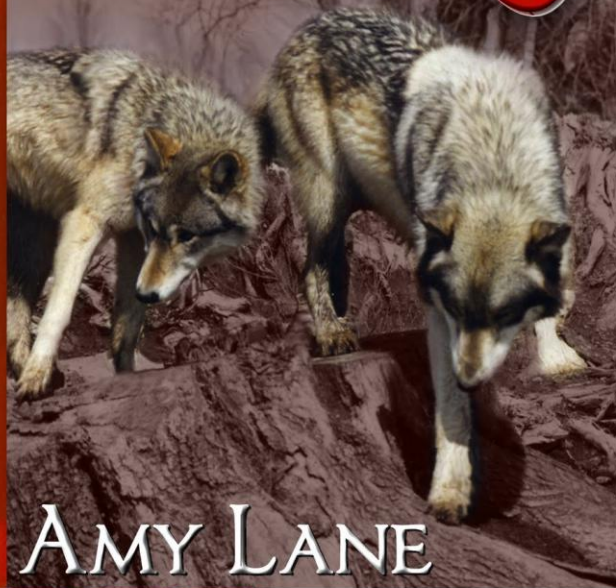


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# Waiting

GREEN'S HILL WEREWOLVES BOOK 2



AMY LANE

## **Waiting**

### **Book Two**

#### **A Green's Haven story of Jack and Teague**

**By Amy Lane**

## **Prologue**

### **Teague Dreaming**

*The dream didn't sneak up on him. It didn't change magically from one thing to another. It pretty much just ripped through Teague's consciousness like blunt scissors through human flesh, and it had been doing so for nearly a week and was therefore starting to piss Teague off.*

*It started with what he knew was true. Jack was at his feet, crouched in the middle of a scene, looking for clues to the whereabouts of one Katy Garcia, the werewolf who'd been captive in the dingy little craphole they'd gone to rescue her from. And then Teague stood up, and there she was, scared, pissed off, and ready to chew the face off of anyone who got in her way.*

*Teague was in her way. His only emotion was a vast feeling of relief that it was him and not Jacky. And that was the pulse-pounding panty-pissing moment that the dream became a nightmare, because in a blur of fur, in a growl that stood Teague's hackles up in his sleep, Jack stood up and Katy ripped a big fucking hole in his stomach and his chest and Teague fell to his knees screaming 'No Jacky no!'*

*And that's when the dream became a dream and not a memory, because that's when Teague could feel his body twisting, stretching, popping, when he hadn't done this yet, hadn't gone through it, didn't know to know, just knew to guess, but still it happened. His skin itched, his teeth and snout grew, and a horrible growl issued from his chest...*

*And he bent his sharp teeth and long tongue, dug a snout into the hole in Jacky's chest and ripped out his heart, chewed on it ecstatically, swallowed the pieces whole.*

Teague sat up in bed, strangling on his breath, the sweat popping over his body, a scream trapped and struggling inside his chest. Instinctively his hand shot out to where Jacky had slept at his side for the last week, and Jack grunted even as Teague stroked his chest, making sure everything was where it should be.

The scar was new, where Katy had ripped at him with her jaws and her back claws, but

Jacky, lean, long, and peaceful in his sleep as Teague had never been—Jacky was as he always had been. He had dark shaggy hair and thoughtful blue eyes, a narrow face, average nose and a square chin. He was also kind, quiet, smart, incredibly passive-aggressive, and, according to the tattoo on the inside of his thigh, he was Teague's.

And now he was in Teague's bed, and Teague could, while Jacky was asleep, gather his lover to his chest and tighten his arms around him, shuddering, fighting and losing to the urge to bury his nose in Jacky's hair and breathe in his scent, reassuring himself that Jack was whole and well and not bleeding, dying, his heart consumed by Teague's bewildered werewolf.

Jacky murmured and shifted in Teague's arms, and Teague wiped his cheek in Jack's hair, wishing he could get his shit together and stop sniveling like an asshole. They would be changing, both of them, changing into their wolves, becoming something new right after they had just become something new, and Jack would look to him to make it right. The whole reason he'd asked Katy for the bite so he could follow Jacky into this new world was to make it right.

*Oh God...Goddess, if She was who he got to pray to now...oh, please, for Jacky's sake, let him be able to make it right.*

### **Jack Waking**

Green's place was the sort of place where you didn't sit idle long. Whether it was sitting in the were's common room, soaking up lore about your new life (Teague called them 'werewolf lessons') or simply helping the people around you to keep the place running, Teague always seemed to have something to do in the week since Jack was bit.

Something, anything to do, besides talk to Jack about what was in his heart.

"He's looking at you again," Katy said from Jack's side. They were sitting at the weekly banquet—which they understood was a smaller version of the Thanksgiving that Grace had been running them ragged to plan all week. Teague was up at what Katy called the 'Alpha' table, where he'd been sitting in one way or another since the two of them had woken up in their semi-permanent guest room after Jack had recovered from his wounds.

A private smile flirted at Jack's lean mouth, and he flipped his longish dark hair back from the part down the middle as he returned his lover's smile.

Teague flushed, the red mottling his Irish-fair skin, making the freckles stand out on his razor cheekbones. Abruptly, Teague's attention was very seriously on the short young woman at the head of the table. She was plain and freckled, with wide hips and shoulders, and a flat chest, and at first glance looked incongruous with her tall, anime-beautiful mates, Green and Bracken, but one look at the deference everybody at the leader's table paid to the little college student and she suddenly assumed a glamour all her own.

Right now, that glamour made Teague laugh a little at something she said, and Jack would be jealous, but she smiled at Jack as she said it and waved gaily, and it was obvious that whatever it had been, she didn't have any designs on Jack's chosen mate.

He couldn't say the same thing about the breath-takingly pretty woman sitting next to him.

"I like the way he looks at you," Katy Garcia said lowly, her own dark hair floating around her face in a spangle of silver from something she'd put in it when she dressed for dinner. She had clear dusky skin, a heart-shaped face, flared hips, a tiny waist, and lush breasts. If it hadn't been for her direct gaze and the wisdom in her brown eyes, he would have said the silver spangle was overkill.

"What do you like about it?" Jack asked, curious, and the smile she slanted up at him was speculative and sultry. Jack's mouth went suddenly dry, and he realized that Teague wasn't the only one who knew how to send hot looks. Katy saw him blush, and her eyes grew positively predatory.

"It's the way I used to look at smack," she murmured, "all hot, like it was everything I ever wanted, like it would make my heart beat and fill my stomach and caress my skin...except..."

"Except what?" Jacky asked, surprised that his voice didn't squeak. Between Teague's looks—oh, he gave them all day—across the common room, in their own shared bedroom as Jack was reading, across the table at breakfast... all day long those hungry, devouring looks—but between them and Katy's playful, seductive voice...

Goddess, he had a hard-on that wouldn't quit.

"Except he doesn't want anything from you," Katy finished wisely. "I wanted that smack—I needed what it had to give me. He doesn't want anything from you, does he? He just wants to give and give and give until you have to stay with him, doesn't he?" She shuddered a little, ecstasy by proxy. Until she came to Green's, no one had wanted Katy. Now that she was clean—becoming a werewolf did that to you—it was clear that smack had been a pale substitute to the drug she'd really wanted.

Jack looked at her, wondering if that low sultry voice was his imagination, if she really wanted him as well as Teague. She'd made her attraction—her lifelong crush, actually—on Jack's lover absolutely clear. But since she'd never been competitive with Jack, had never tried to vie for Teague's affections, never tried to show Jack up or seduce Teague behind Jack's back, Jack had no choice but to accept her friendliness—and her willingness to help them through their first transition—for what it appeared to be.

But that didn't keep her from being brutally honest, either.

"So, Jacky," she was saying now, since his attention seemed to be cleaved between her

honest conversation and his own covert observations of the man he'd loved for over a year, "what's it like to be looked at the way he's looking at you?"

"What's it like?" Suddenly Jack's attention was all on Katy, the question vibrating through him like a cathedral bell. What was it like to have Teague turn those burning brown-green eyes on him, wanting him, yearning for him, begging him to be ready and willing, hands on the bed, ass in the air accepting his rough, desperate sex as the only love he could give?

*It's like a hand on my ass, a mouth on my cock, fingers on my nipples, a voice in my ear whispering sex, a come so hard it hurts...*

And one of those shudders of sixth sense that he'd been having since he'd been bitten shook him hard, and he looked up to find Teague's eyes fastened hotly, hungrily, not just on Jack but on the both of them, Jack and Katy, their heads bent together and almost touching, the breath of their conversation in the midst of the weekly banquet close enough to be a scent on the other's skin.

Jack's eyes connected with Teague's, the current flowing between them so thick he wondered that anyone in between them didn't get fried by the electricity.

"If you want to know what it's like, Princess," Jack murmured, "why don't you look at him now, because he's got us both in his sights."

Katy gave a little 'ohhhhh' at his side, and then Green shook his butter colored hair and laughingly called Teague's attention back to the head table she sighed again and then sagged into her chair as though that look alone had held her up.

"Hey, *Princeso*," she murmured into the broken stillness between them, "you do me a favor, hey?"

Her accent—that of a child raised by a mother who spoke almost exclusively Spanish—was suddenly thick and even sexier. "What?" Jack asked, his eyes still on Teague's face as he discussed ruling the fey world with his new best friend, Green.

She shifted a little in her seat, and his werewolf senses sharpened suddenly. He could have smelled the must flooding between her plump thighs from across the room. She gave him a slanted smile, as though very aware of what his new and improved senses would pick up on, and then cast her eyes in the same direction Jack's were glued: Teague.

"When he gets you back to your room and fucks you til you scream, you think of me when you come, eh *querido*?"

Jack's hard-on throbbed in his pants and he made a sound like "Unnggghhhhh..." as he watched her stand up and walk away on obviously shaky knees.

When he looked back up at the table, Teague had disappeared. Jack excused himself

shortly thereafter. He knew exactly where Teague'd gone.

Green's hill was huge—it probably housed three times as many people in one form or another than the apartment complex that Teague and Jack called home down in Sacramento. Jack had gotten lost three times after he and Teague'd started rooming together on the corner of Howe and Hurley. Since he'd been bitten by Katy, he hadn't gotten lost in the hill once. For one thing, he could *smell* his partner. He could trace Teague's steps as he went up the stairs from the basement banquet room, down the colorfully tinted hallways and the muted watercolor carpet, around the hill a couple of times...Jack stopped.

Katy had stood here. He could smell her, and Teague. They'd stopped, they'd talked...there had been...

Arousal.

Both of them had been aroused, but nothing beyond that. A conversation, Jack thought, trying to stomp on his jealousy. Just like he'd had with Katy, a simple conversation and Teague had been springing a boner and he'd said from the beginning that they both liked women, that their thing would be permanent, but it might not be exclusive and...

Jack was practically snarling to himself as he stomped the rest of the way to his room and flung the door open, letting it bang shut behind him.

Teague had his face pressed against the paneled wooden wall before the door had completely snicked in the lock.

Teague was shorter than Jack by several inches, but his chest was powerful—it would be really wide if the guy ever ate—and his muscles were wiry and ripped with working out and...and his *force* was just so powerful...even if he couldn't hold Jack physically, the strength of his *want* was enough to keep Jack pressed against the wall.

Jack grunted and didn't try to fight as Teague pressed his groin along Jack's upper thigh, pinning his shoulders against the wall with the whole of his weight.

"Took you long enough, Princess..." Teague muttered in his ear.

"Long enough for Katy to turn you on," Jack muttered back, and Teague let out a short bark of laughter before he unhooked Jack's belt with shaking hands.

"Are you pissed about that? That I want her?"

Jack groaned as his body was exposed to the air, and Teague toed his shoes from his heels and slid rough hands around Jack's ribs and slid the T-shirt and partially buttoned dress shirt over Jack's head.

He pressed his body against Jack's again, and Jack groaned again, his knees going

weak. Teague was completely naked, bare, vulnerable, his generously sized erection oily with lubricant and sliding against Jack's backside.

"Oh God..." Jack shuddered, and if he'd had any room at all, he would have lifted his ass in a blatant invitation to a sex act he'd been ignorant of a week ago.

Teague seized his arms and whirled him around to the king sized bed, bending Jack over and sliding a slick, hard hand over Jack's own cock, around his bottom, cupping his balls and squeezing just enough to make Jack gibber into the coverlet.

"Jealous, Jacky?" Teague taunted as Jack whimpered into the mattress. His arms were pinned behind his back as Teague fondled him, penetrated him, readied him for what was coming even as the press of Teague's chest along Jack's back made Jack yearn to hold his lover, stroke his skin in turn, love him back.

"Uuahhhggghhhh..." Jack responded, bucking his backside up, hating that he didn't have the strength in his heart to turn the tables, to force Teague back to the mattress, to make the man accept his touches, to make him take tenderness and sweetness and gentleness in their bed.

Teague grunted again, and plied his fingers as Jacky groaned, searching for words, finding none in the rampant violation of Jack's senses by his desire.

"You can be as jealous as you want, Jacky," Teague muttered against Jack's back. Jack grunted again and Teague breached Jacky's body, stretching a little...ah gods, the fine edge of pain...the fullness...

"Auuuugghhhhhh..." They both cried as Teague slid into Jack's backside, flush against his body, the two of them joined, slamming into each other, grunting, whimpering, urging each other on.

Teague bit Jacky's shoulder, hard, and Jack cried out again even as Teague wrapped his hand around Jack's cock and stroked, rough, hard, perfect. Jack's shudder, his shout of climax set Teague off, and blackness washed Jack's vision as he went limp against the coverlet, panting and sweating from the exertion and the high of Teague's body in his.

"I'm not jealous," Jack denied, still panting, "I'll never be jealous, as long as it's my bed you're in at the end."

Teague chuckled against his flesh, still quivering in after effects of orgasm, and soon—much too soon—pulled sloppily out. He smacked Jack's bottom playfully on the way to the bathroom for a washcloth to clean them both up.

Jack—who was still, admittedly, recovering a little from the wound that had made him a werewolf in the first place-- had just enough energy to crawl up and put his head on the pillow, pulling the covers down and around his long, naked body. Teague came to bed and cleaned his backside and his frontside off with a warm washcloth, using efficient, impersonal movements,

like a grade school teacher wiping paint off a kid's hands.

Jack pressed his face into his pillow, ignoring the brusqueness, ignoring the cold feeling left in his groin from the faceless sex. He'd tried, this last week, to get Teague to let him kiss, let him hold, let him caress—but Teague had insisted, Jack's pleasure first. Teague would go on his knees and lick pretty much everything Jack had below the waist, but Jack wasn't allowed to so much as touch Teague's face in affection.

*Don't worry about me, Jacky. You okay?*

*No*, Jack had wanted to snarl. *I'm not okay when you won't let me in.* But Jack didn't say it. Jack didn't force confrontations. Jack didn't question the good fortune that finally brought Teague Sullivan to his bed. He had waited more than a year for a sign, any sign, that his dreamy-eyed love hadn't been misplaced, that Teague would love him someday in the same, hungry, consuming way that Jack loved him. And Jack was good at taking orders, good at letting Teague lead. Questioning the way Teague was leading seemed wrong somehow, as though he wasn't grateful for the way Teague looked at him, bumped his hand when they were in public, spoke low to his ear when it was something private, slid into his flesh when it was the two of them alone.

Besides, Jack thought with his first surge of contentment since he'd walked into their room—the best part was coming.

