was the same. When he lost,

it simply took longer for Jasper to bring him to that glittering brink. It usually involved floggers and a few of the intriguing toys Jasper was fond of collecting.

Jasper rose high, slotting the head of Brutal's cock to his ass. He made a huge production of working it in, moaning and cursing, knowing that the dirty talk further aroused Brutal. He pulled away, added more lube and began the process all over again. Brutal's hips strained upward. He braced his heels, doing his best to thrust into Jasper's ass.

"Stay very, very still, Brutus."

He gasped and cursed, trying to stay with the spirit of the moment. He let his eyes drop partly closed, watching Jasper through the misty light of the candles. The Siberian was beautiful; his hair had grown out and now brushed his shoulders with his every movement. He tilted his head back as he slowly rode Brutal, using every trick he knew to bring him quickly to the brink.

Brutal shredded the table in his attempt to remain still, but finally he bucked, shouting at the sensation of hot wax slipping over his belly. It didn't take long after that. Jasper rose and fell over him, gripping Brutal's cock in a vise-like grip. He ran his hands up and down his ivory colored skin, plucking at his own nipples in an erotic display. Brutal managed to hold out long enough to watch the shifter climax. Jasper's skin flushed, he pumped hard, clasp his cock as shimmery ropes of semen jetted out over Brutal's belly. The sight aroused him so much that he gave up, shuddering, feeling his own release grip him and toss him over the edge.

Brutal groaned and thrust, using the bindings as leverage until every last drop of seed had been wrung from his balls. He went limp, staring at Jasper's lust-filled expression. He was stroking his cock, which was already half erect again.

"Shit." He let his head drop back to the table, wrung dry and exhausted, feeling that delicious languor steal over his limbs. When he opened his eyes next, Jasper still straddled his hips, and the candles still burned.

"You lose." Jasper grinned wickedly.

Brutal frowned and lifted his head, blowing out the candle on his right nipple. After a heartbeat, it flickered and came back to life. He tried again with the other, and again it re-lit. "You little shit! These are trick candles!"

"Didn't say I'd play fair!"

Brutal pulled at his wrists, breaking through the flimsy rope that bound him. Jasper reached out, plucked a candle from Brutal's belly and licked the frosting from his finger. He leapt to the bed and bounded over it, laughing hysterically as he fled.

By the time Brutal caught him, the candles had been crushed out and chocolate frosting smeared the expensive carpets. He pinned the Siberian to the floor and lay full-length over him, caught between cursing and laughter.

Humor won out. He rolled off Jasper and lay on his back, laughing nearly as long and as loud as his lover. When he was drained, Brutal rose to his feet, pulling Jasper up and tossing the man over his shoulder.

"Oy... you big lunk... What now?"

Brutal headed for the bathroom. "If this place works right, there should be a hot bath waiting for us." He pushed open the door and was delighted to find that the timer he'd installed worked perfectly.

With the greatest of care, he lowered Jasper into the steaming water. He walked over to the counter, pulling a towel off a tray. Brutal mixed their drinks, layering the Black Sambuca over the Green Chartreuse, and then topping it with Tabasco sauce. He handed Jasper a shot glass and set his own on the tiled side of the tub while he climbed in, facing Jasper. He slid down, tangling their legs as he lifted his glass in a toast.

"Last call for the Siberian Husky. He ordered a Black Wolf."

They clinked their glasses together and downed their drinks, blinking away tears from the heat.

"Happy birthday, Red."

Belinda McBride

Belinda lives in the wilderness of the Siskiyou Mountains and at night, she runs naked with a pack of wolves...

Uhh...

Belinda lives *near* the Siskiyou Mountains and shares her home with a pack of Siberian Huskies who like to pretend they're wolves. And she usually keeps her clothing on when she goes outside.

Belinda loves to travel, collect rare gemstones, make soap and spend precious time with her daughters. Her degree is in History with a Cultural Anthropology minor. On weekends, you will often find Belinda ringside at a dog show, comb and spray bottle in hand.

She invites you to visit her website at www.belindamcbride.com, or email her directly at belinda@belindamcbride.com.