



STARSTRUCK

THE MOON AND THE STARS

BOOK ONE

MAC FLYNN

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THE MOON AND THE STARS, BOOK 1

MAC FLYNN

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Horror movies had nothing on this experience. That's because this was real.

Their hearts pounded as the couple, a young man and woman, raced down the deserted street. Their quick, short breaths were in time with the pounding of their feet on the cracked sidewalk. The man dragged his slower companion past the faint halos of the flickering street lamps as the shadows of the tall commercial buildings loomed over them.

They reached an alley. The young man turned into the side road and pulled her in with him. He pressed his back against the brick wall of the small bookstore and drew her close to his side. The darkness aided them by concealing them from clear view.

The young woman clutched his coat and glanced in the direction they came. Her voice was a high-pitched squeak that bordered on a scream. "Is it gone, Emery? Did we lose it?"

He clapped his hand over her mouth and glared at her. "Shut up, Kelcy!"

A noise came from the street. They held their breath. Kelcy quaked in Emery's arms. Tears streamed down her cheeks. A cold breeze blew across the streams and chilled her.

A plastic bag blew by. Its crinkling noise was what they heard. They both relaxed. He removed his hand from her mouth. "I think it's gone."

Kelcy leaned against the wall beside Emery. She clutched her chest and

glanced at her boyfriend. "What do you think that thing was?"

He leaned his head against the wall and shook it. "I don't know. It looked like a giant dog, or maybe a man in a furry suit. You know, like in those old cheesy horror movies."

She shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself. "You mean like a werewolf?"

He rolled his eyes upward. "Come on, Kelcy, you know those things. . .don't-" His eyes widened.

She frowned at him. "What? What's-" She followed her gaze and tilted her head back. Her heart stopped.

Above them in a fire escape knelt the hairy beast. The creature was six and a half feet tall and covered in a thick layer of soft gray fur. A pair of ruined dress pants covered its waist. The face was elongated into a narrow snout, and its ears ended in sharp points. Its claws dug into the grates of the fire escape landing, and its lips were curled back to reveal long, sharp teeth. Drool dripped from its mouth and its yellow eyes gazed down at them with a feral hunger.

Kelcy grabbed Emery's arm. "E-Emery."

He swallowed and slid toward the opening to the alley. "N-nice doggy. Good doggy."

The creature backed up to the raised ladder. It hit the ladder with one of its back legs. The metal ladder clattered down and stopped two feet from the ground.

Emery grabbed Kelcy's hand and pulled her away from the ladder. "Run!"

The pair sprinted onto the street. Kelcy glanced over her shoulder. Her eyes widened as she watched the monster drop through the open ladder hole and to the puddle-riddled ground. Its claws dug deep into the mud-slicked ground and left long scratches as the thing scrambled after them.

Emery led her into the road. Kelcy tripped and tumbled onto the hard pavement. The headlights of an oncoming vehicle flooded over them. Emery waved his arm wildly over his head. The driver slammed on the brakes and the car skidded to a stop feet from them.

The owner leaned out his window and glared at them. "What's the big idea?"

Emery pulled Kelcy to her feet and hurried to the rear passenger door. They dove inside and Emery leaned over the back of the driver's seat.

"Step on it if you won't want to die!" he screamed.

The driver's eyes widened. He looked ahead and punched on the gas. The car burned rubber for a few seconds before the wheels found traction and jumped ahead. Kelcy turned in the seat and glanced out the rear window.

The street was empty. The monster had vanished.

The driver glanced at them through the rear view mirror. "Mind telling me what's going on?"

Emery fell back against the seat beside Kelcy and shook his head. "Something too crazy even for the movies."

"Another month, and another month gone without a movie offer."

The speaker was a tall man on the good side of middle-age. He wore a crisp gray business suit that suited his slim physique. The man plopped himself into a chair in the large drawing room and looked at the luxurious home around him. There were priceless vases atop wooden cabinets, paintings of landscapes and people on the walls, and a real wood floor that was carpeted with oriental rugs of various ancient vintages. A fire burned in the hearth to his right, the mantle large enough to roast a small heifer over those warm flames.

To his left was the open doors to the drawing room where was glimpsed a large foyer. The floor there was marble with white walls filled with paintings. Across the foyer he glimpsed the long dining room with a thick oak table and accompanying chairs that could easily fit two dozen people. His lips twitched upward as he thought about all the silver utensils safely locked away.

"A couple more months like this and you might have to sell some of this stuff," he added.

The man spoke to a darkly handsome gentleman of thirty-five who sat opposite him on a long couch. The man was a touch over six feet tall with short, black wavy hair that was combed back, but not tamed, and he had short sideburns. He had a chiseled face and his dark eyes were partially hidden under bushy eyebrows. The shadows gave him a heavy expression that hid all his emotions but anger. The rest of his build was long and stocky, but not out of

proportion. He lounged in the corner of the couch on his back with one arm slung over his eyes and the other draped over the back.

The man barely stirred. "You're my manager. Find something."

"I'm not a miracle worker, Paul. I can't just make someone want to offer you a movie," the first man argued.

Paul removed his arm from his face and glanced at the short man. "Then what do I pay you for?"

The other man frowned. "Come on, Paul, don't kid like that. You're not going to get rid of Al List after all these years, are you?"

"Who said I was kidding?" Paul returned as he sat up. He winced and rubbed his eyes.

Al studied Paul's clothes and face. His pants were torn to above the knees and his shirt was wrinkled. There were dark pouches under his eyes. Dark blotches of dirt and mud speckled his clothes and his shoes were missing. The tattered, filthy remains of his socks were wrapped loosely around his ankles.

Al sighed and drew a flask from the inner pocket of his suit jacket. He unscrewed the top and took a swig before he nodded at Paul's attire. "What time did you get back in?"

Paul raised his eyes to Al and frowned. "What time do you think I got in?" he snapped.

Al shrugged. "I don't know, maybe a few minutes before dawn? An hour after slaughtering someone's expensive chihuahua?"

"Al, why don't you stop being an idiot and go find me some parts?" Paul told him.

Al slumped in his chair and threw up his hands. "How am I supposed to do that for a moody drama star, huh? You haven't had a hit in years and the box office returns on your last movie weren't that great."

"If you want to remind me of my failures then you may as well get out of here," Paul growled.

"Hey, is that any way to talk to the guy who's going to jump-start your career?" Al scolded him as he tucked the flask back into its pocket.

Paul arched an eyebrow. "Yeah? How?"

A big grin spread across Al's face as he leaned forward. "By getting you a girlfriend."

Paul's face drooped and his eyebrows crashed down. "A girlfriend? That's it?"

Al frowned. "What do you mean 'that's it?' That's everything! It's the answer to your problems!"

"How?" Paul questioned him.

"Well, just think about it," Al continued as he leapt to his feet and paced the floor in front of his client. "You pick up a new girl and the press takes notice. You get noticed and the movie roles come pouring in."

Paul shook his head. "It won't work."

Al stopped his pacing and frowned. "Why not?"

"Models have been done before," Paul reminded him.

Al shook his head. "I wasn't thinking about a model. I was thinking a normal girl."

Paul raised an eyebrow. "And what is a 'normal girl?'"

Al shrugged. "You know, a Plain Jane or something like that. One of those girls who didn't get to be prom queen but was worth a kiss or two in the dark corner."

"So we what? Go to an agency and ask for a rent-a-girlfriend?" Paul asked him.

Al dropped back into his chair and shrugged. "If you don't like my idea then I'd like to hear you give me a better one."

Paul leaned back and ran a hand through his disheveled hair. "With a plan like what you've got it'd be a better idea to wait."

"You haven't even let me finish telling you about my plan," Al argued.

Paul tilted back his head, closed his eyes and sighed. "Fine, finish it."

"So we get a plain girl or someone like that, and we set her up as this big mystery woman, see?" Al explained to him. "Then we take her to a premier or big party, and show her off for the cameras. We get attention and the movie roles come rolling in."

Paul tilted his head back and frowned at Al. "You forget one very important

problem."

Al blinked at him. "What's that?"

"My 'condition,'" Paul reminded him.

Al rolled his eyes. "Come on. It's not like we're going to be picking her up for a night of fun and you'll go all wolfy on her." Paul's eyes narrowed and Al was quick to hold up his hands in front of him. "All right, all right, talking about your 'condition' is off-limits today. I get it. Anyway, it's just one night, two tops, and then we never see her again. No touching, no biting, no problem."

Paul sighed and closed his eyes as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "And where do you propose we find this Plain Jane?"

Al grinned and leaned forward. "How about we go for a ride tonight?"

Paul opened one eye and arched an eyebrow. "What for?"

Al rolled his eyes. "So we can find the girl without someone spotting us."

Paul leaned forward so his elbows were on his legs, and his eyes stared across at Al. "The more you talk the worse your idea sounds."

"Just hear me out," Al pleaded as he jumped to his feet and slipped behind Paul. Al leaned over the back of the couch and lowered his voice. "Listen, we're looking for a normal girl, right?"

"Yes, but-"

"And a lot of normal girls work, right?" Al continued.

"What's your point, Al?" Paul snapped.

"So a lot of normal girls get off work at five. We can pick one out then," Al finished.

"The cops are going to see us and wonder what we're doing staring at a bunch of women at night on street corners," Paul pointed out.

"We're only going to be picking up one, and that's if we find the right one," Al countered.

Paul sighed and clutched half his face in one hand. "Fine, you win. But we'll only try it tonight, and if we don't find her then that's it. We're done." He lifted his head and stared into Al's eyes. "Got it?"

Al grinned and clapped his hands together. "No problem, Paul! I'll be back here at five and we can go around town looking for her together." He patted him

on the shoulder. "And don't worry so much. This'll turn out to be my best plan ever."

Paul looked ahead and pursed his lips. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"The buns!"

The cry of anguish came from a stout, middle-aged man. He wore a hairnet over his bald head and an apron over the front of his large belly. His finger pointed at a stack of ovens against the wall, and one of them exuded a clear trail of black smoke.

A young woman of twenty-five rushed to the rescue. Her face was plain, but not ugly, and her long, dirty-blond hair was tucked precariously into the all-too-small hairnet. A few loose hairs edged her smooth face, and her brown, bright eyes finished off her matching look. She, too, wore a white apron. She opened the door and was met with a face-full of smoke.

"Shut off the oven!" the man yelled.

The young woman leapt at the button and pressed it. The machine clicked off, but the smoke continued to float out the open door. The man pushed her to the side and slammed the door shut. He slumped his back against the wall beside the oven and wiped his brow before he turned his attention to his companion. The young woman cringed beneath his disapproving frown.

"What did I tell you about this oven, Elizabeth?" he asked her.

She shrank beneath his ire and her voice came out a tad squeaky. "To always watch it?"

"And what didn't you do?"

"Always watch it?"

"And what are you going to do now?"

Her shoulders fell and she hung her head. "Hang up my apron and go home."

The gruff man pursed his lips and sighed. He straightened and set a large, heavy hand on her shoulder. She dared to look up into his stern face.

"When the going gets tough you never give up, you hear?" he told her.

She looked past him at the oven. The interior was blackened beyond compare. Her shoulders slumped. "But all those buns. . ." she reminded him.

"We can make more tomorrow, but only if you pay attention," he scolded her. A faint ghost of a smile slipped onto his lips. "Otherwise I'll have to dock it off your perk pay."

She winced. "So no more dozen donuts a week?"

He nodded. "For a month."

Elizabeth sighed, but gave a nod. "I understand, and I'm really sorry, Mr. Baxter. I just don't know how I forgot-

"It's because your heart wasn't into it," he told her.

Mr. Baxter dropped his hand and walked around her to the desk at the front wall of the kitchen. Elizabeth remained near the far right wall beside the triple stack of ovens. On either side of the ovens were plain walls with a few silver trays stacked on the shelves of tall wheeled carts. To the left of the wall of carts was the back of the small store with an exit door and a long counter with a large sink. The wall that Baxter approached was also surrounded by a long counter and several cabinets filled with ingredients for the confectionery ingredients. The center of the bakery held a large island with store under the counter top for pots and pans. Those that couldn't fit or were used nearly constantly hung above the island for easy access.

The front of the store lay beyond the front wall and through the wide doorway. The small shop was covered wall-to-wall in angled trays of white paper covered in the remains of that day's unsold donuts, cakes, cookies, breads, and other assorted pastries. There weren't many left, and tomorrow they would all be priced down and sold within minutes. Baxter's Bakery had a solid customer base because of its solid baking, so there were very few days where Mr. Baxter had to gift out food to the local shelters.

Mr. Baxter untied his apron and tossed the cloth over the desk before he turned to Elizabeth. He folded his arms over his ample chest and studied her downcast face. "So why did you forget?"

She turned her face away and shrugged. "I don't know. I guess my mind was on other things."

He chuckled. "That wouldn't be about a man, would it?"

She snorted and shook her head. "No worries about that. The only man who's ever been in my life is my dad."

"And he was a good man," Baxter added before he leaned his rear against the desk and set his large hands on the top behind him. "But perhaps that's the problem. Here you are cooped up in a bakery all day with an old man like me. You need to get out and meet more people."

Elizabeth held up a hand. "I can do—"

"—without a man," Baxter finished for her. "You keep saying that, but I see you leave here night after night with no one to meet you and I don't like it." He wagged his finger at her. "You don't like it much, either. I can see it in your eyes."

Elizabeth removed her apron and hairnet, and folded the items over one arm. "Well, tonight you don't have to worry about that because I've got someone waiting for me."

He arched an eyebrow. "Who?"

She hung her uniform on a hook nailed into the dividing wall between the bakery and shop, and shrugged. "Una."

He snorted. "Una is not a man." He paused and stroked his chins. A mischievous smile curled the corners of his lips. "Though I sometimes wonder. She is a little odd."

Elizabeth laughed and pulled down his arm. "Odd and not a man, yes, but not a bad roommate, as far as roommates go."

He pursed his lips and shook his head. "I still wish it was a man you were meeting."

She sighed and patted him on the shoulder. "Maybe someday, but this Friday night is not a day, and I need to get home and wash the smell of my failure out of

my clothes and hair. Una gets off early tonight and that's why she's going to meet me." She leaned forward and pecked a platonic kiss on the older gentleman's cheek. "Goodnight, Mr. Baxter, and thanks for putting up with me." She strode past him towards the front door.

Mr. Baxter shook himself from the allure of the gentle kiss, spun around to frown at her retreating back. "Don't make me put your name in a husband-wanted ad!"

She paused at the door, flipped the sign so it read 'Closed,' and smiled at him. "I'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Baxter."

She stepped out of the bakery and walked down the street. Through the large front windows Mr. Baxter glimpsed her meet another young woman of short stature with short, bobbing brown hair. Night had already fallen and the streetlight illuminated their bright smiles. They walked down the street and disappeared around the corner.

He sighed and shook his head. "That little Lilly deserves a good man. Such a pity there aren't many of those left."

"Geez, there's a lot of ugly girls out tonight," Al commented.

Al and Paul sat in Paul's short limo. It was just after five o'clock that Friday evening, and the streets along the commercial district were lit by the lampposts. People walked to and fro, getting to work or a dinner date. The limo drove in circles of figure-eights around the blocks. Al's window was rolled down and he surveyed the scene with his usual tact.

Paul leaned into the dark corner corner opposite Al. His arms were crossed over his chest and one leg was crossed over the other. In the dim light his eyes appeared to glow. "You're not going to find her."

Al scowled at him. "How would you know? You're not even looking for her." Paul's illuminated eyes flickered up to Al and narrowed. The manager held up his hands in front of him. "All right, all right, I know when I've gone too far." He glanced back out the window and cringed. "Wow. We've got a couple of ugly girls coming now. Looks like their mothers dropped them at birth."

Paul, curiosity getting the better of him, sat up and looked out the window. The limo drove down a street with small shops. One of them was a bakery. A pair of women, one long haired and the other bobbed, walked arm-in-arm down the block. His gaze fell on the one with the long hair. A strange weight pressed against his chest.

Paul pressed the button on the door to his left. "Origa, park the car."

"Yes, sir," came the reply from a thickly accented Spaniard.

Al glanced at his bow and furrowed his brow. "What's the idea?"

The limo parked on the sidewalk close to the two women. Paul slid across the seat to sit opposite Al. He nodded at the two women as they passed by the car. "The one with the long hair. She'll do."

Al followed his boss' gaze and wrinkled his nose. "I know I said a plain girl, but isn't she overdoing it?"

Paul frowned. He retreated into his corner and crossed his arms over his chest. "Then find a girl yourself so we can get out of here."

Al held up his hands. "Wait a sec, I didn't say nothing about leaving. Let's go talk to her."

Paul turned his face away. "You go talk to her."

Al dropped his hands and pursed his lips. "Fine, I'll go talk to her."

He opened the door and stepped out. A slam of the door told his boss what he thought about this mission. The cool fall evening bit at him as he tucked the overcoat close to his scrawny neck. The pair of women were a half a block down. He meandered through the crowd and reached them just as they came up to an intersection.

Al tapped the shoulder of the woman with the long hair. "Excuse me," he spoke up.

The two women turned around, and both furrowed their brows as they inspected the man in the long coat. "Yes?" the long-haired woman asked him.

He stuck his hands in his pockets. "I was just wondering if I can offer you a chance of a lifetime, Miss-?"

The woman with the short hair pulled her friend behind her and glared at the man. "What the hell are you trying to pull here, mister? My friend doesn't go into that sort of stuff."

He scowled back at her. "I'm not talking to you, I'm talking to the other one."

She pulled back her arm and balled her hand into a fist. "Get outta here or you'll be having dinner early with my knuckle sandwich as the main course."

Her friend grabbed her arm and pulled it down. "We haven't even heard what he has to say, Una."

Al smirked at the short-haired woman. "Una. What a name."

Her eyes narrowed and she looked him over. "What's yours?"

He puffed up. "Al List."

Una snorted. "You can't spell 'alley' without an 'al.'"

Al frowned and stuck his finger under her nose. "Listen here, sister-"

"If I was your sister I'd tell everyone I was an only child," she quipped.

The other woman stepped between them and pushed the squabbling pair apart. "Please, Una. Don't start another fight. Not with so many people around." A small crowd had congregated around them.

Una loosened her shoulders and stepped back. "All right, Lilly, but I still don't trust this rat."

Al sniffed. "The feeling's mutual, but I'm here to talk to your friend. My boss wants to-" Una leaned close to him with a face that bespoke suspicion and a threat of physical violence, Lilly's pleas be damned. He cleared his throat. "I'm the manager for a very famous actor who wants to meet you. He saw you walking along and thought he'd never seen a lovelier young woman."

Lilly started back. "Your boss wants to meet me?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes you just get lucky, and that's why he wants to meet you and take you out on a date."

Lilly blinked at him. "I . . . I don't think I quite understand."

Al glanced around at the crowd. He grabbed the tall collar of his overcoat and pulled it closer to his face before he jerked his head towards a nearby alley. "Let's just step into my office and have a quick chat. If you don't like the offer then you're free to go."

Una looped her arms around one that belonged to Liz. "I'm going as her manager."

Al scowled, but he let them both step into his 'office.' The crowd eyed the dark confines of the alley and dispersed. The two women stopped five yards into the darkness and faced Al.

Al's attention fell on Lilly. "My boss is surrounded by a lot of frauds, if you know what I mean."

"I think we're looking at one," Una quipped.

He glared at her. "Mind butting out out of this for a few seconds? I'm trying

to tell her my guy is legit."

"It's not him I'm worried about," Una quipped.

Al pursed his lips and held up his hands. "All right, you ladies want some reassurance this isn't a scam?"

Una nodded. "That'd be nice."

Al rolled his eyes. "What if I told you my boss was Paul Lupe? Huh? What then?"

Lilly's eyes widened. "That actor?"

Una wrinkled her nose. "Never heard of him."

Al looked her over. "I don't think you're part of his audience. Horror movies would be better for you."

Una narrowed her eyes and ground her teeth together. She balled a hand into a fist and leapt at him. "You wanna-" Lilly grabbed her upper arms from behind and pulled her back.

The shy young woman turned her attention to Al. "Is it really Mr. Lupe who wants to see me?"

Al snapped his fingers and dug into his overcoat. He pulled out a card and handed it to Liz. "If that ain't proof for you then nothing is."

Una leaned against her friend's arm and the pair browsed the contents of the card.

Al List
Manager to Paul Lupe

THERE WAS an address and a phone number beneath the job title. The women glanced at each other. Al studied their faces. A sly smile curled onto his lips. "Well? Proof enough for ya?" he asked them.

Una glared at him and tapped the card. "Anybody can make up one of these."

Al shrugged. "I'm in the phone book, and so's my address."

"That still don't say much about you," Una argued.

The pair stuck their faces into that of the other. Lilly tucked the card into her coat pocket and made to separate them, but movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. She paused and glanced at the street. A short limo was parked on the curb. The rear window was rolled down. She had an angled view of the interior, but it was enough to see the shadowed figure seated in the far corner. Their eyes met. She felt a strange weight fall on her chest.

Al's shrill voice interrupted the moment. "That's my ride. You coming or aren't you?"

She started back and whipped her head to him. "What? Oh, um, could I have a little while to think this over?"

Al shrugged. "Fine, but don't wait too long. Mr. Lupe's a busy man and he might find a girl he likes better."

"Then that'll be his loss," Una snapped.

Al gave her one last glare before he turned away and strode over to the limo. He slipped inside and slammed the door shut behind him. Al leaned against the seat and rolled up the window with one finger as he drew out his flask with his other hand. "Get us out of here."

Paul arched an eyebrow, but pressed the button close at hand. "Home, Origa."

The limo pulled into traffic. Paul studied his disheveled manager as Al ran a hand through his hair. "Well?"

Al downed a mouthful and swallowed hard. "She's got a pain-in-the-ass friend."

Paul frowned. "But what about her?"

Al shrugged as he tucked away his comfort drink. "Nice enough, I suppose. Kind of quiet, but I suppose that means she won't spill anything to the press without us knowing beforehand."

Paul turned away and cupped his chin in his hand as he watched the tinted scenery pass by.

Al leaned forward and eyed his employer with a curious gaze. "Mind telling me why you picked that girl?"

"Yes," came the reply.

Al threw up his arms and slouched in his seat. "Fine. Keep me out in the cold. See what happens when trouble comes and you're-

"What's her name?"

Al blinked at him. "Huh?"

Paul straightened and turned to Al. "What is the woman's name?"

Al's face fell. "Um, Lilly something."

Paul arched an eyebrow. "Lilly Something?"

Al shrugged. "Okay, so I didn't get her last name or even where she lived. That damn friend of hers wouldn't let me get in any questions between the ones she was asking."

Paul pursed his lips and pressed the button. "Park the car in the nearest alley."

Al narrowed his eyes as the limo turned onto a side street. "What are you planning?"

The car stopped and Paul opened his door. Al's eyes widened. He leapt across the limo and grabbed Paul's arm. "Paul, whatever you're thinking you'd better not-" He started back when Paul glanced over his shoulder at him. There was an unmistakable yellow tint in the depths of his eyes. Al drew back his hand, but shook his head. "Come on, Paul. Whatever you're gonna do it ain't worth it."

Paul turned to face the car and held the door. "I'll see you back at the house."

Al held out his hand. "Whatever ya do just don't make a dent in something more than your career, and-" Paul slammed the door shut and Al winced.

Paul's shadow passed over the window and disappeared into the night.

Al leaned back against the seat. He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. His hand settled on his coat over where the inside pocket, and a bottle of liquor, was located. "I need a good, hard drink."

"I feel like I need a good, hard drink after talking with an asshole like that," Una commented.

It was a few minutes after their unexpected meeting with Al, and the girls were several blocks down the street in a residential district. The tall, brick apartment buildings were old, but well kept, and the stoops were clean. There were a few dark alleys between some of the buildings and one or two streetlights were out, but overall the neighborhoods were safe.

Lilly smiled at her shorter friend. "He wasn't that bad."

Una snorted. "He sounded just like an insurance salesman, but without the benefit of their honesty." Lilly raised the card in her hand and studied the contents. Una looked from her friend's face to the card and back. Her eyebrows crashed down. "You're not seriously gonna call that guy up, are you?"

Lilly shrugged. "I don't know yet."

Una grabbed her friend's arm and stopped them. She clasped their hands together and looked into Lilly's eyes. "Listen, Lilly, there's something weird about that guy and the limo. I got one of my bad vibes from them, and you know my bad vibes haven't led me wrong yet."

Lilly's face fell. "That bad?"

Una wrinkled her nose. "Well, not as bad as that one guy that turned out to be an aspiring serial killer, but I just got the feeling they were hiding something, and that something wasn't good." Lilly's shoulders slumped and she turned her

face away. Una furrowed her brow and leaned her head to one side to catch her friend's eyes. "What'd you see in that car?"

A small, sad smile slipped onto Lilly's face and she shrugged. "I. . .I guess I saw a lonely guy in there."

Una pursed her lips and sighed. She looped her arm through that of her friend and tugged her down the sidewalk. "I guess that settles it. When you've found a poor, pathetic creature to nurture there's no stopping you from helping it."

Lilly smiled at her friend. This time there was warmth in it. "I wouldn't put it quite like-" She jerked to a stop and whipped her head to the right.

Una frowned and followed her gaze. Lilly stared into the darkness of one of the deeper alleys. The shadows of garbage cans and crates stared back. Una glanced between the garbage and her friend. "What? What is it?"

Lilly shook herself and furrowed her brow. "I. . .I'm not really sure. I thought I saw-" There was a loud clanging noise from the depths of the alley.

Something rolled towards them. Both women jumped back and watched a round, narrow shadow roll out of the darkness and tumble to a stop at their feet. It was the lid to a garbage can.

Una sighed and clutched her heart. "And I think that's just about enough excitement for one night."

Lilly nodded. "Agreed."

They spun on their heels and marched the two blocks to their apartment building. Their arms were wrapped around the other and their eyes flickered to the deep shadows all around them.

Una looked up at her companion and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I ever tell you the stories about the beast that's supposed to hang out around the apartment district?"

Lilly swallowed the lump in her throat. "You told me all of them."

Una gripped her friend's arm tighter as they passed another alley. Her wide eyes flitted over the deep shadows. "Well, misery loves company."

Lilly sighed. "Thanks."

Una licked her parched lips. "You know, it's supposed to be as big as an

elephant, and furry all over."

Lilly frowned at her friend. "I don't think now's the time-"

"And it's got rows of sharp teeth that could rip a man in two."

"Una, I really don't-"

"And its long, sharp claws are known to take a man and throw him a hundred feet."

"Una!"

Una looked up at her and blinked. "Yeah?"

Lilly sighed. "You're not-" She stopped so quickly Una nearly fell on her face.

Una caught herself and glared at her friend. "What's the big idea?"

Lilly glanced around them. Her eyes were as wide as saucers. She slowly shook her head. "I-I don't know. I just feel like we're not alone. Like someone's watching us."

Una whipped her head left and right. Their unscheduled appointment with the manager had made them later to dinner than everyone else, so the streets were empty but for them. "Watching where?"

Lilly shook her head. "I don't know."

Una grabbed her hand and pulled her down the street. "Then let's not find out!"

Hand-in-hand the pair sprinted the last block to home. They reached their stoop and caught their breath. Lilly looked over her shoulder at the empty block. She started when Una patted her on the shoulder.

"I'm glad. . .you were. . .wrong," Una huffed.

Lilly nodded, but didn't agree. She still felt like somebody was watching them.

The pair went up the stairs and into their building. Their roomy quarters lay on the third floor. The windows on the wall opposite the front door looked out on the fire escape and a vacant lot most of the residents used as their personal dumping ground. A few scraggly weeds and grass grew up among the asphalt and dumped furniture and trash.

Their apartment was small, but comfortable. Between the front door and

windows were the dining space and living room. On the left was the kitchen and the short hallway to their separate rooms with a shared bathroom.

Una tossed her coat onto the floor to the right beside a small table and walked over to the couch. She flopped onto a cushion, put her feet up on the coffee table, and sighed. "For the next forty-eight hours I don't want to hear one god damn thing about coffee, and most especially that one word."