Teague slept in his tighty-whites—always—and after he pulled those on and climbed up into the big-assed bed next to Jack, he let Jack turn sleepily—had to make his movements slow and dreamy or it didn't work—and pull Teague in against his narrow chest. Jack forced his arms to relax, forced his face to stay slack with exhaustion, forced his body to not just engulf his smaller, compact lover and convulse an embrace around him, holding him tightly enough to absorb Teague into his skin.

It worked. Teague rubbed his cheek a little on the small patch of fur on Jack's bare chest, and Jack made his breathing even out, smooth, grow shallow, because he knew what would come when Teague thought he was asleep.

The words would come.

The first time Teague had done this, Jack had been wounded in the back of the car and Teague had been speeding through two counties to get him to Green's healing touch. Jack thought it was his imagination, hallucination inspired by blood loss, until the second time Teague had buggered him senseless and spoken into the still night, thinking Jack was too far under to hear. Teague had spoken to him every night since—but only when he thought Jack was asleep.

*Thanks, Jacky.*

Always, always it started with 'thank you'—Jack was never sure whether to weep or kick something. If they'd been home he would have already thrown his fist through the wall.



*I wish I had words for you, brother. I wish I was the kind of guy who could say sweet things, make your heart swell with words.*

A fluttery sensation in the dark that Jack couldn't help lean his cheek into.

*I wish I was the kind of guy who could touch your face. I keep trying. I look at you and my heart is in my eyes and I think you need to hear the words and we're alone and all I can do is fuck you until you pass out. It's what I've got. It's sad and it's sorry, but it's all I've got. My whole life, I've wanted someone to care about and now I've got you and I just want to make it worth it for you, that's all. I just don't want you to ever hate me for dragging you into this life, for getting you wounded, for loving you. And tonight, you and Katy were looking at each other, and suddenly I wanted you both. I don't know how to feel about that, Jacky. We made it pretty clear that we liked women too—we didn't want to give them up, but we didn't want to give each other up either.*

You, Teague, Jack thought wryly. It had been Teague who didn't want to give women up—but now that Jacky had gotten close enough to Katy to breathe her perfume he could let that one slide.

*And I want to protect her. It must be the wolf coming out—can you feel the wolf yet, Jacky? He's sliding under my skin and he wants to protect you. He wants to protect you and protect Katy—hell, he even wants to protect the other wolves in our little pack—but mostly it's you and Katy.*

Jack had met the other wolves in their pack. Five young men, picked-on kids, recovering prostitutes and drug addicts who had taken the Green's Hill way out of their old lives. Hell, Jack wanted to protect them too—obviously someone needed to.

*But I just keep hoping the wolf is stronger than I am, braver. I've been nothing, Jacky. I can't stand that you'd look at me and see that I was nothing. When I'm inside you, at least you think I'm something. I need you to think I'm something. Maybe the wolf, he'll be worth the way you look at me, worth the way Katy is looking at me. Maybe the wolf, he'll be something.*

There was more after that. There was talk about a house for them, close to Green's Hill but not on it, because this much family gave Teague the shivers. There was talk about a garden, because Teague never could sit still and he was tired of cleaning their small apartment. There was talk about cats.

Jack had heard Teague's quiet, half-terrified desire for a cat before when he'd been in the car. It wasn't until the night before that he'd heard the story of a kitten snuck into Teague's room shortly after he'd gotten his first job at the local diner when he was barely fourteen. Teague's father had found the thing after a week, knocked Teague against the wall, and grabbed the kitten by the back legs and closed its head in the door.

After Teague had cleaned up the mess, Sean Sullivan had beaten his son until Sean had

passed out. Teague reckoned it had been about a half an hour after Teague himself had gone under, judging by the state of his body when he'd woken up.

It was a horrible story, but it told Jack everything he needed to know about the man he loved.

Teague had learned that love hurts, and then it hurts, and then it rips out your heart and gnaws on your thrashing corpse. He learned that the thing you loved needed to be protected but that it probably died anyway. He learned that the people you trusted to love you could rip your heart out when you needed them most. He learned that the things you wanted for yourself were wrong and were meant to shred what was left in your chest to teeny-tiny bits.

The fact that somewhere in there he'd learned to love Jacky at all seemed to be a sort of miracle.

When Teague was done talking, Jacky waited some more in the dark, until Teague's breathing evened out and he was well and truly asleep.

First he wiped his eyes on the corner of the pillow case because he was weeping like a stupid girl, and then he kissed Teague's face, soft kisses, gentle kisses, a lover's kisses, not just a bedmate's. When Teague was moving—just enough to respond, but not quite enough to wake up—Jack kissed his way down.

He kissed over Teague's stubbled chin—the stubble was thicker since they'd gotten bit, but still blonde like Teague's hair must have been as a child. He kissed down his tender neck, liking the little purr Teague made in his throat when he nipped, and then he moved on to the mostly smooth, lean chest that should have been broad but just didn't have enough meat.

Jack took his time—he learned Teague's body in the moonlight. He learned the feeling of his ribs, defined under the knotty muscles, and the way Teague said “unnhh...” in a shivery way every time Jack played with a little pebbled nipple.

He learned the place of every scar and filed the location away so he could put together every horrible thing his lover had endured later, and suffer with him.

But mostly, he just learned to make Teague happy, to please him until, like Jack, he didn't have the strength to say no.

Teague came fully awake and made a protesting noise when Jack peeled his underwear down. “Jacky, n...”

Because Jack swallowed his thick erection down to the back of his throat before Teague could say no.

Teague almost came off the bed and his fingers knotted in Jack's hair and Jack kept swallowing. He was inexpert at this—Teague had been his first male lover, and as of yet, Jack

hadn't been allowed to love him. But as he slid his lips over the ridge and played his tongue along the taut little harp string below it he figured he must have been doing something right because Teague was making inarticulate, surprised moans into the moonlit quiet around them. That (impressive) erection kept thrusting into the haven of Jack's mouth and again and again and again... Jack's mouth was stretched and getting tired, but he was damned if he'd stop before Teague was done.

He snuck his hand to Teague's balls and touched them tentatively, fondling the soft skin underneath the coarse brown hair and Teague gave a strangled "Jacky you're killing me..."

Memories of Teague's chest, bruised from his own fingers, passed through Jack's mind. Jack refused to hurt Teague—he would never make love to him that way—but he could, maybe, just a little bit more firmly...

Teague cried hoarsely, convulsing around Jack's head and spurting and spurting as Jack did his damndest to swallow.

It was bitter/salty/creamy, and he couldn't swallow all of it. Some of it spilt down his chin and he wiped it on the back of his hand in the quiet that followed. Teague's hands came down to his shoulders and he pulled Jack up even to him, but he couldn't look his lover in the face.

"Why..."

Jack put his fingers under Teague's chin and forced the older man to meet his eyes. The terrible fragility in Teague's expression made Jack want to punch something again.

"Don't ever be afraid to let me love you," Jack said roughly. He would have said more, but Teague silenced him with a kiss.

Jack, hungry for Teague's kisses in a way that far exceeded his hunger for Teague's skin, fell into the kiss like a ship into a whirlpool. He let Teague taste his own spend on his tongue, he let Teague drug him into silence, he let the kiss continue until they drowned in it. They fell asleep lips touching, breath mingling, practically in the middle of the kiss itself, because he'd seen his lover's face as they'd made love and he'd tasted his lover's spend on his own tongue and Jack knew it would be a long hard haul for the two of them—or the three of them—but that for now, he could trust the waiting would pay off.

### **Teague Waiting**

Teague was pretty sure he'd deal with being a werewolf just fine. It was the waiting that was killing him.

Jacky had been wounded about two weeks before Thanksgiving—their first week spent in

Green's Hill, waiting to change, they had been enlisted as kitchen help. Teague wasn't sure how that had happened, but he was grateful for it. Since the two of them had been cautioned to only go out of the hill accompanied by somebody—*anybody* else whose body wasn't going through a sort of hyped-out puberty—taking the orders of Grace, the resident den-mother-cum-vampire kept him busy and out of trouble.

Teague needed to be busy. If he and Jack had been at home, he would have been cleaning the little apartment until it gleamed, taking runs down to the river bike trail, or working on his car. He didn't sit still, didn't meditate, didn't vegetate—he did his best thinking when his wiry, vibrating body was moving.

Jacky could sit still just fine, which was all well and good with Teague, because Green may have healed that awful wound across his stomach nice and pretty, but Teague still woke up in a cold sweat remembering when Jack's perfect, pale skin had been ripped, spilling blood over Teague's hands.

So being busy was not a problem. The fact that being kept busy actually kept him from having time to sit down and *talk* to Jack was a serious bonus.

"You can't avoid that conversation forever, *querido*," Katy said at his side as they were hopping into his red and white '70 Mustang in the vast underground garage. He was distracted from Katy's words for a moment when he saw a brother car—without the white trick paintjob of the fastback—nearby. He'd seen it before, but it was pretty easy to spot, since, with the exception of a battered, rusty brown Toyota P.O.S. and a big purple hearse, every other car in the garage was some sort of hybrid S.U.V.

"Who else has a 'Stang?" Teague asked happily.

"That's Max's—he don't even let Renny drive that car." Mario, the Avian who was getting dropped off at the Camp Far West site, shook his head. He was a handsome guy—about Teague's height but more powerfully built. Like Katy, he had the light brown complexion and black hair of Hispanic heritage, but unlike Katy, he didn't live at the hill full time. When he saw they were running a shopping errand for Grace and asked to cop a ride, he'd explained, *My people, they do the sex once, it's for-fucking-ever. You stay under the hill too long without a break, brother, and you're going to find yourself doing the sex, you feel me?*

Teague had flushed and nodded, and asked him to jump in the back. And then tried hard not to squirm under the weight of the questions pressing him into the seat as he drove out of the garage and onto the drive.

"It's a nice 'Stang," he said lamely into the silence, and Mario, seemingly oblivious to the undercurrents nodded his head.

"It's Max's baby—I think he's had it since he was a kid, you know?"

"Yeah—whose beater was that in the back?" Teague had been curious. There didn't

seem any reason to keep it.

“That’s Lady Cory’s car,” Katy said next to him, “except Green, he don’t let her drive it. You got any more dumbshit questions to ask, Teague, or are you going to talk to me?”

She tended to slant her eyes at him when she was irritated, Teague thought, charmed. When she was just talking, she looked him full on in the eyes.

“You want to talk to me about talking to Jacky?” Teague asked, shaking his head. What in the fuck? Could these people not *see* that talking was *not* his strongpoint? “Why doesn’t Jacky just talk to me?”

Katy muttered something that sounded really vile in Spanish, and Mario sat up behind them and laughed. “Brother, whatever it is she wants, you’d better give it to her because she sounds pissed off!”

“I don’t know what she wants,” Teague muttered. For a year and a half, it had been him and Jacky. On a really rare day, he might talk to a clerk in a store, and on a run, he might talk to three, maybe four other people, including Green. Sitting up at the leader’s table this last week had been like a self-test in making sure he could converse with his fellow humanoids. Finding himself locked in a car with two people who weren’t Jacky was suddenly turning into an endurance run and Teague was regretting saying ‘Yes’ to Grace’s request more and more with every passing meter. It wasn’t like his job tonight wasn’t going to be enough of a trial.

“I want you to not leave Jacky looking like you ripped his heart out!” Katy protested, and Teague cut a curve really fast because he almost turned to look at her at a bad time. Since one side of this road was a sheer drop with a flimsy rail, he decided he’d better do more driving than talking for a moment. The road evened out and Teague risked a look at Katy, who was a little paler than she had been and gripping the sanity bar with white knuckles. Teague risked a look in the rearview and caught Mario’s shrug.

“Don’t look at me, wolf-man—I take this drive with Lady Cory. You ever want to shit your shorts, she’s the one to make you do it.”

“You guys go to school together, right?” Teague asked—it was a serious question: he had an agenda.

“Yeah—but not this next semester. I’m taking the time off to help Green get the Aerie finished. He’s doing it up right, you know, and it’s hard with all of us in and out.” Mario shrugged, the gesture hiding sadness. “I don’t start aging until my next mate. I got time.”

Teague’s eyebrows hit his hairline and he almost forgot where he was going with the question. “So Jacky, he could fit in the car this next semester, right?”

Mario shrugged again, this time in bemusement. “Yeah—don’t see why not. But you gotta know those of us that go—we’re like her honor guard, you know?”

And now Katy was curious. “She got to have all those people with her? What, she gets an *entourage* or something?”

Mario’s face and voice grew grim. “You two weren’t around last year. Yeah, she needs a fucking entourage, and if you’re really lucky, you get to think it’s for decoration. We don’t call her ‘Lady Cory’ cause she’s cute little white girl, *mija*—we call her that because she’s laid her life down more’n once for pretty much every fucking one of us.”

“Okay okay okay already!” Katy held up her hands. “I gotchu—being her entourage is like the secret fucking service—I hear.”

Teague was silent, and both of them looked at him. He shrugged. “Maybe I’ll hold off on that school thing if it’s dangerous. We got a run tonight—I’ll get to see how she rolls.”

“What—you and Jack and Cory?” Katy asked suspiciously, and Teague was able to keep his eyes on the road.

“Cory, Bracken, Nicky, Max, and a couple of the vampires,” he replied expressionlessly, and Katy blew out a low whistle. Mario did the math and held up his hands.

“Okay—you two? I’m asleep. I’ve had a long fucking week—finals are kicking this old man’s ass—you two go about your business and have this big throwdown that’s brewing in the air like a storm and I’m going to close my eyes and snore like a sick horse, *comprende?*”

“Does Jacky know?” Katy asked hopefully, and Teague’s shrug was not even close to a lie.

“I was going to tell him,” Teague muttered.

“When?” Katy asked sharply, and Teague would have thrown her a dirty look but they were crossing the Foresthill bridge so it was best to keep his eyes on the road.

“Tonight before we left!” Teague shot back, and what Katy let loose a string of Spanish that had Teague growling.

“You stop swearing at me in Mexican, Katy—this is none of your business!”

“I don’t speak ‘Mexican’ you stupid *pendejo*, I speak Spanish!”

They were at a stoplight now and Teague glared at her. “I took Spanish in high school and I know the difference between good Spanish and dirty-mean Nor-Cali-Mexican—whatever you just said, it wasn’t in the schoolbooks, it wasn’t nice, and it’s none of your goddamned business, so you just take it back!”

Behind them Mario made a sound that didn’t sound like a snore at all, but they all

pretended that it was.

“Okay, okay,” Katy backed down. Her next look at Teague was direct and sad. “I just...I watched you, Teague. I watched you in our suckass town, when not a single mother-fucker would help you. I watched you leave, I watched you kneel at Jacky’s body when you thought I’d killed him... your whole life, you wanted somebody to love, Teague...”

“Aw... gees...Katy...” Teague muttered, feeling naked. He hated being naked in front of people—it was worse when he cared for them, when what they thought of him mattered.

“No—don’t ‘Aww gees’ me,” Kate snapped back. “Your whole life, you’ve been a naked bird looking for a tree, Teague Sullivan, and now that you’ve found one you’re going to peck it to death for... for I don’t even know what!”

“You didn’t have it much better, Field Mouse,” Teague defended, using the name he’d called her when she was barely out of diapers and her mother, her poor, lost mother, would come into the diner where Teague worked for coffee.

“Bullshit, Teague,” Katy responded after a few tense moments of driving in what amounted to a rural residential zone. Her little body bounced against the seatbelt as she navigated the un-lined streets on the gray November day. “I had my moms—she couldn’t always feed me, but she held me. She sang. I had you—you say you don’t remember, but I got to tell you, I got four meals a week from that diner. You damned near kept me alive until I was old enough to steal. I asked mommy once, you know, why she didn’t eat when you offered? She told me that was your food, and it was all you got all day. She’d take it for me but not for herself. You were feeding me *your food*, you dumb mother fucker—we all knew your *poppi* was drinking your paycheck—and you’re feeding a lost little kid your fucking food...and...dammit...why? You’ve finally got someone to shelter you, and it’s not like I don’t want in on some of that, but why you trying to push him away? Why not tell him about this run?”

Katy finished speaking. They were on a stretch of McCourtney Road now, long, windy, with a decent shoulder. Someone used to have cattle here, but the barbed wire was all rusty and broken. Teague looked at her, and she was looking down at her hands, and the silence in the car was so thick that Mario’s obviously wide-awake swallow seemed to slice right through it.

So did Katy’s snuffle.

Teague looked at her again and there was a quiet, clear tear, trembling down her cheek, just for him.

“Fuck!!!!” Teague peeled into the road shoulder, hoping the fucking car didn’t sink into the fucking mud, and hit the brakes hard enough for the posi-traction to wobble the back. With a slam of the door, Teague was out of the car, stomping over the downed wire, hauling ass through the long pale green grass the rains always brought, trying to get away from the fucking car, from the fucking conversation, from the goddamned little woman who reminded him who he had been

once, who he was afraid of being now.

He barely heard the door slam behind him as that woman marched out of the car after him.

“So you not driving anymore, is that it?” she hollered and he stood with his back to her, trying to fight off the shakes.

“Wouldja give me a minute, Field Mouse,” he asked, trying to be reasonable, trying to keep the shaking out of his voice. “I’d just like to pull my shit together a little here—is that so fucking wrong?”

“Why you got to pull anything together, Teague? Why can’t you just say...”

Teague whirled. “I can’t even say it to Jacky...to *Jacky*... what makes you think I’m just going to blurt it out to you?”

Katy stood her ground, her pretty, full mouth pressed together and her dark brown eyes narrowed. “Because you got to say it to somebody—why not me? No one ever noticed me but you—no one ever know to ask me what your deal is.”

“You’re beautiful, Katy—don’t tell me no one noticed that!” He smiled a little, and a faint hope pulsed through him that maybe they could flirt this moment away, and the fear howling through him wouldn’t have to be revealed, naked under the gray November sky.

Katy screwed up her eyes against his words, and a brief, hard sob shook her before she set her mouth mutinously and glared at him through red-rimmed brown eyes. “I’ve been told that, Teague. Boys wanted my body and if they had smack I gave it to them. I lost my virginity to the *bobula* that gave me my first fix. I lay there on that filthy mattress and I closed my eyes and thought of someone, anyone, I’d rather have on top of me...you know whose face I saw?”

Now Teague screwed up his eyes against the words. “Jesus, Katy... I’m no one to dream about...”

“Bullshit—you don’t want to be but that don’t make you not a good person—that don’t make you not my dream guy. Only time I ever saw you be a bad guy is now, treating Jacky like a boy when he’s all grown.”

Her mouth was set and angry and her pointed chin quivered and she was so damned beautiful that for a minute he couldn’t breathe. But her words about Jack conjured those lean hands on his skin in the dark, the way he’d traced the scars Teague had lived with for his entire life, and suddenly every scar felt new and raw. His heart broke, cracked like brittle china, and his brain must have cracked a little too.

His hands moved to the front of his plaid flannel shirt, fumbling with the buttons, his breath coming in thick, furious pants as he tore open the front and then hauled everything, his



leather jacket, his undershirt, his flannel shirt over his head and hurled it with all the force he had. There he stood, pale, naked, thin, scarred and ugly for the world to see.

“THIS!!!” he screamed incoherently. “THIS is your dream guy, Katy—goddammit, LOOK at me!”

“I’m looking, *Papi*, ” she said in a small, sad voice and he wanted to rip his chest with his nails and howl.

“This is the man you want, this is the man Jacky’s stuck with—and look at me! I can’t protect *anything*, I couldn’t protect myself, I couldn’t protect Jacky...I’m NOTHING. I’m a punching bag, an ignorant redneck, a dumbfuck killer—I’m NOTHING!!!”

He howled the word ‘nothing’ into the air until it echoed on the treetops, and then he turned to the tree stump behind him and kicked at it and kicked again until he felt something give in his toe in spite of the steel-enforced waffle-stompers on his feet. He turned back to Katy none of his fury abated, and she was still glaring at him, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“How am I supposed to protect you? How am I supposed to be a good lover or husband or father or...or...or *anything*, if I’m nothing? You tell me that, Katy. You tell me how I’m supposed to do right by Jacky or right by you if I can barely do right by myself. So here I am. Nothing. And Green comes, and he tells me I’m something. I can be something for him—for *Green!!*” He held up his wrist, tattooed with an oak tree with a bloodied sword in a granite base. Green and Cory’s mark, blown through him because he accepted a hug from a brother, a kiss on the cheek.

“So for Green,” he continued, “and for Lady Cory. And all I can think is, maybe if I’m something for them, maybe I won’t be nothing no more. So yeah. I’m going on a run, and I’m going without Jacky, and I’m hoping that if I’m all hot Alpha and shit then maybe Jacky goes back to school and becomes what he’s supposed to, and he does that and I keep going on runs and being Green’s boy, because next to being in Jacky’s bed it’s the best thing I’ve ever been. Jacky, he’s got shit in his head. He knows he’s something. I’ve got to prove it, or I don’t get him. It’s not fair, he’s stuck with me and I’m nothing. It’s not fair, you want me, and I’m nothing. I go tonight and I know I’m something, and then I’m straight in my head, you see?”

Oh Jesus-fucking-mercy-fucking-son-of-a-tinker’s-fucking-bitch, he was *crying*.

He didn’t know what to do with that—with any of it. He stood there, his chest heaving, trying to pretend he wasn’t crying—wasn’t bare and naked in front of this smart, vulnerable woman who had apparently loved him since her childhood—and wondered where he’d managed to hurl his goddamned clothes.

Katy met his eyes and bit her lip. “Teague, *Papi*, your skin is blue—it’s fucking November for Christ’s sake...”

He didn’t wait for her to say anything else, to notice that he had tears when the only other

time he'd cried in years had been when Jacky had been wounded and bleeding out at his feet. Instead he turned his back and looked futilely for his damned clothes.

He found his jacket right behind him on the damned stump and he was scanning the grass and bracken on the wet ground when two little hands came into his vision—one with his T-shirt and one with his flannel shirt—and he reached out to take them.

Katy took his bomber jacket instead and folded it over her arm, then held the neck of the T-shirt like a mother dressing a child.

"Here, *mijo*," she murmured, and he rolled his eyes and ducked his head, just to humor her. She pulled the neck of the tee over his head, and then stalled, smoothing her hands over his shoulders. There were bumps on his collarbones—two on one, three on the other, where they had been broken. There were little boiling craters of healed flesh over his pectoral, where lit cigarettes had been put out. There was a thick lump of glazed flesh on his upper arm, where the bone had burst through, and lumps on his side where his ribs had been broken.

The list went on. The damage to his heart was documented in every scar on his body.

Angrily he grabbed at his shirt and jerked back, but she kept her hands on his chest. "It's not your shame, Teague. You earned Jacky—you earned me too. You earned us just by surviving."

"You're not grades, Katy," he muttered, trying to back up some more but bumping up against that damned tree stump. God—after Jack's touch the night before this complete scenario was a surreal experience in being completely exposed.

"Here—would you let me get dressed?"

Katy smiled a little, and ran her hands one more time across his chest, watching his face closely. When he closed his eyes and shuddered—and not from the cold, either—her smile grew a little. And it grew a little sadder as well.

"You're right—we're not grades. We're not a paycheck. We're the people who love you..."

"Katy, you don't know me," he grunted and pulled the white T-shirt down his torso to cram it hurriedly in his jeans.

"I know you fine, Teague," she replied without heat. "Everything I needed to know about you I heard in your voice when you thought Jacky was dying. Anything else is discovery—they tell me that's the fun part."

A little chuff of air shook Teague's chest, and the corner of his lean, sculpted mouth turned up. "Well then why don't we take it easy, and let the discovery happen? Why you got to jump into me and Jacky when we're just finding out what we are?"

Katy looked stricken, and Teague stopped in the middle of finding the arm of his flannel shirt to take her hands back in his. “What’s the matter, Field Mouse? It’s just a little time...”

“You don’t get it, Teague!” She shook her head and looked over to the car where Mario looked suddenly asleep. “The Goddess—she dicks with us, when it comes to mating. Every group save the vampires, but really, isn’t being dead enough? Anyway, we all got our own little quirks, like her own little ‘fuck with me’ stamp on our species. For some of us it’s death if we cheat, for some of us it’s that we mate for life. The Avians?” she nodded towards the car, “They have to stay with their mate for their whole lives or they die. If the elves actually bond, any outside action—and you know those people, they do everything but hump trees and call it experimenting—well they melt into fucking goo. Werewolves, we ain’t no different.”

Teague blinked. “What’s our glitch then?” he asked, half afraid for him and Jacky, half afraid for her.

“We got it easy—we’re like real wolves. There’s no big mating ceremony, no big flash of light—but the person we hang with for a while after we turn—well, that’s our mate. Pretty soon, all desire, all attraction for anyone else pretty much fades. Which sounds great, but what if the coupling isn’t so good? Well, you split up and all, but you got no one else—your body just won’t go. And what if you want to do something epic—something like Cory and Adrian and Green?”

She swallowed, and her voice lost its casual instruction. “I mean, here you are, in the hill where everybody’s getting some and here I am—the man I’ve wanted all my entire fucking life just a few doors down, and if I’m not a part of you and Jacky in the next few weeks, you’re a million fucking light-years away.”

Teague scrubbed at his face with both hands, his flannel shirt dangling from one shoulder. “God,” he muttered. “Goddess. Whatever. You really want to mate with me? How do you know someone better isn’t going to come along?”

Katy’s look was dismal and near as naked as Teague had been, just moments before. “I was a smackwhore, Teague,” she said grimly, “and I did anyone who would fix me. I got to tell you, quantity ain’t quality. The only man I ever dreamed about was you.”

Teague sighed, the implications—all the implications—of what she just told him seeping into his brain, fitting themselves like a puzzle. It was easier, somehow, to think about the situation in terms of what would make Katy happy, what would make Jacky happy, and not how to persuade her that he wasn’t the one who could do it. Katy reached up and grabbed his flannel shirt and helped him into the sleeve in total silence, and then gave him the leather bomber jacket and watched as he shrugged into that.

When he was done he opened his arms and she ran in, leaning her head on his chest and wrapping her arms under his coat, rubbing at his back.

They stood that way in silence, the quickness of their breathing heating their faces as they leaned together. “You’ll have to love Jacky too,” Teague said at last, and a quick, hopeful smile crossed Katy’s sad, pretty face.

“You think I don’t know that?” With that she stood on her tiptoes and gave him a quick kiss—not enough to arouse, just a press of her lips on his.

Because he was becoming a werewolf, he smelled the spice of her skin for the rest of the day.

Mario made the rest of the drive as comfortable as he could—he really did seem to be asleep when they got back to the car. It was obvious though, that he’d seen enough to put his two cents in.

“You sure you don’t want to come inside to eat, brother?” he asked as they dropped him off on the long drive to the Aerie—a fantastical invisible fiberglass perch for the twenty or so man-sized birds that lived in the newly refurbished house at Camp Far West.

When Teague said a gruff ‘No thank you’, Mario shook his head. “Man, you’d better eat something. I’m telling you, just looking at your ribs makes me want a cheeseburger!” And with that he blurred quickly, turning his skin and ruffling his feathers, then flapping his six-foot wingspan and soaring to his home.

Teague watched him fly and laughed a little to himself. “Good man,” he murmured, and Katy agreed. It was the last thing they really said to each other, even when Teague ran into the Raley’s for Grace’s last minute supplies before they ventured back to the canyon. It felt as though they’d said everything they needed to for a while.

### **Jack Running**

Jack was reading in a corner of the front room, facing the window that overlooked the canyon, when Teague and Katy came in with their bags of groceries. Teague looked down and jerked his chin in Jacky’s direction and Katy looked over and nodded, seriously.

Teague walked to the corner and bent down over the back of the overstuffed chair. Jack almost stopped breathing when he felt Teague’s breath near his ear. “You want to go running, Jacky? There’s a cross-country trail around the hill—I want to go running. I do my best talking when I move.”

And with that, Teague was trotting towards the network of halls where their room was located, Jacky at his heels. Jacky turned around belatedly, right before the living room was out of sight, and caught Katy’s eyes. She wasn’t looking forlorn or left behind at all—she was looking sad and thoughtful. She caught his eyes as he looked and winked reassuringly, then shooed Jack down the corridor and he went.

Teague was already into his running shorts and a sweatshirt by the time Jack got to the room. He bounced on his toes a little while he waited for Jack to struggle to find his own sweats and sweatshirt and lace his running shoes. Jack glared at him in irritation as he did the laces.

“You’ve got some place to go or something?” he asked, and the expression on Teague’s face went all inscrutable.

“That’s one of the things I wanted to talk about—don’t panic!”

Jack had no idea what his expression had been, but his chest felt half frozen with fear. “I wasn’t!” he lied gamely, and Teague’s own expression became instantly contrite.

“That’s my fault,” Teague said quietly. He moved forward to the bed, where Jack was sitting and bent down, placing a quick, awkward kiss on Jack’s temple. Jack wondered if Teague had ever given a casual kiss to the women he’d dated—and thought that maybe he hadn’t. “You’re sort of stuck with me unless you come to your senses in time. Now hurry up and let’s go.”

Teague ran all the time—but he made Jack run with him at least three times a week. *If we only run when we’re chased, Princess, we’re gonna get caught.* Teague ran like a real runner, with a quick, wiry grace that always fascinated Jack. Jack ran like an epileptic gazelle—he could achieve speed, but there was some awkward gamboling at the beginning and there were some spazzing out parts in the middle that weren’t pretty either. Teague knew this—he waited until Jack had hit a mild, easy stride, before he started talking.

Because he was Teague, and because they were running, he made it quick and dirty.

“I’m going on a run tonight.” He punctuated that bit of news with a little skip around a rock. The path itself was fairly smooth—it ran in a series of loops around the hill, ending (or so Teague told him) on the crown of the hill at the Goddess grove. From what Cory had told Teague, it had been a wedding gift of sorts from Green and Bracken, and she used it often.

“A run,” Jack repeated blankly. “I thought we were running now?”

Teague rolled his eyes in mid stride. “A *run*, genius—a job, an errand, that thing we do that puts money in our bank accounts...”

Jack tripped and almost went down on one knee. “*Without me?*”

Teague gave a half-turn, and launched himself off a rock, to a tree and over another bump in the road while mostly running backwards, but Jack was too heartsick to be impressed.

“You’re going to leave me behind?” he asked again, hating the plaintive note in his voice.

And that's when Teague hit him with the 'master plan'. Jack was going to school, Teague was going to stay in the business and be an Alpha wolf and Green's right hand guy, and they would move up from Sacramento to someplace nearby, because "I hated high school, Jacky—I love this place, but I can't live here twenty-four/seven."