Lilly picked up her friends coat and hung them both on the hooks to the left of the door. "You mean grande?"

Una sunk deeper into the couch and groaned. "I said not to say that word."

Lilly smiled and walked over to the kitchen. "If you're so tired how about I cook dinner tonight?"

Una leapt to her feet and hurried over to the kitchen. "Oh no, you get out." She put her hands on Lilly's back and pushed her out of the kitchen.

"I can't be that bad if I work at a bakery!" Lilly argued.

Una snorted. "I've seen you cook at that bakery. If it wasn't for that guy-"

"Mr. Baxter."

Una grabbed a pan and the eggs from the fridge. "If it wasn't for him being so nice you'd be up front managing the till. That's where I'd put you and leave you there."

Lilly walked over to one of the windows and leaned her left shoulder against the frame. She looked out on the tiny lot and sighed. "I suppose." She paused and furrowed her brow. A shadow in the lot shifted, but there wasn't any breeze.

"Food'll be ready in a jiffy. Think you can get out the plates and stuff?" Una called from the kitchen.

Lilly nodded her head. "Yeah, sure."

She pulled herself away from the window, but her thoughts remained with the shadow in the lot. The pair ate dinner and retired to their bedrooms for some R&R. Una's bedroom lay at the end of the hall and Lilly's was on the right, on the wall that faced the lot. She walked over to her window and brushed aside the curtain to look out. The fire escape blocked some of her view, but she could see where the shadow had moved. Now there wasn't even a shadow.

Lilly purse her lips and half-turned away when something in the lot caught

her eye. She glanced over her shoulder and squinted her eyes. Something moved in the lot again. She opened her window, placed her palms on the sill, and leaned out. Whatever it was kept to the shadows behind the rusted cars and soiled wheels. She couldn't get a good look.

Lilly swept her eyes over the fire escape. She'd never seen it used, but now was as good a time as ever. She eased herself onto the grate that made up her landing. The metal creaked and groaned under her weight. She stepped gingerly over to the low railing and leaned over.

Lilly frowned. The shadow was gone. She leaned further over and her soft whisper disturbed the silence of the night. "Where did it go?"

A horrible groaning sound came from the wall behind her. She whipped her head over her shoulder. Her eyes widened and her pulse quickened as she beheld the bolts connecting the fire escape to the brick building wiggle out of their holes. The whole structure leaned away from the apartment building. Every inch pulled the bolts farther from the wall.

Lilly grasped the railing and shuffled along the perimeter towards her window. The metal framework rattled and leaned at a severe angle. The platform pulled away from the window and left a foot-wide gap.

Lilly slid away from the wall and her back hit the railing. She clung to the railing and screamed. Lights flicked on at several of the other rooms. People stuck their heads out their windows and gasped. A few seconds later Una arrived at her window.

Una's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "Oh my god, Lilly! Don't move!"

"I-I don't have a choice," Lilly stuttered.

The framework shuddered and leaned further away from the wall. Una looked from her left to right. "Wait a sec! I'm gonna go get a rope!" She disappeared from the window.

Lilly pursed her lips. The wall was only five feet away. There was a long hop to her window, but she could make it. She shuffled her feet towards the wall while keeping a solid hold on the railing.

The framework gave up the ghost. Lilly's eyes widened as the bolts that

connected the fire escape to the brick wall pulled completely from their holes. The whole structure fell away from the building. Wind whipped at her hair as she fell backwards with the fire escape. The platform and she hurtled towards the hard, unforgiving ground of the rust-filled lot.

A dark shadow leapt out of the lot and high into the air. A pair of strong, furry arms wrapped around Lilly and swept her into a tight hold against a warm body. She was spirited out of the falling metal frame, and her rescuer and she dropped with ease to the ground at the base of the apartment building. Behind them the fire escape framework crashed into the empty lot, obliterating the ruined cars and trash in a mess of twisted metal and ruin.

Lilly looked up into the face of her rescuer. Her heart stopped. The thing that held her was a monster. Its face had a long snout full of sharp teeth, and fur covered most of its body except for strands of tattered clothes. The hands in which she was held ended in long claws. Its terrible yellow eyes looked into her own.

The creature tilted his head to one side. A low, almost purr-like growl rumbled from its lips. Lilly blinked at it. The deep, almost kittenish sound swept aside her fear. She leaned upward and searched those beautiful yellow eyes. There was something familiar about them.

"Lilly!" The scream came from Una.

The creature growled and set her on her feet. It backed away into the darkness that lay beside the building where once stood the fire escape.

Lilly reached out her hand towards the creature. "Wait. Don't go."

The front door to the apartment building burst open, and Lilly looked away from the creature to the doors. Una rushed down the stoop with Lilly's coat in her hands, and behind her came many of the other occupants. Sirens in the distance warned them that someone had called the police and fire departments.

Una raced over to her friend and enveloped her in a big hug. "Thank god you're okay!" She pulled her to arm's length and set her coat over Lilly's shoulders before she looked her over. "And I can't believe you were able to jump out of there! When'd you learn to do that?"

Lilly shook her head. "It wasn't me, it was-" She looked over to the creature.

The thing was gone. Lilly took a few steps and swept her eyes over the area. "Where'd it go?"

Una blinked at her. "Where'd what go?"

Lilly spun around to face her friend. "The thing that saved me. The big hairy thing."

Una furrowed her brow and shook her head. "I didn't see anything. There was just you jumping out of the fire escape."

Lilly looked back at the alley and the wreckage. Her eyes fell on the remains of the fire escape. Amid the ruin of the lot stood a single, short flower. The yellow petals were like a sun among so much gray and destruction.

Una walked over and set her hand on Lilly's shoulder. "Come on, let's get you on the stoop and check you out."

Una led Lilly away from the ruins. A large shadow watched them from a nearby rooftop before it drew back and disappeared into the night.

"Well, you don't look like you hit your head," Una pronounced as she leaned away from Lilly.

The pair were seated side-by-side on the stoop while their neighbors gawked at the rubble that was once their fire escape.

"I know what I saw, and I saw a big wolf thing," Lilly insisted.

Una set a hand on her friend's shoulder and nodded down the block. "Well, just in case we'd probably better get a second opinion."

An ambulance followed two police cars as they drew up to the building. A fire truck arrived only moments later. The cops stepped out and scurried over to the wreckage. People were sifting through the metal and picking up bits and pieces.

"Stand back, everyone!" one of the officers shouted as he and his fellow cops shoed the curious away. "Stand back so you won't get hurt!"

One of the tenants of the apartment, an elderly man with spirit in his eyes, pointed the end of his cane at the rubble. "We almost did! I could've been on that fire escape."

"But you weren't, Mr. Harold, now stop making a fuss over yourself," a woman snapped.

He whipped his head to the middle-aged speaker and glared at her. "I'm going to raise a fuss if it's worth raising, woman, and that-" he jabbed his cane at the wreckage, "-is worth raising a fuss over. How am I supposed to get down if

there's a fire?"

The officer pushed Mr. Harold's cane closer to the ground and grasped the old man's upper arm. "I'm sure everything will be worked out with your apartment owner, now please step back."

"Was anyone hurt?" one of the ambulance drivers shouted.

Another tenant, the neighbor directly above the apartment of Lilly and Una, pointed at the pair. "I think one of them was on the fire escape when it fell away."

The ambulance driver and his fellow EMT hurried over to where they sat. "Are both of you okay?"

"I think my friend might be in shock," Una suggested.

Lilly shook her head. "I'm fine. I wasn't even on it when it crashed."

"We're still required to check everyone out who was involved in the incident," the EMT told her.

Lilly pursed her lips, but stood. "All right."

They were escorting her to the ambulance when two more vehicles drove up. One was a large white van with the words 'Channel 9' marked in big, bold red letters on the side. A small satellite sat on its roofs and the rear doors opened to reveal broadcast equipment. The person who opened the doors was a middle-aged woman with bouncy brown hair and a smile that was so tight it crinkled the edges of her eyes. In one hand was a mic, and in the other was a small slip of paper.

The other car was an unmarked old sedan with a red light on the roof and a slight oil leak that left a trail behind it. A young woman of about twenty stepped out. She wore a flashy red business suit and had her cell phone out and held in a position like the other woman held her mic. The passenger seat was occupied by a man of the same age with short black hair. In his lap was an open laptop on which his entire focus lay as he tapped away at the keyboard.

Una followed Lilly and the EMTs to the back of the ambulance and stood beside the open doors. The EMTs made Lilly comfortable on the floor with her legs hanging out and began their examination.

A man with a camera on his shoulder stepped out of the van after the older

woman. She turned around so her back faced the open rear doors of the ambulance and smiled for the camera. Her eyes fell on a dark light atop the camera. "Are we live yet?" she snapped.

The red light turned on. "We're live," the cameraman told her.

She reapplied her smile and drew the mic up to her face. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Marie Bolles. I'm here in the historic-"

Una snorted. "More like decrepit."

"-downtown apartment district where a call came in only a few minute ago describing a horrific scene. One of the ancient fire escapes had torn itself from a tenant building and crashed into the neighboring empty lot. Let's see if I can find an officer to give us some updates. Officer!" She waved her arm at the men in blue who were still handling crowd control. "Officer!" None of them came at her beckoning.

The younger woman, untethered by a clumsy mic and the cameraman, scurried through the crowds and over to the men. She shoved the top of her phone into the face of the highest ranking officer. "My name is Taylor Pippin, of the news blog Persistent Pippin. What can you tell me about what happened here?"

The officer nodded at Marie. "Ask her."

The young woman smirked. "It wouldn't look good quoting my competition, so what can you tell me?" The officer sighed, but began repeating the tale of fire escape woe.

Marie's face almost dropped into a scowl before she caught herself, and caught sight of Lilly. The EMTs had placed a blanket over her shoulders and one of them was checking her eyes. Marie hurried over to them and shoved her mic into Lilly's face. Lilly started back and the EMT glared at her.

"Miss, can you tell our viewers what happened here?" Marie questioned her.

Una pushed the mic out of Lilly's face and into Marie's chest. "Shove off, lady. We're working here."

A laugh came from the side of the ambulance, and all eyes fell on the young Miss Pippin. She leaned against the corner of the ambulance and folded her arms over her chest. "Having trouble getting a scoop, grandma?"

Marie's eyes flickered to her cameraman and she cut her hand across her throat. The light shut off and he lowered the machine. Marie returned her attention to her younger competition. "What the fuck do you want, you stupid brat?"

Pippin shrugged. "Just to watch how the dinosaurs do it. It would make a good anthro course in journalism school."

Marie snorted. "I doubt you darkened the halls of a community college, much less a journalism school."

Pippin frowned. "Who needs college anyway when all you need is a computer-" she nodded at her companion who remained in the car, "-and a phone. Just watch." She shoved the phone into Una's face. "Mind giving me a quote for my news blog?"

Una repeated the favor she'd done for Marie. "We're not taking any questions from a blogger or a dinosaur. Now if you don't mind-" she pulled Lilly off the back of the ambulance and walked through the reporters, "-we have some sleep to catch."

A crowd surrounded the stoop and Lilly sensed a thick tension in the air. Una was oblivious to the angry murmurs and shoved her way past. They were nearly to the stoop when an officer stepped in front of them and held up his hand. "Not in here, miss."

Una stabbed a finger at the third floor. "But we live there!"

He shook his head. "This building's been condemned until further notice."

Una's mouth dropped open. "By who's authority?"

He nodded at the wreckage. "By the authority of God, now please move along."

Una opened her mouth to tell him what she thought of that, but Lilly tugged on Una's arm. "Let's just go." Una pursed her lips, but let Lilly tug her away from trouble.

Trouble remained at the site as the unhappy reporters squared off in front of the ambulance crew.

Marie stabbed a finger at her two prospective interviewees as Lilly and Una made a hasty getaway. "You stupid bitch! Look what you've done!"

Pippin scoffed. "Look what I've done? You're the one making an ass of yourself trying to act like you matter anymore." She held up her phone. "This is the future of journalism, hag, and I intend to be at the forefront."

Marie stretched to her full height and smirked at the younger, shorter woman. "You think you're hot with your toys and good looks. You just wait and see if you even climb the first floor of this town. Me-" she jerked a thumb at herself, "-I'm at the top. I was here before you, little girl, and I'll be here long after you. Now go play reporter and fuck off." Marie marched past the stunned Pippin and her cameraman, and slipped into the passenger seat at the front.

Pippin balled her shaking hands into fists at her side and glared at the closed door. "I'm going to be the top dog in this town! You'll see!" Her only reply was a derisive laugh from inside the cab.

The cameraman rolled his eyes and followed Marie into the van. They drove off, leaving the young woman trembling with rage.

Pippin marched off to her own vehicle. She dropped into the driver's seat and grasped the wheel so tight her knuckles turned white. "What a bitch!"

"Who?" the man asked without looking up from the laptop.

She nodded at the white van. "That asshole dinosaur reporter. She thinks she's everything just because she's been around for a while."

"You have your phone?" he inquired as he held out his hand toward, again without raising his eyes from the screen.

She rolled her eyes, but plopped the cell phone into his open palm. "Does anything ever bother you?"

"Dead spots," he commented as he plugged the phone into a cord that ran out of the laptop.

She snorted and started the car. "Typical. I hope you have a fun time sleeping on the couch tonight."

That made him look at her. "Couch? Why?"

"Because, Pete, your girlfriend was just personally insulted by a dinosaur and you're worried about dead spots in your wi-fi," she told him.

He glanced over at the white van and shrugged. "I wouldn't let it bother you. Like you always say, people like her are on their way out."

"And we should be on our way out of here," Pippin added as she started the car. She glanced over the hood at the crowd of people forced to be homeless and wrinkled her nose. "Glad I don't have to live in this place. Even the smell makes me sick."

Pippin backed out of the area and hurried them on their way, leaving behind a scoop that was in the making.

"**W**here exactly are we supposed to be going without a wallet, cards, or even my teddy bear?" Una asked her friend as they walked down the street.

Their apartment was several blocks behind them and they neared the edge of the older commercial district with its small shops and sidewalks with broken edges. At that late-evening hour the streets were nearly deserted except for the occasional late-night shop and a car or two that passed by them. A cold wind blew stained newspapers and trash out of the full bins and into the streets.

"I think I know someone who'll help us," Lilly revealed as she stopped them before one of the small shops.

Una looked up at the cheery sign between the first and second floor. Her face drooped. "This is where you work."

"What's wrong with Baxter's Bakery?"

"You want me to sleep above a bakery?"

Lilly shrugged. "Why not? It can't be any worse than Mrs. Simpson's snoring."

Una stabbed a finger at her mouth. "Have you forgotten about my sweet tooth? Even being near a bakery makes me break out in fits of disorderly snacking, and this will be a whole lot worse because I don't have any money to buy anything."

Lilly rolled her eyes as she took her friend's hand and tugged her toward the door. "I'm sure he'll let you have some food on account."

"I don't think he offers accounts that big," Una quipped as they stopped before the entrance. She shivered and rubbed her hand up and down her other arm.

"It should still be warm in there from the ovens," Lilly pointed out as she tilted her head back to look at the row of windows on the second floor. She cupped her hands over her mouth and took a deep breath. "Mr. Baxter! Are you there?"

A light flickered on in one of the rooms and the window was slid open. Mr. Baxter, complete with nightcap over his bald head, stuck his head out. He squinted down at the pair of shivering women at his doorstep. "Elizabeth? Una? What are you two doing here?"

Lilly wrapped her arms around her shivering self and smiled up at him. "It's a long story. Could we come in to tell it?"

Mr. Baxter nodded. "Of course. Wait a moment and I'll be right down." He disappeared back inside and shut the window.

"How come he calls you by your real name again?" Una asked her friend.

"Because he's my boss," she pointed out.

The pair heard the faint thump of heavy shoes on the floorboards. They receded to the back of the building and soon the lights in the rear of the bakery were flicked on. The staircase to the upper level was located there, and soon Mr. Baxter made his appearance in the doorway to the kitchen. The older man was dressed in a long nightgown, but a heavy, opened blue robe covered most of him. He strode around the counter and over to the door where he unlocked and opened the entrance for them.

"Come in, ladies. It's too cold out there for man or beast," he commented as they slipped inside.

Una sighed as the warmth of the bakery settled into her weary bones. The smell of sweet breads also soothed her. "I think we've stepped out of a cold hell and into a hot heaven."

"I'm really sorry to be bothering you at this hour, Mr. Baxter, but we've been kicked out of our apartment," Lilly apologized to their host.

Baxter arched an eyebrow. "Kicked out? Why?" His eyes flickered to Una

and narrowed. "You both were behaving yourselves, weren't you?"

Lilly sheepishly grinned at him. "It's actually my fault, Mr. Baxter. I accidentally collapsed the fire escape."

His eyes bulged out of his head. "You what?"

"I was standing on the fire escape looking out over an empty lot when it sort of-well-" she scratched the back of her head, "-it sort of detached from the building and crashed into the lot."

Baxter grasped her hand and inspected her person with a frenzied look. "But you're okay? You're not hurt?"

Una snorted. "There's not a scratch on her thanks to her mysterious hairy savior."

Baxter arched a bushy eyebrow. "A what?"

Lilly covered his hands with her own and shook her head. "It's nothing, but the police won't let us back in until the building's been inspected. Could we sleep here tonight?"

A smile slipped onto her employer's face. "Of course, my ladies, of course! I would be glad to have such lovely company! If you will just come this way."

Baxter led them through the bakery and into a narrow passage between the walls of the bakery and the kitchen. The stairs turned at a small landing and followed the exterior wall to the second floor. The floor covered all of the store and had a spacious open floor plan. There was the usual amenities of a large dining room with a living room. A hall on the left-hand side of the upper floor led to the bedrooms and bath. The kitchen was small, with only a few cupboards and no stove.

"If you ladies wish I can make you something to eat before you retire," he offered.

"A toasted bagel sounds really good right now," Una spoke up.

Lilly sighed, but the corners of her lips twitched upward. "That actually does sound pretty good, if it's not too much trouble."

"No trouble at all. Just sit anywhere you like and I'll be right back." He grasped the stairs railing, but paused and looked over at his guests. "There is a spare room at the end of the hall. The bed isn't too big-"

"We'll manage," Lilly promised. He smiled and gave a nod before he disappeared down the stairs.

Una plopped herself down on the couch and sank into the soft, comfortable cushions with a deep sigh. "We're going to have to steal this couch," she commented to her friend. Silence was the response. "Lilly?"

When there was again no reply Una sat up after a struggle and twisted around to look over the back of the couch. Lilly was seated at the end of the dining table closest to the living room. Her arms lay over her legs with her clasped hands in front of her knees. She was slightly bent over with her lower lip pinched by her upper teeth. Her eyes stared at the floor without blinking and her brow was furrowed.

"You okay?" Una asked her.

Lilly shook her head. "I know what I saw, and I saw a werewolf."

Una snorted. "Seriously? That's your hairy savior?"

Lilly stood and paced the floor between them. "I know it sounds crazy, but if it wasn't that then I don't know what it was."

Una turned around and draped her arms over the back of the couch. "Okay, let's say you saw a werewolf. If it was a moon-challenged guy than he did a very un-werewolf-like thing rescuing you like that. Shouldn't he have waited for the steel beams on that fire escape to make you into a shish kabob?"

Lilly stopped her pacing and frowned at her friend. "Did you ever think maybe the movies and books aren't true?"

Una shrugged. "Yeah, but what's the chance that Hollywood and the publishing industry are wrong?" The two stared at each other for a moment before both burst into laughter.

They were still laughing when Baxter returned with a basket full of fresh bagels. He walked over to the end of the table nearest them and set the basket on his oven mitt. "These aren't my best, but when an order is wanted fast you must sacrifice something for the speed and cost."

Lilly set a hand on his shoulder and smiled at him as Una scurried off the couch. "I'm sure they're delicious."

Baxter's eyes flitted between her hand and her bright smile. "You are acting

very strange tonight, Elizabeth."

She drew her hand back as though it'd been refused and cradled it against her chest. "Strange? How?"

He shrugged. "I'm not quite sure. Very forward, I guess. First you came to me for help and now you touch my shoulder in thanks. That's very unlike you."

"Maybe it's the moonlight," Una teased as she stuffed a bagel into her mouth. Her eyes rolled back as she chewed and swallowed. "These are really good, Mr. Baxter. What do you put in them?"

"A little love and a big family secret," he told her, though his gaze remained fixed on Lilly. He studied her with an arched eyebrow and a curious glint in his eyes. "The moonlight can play some strange tricks on the mind. It's said that it can even turn men into wolves."

Lilly tilted her head to one side and smiled. "Everybody knows about werewolves now, Mr. Baxter."

He held up a flour-covered finger. "Ah, but do you know about the wurver or the faoladh?"

"I once knew a guy who could make some nice baskets," Una spoke up as she sat at the table before the basket stuffing her face with bagels.

Mr. Baxter shook his head. "Not a weaver, a wulver. A great beast with the body of a man and the head of a wolf."

"That sounds like a werewolf that quit halfway," Una quipped. Their host frowned at her. She clasped a bagel to her chest and shrank beneath the heavy brow of disapproval. "I'll be good."

Lilly furrowed her brow. "So are these things-"

"The wulver and faoladh," he repeated.

"-are they like a werewolf?" she finished.

He chuckled. "No, not at all. They are kind and gentle creatures native to Scotland and Ireland." He wrinkled his nose. "The werewolf of those other legends, the one of eastern Europe is a beast, less than a man but his with cunning."

Una perked up at the mention of the beasts' disposition. "So they help people?"

Baxter nodded. "Yes. Lost souls and those injured."

"Why do you know so much about these things?" Una asked him.

Baxter puffed out his ample belly and grinned. "A faoladh once saved my life."

Una snorted. "Seriously?" He glared down at her again. She stuffed a bagel into her mouth as a gag.

"How did it happen?" Lilly inquired.

A pensive expression slipped onto the usually jovial face of Baxter. He strode through the living room furniture and over to one of the front windows that looked out over the street. Baxter drew back the curtain and looked up at the bright moon that shone down on the city. His voice was so soft the women could hardly hear him. "It was a night like this one many years ago. I was newly come to this city and had not a penny in my pocket, so I was forced to sleep out in the woods where I could build a fire without being seen."

"That must have been cold," Lilly mused.

He chuckled. "I was young then and didn't mind the hardship as much as I would now."

Una swallowed the lump of chewed bagel in her mouth. "That must've been a long time ago." Lilly and Baxter both frowned at her. She slipped down her chair and nearly out of sight. "I'll behave."

Baxter cleared his throat. "As I was saying, there I was with a good fire before me when I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Something was in the shadows just past the glow of my fire. I stood up and grabbed the stick I'd used to stir the fire. A sound came from behind me. I turned and found myself face-to-face with a half dozen wild dogs. Their terrible eyes told me all I needed to know about their plans for me. They lunged at me! I swung my stick and hit the first one! The others leapt over him and jumped onto me. One of them went for my throat! I would have joined my ancestors than if it hadn't been for the large wolf that lunged out of the darkness!"

"A wolf?" Lilly repeated.

He smiled at her and tapped the side of his nose. "That's what I thought at first, but not when the thing grabbed one of the dogs and threw it off me. Those

beasts scattered like leaves in the wind. That's when I got a good look at what saved me. It was a big beast of a thing, over six feet with hands and claws like a wolf, but on two legs like a man." He hitched up his pants and grinned. "I can say I wasn't scared in the least."

"What happened then?" Lilly wondered.

He sighed and shrugged. "It dropped to all fours and trotted off into the woods. I never saw it again."

Una's shoulders drooped. "That's it?"

"It isn't enough that it saved my life?" he pointed out.

"How many years ago was this?" Lilly asked him.

Baxter tilted his head slightly back and rubbed his chin with one hand. "I'd have to say about twenty-five-no, about thirty years ago."

"Has anyone else seen it?" she persisted.

He shook his head. "I can't say. I've never heard any stories about it. At least, not until these new ones that are spreading around, but those are just gossip."

Una stifled a yawn and stood. "I think I need to be spreading myself over a bed. You coming, Lilly?"

"Sure." Lilly followed her friend toward the hall, but Baxter intercepted her and grasped her wrist.

She looked up into his face and found him searching hers, as well. "Take care of yourself out there, Elizabeth. Like I said, there's the good wolves and the bad ones."

Lilly averted her eyes from his intense gaze. "I don't think I have to worry about seeing wolves, Mr. Baxter. I mean, this is the city."

He studied her for a moment longer before he released her wrist. "Of course. How very foolish of me. You go on now to bed. I'll wake you in the morning."

She nodded and scurried after Una who waited for her at the end of the hall. Together they slipped into the room. Baxter stood at the opening to the hall with his eyes fixed on the closed door and his lips tightly pursed.

"May the faoladh protect you," he whispered.

"What do you mean you're not going to air my segment?" Marie screeched into her phone.

It was nightfall and the white van was parked on a corner half a city away from the condemned apartment building. She sat in the front cab with her cameraman in the driver's seat beside her. The van was parked on a curb that abutted one of the long city parks that took up a whole block for the pleasure of the residents. A few of the tall trees cast their shadow over the van as the woman inside seethed.

"We just don't have room for it," the female voice on the other end of the line told her.

Marie threw up one arm. "What do you have room for?"

"People would rather hear about those wolf sightings than the crumbling buildings they're living in," the woman pointed out.

"That trash? Why the hell are we even reporting on that stupid gossip?" Marie snapped.

"It's what the public wants, but if you type up your segment we could post it to the site as an interesting feature."

Marie's face turned a red so bright that her cameraman in the seat beside her wondered if she was going to choke. "You know I don't get paid more than two dimes for those stupid online articles!"

"That's all we can do. Type it up and submit it tomorrow morning or don't do

anything. It's your choice."

Marie slammed her fist on the dashboard. "Don't you dare tell me-hello? Hello?" She drew the phone away from her and looked at the screen. The call had ended. "Argh!" she yelled as she raised the phone for a good smashing on the floor.

"That's company property," her cameraman and driver reminded her.

Marie's shoulder's drooped and she slumped down in her seat. A deep sigh escaped her lips. "Could this day get any worse?"

A loud slam rocked the van and an oval-shaped indent protruded downward between the driver and her.

"What the hell was that?" she shouted.

Her question was answered when a face leaned over the roof and peered in through the top of the windshield. The features weren't human, at least not most of them. The face was that of a wolf mixed with a human. The beast's yellow eyes fell on Marie, and its curled its lips back to reveal two rows of long, sharp teeth.

"G-get us out of here!" she ordered her driver.

The man jammed the key into the ignition and the engine roared to life. The creature raised a clawed fist and slammed it against the glass. The glass shattered at the point of impact but didn't break. The driver stepped on the gas and the van lunged forward. The creature, prepared for the quick start, slid backward across the roof. They heard its claws scrape against the metal roof down past the cab to the rear. Then there came two successive slams, each one punctuated by a puncture of the roof by a set of clawed fingers.

Marie whipped her head to the driver. "Swerve around, you idiot! Get it off the roof!"

The driver jerked the wheel left and right. That didn't dislodge the creature. One of the claws disappeared and slammed back into the roof, but at a position closer to the cab. The beast began its slow climb toward them again. It reached the windshield and a fist swung down. The glass gave way and shards flew into the cab.

Marie ducked down and threw herself onto the floor of the back

compartment. She whimpered and crawled on her belly toward the rear doors. The beast disappeared from the windshield and in a moment something slammed hard against one of the doors. Claws punctured the other door around the handle and jerked outward, ripping the door off its hinges. The beast tossed the door onto the road and leaned into the open doorway.

Marie screamed and righted herself so she sat on her butt. She scrambled backwards, using her legs to kick off the floor. The creature leaned in and grabbed one of her ankles.

"No! Please no!" she screeched as the thing dragged her toward the open doorway. She clawed at every chair and table leg, but her fingers slipped.

The driver looked over his shoulder in time to see her dragged out of the back and hung upside down beside the beast. The creature leapt up and both disappeared onto the roof. Marie's cries could still be heard.

"Let me go! Please-ahh!"