As Teague wrapped it up, Jack actually stopped running. To his surprise, Teague noticed immediately, turning around and jogging in place and looking at him irritably.

"What?"

"Jesus, Teague, I don't know where to start! It's like you've turned into this whole other person!"

"I don't know if you've noticed, but we're both fucking werewolves now—or, well, we're gonna be. Werewolves, I mean. When this waiting's all done." He blinked when Jack didn't respond. "I mean, we're fucking right now, right?"

"We're still going to be us!" Jack exclaimed, half laughing. He was lost, racking his brain for a response to all of this information in so short a time.

But Teague wasn't laughing at all. "That's the problem," he said, his voice sober to the point of heartbreak, that constantly vibrating body suddenly quiet. "I'm still me, and I'm not enough." As though he'd said too much, he suddenly whirled and continued his graceful trot down the path and Jack struggled to catch up to him.

"Bull...shit..." he panted, pissed because he was winded already. "That's bullshit Teague!"

Teague turned around, keeping his body moving, and shrugged. "It is what it is—you don't get a second rate supernatural PI. You get Lady Cory's right hand man—I'm not good enough for you, I don't get to keep you. If I can't make this run and not be an asshole, I'm not good enough to keep you."

He turned again and ran slower, and Jack was able to catch up, but as much as he was wheezing, he was too frustrated to keep silent. "So I just stay home like the little woman? I thought you *liked* working with me!" Ouch. Just fucking ouch.

Teague turned to him and fluidly sidestepped a puddle in the same motion. Jack flatfooted through the puddle and got water all over his shoe. "I love working with you, Jacky. Best year and a half of my goddamned life. But I want to live with you, make a life with you and maybe Katy now, and you stood up in front of a pissed off werewolf and took my wound for me. I'll be damned if you ever get to do that again."

Teague's voice was choked, passionate, and as he kicked up a burst of speed Jack found that he just couldn't catch up. He slowed to a walk, feeling helpless, and watched Teague trot up a rise. Before the dumb mother fucker could disappear from sight, Jack shouted, "Fine! You go

off and be danger-hero-fucking-werewolf-man, and I'll stay home and feed the goddamned cat!"

Jack was almost as surprised as Teague was when Teague tripped on a rock, did a flat-out shoulder roll, came to his feet with full momentum and smacked into a goddamned oak tree. Then he fell flat on his ass.

Jack hurried to help him up, but he wasn't anticipating Teague to launch upwards, swinging a haymaker that connected solidly with Jack's jaw. Jack went down on *his* ass and glared up at the man he loved more than his own life.

"What in the *fuck*..."

"*You were AWAKE?*" Teague's eyes were wide and outraged, and Jack noticed that the 'fight or flight' pulse in the side of his temple was throbbing.

"Yeah," Jack said weakly, trying to wrap his brain around yet one more thing his lover hadn't told him. "I was awake."

"You couldn't have told me?" Oh gods... the betrayal on his face—Jack half expected him to turn around and take off for the hills behind them and never come back.

"But then you wouldn't have talked to me!" Jack protested, feeling utterly, utterly lost.

"Well maybe there was some shit I didn't want you to know!"

"Well then why did you tell it to me?"

"I thought you were asleep!" Teague began to bounce on his toes again, looking miserable and betrayed and suddenly Jack was angry instead of lost.

"Well I wasn't—I was waiting for you! Work with me here, Teague—we were partners and suddenly we were, you know, like *partners* and the only time we communicated was when we were having sex! Your pecker was talking loud and clear but my heart couldn't speak that language!"

"Was the sex that bad?" Teague asked, stricken.

"The sex was *great*!" Jack shouted. "It was wonderful! Best sex *ever*! But apparently I'm the woman as well as the bottom, because I needed some fucking reassurance that I wasn't just a new kind of toy!"

"Well Jesus, Jacky—why didn't you just ask me? I would have told you..." Teague's mouth set and for a moment the terrible vulnerable look disappeared. "*I did* tell you I loved you! Wasn't that enough? You had to wait until I was all bare and...naked and..." his voice trailed off and Jack couldn't stand it.

With a dark look from his blue eyes and a half-angry rub to his jaw he moved a little closer to Teague, close enough to take those restless, talking hands in his own, close enough to rub the backs with his thumb, close enough to lean forward and touch foreheads in a gesture that was surprisingly Green-like.

“Teague...buddy...” and didn’t *that* sound lame? He remembered Green’s word for Cory, for Adrian, and suddenly it was the right word to use.

“Teague, beloved,” he tried again, “why is it so awful if somebody sees you naked?”

“You’ve seen me naked lots, Jacky,” Teague smirked, “before we decided to go all gay for each other, remember?”

Jack shook his head. “That’s not what I mean. What is so wrong with Teague Sullivan that the things in his heart can’t be exposed to air? What’s so wrong with your body that you don’t want me to touch it? Why is it so awful that I want to see you bare?”

Teague closed his eyes and breathed out slowly. Jack could feel those restless hands shaking, even in his tender grip. “If you listened, Jacky, if you really listened, you’d know the answer to that.”

Jack nodded. He did indeed. Love hurt, and then it hurt some more, and then it ripped your heart out and gnawed on your thrashing corpse.

“You know what I heard, Teague? I heard pain. And courage. And nobility. And vulnerability. I heard all the shit that I fell in love with because I *hoped* it was there—except suddenly I didn’t have to hope for it anymore. It was right there, words in the dark, something to hold onto while you got your shit together, ‘kay?”

Teague nodded, swallowing hard. “‘kay.” Suddenly his body started bouncing and he pulled away reluctantly. “Jacky—it’s getting grayer out here. That thing we’re doing—we’re leaving before dark...”

Jack backed up and shook himself out, the painful, private moment swept away by necessity—and by Teague’s need for some space. “Okay, Teague—lead the way, but, uhm,” suddenly he was the vulnerable one, “don’t leave me behind, okay?”

Teague flashed him one of his brilliant, trademark, fuck-me grins. “Princess, if you don’t want to be left in the dust, you’ve got to learn to pick up your feet!”

And like that they were off, running companionably in the deepening gray twilight.

They reached the top of the hill breathlessly as the sky turned a dirty concrete color, laden with not quite enough moisture to rain. The ambient, everpresent light in the Goddess Grove made the fantastically (and erotically) shaped trees glow with warmth, and showed them Katy, sitting patiently on the marble bench in the middle of the grove, doing some sort of



needlework sampler as she waited.

## Katy

### Werewolf Lessons

“Aw, shit,” Teague groaned. Katy caught his apologetic look at Jack, and smiled to herself—whatever they had been talking about, it had been serious and important—and it had nothing whatsoever to do with her. His next words confirmed this, “Katy, darlin’, would you take it wrong if I told you that you were the last thing on our minds out there?”

Katy rolled her eyes. “No, *Papi*—I hear you. We can talk tomorrow. Cory wanted me to tell you that they’re ready when you are.” Cory had also, she thought with warm satisfaction, given her this lovely needlepoint sampler with three wolves printed on the front of it. The instructions were pretty simple, mostly, and Katy was flattered—it was like being invited into the little club of women that gathered together in the hill.

“*Shit!*” Teague growled, hauling ass towards the staircase. Jacky made a sound—a bereft little sound that confirmed her suspicions about how serious their conversation had been, because Teague looked back at him and flashed that fuck-me grin.

“Don’t worry, Princess—I’m just going to go get changed. I’ll be up in a sec to kiss you bye-bye.”

He disappeared, leaving Jack shaking his head. “Do you think he’s going to be calling me ‘Princess’ forever?”

Katy flashed him a grin that had the same brilliance and intensity as Teague’s. “Well, *mijo*, you are the most delicate man I ever met.”

Jack shook his head and rubbed his jaw. For the first time Katy noticed the swelling. Wow. Whatever they had been talking about, it had been more intense than she first thought.

“So he’s ‘Poppy’ and I’m ‘Me-ho’,” Jack asked curiously. “What’s that mean?”

Katy laughed a little and scooted on the bench. There were squishy pillows over the marble, in brilliant colors, and it made the bench warm and welcoming. She patted the spot next to her and Jack gave a sigh and plopped down.

“*Mijo* is a child’s nickname—*Papi* is a man,” she said tranquilly, and Jack grunted.

“Oh yay—one more person who thinks I’m a child.”

Katy pointed to his jaw. “I don’t think he did that to you because he was treating you like a child.”

Jack fingered his jaw again and shook his head. “No.”

“What happened, Jacky?” she asked gently, wondering if he’d tell her. Jack liked to talk—a lot more than Teague, anyway—but a man had his pride.

Apparently the need to talk to someone who would understand outweighed pride. “I...I snuck a peek, I guess,” Jack murmured. “I saw him vulnerable.”

The image of Teague screaming at her under a gray sky would be etched forever behind her eyes. Very carefully she added a stitch to the vine-stitched outline of a blonde/brown wolf.

“Bad things happen to him when he’s vulnerable,” she replied sadly.

“You think I don’t know that?” he asked bitterly. “I...I just want him to know they won’t happen when I see him that way.”

Katy nodded, and felt that maybe she owed Jacky her own truth. “I told him I was a smackwhore, and that I loved him—you know what he said?”

“It’s bullshit for you to call yourself such an ugly name?” Jack asked irritably.

Katy actually felt tears start as she turned back to her needlepoint wolf. *You’ll have to love Jacky too.* Not such a chore, really.

“He told me he wasn’t good enough for me.”

Jack closed his eyes tightly. “Of course he did.” Suddenly those eyes—the guileless color of a spring day—opened, sharpened, concentrated on her.

“You told him you loved him?”

Katy put the sampler down and looked right back. “I’m not trying to get rid of you, Jacky. I wouldn’t do that to him—what kind of love would that be, once he finds someone who makes him happy and I get all bitch-kitty on him and try and kick you out?”

“Then what?”

“You been here a week, and you really have to ask that?” She arched her brows at him and tried to look confident that such a thing would really work.

Jacky wasn’t stupid. “So we take turns, is that it? I get him most days and you get him

weekends?”

“That’s no way to mate in a pack,” she returned grimly. “No, Jacky—he made it very clear that I would have to love you too. And when you’re not being a pissy little bitch, that’s not such a chore, you know?”

Jack stood up restlessly and swing his arms, as though trying to shake off an image of something. “So...we’re just all one big happy puppy-pile? Share the same bed? You and me are the little women in his werewolf harem?”

“You got to make it sound nasty?” she asked, hurt. “What’s the matter, Jacky—I know you like women. Don’t tell me something different never crossed your mind. You never fantasized...”

“About you?” And there was just enough panic in his voice to give her a little hope.

She stood and moved closer—no plan in mind, just the animal idea that it was easier to read a person up close. “Okay—that’s a start. You never think about me naked? You never dream about the way I look, or feel or...” she was up close to him now, and his back was against a tree. She could see the dark ring around his iris, the fairness of his skin under the dark hair. He’d chipped a tooth sometime in his adulthood, and the way he smelled... she closed her eyes and inhaled, smelling the same things Teague loved—innocence, spice, surprising strength.

“You smell like vanilla and cinnamon,” he said, echoing her exact thoughts. “I dream about the way you smell.”

“Did you think of me last night?” she purred.

“No,” he murmured, and she was hurt enough to study his face. “You had to be there,” he said with a little laugh, and she answered him with a little smile.

“I’d like to be,” she murmured.

He blinked unhappily, still doubtful, and the smile she gave him back was all woman—and mostly bravura. Her previous sexual experiences had been the ones she’d had when high. Mostly, she’d just lay there and ride the chemical vein-wave. She’d never had to think about liking the act, liking the touches on her skin, liking the person she was with. But looking at Jacky, knowing that he was the sort of person Teague would die for, knowing he thought she was beautiful...it was like discovering she was a whole new person, someone who could seduce a pretty college boy under a tree.

“What’s the matter, Jacky—you never thought about being the creamy filling in the Oreo cookie?”

Jacky’s instant erection, his instant high of arousal saturated the air with his smell and stunned them both with its ferocity.

Katy took a deep breath and stepped back, her eyes dropping immediately to his groin, where the scent of desire came from. The tip of his engorged erection was peeping at her from the waistband of his loose sweats.

“Oh gees,” he protested, and from behind the both of them Teague made a snorking sound between a laugh and a whoop.

“Jacky, I could have sworn you told me you didn’t normally start fast!”

Katy cast a dismayed look over her shoulder and saw Teague, fresh from the world’s fastest shower and dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, looking at the two of them with surprise, amusement and... she closed her eyes, let her werewolf do the thinking...

“This makes you hot, Teague,” she told him with a blessed, blessed shiver. She wasn’t off base, she wasn’t making random guesses—he wanted this. He wanted her. This could work.

“Yeah, Katy,” he muttered, shaking his head in what was nearly sorrow. “Of course it makes me hot. But I’ve got places to go—if you’re going to finish this, you’d better do it now.”

Katy was suddenly panicked. She hadn’t done this since... since...Jacky reached down and cupped her cheek, grinning a little bit in what amounted to pain.

“You don’t have to,” he murmured. “We don’t have to rush...”

It was all the incentive she needed, and she dropped to her knees before she knew what she was doing, shucked his shorts just low enough to let his engorged manhood and testicles flop out, and swallowed him to the back of her throat.

Jack made a sound between a grunt and a howl then, his head cracking backwards against the tree. He tasted like sweat—he’d been running, of course he tasted salty—and like clean and like long, smooth stretches of skin. He wasn’t small but he wasn’t huge either, and she could fit him to the back of her throat, and when his hand knotted in her hair in encouragement, not force, she did it again and again and again.

Jack whimpered a little, and she tasted the salty beginning of the end, and licked his head enthusiastically. He wanted her. He was young and beautiful and smart...and Teague’s hungry eyes were fastened on them both.

She felt Teague’s movement behind her, and his shadow darkened over her. He was leaning in from the side and...his fingers knotted in her hair with Jack’s, and Jack’s grunts and whimpers were suddenly muffled.

Oh Goddess. They were *kissing*, they were *kissing*, and she could smell them together, could smell Teague’s desire, could even feel his erection where his body bumped her shoulder,

and his fingers rubbed her scalp tenderly and...

She whimpered herself, in desire, in satisfaction, and Jacky tensed under her mouth, under her hands which were pressed against his still-covered thighs, and she heard Teague chuckle, Teague who knew Jacky's noises, maybe even knew his smell by now, and then Jacky was spurting in her mouth and she was swallowing, happily, thrilled that sex could be good, that she wanted Jacky too, that she'd done something wonderful and that Teague, her Teague who had always seemed too old, too beaten, too gone from their suck-ass hometown to reach, seemed to approve of.

Jacky gave one more spasm against her, and leaned back, the tree and Teague's strong arm the only things holding him up. Teague moved then, and reached down, helping her up and bending down to brush off the knees of her jeans and pull up Jacky's sweat pants.

She was staring at Jacky's closed eyes and slack, ecstatic expression in wonder.

Teague was suddenly looming right above her (not too far above—Teague wasn't tall) his hand on her chin, and she realized she was dripping a little bit of Jacky's spend down her the side of her chin. Her hand came up to wipe it off and Teague stopped her in mid-motion.

"You tell him about werewolf mating while I'm gone," he told her seriously, and she nodded. "And you remember this moment until we talk tomorrow, 'kay?"

She nodded again, and was going to say "'kay'" back, when he dipped his head and stuck out a pointed tongue, taking the last of the come from the corner of her mouth. His lips brushed hers, and suddenly she had to take—she had given, right, and she wanted something in return. She wanted his kiss, and he gave it to her, his warm chest surrounding her, his mouth on hers, wet and hungry and tasting her and Jacky as though it was all he wanted in the world. He pulled back after a moment, sucking on her tongue a little, and then gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead.