Something dropped onto the hood of the car in front of the driver. It was the disembodied head of Marie, and her wide, lifeless eyes stared into his in horror. He braked hard and the head rolled off the hood, but the rest of her slid off the roof and took the place of the head. He pressed himself against the back of his seat as a shadow flew over the front of the car. It landed on the road and the headlights of the vehicle shone brightly on its furry body.

The man's mouth dropped open. The creature was a werewolf. There was no denying those padded feet and sinewy form. The werewolf growled at him and raced off into the darkness that engulfed the park. The cameraman's eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped down in his seat into unconsciousness.

THE LIGHT of the morning sun crept into the grand room, adorned with furniture in the style of Louis the Fourteenth. Known as the Sun King, the decor mimicked that golden radiance with heavy black curtains trimmed with gold lace. The wood floor was covered in expensive rugs with scenes of hunting in the bright streams of light that speckled the thick woods. The thick metal handles on the wooden armoire and heavy dresser were speckled with gold. The

bed was a four-post behemoth with silken covers in the same golden hue.

Those same covers were tossed asunder and wrapped around the legs of the man who was draped across the bed. The remains of his clothes still clung to him, covering enough to have some decency but not enough to leave much to the imagination. The steady movement of his chest denoted a deep sleep, though the wrinkle of his brow showed the sleep was not without its problems.

A pair of heavy wood doors with equally heavy handles guarded the entrance to the room like silent sentinels. Those proved worthless as they burst open and Al marched into the room. In one hand was a pair of thick newspapers. He strode over to the foot of the bed and tossed them onto the slumbering figure. The papers slapped Paul in the face, rousing him from his sleep.

Paul's bleary eyes opened and focused on Al. "What's wrong now?"

"What the hell is this about?" Al questioned him.

Paul sat up and glared at the intruder. "What are you talking about?"

Al stabbed a finger at the newspapers. "That."

Paul grasped each newspaper in one hand and glanced between them. One was the front cover, and had a headline that screamed Reporter Murdered! in big, bold print. The other was from a page deeper in a rival newspaper, and in small font size read Apartment Building Condemned After Fire Escape Collapses.

Paul looked up at Al who's shadow fell over him. "What about them?"

Al nodded at the paper that mentioned the building. "Some of the witnesses to that collapse mention seeing a large animal racing from the scene. You wouldn't happen to have been that animal, would you?"

"And if I was?" Paul challenged him.

Al leaned over and placed a hand on the covers so he could tap the bolded headline. "Then I want an explanation for this."

Paul read the first few paragraph of the article.

A GRISLY SCENE took place last night when a local media report, Miss Marie Bolles, was viciously murdered. The only witness to the event, her cameraman, swears the murderer is the furry beast that is rumored to be prowling the streets

of the city. Police have yet to identify the creature, but the Chief of Police, on questioning, has stated that a task force will be created to look more thoroughly into those reports.

PAUL LOOKED up at Al and held up the paper with the murder headline. "You think I did this?"

"Did you?" Al questioned him.

Paul tossed the papers onto the bed and swung his legs over the side. "No."

"What about the other headline?" Al asked him. The reply was for Paul to stand, forcing him backward as Paul walked over to the dresser. "I'm going to take that as a 'yes,' but what brought on this sudden interest in being a good Samaritan?"

Paul opened a drawer and drew out a set of baggy clothes that he draped over the top of the dresser. "You know the answer. The paper mentions her name."

Al crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah. It was the girl you picked out last night, but what were you doing at her place?"

Paul paused and set a hand on the open drawer. "I don't know."

Al snorted. "You don't know? The great and confident Mr. Paul Lupe doesn't know why-" Paul slammed his fist against the top of the drawer.

The wood shattered beneath his hand and fell as splintered pieces on the floor. The few intact walls clattered atop them and was joined by the clothes left in the drawer. Paul set both hands on the top of the dresser and bowed his head. He stood hunched over his destruction and his body quivered with tension.

Al's face fell and he took a step toward him. "Listen, Paul, I'm sorry. I-"

"Quiet," Paul snapped.

Al winced as he felt a familiar jolt of pain from his arm. The tense silence between them lasted until Paul sighed. His hands slipped off the dresser and hung at his sides as he straightened.

Paul continued to stare at the wall as he spoke. "I know why you want to know why I was there, and your concern for her is admirable, but misplaced." He turned his head to one side so Al could see one of his yellow eyes. "She

means nothing to me. I merely was curious to see what sort of woman would be on my arm during the course of your plan."

Al pursed his lips, but nodded. "All right, Paul. I won't ask any more questions about the girl." Paul returned his attention to the clothes atop the dresser. Al recognized them as clothes Paul normally wore in public when he didn't want to be noticed. "So where are you going?"

Paul didn't turn around as he drew off the remains of his clothing. "To the scene of the murder."

"So you can look over your handiwork?" Al quipped. Paul paused in his dressing and half-turned to glare at Al. Al held up his hands in front of him. "Okay, you didn't do it, but how's it going to help you being spotted at the scene of a murder?"

"I've done this before," Paul reminded him as he drew on the last bit of clothing.

He fully turned to Al and revealed his 'baggy' persona. The clothes were four sizes too large, but stuffing sewn into the interior lining gave the impression that his limbs were fat enough to fit into that size.

"This is a bad idea," Al insisted.

"Do you have a better one?" Paul countered as he donned a couple of fake sideburns and bushy eyebrows. One of them was askew.

Al sighed, but walked over and corrected the mishap. "No, but I still think this is a bad idea."

"Duly noted. Now let's go."

Origa drove them to within a block of the location of the reporter's murder. The men got out and walked the rest of the way. The area was cordoned off by police tape and barriers, and a crowd amassed around the perimeter to peer curiously at the scene. The white van with its tell-tale hood was gone, but the city crews were still trying to hose the red blood stains off the rough pavement.

Al noticed Paul lift his nose to the air and sniff. "Catch anything?" Al whispered.

Paul narrowed his eyes. "Yes."

"Your perfume?"

"That joke is becoming very old, Al."

Al shrugged. "Just thought I'd ask one last time. Anyway, what'd you catch?"

Paul lowered his chin and his eyes flickered over the crowd. "A European."

"She better be pretty," Al quipped.

"You know what I mean."

Al sighed. "Yeah, I know what you mean, but any clue where they went?"

Paul walked around the edge of the crowd and over to the park. He followed the trail with his nose, but his eyes scanned the ground. They walked down a gentle slope that guided them toward the depressed center of the park.

"So are we dealing with a naughty boy or girl?" Al asked him.

Paul kept his eyes to the ground as he shook his head. "I can't tell. They're wearing a heavy perfume."

Al rolled his eyes. "Boys these days are such pussies."

They walked through a thick nest of trees to the center of the park. Paul knelt on the ground and brushed his hand over the grass. His eyes followed the movement of his fingers. "They changed here."

Al swept his gaze over the area around them. "Great. Now all we need to do is find out if anyone saw a stalker."

Paul's hand paused over an area of crushed grass. "They may have had an extra set of clothes."

Al whipped his head back to Paul and all humor fled his face as he arched an eyebrow. "So you're saying this was premeditated?"

"It may very well have been," Paul mused as he stood. He raised his nose to the air and frowned. "There's been too much foot traffic since last night. I can't follow their human scent."

Al drew a cigarette from a pack and lit it up. "So now what?"

"We wait for them to strike again," Paul suggested as he walked back the way they came.

Al choked on his cigarette, and the burned butt dropped to the grass. He scooped it up and hurried after Paul. "Are you serious?"

"Quite."

Al slipped in front of him and faced his protege. "You can't seriously think

we need to wait for another murder."

"Do you have a better suggestion?" Paul asked him.

Al frowned. "I'm getting really tired of you being the only one with a suggestion."

Paul pushed past him. "Then inform me when you have another."

Al ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "You're a great client, Paul. Here I am trying to revive your career and you want to play detective." His eyes widened. "That girl! Shit!" He fumbled in his pocket and drew out his phone. A quick check told him there were no missed calls. His face fell. "Great. No call from her or a director."

The door to Mr. Baxter's spare bedroom burst open and the baker himself strode in. He wore an apron over his stomach and a smile on his face as he spread his arms out in a jovial offer of a hug. "Good morning, my ladies! Good morning to-" He paused and arched an eyebrow.

His spare bedroom was a spartan affair with a simple queen-sized mattress with white sheets and two pillows. A dresser stood against the wall opposite the door and to the left of the window. His guests were both draped over the bed. Lilly was at the proper angle on the bedside nearest the door with a pillow tucked under her head. Her arms wrapped around the squishy object as though her life depended on keeping it safe. Una was perpendicular to both her friend and the bed so that her legs traveled under those of her friend and stuck out toward the door. Her bare feet presented themselves to Baxter for mischief.

The older gentleman had some rather ungentleman-like thoughts as he lowered his arms and crept over to the bed. He stretched his arm down and his fingers brushed against the smooth bottom surface of Una's foot. A goofy grin slipped onto her face and a little giggle escaped her lips. Baxter tried again, this time with more touch.

His mischief caused a chain-reaction of chaos. Una squirmed and kicked her legs. That lifted Lilly from her spot and sent her tumbling over the side of the bed. Baxter tried to back up, but he was knocked over like a bowling pin by his guest. They crashed to the floor, a rude awakening that made Lilly yelp and

struggle atop him.

"Elizabeth!" Baxter scolded her as he tried to slide out from beneath her. "Eliz-ooph!" She had kicked him in the stomach with her flailing foot.

Lilly paused and turned over onto her rear. The color drained from her face when she noticed the pained look on Baxter's. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Baxter!" she apologized as she slipped off him and scurried on her knees to his side. "Are you okay?"

He sheepishly grinned at her and spoke with a wheezing accent. "It's something I deserved."

Una leaned over the bed and looked down on the pair. She rubbed the sleep from one eye. "What's going on? What time is it?"

"Four in the morning," Baxter announced as Lilly helped him to his feet.

Una's mouth dropped open and she drooped her body across the foot of the bed. "Four? Is it even legal to be up this early?"

"It's not only legal, but required for a bakery," Lilly laughed as she looked over her boss. "You're sure you're all right?"

He nodded. "Nothing a little scent of fresh donuts won't fix."

Una perked up. "Donuts?"

He wagged his finger at her. "Only for those who rise at four."

Una leapt off the bed and stood as straight as a soldier at attention. The state of her clothing-mussed with wrinkles like an aged witch made the look comical. "I'm ready for my donuts, sir!"

Baxter chuckled before he jerked his head over his shoulder at the door. "Then come and feast." Una eagerly followed him out the door.

Lilly rolled her eyes, but the corners of her mouth twitched up. She grabbed her coat and made to follow, but something white slipped out and floated to the floor. Lilly stooped and plucked the paper from the carpet. It was the card given to her by that brusque agent of the star.

"Paul Lupe," she whispered.

Her mind recalled those bright eyes hidden in the back of the limo. List had said Lupe wanted to take her out on a date. Lilly brushed her thumb over the embossed words that spelled out that name. Her heart beat quickened as she felt

herself drawn to those eyes. There was just something about them that-

"Lilly! You coming?" Una shouted.

Lilly started from her reverie and quickly tucked the card into her pants pocket. "I'm coming!" she returned as she hurried from the room.

She met her friends downstairs in the kitchen. Una stood before a large wood block with a rolling pin in her hand and an apron covering the front. Before her was a wad of dough. She looked from the pin to the dough.

"This is so mean. . ." she muttered.

Lilly set a hand on her friend's shoulder and grinned at her. "Didn't you know there's some assembly required?" she teased.

Una wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, but I didn't know I was the one to have to do it."

"Ladies, we must get to work," Baxter called as he tossed Lilly an apron.

Lilly smiled and gave a nod as she drew on the apron. "Right, Mr. Baxter." She settled in front of another board beside her friend, and together they started the day's work.

Una leaned toward her and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Speaking of dough, have you thought about what that creepy agent guy asked you last night?"

Lilly tried not to look at her coat that hung on its hook by the kitchen door and its tell-tale pocket. "A little."

"And that little means what?" Una persisted.

Lilly nodded at Una's board. "It means you're working that dough a little too thin."

Una rolled her eyes and returned the dough to a wadded state. She slipped her cell phone out of her pocket and set the machine beside the board as she reworked the dough. The screen showed headlines with truncated summaries.

Una stretched her neck and scanned the headlines. Her eyes widened. "Oh my god!"

"There is only one god in this kitchen, and he demands you keep at work!" Baxter barked from the ovens.

Una straightened like a twanged pole and looked ahead with unblinking eyes.

Lilly nudged her arm against that of her friend. "What's wrong?"

Una swallowed hard and kept her voice to a whisper. "You know that lady who was trying to interview you last night?" Lilly nodded. "Well, she's part of the headlines now."

"You mean with my interview? Lilly guessed.

Una shook her head as she began to roll out her dough again. "No, I mean she's the headline. Somebody killed her last night."

Lilly's jaw hit the floor. "What? Why?"

Una shrugged as she focused on her dough. "Don't know, but according to the Persistent Pippin she was murdered by some sort of animal." She paused and her eyes flickered up to Lilly. "Some werewolf type thing, and it wasn't pretty."

The color drained from Lilly's face. "A-are they sure?"

"Oh yeah. The cameraman got to see everything. He'll be on a cushy couch for a lot of sessions."

Lilly stared ahead as memories of last night flashed through her mind. The shadow shifting in the lot, the fire escape giving way, those strong arms as they wrapped around her, and the feel of the wind as they leapt away from the inevitable crash.

And then there were those beautiful yellow eyes. A slight blush came to her cheeks as she thought about those wonderfully deep depths staring at her with curiosity and a hint of something deeper. Something more feral and binding. Something that stirred within her a deep emotion of longing.

"Is the dough done?" Baxter spoke up, shoving Lilly from her daydreaming.

"A-almost, Mr. Baxter!" she yelped as Una and she furiously pinned away at the dough.

Still, her thoughts lingered on those yellow eyes. The eyes of a murderer? She had a hard time believing that. No, it wasn't quite that.

A voice inside her told her she couldn't believe it.

AL PACED the floor of the living room with his hand clasped behind his back. Beside him on the coffee table was his cell phone. The screen showed no missed

calls.

It was the evening after the fated meeting with Lilly and Una, and there was still no call. The hours ticked by and the clocks showed it was fifteen minutes after five.

Close to the table was a couch, and on the couch was seated Paul. He watched his agent's agitation with his own growing annoyance. "Sit down."

Al stopped and glared at him. "Sit down? You want me to sit down when our-your career is hanging in the balance?"

Paul's eyes narrowed. "Yes."

Al frowned, but grabbed his phone and plopped himself into his usual chair. "I suppose it might be a good thing if she doesn't come."

Paul arched an eyebrow. "Why?"

Al's eyes flickered up to his employer. "You damn well know why, but in case it's slipped your mind there's that trouble with a reporter's murder."

"It wasn't me," Paul insisted.

Al snorted and ran a hand through his hair. "Even if it wasn't you and another werewolf happened to be wandering through the city and wanted a personal interview with a reporter, it still means we've got a big mess to deal with, and throwing a strange woman into it won't help things."

"This was your idea," Paul reminded him.

Al dropped his hand to his lap and frowned at Paul. "That was before someone decided to make a reporter headline news."

"Are there any further developments in the case?" Paul asked him.

Al shrugged. "Except for the cameraman, nobody saw anything and nobody knows anything. The police tried to use their own dogs, but all they did was whimper and run back into their police cars." His phone vibrated. Al whipped his head down, but his tense face fell. "Damn it. Just another stupid app update."

"If she does call are you prepared with a contract ready for her to sign for this job?" Paul wondered.

Al raised his eyes to Paul and blinked at him. "What for?"

"In case she sues us for hurting her feelings," Paul quipped.

The manager rolled his eyes. "Come on. Even I know not everybody's like

that."

Paul tightened his grip on the arms of the chair. "We're not talking about everybody, we're talking about this girl, and if she's going to get any other ideas about this job then you'd better draw up a contract."

Al raised his hands in front of him. "All right, I get ya. Sheesh." He jumped to his feet and studied his employer. "You know what your problem is?"

"I don't pay you to assess my psychology," Paul retorted.

"Well, you're gonna hear it, anyway," Al returned. "Your problem is that you just can't trust anybody."

Paul's eyes narrowed and his lips pursed tightly together. "And you know the fuck why," he snapped.

Al rolled his eyes and shrugged. "Fine, don't listen to me. What do I know? I've just been your manager for thirty years when you happened to find me at my office and took a bite out of-"

Paul's lips curled back in a snarl and a deep growl reverberated from his throat. "That's enough. You wanted a plain girl and I found one for you. The rest is your problem, and I expect you to deal with it."

Al sighed. "All right, I'll deal with her, but don't go expecting more of those miracles."

Paul leaned back and pinched the bridge of his nose. "It'd be a miracle if she called you back."

"Well, prepare for another miracle because I think she was smitten with you," Al commented.

Paul froze. His pursed his lips and his narrowed eyes flickered to Al. "What makes you say that?"

Al shrugged. "I don't know. Just the way she was getting googly eyes looking at you over my shoulder."

"All the more important that you should draw up a contract," Paul insisted. "You can set out the terms that you told her for this acting job." Al cringed. Paul noticed. "What's wrong?"

Al cleared his throat. "I guess that's one way to call this date."

Paul arched an eyebrow as he examined his manager. "How did you phrase

this proposal to the girl?"

Al shrugged. "Oh, just the usual. Anyway, about that contract, how about we wait for the-" He jumped at the ring of his phone. He fumbled for the device for a few seconds before he caught it in one hand and looked at the screen. It was an unfamiliar number, but he answered it. "This is List."

"Mr. List?" The voice was soft and female.

"Yeah?"

"This is Elizabeth Edmonds. We met last night on the street."

Al's eyes flickered to Paul who continued to study him with narrowed eyes. "Oh yeah, how have you been?"

"I'm fine. I was thinking about what you said, and I decided to accept Mr. Lupe's offer of a date."

Al cringed. "That's great to hear, Miss Edmonds. Mr. Lupe can't wait to meet you."

Paul frowned. "The contract."

Al glared at him and waved his hand. "That's fine, Mr. Lupe will pay for any expenses. He'd like for you to come over to his house this evening so I can explain a few things, and then we can get this ball rolling. Great. We can have the car pick you up. What's the address?" Al scribbled the address on a napkin in front of him. "Got it. See you soon." He hung up and grinned at Paul. "Looks like I got you that date. She's waiting for the car right now."

Paul pursed his lips and turned his face away. "Bring her here, but deal with her yourself."

Al rolled his eyes. "You're already brushing her off? You haven't even met her except for that look last night." Paul's face hardened. Al sighed and nodded. "Right, I forgot about the incident-which-shall-not-be-mentioned. Fine, I'll deal with her when she comes."

Lilly waited outside the bakery with her hands tucked into her coat pockets. Una stood at her side and looked up and down the dark street. "Where is this guy driving from? Albuquerque? We've been waiting here for fifteen minutes."

Lilly drew out the card from her pocket and looked over the address on the bottom. "Maybe it's this address."

Una shook her head. "Nope. I looked that up last night before you decided to fall for the fire escape. It's just an office in the city."

Lilly's heart fell and she tucked the card away. "Damn. . ."

Una leaned forward and studied her friend's pale face. There was a slight tremble over her body. Una set a hand on her friend's shoulder. "You want me to come with you?"

Lilly managed a shaky smile. "No. If I don't make it back you can pay next month's rent."

"To hell with the rent. I'm going with you."

Lilly shook the shiver off herself and shook her head. "I'm all right, really. Besides, I get the feeling you wouldn't be welcomed there."

Her friend frowned. "Why not?"

"Because Mr. List doesn't like you."

Una snorted. "I can live with that, and if he can't then he can jump off a bridge."

Lilly checked the last call she made on her phone. It'd been twenty minutes since she made that call to List. She pursed her lips. "It has been a long time, hasn't it?"

Una wrapped her arms around herself as a chill wind blew over them. "It feels like a long, cold eternity."

The door behind them jingled and Mr. Baxter stuck his head out. "Would you ladies like to wait in the shop?"

Lilly half-turned and smiled at him. "It's okay, Mr. Baxter. I'd rather not miss the car when it comes."

Una pointed down the road. "Don't look now, but I think it's coming."

Lilly followed her friend's finger and watched a long limo round a corner. The vehicle parked on the curb in front of them and the driver stepped out. He was a burly man with dark features and eyes. His attire was classic chauffeur with a heavy suit that buttoned down the front, a short black hair, and heels that clicked on the road as he walked around the front of the car and over to them.

His eyes flickered between the pair. Those same eyes didn't blink. "Miss Lilly?"

Lilly gave him a shaky smile and reluctantly raised her hand. "That's me."

The man bowed low at the waist to her. "My name is Origa. I was told to bring you to Mr. List." He opened the back door that he had strategically stopped in front of the pair. The interior was as dark as a tomb but for a few faint outlines of the seats. "If you would step inside."

Lilly swallowed the lump in her throat and took a step forward. Una grabbed her arm and tugged her back. "Don't you dare get in there! That guy gives me the creeps!"

Lilly patted her friend's hand before she pried them off of her. "I'll be fine."

Una snorted. "As fine as one of those victims in a horror movie." She grabbed her friend's upper arms and turned Lilly around so they faced each other. "Oh, Lilly, don't go! He's going to murder you!"

"Let her go." The voice was that of Mr. Baxter. The pair looked back at the bakery to find that the baker stood outside in the little nook before the door. He had his arms crossed over his wide chest and his expression was serious as his

gaze fell on Una. "She'll be fine."

Una shook her head. "But-"

"He's right," Lilly spoke up as she again pried herself from her friend's caring grasp. She stepped back and closer to the open car door. "I'll be fine. I promise."

"I'm going to wait up to make sure you keep that promise," Una swore.

Lilly slipped one foot in the rear and smiled at her. "I'm counting on it. Later."

Lilly disappeared into the darkness of the car. Origa shut the door, bowed his head to the pair, and walked around to the driver's door where he slipped inside. The limo pulled away. Una stepped up to the curb and watched the car until it disappeared. She hung her head and her arms dropped to her sides.

Baxter came up and set a heavy hand on her shoulder. His gaze, too, lay on where the car had gone, but there was a smile on her lips. "I think this will be good for her. Now come. I have some donuts left over that need to be eaten."

The car took Lilly away from her friends and through the loud, bright city lights. Lilly couldn't tell any of that from the interior. The walls were made from heavy steel that silenced the noise. The heavily-tinted windows were all closed, including the one between the driver and where she sat. She pressed the window button on the door beside her and was relieved when the window rolled down.

The world welcomed her back with a loud blare of a nearby car horn. She fell back against the seat and watched the lights flash by in a dim haze of colors. The limo drove through the madness of the metropolis and left the street scenes behind for the thickly-wooded countryside north of the city. Trees soaked in shadow became the primary view as they traveled along a curvy country road.

The houses became few and far between, but what ones there were represented the pinnacle of the elite. Grand mansions rose above the tree tops and scowled down at the lowly young woman who gawked at their beauty. Tall fences with thick bars blocked unwanted visitors and their prying eyes from the perimeters of lush yards and bubbling fountains.

They traveled down that road for several miles before Lilly felt the car slow down. She leaned her head out the window and looked ahead of the vehicle. The limo turned onto a rough dirt road full of rocks and pot holes that put some of

those in the city to shame. They bumped their way down the road for another few miles before the way flattened and the car slowed to a stop.

Before them stood an imposing stone wall some eight feet tall with black metal spikes on short rods sticking up at close intervals like constant sentries. An imperious wrought-iron gate hung between two tall towers. Lilly looked up and down the wall. The gate was the only entrance for the fifty yards she could see on either side of the road.

The home itself stood some hundred yards from the gate and loomed above the property like a lord over his manor. The design was a mix of Tudor and castle with stone walls intermingled with heavy wood beams. Paned windows with heavy curtains looked out on the property like half-lidded eyes. A single tower with a coned top on the left punctuated the sky with its sharp lightning rod.

A straight gravel driveway led from the gate to a round turnaround in front of the stately home. A small detour of the gravel on the right of the house led to a four-car garage. Trees dotted the expansive lawn on either side of the gravel and stood close enough to one another that their branches intermingled like caressing lovers.

The gates parted and they drove up the gentle incline to the front where the driver parked the car. He stepped out and walked around to open her door. Lilly clutched at her coat-her only source of comfort as much as to stop her hands from shaking-and slipped out. The gravel crunched beneath her feet as she took a few reluctant steps toward the front door.

The slam of the car door made her jump and spin around. Origa bowed his head. "My apologies, miss. I didn't mean to scare you."

She gave him a shaky smile. "It's fine. I'm just a little nervous."

"Would you prefer I kept the limo here until you return?" he suggested.

She nodded. "That would be great, thanks."

Lilly returned her attention to the two imposing wood doors that acted as guardians to the house. She stepped off the gravel and onto a concrete walkway that guided her up three steps to the entrance. Two Marley knockers in the shape of wolf's heads greeted her. She cringed, but reached for one of them.

The door opened. Lilly started back with a gasp. The light from a grand hall spilled over her. She blinked against the sudden brilliance, and when she could see again she found herself staring up at the smiling face of Al List.

"Good evening, Lilly," he greeted her as he stepped to one side. "Won't you come in?"

Lilly stepped inside. Her pulse quickened when he shut the door behind her, but her surroundings were a welcome and beautiful distraction. The entrance hall itself was a large room that stretched up to the second floor ceiling. A curved staircase led from the left-hand wall up to the right. A small balcony on the second floor overlooked the steps and also made up the hallway of that same floor. On both sides of the hall were a pair of wood doors, the right side of which were open to reveal a large, wood-paneled room. A hallway under the stairs and following the right-hand wall deeper into the house finished the architecture.

The house was furnished with a variety of curios. Tapestries covered the white walls, and if they didn't large paintings took their place. Little alcoves partially hid white marble statues and short tables beneath the hangings glistened with countless centuries of careful polishing. With all the variety of items, however, Lilly noticed a common theme. The paintings and tapestries showed hunting scenes, and the statues were of man struggling with beasts. The short tables all had clawed feet and the intricate artwork along their walls showed more hunting scenes.

Al gestured to the pair of open doors on their right. "Let's talk in here. It's the coziest room in the house."

Al led her into the large room that turned out to be a drawing room with a ceiling that stretched into the second floor. The area stretched leftward for seventy feet, making the room look more like a ballroom than a sitting room. A huge fireplace with a hearth large enough to roast an ox stood opposite the doors. The walls were covered in dark wood paneling, but the darkness was offset by two large paned windows on either side of the fire that stretched from the floor to ten feet above the ground. Expensive Turkish rugs covered the cold floor and more tapestries filled with the usual hunting scenes covered the dark wood paneling. At the back of the room to their left was a billiard table with a rack that

held the sticks.

In front of the fire was a matching set of furniture composed a long leather couch and two leather chairs. In their company was a low, long coffee table with an intricate scene of hunting on the top surface. End tables along either side of the couch and beside the chairs held large lamps with wide covers. Only one of them was on and cast its dim light over the area. The only other source of light came from the crackling fire in the hearth.

Al led her over to the sitting furniture and gestured to the table. "I have something here for you to look at."

She stopped between the couch and the table and squinted at the top. There was nothing but a black pen. "The pen?"

Al frowned and whipped his head to where she looked. "What the-" He knelt in front of the table and pressed his hands against the top. "Where the heck did it go?"

"Where did what go?" Lilly asked him.

"It was just here. . ." he muttered to himself as he dipped his head under the table. A cursory examination brought him disappointment. He lifted his head and stood. "I'll be right back. Just make yourself comfortable." He left the room still grumbling to himself. "Must be in my room. . ."

Lilly clutched her coat closer to herself as she studied the room. The only sound was the crackle and pop of the fire. The rest was silence. A dark, terrible silence.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Lilly's pulse quickened as the feeling of being watched draped over her like a heavy, stifling cloth. Her breath caught in her throat when she felt a pair of eyes looking at her from behind where she stood.

Lilly slowly turned around. Her eyes fell on a shadow in the darkest corner of the room. She gasped as a pair of bright eyes stared back at her.