Then he moved to Jacky and gave him a quick kiss—but one that tasted, so they would all taste together on his tongue—and then he shook his head.

"You two are certi-fucking-fiable. If you two can make this happen, I'll take care of you. I still think you both could do better."

And with that he was gone down the trap door, leaving them both breathing quickly in the glowing dark. Jacky was still leaning against the tree with his eyes closed, but when he opened his arms, she knew enough to burrow into them and shudder in his embrace.

They stood there, shuddering, for a couple of moments, before Jack chuckled lowly. "That was, uhm, pretty wonderful. I didn't think it would feel that good with anyone but Teague."

Katy shrugged. "He was there. I think it helped."

Jack leaned down and kissed her temple. “I love the way you smell,” he said softly, invitingly.

Katy nodded. “I love the way your eyes get darker when you look at Teague.”

“I love the way Spanish comes out of your mouth when we’re not expecting it.”

Katy laughed. Of course, Jacky hadn’t heard her speak ‘dirty-Nor-Cali-Mex’ yet. “I love the way you defended me from myself.”

They could have gone on, she thought. They could have gone on, finding reasons why they could love each other, why this idea could work, but something caught Katy’s attention: a spectral set of autumn-sky blue eyes, floating out of one of the erotic tree sculptures. They didn’t float for long—after a moment they formed coherency into a medium-tall young-man’s body, with white-blonde hair and a lean, haunted face.

It was the same face carved into the side of the bench that Katy had been sitting on.

“Adrian?” Katy whispered, hesitantly. They all knew he was there. He was, like, legend—he was the reason for Katy and the other werewolves. His legacy of finding the lost, the dispossessed, the addicted and the lonely, and bringing them to Green’s Hill had lasted beyond his death. The werewolf who had found Katy lying on a dirty mattress and offered her a choice between vampire or were had been one of Adrian’s saved.

Adrian’s passionate love affair with Green and Cory had become the Hill’s epic anthem.

Tonight, Adrian was wandering restlessly from tree to tree, hunting something unhappily. Katy was pretty sure Jack was staying still for the same reason she was—he was so lost, so lovely—they didn’t want to disturb him.

Abruptly the trap door into the house opened, and Green emerged, his own movements hurried and urgent.

“Beloved...”

Adrian’s ghost looked up, and the smile that whispered across his features was heartbreaking in its joy.

“Where is she?” The voice was so faint, cocky, cockney British, they could almost swear they imagined it. “I came because she needs me...where is she?”

Green, tall, inhumanly beautiful, serene and kind Green, closed his eyes in what must have been a crippling pain. He opened them again and managed a sweet, crooked smile.

“She’s gone on an errand...”

“A dangerous one!” Adrian accused, and Green conceded the point with a bow of his head. With a sigh he folded his long frame onto the marble bench, and Adrian came to stand before him. Green picked up Katy’s discarded needlework sampler and held it up as several tiny, sparkly little beings surrounded it and abruptly disappeared, sampler and all. Then he held out his hands, and Adrian took them, and although there could be no touch of flesh, the gesture looked as natural as if it had been Cory before him, taking his hands the same way.

“Dangerous and necessary—she has back-up, you know!” Green smiled winningly and Adrian, for all that he was not only a ghost but a *vampire*’s ghost, huffed irritably down next to him on the bench, his translucent form making not a single dent.

“Don’t tell me you sent Fuckwit with her,” Adrian sulked, and Green laughed.

“He’s your best friend, so don’t give me that shit, my lovely. And he’s not her only backup. I also sent Nicky and Marcus, and Phillip, and Max...”

“Cop-fuck Max?”

“He’s a were-cat now, Adrian. We haven’t called him ‘cop-fuck’ for...” a swallow, “for a while now.”

A shiver passed through that translucent frame, a grief, a pain that could not be eased. “Time keeps passing,” Adrian said plaintively.

“That it does,” Green agreed, his face etched with the same pain.

Adrian turned his non-existent body and laid back, his head resting on Green’s lap, and Green reached out and wove his long fingers with Adrian’s transparent ones. They clasped and unclasped their hands languidly as they talked.

“So if she’s all covered, why does she need me?” came the faint question, and for the first time Green looked up and captured Jack and Katy’s gaze.

“Because she’s with someone who reminds her awfully of you,” he said softly.

Adrian went to sit up, and although Green couldn’t keep him lying down physically, something about the way he held himself kept Adrian leaning back, a melancholy parody of two lovers in the garden on a summer’s day.

“She can’t have another lover in her bed!” Adrian protested. “Unless it’s someone with Brack, she’s stretched too thin as it is!”

“She does very well, actually—but I agree. She has all she wants or needs, and nobody’s going to push that unless it just happens—especially not Bracken. No—that’s not the problem, beloved. This one has lovers of his own.”

“Then what—it just hurts her to see someone as fucked up as I was?” Adrian asked bitterly, and Green’s hand freed itself and stroked the non-existent white-blonde hair.

“No, beloved. It hurts her to see someone completely wonderful who’s so sure he’s fucked up beyond repair. It took you two lovers to see your worth—I’ve always wished that I could have been enough.” Green swallowed, hard, and a nearly invisible hand came up and stroked his cheek.

“No regrets, beloved. If I hadn’t had that time with you, there wouldn’t have been enough of me for her to heal.”

Green smiled faintly, and met Jack and Katy’s eyes again, his chin giving a faint jerk towards the door behind him. The signal was clear—they had heard all he wanted them to hear, and it was time to get the fuck out of the garden and away from this more than private conversation.

They ran as quickly as they could, across the garden, down the granite staircase, through the labyrinth of halls and into Jack and Teague’s room. It wasn’t until the door slammed behind them that they looked at each other and saw that they both had been crying silently the whole time.

“Aw, Jesus,” Jack sniffed irritably, “I really *am* the woman!”

“In this case *mijo*,” Katy told him, wiping her cheeks on her sweatshirt, “I think we’ll let you keep your man-card.” Then she remembered something and swore. “My sampler—dammit! I was going to work on that to...”

She and Jack both stopped talking and stared.

There on the three (there had originally been two?) overstuffed chairs by the lamp, lay Katy’s sampler. Jack’s book was on the end table next to it, right where he’d left it. Katy laughed a little, and looked at Jack helplessly. Jack leaned down and kissed her salty, wet cheek.

“Tell you what—how about you go get us a plate of whatever’s in the kitchen, I’ll take a shower, and you can work on it in here while we wait...”

“Wait for Teague,” she finished soberly, and Jack nodded.

“Yeah. Wait for Teague.” Tried not to worry, prayed for his safety, wished he was there.

“I’ll leave when he gets here—you two...you need to talk.” She felt very noble saying that, and very gratified when he kissed her forehead and nodded.



“He said if we could make this work, he’d take care of us. Katy...maybe we could make this work, you think?” He looked honestly hopeful, and she had to respond the same way.

“Yeah—I think. It’s what I’ve been hoping, anyway. But first, there’s some things about werewolves I got to tell you, Jacky. I need you to listen, ‘kay?’”

Jacky nodded. “Okay—how ‘bout while we eat?”

It wouldn’t be that easy—they both knew it. But he was happy, and she wanted to keep him that way, and not just for Teague. “It’s a plan. But first, *Princeso*, you need to take a shower—I’m not eating my dinner with no stinky man!”

Jack laughed, and so did Katy, and then she trotted off to go get them some food.

## **Teague**

### **Family**

Cory wouldn’t let him load his own damned gun.

The little college student stood at the SUV right outside the landing, loading guns and checking equipment and generally being tough, competent, and surrounded by older, taller men. Teague would have been tempted to smirk at the thought of her leading this little expedition like a military commander on a covert ops mission, but two vampires, and a police officer/were-creature were nodding at her with complete seriousness, and Nicky, her own bedmate (an Avian like Mario), was taking orders like a low-ranking corporal.

The only one who was determined to give her shit was Bracken, her actual bonded mate, and he seemed to be doing it to keep her from winding too tightly. It was certain that even when he gave her shit, he was doing exactly what she told him to.

“Teague, dammit,” she muttered, “stop. I told you not to unload that last clip—you’re carrying silvershot, right?”

Teague blinked. “I’m dumber than a bag of horseshit, Lady Cory, are you sure you want me along?” When he’d loaded the damned gun, silver hadn’t been on his list of fatal allergies. Now that he needed to load his beloved 9mm again, he couldn’t touch the ammo or, according to Katy, it would burn like acid and unless someone stepped in to heal or wash him off with mineral or salt water, the burn would spread slowly like a chemical toxin.

She scowled at him. “See, now that’s the first stupid thing you’ve said. Stop screwing around and give me the fucking gun.”

She finished loading his gun and Max’s, then clicked the safety on and jammed her own

.38 in a little tailored holster under her pea coat. She pulled a bottle of something out of her pocket that looked like hand cleaner but smelled like ocean and sage and rinsed her hands quickly before going up to Bracken and accepting his kiss.

“Do you have the iPod?” she asked, and it was clear that this was a matter of vital importance.

Everybody else getting into the car—they were all wearing dark clothes, it looked like some sort of bizarre mafia reunion—groaned, including Nicky.

“Well did anybody else bring music?” she asked sweetly, and Nicky said “I did!” with some enthusiasm.

“Christ’s corset, no!” Phillip, a suave, dark-haired blue eyed vampire who actually *looked* like Dracula replied.

Marcus, Phillip’s long time on-again/off-again shook his head and explained, “Nicky likes hip-hop,” to a bemused Teague.

“Oh God!” Teague responded in honest horror, and Cory met his eyes and nodded enthusiastically.

“Don’t worry, everybody—we can put it on Adrian’s mix, right?” The reluctance turned philosophical and Bracken put his arms around her middle and whispered something in her ear. She smiled wanly and then jumped back and smacked his hand. “Don’t touch me, dammit! You know...”

Bracken rolled his eyes. “Don’t be a complete spazz, beloved—I’m not going to *touch* it!”

Cory rolled her eyes as she was stomping back to Teague. “Asshole!” she muttered. “You should have seen his hand the one time I forgot and handed him the fucking gun!” Still grumbling to herself, she motioned for Teague to get into the very back SUV first, and then followed, with Max on her other side.

“You were distracted!” Bracken called over the noise of the others getting in. “Fuckwit broke your fucking hand! That’s no reason for you to sit in the way back.”

Teague looked around Cory at Max, who shrugged. “Don’t ask me—I was unconscious for that part, and Nicky wasn’t around yet.”

Cory shook her head, irritated. “Green had to heal him—it was pretty fucking horrible...”

“So was your shattered hand, so could we just drop it!” Bracken shot back, and the comforting sounds of *Nickleback’s* ‘Rockstar’ started playing over the sound system.

Everybody in the car brightened—including Teague--and as the whole car started to belt it out, Bracken cranked up the sound, and they pulled out of the driveway to Green's Hill in good spirits. When 'Rockstar' was over, *GnR* came on with 'Welcome to the Jungle', and Cory was singing along with everybody else when there was a sudden glorious smell, rolling through the car like open meadows and mustard flowers and the werewolf emerging in Teague's consciousness wanted to roll down the window and stick his nose out into the damp November night.

Next to him, Cory shivered and closed her eyes. Teague saw an expression cross her face that he'd learned to associate with a voice in her head that no one else could hear. And then, underneath the raucous singing pumping up his companions, he heard her whimper. She opened her eyes and glanced sidelong at him, and then shook her head.

"Tell him I love him," she murmured, and if Teague's hearing wasn't going hyper-dog, he wouldn't have been able to hear her.

She met eyes with Bracken in the rearview, and Teague could barely make out the "I'm sorry you hurt" expression on his face. She smiled a little, weakly, and *GnR* was up again as 'Get in the Ring' thundered through the SUV. Teague watched Cory as she did her best headbanging within the confines of the car, and when she closed her eyes and screamed, *Get in the ring, motherfucker!* he knew with absolute certainty that she was using the music to block out something exquisitely painful.

It must have worked, he thought, feeling for her. Whatever she was screaming to block out, it must have been compartmentalized down to the last fold by the time the song ended.

When the song ended, Bracken met Cory's eyes in the mirror and turned the music down.

"Okay, everybody—we've all heard the plan in bits and pieces but we're all here together and I want to run it through before we get there—everybody good with that?" There were nods all around, and Cory ran through the details.

Two months ago at exactly the same time in the moon cycle, the first victim of a 'wild dog' attack had been found lying in pieces on the side of the American River bike trail by Discovery Park. Exactly one month later, the second one had been found floating downstream.

Both of the victims had been young, female, and pretty, and Green's people weren't buying 'wild dog attack' any more than they were buying stock in California Public Education.

"If he's a wolf, he's going to smell Teague—he'll either attack or start a dialog, and either way, we get him out of circulation. If he gets to me first, it's the same plan. But one way or another he ends up on our side or dead by the end of the night, right?"

There were nods all around and Cory went on.

“Those of us with guns, remember, fire towards the river and low—the embankment’s high on the other side, and we won’t hit anything but dirt if we miss. Bird-boys, you’re flying high as look out, vamps, you’re the same way. Phillip you’re over me, Marcus, you’ve got Teague—Teague, anything happens to you, I’ll know, so hang on, back-up is *always* coming. Bracken is doing his hyperspeed thing in the shadows on the side NOT near the river—if you wound bad guy and he’s still dangerous, step back and let Brack do his thing, right?”

There were nods all around, and Teague felt like an asshole because he was the only one who had to ask.

“Uhm, what’s Brack’s thing?”

Cory gave him a reassuring smile. “He calls blood. It sucks if you’re wounded next to him, but very handy if you’re trying to kill something that doesn’t want to die.”

Teague had to blink, and blink again. “You’ve been wounded standing next to him, I take it?” he asked, appalled. Of all the horrible powers to have when you had to go out into danger with someone you cared for.

“Too many fucking times,” Bracken said sourly from the front of the car, and Cory made a little ‘kiss-kiss’ face into the mirror.

“It’s not a picnic for him either—he’s the only elf in the hill who can bleed to death.” She met those eyes in the mirror again. “And he almost has!”

“Oh *Goddess*,” bitched Phillip from the middle of the car, “would you two stop walking memory lane before a job? There’s too many ways this can go bad!”

“That’s every job, darling,” Cory said with a saccharine smile, and then went on as though she’d remembered something. “That reminds me—Teague, if the bad guy goes for you and I’m in sight, I can throw up a shield between you and it. If I do that, bullets *can* pass through the shield, so don’t hesitate to shoot, nothing’s going to rebound at you. If we do end up killing him, once we’re done, we’re going to have about five minutes for clean-up before the cops come—I’ll either burn him or have the vamps scatter him over the river...”

“Blargh...” muttered Marcus from the front, and she shrugged in apology and closed her eyes for a second, obviously going over a mental checklist.

“Lessee lessee lessee...” then she looked up at Max on her side. “Oh yeah—Max, you’ve got the changing thing under control, right?”

Max nodded tersely and Phillip threw in his two cents, “Now if only he’d not be so squeamish about letting me eat when he’s not furry!”

Cory turned to Teague apologetically. “Marcus and Phillip have been feeding from Renny and Max—it’s easier sometimes if vamp couples bond with were-couples.”

“Yeah,” said Phillip from the front, his voice laden with not quite enough disgust, “but it was a lot more fun bonding when my food had tits!”