The figure stepped out of the shadows and into the weak light of the glowing fire. Lilly had seen enough movies to recognize the chiseled face of Paul Lupe. The man was dressed in a casual black turtleneck with black pants and matching shoes. His dark hair was combed back and accented his pale features.

One thing she couldn't understand were his eyes. They were dark now, but she swore they had been bright only a moment ago.

"Good evening," he greeted her in his deep voice.

She smiled and bowed her head a little. "Good evening."

Lupe walked the length of the billiard table and stopped at the corner nearest her. He set the fingertips of one hand on the surface and studied her. "You are Lilly?"

A nervous twitter escaped her lips. "Yes, but Lilly's just a nickname. My real name is Elizabeth Edmonds."

"Lilly suits you better," he mused. A slight blush accented her cheeks. "But how did you come by that name?"

Lilly shrugged. "My dad used to call me Liz, but one time we were visiting a pond and I liked the lily pads so much that he started calling me that."

"I see," he commented as he walked closer to her. She was struck by his graceful movements. It was like watching a giant cat stroll through its cage. He stopped at the back of the couch and gestured to the scenery around them. "How

do you like my house?"

Lilly followed his hand and smiled at the decor. "I like it very much."

"The scenes don't bother you?" he persisted.

She returned her attention to him and tilted her head to one side. "No. Should they?"

He strolled the length of the back of the couch away from her, his gaze set on the painting above the mantel. It showed a deer lying on the ground on its side. An arrow protruded from its upraised side, and from the wound poured blood onto the green grass beneath it. A man in hunting garb stood over it with his arm raised up. A knife was clasped in his hand. "They aren't for the faint of heart."

She snorted. "They're just pictures."

Lupe paused at the opposite end of the couch. His back was to her and his eyes fell on the fire. "Just pictures. . ." he whispered. A bitter chuckle escaped his lips. "Pictures of a soul fraught with constant struggle."

Lilly felt rather than heard the pain in his voice. She took a step toward him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

He shook his head before he turned to face her. The light from the fire cast a shadow over his features that the table lamp close to Lilly couldn't vanquish. "I'm sorry. I'm sure you must think me strange, spouting such words after I invited you to come to my home."

She smiled and shrugged. "If you can't be yourself at your own home, where can you be?" Lupe studied her for a long moment with such an intense gaze that she couldn't stop the blush from reappearing on her cheeks. It both flattered and annoyed her. Lilly thought of her friend's forward personality and gathered her courage. "Do I really look that weird?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "No. On the contrary, you look quite beautiful."

Lilly bowed her head to hide her glowing cheeks, but she couldn't hide her hands as they fidgeted together in front of her. "Thank you. Nobody's ever called me that."

Lupe stepped up to her so there were hardly a few inches between them. He lowered his voice to a ghost of a whisper. "The world is full of foolish people who don't know what beauty is." Lupe grasped her chin and lifted her eyes to

his. She was captured by the deep depths of his intense gaze. "Never let anyone tell you you're ugly. Never."

Al made his reappearance at the door with a paper in his hand. "I found the-" He froze on the threshold and glanced between the pair. Paul lifted his gaze to him and there was a tinge of angered yellow in their dark depths. "I should leave now, shouldn't I?"

"No."

"Yes."

The first reply was from Lilly, and the second from Lupe. Al arched an eyebrow. "You guys aren't making this easier on me."

Lilly stepped away from Lupe and cleared her throat. "I mean, it's all right if you come in."

"There's no need for you to be here," Paul assured him.

Al's eyes flickered to Lilly. Her hands still fidgeted with the buttons of her coat. "Maybe I could just take a seat and-"

"We're fine," Paul insisted.

That tone. Al knew what that tone meant, and he also knew who signed his paycheck. He reluctantly saluted the pair. "Then I guess I'll see you later."

"Very much later," Paul told him.

Al paused in his leaving and spun around. "What are you talking about?"

"I had promised Miss Edmonds a date," Paul reminded him.

Lilly whipped her head up and her jaw dropped to the floor. "A date? Tonight?"

Al blinked at him. "Yeah, but that was supposed to be-"

"That date will be tonight," Paul repeated, but with more force behind his words.

Al shrugged. "All right, it's tonight, but I think you two need a chaperon. I have some experience in that line of work-"

"We'll see you later," Paul told him as he offered his arm to Lilly. "Are you ready to leave?"

"I-I guess," she stuttered as she reluctantly took his arm.

Paul guided her past Al and out the door to the waiting car. Al followed the

pair to the open front door and watched the vehicle leave. A deep frown graced his lips as the limo disappeared into the distance. "What the hell are you doing, Paul?"

In the car, Lilly was thinking much the same about herself. What am I doing? Here I am going with a stranger out to dinner! Una would kill me if she found out!

"You're not comfortable with my idea," Lupe spoke up.

Lilly started from her thoughts and cringed. "I guess not."

"Why not?"

She snorted and looked up at him with a playful smile running across her lips. "Because I don't really know anything about you, Mr. Lupe."

"I would rather you call me Paul," he requested.

"Whether your name is Paul or Peter, the only things I know about you are that you're a movie star and you're not married," she confessed.

He arched an eyebrow and the corners of his lips twitched upward. "You know I'm not married?"

Lilly turned her face away from him and to the tinted window. The car drove off the gravel and onto the rough surface of the dirty road. The bouncy road forced her to grab hold of the car door on her right.

She looked down at the many buttons on the door and shrugged. "Everybody knows that. You're one of the most eligible bachelors in the city. All the magazines say so."

"Then you follow my career?" he mused in a teasing tone.

Lilly tilted her head back and frowned at him as she crossed her arms over her chest. "You want me to admit I think you're cute, don't you?"

"Flattery doesn't get one very far in my esteem," he admitted.

"Good, because I don't."

He started back and blinked at her. "You don't?"

Lilly closed her eyes and shook her head. "Nope."

"Then what do you think of me?"

She opened her eyes and had a hard time suppressing a wide smile. "I think you're handsome, and a bit of a tease for dragging me out to your house just to

show everything off."

Paul leaned back against the seat and chuckled. "To be honest with you, I had meant to only see you and have Al take you home, but when I saw you I couldn't resist speaking with you."

Lilly took a deep breath to calm her giddy nerves before she returned her attention to him. "You really know how to make a girl feel special, don't you? I mean, inviting me to your wonderful house and then a date. You really don't have to go to all this trouble on my account."

"If I minded, then-as Al will eagerly tell you-I wouldn't go to the trouble," he assured her.

"I think Mr. List means well," she defended the manager.

Paul crossed one leg over the other and set his hands in his lap as he scoffed. "Perhaps he does, but he has a bad habit of misreading me."

Lilly leaned forward to catch his gaze. "And what bad habits do you have?"

Paul arched an eyebrow. "Why do you wish to know?"

She laughed. "I'm just trying to get to know you better, and I'm going to guess with that question that you don't trust many people."

Paul pursed his lips and gave a curt nod. "Yes. My. . .my life doesn't allow for close confidants."

"Because you're a movie star?" she guessed.

"Among other things," he admitted.

"And those are?"

"I would rather not say."

Lilly fell back against the seat and turned her attention to the window as she sighed. "Well, it was worth a shot, Lilly."

"What was?" he inquired.

She shook her head. "You may as well let me off at the nearest bus stop."

"Not until you answer my question," he insisted.

Lilly stared at the her open hands that lay in her lap as a bitter smile slipped onto her lips. "I guess I just thought I could get to know you a little better than-well, than you're willing to let me."

He sat up straight and arched an eyebrow as he studied the young woman at

his side. "Why do you want to know about me?"

Lilly bit her lower lip and a sheepish smile replaced the bitter one. "This is kind of embarrassing, but-"

The screeching of brakes and the sudden stop of the limo interrupted their conversation. Lilly, unbuckled as she was, would have been thrown forward if Paul hadn't caught her and drew her against his chest. The intimacy of his arms around her made her cheeks warm.

Though not as warm as Paul's blood that boiled in his veins. He slammed his fist on the door console to his left. An illuminated light indicated he'd switched on an intercom between the front and rear of the car. "What the hell is going on?"

"A large dog ran out in front of me, sir," Origa told him.

Paul's eyebrows crashed down. "What kind of dog?"

"I could not identify it, but the creature was larger than myself and appeared to be partially of the wolf variety. It also was capable of standing on two legs."

Lilly's heart quickened. That sounded like the creature she'd met last night. "Where did it go?" she asked him as she sat up and drew herself out of Paul's hold, though she found him reluctantly letting her go. She didn't notice the surprised look on Paul's face as she asked her question.

"The creature headed down the driveway of Mr. Hearst," Origa informed her.

Lilly's mouth dropped open. "The owner of the largest newspapers in the city?"

"Follow the creature as far as you can," Paul ordered him.

"Very well, sir." The car moved

Lilly whipped her head up to Paul. "Why do you want to follow it?"

Paul stared straight ahead as his lips tightened. "A life may be in danger."

"**Y**ou mean because of the reporter who was killed last night?" Lilly guessed.

"Yes, and I would rather my neighbors not be so horrifically slaughtered," Paul added.

Lilly cringed as she recalled the details of the grisly murder, but her heart was struck a harsher blow. The sad eyes of the creature that saved her. Those couldn't be the ones of a murderer. "You don't really think a wolf thing is killing these people, do you?"

"I hope we won't find out tonight," Paul told her as the car slowed to a stop.

"We have reached the gates, sir," Origa informed them.

Paul grabbed the handle of the door. "I'm stepping out. Turn the car around and keep the engine running."

Lilly grasped his arm with both hands. "I'm coming with you."

He looked over his shoulder and shook his head. "You should stay here. It could be dangerous."

"That's exactly why I should come, so I can watch your back and you watch mine," she insisted.

Paul slipped out and Lilly scooted across the seat to the door, but he blocked the exit. "Stay here." He slammed the door shut in her face.

Lilly started back, but her frozen self soon turned icy as a cool anger rose up inside her. She wasn't going to let him keep her from seeing that thing. She didn't know why, but she had to see that creature. Lilly hardened her normally meek

demeanor and flung open the door.

She jumped out to confront him, but there was no one there. He had gone, but she couldn't figure out how he'd disappeared so fast. The car sat on a driveway that was open on either side for fifty feet. Forty feet in front of the vehicle a large stone wall towered over the woodlands. An ornate metal gate blocked further access to a stately Victorian mansion that stood atop a gentle incline.

Lilly hurried toward the gate, but she yelped when a hand shot out of the open driver's window and grabbed her wrist. Origa leaned out and his dark eyes captured hers. "It would not be wise of you to leave the safety of the car."

She tugged herself free of his gentle grasp. "I'll be fine. I'm just going to make sure he doesn't get himself killed."

"Mr. Lupe is capable of handling himself," Origa assured her.

She snorted. "Then he's learned a thing or two from his action movies, but I'm still going."

Lilly hurried to the front gate and rattled the gate. An intercom crackled to life. "Who the hell are you?" snapped the scratchy voice of an older gentleman.

Lilly stepped back and swept her eyes over the area. She found the mic and a small camera on the top of the stone post to her left. "I-I'm with Mr. Lupe."

"Lupe? What the devil is he doing here?" the man questioned her.

Lilly frowned. "Didn't he go inside the gate?"

"I haven't seen him, and I don't want to see anyone, so scat! Leave!"

Lilly backed up. "All right. I'm very-" A loud, haunting howl of a wolf rose up from the woods.

"What the devil was that?" the man yelped.

The sound had come from her left, she was sure of it. Lilly dashed along the tall stone wall. The deeper she traveled the more the woods encroached upon the property until low tree branches brushed against her left arm. Another howl cut through the calm night air. This one was closer. Just a few more yards and-

A pair of arms shot out of the brush and wrapped around her. She opened her mouth to scream, but a hand muffled the sound as she was dragged into the woods. Lilly kicked and thrashed, but the hold was impossibly strong. Her

captor dragged her into the brush and hunkered low to the ground. A warm breath wafted over her left ear.

"Quiet," Paul hissed.

Lilly relaxed, but her anger didn't. She started to squirm again when a heavy footfall into a clump of dry leaves caught her attention. A tall shadow fell over their hiding spot. She looked up through a small hole in the branches and her blood ran cold.

A monstrous wolf beast like the one that saved her stood above them, but it wasn't the same. The yellow eyes weren't the same soft yellow, but were a demonic amber. They were cold and hard, and there was no mercy in them. The black pupils stood out against the color and darted around looking for prey.

The creature lifted its nose to the air. Lilly stiffened as the thing slowly turned its face toward them. Paul tightened his hold on her so that she was pressed hard against his chest. The thing leaned down and stretched its neck closer to them. Its lips curled back in a snarl that revealed long, sharp teeth that dripped with drool. Some of that drool fell from its jaw and landed on a branch in front of Lilly's face.

The barking of dogs and a loud, screeching alarm broke the tension. The wolf creature whipped its head up and looked over its shoulder at the wall. Lights illuminated the grounds and shadows of a dozen men fanned out across the expansive yard. Before them were two dozen dogs with noses to the ground. The wolf thing sneered at the security before it slunk off into the night.

Paul removed his hand from Lilly's mouth. She took a deep, shaky breath before she looked over her shoulder at him. Her eyes were wide. "W-what was that?"

His gaze lay on where the creature had gone. "Pure evil." The yipping dogs grew louder as they came closer. He stood and helped Lilly to her feet. "We should go."

Lilly looked down at her trembling legs. "I-I don't think I can move. Hey!" Paul had swung her into his arms and now cradled her against his chest.

"Hold on," he commanded before he turned away from the wall and dove into the trees.

Paul flitted through the brush and low-hanging branches like a ghost. Lilly wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned her cheek against his chest. Her eyes flickered up to his face. His dark eyes were focused on the way ahead of them and his expression was tense, but she couldn't help but admire the determination in his face as they gained more distance from the dogs.

"I'm. . .I'm sorry I didn't listen to you," she spoke up.

His lips tightened as he ducked a low branch. "It would have been better if you had." Lilly cast her eyes down into her lap. He sighed. "But I'm glad you weren't hurt, and. . .and I'm glad you're with me."

She felt a thrill run through her and looked up at him. "You mean that?"

"I don't lie about how I feel," he told her.

A blush accented her cheeks and she snuggled closer to his chest. His arms gripped her tighter in response and she bathed in the warmth his embrace gave her.

After a few moments Paul turned sharply to their left and they soon broke free from the trees. Lilly was surprised to see that he had navigated the thick dark woods and brought them safely to the driveway where the car, turned around and running, awaited them.

Origa stepped out of the car, but a shake of Paul's head gave him the signal to duck back inside. Paul stopped in front of the rear passenger door and gently set Lilly on her feet. He opened the door for her and helped her inside before he slipped in after her. The door was hardly closed when the limo pulled away and down the short driveway to the main road.

Lilly grasped her door handle and whipped her head over her shoulder. "Shouldn't we be warning them about that thing?"

Paul studied her with his dark eyes. "Would you like to explain to them that a wolf creature attempted to breach their security?"

She returned her attention to him. "But there must've been cameras that saw it."

He shook his head. "No. The creature found a weak spot in their defense. No one knows the truth but you and me."

Lilly tightened her grip on the door. "And what's that truth exactly?"

"As I see it?"

"Yeah."

"That what we saw was a werewolf."

The color drained from Lilly's face and her hand shook. "That's. . .that can't be possible," she argued.

"Do you doubt your own eyes?" he countered.

She shook her head. "No, but-I mean, werewolves don't exist. They can't."

He chuckled, but there was no mirth in the sound. "'There are more things in heaven and earth, my dear Lilly, than are dreamt of in our philosophy.'"

A snort escaped her lips that was replaced by a wry smile. "You are an actor. We just saw a werewolf and you're quoting Shakespeare."

He arched an eyebrow, but the corners of his lips twitched upward. "You know the line?"

"I had to read Hamlet in high school," she told him as she sank into her seat. Lilly stared ahead and sighed. "So now what? Do we just not tell anyone?"

"Who would believe us?" he pointed out.

She ran a hand through her hair. "I don't know. I guess even I don't believe it, so I don't see how we'd get the newspapers-" She froze and her eyes widened. "The papers!" she yelped as she sat up and whipped her head to Paul. "That thing! That was what killed that reporter!"

Paul bowed his head. "That's very possible."

"Then maybe somebody will believe us if we tell them!" she insisted.

Paul reached into his pocket and drew out a cell phone that he offered to her. "Do you have enough faith in the news and the police to make that call?"

Lilly reached out for the phone, but her fingers hesitated mere inches from the machine. She bit her lower lip as her eyes flitted up to his that stared at her without blinking. "You don't think they'll believe us, do you?" He shook his head. Lilly dropped her arm onto the seat and bowed her head. "I suppose not. . ."

Paul tucked the cell phone into his coat before he grasped one of Lilly's hand. She looked back up at him. "They may not believe us, but we know the truth."

She pursed her lips. "But we need to do something to warn everybody."

"The news will do our work for us, and everyone will be keeping a sharp eye out for the creature. I suspect that's why Hearst had such a large security force," he mused.

"Do you think it's going to try to get at him again?" she wondered.

He shook his head. "I can't say, but it would be foolish to try."

"I suppose so. . ." Lilly agreed as her gaze fell on his hand that held hers. She brushed her thumb over the rough surface. A few old scars caught her attention. "What are these from?"

She didn't notice him stiffen. He swallowed a lump in his throat as he tamped down a tremble in his hand. "An incident with an animal."

"On set?" she asked him.

"I was vacationing and ventured where I shouldn't have," he admitted as he drew his hand away.

Lilly's heart fell. Still reclusive. She turned forward and fell back against the seat. "I think I've had enough fun for one night."

"You'd like to go home?" Paul guessed.

She tilted her head to face him and meekly smiled. "If you don't mind."

He returned the smile with one of his own and shook his head. "Not at all, though there are two favors I'd like to ask of you."

Lilly's eyebrows rose up as she sat up. "What's that?"

"That you not mention what happened tonight," he requested of her.

She snorted. "I don't think even Una would believe me." She paused and furrowed her brow. "On second thought, she might."

"Then I want you to promise me you won't tell this 'Una,'" he pleaded.

She tilted her head to one side and studied his serious expression. "But why?"

His smile widened. "I wouldn't want her to think I'm too dangerous to be around."

She snorted. "You might be right there, but what does it matter that I can't be around you?"

"It has to do with my other favor."

"And what's that?"

"I would like to invite you on another date," he revealed.

She cringed. "That one won't be as exciting as this one, will it?"

He chuckled. "No. It's just a premiere for a new movie."

Her jaw dropped open. "You mean. . .you mean you're taking me in front of cameras? And reporters?"

"And a great many fans and stalkers," he teasingly added.

She pointed at herself. "Are you sure you want to take me?"

"Who should I take?" he asked her.

She threw up her arms. "Well, anybody else!"

He leaned his back into the corner to face her with his legs crossed one over the other. "You mean past costars and current flames?"

"Or anybody that doesn't look like a dirty rag," she added.

"I would take your dirty look over the false beauty of many women any day," he assured her.

She dropped her arms to her sides and tilted her head to one side to study him. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Perfectly serious."

"And you don't care that I don't own any really nice dresses for this premiere?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. Come as you would any other formal event."

She snorted. "I don't go to formal events."

"Then let this be the exception."

She looked down at herself and blushed. "To be honest, I'm kind of locked out of my apartment so this is all I have."

"I would take you in rags," he persisted.

There was such a deep, sincere plea in his voice that Lilly cast her eyes down to the floor, but nodded. "All right, I'll go."

Paul leaned forward and grasped one of her hands in both of his. She lifted her head, and his eyes caught hers in their bright, intense gaze. "Thank you. Your presence there will make the event tolerable."

A blush accented her cheeks and she drew herself out of his hands. He

reluctantly released her. "I-it's nothing. I'm sure you'll be just as bored with me as anyone else."

He shook his head. "No one else is like you."

That familiar thrill rushed through Lilly's body. She sat face-forward and fidgeted with her hands in her lap. "You're. . .you're too kind."

Lilly didn't see his face fall. He turned his eyes to the dark window and the shadows that lay beyond.

"If only that was so," he whispered in a voice too low for her to hear.

The limo reached the small bakery and Paul stepped out. He offered his hand to Lilly, who took it with a smile and let him help her onto the sidewalk. She glanced up at the small building and noticed the upstairs lights were on. Two shadows slipped out of sight. She smiled and shook her head before she turned to Paul.

"I'm sorry this evening didn't go as planned," she told him.

He shook his head. "The evening was tolerable only because of your presence, but I do look forward to the coming evening."

"Tomorrow at six, right?" she repeated.

"Yes. I'll be here to pick you up at half past five," he promised.

"I'll be waiting. Oh, and-" Lilly leaned forward and pecked a tender kiss on his cheek. She stepped back and laughed at his shocked expression. "Thank you for the interesting evening." She spun on her heels and hurried into the bakery.

Footsteps overhead alerted her to the wakefulness of her friends as they scrambled to their rooms. She climbed the stairs and found all the lights were off. The light from the windows helped her navigate to the room she shared with Una. Her friend was sprawled on the bed with the covers haphazardly thrown across her body. A loud snoring sound escaped her open mouth. Lilly rolled her eyes and tossed her coat onto her friend's face.

Una shot up onto her folded legs and whipped her head left and right. "What? Where? When?"

"Me, here, and now," Lilly quipped as she flicked on the light. "But I think you already knew that."

Una rubbed one of her alert eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. I was just laying here sound asleep--"

"And snoring, which you do do, but not that loud," Lilly countered as she took a seat on the side of the bed.

Una shrugged. "All right, I wasn't asleep, but I almost was. I mean, you guys were gone for a long time."

Lilly glanced at her watch and snorted. "It's only eight."

Her friend rubbed her cheek against Lilly's arm. "Yeah, but when you're worried about your friend that can be a long time. Anyway--" she drew herself up beside Lilly and crossed her legs, "--what happened to you at his house?"

Lilly stared down at her hands that fidgeted in her lap as she shrugged. "Not much. We weren't there for very long. He-um, he wanted to drive me around where he lived."

Una narrowed her eyes and leaned toward her friend close enough that Lilly was forced to lean back. "You're not telling me the truth, are you?"

Lilly tried to put on her best pokerface and came up with a shaky frown. "I told you the truth."

"Then you're not telling me the whole truth, are you?" Una rephrased.

Lilly frowned at her friend. "All right, maybe I'm not."

Una drew her arm over her forehead and leaned back to feign shock. "How could you not trust me?"

"Does my childhood sleep-walking secret ring a bell?" Lilly asked her.

There was a brief knock on the door and Mr. Baxter peeked his head in. "I am sorry to interrupt, but I made sure to lock the front door in case Lilly should try to get out in her sleep."

A tense smile stretched across Una's lips. "Thanks, Mr. Baxter."

He returned her smile with a real one and nodded his head. "My pleasure. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," the pair replied, and he drew back and shut the door.

Lilly returned her attention to her friend and gestured to the door. "That is

Exhibit A for why I can't trust you with secrets."

Una shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about, but I am absolutely shocked that you're already keeping secrets with a guy you only just met." She leaned close and studied Lilly with narrowed eyes. "You're not in love with him, are you?"

Lilly jumped to her feet and paced the foot of the bed. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Una pointed at finger at her feet. "Then why are you pacing the room?"

Lilly jerked to a stop and spun around to face her friend. She put her hands on her hips and frowned down at her. "I'm not pacing the room."

"Then what were you doing?" Una questioned her.

"I was-well, I was-"

"Lilly." Una stood and grasped Lilly's upper arms as she looked her friend in the eyes. Her face was tense and her eyes were searching. "You had sex with him and it was bad, wasn't it?"

Lilly blinked at her for a long moment before she burst out laughing. Una's serious expression broke and soon they were both doubled over with laughter.

Their fun ended with a loud pounding on the door. "Are you two okay?" Mr. Baxter called from the other side.

Lilly tried to gather her wits, but she still had to speak between giggles and gasps for air. "We're fine, Mr. Baxter!"

"Then be fine, but quieter, please," he requested. His footsteps retreated back to his room.

Lilly plopped herself onto the foot of the bed and Una joined her at her side. Both wiped tears from their eyes, and their faces were aglow with good humor.

Una draped her arm across Lilly's shoulder and smiled at her. "You're still not going to tell me what happened, are you?"

Lilly shrank beneath her friend's slightly hurt tone. "I promised I wouldn't."

Her friend shrugged and dropped her arm to her side. "All right. It better be a good trade secret, though-" she scolded Lilly as she drew her phone out from beneath the pillows. She opened the browser app and began to surf the internet. "Oh, and the manager of our apartment called. He said we can go back any

time."

Lilly sighed in relief. "Thank goodness. I don't have to buy another dress."

Una whipped her head up and stared at Lilly with wide eyes. "A dress for what?"

Lilly shrank beneath her friend's accusing tone and sheepishly grinned at her. "For my date tomorrow?"

Una leapt to her feet and spun around to face her. "You're doing what?"

Lilly shrugged. "I'm just going on another date with him."

"Don't you think this is a little soon?" Una questioned her.

"Well, it's a movie premier, so we can't exactly move the date," Lilly admitted.

Una's jaw hit the floor. "You. . .you're going to a premiere with him? Like a big shindig?"

"And what's wrong with that?" Lilly countered.

Una pursed her lips, but plopped herself back on the bed beside Lilly. Her gaze returned to the screen as she both scanned the pages and focused on her friend. "Because I don't like it. It takes you away from poker night."

"We don't have a poker night."

"Well, we do now if it means I get to keep you home away from Mr. Keep-
Secrets-From-Your-Friends-For-Me."

Lilly smiled and patted her friend on the shoulder. "Maybe someday when you're older I'll tell you what happened."

Una's gaze still lay on the screen, and her eyes widened as she paused in her scrolling. Her face hardened as she squinted her eyes at the screen. "Maybe you'd just better tell me what happened right now."

Lilly arched an eyebrow and leaned closer to her friend to study the screen. "Why? What are-" A gasp escaped her lips.

Una's screen showed the home page for the Persistent Pippin website. On the front was the blaring headline that read Werewolf Strikes Again! A brief teaser for the article ran as follows:

WEREWOLVES IN COLMOUTH? You'd better bet your last silver moon dollar! Just ask Mr. Joseph Hearst, the owner of one of the largest newspapers in the city (and a man who won't let me advertise in it). According to my insider info someone tried to take a bite out of more than just his revenue when his security team spotted a large animal running along the wall that surrounds his posh estate. The security dogs gave chase, but on nearing the thing they went bananas and retreated back to their kennels for some much-needed therapy.

Sound familiar? It should. That's what happened to the police dogs last night after someone munched on Miss Maria Bolles. Could the two be connected? Could there really be a werewolf running loose? Is it after only those affiliated with the news industry? Might your favorite blogger be in big trouble? Maybe so, but that won't stop her from searching for the truth!

UNA STUDIED Lilly's gawking face with a deep frown on her lips. "According to the online maps Hearst doesn't live too far from your movie star buddy. You two didn't happen to go past that place on your little drive, did you?"

Lilly looked ahead at the wall and ran a hand through her hair. "I . . . I promised not to tell."

Una held up a hand and shook her head. "There's no need. Your face tells me everything. You were there, and you did see something. And-" she stood and faced her friend, "-that's why you can't go to his house again."

"But it wasn't at his house when it happened," Lilly pointed out.

Una sighed and set her hands on Lilly's shoulders. "Lilly, I only want you to be safe. You know that, don't you?"

A tender smile slipped onto Lilly's lips as she thought back to how he'd drawn her into the bushes and probably saved her life. "If I told you everything that happened it'd make you feel better about him, but I will say that he protected me, and I'm sure he'll protect me again."

Una dropped her arms to her sides and sank down on the bed. "All right, I guess if I can't trust him then I'm just going to have to trust you to trust him."

Lilly laughed and ruffled Una's hair. "Thanks."

Una cringed beneath the fond affection, but arched an eyebrow. "For what?"

Lilly wrapped her arms around her friend and pressed their cheeks together. "For being there for me, no matter what."

Una smiled and returned the hug. "You know, if he has this effect on you then I guess he isn't such a bad guy." She frowned and wrinkled her nose. "That other guy, however. . ."

A sneeze struck Al as he sat in his usual chair in the drawing room. He rubbed his finger across his nostrils as Paul strode into the area, a hint of a smile on his usually stoic face. Al arched an eyebrow as his employer plopped onto the couch.

"You look like the cat that caught the mouse," Al quipped. He narrowed his eyes. "Or a wolf that caught the rabbit."

Paul lay down on the couch and crossed his hands over his chest as he studied the ceiling. "Even your foolish idioms can't bother me this night."

"Why's that?" Al questioned him.

"Because the lovely Miss Edmonds has agreed to be my companion for the next evening's premiere."

Al cringed. "You sure that's a good idea?"

Paul turned to him with a frown. "Why shouldn't it be?"

"I just got a bad feeling about all of this, and the online headlines aren't helping," Al mused as he raised his phone in front of him so the screen faced Paul. "According to Persistent Pippin, there was some furry fun near here. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

Paul wrinkled his nose. "How can you rely on that creature for your news?"

Al snorted. "You calling someone else a creature is a new one, but that doesn't really answer my question."

Paul sat up and gestured down at his clean and un-torn attire. "Does it look

like I acquired my usual form?"

Al held out the phone. "No, but you'd better look at this."

Paul took the phone and read the same article as the women. He frowned. "This werewolf appears to not mind publicity."

"And it's good at making it," Al added.

Paul's eyes flickered to his manager. "Perhaps I have the wrong agent."

Al snatched the phone from him and tucked it into his suit coat. "Hardy-har-har. It's nice to make jokes while somebody goes around with your fur coat making your kind front-page news."

Paul's good humor fled and he stood. "Fortunately, our foe's actions are growing more rash."

"Yeah, soon he'll be knocking on the mayor's door asking for a bite to eat," Al quipped.

Paul shook his head. "No. The werewolf is attacking only those in the newspaper business. We must find some connection between the reporter and Hearst."

Al sank down in his chair and sighed. "I know what that means. I get to do digging and go deeper in debt with favors."

"You can always pay your contacts," Paul suggested.

Al snorted and sat up. "That just shows how lost you'd be without me. These guys are relics of the bartering system. A favor for a favor, and nothing else."

Paul closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Fine. Just find that connection through your connections."

Al jumped to his feet and gave a crooked salute. "Aye-aye, captain." He hurried over toward the door, but paused on the threshold and glanced over his shoulder. Paul's head was turned toward the fire. "You really like that girl, don't you?"

Paul started from his reverie and whipped his head to Al. A frown creased his lips. "I can't afford to like a girl. You know that."

Al let a crooked grin widen his face. "I know that, but do you?"

Paul stabbed a finger at the door. "Leave. Now."

Al raised his hands in front of him, but his smile didn't falter. "All right, I'm

leaving." He slipped out of the room.

Paul returned his gaze to the fire. A single, whispered name parted his lips in a tone that bespoke longing. "Lilly. . ."

TO SAY Lilly was nervous the next night was the understatement of the year. She stood on the sidewalk in front of the bakery in her best dress, a simple white affair that hugged all the right curves. A matching handbag was clutched in both her trembling hands as she looked up and down the street. Traffic was sparse and the foot traffic was even fewer, but those that did pass by her gawked at her nice attire in such a dingy neighborhood.

Una glared back at them, and they hurried on their way. She shook her head as she watched them scurry down the sidewalk. "You'd think they'd never seen a girl in a nice dress before. . ." she grumbled.

Lilly glanced down at herself. "Maybe I don't look-oh!" She slipped in her high heels and stumbled into her friend who stood beside her.

Una grabbed her arm and kept them both from falling. "Easy there. Breaking a leg is what your actor boyfriend is supposed to do."

"He's not my boyfriend," she argued as she smoothed out creases in her dress.

Una snorted. "Then you're going to a lot of trouble for a guy you hate."

"I don't hate him, either," Lilly insisted as she straightened and resumed clutching her purse. "I just-well, I feel sorry for him, and he is cute."

Una snorted. "Sorry for him? A big movie star in a fancy house? I mean, sure, his neighbor has dog problems, but I doubt he has to worry about working for a few years."

Lilly looked down at the ground and shook her head. "It's not that. He just-I don't know, he just seems kind of lonely."

Una sighed and nodded her head. "I can see that. I'd be lonely, too, if I had that asshole to deal with."

At the mention of Al the limo appeared around the corner, and the person himself stuck his head out one of the rear windows. He waved to Lilly until he

noticed the scowling figure by her side. He ducked back inside before the car parked on the curb in front of the pair. The door opened and Paul stepped out decked in a full black suit and tie.

He walked up to them and smiled at Lilly. "You look gorgeous."

Lilly blushed, but a sharp elbow from her friend reminded her of her manners. "I'm sorry, let me introduce my friend. Mr. Paul Lupe, this is Miss Una Amos."

He bowed his head to her. "A pleasure to meet you."

Una eyed him with an arched eyebrow. "You're going to take better care of her tonight, aren't you?" Paul raised his eyes and furrowed his brow.

"Una!" Lilly hissed.

Una crossed her arms over her chest and pursed her lips. "Don't go giving me that look, Mr. Actor. I found out through the online grapevine what trouble you two were getting into last night, so don't go blaming my little Lilly for what I know."

His stiff stance relaxed a little. "I see. I will keep her as safe as I can tonight."

"I think we should get going," Lilly spoke up as she wrapped her arms around one of his and tugged him toward the open car door.

"Stay alert, and don't go anywhere that has a large amount of raw meat!" Una shouted before Paul shut the door behind them.

Al sat opposite the disheveled two and jerked a thumb at the closed door. "What the hell is her problem?"

"Insanity. . ." Lilly grumbled as the car pulled away from the curb.

Al snorted. "That explains a lot."

Lilly looked the man up and down. He wore his usual blue business suit with a white tie. "Are you coming to the premiere with us?"

He shrugged. "Yes and no. I get to rub elbows with the directors and producers backstage to see if I can find any movie deals in the works that might interest Paul here."

Lilly glanced over at Paul who was scowling at his manager. "Is that how it normally works?"

"It's how it works right now," Al told her.

"That's enough," Paul warned his old friend.

Al frowned and toyed with his tie. "Anyway, I guess this is probably your first premiere, right?" Lilly nodded. "Just a few tips of advice: don't stare into any of those damn searchlights they got everywhere, don't sign autographs, and whatever you do don't try to give an interview with a reporter you don't know. They usually turn out to be somebody looking for a quick sound-bite that'll ruin your career and make theirs."

Lilly cringed. "They won't be trying that on me, will they?"

"Possibly," Paul admitted as he turned his attention to her. His eyes were soft and kind as he studied her face. "But I won't allow them to question you."

Lilly smiled at him. "Thanks. Really." She snuggled into the seat, but the familiar soft leather brought out memories from the previous night that made her tense. Her eyes flickered back to Paul. "So have you seen any more of-well, that thing?"

He shook his head. "Nothing."

"Did you read the online article about it?" she asked him.

"You read the Persistent Pippin, too?" Al spoke up with a proud grin on his face.

Lilly shook her head. "No, my friend Una does."

The mention of the spitfire made Al's face droop. "Oh, that thing."

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about for the time being," Paul assured her.

"Maybe. . ." she murmured as she toyed with her bag that lay in her lap.

Origa's voice came over the intercom. "Sir? We have arrived."

The car slowed and Paul rolled down the window. He moved to the seat across the way and looked to Lilly before he gestured to the open window. "Have a look."

An eager smile slipped onto her lips and she scooted over the seat to the window. Lilly leaned her head out and gazed in awe at the bright flashing lights that surrounded the glamorous red carpet. The premiere building was a two-story affair built in the style of the Grauman's Chinese Theater complete with stone lions on either side of the front door and a temple roof with its curved slope and tiled covering.

Crowds gathered on either side of the roped-off red carpet. They pressed against the rope and a line of security guards that held them at bay from the many stars that walked through the front doors. Many stopped to pose for the countless flashing cameras.

"Wow," Lilly breathed.

Al leaned close to Paul and lowered his voice. "You sure this is a good idea?"

Paul glared at him. "Why?"

Al shrugged. "I don't know. I got one of my bad feelings."

The car slowed to a stop at the start of the red carpet and Paul straightened his tie. "Everything will go according to plan."

Paul opened the door and stepped out. Dozens of flashing cameras caught his every move and dazzled the young woman in the limo. She hesitated, her eyes flickering between the open door to the red carpet and the closed one to the safety of the familiar street.

Paul leaned into the car and gave her a smile and an offered hand. "I'm here for you," he whispered.

Lilly smiled and took his hand. He drew her out and into the limelight. Al frowned before he followed them out of the car.

The whole world was a dazzle with snapping pictures and silent recorders. Women screamed and men shouted, or sometimes the reverse. The whole scene seemed too surreal to Lilly as Paul led her down the red carpet. A pair of celebrities in front of them stopped and smiled for the photographers and waved to the fans, forcing them to pause.

One of the spectators ducked underneath security and sprinted up to the pair. Lilly recognized her as the woman from the scene of the apartment disaster, Taylor Pippin. Pippin shoved her cell phone into their faces. "Who's the mystery woman, Mr. Lupe? Another up-and-coming actress in your new movie?"

Al slipped between the interloper and the 'stars,' and held up his hands to give himself some space between Pippin and her nosy phone. "No questions, please."

Pippin leaned to one side so she could see the pair. A sly smile slipped onto

her lips as she studied Lilly, who blushed under the scrutiny. "Don't tell me you're the girl-for-hire for Mr. Lupe."

Lilly frowned. "A what?"

Paul grasped her upper arms and guided her onward. "Let's go."

Pippin followed them while Al continued running interference. "Don't tell me you haven't heard of this scheme! It was tried only two months ago by another 'ailing' actor. It's a ploy to get attention! Bring a poor nobody and see how kind and caring he is!"

"Oh shit. . ." Lilly heard Al mutter.

Lilly looked up at Paul and searched his tense face. "Is she telling the truth?"

Pippin snorted. "Am I telling the truth? I broke the last story of this type of dating scheme! When everyone found out, that girl was dropped like a rock by her actor-boyfriend faster than you can say front-page news!"

Lilly pulled herself from Paul's grasp and stepped backward away from him. Tears welled up in her eyes as her foolish dreams came crashing down. The look in his eyes. The sweet words. They'd all been just acts. He'd been acting.

A sob escaped her throat. Lilly turned and tried to flee, but Paul grabbed her wrist. "Let me explain!" he pleaded.

Lilly whipped her head back to him and glared at the handsome man. "Explain this!"

She swung and her pointed shoe connected with the family jewels between his legs. Paul's eyes bulged out of his head and he dropped to his knees.

Lilly didn't look back as she pushed through the security and other guests. She turned a sharp left and rushed into the crowds. They jostled and pawed at her, but she finally broke free at the other end and sprinted down the street as fast as her high-heeled feet could take her.

Paul staggered to his feet and hurried after her. He stumbled through the crowds and broke through them in time to see her turn the corner. "Lilly!"

"Paul!" Al cried out as he drowned in the sea of adoration. "Where the heck are you?"

Lilly raced down the other street until she saw a taxi. She waved her arms above her head and the vehicle pulled into the curb. The young woman threw

herself into the back seat and slammed the door shut behind her. "Get me out of here!" she shouted at the middle-aged cabbie.

The cabbie slung his arm over his seat and looked her over. "What's the hurry, lady?"

Movement out of the corner of her eyes warned Lilly that he'd almost caught up to her. "Just go!"

The cabbie shrugged and started the car. He stepped on the gas and the vehicle sped away from the curb.

Lilly glanced over her shoulder and through the rear windshield. Paul stood on the sidewalk they'd just left. Pain still contorted his features, but there was also a hint of sorrow in those bright eyes.

Lilly turned away and sank into the seat as her heart twinged with pain. She cupped her face in her hand and sobbed. "I. . .I just can't do it. . ." she whispered.

Al hurried up to his client and doubled over with his hands on his bent knees. "You. . .you really. . .need to slow down," he wheezed.

A long, low growl made him look up. Paul stood as stiff as a board with his eyes fixed on where Lilly's taxi had disappeared. His clean-shaven face had the beginnings of long, furry hairs, and the same hairs pushed out of the skin on the back of his hands.

"Paul! Your face!" Al hissed. Paul's chest moved in and out as his breathing quickened and deepened. Al grabbed Paul's shoulders and looked at their surroundings. The premiere had attracted a crowd of onlookers who passed by them with curious glances. The streets bustled with cars and limos going to and coming from the movie house. "Pull yourself together! You can't go all wolf man here!"

Paul clenched his hands into fists at his sides and jerked his face to Al. His eyes were a bright yellow and fangs peeked out from his upper lip. "You think I don't know that?" he growled.

Al shoved him into the shadows of a nearby alley, enveloping them in the privacy it provided. "Then knock it off! It was just a kick!" Al hissed.

"Just a kick!" Paul roared. He grabbed the short man by the throat and lifted him off the sidewalk so that he was forced to look up at Al. "She kicked me in

the balls, Al! Do you think that feels great?"

Al grabbed Paul's arm with one hand and fumbled in the pocket of his coat with the other. "No, but I bet that felt a lot worse than this."

Al's fingers wrapped around a small object and he pulled a syringe from his pocket. He stabbed the needle into Paul's arm. The partial wolf man roared and let go of Al as he stumbled back. Paul grabbed the needle and yanked it out. He whipped his head to Al and snarled at him. Al stumbled backwards and his back hit a sign. Paul marched forward, but his feet faltered after two steps. He crumpled to the ground and clutched his head in one hand. The fur shrank back into his body and his stretched clothes loosened and fell about his smaller frame.

Al let out the air he'd held in and hurried over to Paul. He slipped his hands under Paul's armpits and helped Paul to his feet. Paul hung his head and shut his eyes.

"What the hell happened there, Paul?" Al asked him.

"Not now, Al," Paul hissed.

"Come on, Paul. You've never freaked out like that before, not after being hit by a girl," Al persisted.

Paul pushed him away and tried to walk away, but the toes of his shoes tripped over the cracks in the sidewalk. He stumbled forward, but Al jumped forward and caught him before he fell.

"Whoa there. Don't go falling and breaking your neck on me now," Al scolded him.

"I need to get home," Paul whispered.

Al sighed and looked around them at the dark, busy streets. "It isn't going to be easy getting out of here," he pointed out.

A small, crooked smile slipped onto Paul's face. "You're my agent. You figure out something."

The appearance of Origa and the limo saved the day. The car drew up to the curb and Al opened the back door. He shoved Paul in and climbed in after him.

Al slammed on the intercom button. "Home! ASAP!"

"**W**hat the heck are you doing back so soon?" Una asked her as Lilly slunk into their apartment.

Lilly turned and closed the door behind her. She rested her head on the cool wood and a little sob escaped her lips.

Una jumped to her feet and hurried over to her friend. She grasped Lilly's arms and looked her over. "What happened? He didn't hurt you, did he?"

A snort escaped Lilly's nose. "Yes, but I hurt him, too."

Una drew her away from the door and over to the couch where she sat them both down. "How about you start from the beginning and tell me everything."

Lilly bent over and clutched her face in her hands. "It. . .it was all going so well, and then we got to the carpet." A small hiccup escaped her lips. "Then that Pippin woman jumped out and said Paul-Lupe was just using me to get attention for his career."

"And he denied it, right?" Una asked her. Lilly turned her face away and shut her eyes. "Right?"

Lilly shook her head. "No, he didn't."

Una straightened as stiff as a board and her eyebrows came crashing down. "He didn't?" she growled.

"No. . ."

Una took a deep breath and hugged her friend close to her. "Please tell me you left his hide at the red carpet alter."

Lilly cringed and turned her head to face her. "I might have also kicked him in the balls."

Una's eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. "Seriously?" she gasped. Lilly weakly shook her head. Una friend covered her mouth and turned her head so she stared straight ahead of herself. "Wow. Just wow." She returned her attention back to her friend. "Did anybody see you do it?"

"Only everybody," Lilly admitted.

Una clapped her hands together and laughed. "That's my girl! Hit him where it hurts! The limelight and the family jewels!"

Lilly hung her head and half-lidded her eyes. "I. . .I'm sorry I did it. . ."

Una wrinkled her nose. "Why? The creep deserved it."

Lilly set her hands on her lap and looked down at her upraised palms. "He. . .he looked so sad when I last saw him. Like he'd lost a friend."

"Well, he can go buy some more. For us normals, however-" Una helped Lilly to her feet and guided her to the bedrooms, "-we're going to get you into some comfy clothes and I'm going to get out a tub of ice cream."

Lilly stopped and whipped her head to her friend. "We don't have a tub of ice cream."

Una sheepishly grinned at her. "I kinda bought one thinking I was going to be alone tonight."

"A whole tub?"

"It was going to be a long night, okay? Now-" Una pulled her friend onward, "-let's get you into your pajamas and me into that ice cream."

AL PACED the floor in front of the grand doorway. He paused to check his watch. A few minutes until sunset. "Damn, that stuff sure does make him sleep. . ." he mumbled to himself.

A groan from beyond the doors announced an awakening. Al opened the doors and strode into the bedroom of Paul Lupe. The actor himself was draped over the bed, his clothes from the night before mussed and slightly stretched.

"Morning, sleepy head," Al cooed as he walked up to the side of the bed. "Or

should I say 'good evening?'"

Paul's eyes flew open and narrowed as they zeroed in on Al. "You dirty bastard," he growled as he eased himself to a seated position. He clutched his head and shut his eyes. "You used it on me."

"It was an emergency," Al defended himself. "You were about to reveal your hairy self to dozens of cameras and curious folk."

Paul rubbed his head and eased open one eye that glared at his manager. "I would have been fine without the antidote."

Al scoffed as Paul eased his legs over the side of the bed and slowly stood. "You would've been chewing the arms off of any screaming woman if I hadn't stabbed you."

Paul shuffled over to a chair around a small round table and grabbed the bathrobe off the back. He slipped his arms inside before he turned to Al. "Might I remind you that this whole thing was your 'original' idea."

Al winced. "Come on. It's not like it's easy thinking up stuff to get your name back in the papers. And speaking of those-" he held one up, "-your name is back in the papers."

Paul snatched the paper from Al and perused the front headline. Mystery Date Assaults Paul Lupe.

Paul's eyes flickered up to Al's eager face. "Did you plant this?"

Al squealed and shook his head. "That's the beauty of it! I didn't! People just saw what happened and-" he grabbed another paper and held them out like they were cards dealt to him. The other headlines were much the same with various angles that showed Paul's moment of agony, "-and suddenly everyone wants to know who your mystery date is!" Paul tossed the paper onto the floor and marched out of the room. "Hey! Paul!" Al shouted as he hurried after him. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," Paul growled as they walked down the hall and down the stairs to the foyer.

"You stalking the halls is not nothing," Al argued as he followed him into the drawing room.

Paul spun around and Al nearly bumped into his chest. "I said nothing!"

Al held up his hands. "All right, nothing's wrong, so why not give Al a big round of applause for getting you noticed?"

Paul scoffed. "I've got the publicity, but are there any movie offers?"

"Give it time, Paul! These things take a couple of weeks," Al warned him as he sat down on the edge of the coffee table. "In the meantime, we've gotta milk this cow for what it's worth."

"How?" Paul asked him.

Al shrugged. "You know, go to more premieres, be seen about town. Those sorts of things."

"With the girl?" Paul guessed.

"Who else?" Al countered.

Paul strode past him and stopped before the crackling fire that burned in the hearth. His eyes stared into the glowing coals as he clasped his hands behind his back. "Do you even know if the name she gave us was her one?" Paul questioned him.

Al opened his mouth, froze, and clapped it shut. "Fuck. . ." he muttered.

Paul's hands clenched one another. "Do you even know where she lives?"

"No, don't you?" Al returned.

Paul looked over his shoulder to glare at his manager. "No, and I also forgot to ask for her social security number."

Al gestured to the room around them. "Well, why don't you use that nose of yours to find her? Her scent must be all over this room."

Paul scoffed and returned his attention to the fire. "And how am I supposed to explain how I found her? I just happened to be in the neighborhood and picked up on the smell of her phone?"

Al's eyes widened and he snapped his fingers. "Her phone number! I've got her phone number! We can find her that way!"

"If it's listed," Paul pointed out.

"It's something," Al shot back. He stood and pulled out his phone. His hand paused over the screen and his eyes flitted to Paul. "Didn't you find out anything about that girl?" he wondered as he slid through the dozens of calls from the past few days.

Paul frowned. "This was just supposed to be a fling, remember? Nothing personal?"

"She's still human, and she wasn't that bad looking," Al argued.

"That first part would be a problem," Paul reminded him.

Al pursed his lips and shook his head as he returned his attention to the small screen. "You gotta stop freaking out about anybody getting close to you-hah! Here it is!" He pressed the call button and put the phone to his ear. His tense face drooped and his bright, wide eyes narrowed. He pulled the phone away and pressed the cancel button. "No answer. Just her message machine."

Paul sighed and stood so he towered over his short manager. "Then I recommend you go out and find her."

Al crossed his arms over his chest and raised up his chin. "No."

Paul turned to him and arched an eyebrow. "What do you mean 'no'?"

"Just what I mean. If you want her found, then you have to find her yourself," Al insisted. "I've pulled all the favors I can with trying to find that reporter connection, so you're on your own for this-"

"Then pull some more," Paul snapped.

"You just can't admit to yourself that she's the best thing that ever happened to you and you fucked up," Al scolded him.

Paul set a hand on the mantel and hunched over the warm flames. "You're quite useless as a friend."

Al shrugged. "I'm just telling it like it is. You fucked up and she ran off, so what are you gonna do?"

Paul shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe leave her alone. We might both be better off that way."

"You think the paparazzi are gonna feel the same?" Al pointed out.

Paul lifted his head and frowned. "What do they have to do with her?"

Al crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. "Just that they'll eventually find out who she is. When that happens she's going to have a hell of a time, with or without you around her. As everything stands, I can just see the headlines now." He swept his hand in front of him and looked into space. "Temporary girlfriend hounded by reporters seeks solace in food and friends. Driven to near

insanity by inquisitive newspapers."

"Shut up." Paul growled as he paced the room. He stopped on the other side of Al's usual chair and ran a hand through his disheveled hair. "Damn it. . ."

Al studied his boss' expression for a moment before he spoke. His voice was low and soft. Only the werewolf could have overheard his words. "I'll ask you again: what are you gonna do?"

Paul shut his eyes and ground his teeth together. Outside the windows the sun set below the hills, enveloping the world in the cold embrace of night. Paul felt a pull inside of him, a pull that demanded he do one thing.

Paul's eyes flew open. There was a hint of yellow in their depths. Al didn't like that look as Paul strode toward the door.

Al intercepted him in the doorway and stretched out his arms on either side of him. "Where are you going?"

"Out," Paul growled in a tone that bordered on feral.

"Out where?"

"Get out of my way, Al!" Paul snapped as he shoved his manager to one side.

Al stumbled into the wide door frame and Paul marched past him. He reached the bottom of the stairs but paused with one hand on the railing. He looked over his shoulder at Al who stood with his lips tightly pursed together.

There was a hint of remorse in Paul's voice and an almost pleading look in his eyes.

"Al?"

Al pushed off from the frame and adjusted his suit. "What?"

"In case I do something stupid-"

"Which you will," Al quipped.

"In case I do, you know what to do."

Al frowned. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It's supposed to mean that if I'm on the front page of your newspaper then I'm better off dead," Paul explained.

Al's expression darkened. "Then you'd want me to use that?"

Paul turned to him and looked him in the eye. "You know they'd do worse to me. I'd rather be dead than a guinea pig for the rest of my life."

Al slowly walked toward him. "Maybe you need to stay in the basement tonight. I'll help you down there right now and-"

A long, low growl escaped Paul's lips before he whipped his head away. The sound made Al jerk to a stop. Paul clutched his face in one hand, and Al could see small hairs sprout from the back of his palm.

"Promise me you'll do what it takes," Paul growled.

Al swallowed the lump in his throat before he gave a nod. "I promise."

Paul's body relaxed, but only a little. He trudged up the stairs and disappeared down the hall. Al walked up to the bottom of the banister and looked up at where he'd gone.

"Damn it, Paul. What are you up to?" He glanced down at his phone that showed the Persistent Pippin page. The article relating to the fire escape crash caught his attention. It had the address for the building. Al cupped half his face in his hands and shook his head. "Al, you idiot. . ."

"So how long are you going to hide out here?" Una wondered.

Her question was directed at Lilly who sat in a tight ball on the couch. A quilt was draped over her body and she had a book in the only hand that peeked out of the warm cover.

"Forever," Lilly retorted as she flipped a page with her thumb.

Una walked past her and over to one of the windows in the living room. She turned to her friend and gestured to the dark sky. "It's a great night. How about we go out for a pizza?"

"Not hungry."

"What about a game of pool?"

"Not interested."

"What about an autopsy?"

Lilly's eyes flickered up from the pages of her book to glare at her friend. "That's not funny."

Una put her hands on her hips and returned the glare. "It wasn't meant to be funny, it was meant to get you to look at me."

Lilly sighed and set her book on her covered knees. "All right, I'm looking at you. Now what?"

Una strode up and knelt before her friend. She looked up into Lilly's eyes with her own pleading ones. "This isn't like you, Lilly. I'm the moody one, remember? You're supposed to be the ever-chipper one."

Lilly turned her face away and sighed. "Maybe I don't feel like being chipper. . ."

"Was that guy really that important to you?" Una asked her. Lilly shrugged. "You only knew him for two days."

Lilly lay one side of her face on the top of the couch and stared into the distance. "I don't know. . .maybe that was enough."

Una arched an eyebrow. "Enough for what?"

Lilly shook herself and shook off the quilt, but draped it over one arm. "I think I'll go to bed."

Una scuttled back to let her friend rise. "But it's only six!"

"I've got an early day tomorrow," Lilly pointed out as she tossed her book on the coffee table. She skirted around the couch and toward her room. "Mr. Baxter's probably furious with me for just leaving a message on his answering machine."

Una cringed. "Actually. . ."

Lilly stopped and spun around to face her. "Actually what? What's 'actually?'"

Una shrank beneath her friend's accusing tone. "Actually, he called while you were taking a nap and said you could. . .well, that-you-didn't-have-to-come-in-for-the-rest-of-the-week-if-you-didn't-want-to."

Lilly crossed her arms over her chest and glared at her friend. "And when were you going to give me this message?"

Una sheepishly smiled and shrugged. "After you went back to work?" Lilly threw her quilt at Una. The cloth draped over her head, covering her like a ghost. "So does that mean you're mad at me?"

Lilly rolled her eyes, but the corners of her lips twitched upward. She marched to her bedroom and gave the door a half-hearted slam. Lilly leaned her back against the door and shook her head. "What am I going to do with her?" she whispered.

"Take her out to lunch," came a muffled voice from the other side of the door. Lilly swung around and flung open the door. Una stood on the other side with the quilt still covering her like a ghost. "Boo?"

"Don't you ever quit?" Lilly questioned her.

The ghost shook its head. "Only when I'm resting peacefully in my bed."

"Then go do that," Lilly commanded her before she slammed the door shut in her friend's face.

"Hey! Spirits have noses, too!" Una called through the door.

"Go to bed, Una!" Lilly snapped as she turned to her room.

Lilly dressed for bed in her usual tank-top and shorts ensemble. Come winter there would be the sweatpants and long sleeves, but the fall night was unusually warm. She opened the window that hung on the wall opposite the door and leaned out. The wreckage of the fire escape had been cleaned up, but the imprint of the disaster was still visible in the empty lot. The junk was dented and broken, giving the lot an even eerier look than the first night she'd looked at it.

It was also the first night she'd seen that thing. Lilly knelt down on her knees and crossed her arms atop the sill. Her brow furrowed as she thought back to the first time she'd seen that creature with the yellow eyes. Or had that been the only time? There was the episode in the woods near the Hearst estate, but those eyes had been cold and cruel. The eyes of the creature that saved her-

"The werewolf," she whispered to herself.