“Well it’s a lot more fun for the whole hill if you’re not humping your food stupid!” Cory replied sharply, and Phillip cast a resigned and affectionate look at Marcus, who sat next to him. The two men’s hands were casually clasped.

“Yeah,” Phillip sighed, “but for some reason I kept thinking the love of my life would have tits.”

“So I’ve got pecs instead,” Marcus muttered drily, “get over it.”

“I *like* tits,” Phillip muttered, but Marcus kissed their clasped hands and Phillip subsided.

Cory turned to Teague and grimaced. “Not everybody’s as lucky as you and Jack and Katy,” she murmured. “They kept trying to find a third, but they can’t stand the same kind of girl. They squabbled like kindergartners for a while, but Green threatened to separate them for a year, and they decided they’d rather live together as a couple than apart as friends. Max and Renny being their food helps...”

“Yeah,” Max snarked next to her, “because Renny doesn’t have any tits...”

Cory squealed and smacked his arm hard. “I am *so* telling on you!”

“Don’t be petty just because you’re losing yours again!” Nicky chortled, an edge of something in his voice, and she shook her head and stuck out her tongue.

“You miss them every time they go!” Bracken added, and it wasn’t Teague’s imagination—they were reprimanding her for something. She gave her giant dark-haired lover a disgusted sniff and turned all her attention back to Teague.

“Morons,” she muttered to Teague. “But since I *was* talking about changing, there’s some stuff I’m not sure if Katy got to in your ‘werewolf lessons’.”

Teague blinked. He had been processing...well, *everything*. He’d been ready to go on the run—he really had. But suddenly, instead of just being on a run, he was in the middle of a raucous, happy family, whose business was, apparently *everybody’s* business. He’d told Jack that this was like high school—he realized now that high school had never been this tight, and he wondered if there would be the same sort of chemistry with every carload of people from Green’s Hill he might jump into.

And the idea that he and Jack were lucky because Katy could love them both...it was extraordinary. The whole thought had scared him shitless, but looking at Phillip and Marcus,

happy but not...not quite complete...

That moment in the garden was so real behind his eyes that he could still smell the desire pounding from the three of them.

Abruptly, when he'd been avoiding it for a week, *all* he wanted to do was talk to Jacky. It hurt, being in this car without his friend and companion. Jacky would banter, he thought painfully, Jacky would tell stories. He and Jacky...they would fit, in this car with these people.

His whole life, the only place he'd ever fit was next to Jacky. If they both fit here...well, Cory and Green and Bracken and Nicky—they seemed to fit pretty well together. The possibilities were stunning, and suddenly Teague, who never reached for anything, wanted to reach for this one thing with all his soul.

Reluctantly he drew his attention back to what Cory was saying, because it was pretty damned important.

"So, the thing is," Cory's attention was suddenly elsewhere. She closed her eyes, nodded, and focused her eyes on Teague again. It was hard to read her expression in the dark. He might have caught the glimmer of something in her eye—a tear, irritation, it was hard to tell from grim mask she slipped on immediately—but she carried on as though he was the only thing in the world she had to worry about.

"The thing is," she repeated roughly, "you haven't changed yet, and I'm sure Katy told you that you wouldn't, not until a month had passed and the moon was full, and your wolf was ready to come out, right?"

Teague nodded, and Cory grimaced. "Well, Katy's pretty new—she hasn't been here during any of the big," she blushed for no reason he could think of, "power surges that blow through the hill. For the most part, we try to shelter our were-creatures until their first change—we keep them with us and safe. Renny's first lover, Mitch, became a were-cat because his brother escaped to try to get a fix—his blood was clean but his brain wasn't, right?"

Teague nodded, interested.

"Well Ray left his needle around, and Mitch was using, so suddenly Mitch is furry, and Renny followed him, and Max followed Renny, and now I'm in an SUV with a cop who can't touch a silver bullet."

"I love you too, bitchy-pooh," Max muttered, and Cory patted his shoulder in a sisterly fashion that made Teague smile.

"So we shelter them. But sometimes, even if they're sheltered, they get stressed or freaked out, or...well...subjected to..."

“Sexual nuclear meltdowns,” Nicky inserted, his own cross splintering his words, and Cory sent a look of apology to him over the back of the seat.

“Yeah—those—and the thing is, a strong wash of emotion or magic can set off your wolf. Max here got bit and changed all in the same night—Renny planned it that way, and I shudder to ask if it was good for him...”

“It was,” Max murmured mildly, staring into the night with a pleased expression.

Cory ignored him. “I don’t think it will happen—not tonight. You’ve done this thing before, Green says you’re good at it—you know how to handle yourself. But if you get caught in a wash of my power, or start panicking about something, and you find yourself starting to change?”

Teague nodded, knowing his eyes were going wide and realizing she’d hit on the biggest fear that he’d never known he had.

“Anyway, if that happens, don’t sweat it. If that happens, you go with the change, and you’ve just become our first priority. Fuck this other thing, fuck this other guy, we’ve got your back, you hear?”

Teague blinked. “So I’m suddenly the asshole who got in the way of the job?” he asked, appalled.

“No,” she frowned. “No—you’re the family member who needs us more than the rest of the fucking world. This isn’t our only shot at getting this guy. You—we’ve only got one you. We’d like to keep you.”

She shrugged then at his jaw-dropped silence. “Besides, now that your beloved’s at home, I don’t think you’ll panic, right?”

“Right,” Teague nodded, stunned all over again.

“Just remember—we’re taking you out in the month before the change—if we’re pressing you too hard, it’s our fault.”

He didn’t have a chance to reply then, because Cory called to the front, “Hey, Bracken, I like this song—could you crank it up?”

There were groans, but that didn’t stop the whole hunting party from belting out ‘Finnegan’s Ball’ at the top of their lungs, right along with the *Dropkick Murphy’s*.

When they got to Discovery Park, Cory had to shoot some magic through the lock to get it to open. Teague, getting a look at the casual way she touched the lock and sent a little bolt of something to melt the insides until it clicked—finally had an idea of where she must have gotten enough self-possession to lead a car full of men—all of whom appeared to be older than she

was—on a mission like this.

He was impressed with her all over again, and not in a way that suggested sex. He just seemed to like to follow her orders. She reminded him of a queen from some of Jacky's stories—the ones Jack had learned about in school and told him about sometimes on stakeouts. Cory was just the kind of woman that knights would die for, that's all.

Once the car pulled in, they parked in a far corner of the lot, and the whole car unloaded into the shadows and waited for Cory to trot up to them. It was dark and cold and damp—no rain and not quite a mist, but obviously November. The vampires took a look at her and nodded, lifting into the sky like gigantic bats, their black trench coats helping the illusion.

Cory raised her face to the sky and watched them until they disappeared into the dark, and Bracken caught her eye with a teasing smile.

"It just looks cool," she defended, and the brawny, dark-haired sidhe nodded in agreement.

"That it does," he murmured. "Now hand Nicky your gun—I'm going to kiss you and hold you before this starts, and you don't get to bitch at me for it."

Cory nodded, and Nicky reached out his hand, coming to stand by Teague and Max as they embraced—the sight was intimate enough to make watching uncomfortable but too magnetic to look away. Max lifted an eyebrow and Nicky shrugged.

"Green...he was in the car for a second—I don't know what he told her, but I'm betting that..."

Max swore. "Adrian was in the garden."

Nicky nodded and pointedly didn't look at Teague. "Something must have made her think of him."

Max rolled his eyes. "Subtle, bird-man. Real subtle."

Teague shook his head, remembering one more time why he didn't like high school. "What are you two *not* saying?"

Nicky sighed, and then looked at Cory's pale face in the darkness, almost as bright as Bracken's as it gleamed by the waning moon.

"She's lost weight since you've got here, Teague—she only does that when she worries. You and Jack...whatever it is you're doing, it's obvious you're not...not content. Not entirely happy."

Teague grimaced. "So she's pining over me?" *That* was unlikely, and Max and Nicky



both grimaced. Max tried again, shaking the dark hair out of his eyes. He really *did* look like a shorter, grimmer Jacky.

“You’ve got to understand—Green’s Hill *ain’t* a democracy. It’s a monarchy. And she’s the Queen. The only way that place functions is if eighty-five percent of us are happy—seriously, if we’re not happily mated, happily getting busy, there is a serious power fluctuation. Green and Cory can...they’re so attuned to it that they can feel it, especially if they’ve taken an interest in you.”

Teague screwed up his face in honest disbelief. “Are you saying she’s *interested* in me?”

Before Nicky and Max could voice the “Oh *hell* no!” that was obviously written on their faces, Cory came up, rolling her eyes.

“You guys are going to make him think I’m hot for his bod. No, Teague—I just want you to be happy, that’s all—and yes, your happiness is of interest to more than just you and Jack—get used to it. Are you going to fly, now, Nicky, or did you and Max want to do make-up and hairstyles?”

Nicky cast her an evil look, but when she caught his hand and kissed his cheek, he leaned into the kiss, and turned his head and gave her a brief, hard kiss on the mouth that she returned.

Then he gave her back her gun and in a brief warp of flesh and space, turned into a giant hawk and flew into the sky after the two vampires.

Cory turned to Teague and jerked her chin in the direction of the bike trail. “I’ll take the right, you take the left—Phillip will follow you, Marcus will follow me, I’ve got Max in the shadows, you’ve got Bracken...”

“I’ve got Bracken?” He saw that kiss, he thought wretchedly. How did he rate *Bracken*?

“Dude, I’ve got the sexual-powered-nuclear-fusion-ray-gun-and-shield—you may be the Alpha werewolf, but I’m still hotter shit than you!” She smiled then, and winked, and he watched her turn to the right and walk downstream as though she were a college co-ed in broad daylight without a care in the world.

He went his way, and his hyper-dog hearing perked up right before she was out of sight. He turned, and almost began running back when he saw the group of young men in full colors, surrounding her like beaus at a cotillion. He didn’t have to be a werewolf to hear the banter around her.

“Hey, mommy—whatchu doin’ here? Come our way, pretty lady...c’mon, cuz, we won’t hurtchu...”

He’d already taken two steps in her direction when Bracken’s voice from the shadows

stopped him in his tracks. “Take it easy,” he murmured. “Take it easy and watch her work.”

Flat as an anvil, her voice smacked through the misty dark. “I’m not your ‘cuz’ asshole. Touch me again and you’ll be sorry you ever weren’t sorry.”

There was laughter, and Teague’s breathing caught as he saw two of them reaching for pieces stuffed in the back of their baggy jeans, and then he felt Bracken’s hand on his wrist. He heard her voice again through the dark, but with Bracken’s touch vibrating through him, he could see the sound glow.

“All right, children,” she murmured sweetly, “since you’re all trying so hard to be jerk-offs, I want you to go into the bushes—those with the poison oak, yup—drop your trousers, and jerk-off. Make sure you laugh at each other’s little teeny wieners when you go!”

With that she waved gaily, her dull-red ponytail bobbing and a “thank-you-buh-buhay” smile on her face. And as a whole, the young men—there were at least six of them—turned dumbly and walked towards the poison-oak covered section of the park.

Teague blew out a sigh of relief and Bracken let go of his arm and chuckled.

“That was *awesome*, ” Teague breathed, and Bracken ‘hm-mmd’ in agreement.

“She doesn’t usually do that—she hates using power in her voice, calls it ‘mindfucking’--but a fight would scare off our guy.” On that note, he faded back into the trees without a sound, and Teague resumed his solitary walk on the thin black ribbon of bike trail.

It was a pretty walk—willow, oak, and beech trees arched over the river on his right, and bushes lined the levee to his left. Recent storms had beaten the last of the leaves off of the seasonal trees, and their naked branches reached restlessly for the misty sky. The I-5 above the other side of the riverbank lit the fog and provided enough ambient light to see—although Teague amused himself for a few moments playing with his new night vision. The view in front of him went from all shadows and starlight to a sort of gray-scale two-D map of the landscape, and then, with a blink, it was back to shadows and starlight again.

He decided he liked it—and then decided it was probably good that he liked it, since it didn’t seem like the werewolf thing was going away.

It was about then that he smelled something that took the werewolf thing from a perk to a liability. It was...acrid, foul, like a human who hadn’t bathed for days, except at least that was an animal smell.

This was...supernatural in a way, and Teague realized that he could smell the supernatural—that he had been, in fact, because he recognized the undertones of this smell from sitting at the dinner table with the other were-creatures, and from sleeping with his nose buried in Jacky’s hair.

But where those smells had been comforting, this was not. This was like supernatural salad, covered in bacon grease and left in the sun to rot, and he crinkled his nose up against it.

His night vision went to two-D landscape, and a flat human form popped up even as he blinked and tried to see how deep the new werewolf was in the shadows.

“Hello, brother...” the voice emerged from the darkness. It was amused. “Are you hunting too?”

“Hunting you, mostly,” Teague replied, getting a bead on the guy—he was closer than Teague had thought. “You’ve sort of been pissing in our pond.”

“Our?” Oh, a wealth of meaning in that word!

“We’re Green’s people—and we don’t kill the humans,” Teague said implacably. It used to be *I work for Green*; now it was *We’re Green’s people*. A small change. A *huge* change. A good feeling all around.

“So what?” The new werewolf was close enough to see with human sight. He was old, was Teague’s first thought, and then he realized that he wasn’t *old*, he was *used*. Teague knew that look—it was a junkie’s look, a street person’s look. The look of too many days and nights in the weather, too long without a bath. Had he been changed on the street? Had someone tried to save him the way Katy had been saved? There was a faint accent—SoCal, maybe—and Teague wondered where this guy had come from. There was something decidedly...off about the way he kept fingering his dirty-blond dreadlocks, the way his eyes wandered towards the moon.

“We need you to lay off, that’s all,” Teague murmured, but he was actually more intent on where his backup was. Bracken was moving too fast to smell, the vampires were too high up to sense, and Cory and Max were downwind. For a moment, just a moment, he felt extremely exposed and he fought the urge to reach behind him and get the 9mm jammed in the back of his pants.

“What—you all alone? You’re here like Clint Eastwood, the werewolf lawman come to town?” The rogue giggled a little and twirled his dreads, looking at the cookie-bit of a moon in the sky as though it were singing to him.

“Why now?” Teague asked, not wanting to give away how many of them there actually were. “Why at a three-quarter moon?”

“Oh...” Teague was abruptly the focus of the rogue’s attention. “It’s the fifteenth, mostly...you know, when the handouts get fat for a bit...and I eat and I’m still...hungry...”

There was a sudden flutter to Teague’s left, and as quickly as that, Teague wasn’t alone anymore.

“Brother,” Cory said, her voice gentle, but her hands locked around the gun held firmly pointed downwards, “we can feed you. We can feed you and house you every day, but you can’t go hunting anymore, not like this.”

The werewolf didn’t even blink at the blind appearance of a small woman and a big scary vampire behind her. She nodded to Phillip and he took off, and she shifted her stance to a more serious, grounded stand and leaned a little to their distracted, wandering enemy. That weathered, dirty, brick-red face turned a little towards her, and the werewolf closed his eyes and inhaled.

When he opened his eyes and smiled, he was partially changed. His rheumy brownish eyes were wolf-blue and his mouth was partially extended with fangs and a snout.

“Pretty cunt...” he murmured, his syllables lisping through his distorted mouth. “I wants it.”

“What’s your name, brother,” Cory asked, her voice cold.

“Ames, pretty cunt...let me smell you...”