That's what it had been, a werewolf. They were either real or her eyes needed some serious surgery. But then, what was to explain what happened to that reporter, and the fact that Paul had seen the creature, as well?

Paul. That name had haunted her all that day. She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd done something horrible to both of them, and not just with the point of her heel. There was just something deep inside her that told her he shouldn't be far away, that they somehow belonged to one another.

Lilly sighed and climbed to her feet. "Way to go, Lilly. . ." she muttered to herself as she slipped into bed. She closed her eyes and drifted into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Outside her window and in the ruins of the empty lot a shadow moved, but no breeze blew. The large shadow flitted among the junk and over to the brick wall. Holes from the reinforcement beams of the fire escape created a trail up the bricks. The shadow slipped its long claws into the holes and climbed them up to

the open window. It slipped inside and stood on two feet.

The light from outside cast their front in deep shadow, but a pair of yellow eyes looked hungrily at the sleeping figure in the bed. The creature dropped back onto four legs and crept up to the side of the bed. It gently lay its front claws on the edge of the covers and studied Lilly's face. Her features were soft, and her chest moved up and down in a slow rhythm of slumber.

Lilly's face scrunched up. She tilted her head toward the creature and her eyes flitted open. A gasp escaped her parted lips and she shot up in bed. The creature lunged for her and opened its jaws wide. It buried its teeth deep into her collar bone just short of the neck.

Lilly's eyes widened and her mouth opened in a soundless scream. The creature's teeth sank deep into her flesh, but she felt more than just the razor-sharp points of those canines. With them came a sensation of an invading force shoving its way into her very soul. This creature was transferring some of himself into her, changing Lilly into something else. Something unnatural. Something that belonged to it, and it alone.

At that last thought Lilly's scream finally came out. It was long and loud. The creature released her and fled to the window. It crawled out and its tail disappeared beneath the sill just as the door to the bedroom flew open. The hallway light spilled across the floor and onto the bed where Lilly lay in half a faint.

"Lilly!" Una yelled as she hurried into the room and over to the bed. She gasped when she noticed the deep gash on her friend's throat. Lilly's face was red with fever and her breath came out in quick, short pants. Sweat covered her forehead and her body shivered. Una grabbed Lilly's arms and shook her. "Lilly! Lilly, what happened?" Lilly's eyes fluttered open. At the sight of the shadow over her she started back and screamed again. "It's just me! Una!"

"U-Una?" Lilly breathed before her eyes widened and she whipped her head to her left. The place was empty. The creature was gone.

"You gotta get up! You're bleeding everywhere!" Una commanded her as she tugged her dazed friend out of the bed.

"I-" Another shudder ran through her body. "W-what's wrong with me?"

"I don't know, but a doctor will," Una insisted as she wrapped one arm around Lilly's waist and slung one of Lilly's own across her shoulders. She half-dragged her out into the hall and toward the front door.

Lilly dug her heels into the carpet. "'Not. . .not to the hospital," she pleaded.

Una's mouth dropped open. "Are you nuts? Look at all that blood! And you're as hot as an exploded potato!"

Lilly couldn't understand it herself, but she knew she couldn't go. She wouldn't go. "No. . .no hospital."

"Then what do you want to do? Die?" Una snapped at her.

Lilly shook her head. "The. . .the bathroom."

Una pursed her lips, but sighed. "All right, I'll get you prettied up, and then I'll take you to the hospital."

"No. . .hospital," Lilly insisted

"We'll just see about that," Una retorted as she half-carried her to the bathroom.

Una flicked on the light. Lilly raised her head and caught her reflection in the wide mirror. Her face was a ghastly white, a stark contrast to the bright red that covered the left side of her neck and trailed down her shirt.

Una set her on the toilet lid and snatched every towel they owned from the linen closet. "Just hold still and tell me what happened," she ordered her as she soaked the towels in hot water from the tub.

Lilly clutched her head and swayed from side-to-side. She could feel her forehead cool under her hands, almost like her palm was an ice-pack. "I-I don't know. One minute I was asleep, and the next-" she scrunched her eyes shut, "-and the next I was awake. Someone was standing over me. They. . .I think they bit me."

"Whoever you saw must've had a set of chompers, like a dog," Una quipped as she dabbed Lilly's neck. Lilly hissed and started back. "Hold still or I'm taking you to the doctor right now!"

Lilly stiffened and clenched her teeth as Una resumed her cleaning. She paused after a few more dabs and leaned back with her brow furrowed. "I. . .I guess it isn't as bad as I thought." She pressed the back of her hand against

Lilly's forehead. "And your fever's gone."

"Really?" Lilly wondered as she looked past her friend and at the mirror. Most of the blood was gone from her skin and revealed a long, shallow gash. Her pale face had regained some of its usual color.

The more Una wiped the wound down the less the terrible the damage looked. Una shook her head. "This. . .this is really weird. Are you sure it was a guy that bit you?"

Lilly clutched her head in one hand and shut her eyes. "I. . .I don't know. It was so dark. . ."

Una did one final swipe and her jaw dropped to the floor. She glanced from Lilly's neck to the towel and back. "H-how?" she squeaked out.

Lilly lay her hand on the wound. The gash was gone. There was only a few deep bite wounds where the canines had done their worst. The memory of those yellow eyes returned to Lilly, but she only shook her head. "I don't know. I just don't know."

AL WALKED up to the second-floor balcony and grasped the railing as he looked out upon the foyer. A noise had brought him from his room. From his vantage point he could see the front door was slightly ajar. He eased himself down the stairs and closed the door, but his attention was caught by the entrance to the drawing room. He remembered shutting the doors after the fight with Paul, but now one stood open.

Al tiptoed over to the door and peaked his head inside. The dying fire still gasped for life with a few small flames. Its weak light cast itself over the figure of Paul. He stood stiff and still before the mantel. Both his palms rested on the thick marble and his head was bowed.

Al slipped inside and walked up to him. Paul's unblinking eyes stared into the fire, and the flames reflected off his haunted eyes. "Paul? You okay?"

Paul didn't move but for a few whispered words from his parted lips. "I did it. . ."

Al furrowed his brow. "You did what?"

Paul shut eyes and turned his face away from his manager. His teeth clenched together as his voice changed from sorrow to agitation. "I visited her tonight."

Al scooted around to the other side and grabbed Paul's shoulders. His voice was hoarse, hesitant. "What happened?"

Paul opened his eyes and revealed their deep yellow color. "I bit her."

Al's mouth dropped to the floor. "You. . .you're sure?"

Paul clenched his sharp teeth and turned away from his companion. He slammed a fist against the marble mantel. "Don't you think I would know?"

Al raised hands in front of him. "All right, all right, you bit her." He pursed his lips and glanced out the windows. The light of the early morning sun peeked over the horizon. "I guess we'll just have to wait for her."

Lilly rubbed her collar bone. The scar from the previous night was still there, but it already looked as old as any of her childhood scars.

"Is something wrong?" Mr. Baxter wondered.

The pair stood in the kitchen of the bakery, and not a spot of flour was to be found on the wide kneading boards. The reason for the cleanliness was the clock on the wall. Its hands showed the hour as five in the evening. Outside the sky had darkened and the sun had sunk below the horizon of tall buildings.

Lilly dropped her hand and shook her head. "I'm fine."

"Did you hurt yourself hitting that man?" he suggested.

Lilly cringed and moved toward the dividing door. "No. I guess I just didn't sleep well, that's all."

"Is Una coming for you tonight?" her boss asked her.

Lilly shook her head as her fingers fumbled with her apron tie. "No, she has to work late."

Mr. Baxter came up behind her and untied the strings with ease. "Perhaps then you should take a taxi. With how distracted you are you might walk into an open manhole."

The idea appealed to Lilly, more than she thought it would. She took off her apron and hung it on the hook. "I think I'll do that. Thanks, Mr. Baxter."

He waved away her gratitude. "It is nothing. Now go home and get a good night's sleep. That will help you."

Lilly turned to him and draped her arms over him in a tight hug. He blushed and she pulled away to smile up at him. "I will, and thank you for putting up with me."

He chuckled. "It is my pleasure, now off you go or people will think the bakery is open twenty-four hours a day."

Lilly slipped into her coat and hurried out the front door. Baxter shut the lights off inside, but kept the outside sidewalk light on for her. She walked to the edge of the curb and waved her hand. A taxi drove up and she climbed in.

"Where to?" the man asked her.

"2600 Birch Avenue," she told him.

He wrinkled his nose. "That ain't very far."

"I tip."

The cabbie grinned and tipped his mangy cap at her. "We're on our way, miss," he assured her as he faced forward and drew the car away from the curb.

They had gone only a few buildings down when a sudden urge struck Lilly. She had her mouth open before she even knew what she wanted to say. "Wait."

The cabbie glanced in the rear view mirror at her. "Wait what?"

Lilly furrowed her brow. She couldn't quite gather the strange thoughts that followed the sudden impulse. "I. . . I want to go somewhere else."

"You sure? We only got five minutes left to get there," he pointed out.

Lilly glanced out the window. The sun had disappeared. Night reigned over the metropolis. Even the artificial lights couldn't banish away the deep shadows that lingered in its alleys and stoops. "I want to go somewhere else," she repeated, as much to convince herself as the cabbie.

He shrugged. "All right, where to?"

"I'd like to go to 13 Talbot Drive."

He arched an eyebrow. "That's a ways from the first address you gave me."

She nodded. "I know, but that's where I want to go."

He sighed and turned the wheel. "Suit yourself."

Lilly glanced out the window and grasped the bottom edge of her coat. That was his address. Why had she given the driver his address? Better yet, why wasn't she telling the driver to turn around and take her home?

Lilly felt like a passenger in more ways than one as the car drove down the winding country road to the estate of Paul Lupe. She couldn't fight the inexplicable desire to go to that place. Even her own mind, trying to convince her of the passengers of seeing a guy she'd recently kicked in the balls, couldn't change her intention to see him again.

The taxi reached the gates to the property. They were closed. The cabbie draped an arm over the top of the front passenger seat and studied her with doubt. "You sure this is the right place?"

She looked up at the towering heights of the stately home and nodded. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"You want me to wait?"

She turned to him and shook her head. "No, it's all right."

He shrugged. "Okay. Suit yourself."

Lilly stepped out and shut the door. The taxi pulled a u-turn and honked his horn before he disappeared down the bumpy road, leaving her alone with her poor decision.

Lilly swallowed the lump in her throat and walked up to the gate. She grabbed one of the bars and shook the heavy metal. The wrought-iron didn't even budge. The young woman took a step back and looked left and right for another way in when she heard a groan. The gates shuddered and parted just wide enough for her to slip inside.

Lilly's pulse quickened. "Easy there," she whispered to herself. "I'm sure you just rattled it loose."

Lilly didn't believe her own words, but that tiny voice inside of her demanded she go inside. She slipped through the gates and walked up the gravel drive. The gray stones crunched beneath her feet. It was the only sound in that lonely place as she came nearer to the house. A pair of heavy wood doors made up the entrance.

Lilly reached the bricked front walk and one of the doors opened. She froze as a block of light slipped out and cast itself over her tense form. The slim figure of Al stood in the doorway. There was a welcoming smile on his face as he stepped to one side and gestured to the foyer behind him.

"Come on in."

She hesitated. Her two instincts, that of self-preservation and the new, intense desire to enter, battled with one another. "I-I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm here. I just couldn't-" The words wouldn't form themselves.

Al smiled. "It's all right. We've been waiting for you."

She furrowed her brow. "You have?"

He jerked his head toward the interior of the building. "How about we talk about this inside?"

Lilly bit her lower lip, but stepped up the walk and into the house. Al closed the door behind her and the latch shut with an ominous clang that echoed over the large foyer. He raised an arm and gestured to a pair of open doors on the left of the hall that led into the parlor.

"We can talk in here," he told her as he walked over to the doors. Lilly hesitated. She didn't know why, but her eyes were drawn to the hall that led deeper into the house. Al paused in the parlor doorway and half-turned to her. "You can see him in a few minutes, but first you need to hear a few things."

Lilly shook herself and turned her attention to him. "See who?"

A crooked, bitter smile slipped onto his lips. "We both know who, but let's sit down." Lilly reluctantly followed him into the drawing room. "Sit anywhere you want," he offered as he took a position before the fireplace. Lilly chose the long couch. She sat on the edge of the cushion while he drew out a pack of cigarettes. He lit up a cigarette and tossed the match into the fire before he realized his mistake. Al held the pack out to her. "You want one?" he offered.

Lilly shook her head. "No, but I'd like to know how you knew I was coming."

He pocketed the pack of cigarettes and looked her over. "He told me what happened last night."

She frowned. "What did he tell you?"

He nodded at her body. "So where'd he bite you?" Lilly's pulse quickened and her hand inadvertently flew to her collar bone. He chuckled, but there was little mirth in the sound. "Not a bad spot, but I bet it hurt like hell for a second, didn't it?"

Her eyebrows crashed down and an impulsive need for secrecy overwhelmed her. "I-I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your instinct is probably telling you to hide it from everybody, isn't it?" he mused as he leaned his shoulder against the thick mantle. "But I'm not everybody."

"M-maybe I should go," Lilly suggested as she stood. "I think it was a mistake coming-"

"You won't get your answers by running away," Al warned her.

She frowned at him. "Answers to what?"

Al blew a ring of smoke from his lips. "To what happened last night, to why you felt compelled to come here." He pushed off the mantle and met her eyes. "To why you can't leave here even though you know you should."

Lilly stiffened her jaw and stretched herself to her full height. "All right, tell me: what happened to me last night?"

"He came into your room and bit you."

Lilly's heart sank. Her hopes of it just being a dream crumbled before her weary mind. She dropped back onto the couch and clutched her forehead in one hand. Her lips parted and a few whispered words spilled out. "Then it's true. . ."

"Everything you remember," he confirmed as he studied the young woman with pity in his eyes. "The worst of the physical damage is over. You won't have that fever again, or any other illness, for that matter."

She raised her eyes to him. "H-how do you know that?"

Al rolled his sleeve up to the elbow. Lilly's eyes widened as she beheld two large puncture marks on the upper part of his arm. "Because he did the same thing to me." Lilly started back and gasped. Al rolled down his sleeve. "It kind of puts a damper on wearing short sleeves."

A terrible question arose in her mind. Her hands shook, but she swallowed her fear and lifted her gaze to Al's face. "Is he. . .is Mr. Lupe a werewolf?"

"Yeah."

Lilly felt as though her whole life was crashing in around her. Paul was a werewolf. She should have recognized the signs-those yellow eyes and his prodigious strength-but how could she have believed it? Who would believe that a movie star was a creature of myth? Who would believe that he had snuck into her room last night and-

Her heart thumped loudly in her chest as her hand flew up to her collar. "Then are we. . .am I a werewolf?"

Al took a drag on his cigarette and tilted his head back to look up at the ceiling. He blew out a puff of smoke and furrowed his brow. "Funny thing about those legends. They get a lot of things right and a lot of things wrong."

She stood and pressed her arms against her chest. Her voice shook with all her fear and impatience. "Am I a werewolf?"

He met her gaze and shook his head. "Nope."

Lilly furrowed her brow and shook her head. "But-"

"You're not a werewolf, but you're not human, either," he told her.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted. "Then. . .then what am I?"

He laughed. The sound was full of bitterness. "You're a Star."

She leaned her head back and blinked at him. "I'm a what?"

"A Star," Al repeated as he turned to the hearth. He tapped his ashes into the fire and watched them be consumed by the flames. "In the werewolf world there's the Moon-that's the werewolf-and then there's their Star-or in Paul's case

Stars. Those are the people they bite." He picked up the poker and shifted the wood around. "Not just anyone gets bitten. The werewolves feel an attachment to those people." He snorted and set aside the poker before he turned to her. "I guess they feel that we're kindred spirits, if you believe in that stuff."

"And what do Stars do?" she asked him.

"You get to protect him from himself, and from anyone else that might try to hurt him," he explained.

Her mouth dropped open and her voice was an octave higher than usual. "Me? How am I supposed to do that?"

"You're stronger than a normal human, or will be in a few days," he told her. "And you'll be faster, too. There's also sleeping. You won't be doing much of that anymore."

She eased herself back onto the couch and grasped the edge with one hand as she stared ahead, but without seeing anything. Her mind was a whirl with half-constructed thoughts and questions too terrible to ask. "Werewolves. Moons. Stars." The words left her lips in a tone of disbelief. She leaned forward with her elbow on her leg and clutched her head in one hand. "I. . .I can't believe it. . ."

"Gives new meaning to the word 'starstruck,' doesn't it?" he mused.

"This can't be real. . ." Tears sprang to her eyes as she shook her head. A shaky smile slipped onto her lips. "This has to be some sick joke."

Al's cigarette drooped when the woman before him broke down. Heavy sobs rattled her small frame and filled the room with the terrible sound of fear and grief. "Hey hey hey, easy there," he soothed as he slipped onto the cushion beside her. He rubbed her back and leaned forward to catch her eyes. "It'll be okay. Ol' Al is here to help you out."

She shook her head. "I don't know what's going on. I don't know why I'm here. I don't know why any of this is happening to me." She raised her gaze to him and searched his face. "Why me? Why?"

A hollow humor slipped onto his face. "I guess it was just written in the stars." A bitter, gurgled laugh escaped her lips. He wrapped his arm around her and gave her a bit of a shake. "Easy there. It's not all bad. You can stay here-" he jerked his chin up at their surroundings, "-and you've got a lot of time to catch up

on any reading you've wanted to do."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Let me put it this way: I've known Paul for thirty years and he hasn't aged a day." He leaned back and grinned at her. "And yours truly hasn't aged a day in that time, either."

She whipped her head up and her mouth dropped to the floor. "You. . .you haven't grown older?"

He shook his head. "Not a day, and I don't have to take vitamins to do it."

Lilly turned her face away from him and cringed. "I don't think I like that. . ."

Al sighed. "Well, you've got a lot of time to think that over, too. Anyway-" he stood and turned to face her, "-come on."

She raised her eyes to him and blinked at the man. "What?"

The humor fled from his face, leaving behind a hint of sadness. "I know you want to see him, so we're going to go see him, but I warn you it's not going to be pretty."

The color drained from her red-tinted cheeks. "W-why?"

He sighed and walked over to the doorway where he half-turned to her. "You'll have to come with me to know what I mean."

She slowly stood to her full height and looked him in the eyes. "I'm ready."

Al's gaze flickered down her hands that she grasped together in front of her. They were shaking. This girl's scared stiff, but she's still got balls. He jerked his head toward the foyer. "Follow me."

Al guided her out of the parlor and down the hall that led parallel to the stairs and deeper into the house. He stopped them at an old door in the left-hand wall which he opened to reveal a coat closet. A row of said clothing hung on a thick dowel and hid the back wall. Al ducked inside and disappeared behind the coats, but Lilly hesitated. She leaned inside and squinted into the darkness. A hidden doorway lay beyond the clothes, and beyond that was a steep, narrow staircase.

"Come on," Al called to her.

Lilly took a deep breath and dove into the clothes. Popping out the other side was like entering another world. Gone was the elegant wood paneled walls and in their place were walls of stone and rough plaster that ran on either side of her.

The ceiling and floor, too, were made from the same rounded stones, and her feet clacked noisily on them as she stepped down on the stairs. A wood railing was bolted to the wall, and above that hung battery-powered lamps stuck in torch casements.

Lilly grasped the railing and followed Al as he led her deeper into the bowels of the earth. The air was heavy with moldy moisture and cobwebs hung from the ceiling. At twelve feet down the stairs turned at a small landing and went for another dozen feet before reaching a dirt floor. The way opened up and revealed a short hall of stone walls. On one side was a line of small cells with thick bars. The bars glistened gray in the light of the battery lamps.

Al led her to the first of the three cells and turned to face her with his right side three feet from the bars. "Miss Lilly, may I introduce you to the real Mr. Paul Lupe."

The cell was without lamps so that three-quarters of it lay in complete darkness. Lilly leaned forward and squinted. A deep, harsh breathing sound emanated from the shadows. She took a step closer.

A shadow leapt from the depths of the cell and slammed into the bars. It reached out with one clawed hand and swiped at her face, missing her nose by a mere inch. She yelped as Al grabbed her shoulders and jerked her back.

"Not that close!" he hissed as he righted her quivering body.

Lilly gawked at the behemoth that stood at the bars. It was indeed the monster from the empty lot, and the same one that had attacked her the previous night. The beast pressed against the bars, but a quick yelp escaped its lips and it leapt backward. A few plumes of smoke rose from the front of its body as the scent of burnt fur joined the damp smell.

A crooked grin slipped onto Al's lips. "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, Paul: silver bars don't like werewolves."

"Silver?" Lilly wondered as she studied the bars closer. Their gray exterior revealed them to be coated in silver.

Al nodded as the creature hunched over and stared at her without blinking its yellow eyes. "Yep. That part of the legends was true, otherwise Paul here would be out there trying to track you down."

Lilly stiffened. "M-me? Why me?"

"Because you're his new Star and he wanted to make sure you made it safely to him," Al revealed. He tilted his head to one side and looked off into the distance. "He almost destroyed my office trying to get me to go with him. I don't think I've ever run so fast in such a small area in my life."

Lilly studied the cold bars and the cramped space. "Is he. . .is he in here a lot?"

"Not as much as he should be," Al commented. The werewolf curled its lips back in a snarl. Al snorted. "Oh, now you want to talk to me. It's because she's here, isn't it?"

The werewolf crept close to the bars on all fours and studied her with its bright eyes. Lilly felt drawn to them, as though they were beckoning to her. She walked forward in a half-daze. Al reached out to grab her again, but the werewolf snarled.

He held up his hands. "All right, I get it."

Lilly reached the bars and raised her trembling hand. She stretched her arm through the bars and into the cell. The werewolf leaned its head into her palm. She curled her fingers and scratched the beast behind its ear. The werewolf closed its eyes and a soft rumble came from its throat.

A nervous twitter escaped Lilly. "You're just a big pussy-cat, aren't you?"

The werewolf raised its nose and brushed the wet tip against her palm. She cringed at the cold damp and drew her hand back a little. The werewolf whimpered and took a few steps back into the cell.

Lilly stretched out her hand to it. "Wait! I'm sorry! I didn't mean anything by it!"

The werewolf raised its head and let loose a long, low howl. The sound echoed off the stone walls like distant, haunting voices. A chill swept up her spine and Lilly clapped her hands over her ears. The sound hadn't died away before the werewolf bowed its head and grunted.

Lilly's eyes widened as she watched the beast's form shrink. The fur drew back into a pale body and the hair shortened to neck-length. The claws disappeared and the snout shriveled to the puny teeth of the omnivorous human.

Loose-fitting pants appeared around his waist and upper thighs, but that was it for clothes as the lack of fur revealed his muscled chest.

Paul-now in his human form-groaned and fell face-first onto the dirt floor. Lilly gasped and grasped the bars. "Paul!" Al joined her at her side and looked him over. She whipped her head up to him. "Is he okay?"

Al snorted. "Yeah. You just brought him back to the world of humans."

Lilly blinked up at him. "Me?"

Al nodded. "Looks like it. I guess you've got a better touch with him than I do."

Lilly shrank from the touch of coolness in his voice. "I don't mean to."

A smile slipped onto his lips as he snatched a round key chain from the wall around the corner. "Don't worry about it. He's not my type, anyway," Al commented as he shoved one of the keys into the lock. He swung open the door and stepped inside. "Come on, Paul-" he sing-songed as he helped the half-conscious man to his feet, "-time to go upstairs for some brandy and a nice, long chat with your rising Star."

Lilly followed the men as Al hefted Paul up the steep stairs and into the hall. "Is he always like this after he-" Her weird new reality was still hard for her to accept.

"Transforms back? A lot of the times, yeah," Al confirmed as he walked down the hall. A small snort escaped his lips. "I guess it's God's way of giving their human victims a chance."

Paul's feet shuffled beneath him, but by the time they reached the drawing room doors his head was up. "L. . .Lilly," he whispered.

"Knock it off, will ya?" Al snapped, though he carried him over and lay him gently on the couch. "If you were using that damn nose of yours you'd know she was here."

Lilly scooted to the other side of the coffee table as Paul turned so he faced her direction. His bright yellow eyes zeroed in on her, but the joy in them didn't extend to the rest of him. His mouth turned down and he tensed. He spoke in such a low voice that Lilly barely caught the words.

"I'm. . .I'm sorry."

Lilly grasped one of the arms of Al's chair and eased herself onto the cushion. "Did you. . .did you know all along? That you were going to bite me?"

He shook his head. "No. I sensed a connection to you, but I didn't understand what it meant." His eyes flickered to Al who stood beside the couch. "I've only felt it once before in my long life."

"Maybe I need to keep you on a shorter leash," Al quipped.

Paul closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "Perhaps."

Al arched an eyebrow. "Come on, Paul, it's not the end of the world."

Paul shook his head. "No, merely the end of her life."

"Can't I have my old life and this new one, too?" Lilly asked them.

"No." Paul opened his eyes and returned his attention to her. "A Star is compelled to be at their Moon's side. You won't be able to resist the urge to remain here at my home."

"Oh, I don't know," Al mused as he took a seat on the arm of the couch. A sly smile slipped onto his lips. "Going to my office can be pretty easy after you've been out prowling around the city without me."

Paul frowned at him, but nodded at Lilly. "I suspect I was looking for her."

"So Ol' Al wasn't pretty enough for you?" he teased. Paul frowned up at him. Al leaned away and held up his hands. "All right, I'll knock it off."

"But what about my job? And my apartment?" Lilly spoke up.

"You have to give it up," Paul told her.

She leapt to her feet and grasped her purse tightly in her quivering hands. Her face twisted with anger. "I can't just give it up! Mr. Baxter needs-well, he'd miss me! And Una can't afford the apartment on her own! She'll be kicked out!"

"She needs kicked. . ." Al mumbled.

Lilly glared at him. "She doesn't deserve to lose her home just because this-" she pulled down her shirt to reveal the scar, "-happened to me."

Paul sat up and swung his legs over the front of the couch so that he faced her. "That scar means more than you can understand at this moment, but you'll learn."

"I'm not learning anything if it means hurting the people I care about!" Lilly snapped.

Paul's eyebrows crashed down. "You no longer have any choice in the matter."

She scowled right back at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I control your destiny," Paul informed her.

"You can't even get out of a cell with silver bars," Lilly taunted him.

"That's enough," he growled.

"Wait a second!" Al spoke up as he leapt to his feet and jumped between the two. He held up his hands, one in front of each of them, but his attention fell on Paul. Al frowned at his Moon. "You know you'll regret it if you Collar her."

Lilly's jaw hit the floor. "He's going to do what to me?"

"Don't take it literally," Al suggested as his eyes fell on her. "A Moon controls their Stars through the unique bond, but if a Star gets a little uppity then the Moon can cause their scar to hurt."

Lilly put her hands on her hips and glared at Paul. "You'd hurt me because I made fun of you?"

Paul pursed his lips. "I would rather not."

"But you'd still be willing?" she persisted.

"I would rather not."

One corner of Lilly's lips twitched upward as her eyes flickered to Al. "How long is he-" she jerked her head at Paul, "-going to be weak?"

Al stepped back and watched the proceedings with his arms folded across his chest. A grin slipped onto his lips. "Oh, I'd say a couple more minutes."

"Why?" Paul spoke up.

"So he's still a little slow?" she continued her questioning of Al.

"As slow as a toddler."

"Good."

Lilly marched over to Paul and grasped the string of her purse tightly. She swung it long and fast, and the wide side connected with the side of Paul's face. His head snapped around and the force shoved him onto the couch.

Paul whipped his head up to Lilly and his eyes glowed with an unnatural fury. "You will not do that again."

She put her hands on her hips and snorted. "Or you'll what? Hurt me? A Star is supposed to watch over you when you're most vulnerable, right?"

"Right," Al confirmed.

"Then remember who wipes your ass when you're in that trouble," she snapped at Paul.

Paul climbed to his feet and towered over her. She was a head shorter, but

she didn't shrink from his anger. His hands were balled into fists at his side and he spoke through clenched teeth. "You will-"

"Smell that?" Al spoke up as his eyes flickered around the top of the room.

He lifted his nose to the air as Paul did the same. Lilly watched them as though they'd gone mad, but the faces of both them revealed tension and concern.

Paul glanced at Al. "How did you not notice this before?"

"I was busy watching you get your ass kicked," Al retorted.

"What's going on?" Lilly asked them.

Al nodded at one of the windows on either side of the fireplace. "Trouble. Something's out there that shouldn't be."

"What's 'something?'" she persisted.

"Another werewolf, and this one isn't likely to be friendly," he told her.

She blinked at him. "You can tell that just from smelling them?"

"Remain inside while I investigate," Paul commanded them as he pushed past Al and marched toward the door.

Al reached out and grabbed his shoulder. "Wait a second here. You just got out of that fur coat and now you want to go back in it without backup?"

Paul turned and his eyes fell on Lilly. A crooked grin slipped onto his lips. "I think I've had enough stimulation to do it again, and you must protect her while I confront our 'guest.'"

"We're supposed to protect you, remember?" Al reminded him.

"Lilly can't do anything as she is, so protect her for right now," Paul ordered him as he shrugged off his hand. "I should return in a few minutes."

Al crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at Paul. "And if you don't? Should we order flowers and a casket?"

"Protect Lilly at all costs," he told him before he disappeared through the drawing room doors.

That unfamiliar impulse arose inside Lilly and she made to follow him, but Al grabbed her shoulders. "He said stay, so we stay," he told her.

Lilly looked longingly at the doorway. "But I have to go."

"Not this time, at least not yet," he insisted as he pushed her down onto the

couch. He resumed his seat on the arm of the couch between Lilly and the door. "Besides, I think we need to get a few things straightened out with you before Paul really fucks things up."

She arched an eyebrow. "Fucks what up?"

"About some of the info he was telling you," he revealed.

"You mean like I don't have to stay here?" she hoped.

He shook his head. "No, that one's pretty much a done deal. One that's signed, sealed and delivered when he bit you and me. Except for the occasional permission to go out and play, we're stuck with him."

"So I can leave?" she persisted.

He shrugged. "You can, but only if he says so or if he's really knocked out cold. Right now, though, I'm going to guess Paul wants you at his side."

Her shoulders fell along with her face. "Then what's he getting wrong?"

"He's getting himself wrong, and you," Al told her.

She blinked at him. "Huh?"

"Well, for starters there's that whole 'Collar' thing."

She cringed. "Where he can hurt me whenever he wants?"

He snorted. "Believe me, if he really wanted to hurt you he would've done it. He's done it to me more than once."

Lilly tilted her head to one side and knitted her eyebrows together. "Then. . . then he didn't want to hurt me?"

"That's what I said," Al confirmed as he drew out his pack of cigarettes. He lit up another one and blew a ring of smoke before he spoke again. "He really likes you, probably more than he's ever liked anyone else in his whole long life, and that's saying something. That's why I'm telling you that he's not going to Collar you, now or ever. Well-" he glanced out the window, "-if he comes back, that is."

Lilly glanced between the glass and her fellow Star. "You guys smelled someone out there, right? And you knew they were trouble?"

He nodded. "Yeah. A werewolf's scent tells more about them than their looks. It tells us what kind of werewolf it is, too."

"There are 'kinds?'" she asked him.

"Oh yeah. Take Paul, for example. He's your basic Irish werewolf. Well, except for some of that 'benevolent' part. The guy out there-" he jerked his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the windows, "-that guy's from the European branch, and that means trouble. That type is designed to slaughter. Maybe not indiscriminately, but it needs to kill something around a full moon, or they get weak."

"And you smelled it because you're a Star?" she guessed.

"Yep."

"So how come I don't smell anything?"

"Because you're pretty much useless until you've had a few nights to adjust to your nocturnal life," he told her.

She hung her head and bit her lower lip. "So I can't help him at all right now?"

Al looked at the saddened woman and winced. "I didn't mean it that-" A long, low howl interrupted him. He shot up and the cigarette drooped in his mouth. "Shit."

Lilly leapt to her feet. "What? What is it?"

"That howl was werewolf for a challenge. That means those two are going to duke it out," he told her.

She gasped. "But he might get killed!"

Al grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the drawing room door. "Exactly, so now it's our turn to do our duty and save his ass."

"But he told us to stay-"

"His survival overrides any stupid thing he might have said, and right now I think that's at stake," he told her as they hurried into the foyer.

The front doors were open and revealed the dark night with its many shadows. Another howl resounded from outside, but this one was different. There was a melodic sound to the deep call. It tugged at Lilly's heart.

"Shit," Al growled as he broke into a run, dragging Lilly behind him.

They rushed through the doors and out onto the gravel drive. Al released Lilly and lifted his nose to the air. He sniffed while Lilly swept her eyes over the darkness. She couldn't see anything beyond the streams of light that poured out

of the house doors and windows.

Al whipped his head to the right. "Over there!"

He sprinted into the darkness and Lilly blindly followed. Al was like a wild rabbit. His feet were confident and fast as he dodged root and rock. Lilly was a lumbering giant who stumbled over and into every hidden blunt and sharp object that lay in wait in the night. She soon fell far behind until Al completely disappeared.

She skidded to a stop and whipped her head to the left and right. There was nothing but the tall, dark shadows of brush and trees, but there was sound. A terrible noise came from in front of her. With snapping, yipping, and yelping, it sounded like two dogs locked in a fight to the death.

Lilly ran deeper into the darkness and tripped over a root. She fell face-first onto the ground, but her arms cushioned the blow. They couldn't cushion the blow inside of her when the noise abruptly stopped. The forest filled with silence. She raised her head and scanned the trees in front of her.

Then she heard it. A deep, growling breathing. Heavy footsteps stomped against the ground and brush bristled as something pushed them aside. Lilly's heart stopped when the noises did. She raised her eyes higher and froze.

A pair of bright yellow eyes stared at her from only four feet away. They weren't the soft yellow of Paul, but the hard yellow of the beast she'd seen at the Hearst house. Those terrible eyes now looked at her with disgust and hunger.

K eep calm! Lilly shouted at herself as the monster flexed its sharp claws. Think of something!

Lilly shifted and winced when a stick stabbed her stomach. That gave her an idea. She clutched the ground beneath her as the monster stepped out of the brush. Its fur was mussed and bloodied patches dotted its body. It curled its lips back and snarled at her.

Lilly eased herself up to a sitting position, keeping her hands still tightly clenched at her sides. The monster snapped its sharp teeth at her before it lunged at the young woman. She threw her arms in front of her and released all the debris she'd picked up off the ground. Needles, dry leaves, dirt and tiny pebbles flew into the beast's face. The werewolf yipped and clutched its face as it stumbled back.

Lilly leapt to her feet and sprinted toward the house. The dim lights from the windows guided her through the dark woodland maze, and she had broken through the trees when a shadow ran out of the trees to her left and blocked her route to the house. It was the wild werewolf, and now its eyes were both yellow and red with irritation from her dirt attack. She backed up as it stalked toward her, its clawed hands balled into fists so tight she saw blood drip from its shut palms.

Lilly yelped as her heel hit a root and she fell back onto her rear. The werewolf's shadow fell over her. She looked up in time to see it raise one clawed

hand above its head. Lilly threw her arms over her to protect herself from the blow.

It was a blow that never came. The werewolf swung downward, but another shadow dropped out of the trees and landed on top of it. The pair tumbled away in a mess of fur and fangs. Lilly dropped her arms and watched in awe as two werewolves-and the newcomer had a pair of softer yellow eyes-grappled on the lawn.

She yelped and started back as a pair of hands grabbed her shoulders. Lilly whipped her head up and found herself staring into the tense face of Al. His gaze, too, lay on the vicious fight as werewolf tore into werewolf.

"W-where the hell have you been?" she snapped at him.

"No time for that now," he hissed as he pulled her to her feet.

Paul in his werewolf form threw his opponent off him and rose up on his hind feet. The other werewolf landed on its feet and faced off with him. It curled its lips back in a snarl that Paul returned with equal vigor. Al and Lilly skirted around behind Paul and toward the open doors. The other werewolf saw them and dropped on all fours to charge at them.

Paul rushed forward and rammed his broad shoulders into his foe's side. The other werewolf went tumbling across the gravel, but slammed its claws into the ground and stopped its rolling. It whipped its head up and snapped at them.

Al rolled his eyes and reached into his suit coat. "Enough of this!" he snapped as he drew out a magnum. The single, long barrel shone brightly in the light from the house as he pointed it at their foe. "Hope you like silver, wolfy."

Al fired off a quick round of three shots. The werewolf leapt back and missed the bite of the first two bullets, but caught the third one in the shoulder. The creature yelped and clutched its injury, but Lilly could see black smoke rise from the wound.

The fourth shot jammed in the machine. Al slammed the six-chamber against his other palm. "Damn it!" Their foe snarled at them one last time before it turned and raced off into the night. Al stopped the abuse of his gun and shrugged. "I guess that worked."

Paul turned to the pair and limped toward them. As he walked into the light

of the house Lilly could see the extent of his injuries. His fur was clotted with blood and large patches were missing, revealing deep gashes and bite marks. There was evidence of victory, however, in the ends of his sharp claws and his teeth. They were stained with blood, but not his.

Paul was nearly at them when his eyes rolled back in his head and he fell face-forward onto the lawn. "Paul!" Lilly and Al both shouted as they rushed over to him.

Paul's form shrank until he lay nearly naked on the ground. Only the remains of his jeans hid the rest of him from view. Al slid onto his knees and ended up beside Paul. He drew the limp werewolf into his arms and gave him a good shake. "Snap out of it, Paul! Come on!"

Lilly dropped to her knees on Paul's other side. Only half her attention lay on the werewolf. The other half was on his body. The muscled skin was covered in a variety of scars, some thin and shallow and others wide and deep. It was a tapestry of torment, and the recent battle had added some fresh cloth.

Paul's eyes fluttered open. He opened his mouth, but his body shivered as a shot of pain ran up and down it. The wounded man shut his eyes and clenched his teeth.

Al pursed his lips as he slipped his arms underneath Paul. "Come on, let's get you inside."

Lilly was surprised when Al's slim frame easily lifted Paul in his arms. They stood and she followed them inside. Al took Paul upstairs to his room and paused beside the bed. He glanced at Lilly and nodded at the dresser. "There's some sheets in the bottom. Get those out and spread 'em over the bed."

Lilly nodded and hurried to the dresser. She opened the bottom drawer and gasped. Before her lay a wide array of bedsheets that were once white, but were now stained with blood. She swallowed the lump in her throat and grabbed an armful before she hurried back to the bed. Lilly covered the other, more elegant sheets and Al set his burden down atop them.

"Is he going to be all right?" Lilly asked Al leaned over and looked over the wounds.

Al straightened and the smile that appeared lightened her heart. "Yeah, but

this ass really needs to take it easy next time."

Lilly wrapped her arm around one of the footer posts and leaned her cheek against it. "Thank goodness."

"But this is going to take some time to heal, so have a seat and I'll get us a stiff drink," Al suggested.

"I-I'm fine," Lilly assured him.

His eyes twinkled as he nodded at her legs. "Is that so?"

Lilly followed his gaze and saw that her legs quivered. It was only then that she realized that the post was the only thing keeping her from collapsing. She sheepishly grinned at him and slid down onto the bed. "I guess I'm not so fine."

"It's your first night, and it hasn't exactly been the easiest," he pointed out as he patted her on the shoulder. "But just take a breather. I'll be right back with grandpa's cough medicine." He left the room.

Lilly glanced at Paul. His chest moved up and down with an irregular quickness that denoted his pain. His face was scrunched up and his hands clutched the sheets beneath him. Lilly leaned over and lay her hand atop one of his. Her heart leapt for joy when his face relaxed and his breathing slowed a little.

She didn't realize how long she stayed in that position until she heard a chuckle behind her. Lilly drew her hand back and whipped her head to the door. She found Al leaning against the frame. He had a bottle under one arm, two glasses in his hand, and a tray in the other.

"Ya know, if you keep doing that you're just going to spoil him," Al teased her as he pushed off from the frame and walked over to the bed.

"I just thought it'd help," she told him.

Al deposited his load on the large nightstand beside the bed. "Don't worry about it. I'm actually pretty glad you're here. Well, except the fact that you're here," he added as he poured out some white wine for them. The tray was loaded with freshly-cut cheese and meats of all kinds.

"That looks delicious," she told him.

Al swung around and offered her a glass and the goodies on the tray. "I wish I could take the credit, but Origa was haunting the kitchen and made the tray for

me."

Lilly took some meat and the glass. "Is he a Star, too?"

Al laughed as he turned away and set the tray down. "No, but he makes a hell of a werewolf sandwich."

Lilly blinked at him. "A what?"

Al walked one of the chairs from the small table over and plopped it down close to the nightstand and bed. "It's where you take two thick slices of meat and fill the middle with more meat, and most of it isn't cooked."

Lilly wrinkled her nose. "That sounds awful."

"It does make a bloody mess," he agreed as he munched on some cheese. He downed half his glass of wine and choked. Al beat his fist against his chest and shuddered. "Damn stuff. I could never get used to this fancy drink Paul likes."

Lilly returned her attention to their patient. Paul's head lay on one side and his hands no longer gripped the sheets as before. Something strange caught her eyes. She leaned toward him and squinted. "Are. . .are his wounds healing already?"

"Yep," Al confirmed through a mouthful of meat. "Amazing, isn't it? You can watch him heal himself. I never get tired of seeing that happen."

She nodded at the old wounds on his body. "So those scars-"

"Are from past fights," he finished for her.

Lilly winced. "That's a lot of fights."

Al downed the rest of his glass of wine and poured himself another. "Yeah, and sometimes his fights don't even leave scars."

"Why is that?"

"Because the werewolf he fights isn't strong enough to get a knick off him before he-well, before he makes sure they don't see another full moon," he told her.

She cringed. "Then he's killed a lot of others?"

"Well, since I've known him, about a dozen," Al mused. He leaned back in his chair and swished the wine around in the glass. His gaze lay on the sleeping werewolf. "Some of them have been easy, and others not so much."

"Was this werewolf stronger than a lot of the others?" she asked him.

Al shook his head. "I doubt it. It wasn't as fast as others I've seen Paul whip."

"Then why is he so injured?" she asked him.

His eyes fell on her and he smiled. "If I was to take a guess I'd say he was too worried about protecting a certain newborn Star to worry about himself."

"Was he that way for you, too?" she guessed.

Al laughed. "Me? He was a pain in the ass for the first month I worked for him! He wouldn't even let me go get lunch without growling at me!"

"So does that mean he really liked you, or didn't like you?" she wondered.

He shrugged. "I still can't figure that out, and even after all these years he still surprises me."

Lilly returned her attention to the sleeping Paul and shook her head. "I don't know if I'll ever understand him."

"Just give it time. You've got a lot of that," Al reminded her.

"But what if it was a mistake?" she persisted as she clasped her hands together in her lap with the base of the glass between them. "What if I'm not a good Star?"

"Listen, Lilly," Al scolded her as he set his glass on the nightstand. He lay his arms on his thighs and leaned toward her. His eyes caught hers in a steady gaze. "Werewolves don't go choosing just anybody to be their Star. The human probably have some skill that's useful to them, even if neither party knows about it."

"So what skill did he see in you?" she asked him.

Al flashed her a grin. "Well, I was smart, had an extensive network of informants all over the city, was an experienced agent for a dozen other stars-"

"And was a bachelor," a weak voice spoke up.

Lilly whipped her head to Paul. His eyes were open and quite yellow as they flickered between his two Stars.

Al sighed and forlornly shook his head. "Never was a bachelor so betrayed by his chosen lifestyle."

Paul drew his arms higher to his chest and pulled himself to a seated position. Lilly jumped up and hurried to his side where she put her hands on his chest. "Don't move!"

"I'm fine," he assured her as he leaned back against the plush pillows that covered the headboard.

"Yeah, you'd be a fine slab of meat if it wasn't for this-" Al quipped as he drew out the large gun. "A second later and we all might have ended up as dog chow to an amateur European werewolf."

"Why didn't you use that sooner?" Lilly scolded him.

"I might have superhuman eyesight in the dark, but I still need a clear view of what I'm shooting at," he countered.

Lilly's eyes widened. "Superhuman eyesight?"

He nodded. "Yep, and some nice speed and strength that I told you earlier about."

"We don't have time for your bragging," Paul spoke up as he shifted and winced. "Where did the werewolf go?"

Al shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. We were too busy dragging

your carcass inside to follow its trail."

"Its warm trail that has no doubt cooled beyond usefulness," Paul grumbled.

Lilly frowned at him. "Aren't you even going to thank Al for bringing you upstairs and making sure you were all right?"

Al smiled and bowed his head to her. "Thank you, Miss Lilly."

Paul pursed his lips and turned his face away from them. "Never mind. We must find that werewolf and destroy it." His eyes flickered back to Al. "Have your sources found anything out?" Paul asked him.

Al shook his head. "Not a thing. I've pulled every string I have and nobody knows a damn thing about any connection between the two. Hearst doesn't even own that station the woman worked for. He owns their rival."

Paul drummed his fingers on the bed sheets. "Which means there is a third party involved."

"One that wants everyone to sign on the dotted line in their blood," Al quipped. A ding interrupted the tension. Al drew out his phone and scrolled down the screen. He frowned. "Looks like we've got a serial killer on our hands now."

Lilly sat up and Paul returned his attention to his manager. "What has happened?"

Al scanned the screen as he read the news aloud. "Looks like something attacked and murdered a female dog-walker."

"How is that connected to our troubles?" Paul questioned him.

"In the woman's spare time she moonlighted as a reporter for her own personal blog," Al revealed as he raised his eyes to the two curious faces. He pursed his lips and his eyebrows crashed down. "And the police said she was torn apart by some kind of large animal."

Lilly cringed. "How could anyone do that?"

"A European werewolf is a bloodthirsty beast without remorse," Paul told her.

"And if we don't stop its eating habits soon everybody and their dog-walker is going to know what it is," Al mused.

"What sort of reporting did she do on this 'blog?'" Paul asked him.

Al tapped the screen with his thumb and a new tab came up. He examined the contents before a crooked smile slipped onto his lips. "It looks like she followed the movie star scene. That's your beat, when you're not trying to get yourself killed in a mythology-creature battle."

"I am trying to save lives."

"I wish you'd try to save your career."

While the pair bickered something nagged at the back of Lilly's mind. It was a few words Al had mentioned: a blog and reporting. There was something about them that reminded her of a grand connection.

A memory clicked in her mind. Her eyes widened as she gasped. The pair of men paused in their fighting and turned their attention to her.

"You okay, Lilly?" Al asked her.

Her lips parted in a few whispered words. "It's her. . ."

"Her who?" Paul insisted.

She shook herself and looked between them. "It's her! That lady reporter!"

Paul arched an eyebrow. "What 'lady reporter?' The deceased one?"

Lilly leapt to her feet and shook her head. "No, the one that was bothering Una and me! And the one that was at the premiere asking us questions!"

"Persistent Pippin?" Al guessed.

Lilly stabbed a finger at him. "That one! And Una told me she reported on the Hearst house, too!"

"She is worth looking into," Paul agreed as he swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Lilly lunged forward and grabbed his muscled upper arms. "What are you doing? You can't get out of bed yet!"

"I am fine," Paul insisted.

Al snorted. "Come on, Paul. Even you can't bounce back from that much damage. Besides, it's late."

"That would make it a perfect time to visit this reporter," Paul pointed out.

Al stood and stretched. A yawn added to the bags under his tired eyes. "And the perfect time to get some sleep."

"Al's right," Lilly agreed as she clutched his arms tighter. She looked into his

eyes and pursed her lips. "You need to get some rest, and I could really use some time to catch up on-well, everything."

Al grinned at her. "I'm really starting to like being a part of the majority."

Paul returned his attention to Al and glared at him. "Very well, but in the meanwhile you will hunt her down."

Al held up the phone and showed them the screen. On the screen was a bright website, and in the footer was a header with the word Contact Me. "I think this might help."

Paul sneered at the screen before he lay his head back. "Write it down and be prepared to journey there tomorrow-" his eyes flickered to Lilly, "-both of you."

Lilly pointed at herself. "Me? What can I do?"

"We'll just have to see," Paul told her as he closed his eyes. "Now leave me."

Lilly opened her mouth, but Al set a hand on her shoulder. She looked up and he shook his head before he jerked it toward the door. Al guided her out of the room and down the hall.

Lilly sidled up to him with a frown on her lips. "How can I help? I didn't do anything but be chased tonight."

A smile slipped onto his lips as he glanced down at her. "But you were pretty fast when you were doing it. Probably faster than you realize."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Were you watching me?"

"Yes and no. I was following Paul who was following you two," he revealed.

Her mouth dropped open. "Why in the hell weren't you two fighting that thing?"

"Paul got a nice slice across the chest-you probably noticed that cut-and it was all I could do to scare that thing off with this-" he reached into the other side of his coat and drew out a large baton. The baton was only four inches long, but he drew out the inside like a handheld periscope until the object was two feet. The end tapered to a sharp point while the other end had a rough surface for a better grip. "This is Betsy."

Lilly leaned forward and studied the smooth gray surface. "Is that. . .silver?"

"Every inch. Our unwelcome fiend got the sharp end a couple of few times before I could get it off Paul," he told her.

She stretched out her hand and tapped a finger against the long surface. Nothing happened. She tapped it again, but there was no sharp pain or smell of burning flesh. "So we can still touch silver?"

"Yep," he confirmed as he tucked the baton back into his coat. "And then there's this secret weapon." He drew out a small vial. Flakes of some herb chinked around the inside walls.

"What is it?" Lilly asked him.

"Wolf's bane. It's our best friend, but we have to handle it carefully around Paul."

"What would happen?"

"Let's just say we don't want it touching him," Al warned her as he re-hid the vial. "And definitely don't spread it on his pizza."

Lilly eyed his clothing with new respect and curiosity. "What else do you have hidden under there?"

"You mean besides a manly physique?"

Lilly snorted. "Yeah, besides that."

"That's pretty much it. My coat doesn't have any more pockets."

"Will I get some of those things?" she wondered.

"Sure, but I'll have to look at our budget before I hand over another magnum filled with silver bullets," he mused as he rubbed his chin and a look of concentration entered his eyes. "Those things aren't cheap, and sometimes they don't work."

"Like earlier?" she guessed.

He dropped his hand and nodded. "Yeah. Silver really isn't the best metal to use for casings so it has a chance to warp, meaning it gets stuck in the barrel and jams the whole damn thing." By this time they had reached the drawing room. Al walked over to the crackling fire and leaned a shoulder against the mantel. "So-" he mused as he lit another cigarette and tossed the match into the fire. He turned toward her with a smile. "-do you have any other questions before we get some sleep?"

Lilly took a seat on the couch beside her forgotten purse and clasped her hands in her lap. She leaned toward him and met his gaze. "I want to know

everything I can do-or will be able to do-or however this works."

He blew a puff of smoke into the air. "Well, like I said earlier, you get more strength and speed. Then there's the smell-you might regret that one on an outing into the city-and then there's that last one."

Her ears perked up. "What last one?"

"Sometimes-and don't think this happens every full moon-you get a little-well, hairy," he admitted.

The color drained from Lilly's face. "You mean-?"

"Yep. You get a little wolfy."

"But you said we weren't werewolves!" she reminded him.

He held up his hands in front of him. "I know, and I was telling the truth. That doesn't mean we don't get some of the bad side-effects of this curse. Besides, it doesn't happen very often. Just when you're under a lot of strain and the moon is at its fullest."

"How many times has it happened to you?" she questioned him.

Al held up three fingers. "This many, so I'd say it happens once every ten years." He covered a yawn with his hand. "And that's it for the lessons for this evening. I think I'll follow Paul's example and get some sleep. With all those wounds he should be out for the rest of the night. Do you want me to show you your room?"

Lilly shook her head. "I think I'll stay here for a while."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. Your room's the second on the left. If you need me mine is opposite yours."

"I'll remember that," she assured him.

"And if you need any food just go to the kitchen. Origa should be there all night."

"All right."

"Goodnight."

"Night."

And with that Lilly was left alone with her muddled thoughts. She leaned her elbows on her bent legs and cupped her chin in her hands.

"What the hell happened, Lilly?" she muttered to herself. "One minute you're

a clumsy baker's assistant and the next you're a werewolf's keeper with supernatural powers."

A slight vibration beside her made her jump. Lilly glanced down at her purse that lay on the cushion. The movement had come from that. She drew her purse into her lap and pulled out her phone. The screen showed twenty missed calls and several text messages with more question and exclamation marks than words. All of them were from Una. Lilly winced. Her friend was worried about her. Lilly had to explain everything to her-well, everything that was believable-and she didn't want to do it over text or the phone.

Lilly stood and swept her eyes over the large room. I've got to get to her, she told herself. Her heart sank as she thought about the pull that had driven her here. But can I leave?

She recalled something Al had mentioned before the werewolf attack. You can, but only if he says so or if he's really knocked out cold.

Getting attacked by another werewolf and having to heal for a night sounds like he's probably pretty knocked out, she guessed as she crept toward the door.

Lilly paused on the threshold and peeked out. The house was as quiet as the grave. She tiptoed across the foyer and into the west wing. The first room was the large dining hall, but on the wall to the right was the entrance to the kitchen. It was a behemoth of an area with a large island and enough counter space to make a professional chef weep for joy.

Unfortunately, it didn't have the driver. "Origa?" she whispered. She crept deeper into the room and could see every inch, but he was nowhere to be found. "Origa?"

"Yes?"

Lilly yelped and spun around. Origa stood a foot behind her dressed in his impeccable black attire. The dark getup made his pale skin stand out. She swallowed the lump in her throat and smiled at him. "H-hi. I was just wondering if you could drive me home?"

He arched a black eyebrow. "Has Mr. Lupe allowed this?"

"Of course, and he said to get me there as quick as possible because I'll be coming back," she assured him.

"I see. Then we shall take the convertible. If you will follow me."

Origa led her out of the kitchen and onto the lawn. They entered the side garage through a door on the front beside the bay doors. Origa flicked on a light switch and illuminated a half dozen expensive cars, including a red Porsche and a black Rolls Royce. A mustang convertible stood at the far end near one of the bay doors. They slipped into the comfortable leather seats and Origa pressed a button on the dash that opened the garage door.

Lilly winced at every squeak groan from the mechanical door. The mechanism felt like it took forever to rise. Her eyes flickered to the garage door. She half-expected the entrance to be thrown open and Paul to rush inside, partially transformed and angry.

Finally the door was opened and Origa stepped on the gas. They sped out of the garage like a bullet and zoomed down the road. The opening of the garage door had triggered the gates so that they were opened by the time they went through.

Lilly turned in her seat and glanced back at the house. She couldn't see Paul's windows from the front of the house, but most of the home was darkened. There was also no tug within her to return. She slipped down in her seat and breathed a sigh of relief.

"You are worried about something," Origa commented. His eyes never left the road.

She sheepishly smiled at him. "Just seeing if somebody was going to see me off, but I think they're all asleep."

They made it to Lilly's apartment in record time and Origa parked on the curb in front of her apartment building. She hopped out and looked up at the faded old structure. Never had it looked so good to her.

"Do you wish for me to wait?" he asked her.

"Um, how about you go home for a while?" she suggested as she turned back to him with a smile. That smile dropped fast when she noticed his dark eyes staring directly into hers. There was something unnerving about the way they didn't blink, or twitch, or move at all. "I-I don't know how long I'll stay here, so I'll call the house when I need someone to pick me up."

He stared at her for a long moment before he stiffly bowed his head. "Very well. Goodnight."

"Night," she returned, and he sped off.

Lilly raced inside and up the stairs. She unlocked the door and burst into the apartment. "I'm home!" she shouted as she tossed her purse onto the end table beside the entrance. "You would not believe the night-"

Lilly froze. The hour wasn't late, but none of the apartment lights were on. She strained her eyes to hear anything, but all was silent.