Cory muttered under her breath, something that sounded like *I hate that fucking word*, but when she spoke again her voice was level.

“Where are you from, Ames. Who turned you?” Her muscles were tense with the urge to hold the gun level, and Teague knew suddenly why she was asking the questions. Ames was a dead man. Whatever was left of his mind was not enough to save, and not enough to risk more lives to keep him alive. She wanted to know what made him, so she could make sure nobody made another like him.

“The ocean, pretty cunt...I miss the ocean. I fell asleep by the ocean, and I woke up being chewed on by a dog. And then I woke up and I did the chewing.” A predatory, smile then, one almost childish in its glee. “I like the chewing.”

“Warm ocean, Ames, or cold ocean?” Cory asked. Northern California or Southern California—an important distinction. Nor Cal was run by Green, So Cal was a free-for-all of tiny, three person packs with no ruling body. However Ames had made it to Sacramento, it would be good to know if he came from the werewolf morass of So Cal or if someone had gotten stupid in Green’s territory.

“Warm ocean, pretty cunt...so warm. I don’t like this nasty cold river. But I swims in it anyway. Do you want to swim in it with me, girl?” His body was changing, slowly, dreamily, almost painfully, and abruptly Cory’s gun was leveled and Teague’s with it. Ames was about five feet away with two guns loaded with silver shot, and all he could do was close his eyes and let Cory’s smell draw the wolf from him.

Bracken was suddenly between them, and Teague, remembering Cory’s stricture about

cold iron, shifted sideways a little and so did Cory, and that motion alone was enough to set Ames lunging for Cory's throat.

Cory and Teague leveled their guns and fired three times a piece and Bracken held out his hand made a sound like a man pulling a rope with a car attached to it. The body of the morphing werewolf blew back from the force of the shots, and then seemed to suspend itself in the air as another force drew it towards them. Underneath the sharp retorts of the guns there was a sickening 'plop' sound, and then Teague's vision in his left eye was violently spattered with red.

Cory said, "Oh, ewww, ick!" And then, "Oh fuck!"

Without warning Teague was being shoved by a little woman with surprising force of will, across the bike path and down the river embankment and with a big splash they both 'kerplunked' into the shallows of the American River in November.

Even Teague's new and improved metabolism couldn't make that water warm. He flailed seriously, making contact with Cory's jaw when she grabbed him by the back of the neck and gave his head a shove under.

She grunted but managed to dunk him anyway and then let go. He was struggling to his feet, too stunned to even say "What in the fuck?" when she barked at him.

"Hold still—I washed the blood off but I need to treat your face!"

And suddenly his higher brain function kicked in and he knew that she'd possibly just saved his useless life—or at least a lot of fucking pain. He was abruptly still, and she fumbled for a moment in the pocket of her sodden pea coat and then came up with the little bottle of wash she'd used before, when she touched Bracken.

"This is p...pretty p...potent, and it's going to sting your eye like a s...s...sonovabitch," she chattered, smearing it along his cheek, forehead, and neck.

She was right, it did sting his eye, but after a short bark of a swear word, he kept the pain to himself and tried to keep his footing. It wasn't easy—Cory didn't have the hyped up body temperature he was developing and her hands were shaking like spiderwebs in the wind. One particular flinch sent his feet skating out from under him and he kicked her feet out from under her on accident and the two of them went bobbing down the river, floundering and sputtering and (in Cory's case) shrieking breathlessly.

There was a sudden clatter from above, and Phillip and Marcus dropped from the sky, splashing into the river next to them, laughing so hard they couldn't breathe. Since they didn't actually *need* to breathe, it meant the two men simply convulsed silently, caught up in their clothes and not even bothering to surface.

Bracken blurred down the riverbank and then stopped and hollered and brought some

sanity to the situation, because just when Teague thought he was going to have to morph into a werewolf after all and dogpaddle to shore, the vampires lifted out of the water. One of them seized him by the armpits and they were both hauled back over the bike trail in the frigid November air.

They hovered for a moment over the giant blood and entrails spot that had been Ames, the insane werewolf, but Teague's hyper-dog hearing caught Cory's chattering teeth and irritation as she sputtered, "I'm...too...damned...cold...asshole. You...get...it. Serve you...r.r.r.r.right..."

Marcus, who had Teague up close to his cold, clammy body swore loud enough for Teague to hear. "She's right," he murmured. "We forget sometimes that she's mortal, you know?"

Teague nodded—he was starting to shiver himself. Poor kid, he thought, looking at her, small and fragile enough to be cradled in Phillip's arms, her lips and fingers tingeing blue in the chill wind as Phillip zipped over the trees and to the parking lot. Then he remembered the cool way she'd assessed Ames the insane werewolf and drawn her gun, her quick thinking as she tackled a grown man and shoved him into a river to save his life—or at least save him some pain-- and the way she'd competently planned the whole run from start to finish.

Poor kid indeed, he almost chuckled, but then Phillip set her down next to the car and Bracken started stripping her wet clothes off, and Marcus set him down too and without waiting to see if Teague's stiff fingers could manage started doing the same for him.

"Aaahhh!" Teague protested when Marcus went for the fly of his jeans, but Marcus batted his hands away.

"Don't get any ideas, werewolf," he muttered. "The quicker we get you out of your clothes, the quicker you get the warm and dry ones Nicky's getting out of the car."

Teague looked over and saw that Nicky, indeed, had already landed, changed human, and was fishing a bunch of loudly colored green and yellow Sac State sweats from the back of the SUV and that Max had already started the car and was revving the heater. The fact that both men were laughing hysterically as they did their jobs didn't stop them from being efficient.

"Oh...sh...sh...sh..." Cory tried, as Bracken stripped off her pea coat and literally ripped her sweatshirt and jeans off her body.

"Shut up?" Nicky supplied with a grin, and the look she sent him spoke volumes.

Teague got a glimpse of bony hips and breasts that had just barely started to gain a little weight under a light cotton bra before Marcus gave his tighty-whitey's a haul down and Teague gave another girl-squeal in protest.

"For Christ's sake, asshole, I'm not a five-year old!" For the love of little green fucking

apples, he was mortally tired of being naked in public.

“Jesus, werewolf,” Marcus said, helping Teague impersonally into a truly heinous pair of yellow sweats, “did someone play tic-tac-toe on your ass with a switchblade?”

Something about Marcus’ bald-assed question seemed to flip a switch in Teague’s head. Yeah. He was naked. So was the skinny, flat-chested, wide-hipped little girl who had just led a military op with cold precision. He was just about to say ‘Yeah, so the fuck what?’ when Cory, reading his mood with surprising accuracy, snapped, “Marcus are you gonna come over here and talk about my scars? Jesus, leave him alone!”

Teague looked over again in time to see her putting her arms obediently into an ugly green hooded sweatshirt for the brooding presence who had hovered over her from the moment she’d landed. This time he saw that the front her shoulder looked like it had been blasted by a hand-grenade, and there was an ugly rip of scar tissue across her stomach. He felt his jaw drop, and he continued staring at her even as Marcus finished dressing him and shuttled him into the middle seat of the SUV.

“Phillip and I are going to take care of the body and fly home,” Marcus told him quietly, shaking out the water from his trench coat. “It was good working with you, wolf-man—nice job.”

Teague blinked. “Yeah,” he said, “you too.”

“She got those scars serving us, you know—and more you can’t see,” Marcus added, looking Teague in the eye, and Teague’s heart was so naked by now that he couldn’t prevaricate or lie or even throw up his usual bravado.

“I got mine being a punching bag as a kid.”

Marcus nodded. “I used to be a high school teacher, wolf-man. I know what those kids usually grow up to be. You must be something special to end up with us.”

And with that, he walked over to Lady Cory and bent down on one knee, even as Bracken was drying off her hair with a towel—another ubiquitous Sac State piece of merchandise, this one white with a big fat bee on it. Teague heard him apologize sincerely, and Phillip, who had given up trying to help her out since Bracken was there in full protective force, joined him.

Cory shook her head in disgust. “Morons,” she muttered, but it was affectionate. “Would you get off the fucking ground already...” a smile tilted her blue-tinged lips and a laugh shook her chest. “We *were* pretty fucking hilarious, weren’t we?”

The two vampires looked up, and Teague couldn’t see their expressions, but he could tell by the way she grinned at them, teeth chattering, body shivering and all, that they must have been grinning back.

“Be safe,” she told them, “Get home by dawn.” Without even bothering to stand, both men lifted into the sky and then stretched their bodies, aiming for the other side of the tree line and the horrible carcass left on the bike path. This time too, she watched them in the sky with a wide-open face and a delighted smile.

Bracken didn’t give her much more time to sky-watch after that. He grabbed a fleece blanket from the back, slammed the door shut and then shoved her into the back row of the warm car before getting in after her. Nicky was going to get into the way back with her, but Teague saw her touch his hand and offer her face up for a kiss.

“You may want to keep Max company,” she murmured, and Nicky didn’t take it personally. Teague wondered how long it had taken him to read the cues for when she wanted to be with Bracken or Green without him, and the thought crossed his mind that he and Jacky could be together alone sometimes after all.

He missed Jacky. They’d been sharing a room and a bed for a week, and he still missed him. He would have wanted to see him laugh at the werewolf and the sorceress, floundering around in the river, or see if he, like Cory, would lift her eyes to a night sky to watch vampires fly.

“Ow!” Cory protested, and Teague looked back to watch Bracken finger her jaw with careful fingers.

“Aw, shit,” he said sincerely over the back of the seat, “I’m so fucking sorry!” He’d connected with her *hard*, and she looked at him with a smile.

“I guess I could have handled that better,” she smiled ruefully and he shook his head.

“All my fault,” he denied. “I can’t quite think about myself as a werewolf yet.”

She nodded. “It takes a while, even when you don’t have a while.” She sounded like she knew, and he suddenly wondered if, in the midst of all of that tight high school gossip, there wasn’t someone who could tell him “Lady Cory stories”.

She brightened. “But you do think of yourself as one of ours—that’s a start!”

He flushed. She must have heard him then—someone must have heard him. *We’re Green’s people.*

Well shit. He’d been naked all day—he might as well make it count.

“Just so you know, Lady Cory, I’d follow you into hell. I hope I’m good enough to be yours.”

The look on her face was suddenly so vulnerable he strangled on anything he’d been going to say next.



“Teague Sullivan, we’d take you any day and twice on Sunday,” she said gruffly, and then, as though she couldn’t bear it anymore, she called, “Nicky, sweetheart, could you turn this song up for me?”

It wasn’t a headbanger—it was the Eels, something melancholy with a long, complicated title, but what it boiled down to was the chorus. *I can finally admit that I broke your heart.*

Teague swallowed and risked a glance in the back of the car again. The two of them were ignoring all seatbelt laws, and she was practically lying in Bracken’s lap. He was holding his hand to her face and rubbing his thumb through the glittery tear-track down her cheek. She was smiling gamely up into his eyes and murmuring something private and Teague had to look away. Abruptly, with so much force he almost doubled over with the cramping in his chest, he wanted Jacky, sitting next to him, talking, saying something snarky, saying anything.

Holding his hand and telling him that what they could be together was worth all of the bullshit Teague had put him through.

Anything.

Teague leaned his head against the window and watched the streetlamps pass him by in the dark of highway 80, watched as it started to rain again, and prepared himself for another hour in the car while he wished for his friend and partner. Wished for his lover. Wished for home.

**Jacky**

**Naked**

By the time Teague got back, Jack had fallen asleep in bed, chest bare, propped up on pillows, reading. When he realized that Teague had come in, pulled up the covers, turned out the light and was in the shower, he felt absurdly naked, as though he’d been spied upon doing something private.

With a swallow, he knew how Teague must have felt knowing Jack had been awake while he poured his heart out.

He sat up in bed and turned on the light, fixing his book on the end-table and shaking himself awake, the relief at knowing Teague was home safe seeping in at small increments. *He’s back. He’s safe.*

With a start, Jack patted the space on the bed next to him. Katy had lain there for a little while, talking, telling him about werewolves and mating and anything else he cared to

know. Her presence wasn't quite as vital, as immediate as his need for Teague, but it had been nice—wonderful in fact. Sitting up in bed now and stretching, he had to wonder what it was about Teague, difficult, irascible, damaged Teague that made the man such an irreplaceable part of life for not only Jack, but Katy too.

Then Teague came out of the shower in a pair of sleep-shorts and a cream-colored sweatshirt with the arms and neck cut away, and Jack's breath caught in his chest. Ask the question later, enjoy the look of him now.

"Didn't mean to wake you," Teague murmured gruffly. "I was coming right to bed."

Jack squinted in the light. "What'd you do to your face?" There were red blotches on his left cheek, forehead, and chin, as though he'd been burned. His eye was red and irritated and he kept blinking it as it teared up.

Teague shrugged, a smile quirking at his lips. "I forgot I was a werewolf—you know, we've got to remember we're allergic to silver-tainted blood now."

Jack shook his head, a little angry at how casually Teague dismissed his own safety. "So you got spattered with blood? What in the hell were all those other people for if you're the one who was eyeball deep in blood?"

Teague blinked and scowled. "Oh trust me, Jacky, we all had our parts to play." With a little hop, he threw himself across the bed, resting his head on his arms about a foot below Jack's chest. He regarded Jack solemnly until Jack blinked and reached out a tentative hand, touched the reddened skin on Teague's cheek. Teague closed his eyes and leaned into the touch a little, his lean mouth curving up into a smile.

"Katy was here," he murmured, scenting her on the quilt.

"Mmm-hmmm." Jack kept up his touching, wondering how a guy who was about to become a werewolf could remind him so much of a feral cat, barely trusting the outstretched finger to stroke it. "I like her, Teague. I do."

Teague opened his good eye. "She needs cherishing, Jacky. She's had it rough—I like her too. Can we love her? We don't do this unless we can love her."

Jack's mouth quirked up. "You all already do."

Teague closed his eye and captured Jack's hand against his cheek. "Cory has three lovers—husbands, I guess. They've got rings."

Jack nodded. "I noticed."

"She doesn't love Nicky likes she loves Green and Bracken. He knows it, it's not personal. I don't know how that happened."

Jack didn't know where he was going with this. "It was involuntary—something about how the Avians bonded and some sort of power-wash. I think you've got to ask the folks who were there—sometime when he's not around."

Teague nodded. "I...I don't think it would be that way with Katy. She'd be...personal. Ours. But..." he looked at Jack, his face scrunching up as he tried hard to put words to something ineffable. "I loved you at first sight, Jacky. I didn't come to love you, or try to love you. I just saw you and thought 'If I don't have his back, he'll get hurt' and everything after that was me, trying not to let you get hurt. You just need to know that. We hang out with Katy, we treat her like a queen, like the light of our lives, and we see what comes. But you needed to know that other thing."

Jack's hand grew suddenly clammy and his breath literally stopped. Teague's dark hazel eyes were serious, searching inside his own heart for something, and then he shrugged and smiled his usual fuck-me grin.

"So you want to hear how it went down?"

Jack was surprised to find that he did.

Teague got to the part where the vampires had to fish him and Cory out of the river and Jack gave a low whistle. "Man, she's tough isn't she?"

Teague nodded, and looked sheepish. "I clocked her on the jaw—I'm sure Green will heal it, but..."

At that moment there was a knock on the door. Teague jumped up and answered it, and Green himself stood there, tall, blond, and beautiful.

"Mmm...Cory was right—you were hurt," he murmured, and Teague shrugged.