One of the table lamps in the living room was flicked on. Lilly jumped back into the open doorway and stiffened, ready for some goblin or another werewolf to attack her. Instead she saw a familiar arm retreat from the lamp and disappear on the other side of the recliner chair.

The back faced her, but slowly turned around like a rusty, ticking clock to reveal her friend. Una sat on the cushion with her arms and legs crossed. In one hand she clutched a child-sized commemorative spoon they'd picked up at a city hall celebration. Her eyes were narrowed and her empty hand tapped her arm.

"So we meet again," Una mused.

Lilly breathed a sigh of relief and shut the door behind her. "Do you have to be so creepy?" she scolded her as she pulled off her coat and draped it over one arm. She gestured to the rest of the apartment. "Why are all the lights off? And why are you holding a spoon?"

Una stood and held out the spoon toward Lilly. "Back! Back, I say!"

Lilly blinked at her friend. "Have you flipped?"

"I said back!" Una shouted.

"Why?"

Una drew her hand back and glared down at the spoon. "It always worked in the movies. . ."

"What always worked in the movies?" Lilly questioned her.

"You know. Warding off evil creatures with silver," Una told her.

"That's crosses," Lilly reminded her before she realized what she was saying. Her mouth dropped open and she pointed a finger at herself. "You think I'm an evil creature? Why?"

"Because I know what bit you last night," Una revealed as she held up her cell phone. "The internet told me all about werewolves, and then I remembered that long talk we had with Mr. Baxter that sealed the deal. You're officially a creature of evil."

"I'm not a werewolf!" Lilly insisted.

"Then where have you been since night fall?" Una asked her. "A night of the full moon, might I add."

Lilly winced. "I . . . I was at Paul Lupe's house."

"Doing evil things?" Una accused her.

"I'm not evil, and I wasn't doing anything except-" Lilly stopped herself. She was just about to spill the beans.

Una held out the spoon again. "Doing what, evil creature? Talking with the

devil? Did he tell you to come here and steal my soul?"

Lilly's face drooped and she frowned at her friend. "What in the world did the internet tell you?"

Una dropped her arm and shrugged. "Not much, really. It just sort of said silver worked on all things evil and cursed, and that now that you're bitten you're a werewolf."

Lilly sighed and ran a hand through her hair. "Listen, Una, I'm really sorry about tonight. I can't tell you everything that happened, but let me-" A scent hit her nose that made her blood run cold.

The smell was followed by a loud pounding on the door. Lilly spun around and stumbled backward until she reached Una. With each pound the door bent inward a little and sprang back, but the hinges rattled with warning of impending downfall.

Una threw up the spoon and her eyes flickered to Lilly. "Please tell me this is this one of your demon buddies returning your phone!"

"It's just us!" a familiar voice called from the other side.

Lilly tilted her head to one side and blinked. "Al?"

"Yeah, it's-" There came another pound. "Will you quit that! They'll probably let us in if we ask!"

"Open the door!" bellowed the deep, feral voice of Paul Lupe.

"Not like that!" Al snapped.

Una dropped her arm and rolled her eyes. "Are these guys for real?"

Lilly sighed. "Unfortunately, there's a lot of things that are real."

The knob rattled. "Look, it's not even locked!" Al scolded his companion. "See?"

The knob turned and the door swung open to reveal Al and Paul. Both showed signs of hasty dress in their mismatched button holes and untied shoes. Al's hair was flat on one side from hugging a pillow. Paul sported a large mane around his head and his eyes glowed brightly in the dim light of the apartment. He stepped inside and growled at the women.

Una drew Lilly behind her and threw up the spoon. "Back! Back, I say! You may have her now, but I will free her of your curse!"

Al shut the door behind them and scooted around the front to stand between both parties. He raised his arms toward the groups. "Hold it! Just hold it! Nobody needs to be using a-" he whipped his head toward Una and squinted at her 'weapon,' "-is that a spoon?"

"A silver spoon!" she corrected him.

Paul's yellow eyes zeroed in on Lilly. "You left without permission."

"She doesn't need you or anyone else's permission to go anywhere!" Una snapped at him.

Lilly winced. "Actually, I kind of do now."

Una whipped her head around and her eyes widened. "You mean he's-?"

"The werewolf? Yeah."

Una returned her attention to Paul and raised the spoon above her head. "For Lilly!" She rushed Paul, but Al side-stepped and wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug.

He drew her away kicking and screaming. "Lemme go! I'm going to kill him! I'm going to spoon him to death!"

He ducked a wild swing from her spoon-laden hand. "Will you hold still! I'm trying to save your life!"

"Shut up!"

The roar came not from Paul but from Lilly. The call made everyone pause and look to her. She put her hands on her hips and glared at the whole company. "You guys are all insane! And wrong!" She turned her attention to Una. "Yes, he bit me, but I'm okay. It's not something that's life-threatening."

Al snorted. "Most of the time. . ."

Una pointed up at the much taller Al and almost thrust her spoon up his nose. "What's do you mean by that?"

"I'll tell you later," Lilly promised.

"You will not!" Paul snapped.

Lilly turned her ire on him. "Listen, I know it wasn't either of our choices for this to happen, but we're going to deal with ending my old life my way, and that means saying goodbye my way."

Una's eyes widened. "Saying goodbye?"

Lilly's face fell and she nodded. "I have to go with him. It's just the rules."

"Then I'm coming with you!" Una insisted. She thrashed wildly in Al's hold and managed to shove her spoon into his eye.

"Hey!" he yelped as he released her to clutch his wounded organ.

Una rushed over to Lilly and grasped her arms. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked Lilly over. "Wherever you go, I go, and I'm not taking 'no' for an answer."

"She cannot come," Paul insisted.

Lilly looked past her friend at Paul. His mane was gone and he was in the process of fixing his attire. "Why not?"

"Because she is not a Star," he pointed out.

"What does that matter?"

"She would only be in the way."

Una swung around and brandished her spoon. "Don't underestimate me, dog-breath. I've had some sword training."

"You've had too many knocks on the head," Al grumbled.

"Guys, hear me out," Lilly pleaded as she stepped into the center of the room. "I want this transition to be as painless as possible for everyone, but everyone has to give a little to make this work." Her gaze fell on Paul and her eyes pleaded with him. "You've got a big house and if we have to we can share a room."

"I'll even pay rent," Una spoke up.

Paul raised his chin and narrowed his eyes. "You would be putting herself in more danger than you know."

Una stabbed a thumb at herself. "But that's my choice, and I can live with the consequences."

"It wouldn't be a matter of you living, but dying," Al pointed out.

"Then I'll live with that, too," she insisted.

"Please?" Lilly pleaded to Paul. "If this doesn't work out we can change things, but please don't make me give up everything I've ever known." She stepped closer to him and clasped his hand in both of hers. "Please?"

Paul pursed his lips as his eyes flickered to Una. She grinned and nodded. He

sighed and his shoulders slumped before he turned his face away. "Very well."

"Yippee!" Una whooped.

Lilly leaned forward and pecked a small kiss on his cheek. He whipped his head back to her and looked at her with wide eyes. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't I get a say in this?" Al spoke up.

Una spun around and glared at him. "No."

"Like hell I don't!"

"Like hell you do!"

Paul cupped half his face in his hand and closed his eyes as he shook his head. "What have I done?"

"You've made me very happy," Lilly assured him.

He opened one eye to study her before he dropped his hand. "You made me very unhappy when you left."

"I had to come back for my clothes," she pointed out.

"That could have waited until tomorrow."

Lilly held out her hands and showed off her grass-and-dirt-stained attire. "I really wanted some new clothes."

His face tightened as he looked past her at the bickering couple. "Unfortunately, you shouldn't change your attire just yet."

Lilly arched an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Because we now have the perfect opportunity to investigate the other werewolf."

Una paused in her shouting and whipped her head around. "Another werewolf? You mean you're not the one biting off peoples' heads?"

"Only yours," Al warned her.

"We think it might be Persistent Pippin," Lilly spoke up to stave off the bickering.

Una froze and her eyes grew to the size of saucers. "Pippin? The Pippin?"

Al folded his arms over his chest and grinned at her. "You're not surprised, are you? She was on the scene at most of the places."

Una glared at him. "I'm surprised you haven't been werewolf chow yet."

"We don't have time for explanations," Paul spoke up as he turned to the

door. "We need to go now."

"Then I'm coming, too," Una announced.

"Like hell you are," Al retorted.

Una shoved her face into his and shoved the rounded end of the spoon under his chin. She narrowed her eyes and spoke through clenched teeth. "My spoon and I are coming."

He turned his face away and rolled his eyes. "If it's fine with the boss."

Paul nodded. "Very well, but stay out of the way. Now let's go."

Una and Lilly picked up their coats, and the four left the apartment building. The Porsche was parked on the curb.

"Wow!" Una swooned as she hurried around the vehicle admiring its beauty. "Nice ride!"

"And it can only sit three," Al announced. "Two in the front and one in the back."

Una turned to him and snorted. "You underestimate Lilly and me. We've gotten into tighter spots than this."

"I hope not. . ." Lilly murmured as she climbed into the back.

The two women squeezed behind the two front seats while Al took the driver's chair with Paul as his co-pilot. They drove to the location of Taylor Pippin's apartment, a Bohemian part of the city with winding roads and narrow alleys. Laundry lines hung from fire escape to fire escape, and many advertising signs were posted in more than one language.

Al parked the car in one of the wider alleys and everyone got out. The women tumbled, but caught themselves before they hit the pot-hole ridden ground.

"Lovely place," Una mused as a rat ran past them.

Paul looked up at the tapestry of laundry wires. "I can smell the werewolf, and fear."

"That second one might be me," Una spoke up as she wrinkled her nose in

the direction the rat had gone. "I really hate rats."

Paul strode deeper into the alley and everyone hurried to keep up. His nose led them through the maze of side-streets and to a small square with a bubbling fountain. There he stopped and took a deep breath of air.

"Wow," Una mused as she studied the area. The ground was of cobblestones and all the buildings that faced them were brick. "I didn't know this kind of thing was in the city."

"There's a lot of things you don't know about this city," Al told her.

She stuck her tongue out at him. "I'm only dumb if I refuse to learn!"

He snorted. "That's probably the first intelligent thing I've heard you say."

"Quiet," Paul spoke up as his gaze fell on a tall, narrow house to their left. He nodded at the place. "The scent is coming from there."

Al pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and compared the words with the numbers on the door. "Yeah, that's the place."

Paul turned to the women. "Stay here."

Lilly glanced around them. The buildings stood at odd angles from one another and created a myriad of shadows. "I think we'll come with you," she suggested.

He pursed his lips, but nodded. The four walked up to the door and Al scooted to the front. "Allow me."

Al knelt in front of the door lock and drew out a small roll of leather which he unrolled on the ground in front of him. Inside the leather was an assortment of lock-picking tools. He drew one out and returned his attention to the lock. "Now watch the master in action."

"The 'master' doesn't have to do any action," Una retorted as she turned the knob. The latch unlocked and the door swung open.

Al glared up at her. "You could've mentioned that earlier."

She grinned at him. "I wanted to see how stupid you could be."

"Quiet," Paul hissed as he eased the door entirely open.

The bottom floor of the house was one long room that encompassed a living room, dining room, and a kitchen at the back. A narrow flight of stairs on the left-hand wall led to the second floor. The area was dark, but light from behind

them and the window on their right allowed Lilly to see the damage. Two lamps lay broken on the ground and the coffee table was overturned. A plant, formerly on the banister, lay smashed on the floor.

"What happened here?" Una whispered.

"Trouble," Al told her.

She rolled her eyes. "I can see that."

"Quiet!" Lilly scolded them.

Paul eased inside. Lilly made to follow him, but Una grabbed her arm and slapped something round and heavy into her hand. "I think we're going to need this."

Lilly looked down and saw it was a flashlight.

"Where'd you get that?" Al asked Una.

Una drew another from inside her coat and flicked it on. "I never leave home without being prepared."

Al looked at her with a limited amount of respect as she tiptoed into the townhouse. They reached the couch and saw that the stuffing had been clawed out of it. Al dipped his hand into a dark substance and lifted it to his nostrils. He wrinkled his nose. "Human blood."

"She's killed someone else!" Una whispered.

Paul shook his head as he raised his eyes to the stairs. "No. There isn't enough scent of blood."

"You smell something upstairs?" Al asked him.

Paul nodded. "Yes. Fear."

He led the other three up the stairs and to the second floor. The area was one large room with natural light spilling inside via a wide window at the front. A long row of cupboards on the wall opposite the stairs was the only storage space.

Like the downstairs, the upstairs was a wreck. The sheets of the bed had been torn off and torn to shreds. Pillow stuffing clung to the bare brick walls. Clothing was scattered everywhere.

"Search everything," Paul commanded them as he crept toward the bed. "I smell someone here."

"Her?" Lilly asked as she tiptoed toward the front window and a large living

room set.

"I don't smell werewolf," Al replied as he opened one of the storage doors and poked his head inside. A loud scream and a shark strike on the cheek made him stumble back and fall onto his rear a few feet from the open door. "I think I found the fear!"

The others hurried over and Lilly shone her flashlight on the dark interior of the closet. A figure sat hunched behind a row of short coats. Their wide eyes stared unblinkingly back at them, and in their hands they clutched a large two-pronged serving fork. The glistening metal bespoke an expensive metal.

"W-who are you?" a quivering female voice asked them.

"Miss Pippin?" Paul asked her.

The figure leaned out and revealed herself as Pippin, but much changed from her usual confident self. Her face was pale and her lips trembled. She tightened her grip on the fork as she squinted at the group. They showed puzzlement. "Paul Lupe?"

"And company," Una added.

Al glanced over his shoulder at Paul. "How's she the werewolf if she's the one in the closet?"

Pippin's eyes widened and her body shook. "W-werewolf! Werewolf!"

Paul knelt in front of her. "Can you tell us what happened?"

Pippin scrunched her eyes shut and bowed her head. "H-he came home. I told him I'd be out all night, but I got back early. When I came in I didn't notice him-it-in the kitchen. I sat down on the couch and he turned to me. I-" She shuddered. "He was horrible."

"Who he?" Paul asked her.

A creaking nose from behind them made Lilly look over her shoulder. Nothing was there, but she was sure she heard-

Paul whipped his head up and looked at the ceiling. "Everyone move!"

He drew Lilly out of the way while Al grabbed Una. Both men jumped toward the front of the apartment a second before the ceiling caved in where they once stood. A hulking shadow dropped onto the floor and fell on top of the wood boards. The hole in the ceiling showed there was an attic, and in that space was

an old, formerly-boarded up skylight through which the creature had made his hasty entrance.

Pippin scooted back into her closet screaming. "It's him! It's him!"

The figure turned to the groups and revealed itself as the werewolf. Al and Una were closest to where it stood while Paul and Lilly were huddled by the stairs. It roared and charged them.

Al reached for his coat, but Una was half on top of him. "Get off!" he snapped as he shoved her away and reached into his coat.

The werewolf reached him and grabbed the back of his coat. It lifted Al off the floor and over its head.

"Can't we talk about this?" Al yelped.

He hovered there for a second before the beast launched him forward. Al crashed into the couch and sent both it and him tumbling backward. He rolled over the top and disappeared from view, though his silver stick clattered to the floor in front of the couch.

The werewolf turned its attention to Una, but she was already scrambling toward the dropped stick. Una picked it up, leapt to her feet and spun around to face the beast as it lunged at her. She thrust the stick forward, stabbing the beast in the chest. It yelped and stumbled back a few feet before its eyes glowed a violent yellow. The thing reached out for her, but she stabbed one hand and ducked the other.

Her words were a narration of her actions. "Thrust, duck, thrust." She ducked again. "And another duck! Now a parry!"

Una raised the baton to block a blow from the beast, but her grip wasn't strong enough. The baton flew out of her hand and clattered to the floor. She let out a tiny 'eep' and stumbled back as the monster approached.

Lilly heard a soft growl beside her and turned to Paul. She gasped as she watched his face elongate into a snout full of sharp teeth. Fur sprouted all over his body, tearing most of his clothes. Long, sharp claws grew out of his fingernails and his ears moved to the top of his head and ended in points.

Fully-formed as a werewolf, Paul shot off the floor and rushed their foe. He swiped his claw and sliced the back of the other werewolf, leaving five long,

horrible gashes. The werewolf howled and swung around, swinging one clawed hand. Paul ducked, but his foe lunged at him. They rolled across the floor and slammed into the wall near the stairs. Fangs and claws flew as they clutched one another in a death hug.

Lilly leapt out of the way and raced over to her more human friends. She knelt beside Una who grinned up at her. "Not bad, eh?"

"Terrible," a voice spoke up, and Al appeared from the other side of the couch. In one hand was his gun. "Now watch this."

Al set his arm on the couch and pointed at the pair of werewolves. Lilly watched as Al tried to aim, but his head was a little dizzy from his rough toss. The barrel swayed side-to-side, as likely to shoot Paul as the monster.

"Give it!" Lilly snapped as she grabbed the gun from him. She stood and aimed the gun at the pair. "Hey! Wolfy!"

Both werewolves paused and turned to her. Their frozen moment gave Lilly her chance and she fired the gun. The bullet sped to its mark and struck the foe werewolf in the heart. It gave a mighty roar of pain and stumbled toward her, its eyes full of pain and anger. One clawed hand clutched its bleeding wound and the other reached out for her, but the creature only made it a few steps before its eyes rolled back and it collapsed chest-first onto the floor.

There was silence and stillness for a moment, and then the beast reverted back to its human form. The fur disappeared into its body and its features returned to normal. In a moment he was a young human male again. Dead, but human.

Una thrust her hand in the air. "We did it! We killed the monster!"

"Una!" Lilly hissed as she nodded at Paul who was still in his werewolf form.

Una cringed. "Sorry. . ."

Paul reverted back to human form with the usual shorts covering his more intimate parts. The group gathered around their fallen foe.

Una used the baton to point at him. "Who the heck is this guy?"

"P-Paul Stump," a timid voice spoke up. Pippin crawled out of the closet and eased herself to her feet. "He's my-" Tears sprang to her eyes as her gaze settled on his cooling body. "He was my boyfriend and tech guy."

"How long have you known he was a werewolf?" Paul questioned her.

Pippin's eyes were still glued to his body as she shook her head. "I didn't. I came home tonight and he was here, but it wasn't him, at least not completely. He was some half-monster wolf thing. When he saw me he told me he had to kill me-" A bitter, relived laugh escaped her lips. "He said it wasn't personal, it's just something he had to do, and then he attacked me." She set her hand on her shoulder where her shirt had a long gash that matched the cuts beneath the cloth. "I managed to duck him and run up here where I hid in the closet. He tried to get me, but I stabbed him with this-" she held up the fork, "-it's a silver heirloom meat fork my grandmother gave me. He backed off and left, and then you guys came." She clapped her hand over her mouth and stifled a sob. "And you guys

killed him."

Lilly cringed and her hand that held the gun quivered. "I'm sorry. We had to."

"Once a werewolf decides on a victim, there is no stopping it," Paul confirmed.

Pippin whipped her head up and gaped at him. "Then. . .then he really was a werewolf?"

"The original deal," Al spoke up. "And a good silver bullet to the heart ended that."

Lilly turned to Al and held the gun out to him. "Sorry about taking it."

He pushed it back and shook his head. "Keep it. I think you're a better shot, anyway."

"And I'm going to keep this," Una announced as she brandished the baton. "It seems to work pretty well against these things."

Al frowned and held out his hand to her. "That's mine, give it."

She clutched it in both hands against her chest and glared at him. "Finders keepers."

"Give it!" Al snapped as he lunged for it.

Una hugged it to herself and bent over. "Mine!"

"Who the heck are all you people, anyway?" Pippin spoke up.

Everyone froze before the pair of squabbling children took on a more adult demeanor by standing straight and clearing their throat.

Al walked up to her and smiled. "Who we are is of no importance, but what is important is that none of this leaves this room. That means I'm going to have to have you swear a non-disclosure agreement. No signature needed, of course, because we don't want to leave a paper trail."

Pippin shook herself and a little bit of her spitfire self returned. "Say what?"

"You can't tell anyone what transpired here," Paul rephrased.

"Why the hell not?" she snapped as she gestured to the body. "I've got a real life werewolf-"

"You had a real life werewolf here," Paul corrected her. "Now he's only a dead man. No tests will show that he was anything else."

"W-well, what about you guys being here?" she persisted.

Al folded his arms across his chest and shrugged. "We weren't."

"But you're my witnesses!"

"We don't want that kind of publicity, and if you know what's good for you you'll stick this story in the dustbin, too," Al warned her.

Pippin glared at him. "Why the hell should I?"

"There are forces within this city that would rather keep werewolves a secret," Paul told the woman.

Al nodded. "Yeah. If they even knew you were writing up an article about your werewolf buddy here they'd pay you a visit."

Pippin's arms dropped to her side and her face fell. "No exclusive? No paid media interviews?"

"But you're alive," Lilly pointed out.

"And without the chomping from the werewolf," Una added.

Pippin ran a hand through her disheveled hair and shook her head. "Perfect. Just perfect. What am I going to do now? What am I going to tell the cops?"

"That an intruder entered your home and destroyed it," Paul suggested. "You yourself said you were out. You came home to find the house in this condition and your boyfriend dead upstairs."

She snorted. "From a silver bullet to the heart?"

"There are stranger things in this world."

Pippin sighed. "All right, I'll think of something, but-" she lifted her gaze to him and pursed her lips, "-I want to know what's going on. Everything."

"That wouldn't be the smartest thing to know," Al warned her.

She gestured down at the body. "I'm a reporter. It's a dangerous job."

"We will see if we can be of use to one another," Paul mused as he turned toward the stairs. "In the meantime, avoid attention as much as possible. For your own sake."

"What's that supposed to mean! Hey!" She moved to follow, but Al stepped into her path. He held out a card which she took. "Call us if anything comes up."

Pippin frowned, but tucked the card into her pocket. "I'll call, all right, just you wait."

Al gave her a lazy salute and hurried after his companions. He rejoined them

downstairs at the front door. They stepped out into the cool, crisp midnight air.

Una stretched her arms above her head. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm ready for a long nap."

"I could go with some food," Al mused.

Una grinned up at him. "Now we're speaking the same language."

He shuddered. "Let's hope it doesn't last."

"IS EVERY NIGHT LIKE THIS ONE?" Lilly asked Paul.

The pair sat at the dining room table of Paul's home with the owner at the head and Lilly on his right. It was only a mere half hour after their adventure. Lilly's hands still occasionally shook as she thought about their recent adventure.

Others of their group, however, weren't so affected. Through the open door of the kitchen they could hear Al and Una bickering about the type of cheese to cut up.

"Bree is the best!" Una insisted.

"Don't you know anything? Smoked cheddar is better than that!" Al argued.

"Bree!"

"Cheddar!"

"No," Paul sighed before he took a sip of his wine. "Often there is nothing."

"Is there worse?" she wondered.

Paul set his glass on the table and his eyes fell on her. "You're bothered by what happened."

She clasped her hands together on the table and snorted. "Just a little."

"You did very well," he pointed out.

Her head perked up as did her eyes. "Really?"

He nodded. "Yes. It's not anyone who can understand what must be done and execute it."

She cringed. "Like I executed him. . ."

"It had to be done," he insisted.

"He really would have gone after Pippin until she was dead?" she wondered.

"Yes."

Her eyes studied him. "Do. . .do you act like that?"

Paul shook his head. "No. My race of werewolves is not so vindictive."

"So there's that much difference between them? The races?"

"Absolutely."

Lilly sighed and her shoulders slumped. "There's a lot I have to learn. . ."

Paul reached across the table and set his hand atop hers. She looked up into his face and was caught in his yellow gaze.

"I will be here to help you," he assured her.

Lilly blushed, but a smile slipped onto her lips. "Thanks."

"Bree!"

"Cheddar!"

Paul rolled his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "Unfortunately, they will be here, as well."

She snorted. "It should be fun."

And adventurous, as Lilly and her friends were soon to discover.

<<<<>>>>

A NOTE FROM MAC

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STAGESTRUCK:

"I think you can agree this would make a wonderful theater for your play."

Two men stood on a large wooden stage. Stretched out before them were rows of plush red seats and even a wide balcony. A pair of box seats hung on either side of the auditorium.

The speaker was a short, bespectacled man with thinning brown hair and a round face. He wore a suit that was a little tight on his round form, and black shoes that were scuffed.

The other man, a tall, thin fellow with a cigarette in his mouth, paced the stage. He was on the good side of middle-age and wore a crisp gray business suit that suited his slim physique. The visitor paused every few steps to tap his foot against the boards. "Seems sturdy."

"It is, Mr. List," the other man insisted. "I can assure you your client will be pleased with everything we have to offer, and it would be our pleasure to feature Mr. Lupe in his first theatrical role in quite some time."

Al's cigarette drooped a little. "It's only been five years."

The other man coughed into his hand. "I see. My apologies."

Al raised his eyes to the balcony and nodded at them. "Are those things safe?"

His guide nodded his head like a bobble doll. "Of course. Perfectly so. In fact, they were just inspected by the city building code manager just last week."

Al turned to him and studied the bespectacled man. "All right, 'fess up, Mr. Hulda. What's the problem here?"

"Problem, sir?"

"Why's the rent so cheap for this place?" Al bluntly questioned him.

Mr. Hulda clasped his hands together and slapped a tense smile on his face. "Well, you see, the Imago Theatrum has seen better days, and I'm afraid I've had to drop the price just to attract customers. That is, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with the theater, only that theater itself isn't as popular as it once was."

Al removed his cigarette and blew out a ring of smoke. "Didn't I hear once about this place being haunted?"

Mr. Hulda chortled. "Of course not. What a silly thing to say!"

"So you're not at all superstitious?" Al asked him.

"This is the twenty-first century, Mr. List."

"So I could go up here-" Al mused as he walked to center stage, "-and mention a certain Scottish play-"

"Mr. List!" Hulda scolded him.

Al turned to him with a grin. "I thought you said you weren't superstitious."

Hulda straightened and pressed out the nonexistent creases in his tight suit coat. "I'm not, but there are just some things that shouldn't be done."

Al laughed. "All right, I won't tempt fate. Is there anything else you need to show me?"

"Only the bathrooms, and if you'd like to inspect the balconies,"

Hulda suggested.

Al tapped the floor. "Shouldn't there be an orchestra dump down here or something?"

"It's called a 'pit,' sir, and yes, there was, but the access to it has been sealed off since the days when my father owned it," Hulda told him.

"So there's no mold or anything down there? My client's a little sensitive to smells," Al warned the proprietor.

Hulda shook his head. "None at all, now would you care to see the balcony?"

Al stuck the cigarette back in his mouth and stuffed his hands in his pocket. "I think I'll pass. How about we go sign some papers and get this party started?"

Hulda smiled and bowed his head. "Of course, of course, this way." The pair walked off stage left and disappeared into the wings. Hulda paused beside a large electrical box with a dozen switches. "Let me shut off the lights. The electricity is rather expensive and these Fresnel lights can get rather hot."

He flipped a large switch and the stage was plunged into darkness. The dim backstage lights guided them to the back offices that made up the rear of the large theater. That left the stage deserted.

Or did it?

A soft foot tapped against the stage boards like Al had done, but there was no visible person to make those noises. The noises moved back and forth across the stage as though pacing. Each step grew louder and louder until it sounded like heavy banging.

"I hear something, I tell ya!" Al insisted as the sounds of their feet hurried to the back of the stage.

The noises on stage were silenced just as Al appeared from the wings. He paused and strained his ears. Mr. Hulda switched on the lights and revealed an empty stage except for Al.

Hulda swept his arm over the deserted area. "See, Mr. List? Nothing at all."

Al pursed his lips. "I swore I heard somebody marching along here."

"Perhaps it was Mr. Hickey," Hulda suggested. "He's our repairman and he works odd hours depending on what needs to be fixed."

"Perhaps," Al half-heartedly agreed as he turned away from the stage.

Al walked over to Hulda who switched off the lights. They returned to the back offices, and the stage once more was a darkened silence. From that deep darkness, however, came a low, gravelly voice. Its hissing words were filled with malice.

"Not here. Not ever."

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