"It'll heal by tomorrow..." but Green's hand was already on his face, and Teague sighed and shivered.

"Or not," Green finished, and bent and gave him a kiss on the brow that not even Jack could be jealous of. "Cory says you do good work," Green looked over at Jack and smiled that amazing, kind, strong, warm smile, "and says maybe Jacky will want to come along next time?"

Teague shrugged a little, uncomfortably. "I... I worry," he said baldly, and Jack closed his eyes. Of course. Of course Teague would worry. But Jack wouldn't have that argument, not here, not in front of Green.

"As do I," Green conceded, "but so far, mortal as she is, she's come back every time." He gave a little nod then and turned and left, and Teague shut the door after him thoughtfully. Jack was pleased to see that the redness had cleared up, but his eyes were troubled

as he came back to almost the exact same place on the bed he had just been.

“I don’t know how he does it,” Teague murmured. “He sends her out, and it’s not because he doesn’t care, because I think it would kill him if she didn’t come back...” his voice stumbled, fell away, and he looked up from his crossed arms and rolled over on his side, propping his head up in his hand.

“I’ll think about it,” he said after a moment. “I still think you should go back to school but...”

Jack rolled over and slid down in the bed, assuming the same position until they were eye-level. “But what?” he asked softly.

“But I missed you, asshole,” Teague murmured. He shivered, and Jack ran his outside hand up and down Teague’s bare arms, trying to warm him up.

“I’ve missed you all week, you dumb motherfucker. But I was here when you got back.”

Teague smiled—not his fuck-me grin, but a soft, almost sleepy sort of bedroom-eyed smile, and Jack leaned forward and kissed him softly on the lips. Teague returned the kiss, and for a few moments Jack let himself drown in those kisses. They weren’t girl’s kisses—they were hard, and Teague’s taste was hard and sharp, and his hands and arms were tight and muscular and all in all, it was an opium dream, just to kiss him and kiss him and kiss him.

Jack broke the kiss first and went to push his hands under Teague’s sweatshirt, and to his surprise, Teague backed away, his hand over the hem of the shirt, blushing furiously. With several awkward movements that pretty much took over the whole bed and changed the moment completely, he turned off the light and jumped up to the pillow so he could slide under the covers, wrapping them up tightly around his body. He lay there, enormous dark eyes peering out at Jack, his head on the pillow, and this time his smile was not anything close to sincere.

Jack blinked in the dark, completely baffled. “What in the hell are you doing?”

Teague’s expression turned pained. “I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, Jacky, but I’m really tired of being naked today. Maybe we could just go to sleep tonight, you think?”

Jack blinked again, and scooted under the covers until his bare legs tangled with Teague’s, the cut-off sweats against his skin an unwelcome reminder that something was wrong. “Fine,” he murmured, and bent his head to kiss again. Teague returned the kiss as though he couldn’t help himself, and Jack thought he might be on to something. They kissed some more, like teenagers in the dark, until Jack’s hands moved to the hem of the shirt again.

This time when Teague protested, Jack murmured, “Every night for a year and a half, you’ve been sleeping in your underwear. You’re going to stop now?”

Teague whimpered, but Jack persisted, his hands moving across the warm plane of Teague's stomach and then smoothing over his chest. He hit the first of Teague's raised scars and Teague shifted away. Jack pulled back from the kiss and murmured, "Is that it? I've seen the scars before, Teague...it's not like I didn't know what your body looked like before we touched."

Teague let out a low groan of frustration. "Oh Christ, do we have to do this tonight?" He made to roll away but Jack stopped him.

"Yes, we have to do this tonight. I'm tired of not touching you, Teague! What, you figured you'd just fuck me blind and you'd never have to risk yourself?"

"I'm *damaged*," Teague hissed. "Is that what you wanted to see? To feel? That I'm fucked up and twisted and..."

"Beautiful!" Jack argued, not wanting to watch Teague's eyes glint in the dark anymore.

"Bullshit!" Teague succeeded in jerking away, but Jack followed him, straddling his body with one easy motion and tussling off his shirt with anything *but* ease. Finally, Jack managed it, throwing the shirt across the room and grabbing Teague by the wrists before Teague could even *think* of bucking him off.

"I've seen your scars before!" Jack hissed, leaning forward. Their bare chests were touching and their faces were just inches apart. Jack began to swell and harden, and under his straddled thighs he felt Teague do the same.

Teague's hands were pinned, and Jack knew that if he really wanted to he could break the pin but that he'd probably hurt Jack doing it. Jack was banking on the fact that hurting him was the last thing on Teague's agenda. So Teague didn't struggle as hard as he could have, but he did turn his face away, his lean, beautiful profile clean and shadowed in the dark, and Jack wondered if he would just lie there, inside himself, until Jack gave up.

Jack swore to himself that they'd fall asleep in this position first. "Teague?" he prompted gently, rubbing his nose against Teague's cheek.

"But not when you were mine," he muttered.

"What?"

"You didn't see them when you were mine," Teague repeated, irritated.

Jack gasped—but he didn't let go.

"I showed them to Katy today," Teague went on tonelessly, "because I was trying to

make her go away, but it didn't work."

Jack closed his eyes and kissed the throbbing, fight/flight pulse in Teague's temple. Of course he had, Jack thought sadly, of course he'd tried to drive her away. He'd tried the same thing with Jack.

"What if it worked with you? Now?" Teague asked now, his vision still fixed sightlessly at a point in the dark.

"Impossible," Jack murmured. He could reach Teague's collarbone from this position, so he bent down and kissed one of the fracture bumps, and then the other one, and then the other one, as tenderly as he possibly could.

"It better be," Teague muttered. "You're my reward, Jacky. You're...you're what I get for not turning out like my old man. You're the reason my heart doesn't freeze up and go cold. You...you can't turn away from me now."

Jack fought hard against his tight throat, his burning eyes. "Oh Jesus, Teague—I really am turning into a fucking woman," he choked and a small corner of Teague's mouth turned up in the dark, a ballsy reminder of Teague's usual fuck-me grin.

Finally, he turned to meet Jack's eyes. "You've always been one, Jacky—I've been telling you that since we've met."

Jack let go of Teague's arms but stayed straddling him, liking the friction of their groins rubbing together. He kissed Teague's chest again, and his arms, and his ribs and his stomach, every bump, every break, every burn...he knew where they were, had looked at them since the two of them had started rooming together, had mapped them by feel the night before. His kisses were soft, tender, and kind—everything he knew Teague had never had in his life, Jack put into his touch.

By the time he'd worked his way down Teague's stomach, Teague had knotted his hands in Jack's hair and was moaning softly. Jack resisted for a moment, and found himself hauled up Teague's body and then rolled over on his back, being kissed and kissed and kissed.

This time, after kissing, stretching, playing, when Teague fit himself inside, they were face to face, and Jack could read every joy, every vulnerability, every fine-line between pain and pleasure. He could kiss Teague, could whisper in his ear, see his scowl of concentration as he moved. Jack could trust that when his head tilted back and his spend coated his stomach, Teague would be there with him.

Teague's climax was intense. Jack could tell by his thrusting, almost painful grunts, and the way Teague buried his face in Jack's neck and wrapped his hands around Jack's shoulders and held on for dear life. When it was over Teague made to pull out quickly as he always did, running for the washcloth, running to clean all of his tainted traces from Jack's body, but this time Jack didn't let him.

“Stay,” he whispered, loving Teague’s weight on him, his smell, the rough feeling of his stubbled cheek against Jack’s shoulder, and still shivering with the slackening stretch of their merged bodies.

“Stay...when you’re inside me, you’re not naked. Not anymore.”

Teague’s shoulder’s shook, and a warm puff of air chuffed Jacky’s neck, and Jack wrapped his arms around his lover’s shoulders and hung on.

He planned to do that for as long as the gods would let him.

## Cory

### Laughing

Bracken pretty much hauled me through the hill and shoved me in the shower the instant we got home. I took the world’s quickest hot shower and then got waylaid by Green *and* Bracken *and* Nicky who all insisted that I dry my hair instead of just letting it hang damply while I sat outside.

“If you’re going up to the garden, it’s not particularly warm,” Green remarked tartly when I complained. I gritted my teeth and then winced—Teague was pretty damn strong for such a scrawny guy, and his elbow had caught me *hard*.

Green rolled his eyes. “What did you do to yourself, beloved?” he asked, and although his words were exasperated his touch on my jaw was heavenly. I couldn’t reply—my mouth was tingling and resetting—and Nicky tried to hold onto a chuckle and it only ended up snorking out of his throat. Bracken tried to suppress a guffaw by looking grim and I just shook my head at them. It was good that they weren’t treating me (too much) like a porcelain doll anymore, but it would have been swell if *somebody* had remembered to fish me out of the goddamned river before we practically bobbed to the delta.

But I found my mouth quirking in spite of myself, and I gave a grin, now that my jaw had reset. “I’ll tell you,” I murmured, surrounded by warm men in a steamy room and craving some time with Green alone, “but if he’s coming back to the garden, I’d really rather tell you both at the same time.” I found I was shining with a full grin, and I added, “I really want to see you two laugh.”

Green nodded his head, and our eyes locked for a moment, and that haunted, pointed, sad look that pinched his face when Adrian came left him and my heart did a little happy dance. Green was happy. I made Green happy.

I had a sudden thought and asked if Green could check on Teague's silver-burn before we all went up, and Green agreed.

"Besides," he said dryly, "it would be a shame to break them up once they start in on whatever they've been doing every night."

I sighed. We'd talked about this—it hadn't been hard to figure out that Teague had been using sex to push Jacky away and bind the poor guy to Teague's chest both at the same time. Green was pretty good at playing "guess the damage" with the people at his hill, and when they started out as human, well, the damage could be considerable.

Teague's heart, his battered, valiant heart, was particularly transparent to the both of us. He was so much like Adrian, it almost hurt to look at him.

What Green had told me as I'd lay sprawled in his arms the first night Teague and Jack had arrived at the hill, was that Teague reminded him of me, as well.

*But not anymore, beloved.*

The look on his face had been exquisite in its joy. *No. Not anymore.*

Apparently Jack and Teague had actually *talked* this night, because Green had nothing to report as he met us up in the garden, after he'd gone to heal our newest werewolf.

Nicky opted out of our little party—I knew he would. He tended to stay out of all things regarding Adrian, partly out of respect, and partly, I suspected, because the three of us became so single-minded about him that there was no room left for poor Nicky, period. I hoped Nicky was on the phone with Erik, a very nice guy who thought that Nicky was the end-all and be-all of his world. Nicky deserved to be someone's first priority.

The Goddess grove was lovely. Unlike the river, where the trees had been naked, reaching bare branches towards a misty sky hoping for some warmth, these trees—the oak, the lime, and the rose—were all covered and green. The magic that had made the grove kept working now, even as the trees grew, and the erotic possibilities sculpted into their living wood were still there—some even more, uhm, graphic than they had been since Green, Adrian, and I had created the grove a year and a half ago. (What can I say? I knew a lot more about sex now, and thanks to the little power surges that still washed out of me at certain times, the trees tended to get 'redecorated' a lot.)

Adrian's marble memorial bench sat under a pool of ambient light, and although I knew it had started raining again—nasty, sleeting November rain up here in the higher foothills—Green kept that away from us for the night, and all that survived was a gentle mist, lit up by Green's magic sky.

The three of us bundled onto the bench, the men on either side of me, their need to touch



me so great that Bracken and Green actually interlaced their legs so I could sit on both of their laps. Green kissed my mouth and Bracken nuzzled my cheek, Green's touch like hot satin, Bracken's like electric velvet, the two of them as essential to my heart as blood and oxygen.

They pulled back after a moment, and I rested my head on Green's shoulder and Bracken rested his head on mine.

"He'll come back, right?" I asked anxiously, and that voice, that lovely boyish, cockney-sweet voice, murmured, "Of course, luv. You already know I'd die twice for you."

There's only one kind of laugh you can give to that, and you'd have to hear it to know it in your heart.

"Hello, beloved," I murmured, gazing into those translucent blue eyes with my heart in my tight, fighting-tears smile. "I'm so very glad to see you this evening."

Next to me, Bracken sat up a little and Green shifted, and Adrian sat his ghostly form down on the ground (I mean it's not like the dew was going to soak into his pants!) and we settled in for a visit.

Adrian had been dead for over 150 years before he died twice in a mist of gentle rain. He'd been gone from the three of us for one year, four months and twenty-eight days since then, and given all of that death, you have to wonder at how it was that a vampire's ghost laughed so hard that he got hiccups.

Green laughed along with him and the vibrations of that resonant laughter through his chest and against my ear was like some sort of magic-Motrin, easing away all the soreness that had ached at my heart since Teague had shown up in our living room, pining away for his beloved.

"Wankers!" Adrian gasped, amazed at Marcus and Phillip and the way they had let us drift a hundred meters down the American River while we tried to sputter our way to the rocky shore. "What were you doing, then, Fuckwit?" he asked Bracken, and Bracken looked sheepish.

"I believe he was screaming something like, 'Get your asses up and get them out of there you bastard-asshole-fuckheads,'" I giggled, and Bracken scrubbed his hand over his eyes.

"I probably should have been fishing you out myself," he confessed, and I looked at him sideways, surprised.

"We had two perfectly good sopping wet vampires who needed to earn their keep," I responded. "I don't know why you needed to get wet too!"

But Bracken and Adrian met eyes, and I could read between them. I had been in danger, and it had been Bracken's fault.

“Enough,” I said thickly. “It wasn’t Brack’s fault...it was mine for being stupid—I’m pretty sure if I’d just yelled something, like say, ‘Silver poisoning is burning your face’, Teague would have gotten the hint.” I shook my head. “I get emotional about him and Jack, that’s all.”

Green rubbed my cheek and I leaned into it like a kitten. “I wonder why, beloved,” he said simply, and the moment threatened to lapse into melancholy again.

“So where are the two asshole fuckheads now?” asked Adrian innocently. I’m not sure what he planned to do to Marcus and Phillip, but I had visions of a ghost with a vampire’s sense of humor and laughingly told him it was okay—I’d given them clean-up.

Adrian’s expression, as ghostly as it was, was eloquent with disgust. “Blargh!” he said, and Bracken and I cracked up, and the visit was lovely after that.

As lovely as it could be when every moment of it broke our hearts, but that’s okay. Rather a broken heart than a heart numb from the loss—and I’m pretty sure Green and Bracken agreed with me, or they wouldn’t have been out there with me, comforting me with their warmth and their touch and laughing with Adrian as though he hadn’t been gone from us for one year, four months and, now, twenty-nine days.

I didn’t have school in the morning. It didn’t matter because I would have stayed up the whole night anyway, but you can’t freeze a moment like that like a butterfly in an ice cube, you just can’t. Eventually, somewhere in a distance I couldn’t hear, a rooster must have crowed, because Adrian’s ghost faded abruptly away and it was only the three of us, our smiles fading with him, missing him all over again.

But it was Thanksgiving—or it would be in a few days—and Green’s hill was about nothing if it wasn’t about being grateful for those people we loved.

It was with a sense of profound gratitude that I went back to Green’s bed with the two of them and settled in to sleep. Tomorrow we would wake up and make sleepy love—it was almost a given. It would be the sort of sex where it didn’t matter what went where or who kissed what, but every touch would be magical, every whisper perfect, every glide of sweet-slick-skin shivery with the promise of orgasm.

But that was the morning. For the last breath of the night we simply lay in bed, touching hands, rubbing stomachs or arms or cheeks, and were thankful.